

THE BELLY OF THE WHALE

WHO DARES TO CERTIFY?

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STORY

My name is Joe. Maeve and I felt the draw last night in our courtyard staircase. The night air was filled with the reverberating hush and swish we knew to be the surf. There was cool wind and a slightly acrid smell. Was it the quiet time after the evening meal, the absence of revving cars and buses, their horns and tires sirening, or was it the tempest, coming out of the west, pushing the waves assertively into the shore that made the sound of the swell so compelling? We decided to go visit the ocean post dusk. This was a clandestine activity. Mama was working late. It was essentially Maeve's bedtime, but this was a high priority—like art supplies, fresh fruit, and dancing ... we needed the experience. Maeve likes forays outside of the "special world of childhood." I shrugged off the irresponsible parent voices; this was good curriculum. We walked to the corner and turned into the wind, the two blocks to the beach. The sky was telling a dramatic story—black purple, horizontal gates squeezing a dying ember of pale yellow. The earth's rotation would put an end to that soon; besides, high above us a crescent moon was gathering its own luminescence. The San Francisco pedestrian walkways are a sacred space. This is a code that is vigorously followed; cars will stop and wait patiently for pedestrians—even a greying, long-haired man and a Kindergarten girl with clothes flapping in the wind, rushing to the indomitable dark of the dunes and ocean beyond. On the other side of Ocean Beach there is no sidewalk, just the steep embankment of a three-story dune. We crossed the last street and clambered past the traffic light, similar to Lucy's encounter with the lamp post in C. S. Lewis's (1950) *Narnia*. We padded up and up between two bluffs and felt the full weight of the wind and the sound of surf. Like vertigo, the ocean pulled us to discover its secrets in the dark. There was something terrifying about being next to so much energy in the darkness. It was a hundred-or-so-yard walk to the threshold. We couldn't make out details in the sand, so we glided into this soft, yielding terrain, the last light of a fretful sky and the reflected white-tops of waves showing us the way. When we arrived within the foam's reach, it seemed, impossibly, that the ocean had become intimate. The darkness that hid the expansive seascape now showed us only a coyishly lapping invitation. Sound defined this demesne, and touch—the buffeting wind and sloshing shore. We stood there, silently, for many long moments, evolution's prodigy looking back at its womb with only our toes touching the fecund immensity before us. I was trying to sense the connection, understand why there is such lure and excitement coming here to this margin, this boundary. Perhaps the pull of our nighttime ocean walk was a longing to meet some emissary from the deep. After a time, I felt satisfied, like reaching the end of a story, and felt it was time to say goodnight and go back to the brightly lit little box we called home.

At the end of the year, Maeve encountered another boundary, sponsored by her school: the Kindergarten graduation ceremony. I chose a seat near the center aisle, perhaps 10 rows back, thinking this would allow me a good gander at her and that she could see me, too. I was early. Like the seagulls that descend and mob the possibility of food, so that all can be seen on the ground is a flurry of white and gray feathers, and screeching, gaping beaks, the parents began standing up



one by one, smartphones in hand, to capture the moment. Soon, all I saw was a line of black coat backs. This was one of life's absurd moments for me. I looked left and right, laughed, and wondered if I should start elbowing my way into the fray, so that my daughter would see me advocating for her. Many onlookers were holding their phones above their heads, like the paparazzi. There was an urgency about it, a need to capture this moment, to record it. I imagined what the children saw ... a quickly forming conclave, an array of black phones with red glowing indicator lights. Did I see the ubiquitous camera smile start to bloom across the stage? Yes, crooked, frozen, Stepford smiles on a hundred 6-year-olds mimicking their parents' urgency, soaking up the hidden curriculum of this ceremony. Through shoulders, I glanced my daughter's face, smiling as well. This feverish crowd was taking this threshold moment and turning it to stone.

CAMPBELL

Campbell (1949/2008) uses the iconic image of the swallowing leviathan to introduce a pivotal stage in a hero's journey—the turn towards inner work. All would-be heroes and heroines need to follow Jonah through two vicious rows of razor teeth into the dark, cavernous belly of the whale. To the outside observer, and to the literalists, the hero appears to die. If we stayed in the literal realm we might hope the hero could be saved. The scene would morph into a quest for escape, to see whether the hero could cut themselves out, emerge, kill the whale and return to the world—like so many action films depict the hero-story arc. We are afraid of our hero “self” dying. In understanding the story metaphorically, such a feat would be complete folly. Campbell explains how, metaphorically, dying is the margin we need to cross to do the serious inner work. The mouth and teeth of the whale are gates to be passed, for the worthy, in order to continue the metamorphosis inside (Campbell, 1949/2008, p. 77). The opposite rows of teeth represent the contradictions and dualities that make up our epistemology, and we need to pass, move beyond these toothy threshold guardians. The monster leviathan becomes the womb, the inner landscape, the container where the real traveling is done. These images also symbolize a “death” for the ego of the hero, a necessary event for him or her to go deeper into the curriculum. Campbell also uses the image of the temple entrance to illustrate this idea. The pillars are carved with the images of fearsome guardians, like the teeth in the mouth of the whale. For the hero, “the passage of the threshold is a form of self-annihilation ... the hero goes inward, to be born again” (p. 77). Whether whale, temple, cave, hole, or myriad other spaces, these images convey “in picture language, the life-centering, life-renewing act” (p. 77), which is a far cry from a supposed gory death.

A similar scene from the film *Star Wars* (Lucas, 1977) now makes more sense. In the scene, Luke's mentor, Obi-Wan Kenobi, is seen dueling Darth Vader. At one point Obi-Wan stops fighting, turns off his light sabre and allows Vader to kill him. Later we see Obi-Wan return in a kind of spectral state, and it is made known that, although he has died, he is more powerful than he was before. Another familiar symbol of crossing the threshold and entering into the inner world is the rabbit hole that swallows Alice in Carroll's (1865) *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*.

CURRICULAR IMPLICATIONS

This is about a boundary between the outer, literal world, and the inner world. We fear the teeth, but the belly of the whale is exactly where we want to be, for it is the hero's second womb.

Curricular implications are tentative and imaginative. The stage implies a certain amount of deconstruction and reconstruction of knowledge. There is also the sense that the hero/learner needs to enter into a zone of uncertainty. There are no stated objectives written on the board. There is no syllabus with dates, rubrics, and assignment descriptions. There is no “treatment specification” (Schubert, 2009, p. 80) when entering the cave.

One way this might inform teaching and learning is by focusing on the *conditions* inside the whale, the inner sanctum of the temple, or the dark fecundity of the cave as accoutrements of the learning environment. I’ve been on several retreats with mythologist Michael Meade in the redwood forests north of San Francisco. In Mendocino, the “work” we do is in a 1920s era lodge. The main room is partitioned into smaller spaces through the use of benches, tables, and tapestries. There is a large fireplace at one side. The outer seats are raised. We are packed in there, ready to be baked. There is a concerted design to our gathering space on the retreats. All energy is focused in that space; it doesn’t leak out. Meade’s words, “This is an alchemical vessel,” struck a chord. It was a space for listening and speaking—for sharing, unscripted, from the heart, for “instant community.” In that space were made text-to-self and text-to-world connections. Myths have a pedagogic function, and the stories we listened to evoked the thresholds, conflicts, emotions, insights, and testimonials of our lived experiences. We were doing autoethnography in real time. We were swallowed by Mendocino—removed from contact from the outside world, called in day after day to bear witness to ourselves and each other. It was not really a “retreat” in the sense that you relax and meditate—it was one kind of “hard work.” van Manen (1986) describes learning spaces beyond the physical in *The Tone of Teaching*. In his description, the physical space takes second stage to the psychological, emotional, tonal, and arguably spiritual vessel that teachers create through their words, touches, even glances, and also through the way curriculum and ways of being are embodied. Meade often talked about the need for “instant community” in a mass society. We need to create community in the places and spaces available to us in the modern world. Today’s classroom seems like such a space, but it can be found in even more ephemeral moments.

I recall walking towards a party on the top floor of the Hyatt in New Orleans. The AERA Division B post-meeting party had no music, no drinks, and no raucous revelry, although there was revelry of a different kind. Isabel and I walked into a scene, a space that immediately spoke to our senses as having the timbre of gravitas, as that most courageous of actions was apparent—vulnerability. Two elders, Dr. Grace Lee Boggs, who had just received the Ella Baker/Septima Clark award, and her introducer, Dr. Vincent Harding, social activist, and civil rights leader, were leading a conversation of sorts. The lights were low, people were seated around a table, but these details blurred as the focus was on the story being unfurled as people shared intimate tales about their childhoods, parents, and struggles. In this vessel, participants shared their narratives in real time. No one told us what to do. After several people spoke we knew that we needed to answer three questions: What is your name, and why were you named this? What is your mother’s mother’s name, what is her story? What is the important work you are doing now? The prompts were simple and designed. We were invited, in the sudden present moment, to reconceptualize our lived experience.

CRITIQUE

Our diplomas, certificates, awards, honors, medals, degrees, and other official artifacts testifying to our skills, abilities, mastery, and legitimacy represent our modern gateways. We dress



in robes; we walk across a threshold upon a stage; we receive a degree much like the scarecrow receiving his “diploma” from the Wizard of Oz into his straw hand (Baum, 1900). Theosophical interpretations of the scarecrow say that he represents our intelligence and intellect. All through the story he feels stupid until his audience with the wizard, who despite the pomp and circumstance has the decency to point out that, as the one who comes up with the clever plans to save his companions, he had his smarts *inside* all along. The message seems to be: We don’t need external validation in the form of wizards, teachers, degrees, and awards. Certifying on external authority that is not derived from one’s “inner being,” Schubert (2009) declares, does not have integrity: “Really, who dares to certify? Who really knows what is embodied in another, derived from any experience—school or non-school?” (p. 23). The running of the race/maze that begins in Kindergarten continues all the way up through higher education and the acquirement of terminal degrees.

HIGH-STAKES KINDERGARTEN

The scene at my daughter’s Kindergarten graduation intensified as the children’s songs, a part of the ceremony, were reaching an end. Maeve’s threshold moment—to commemorate her first year in public school—was obscured to me by this mob of parents who were going to preserve this experience, whether their neighbor liked it or not! Getting the video, acquiring the picture, grasping for the diploma: These are the pinnacle moments that reflect ... meaningful learning? The spaces that children encounter in their Kindergarten vessels are microcosms of society. Instead of descending into learning, our culture and education system wants to ascend through competition, ranking, sorting, and certification. Perhaps we don’t descend, let go of our ego selves and ego culture, because there is no discernable goal and outcome. Schubert wonders, “If education is to release wonder, imagination, speculation, and a quest for meaning and growth in unknown directions, then how can purposes be established in advance?” (Schubert, 2009, p. 72).

POSTLUDE

A decade after Maeve’s Kindergarten graduation, as I work on my case for promotion to associate professor, I am encountering yet another threshold. A lot of work goes into the business of recording my worth as I catalog the evidence of things I’ve done for my external reviewers. I will not walk across a stage but will receive a medal in the form of a title—associate professor—if I am successful. While this is a moment to acknowledge the meaningful work I’ve done, the totality of the experience has the timbre of performance.

How do *I* measure my worth? I feel as if I am still at the gates, allowing myself to be chewed by those rows of teeth, or dying on the vine, as a mentor, Denise Taliaferro Baszile, remarked at a conference. Even if I receive my certificate, I still feel, secretly, that I haven’t dived through that shoreline to plumb the depths of what it means to educate. I can certify myself, but I am still convinced that I haven’t done what is necessary to pass the teeth. I want to go back to that ocean edge and jump in, disappear into the depths, the adventure.

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