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# Cruelty to Compassion: the Poetry of Teaching Transformation

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**Abstract** Two complementary bodies of literature either claim explicitly or imply that human cruelty is rooted in asymmetrical relationships. The first describes and analyzes various forms of domination and acquiescence, including colonialism, racism, imperialism, sexism, and interpersonal power dynamics, among others. The second attempts to describe what would constitute the antidote, namely symmetrical relationships of mutuality and equality. Both of these literatures counsel abandoning asymmetrical relationships in favor of the symmetrical. To the contrary, this paper argues that it is *only* in the context of asymmetrical relationships that humans can learn the basics of equality and mutual regard that undergird democracy. More particularly, the moral use of asymmetrical relations would be to help the young acquire, inter alias, the kinds of self-awareness and self-understanding that would enable them to function as responsible parties in symmetrical relations.

**Keywords** Domination and acquiescence · Asymmetrical and symmetrical relationships · Moral uses of asymmetrical relations · Teaching transformation · Enabling participation in relations of mutuality and equality · Teaching democracy · Self-knowledge and moral responsibility · Poetry and imagination in teaching · Avoiding domination in teaching

## Introduction

Philosophy of education opens up space for hope—hope that we humans can learn our way along, perhaps to a better condition. As are many in the field, I also am looking for such hope in educational transformation. In the course of this quest I have stumbled upon something that is so counterintuitive and strange that I spent literally years pretending not to notice. If I am right about this, our enterprise may have some new challenges.

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## Cruelty: the Problem of Asymmetrical Relations

For me, the central human tragedy consists in the cruelties that we humans visit upon one another—cruelties that take numerous forms and have been identified by others with great eloquence and power. Here are some such recent voices; clearly one could evoke others. In *Invisible Man*, Ellison (1952) helps us "see" the devastation of invisibility created by racist attitudes and practices. In *Democracy Matters*, West (2004) fingers imperialism in what he terms "free-market fundamentalism," "militarism," and "authoritarianism." In *The Colonizer and the* Colonized, Memmi (1991) calls us to look closely at the dynamics of colonialism, a relationship that disfigures and diminishes both the colonized and the colonizer. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (2000/1970) shines a light on class oppression and invites engagement in education as the practice of freedom rather than as the practice of domination—domination that limits our humanity. In *The Decent Society*, Margalit (1996) urges us to witness the human devastations of institutional humiliation. In *Negotiating the* Self, Evans (2002) points to the pain and difficulties that gays face when becoming teachers—pain caused by homophobia's domination. In *Talking to Strangers*, Allen (2004) invites us to a meditation upon the relationship of domination and acquiescence represented in the 1957 Will Counts photo in Little Rock, which shows Elizabeth Eckford (a 13-year-old black girl), after having been stopped at the point of a bayonet when armed only with her school books, being shouted away from Central High. Allen argues that even decades since *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, we have yet to rid ourselves of the citizenly habits of domination and acquiescence. The import of these works derives from the cruelties they name and describe. From such works, we walk away with some thoughts about that of which we should want to rid ourselves. They point to cruelties born of how we are with one another—cruelties about which we humans have a choice. As such, they reflect moral failures.

The problem underlying our cruelties, as represented in these works and many others, is located precisely in the *asymmetry* of the relationship: whites in a position to limit the possibilities of blacks, the imperialist lording it over those subjected, those who have the power to humiliate doing so, citizenly habits that accord some the power to prevent others from access to the same educational resources, and so on. Some, such as Memmi (1991), argue that the cruelty is visited upon not only those in the lower position, but also upon those who have the upper hand. For example, he argues, "One is disfigured into an oppressor, a partial, unpatriotic and treacherous being, worrying only about his privileges and their defense; the other into an oppressed creature, whose development is broken and who compromises by his defeat. Just as the colonizer is tempted to accept his part, the colonized is forced to accept being colonized" (1991, p. 89).

## The Solution of Symmetrical Relations

These works either directly state or imply that the solution to the cruelties visited upon humanity by such asymmetries would be symmetrical or democratic relationships, ones of equality of power and regard. Fortunately, there is an equally rich, diverse literature with various disciplinary roots that is dedicated to trying to conceptualize and define the needed symmetrical relationships. Again to adumbrate the breadth of the opus, I sample here works of various sorts. In *Democracy and Education*, Dewey (1944/1916) offers that the route to "breaking down ... barriers of class, race, and national territory which [keep persons] from perceiving the full import of their activity," and to "[securing] a liberation

of powers which remain suppressed," consists in developing democracy as "more than a form of government," as "primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience," which [extends] in "space the number of individuals who participate in an interest so that each has to refer his own action to that of others" (1944, p. 87). Dewey's cooperation and associated living are possible precisely because asymmetrical relations are broken down and replaced by symmetrical ones.

In *Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and the Problem of Domination*, Benjamin (1988) draws on theory of intersubjectivity to argue that the needed relief from domination comes in the form of circuits of mutual recognition. In a line of thought redolent of Memmi's, Benjamin points out that "domination ultimately deprives both subjugator and subjugated of recognition" (1988, p. 218). That is, if two persons do not meet as equals, then the need for mutual recognition goes unmet. Borrowing from Hegel, Benjamin notes that we each need to assert ourselves and, at the same time, to regard the other as an equal, for only then can we receive the recognition from the other that "makes meaningful [our own] feelings, intentions, and actions." Here "mutual recognition" includes, even between mother and child, "emotional attunement, mutual influence, affective mutuality, sharing states of mind" or, put otherwise, "the simultaneous presence of two living subjects"—again, a kind of symmetry (1988, p, 12).

In *Talking to Strangers*, Allen (2004) goes beyond presenting the photo of domination and acquiescence to trying to suggest an alternative. Allen proposes that the key to getting beyond a boss figure, such as is represented by Hobbes' Leviathan is to imagine habits of citizenship where disappointment is acknowledged, sacrifice is honored, and we citizens take turns at having our way. Fortunately for our prospects for being able to imagine such a possibility, Allen notes that we already evidence these habits in the way we conduct *friendships*. Friends take turns, instead of always requiring the same person to sacrifice for the other. Friends acknowledge each other's disappointments. Further, "friendship cultivates a habitual expertise at the only practice that converts rivalrous into equitable self-interest." Moreover, "friendship develops an awareness that our interests, properly understood, include a desire to preserve key relationships" (2004, p. 136). Using Aristotle's distinction between utility and pleasure friendships, Allen reasons that utility friendship is not just a metaphor for democratic (read: symmetrical) relationships, but is also a crucial component. Overcoming the relation of domination and acquiescence requires "trust generation," which is anchored in three claims: "first, recovery of the idea that self-interest comes in a variety of forms; second, recognition that preserving the political bond is in every citizen's interest; and third, an understanding that only equitable forms of self-interest can sustain the political bond" (2004, p. 138). So much as Aristotle understood friendship as the bond of the city, Allen argues that practicing the utility relation she calls "political friendship"—a symmetrical relationship—is essential to giving up the boss figure.

In Vivian Paley's book (1992) *You Can't Say You Can't Play*, we find an extraordinarily skillful description of how the problem of the boss and its attendant cruelties can be addressed in the classroom. Under one reading, which I will call the Rule Interpretation, Paley is seen as arguing that the solution to the common problem of domination in the classroom, i.e. rejection, is the institution of symmetrical relations among students via the rule "you can't say you can't play." And indeed, toward the end of Paley's story, students are giving up the habit of rejection (that is, the practice by some of limiting others' access to that lifeline called play) and Clara is no longer being subjected to the cruelty of boss Lisa's telling her that she that cannot play. Moreover, by eschewing all forms of rejection, the children seem more inclined to venture into new roles in enacting each others' stories,

whether that of a Ninja Turtle or a newborn baby (1992, p. 127). Hence, under the Rule Interpretation, not only does the rule of symmetrical relations rid the classroom of the rejection that caused such pain, but also opens the children up to a kind of growth that can happen only when children feel safe, safe from rejection.

So there we have it. Throughout this varied "opus," an important literature that identifies and illuminates much, democratic or symmetrical relations are commonly imagined to be the solution to the cruelties that relations of domination and acquiescence beget.

As a note in the margin, I add here that a few of my students are not so sure that Paley (1992) actually delivers symmetrical relations as the antidote; they claim that she herself does not act in a democratic way, but steps over the line and becomes a boss figure. They observe that Paley does not actually give the students a choice (the democratic thing by allowing them, say, to vote on the new rule), but instead that Paley herself becomes a boss. While I disagree with these students that Paley thereby becomes a boss figure and visits the cruelty of domination upon her students, their objection serves to nudge us closer to the counterintuitive and strange.

## Alice Pontville's Narrative

The time has come to share with you excerpts from a story—actually a pair of stories—as told by philosopher Alice Pontville in a manuscript on which I've been working for far too long. I invite you to get comfortable and settle into story mode. We join her narrative when she is telling what she observed in Riverside Park:

*Sitting there on a bench near a fenced play area, I would sometimes watch what was happening in the sand. When a child would knock down another's mountain or kick sand toward a playmate, I came to anticipate a particular "teacherly" adult response that seemed to follow a script. The attending adult would grasp the child firmly by the upper arm and in an authoritative voice sound the child's name, utter a negative judgment, and cite some rule: "Evan, that's bad! There's no kicking sand!" Or, "Elise, that's mean! No hitting!" Often as not, there was an additional accusation, precluding the child's claim to innocence. "Evan, you know that's bad!" or, "You know there's no hitting!"*

*Adults so responding to misbehavior blended with other features of this scene, such as the sand, the fence, the sounds of the children at play, the pails and shovels, until one day when a particular child caught my eye. I'd seen such things many times, but had never before been quite so taken aback by what I saw. "Abby!" the teacher shouted for all the world to hear, "you know that's bad. No hitting!" Abby's face reddened as she turned her head away from the teacher, who gripped her arm for a moment longer than what appeared bearable to this slight child. When the teacher turned away, she added, "I don't want to see that happen again!" Abby's arm flopped to her side, like a rag doll's. Chin on her chest, Abby edged over to the wrought iron fence, turned her face away from the other children, and squatted down atop her shoes, where she weakly fingered the peeling paint until recess was over. In the line of children headed back to school, Abby remained expressionless and disengaged. That image of Abby, crouching as if to disappear, haunts me. What happened to Abby happened to many other children. Surely Abby's bodily response made visible for me the impact of this commonplace.*

*The disciplinarian's treating Abby as if she were an enemy to be left for dead suggests that the sandbox is a form of battlefield. Such imagery is unpleasant and makes me uncomfortable. But given that this notion has a distinguished history in educational theory,*

*I cannot ignore it. Here is how the renowned philosopher and psychologist William James talked to teachers about "educating" children:*

*"The mind of your own enemy, the pupil, is working away from you as keenly and eagerly as is the mind of the commander on the other side.... Just what the respective enemies want and think, and what they know and do not know, are as hard things for the teacher as the general to find out" [without citation in manuscript; James 2001/1899, p. 4]. These lines have always jarred me. With Abby in mind, in recalling them I am stunned. But let us not be stopped in our tracks.*

*On another day I was struck by an entirely different sort of response to a child who kicked sand at another, which occurred near the bench where I was sitting. The attending adult went quietly and immediately to the side of the misbehaving child, knelt to the child's level and calmly said, "Daniel, you seem to be upset about something." There followed a torrent of tears and words garbled by sobs. The adult occasionally uttered a quiet word, but mostly she just listened. While I did not catch all of the details about a phone message and his broken lunch box, the gist of the story was that Daniel and his father had gone to meet Mommy at the station, but that she did not arrive on the before-school train, a fact that was hugely disappointing to him. The adult invited Daniel to sit in her lap until he felt better. Tears depleted, Daniel readily agreed with a visible sigh. After no more than a couple of minutes, he literally sprang out of her arms and bounded over to the victim of his outburst, saying "Sorry. I didn't mean to kick sand at you. Wanna make a zigzag tunnel?".*

*Daniel had kicked sand at another child, which clearly was wrong. He surely violated rules of conduct in the sandbox. Nonetheless, this adult did not shout at Daniel or proclaim within earshot of all others that he, Daniel, was an offender. Nor did she grab him by his arm or label his behavior with negative adjectives. No rule was invoked. Daniel was not devastated and discarded, as Abby had been. For whatever reason, this adult waged no war on Daniel; instead, with this particular adult's help, he found his way back to his playmate in the sand. I was deeply pleased for Daniel and felt gratitude toward and admiration of the teacher. Something extraordinary had just happened.*

*What incredibly different fates: Abby's with a warring teacher and Daniel's with a teacher who guided him. What was it that enabled this particular adult to be curious about what Daniel was experiencing? How was it, I wonder, that this adult knew to offer a safe place for focusing inward, where Daniel himself could make the connection between his feeling disappointed and his rationally disconnected kicking sand at his playmate? On the next such occasion of feeling upset, might Daniel now come closer to thinking to himself something like, "I feel disappointed" and then seeking comfort, rather than careening off into a tantrum dangerous to himself and others?*

*In the difference between these fates perhaps we can begin to feel what is at stake in the sandbox. It is literally a matter of life and death. When the sand settled, Abby was crouching over her shoes in a fetal position, unable to move. In response to Abby's misstep, the adult dealt her a "corrective" blow and effectively left her lifeless on the margin of the sandbox. Especially because this teacher's reaction is so commonplace, it merits attending more closely to what is going on.*

*The idea seems to be that rules are rules. Expectations are expectations and violations cannot be brooked. Immediately, predictably, and forcefully one is to call the child's attention to her nonconformance. The feel of the matter from the adult's point of view would seem to be that the child is the problem—a problem that is resolved by correcting the child. According to this ordinary way of thinking, the unnoticed or disregarded fact that Abby ended up disconnected from others in the sandbox and lifeless would surely be understood as a problem brought on by the child. This contrasts sharply with the attention*

*paid to Daniel. When his "sandstorm" passed, he sprang back into engaging with his playmate. Rather than striking out at Daniel, who, like Abby, was already "in trouble" in his sandstorm, this adult sought to understand his difficulty and to offer Daniel a place to recover and to find his way back into play.*

*Let us assume that in both instances the adults were well-meaning. Neither intended to harm the child, yet the action of the first might be said to arrest Abby's spirit and throw her into a kind of jail, where she can no longer engage in life. The second not only gives Daniel a lifeline back into play, but also helps him learn that there is a better way to handle a future "storm," so as not to cause harm.*

*The person who "disciplined" Abby did not discipline Abby. That is, she did not so much as see her. Abby could have been any child whose behavior did not match the announced range of acceptability. The teacher saw not Abby, but a nonconforming behavior, to which she reacted "objectively," perhaps with a rationalizing and even pious thought that this is how matters must be handled because justice is blind. (Were this the thought in the head of Abby's teacher, she might have reason; the statue holding the scales does wear a blindfold.) Is it, then, that she fails to see Abby precisely because she inhabits a world in which ideals, rules, and standards trump and disregard human meanings? Under this view, the adult harbors an idea of what should be the case and so conceives her job of sandbox supervision as one of assuring conformance. In this context, anything that Abby might be experiencing is irrelevant. This adult's treatment of Abby makes sense only if her job is merely to "install" rules. I cannot but wonder if Abby, left for dead on the battlefield, is inadvertently being groomed to one day replace the adult as a supervisor who can see rules but not children. Perhaps the adult who "disciplined" Abby was herself partially blinded by Abby's sandstorm.*

*How, I wonder, did that other adult see Daniel and not simply the nonconformance of his behavior to the rule about sand-kicking? How is it that this person immediately wondered about the meaning of Daniel's behavior and understood it as an indirect expression of a difficulty Daniel was experiencing? Recall her saying, "Daniel, you seem to be upset about something." I surmise that this person conceived of her job as having two parts: first, to help Daniel become more aware of what he was feeling, in this case overwhelming disappointment, and once aware of that feeling, to understand that he can seek help for it (here perhaps comfort) rather than flailing about in ways inconsiderate, dangerous and unacceptable, such as kicking sand at his playmate.*

*Daniel's teacher did not assume that his nonconforming behavior meant that he didn't know the rule. Further, she did not assume that he didn't know that breaking the rule wasn't acceptable. Nor did she assume that he was merely attempting to "get away with something," to flout the disciplinary regime without consequence. Further, I surmise that his teacher was not frightened by his unruly behavior; indeed, she appears to have regarded it as a source of information from which she inferred that Daniel was upset about something, a particular something not obvious from his action. That is, she apparently did not assume that Daniel wanted to harm the other child. Whatever she knew at the point of the sand-kicking, she understood that she didn't know enough to gauge a response. "Daniel, you seem to be upset about something" invites Daniel to speak, to begin to reveal the source and meaning of his storm in the sand. Further, in making this comment, she signals that she expects something of him, namely that he respond out of his own experience and tell her what was going on for him. Her observation seems to have required no specialized knowledge. When a child kicks sand at another, it is fairly safe to assume that the child is upset about something—either about the other child or something else, or*

*perhaps both. Her observation and expectation appear to have enabled him to express his disappointment, of which his kicking sand was an indirect and inappropriate expression.*

*Could Daniel have figured this out on his own, without assistance? This does not seem to be the case. If we allow that as a young child he needs guidance to acquire the important human learning of how to take responsibility for his own emotional life, then it makes no sense whatsoever to say that it can be the child's responsibility to make himself seen. Indeed, by himself he most likely still only vaguely "sees" himself. What the adult does in making the observation is to help him shift his attention. To see himself and not just sand and his playmate, Daniel must look. Without such help, Daniel cannot learn to see what he himself is experiencing. Once the attending adult references his being upset, Daniel is able to attend to his feeling upset, as his outburst of tears and sobs attests. Other than being called by another to consider what one is experiencing, there simply is no other route. Such is the nature of how humans are formed.*

*Without the adult's help, could Daniel have found his way back to engaging with his playmate? If we imagine that the sandstorm were to continue for awhile, perhaps a generous-spirited playmate might have responded, "Daniel, I didn't do anything to upset you. Why are you kicking sand at me?" If this playmate were sophisticated beyond his years, he might also ask, "So tell me what's up with you?" In such a case, one can imagine conditions in which the playmate's response might provide the refocusing that Daniel needs to be able to attend to the provoking feeling, his disappointment at his mother's not arriving on the early morning train. Had that been the case, the playmate would have provided at least part of what the adult offered Daniel. But still it would remain for Daniel somehow to find a safe place in which to dwell with his upset feeling and to see that the feeling does not connect with his playmate. Moreover, only with such an insight regarding his action can he find his way back to engaging with others in the sandbox.*

## Counterintuitive, Strange Finding

Alice Pontville's narrative offers us two tales, in *both* of which one child's action was, intended or not, mean to another. In one, the teacher responds to the child's meanness with cruelty. She humiliates the child. Physically grabbing Abby, shouting at her, and judging her harshly, the teacher exercises her power in this asymmetrical relationship. In this instance, we see a clear case of domination and acquiescence. Abby is devastated. There are no surprises here. In the second tale, however, something counterintuitive and strange happens. Just as does Abby's teacher, this teacher functions in an *asymmetrical* relationship with Daniel. When Daniel kicks sand at his playmate, Daniel's teacher clearly is authorized and empowered to intervene and does so. But that is where two stories diverge. In the way Daniel's teacher responds to his unkind act, she brings him closer to being able to function in symmetrical relationships, democracy's aim. Given the literature we've scanned, that seems counterintuitive. Further, I venture that there is no way, *except through asymmetrical relationships*, that either Daniel or Abby can learn to be a democrat, to function in symmetrical relationships—relationships of mutual regard and consideration. Now that is a downright strange claim.

Those of my students who think that the teacher in Paley's book became the boss in putting the rule "you can't say you can't play" into effect appear to be right in an attenuated sense. That is, the teacher does position herself as a teacher in the teacher–student relationship, which is (one might say of course) an asymmetrical relationship. But in the strong sense, they are wrong, for they mistake this teacher's actions as bossing.

The question now becomes, just what is it that Paley and Daniel's teacher do to distinguish them from teachers who act like bullies? If we can answer this question, then I believe we will understand that the actual solution to the problem of cruelty is not ridding ourselves of all asymmetrical relations, but in developing asymmetrical relations in which teachers (and others) take great care not to bully their charges. Instead, *the moral use of these asymmetrical relations would be to help the young acquire, inter alias, the kinds of self-awareness and self-understanding that enable them to function as responsible parties in symmetrical relations.* This is relatively easy to say and so hard to do. There are reasons this is difficult. It behooves us to consider them.

As a part of trying to limn the task at hand, I return to Paley's *You Can't Say You Can't Play*, this time not with the Rule Interpretation, but with what we might call the Transformational Interpretation. Under this reading, the point of the new rule remains developing the habit of relating symmetrically, but the vehicle is not merely the thoughtful presentation of the rule as the Rule Interpretation suggests, but also (this is crucial) an attentiveness to those who do not yet have the self-awareness and self-understanding that would enable them to function as responsible parties in symmetrical relations. In Paley's story, the teacher focuses especially on Lisa, the child who insisted that there would be no point to play if she could not say who would get to play. (Here I do not want to imply that teacher Paley in her actual classroom was attentive in this way *only* to the child represented by Lisa in her book.) The teacher's moves and Lisa's responses reveal much. Let us step back and then take a look.

In Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*, one thing Florens' mother longs to tell her daughter, whom she gave away to Jacob Vaark, is that "to be given dominion over another is a hard thing" (2008, p. 167). One such instance of this "hard thing" might be a mother's dominion over her child. Another might be teachers' dominion over their pupils. In her story, Paley carries out the "hard" attendant responsibility in several ways. First and perhaps foremost, Paley offers Lisa a safe place to acknowledge what she experiences. For Lisa to take up the offer, she must trust Paley to provide such shelter. In response to Lisa's saying, "I still wish we didn't have the rule," Paley responds by putting her arm around Lisa and telling her, "I know you don't feel the way Clara does. She is [now] much happier, I think" (1992, p. 94). Second, Paley tells the Magpie story in important part to provide a context in which Lisa is able to become aware of her own feelings of jealousy, in response to which she tries to control who can play. Recognizing herself in the character of Beatrix, Lisa says, "Beatrix is jealous, you know. That's the reason she thinks she's not nice. Jealous people don't feel nice." Paley encourages Lisa to continue the thought: "That's interesting. I wonder what makes a person jealous." Lisa replies, "You know, if you can't have someone all to yourself. When I'm jealous I'm not nice" (1992, p. 65). Third, Paley calls Lisa's attention to nice things that both Lisa and Beatrix do, as a way to help Lisa begin to see that she herself can be welcomed by others into play. For example, in response to Lisa's kindness toward Angelo, Paley responds, "I know Lisa, you even pretended you weren't hungry [that time you gave him the M&Ms]. But now, when you saw he was going to be the father in your mousie story, you smiled at him." Paley adds, "[Angelo] now feels you like him also," following which Paley continues, "I stroke her cheek gently and she throws her arms up and hugs me" (1992, p. 128). In this way, Paley not only helps Lisa become aware of the feeling for which she must take responsibility in how she interacts with others, but also helps her learn more generally the "give and take" that fuels friendship and, in a broader sense, all symmetrical relationships. If there is any doubt that Lisa thinks of Paley (Magpie's counterpart) as not being a powerful figure, who will keep things safe, it is

dispelled when she proclaims, "Magpie won't ever let [Beatrix] be mean to Annabella. I just know that!" In response, Paley muses to herself,

> Who is this Magpie who won't let Beatrix be mean? Someone apparently who is more powerful than jealously and more dependable than impulse and caprice. Lisa likes Magpie and trusts him. His is the first picture she draws for the book. I am certain she wants me to be more like Magpie and not allow her to be mean even when she is jealous of playmates or uncomfortable with strangers (1992, p. 68).

Let us consider three possible fates for Lisa and other children who bully. The first is that she has the good fortune to have Vivian Paley as her teacher. The second is that she falls into the regime of Abby's teacher, who devastates her for violating the you-can't-say-you-can't-play rule, leaving her isolated and with no help in forming a self capable of symmetrical relations. The third fate would be to land in a context where the procedural trappings of democracy are "taught," but where any focus on the self is misunderstood to promote "selfishness" and so is deemed inappropriate. (While I rather believe that such shunning of attention to the self is not Walter Parker's intent in *Teaching Democracy*, it might be one plausible interpretation. I say this because bullying cuts across the private–public divide in which Parker (2003) places his hope.) In the second and third fates, the question becomes what would happen if Lisa were never to learn to recognize her own jealousy and how it plays out in meanness to others? What if she were thrown into contexts where friendships and other symmetrical relations were forming, such as in the classroom and elsewhere in her life, without such help from someone who is more powerful even than jealousy—someone to help her learn to be kind? She would herself feel the hurt of not being included when others control the entrance gate. Then if by fate enthroned, she would assume the role of the oppressor. Without such power and isolated by her own meanness, she would cruelly be dealt an equally tragic fate.

Maybe there is hope in the light of the counterintuitive, strange claim that the equal relations that define democracy do not themselves suffice to produce symmetrical relationships. But perhaps we don't have to give up much ground. Maybe we could outlaw all asymmetrical relations only with the exception of the sort of asymmetrical-but-kindly relationships that Vivian Paley and Daniel's teacher have with their students. We could further minimize the "disturbance" of this exception by saying that it is incumbent upon the teachers to know their pupils and for us simply to trust teachers to help enable their pupils to practice symmetrical relations. Would that get us off the hook? Perhaps off the hook in a naïve sense, but clearly not off the ground. The problem is this: what Paley and Daniel's teacher do is not so easy as just knowing some things about their pupils and being kind. I am looking for hope, so I do not much like that I have to report that what Paley and Daniel's teacher did is not something that just anyone can do or do in just any circumstance.

First, this is work is difficult in a practical sense. It requires being aware of and attentive to each individual pupil as they interact with other pupils. That is, it is not just labor intensive but calls for a kind of keen observation for which even Vivian Paley had to sometimes resort to replaying taped conversations to hear what was happening in her classroom. Regardless of the disputes over whether class size affects achievement as measured on standardized tests, the business of trying to enable students to function in symmetrical relationships looms as a huge challenge in what might otherwise be deemed to be "workable" class sizes. Clearly, this work cannot reasonably be called "scalable." A second difficulty comes in a more subtle form. For Daniel's teacher to look after him or for Paley to look after Lisa in the way she does is psychologically tricky business.

As Adam Phillips calls us to consider in *Equals*, "If the best thing we do is look after each other, then the worst thing we do is pretend to look after each other, when in fact we are doing something else" (2002, p. xi). As adults trying to help Daniel and Lisa learn to function in symmetrical relationships, these teachers have, *pace* Phillips, to keep track of themselves in a way that does not hamper helping their students. This would be not unlike the challenge faced by the psychoanalyst. In a sense, self-aware teaching might be a precondition for democracy: "that a person be able to more than bear conflict, and be able to see and enjoy the value of differing voices and alternative positions" (2003, p. 17). In this view, the teachers' task is yet more complex than just helping Daniel understand his kicking sand at his playmate as an inappropriate response to his own disappointment or helping Lisa understand her proclivity to control who can play as an expression of her own jealousy. Applied in this context, Phillips' point is that unless the teachers are self-aware and alert to their own proclivities, they may well be responding to their own internal worlds rather than to their students. What is the source of the garden-variety wrathful reaction of Abby's teacher to her hitting her playmate? Whatever could provoke a teacher to demolish a child and walk away from the devastation? Surely such is something within the teacher, not the child.

The third difficulty is that providing the needed guidance for helping another function as equal to others calls heavily on the imagination, as can be seen in Paley's work. No one could prescribe for Vivian Paley the Magpie story that she created to provide the particular space for the children to consider the complexity of learning not to reject one another. In an important sense, Lisa *needed* a Beatrix with whom to identify, in order to perceive and name her own jealousy. She *needed* to say that she did not want Magpie to let Beatrix be mean, in order to herself accept the new rule that Paley made the focal point of discussions. One teacher recently reported to me that Paley's rule is functioning in many classrooms. Unless in those classrooms there are also teachers creating stories to provide the space for their particular students to see and think about their own reservations about the rule, I am dubious. The rule is one thing. The imagination to open up needed possibilities is quite another. Such imaginative guidance calls for both extraordinary self-understanding and an appreciation of the causes of human action as explicable by reference to both belief *and* desire, as Davidson (1980) argues, whether or not the action, the belief, and the desire are in the field of one's awareness, as Wollheim (1993), among others, calls us to see. Hard as it is, such guidance may not be out of reach, but surely will be until we can bring the pedagogic moves, such as Paley makes, into view.

The fourth difficulty is of an entirely different order. For some "pupils" (here I have no upper age limit in mind), symmetrical relationships may simply not be a possibility, for they dwell in contexts where the very self that democratic relations requires has not formed or has been obliterated. I believe that this fact presents a huge obstacle to those who place their hope for curbing cruelty via democratic or symmetrical relations. In *Rethinking Democracy*, Gould (1988) calls us to consider what constitutes a democratic personality, but does not think that such is necessary to run a democracy. I'm not so sure. I think of the suicidal terrorists who have introduced a new (yet old) genre of cruelty. As Stein (2009) describes in her book *For Love of the Father*, this genre of mostly male extremist willingly take their own lives in killing "God's enemies," in order to merge with a transcendent, all-powerful male God. In this way of being (or, one might say, non-being), democracy is totally irrelevant and certainly not desirable. Further, there is only one relationship that matters, that of filial submission and sacrifice—a way of being in which the very cruelty of the acts of deadly terrorism is itself unacknowledged, for there is no functioning self but only a self foregone in the submission.

Here I call you to place two images alongside one another. On one side, think of what Paley does. Think, say, of Paley telling the Magpie story and of Lisa's identifying with Beatrix. Think of Paley attending to Lisa as she realizes that her own jealousy makes her mean toward the other children and considers the possibility of being nice. On the other, I ask you to place the image of Mohammed Atta, the 33-year-old man who participated in the hijack of one of the planes that were flown into the World Trade Center, as he may have reviewed the four-page document found in his luggage. Written to steady one struggling and possibly weak before the planned course, this document appears as a letter to himself. It instructs him on what he should feel and how he should act. Among numbered notes, presented as if a checklist of instructions, we find in number 4, "Remind your soul to listen and obey [all divine orders] and remember that you will face decisive situations that might prevent you from 100 percent obedience, so tame your soul, purify it, convince it, make it understand, and incite it," and in number 8, "You should feel complete tranquility, because the time between you and your marriage [in heaven] is very short. Afterward begins the happy life, where God is satisfied with you" (Reprinted in Stein 2009, pp. 143–144).

In both pictures we see asymmetrical relations and a desire to please the one in the upper position. Lisa trusts and wants to please her teacher; she is even willing to consider how she could accept the rule, because her teacher seems more powerful than her jealousy. Lisa emerges as nicer or more compassionate, more able to participate in symmetrical relationships. Mohammad Atta tries to overcome what he might be feeling that could make him too weak to carry out the plan that he believes will finally make God satisfied with him. Mohammad Atta entrusts himself to God, believing that nothing about he himself matters other than obedience to God. The point I want to make is this. In rejecting some children from play, Lisa acted as an ordinary bully. Understanding how the asymmetrical relationship between Paley and Lisa functions to make Lisa more capable of participating in symmetrical relations will help us make ours a more compassionate world. The asymmetrical relation between these two humans who are present to one another is where the poetry of transformation from meanness to kindness, from cruelty to compassion, is written. We may not collectively know enough yet to understand what would be required to enable others "minded" as was Mohammad Atta to function in symmetrical relationships. However, I think that we can say with some confidence that if it can be done, that will happen only in the context of asymmetrical relationships between actual persons, with one looking after the other, strange though that may seem and difficult though that may be.

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