

Is Education Possible Today?

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Topics

by [David T. Hansen](#) — 2015

Background/ Context: *This article was presented as the Weinberg Lecture at Teachers College, Columbia University, on September 26, 2013. On that occasion the author was formally inducted as the John L. and Sue Ann Weinberg Professor in the Historical and Philosophical Foundations of Education at Teachers College. In attendance were Sue Ann Weinberg (Ed.D., Teachers College, 1997), President Susan Fuhrman, Provost Thomas James, faculty and students of the College, and guests.*

Purpose/ Objective: *The purpose of the lecture was to pose the question whether education is possible today. The author begins by contrasting two prevalent responses to the question: (1) that it is obviously possible since we can see all around us teachers and students working in classrooms, and (2) that it is obviously not possible because the educational system has been subverted to serve the ends of a global economic order. The author argues that while there is evidence to support both responses, they dismiss, in effect, the question of education's possibility and thus undermine its authentic enactment. The article describes an approach to keeping the question open and in public view.*

Research Design: *The article is a philosophical essay that examines contrasting views of education and the values they foreground.*

Conclusions/ Recommendations *The author encourages fellow educators to accept the invitation philosophy holds out to them. This invitation is to cross the threshold into a reflective consciousness that our educational actions always mirror underlying values and commitments, which in turn have political ramifications with regards to how we constitute our institutions and practices. Moreover, the invitation to philosophy embodies a gift: in propelling us to examine values and presumptions, it helps make possible education itself, understood as the holistic cultivation of the human being in company with other human beings. The question of education is the one question we need to keep open in order to ensure the continuation of education itself.*

The question I will address in this essay appears in its title: *Is education possible today?* I will try to establish two points: (1) that it is not obvious what the answer to the question is, and (2) that the question is more important than any particular answer we might give to it. This claim pertains to my own response to the question, which I will sketch in due course. If there is one thing I hope the reader might take from the inquiry, it will not be my particular

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response, but rather a grasp of the necessity of the question and, even more than that, a sense of how crucial it is to keep the question of education's possibility alive and articulate—to hold it in our hands, metaphorically speaking, with care, thought, and passion. It is the question, not our working, ever-shifting answers to it, that makes education possible. The moment we presume that a given answer to it is sufficient—including the claim that education is its own end—is the moment when we've closed down education and converted it into something else.

It is an ancient truth that philosophy takes its time. Put another way, a person cannot rush thinking but rather must follow the course of thinking. I will pursue such a course here in order to make sensible, I hope, the strange idea that a question can be more important for our educational well-being than an answer. The inquiry will necessarily have quixotic and inconclusive aspects, as befits any attempt to contain the concept education within boundaries.

WHY THE ANSWERS ARE NOT THE ANSWER

There is a famous saying about Julius Caesar that concerns the effect he had on his world. Someone wondered one day whether there was a monument to him in some public space in Rome or elsewhere. The answer this person received was: If you seek his monument, just look around, and you will see his effects everywhere you turn. This same answer can be given to the question, Is education possible today? *Just look around*. Some would point to the fact that on any given day of the academic calendar, uncountable numbers of teachers in schools and professors in universities teach classes. We know from research, published testimonies, and personal experience that many of these educators work hard to accomplish something educationally meaningful. Put another way, if we suddenly became Olympian gods and could observe each and every one of these educators, I have no doubts that we would witness not just effort but success in realizing genuine, formative educational experience—experience that transformed students, and perhaps the educators themselves, in good, positive intellectual, aesthetic, ethical, and reflective ways, however microscopic or hard to discern the changes might be.

Thus, to ask whether education is possible today seems almost like asking whether anyone had a drink of water today or ate some food, or, perhaps more fittingly, it is like asking whether anyone today did a good deed. Why would anyone claim that *not one* of the billions of human beings

alive today on the planet did a good deed? That not a single person engaged in an act of kindness, of respect, of compassion? In short, it seems obvious that education *is* possible today because it happens every school day of the year. Consequently, the title of this essay poses a merely rhetorical but not genuine question.

However, others who might also say “just look around” to the pilgrim asking about education’s possibility would point elsewhere on the landscape. They would spotlight evidence observable throughout the educational system, from preschool through graduate school, which suggests that education understood as the holistic cultivation of the human being in company with other human beings is not possible today. The conditions and the political and moral will to realize it in scale simply do not exist. Critics would emphasize how the imperatives and the reward structures of a globalizing economic order have reduced education into a courtesy term for what amounts to little more than shaping people to fit into that global economic system. The much ballyhooed idea of “lifelong learning” that we hear so much about signifies nothing more, from this point of view, than leading people to internalize this shaping function, so that they continuously adapt themselves to the system rather than so much as question it. People are led to seek credentialing and endless job training, but not education. Critics would say: People today learn, but the system doesn’t engage them in education. Lifelong learning—which is to say, lifelong credentialing and adapting to the needs of the system—is indeed possible because that is what the ethos supports. Lifelong *education*, on the other hand, is not possible, save for a widely scattered community of people who try to keep alive a depth notion of education, perhaps like the memorizers and thus preservers of books in Ray Bradbury’s futuristic story *Fahrenheit 451*. From this perspective, education today on any meaningful social scale is obviously *not* possible because the larger system does not treat education as desirable.

Our answers thus far add up to an obvious yes, education in a depth sense is possible if we look at what many preschool through graduate school educators actually do, and an obvious no, that whatever those individual, singular efforts may be, they are being marginalized by the force of systemic structures and policies.

A natural, Deweyan move here would be to say to the pilgrim who is seeking to know whether education is possible: let us fashion an inhabitable balance between these stark yes’s and no’s. I say “inhabitable” because it seems to me that no educator in her or his right conscience could possibly show up for work tomorrow if they truly believed that education was not possible and that they and

their students were, in effect, manikins acting out the requirements of a globalizing economic order. However, I also use the word inhabitable because to ignore the reality of that all-too-powerful order and its effects is to create a fantasy land as harmful to educators as to students. Perhaps then, we should try to elucidate what this inhabitable balance might look like and how to bring it into being.

The quest for an inhabitable balance is realistic as well as honorable. It is not a retreat or withdrawal from the hard truths of our time, and nor is it a mute surrender to the force of those truths. The balancing act, especially when undertaken in concert with colleagues, can constitute an authentic, meaningful reaching out for actual educational possibilities.

I want to resist pursuing this middle way, however much I admire the pragmatist thinker whose name I evoked a moment ago. For the purposes of the inquiry here, the way of “maybe” or “sometimes” or “it depends” is no better than the way of a stark yes or no, that education is possible or is not possible. In effect, all three ways dismiss the question of education’s possibility. They run right past the question.

PHILOSOPHY AS THEORY, PHILOSOPHY AS PRACTICE (THE ART OF LIVING)

I hope to stay with the question—to stand with it, to circle around it, to look inside it, to apprehend and feel its presence as fully as possible. There are a number of philosophical approaches toward making such a move. By “philosophical” I do not mean solely in the disciplinary sense of the term philosophy, in which the inquirer investigates issues by deploying sub-fields such as aesthetics, ethics, and epistemology. I also do not mean philosophical solely in an analytic sense of elucidating step by step particular concepts and constituents of an argument, though I hope to be clear enough here. By philosophical approach, I also have in mind the long-standing sense of philosophy as the art of living. In this ancient and still vibrant tradition, it is not solely questions such as “What is knowledge and what differentiates it from belief?” or “What is justice and what differentiates it from social convention?” that matter, but also questions such as “What knowledge is most germane if I aspire to lead an ethical life? What knowledge will help me be just toward other people, toward the world writ large, and toward myself?” In philosophy as the art of living, it is the questioner, not just the question, that is of concern. The person her- or himself is in question, just as are a particular constellation of concepts, ideas, and attendant

actions. In brief, to ask, “Is education possible today?” is not merely a theoretical or empirical question, but puts every person who poses it *in* question.

For this reason, to stay near the question of education’s possibility demands something more from us than the familiar and sensible notion of being what many have called reflective practitioners. I wholeheartedly agree that it is crucial to be reflective about what we do as educational researchers, teachers, administrators, and the like. This professional requirement is certainly demanding enough, as anyone who has toiled in the educational trenches well knows. However, there is something as important as all of that, which is not just thinking “about” the question of education’s possibility but rather *living* the question, a topic I take up in the next section.

LIVING WITH/IN THE QUESTION OF EDUCATION’S POSSIBILITY

Readers who know the work of the poet Rainer Maria Rilke will recognize the odd-sounding notion of living a question. In his famous and beloved *Letters to a Young Poet*, Rilke encourages a young neophyte with whom he’s been corresponding to have courage, to stay the course through the inevitable failures and frustrations of learning the poet’s craft. Rilke writes:

You are so young, so much before all beginning, and I would like to beg you, dear Sir, as well as I can, to have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and to try to love *the questions themselves* . . . *Live* the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer. (1986, pp. 34–35)

I part company with Rilke’s vision in but one way, which is to say I cannot imagine “the” answer to education’s possibility (in his letter, I suspect Rilke means “the answer” that will come to life for his young correspondent). While all educators in their everyday work do enact *an* answer to the question, I want to argue that there is a special significance in living with it and in it, in holding it open despite the whirlwind internal and external pressures that can conspire to slam it shut.

What might it mean to live the question, Is education possible today? Consider, first, the proposition that the unsettled, precarious state of education I have touched on

has always been the case. By “always,” I mean more or less since that mysterious moment long ago when, for the first time on planet earth, a human being said to her- or himself something like this:

“Why are we living this way? Why are we believing the things we believe? How come we’re doing the things that we’re doing?”

That same person may also have asked her- or himself these questions:

“Who or what am I? Why am I here rather than not here? What am I to make of this thing, this reality, called ‘life’? How should I lead my life?”

The register of these terms is contemporary, but their meaning is old. They are fundamentally ethical in the sense of having to do not just with theoretical matters but with the most practical matters of all: how to conduct one’s singular life, and how our communities might conduct their collective lives.

Here I am making use of a long-standing distinction between the moral and ethics, in which the former term is outward-looking, in the sense of spotlighting how we regard and treat other people, while ethics is inward-looking, in the sense of highlighting the extent to which a person cultivates, as fully as circumstances allow, her or his aesthetic, moral, and reflective capacities. This idea of an ethics of the self is not individualistic, since people cultivate their aesthetic, moral, and reflective capacities in and through their lives with others. In what follows, I will be deploying ethics in this particular sense, as it moves in company with but is distinct from the concept moral.

Now, goodness knows when that first appearance I mentioned a moment ago of questioning the given actually happened, and goodness knows how it came to be. In written letters, we think of Plato, Confucius, and the philosophically and spiritually minded writers of the Upanishads, all of whom posed such questions. One thing we can say is that this moment of questioning the so-called ways things are has now been repeated uncountable times across the generations.

I want to suggest that this moral and ethical questioning of

the given—of what we see around us and of what we see in ourselves—is an ancient and now long-standing version of the question: Is education possible? Put another way, this questioning means living with and in the question of education's possibility. When that inaugurating person long ago posed those questions about why we're living the way we are and why she is living the way she is, she moved in that moment outside the circle of culture, not with both feet, as it were, since that seems existentially impossible, but with at least one foot. She moved outside the precincts of what we call socialization and into those called education.

EDUCATION IS NOT A SYNONYM WITH SOCIALIZATION, INSTRUCTION, OR TRAINING

These claims call to mind familiar distinctions between education and socialization, and why the former is not reducible to the latter. There are rich and deep philosophical reasons for why we would like to refer, in schools of education, to teacher *education* programs rather than to *socializer preparation* programs. Education and socialization are not synonyms. To be sure, socialization is a prerequisite for education or, put another way, it walks hand in hand with it in many ways. To be able to pose in a reflective and sustained way those questions about how we are leading our lives, we need to have grown up in a language. We need to have grown up with people so that we can partake in the dynamics of communication. The latter encompass both the internal conversation with oneself that Plato at certain points called thinking, and the external process of thinking out loud with other people, an experience often called dialogue.

Socialization and education are not in their very constitution antithetical to one another, though there are always tensions between them. Education as we know has its root in the Latin *educare*, a many-sided concept one of whose most oft-cited meanings is "to lead out." Many people over the centuries have taken this notion to mean that education is a term of art for the process of drawing out, or leading out, the potential and possibilities in a human being. But to lead out does not necessarily imply leading away. To guide a human being or to guide oneself into the space of education does not ipso facto mean breaking with one's socialization or upbringing. To move outside the circle of culture, i.e., outside the circle of one's socialization, does not necessarily require rupturing that circle. To loosen the hold that socialization may have on a person does not mean the person must break her or his hold on their socialization. In this light, education implies crafting what we might think of as a dynamic relation with one's socialization (i.e., culture).

Education does imply movement along unscripted lines. Education exists in tension with socialization because the latter is, in a sense, constituted by nothing but scripts—and, again, thanks heavens for that. Metaphorically speaking, we need to learn our lines if we're going to get to a point where we can create our own. We need what socialization pours in (consider also a related term, enculturation, which connotes the necessary experience as an infant and child of being bathed in culture). Another way to say this is that we all need instruction and training, although education is not reducible to either instruction or training or their combination. Socialization is, in a sense, an unbroken stream of instruction and training. We are instructed in so many things by our families and communities, and as little ones we're like veritable learning machines, gulping down one lesson after another in the course of each day's experience: how to tie our shoes, use a toilet, wait our turn, and a million and one other lessons. In school we're instructed in reading, writing, mathematics, science, history, and many other subjects. We learn skills, capacities, and know-how, and we learn a lot of information about the world. All of this constitutes an honorable notion of formative tuition that can help a person learn to function well in society.

However, as I am underscoring here education has to do with more than functioning, invaluable as the latter accomplishment may be. The danger in ceding the idea of education to a functionalist outlook is that we may no longer be able to conceive, or pose, the question of education's possibility in all its living depth. Education describes a different relation than socialization, instruction, and training with what is taken as given, as natural, as the ways things are. To echo the image of humanity's very first questioner I conjured a moment ago, I take education to mean, in part, discovering the primordial cultural fact that human affairs are indeed often taken as "the way things are." That startling discovery involves the further recognition that you yourself, as a human being, are in fact not given, not natural in the sense of having a predetermined future in the manner of an acorn or fish egg. Unlike an acorn, you can have knowledge of yourself, and (crucially) this knowledge of yourself can change your life (Landmann, 1974, p. 19). Education is the discovery that you can participate in writing your own script – indeed, that this mysterious, incredible, and in some ways utterly unlikely thing called a human life holds out the possibility of doing just that.

This viewpoint is not individualistic, because nobody can write a meaningful script *de novo*. Education presupposes dynamic traditions of thinking, imagining, and questioning that reach back millennia, with many of these embedded in what we call academic subjects. Critics who believe that education is no longer possible might argue that these traditions have been sundered today, to the point where

academic subjects have become a mere means to successful credentialing.

ORIGINS OF THE QUESTION OF EDUCATION'S POSSIBILITY: WONDER AND CONCERN

Education is, in part, born out of wonder—deep, affecting wonder at the realization that as a human being, “I actually am.” Those words come from an essay by the 19th century American scholar Ralph Waldo Emerson (1983, p. 263), in which he turns on its head René Descartes’ famous claim, “*Cogito ergo sum*: I think, therefore I am.” For Emerson, in contrast with Descartes, the discovery that I actually am is the moment when I truly begin to think. Here thinking denotes more than ratiocination, deliberation, or problem solving. Rather it means responding to the world. In technical terms, it connotes thinking the world and being thought by the world, in a paradoxical manner of standing right outside the world and right inside it, so that thinking in this sense never objectifies the world nor subjectifies the thinker but moves within the space of an ever-dynamic relation between them. Thinking becomes a way of moving in and with the world.

For example, I look out the window at the sunset and contemplate its beauty and majesty. My thinking just *is* this beauty and majesty, not something that occurs apart from it. This beauty and majesty light up my mind. The sunset is and I am, therefore I think.

I read a poem and interpret its words and lines. My thinking is both triggered and constituted, i.e., substantiated, by those words and lines, just as the latter literally move off the printed page thanks to my thinking. The poem is and I am, therefore I think.

Put another way, thinking can be thought of as a primordial mode of thanking. This trope is Martin Heidegger’s, which the philosopher Stephen Mulhall (2007) glosses as follows:

Thinking is an expression of the desire to give thanks, hence an expression of gratitude. But for what? Above all, perhaps, for the capacity to think; but surely also for the continued existence of a world capable of eliciting our desire to think – a world in which we can take that kind of interest, one which repays that interest, hence a world of things to appreciate or appraise. (p. 99)

The world we are in can elicit or call out our thinking because it can show us, if we are attuned to it, that we actually are. This point is worth emphasizing. Before we take on socialized, conventional habits of conceiving purposes, activities, and plans, *we actually are*. We can give ourselves over uncritically to our socialized habits, or we can question them and come upon the discovery that our human lives are not so preordained. We can begin to think, truly think, perhaps for the first time.

For the one who questions—that is, for the one who has become a thinker, at least intermittently—these discoveries born of wonder soon join a discovery born of concern. In the course of socialization as it becomes interspersed with moments for education, a person soon realizes that there is often much about the world of human institutions that thwarts, blocks, undermines, or cheapens not just one's own script-writing but that of others. We come full circle again, for to experience these discoveries, these moments of wonder and of concern, just is to encounter in a first-hand way the question, Is education possible today? More than that, these discoveries born of wonder and concern mean *feeling* the presence of the question, and how it can come to variously enrich, haunt, or trouble one's ways of moving in the world. This observation points to the risks and the costs of keeping company with the question, a topic to which I return later in the essay.

EDUCATORS ALWAYS ENACT A WORKING ANSWER TO THE QUESTION, BUT CAN ALSO HOLD THE QUESTION OPEN

To take stock: What I have endeavored to do thus far is *portray* a philosophical approach toward how to stay with and in the question of education's possibility. I do not have an actual canvas here upon which to paint a portrait of the approach. Instead, I have been hanging words in the air, in the hope that they would crystalize into something that can be envisioned. The approach has to do with staying near the question of education's possibility, of keeping ourselves tethered to it, mindful of it, aware of it, heedful of it.

The approach can seem unproductive. It is possible, for instance, to view the core question about education's possibility as an "idle" one, in the sense that it seems quite removed from the realm of actual educational work. It may also appear to be an "idyll" question, appealing to utopian ideals about education that have never been and never will be attainable. It could also be an "idol(atrous)" question that only an ivory tower philosopher would take seriously.

What may seem strange about the approach I have taken is that it seems to imply stripping away of a lot of things that we typically associate with education. Socialization, enculturation, instruction, training, earning credentials—if you try to distinguish education from all these things, aren't you left with an empty hand? With literally nothing to say?

In a way, the answer to these questions is: Yes. To remain near the question of education's possibility is to discipline oneself to listen, to attend, and to be silent. It is to learn to wait for insight through this process of contemplative silence. To heed the question whether education is possible is to resist the quick and perhaps too easy answer, like those yes, no, and maybe responses I characterized in a previous section. It is to resist them when they come from other people or society writ large—and they can drop on our heads like bricks—but also when (sometimes especially when) the answers come from ourselves. When I say resist I do not mean reject, for that can merely become the flip side of taking the easy, unreflective route. I mean holding off, taking time to assess claims about education, and to find worthy criteria in concert with others for judging those claims and for articulating one's own.

This notion of waiting, attending, and listening does not imply an absence of action. For one thing, to pose and to work the question of education's possibility can be a mode of action even if it doesn't involve constructing, building, or tearing down material things in the world. It is especially a form of action when undertaken publicly, that is to say with other people who bring to the table serious ideas and aspirations about education. For another thing, to keep in hand the question of education's possibility can accompany the action we typically associate with the educator. As we know very well, every educator does have to do things, many things. When school opens tomorrow morning, teachers in the first period of the day will do many things. They will need to act rather than merely think about the forms their action might take. Put another way, they'll need to enact a response, if not in so many words, to the question of what education is and whether it is possible. They will need to act according to their best curricular and pedagogical lights.

However, these truisms do not imply a split between philosophy and practice. It may sound contradictory to say that an educator can live wholeheartedly a response to the question of education's meaning and possibility while simultaneously holding open the question in a genuine spirit. In my experience, good teachers from preschool through graduate school show us time and again that this dexterous posture is possible, if not easy. To enact a vision of education day by day in the classroom does not imply being dogmatic, doctrinaire, or intransigent in one's

approach. For teachers who have discovered how natural philosophical questions are—and my sense is that there are many such teachers even if they would never refer directly to the term philosophical—dwelling with tensions between one's actions and one's aims, concerns, doubts, and hopes is part of the job itself.

ANOTHER ORIGIN OF THE QUESTION: THE SUFFERING EDUCATION ENTAILS

Dwelling with tension does not mean that keeping company with the question of education's possibility becomes henceforth a simple, straightforward affair. Quite the contrary. A living awareness of the question can bring on modes of suffering reminiscent, in a distant way, of the anguish Socrates and Confucius experienced when they discovered that their public philosophizing sometimes alienated them from their communities. However, I have in mind here, in a more immediate and pressing way, the anguish many teachers today feel, from preschool through graduate school, when their sense of the beautiful openness of education conflicts with what the system expects or will support.

The literature on teaching is replete with accounts of this suffering, and anyone with the opportunity to talk at length with dedicated teachers will have their eyes opened. The most memorable experience of late, for me, was listening to an accomplished primary school teacher (with whom I am working on a long-term project) recount her reaction to another teacher who had just described his sense of loss at learning that a former student of his, recently graduated from school, had been killed in an automobile accident. With tears in her eyes, the primary school teacher pictured what it would be like for the parents of the lost youth to go into his room and find that the only artifacts of his time in school were a set of standardized test preparation books. A critic might dub her account melodramatic. To me it constitutes a telling, vivid image of the suffering in education today on the part of those aware, if not in so many words, of the question of education's possibility. For a successful, admired teacher to make a wrenching comment like this suggests that something is amiss in our educational universe. Another critic might call her comment irrational. But it is precisely what is called a *cri de coeur*—a cry of the heart, a cry of the soul. There are good teachers today who question whether they will ever be “at home” in the sense of truly realizing with their students their deepest longings about education's promise.

The history of letters in the United States is replete with accounts of the *experience* of the question of education's

possibility, including the suffering that accompanies it. The accounts I have in mind are not educational treatises or attempts to theorize education. Rather, they embody about what it means to live the question. These accounts range from Elizabeth Cady Stanton's autobiography, *80 Years and More*, to Jane Addams' narrative she called *Twenty Years at Hull House*, to Richard Rodriguez's memoir, *Hunger for Memory*. These are provocative, often controversial stories of pain, doubt, and confusion, just as they are stories of accomplishment and joy, and all of this engendered through the moment for education that the kinds of questioning touched on in this essay can generate.

Let me single out, from among these and many other examples, W. E. B. Du Bois' short story entitled "The Coming of John" in the book of writings he assembled and called *The Souls of Black Folk*, first published in 1903. In "The Coming of John," a young black man from the South—this is in the Jim Crow era as it obtained in the late 19th century—succeeds in earning a degree from a northern college. He returns home and for a time is able to run a school for black children—the very first one in the history of the region—but eventually is forced to close it down by a powerful white business man and land owner who dominates the town, and who thinks that John is going too far in opening his students' minds to the possibilities of questioning. A tragedy ensues when John kills the white man's son—with whom he had played as a boy—when he comes upon the latter assaulting his sister. John makes no attempt to flee, and is caught and immediately lynched without so much as the resemblance of a trial.

Among the many sobering aspects of this exquisitely rendered if shattering tale is Du Bois' reflections, enacted in the voice of John, about the costs of having experienced the question of education's possibility. John feels thrown and for a time alienated from all quarters of society, not just from the realities of a racist social order but from his local black community in which he grew up. He tries to move beyond this condition by organizing and running the school I mentioned. But his education has, it seems, propelled him outside the given and the taken for granted. It has rendered him *atopos*, an ancient Greek term for "out of place." Numerous commentators have applied that term to Socrates, who as we know was eventually put to death by the powers that be for being, as it were, out of place or, as I would put it in the terms of this inquiry, *in* the place for education.

John's experience captures the sometimes haunting, unsettling, vertiginous condition that is part of being truly present to the question of education's possibility. His experience is well-expressed in a poem called "The

Wanderer," written by the 19th century German poet Georg Phillip Schmidt and adapted for song by Franz Schubert (2005, p. 9):

I come down from the mountains,
The valley dims, the sea roars.
I wander silently and am somewhat unhappy.
And my sighs always ask "Where?"

The sun seems so cold to me here,
The flowers faded, the life old,
And what they say has an empty sound;
I am a stranger everywhere.

Where are you, my dear land?
Sought and brought to mind, yet never known,
That land, so hopefully green,
That land, where my roses bloom,

Where my friends wander
Where my dead ones rise from the sea,
That land where they speak my language,
Oh land, where are you?

I wander silently and am somewhat unhappy,
And my sighs always ask "Where?"
In a ghostly breath it calls back to me,
"There, where you are not, there is your happiness."

The poem echoes Romantic motifs from the late 18th and early 19th centuries in Germany and elsewhere, a time when numerous writers, artists, teachers, and others took inspiration from the American and French Revolutions for a reformation of political and cultural life. The poem also mirrors Romantic concerns about the rapid economic transformations occurring at the time, which would soon

culminate in what we call the Industrial Revolution. These concerns extended to worries about rationalistic, engineering, and acquisitive mentalities that some observers feared would come to dominate life and render art a superfluous frill, rather than treat it as central to human well-being both individually and collectively. There are clear analogues with contemporary questions regarding the present and future human condition, including what is to become of education.

I do not know whether Du Bois knew the poem in the form that Schubert gave it. We do know that Du Bois studied for several years in Germany as a graduate student and became familiar with German philosophy, poetry, music, and literature. In any case, there is a moment in his story, "The Coming of John," where the young man feels himself both rebuked by the deeply religious community he had grown up in, and guilty and confused at having, in his own way, rebuked it in turn. He is standing outdoors by the sea one evening, alone, when he is joined by his admiring and loving younger sister. "Long they stood together," writes the author (1989, p. 197),

peering over the gray unresting water.

"John," she said, "does it make every one – unhappy when they study and learn lots of things?"

He paused and smiled. "I am afraid it does," he said.

"And, John, are you glad you studied?"

"Yes," came the answer, slowly but positively.

She watched the flickering lights upon the sea, and said thoughtfully, "I wish I was unhappy,—and—and," putting both arms around his neck, "I think I am, a little, John."

CONCLUSION: THE NECESSITY OF THE QUESTION FOR EDUCATION ITSELF

The philosopher Michael Oakeshott is right that education constitutes what he calls, citing the novelist Henry James, an "ordeal of consciousness" (1989, p. 23). As argued here, to come into the space of education poses a risk: It will overturn an easy complacency because it triggers concern and its associated modes of suffering. However, that space also allows the person to experience wonder in the richest sense of the term. It would be hard to describe adequately Du Bois' compelling account of John's euphoric, ecstatic state of mind when he goes to a concert one night, while at

university, and finds himself literally taken up, or taken out of himself, by the music. John is stunned by encountering such marvelous, artistic creativity. In this light, I do not want to imply that dwelling with the question of education's possibility requires a heroic disposition. I would hazard the guess that there are countless teachers at every level of the system who live with the question all the time, if not in so many words. They experience the pleasure and the joy of teaching, even while suffering the constraints and the pressures exerted by today's system.

Still, the question of education's possibility, and of its realization in life, is not easy company. Figuratively speaking, the question addresses people with queries about their self-understanding and self-regard, as well as understanding of and regard for others and the world. The question is also demanding company, since as touched on previously it calls upon the educator to resist the siren call of the straightforward yes or no, and the perhaps too comforting refrain of "well, sometimes." *Is education possible today?* There is a commandingness in the question. It summons to thinking everyone who plays a role in the endeavor we call education. Far easier to elide the question, to turn one's back on it and just keep making decisions no matter what their ultimate effects are on people. Far easier to just keep enacting pedagogy that screens out primordial questions, the kinds of questions that some unknown inaugurator launched millennia ago when she or he wondered about the ways of the human world.

I believe that it is a personal and societal loss to take the easier route. As challenging as the question of education's possibility may be, it harbors a sublime invitation. To pose the question, and to remain near it, is to accept an invitation to philosophy in the theoretical but above all practical sense I mentioned previously. The question is an open invitation to anyone to think deeply about just what we mean by concepts such as education and justice, and yet not solely in and of themselves for the purposes of inquiry, but as concepts that point to our actual ways of life and to how we aspire to lead our lives.

Put another way, the question of education's possibility is an invitation to risk one's self-contained assumptions about education in favor of an outlook more rich and wondrous precisely because it is not preset or predetermined. Friedrich Nietzsche captures the impulse here: the deep yearning to discover and to realize—to make real—the fullness that life is meant to be, which is also the fullness that education is meant to be. "There are moments," Nietzsche writes, "and, as it were, sparks of the brightest, most ardent fire in whose light we no longer understand the word 'I'; there, beyond our being something exists that in

those moments becomes a here and now, and that is why we long with all our hearts for bridges connecting the here and the there” (1995, p. 214). Nietzsche responds to Schubert’s songful rendering of the poem “The Wanderer.” The poet evokes the poignancy of education, that it always seems to point to a place where we are not yet, and a place that we cannot seem to attain in some final, satisfactory manner. But for Nietzsche this condition is also the joy of education. Rather than trying to “arrive” at education in some terminal fashion—as if we could in fact ever hold the holy grail in our hands—Nietzsche focuses upon a bridge—a bridge between here and there, between now and then, between the persons we are today and who we might become tomorrow.

As I have suggested, to dwell on this bridge is precarious and unsettling. However, it provides a clear direction toward what is valuable in the idea of education. In this light, let me conclude this essay by rendering explicit an ongoing, implicit aspect of the philosophical approach I’ve taken to learning how to stand with and in the question of education’s possibility. This aspect has to do with imagining the presence of a third party in all one’s educational work. This idea of an invisible third party echoes or reverberates off the “there” to which Schubert and Nietzsche refer. It is that which is to come, or that which can come depending upon our thought and our conduct. I have had the unpredictable experience—and perhaps the reader has, too—of being in conversation with a person or group of persons and sensing, literally feeling, the possibilities “in the air,” that is to say *sensing* that fresh self-understandings and understandings of others and the world are in the offering if we can hold on, if we can stay in the space of the question and not let it go for some instrumental or strategic end. This experience is to be in the presence of an invisible third party—call it the face of who we might become through education.

These moments mirror those to which Nietzsche points us when he declaims, “There are moments, and, as it were, sparks of the brightest, most ardent fire in whose light we no longer understand the word ‘I.’” I believe we can reconfigure the phrase to also read: moments when we no longer understand the word *we*. To stay with and in the question, “Is education possible today?” is a social, communicative undertaking, as indeed are both philosophy and education themselves in their theoretical, practical, and embodied modes. As I have sought to show, the question of education calls us *into question*, just as it calls us *into questioning* the world around us which includes ourselves. The question of education spotlights all that we presume goes into the endeavor that we would wish to grace with that honorific term. As such, I believe the question constitutes a primordial gift in response to our deepest longings as persons. I urge us all to learn to live the question of education’s possibility, and to never let

anything or anyone ever take the question from us.

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