THE SATIATED LIFE

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Sankofa, a Twi word from Ghana, literally means "to retrieve" or "go back and get it." Its conceptual significance finds purchase, for example, among African-Americans who seek to reconnect with their African ancestry (Asante, 2007). *Currere* (Pinar, 1994), more than any other academic concept I have encountered along my PhD journey, requires a constant practice of retrieval, analysis, and synthesis that steadies me during the vortex of final assignment submissions brought by the end of the semester. One retrieval in particular has me fixated these days—something profound I read in my very first class as a PhD student. We were assigned Lisa Delpit's (1995) seminal text, *Other People's Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom*, required reading for any student of education. In it, Delpit (1995) draws from the writings of Yup'ik anthropologist, teacher, and actor, Dr. Angayuqaq Oscar Kawagley, who distills the larger significance of education into the most exquisite terms: "The purpose of education is to learn to die satiated with life" (p. 107). Now forever embedded in my mind, I thought then that Kawagley, like Harrison Ford in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, was in possession of the holy grail itself—unembellished, stark, but life giving in every way.

On the surface, a definition laid plain and bare in this way might leave the reader with a macabre view of the pursuit of education. Yet just beneath this veneer lies a profound offering of a beginning—one so vast in its possibilities that any hint of the grim or morose is eclipsed. Delpit expands this vision of education, offering that schools must provide

> experiences that are so full of the wonder of life, so full of connectedness, so embedded in the context of our communities, so brilliant in the insights that we develop and the analyses that we devise, that all of us, teachers and students alike, can learn to live lives that leave us truly satisfied. (p. 104)

I think the concept of a "satiation with life" exists as a strong undercurrent of *currere*, suggesting that, while the true potential of education—enlightenment—may reveal itself in our final days, it is the pathways shaped by life's catalytic beginnings and the substance of the journeys beyond that make it truly transformative.

In this paper, I introduce a simple curricular framework centered on four essential and interconnected educational milestones that I believe are integral to living a full and meaningful life:

- Sensemaking and intellectualism
- Learning self-determination
- Understanding of self and place
- Cultivating a satiated life

Interwoven within this synthetical journey are autobiographical miniatures that explore these four elements. I begin with my own early quest for intellectualism and sensemaking in high

school. I then move to an imagined future curriculum that is chosen rather than imposed, delve into thoughts about environmental stewardship as a core educative goal, and conclude with a synthesis shaped by a deeply personal story—grappling with the recent passing of my grandfather John Bilal, I—a man whose very existence defied forces and pedagogies of oppression and whose self-determined life of knowledge-seeking propelled him to his own satiated end. Through this exploration, I aim to reveal the intertwined connections between *currere*, life's arc, and the educational journeys that continue to chisel away at me—human and educator alike.

SENSEMAKING BEYOND THE BINARY (REGRESSIVE)

As an overachieving 15-year-old, my determination to excel academically and gain admission to top colleges was fierce and focused. I sought out an academic environment as challenging and enriching as my musical life, which, at the time, was the cornerstone of my education and identity. Seeking more balance between music and academics, I enrolled in the International Baccalaureate (IB) program at Suitland High School, less than two miles east of Washington, DC. While Suitland HS had a reputation for being "hood," it was equally well-known for its robust performing arts and IB programs. It felt like the perfect place to grow my ambitions in both music and academics.

During the IB program info meeting, Ms. Bridgbasi, the IB director, made it clear that the coursework was rigorous and would make our freshman year feel like a walk in the park. The juniors and seniors who spoke at the session did not warn us of IB Calculus, or IB Physics, no. Of all the classes, their starkest warnings came in reference to IB History, "Mr. James don't play!" one said as she chuckled nervously. "You'll be lucky to get a B in his class." Though I entered Mr. James's class expecting a challenge, I was ultimately unprepared for—and 30 years later I am still unpacking—the impact that classroom experience left on me.

We covered the full spectrum of topics one expects in Mr. James's IB history class: feudal Europe, the rise of the Catholic Church and the Crusades, the British monarchy and the Age of Enlightenment, colonial imperialism, the American Revolutionary and Civil Wars, the World Wars, the Cold War, and finally, the war in Iraq. I was all in—eager to dive into histories my father often spoke about at home but with the academic rigor of a college-level curriculum.

Mr. James was a jovial man, his demeanor as funny as his quirky appearance was unforgettable. His wispy gray hair was styled in a way that made me swear his barbershop was in Legoland. The front was cut blunt and perfectly straight, while the sides curved into a bowl-like shape just below his ears, creating the uncanny effect of a fluffy gray helmet on his head. He must have been a fan of Saturday Night Live because he often used these hilarious exaggerated voices (*a la* Steve Martin) in his lectures. One of his most memorable bits was this hilarious "good/bad" refrain he used to simplify complex historical topics like war, oppression, or conflict. With a goat-like inflection, he'd bleat, "Feudal Lords? B-a-a-a-d!" before switching to a cheery baritone chirp, "Peasants and serfs? Good!" It became this recurring thing: "Slavery? B-a-a-a-d! Freedom? Good!" or "Third Reich? B-a-a-a-d! End of WWII? Good!" His comedic timing and helmet hair cut turned history lectures into ones that remain memorable to this day.

As the child of a former Black nationalist, though, I had been immersed in what was then called Afrocentric education—a powerful and much needed supplement to the systemic narrative gaps in my formal schooling (Asante, 2007). My Dad took his job to supplement my learning seriously, and in so doing, he illuminated the histories and contributions of Black people beyond

the narrow narrative of enslavement by celebrating the richness, brilliance, and beauty of our culture that he knew would be absent from the white-dominated hidden curriculum (Bonilla-Silva, 2010). Against this backdrop, and looking for nuance and complexity, Mr. James's humor and overly simplified "good/bad" binary grew tiresome after a while. Whether due to the constraints of our 45-minute class periods—forcing him to cover an impossibly vast amount of historical terrain—or an unspoken assumption that historical complexity and nuance needed to be "dumbed down" for a classroom of Black students (a thought that still makes me wince), the reductive binaries in his lessons often erased the depth and power dynamics that my father discussed with me and my siblings at home.

For our final assignment, we wrote papers about the Industrial Revolution. I was thrilled because, in our home, the boon of wealth America acquired due to the exploitation of free labor was frequently a topic of conversation. Dad's own refrain still echoes in my mind, "This whole nation was built on our backs," he'd say, gesturing with a broad sweep of his hand. Equipped with this knowledge, I crafted a thesis that challenged me: "The free labor of enslaved Africans enabled America to amass immense wealth, which financed the Industrial Revolution, creating new forms of wealth that America continues to benefit from." My goal was to weave together the lessons I had absorbed at home with the concepts I was learning in school, sensemaking and deepening my understanding of economic systems and power dynamics. In the paper, I cited examples of labor exploitation during the industrial age, framed capitalism as an economic system that was dependent on the subjugation of an underclass, and connected these systems to the enduring legacy of American chattel slavery.

While Mr. James acknowledged the strength of my analysis on industrial exploitation and capitalism, he outright rejected my connection to slavery. Despite the robust primary and secondary sources I drew from—courtesy of my mother's unlimited access to the Library of Congress as an employee—his red-inked comment in the margins is as clear in my mind today as it was all those years ago, "There is no evidence that slavery and the Industrial Revolution are linked." I was incredulous. Given his approach to history—rote facts and oversimplified binaries—it should not have surprised me when he dismissed my well-supported argument. Reflecting on this today, I realize this was my first conscious encounter with the hidden curriculum—how academic gatekeeping authority could erase well supported connections and enforce narrow narratives, limiting students in their intellectualism and meaning-making pursuits.

He gave me a "B," with no explanation beyond his rejection of my thesis. Though I'd long been warned about Mr. James's tough grading, what hurt me—crushed me even—was the feeling of intellectual dismissal. So determined was I to change his mind, I got my parents involved, and he agreed to meet at his home in Glen Arden, Maryland. He and his wife were the caretakers at Monteith Mansion, a former tobacco plantation and historical site. This irony, even then, was not lost on me. I argued my case, walked him through my sources, and pointed out the gaps his curt response failed to acknowledge. There we sat for 10 minutes as he reread my paper, but he was unrelenting. Even in that moment, when he could have guided me toward stronger sources or more compelling evidence, he chose not to. Instead, he closed the door on what could have been a welcome and meaningful exchange of ideas.

I have to wonder about his pedagogical mettle as he approached the end of a long high school teaching career. Was he just dialing it in? Had he become inured to critical engagement from his students after decades of teaching the same content? Regardless of the reasons, some 30 years hence, Mr. James's most profound and enduring lessons were not delivered during his lectures but long after our last conversation on those plantation grounds: meaning-making in

education is often arbitrated and refracted by a dominant, white lens (Bell, 1992). Suggesting that the nation's post-Civil War economic leaps were linked to centuries of free labor was, for him, a step too far. The cynic inside me wonders how much his role as the preserver of a slaveholder's property left him incapable of conceding and engaging with this truth.

Reflecting now through the lens of Bettina Love's (2023) *Punished for Dreaming* and her exploration of erasure, I see that this moment was pivotal. It revealed the shadow side of curriculum and pedagogy but also ignited a resolve within me—to dig deeper, question the veneer of authority, and uncover truths that lie beneath dominant narratives (Bonilla-Silva, 2010; Love, 2023). It was a transformative takeaway that continues to shape my approach to education and meaning-making.

CURRICULUM THAT'S CHOSEN, NOT CONFERRED (PROGRESSIVE)

Few aspects of parenting bring me more joy than seeing the slow and steady self-actualizing of my children as they navigate their educational journeys. Cohen, my bonus boy, is near the top of his sophomore class at school. But he has really found his stride (and literally his voice) in musical theater, where his vocal teacher Mr. Seale is helping him develop a rich and warm baby baritone. He has taken to the American Song Book, and though he loves Tyler the Creator, every now and again, he will croon out to Oscar Hammerstein and Irving Berlin. "This boy is going to be the next Thomas Hampson or Bryn Terfel," I think to myself. A step-momma can dream, right?

My daughter, Araba, is thriving academically at the Cincinnati Waldorf School, where my ex-husband and I enrolled her 11 years ago at the age of 2 after hearing their now-famous WVXU ad tagline: "The Cincinnati Waldorf School—Where education is a journey, not a race." And what a journey it has been. Her early years at Waldorf were magical: naturally lit classrooms decorated with cascading pastel-dyed silks, hand-carved wooden toys, and a focus on developmentally appropriate, child-centered learning (Oberman, 2008a, 2008b). These and other "Waldorf-isms" have become family norms—hikes in the rain, limited screen time, and a reverence for experiential learning.

Now a seventh grader, Araba continues to reap the benefits of her Waldorf education. She creates her own textbooks alongside her classmates, filling them with original art, writing, and projects that reflect their understanding. This constructivist approach allows students to actively build their knowledge, going beyond rote memorization to engage deeply with their learning (Jonassen, 1991). Waldorf education also emphasizes a strengths-based approach, where teachers honor each student's unique talents and encourage them to take on new challenges from a place of confidence and self-assuredness (Easton, 1997; Oberman, 2008a, 2008b). As one Waldorf educator noted, "A Waldorf classroom seeks to create a safe space where students' strengths are honored, allowing them to venture into areas of difficulty with a sense of self-worth." Though I've wrestled hard with the Waldorf curriculum's Euro-centric underpinnings and its perfunctory efforts to evolve toward a more culturally responsive approach, I am able to overlook these shortcomings because of the work I do, like my father did when I was a child, to supplement Araba's curriculum (Oberman, 2008a, 2008b). Our summers in Accra, Ghana, her deep connection with the music, Fante language, and ancestral village, reassure me that she will have the required cultural grounding to know herself.

Just a few weeks ago, Araba became ill with a throat infection. My child cried—not from the discomfort of her worsening pain but from the realization that she would miss the first two days of her much-anticipated anatomy block. At Waldorf, learning happens in immersive, thematic blocks, and her teacher, Ms. Harwood, had previewed the year's topics early on (Easton, 1997). For my kiddo, anatomy was *the* block she anticipated most. Since September, there wasn't one week that went by that Araba didn't talk about the anatomy block. She hilariously put the kibosh on plans we had to visit family in Houston: "Oh no, Momma. We can't go to Houston in November. That'll be when the anatomy block starts."

This hilarious moment (where my 13-year-old was sho-nuff trying to plan our lives around her content block) had larger significance: by enabling Araba to engage with what excites her most, Waldorf fosters self-determination and agency, where love for learning arises naturally through inquiry and discovery rather than being conferred.

When Araba returned to school, she hopped into the car beaming. "So, how was anatomy?" I asked. "Oh, it was SO good!" she exclaimed, launching into a mile-a-minute explanation of everything she'd learned and her excitement for creating her "Main Lesson book"—a handcrafted textbook Waldorf students create for each block, filled with their own artwork. Seeing her fulfillment, curiosity, and anticipation, I couldn't help but wish this experience for every student.

Organizations like EL Education (formerly Expeditionary Learning) adopt similar progressive practices, allowing students to take ownership of their learning. For example, students in EL Education schools prepare for student-led parent-teacher conferences by analyzing their own data and setting improvement goals, mirroring the self-assessment practices seen in Waldorf classrooms (Levy, 2015). These approaches show how curriculum that's chosen—not conferred—cultivates lifelong learners who embrace challenges with confidence and curiosity.

An excerpt from the poem fable "On Children" written by 20th century poet Khalil Gibran provides a powerful conceptual and philosophical basis for what I imagine an effective and irresistible curriculum might look like. In the poem, Gibran reflects on the nature of children "coming through you but not of you," reminding parents and educators alike of the natural independence and self-determination of young minds. He writes:

> You may give them your love, but not your thoughts. …
> You may strive to be like them, but seek not to make them like you.
> For life goes not backward nor tarries with yesterday.
> You are the bows from which your children as living arrows are sent forth.
> The archer sees the mark upon the path of the infinite, and He bends you with His might that His arrows may go swift and far.
> Let your bending in the archer's hand be for gladness;
> For even as He loves the arrow that flies, so He loves also the bow that is Stable.
> (Gibran, 1923)

This elegant and striking prose reminds us that children—and students, by extension—are unique unto themselves. Though we can facilitate and guide their learning from our experiential lenses, ultimately, to expand Gibran's analogy, the arrow's trajectory is determined less by the archer's precise, controlled, and calculated aim but by the unique composition of the arrow itself: the grain of the wood, the feathers on the fletching, and the winds of change, life, and events that may take it off course and bring it back again.

In this sense, I imagine a curriculum that embodies this ethos—one that sets a student on a pathway to soaring but releases the bowstring with trust, knowing they will hit a target of their own making, not merely one that is forced upon them. It would be a curriculum rooted in possibility and agency, offering guidance but never imposing rigid direction, allowing each student to thrive on their terms, guided by curiosity and self-determination.

KNOW SELF, KNOW PLACE (ANALYTICAL)

My curiosity about Kawagley grew after reading the quote in Delpit's (1995) book that left me stunned and enchanted. I searched and found a collection of his writings curated by the University of Alaska Fairbanks, offering me a richer and more textured sense of his ideas, all rooted in indigenous wisdom, and their practical pedagogical applications. A prominent theme among these volumes is balance and harmony with nature. In his (2001) piece, "Contaminants Have Found Us" he contrasts the sustainability practices of Yup'ik society—living in balance with nature, producing little waste, preserving ecological equilibrium—with practices that lie outside of that balance. In an earlier work "Earth, Air, Fire," Kawagley (1996) asserts that education that leaves out a profound respect and stewardship for the natural world is incomplete. Kawagley positions this assertion as a foil to the modern scientific world view that seeks to command and control nature, often to the detriment of the planet, upsetting the delicate balance of nature (Kawagley, 2011).

My sojourn through Kawagley's writings stirred deep reflection within me raising the question: What is the best possible outcome when every educational experience is rooted in a love for place—for mother nature, for our waterways, for the canopies of trees, for the protective layers of our atmosphere (Kawagley, 2011)? This realization hit me at my core, compelling me to confront the absurdity of humanity's failings—our fractals of division and discord scaling and spreading like a relentless cancer. Yet, amidst this chaos, one truth remains undeniable: nature will endure long after humankind. The last laugh will not belong to the industrialists choking the planet with the destruction of the Amazon rainforest nor to neo-colonial prospectors extracting the last rich minerals from Ghana while polluting verdant waterways (a practice known to Ghanians as "galamsey," which today is accelerating river ecosystem collapse). Nature will have the final victory, reclaiming its balance long after we are all gone.

This reckoning led me to contemplate an educational paradigm grounded in Indigenous knowledge—a course correction away from a toxic, burning world wrought by industrial greed. In his piece "Love and Caring for Balance," Kawagley (2002) writes, "our ancestors and parents knew what they were doing when they provided an education based on knowing who you are and where you are" (p. 6). This phrase, often echoed in Indigenous thought, and much like the quote about education being a function of dying satiated, reveals another truism: the existence of self is inextricably linked to the existence of place. Kawagley draws consistent connections between identity and environment, reminding us that, to know ourselves, we must honor and respect the world around us.

To Die Satiated with Life (Synthetical)

Dad called once at 4:47am—I missed that one. It would be another two hours later on that Monday, December 2nd, at 6:45am that I'd learn the news that the patriarch of our family, my grandpa, passed away peacefully in his sleep at the age of 90. Dad's voice was calm and steely-sweet, "Naimah, you awake, sweetie? Honey, your grandpa passed this morning at 2:30 a.m." I whispered my dua (prayer) so as not to wake my partner Jake: "Inna lillahi wa inna ilayhi raji'un" (Surely we come from God, and surely to God we will return). Grandpa had lived two years longer than the doctors predicted, his worn body a testament to age and a life of backbreaking labor. His once-strong vessel had grown frail quickly, prompting more visits, more kisses, and more lingering moments with him. Dad's call wasn't a surprise, but it didn't stop the quiet tears from streaming down my barely open, pre-dawn eyes.

Asking through morning rasp, I spoke, "When do you think grandpa's janazah (funeral prayer) will be?" In any other family or faith tradition, this might seem like an insensitive question to ask on just hearing of the passing of your grandfather. In Islam though, burials are fast, often taking place within 24 hours, to facilitate the body's swift return to the earth. "We're talking to the Imam now. The janazah could be as soon as tomorrow, or as late as Wednesday. I'll call you as soon as I know." I rose from my warm bed, shaking from the chilly tears that clung to my face. In the few paces it took to reach the bathroom sink, I decided that we drive home to DC. We cancelled music lessons, work meetings, and we quickly packed our bags, black suits, dresses, and matching hijabs. By late morning, we were eastward bound on that eight-and-a-half-hour drive.

Grandpa was ready to go. At 90, his life as a nonagenarian wasn't just a step closer to 100; it was an off-ramp into the next life, the eternal hereafter Muslims call "Jannah," described in the Qur'an as "gardens with rivers flowing beneath them." The promise of eternal peace and the ultimate reward—seeing Allah (swt)—lit unmistakable joy in his eyes during his final days. He had this deliberate blink I realize now he'd had my whole life, signaling an assured, "I know this is fact," kind of acceptance.

On the drive over, we comforted each other with reminders that we were on our way to celebrate Grandpa's life—not mourn his death. "I'm just glad he's out of that sick body," my aunt said, when I checked-in on her. When I called dad to check in, he was quick and focused, voice tender with the weight of duty, "I'm good honey. Just headed to the ghusl (Islamic ritual bathing of the body)." In that moment, beyond the dutiful inflection of his voice, I heard a quivering. My dad is not a crier—he is funny and joyful, wearing his emotions on his sleeve—but tears were rare.

Over 90 years, my grandfather carved a path of self-determination that defied the racialized constraints of his circumstances. He survived the mean Baltimore streets of 1940s and 50s enlisted in the Air Force, was a prized boxer, raised 12 children, and became a scholar of Qur'anic Arabic and a pillar in the Washington, DC, Muslim community. Nothing brought him more joy than studying the Qur'an in its original language.

A man of practicality, Grandpa embodied an ethos of "do for self." His urban Capitol Heights garden was a testament to that principle, bursting with greens, beans, tomatoes, and even figs, pears, and concord grapes. At 85, he scaled the exterior of his two-story house to repaint it entirely on his own, a feat of strength my uncle Sahib proudly shared on Facebook. When he joined The Muslim American Logic Institute (M.A.L.I.), he sought to understand the Qur'an on his own terms, untethered from the politics and exclusive interpretive hold he observed from traditionalist clerics, which often left Black worshipers at the margins. For Grandpa, understanding the Qur'an

was not about orthodoxy but a self-led quest for understanding: "I don't need no one interpreting my Qur'an for me. I know the Arabic. I can do that myself."

Studying with Grandpa was joyous. As I read and interpreted the text of Ad-Dhuha (The Morning Hours), a sura (or chapter) in the Qur'an, he'd correct me with the widest grin—proud of my attempt, but firm: "No! The ta marbuta has more meaning than just adding the feminine—it means God's love, you see?" He insisted on a strict grammatical interpretation, not for dogma's sake, but in search of some level of personal clarity. His passion for precise meaning, free from the ideological constraints of orthodoxy, inspired me. Grandpa waited for no one and navigated his way through life on his own instruments—tools fine-tuned to offer clarity in even the cloudiest contexts. Qur'an was no different.

In those months leading up to Grandpa's passing, he was as sharp as ever, telling stories that carried the same youthful mischief as the sage wisdom that defined his life. He often spoke of his boyhood in Baltimore, where his friends called him "Cakes," short for Johnny Cakes—a nickname earned after he was caught stealing cakes from a local bakery to keep from going hungry. His almond eyes sparkled with boyish joy as he recounted his run-ins with the neighborhood gang, the Playboys. Their leader, weirdly nicknamed "Burnt Meat," tormented Grandpa until one day, fed up, my grandpa climbed to the roof of a rowhouse and dropped a brick on his bully's head. "Did you kill him?" I asked, wide-eyed. "No," he chuckled, "but I busted his head open real good!" From that day forward, Grandpa never heard from Burnt Meat again.

Grandpa's life was a masterclass in drawing larger meaning from a world and a time with few available information networks to liberate the Black mind (Asante, 2007). He found answers as to why he experienced the excruciating challenges of a racialized society in the Nation of Islam, which helped him unlearn intergenerational narratives of inferiority passed down from the Hutchins family, who enslaved our ancestors. Disillusioned by the Nation after the death of Elijah Muhammad, years later he converted the entire family to Sunni Islam, changing our family name from Hutchins to Bilal, one additional untethered step away from the long lineage of slavery. He created his own curriculum for life, one that balanced the spiritual and the practical, the intellectual and the natural.

His final years were filled with stories and reflections, all bound by a thread of self-determination. "Never let no man tell you what you can and can't do," he often said, not as a triumph but as a warning shaped by his lived experience. Grandpa navigated his course—choosing his curriculum, learning deeply from it, and running it fully to the end. Just before crossing the finish line, he beamed at the idea of returning to Allah (swt), assured and at peace. He left this world satiated with his life because, in defiance of every force that sought to constrain him, he chose his path and lived it to its fullest.

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