A Calling of Circles: Ruminations on Living the Research in Everyday Practice

by Carl Leggo

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Prologue

I begin with a narrative of living the research in everyday practice. The story of teaching is always a tangled story. The story of teaching is a story that we can never get right because the right ways are often found only by pursuing or even stumbling in the wrong ways. Most of my students know me as a gentle and generous teacher with a constant store of words of encouragement. I relate to my students out of an abiding sense of desire to help them know their desires. My desire is to call out my students' desires. But for a long time in my teaching I wanted my students' desires to imitate and recapitulate, even fulfill, my desires. And I knew frequent frustration. Then I met a wise old woman who taught me the most important lesson I have ever learned about teaching, a lesson I continue to learn as I continue to lean on the old woman's wisdom.

An Angel and Anger

Friday night is probably not a good night for a teacher to grade essays. After more than four years as a teacher, I should have known that basic principle. But I had been coaching and castigating and coaxing my Grade 10 Language Arts class all week to write the best, the most explosive, the most insightful essays any teacher anywhere in the universe had ever read. I didn't want an essay like vanilla ice cream. I wanted an essay like a Baskin Robbins cone with at least 25 scoops in different flavors.

So, on Friday night I just had to read the essays. I couldn't wait. I should have waited. Essay after essay was listless, colorless, flavorless. They lacked imagination, passion, vibrancy, and evidence of desire to say something or evidence of desire for a reader.

I was mad. I wrote on Larry's essay about riding a snowmobile, "If you spent less time riding a snowmobile and more time sitting at a desk, you might one day write an essay worth reading." I was irate. I didn't write many words on Roberta's essay, but the few words I did write were written with so much fury that I tore the paper with my pen. I was angry. I wrote on Kirby's essay, "Junk!"

All weekend I was mad. I was a volcano, actively simmering, occasionally erupting, waiting for Monday morning when my Grade 10 Language Arts class would be scorched with verbal fire. The weekend was long. But Monday morning finally came; one of those silver winter mornings

when the sun plays in the snow. I decided to walk the two miles to school in order both to enjoy the splendid morning and to rehearse my vitriolic speech.

On the way I saw an old woman carrying several bags of garbage to the end of her driveway. As I approached her, I said, "Good-morning, Ma'am." She looked into my eyes, smiled, and asked, "Where are you going?" "To school," I said. "Are you a teacher?" "Yes." "Such a fine, important job." "A lovely day," I added as I began to pass. "Wait. Just another minute. I have a few words for you." Then that old woman with the smiling face and blue-gray eyes that hinted at the knowing which is the fruit of long living gave me two words of advice.

"Always remember to stop and talk to old people," she said. "They might be lonely." I nodded my head. It was good advice. "And don't be angry with your students. They need you." Then she turned and walked slowly up the driveway and around the side of the house.

A cynic might suggest that my Grade 10 Language Arts class had received some intimation about my anger and had hired the old woman to appease my wrath on that Monday morning. But with a firm belief in the supernatural, I like to think that the old woman was an angelic messenger sent to teach me a rich lesson.

When I met my class, I wasn't angry. I told them this story. They agreed with me. She was an angel.

As the days passed, their essays improved. And whenever my self-centered and volcanic anger threatened to erupt, I remembered the blue-gray eyes afire with strong wisdom.

In *Pedagogy of the Heart*, published posthumously in 1997, Paulo Freire acknowledges from the perspective of a long life nearing its end that his childhood backyard was a space connected to many spaces. Freire encourages me that "the more rooted I am in my location, the more I extend myself to other places so as to become a citizen of the world. No one becomes local from a universal location" (39).

Last January I began teaching a new doctoral seminar, and, for the first time, I checked the etymology of "seminar," and learned that "seminar" is derived from "seminarium": a seed plot or nursery or garden. And since then, I have been ruminating on gardens and backyards and even the experience of meadows of wildflowers. I am learning to breathe with the heart's rhythms as I seek to disclose and know again my location situated in local geographical spaces that represent a location for locution in the bigger world.

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Many years ago, I wrote and performed a play with my secondary school students, a drama about a teacher who is facing a crisis of confidence regarding his calling. We called the play, "You're okay, Mr. Oggel." Recently I wrote a poem recalling the experience.

LEGS DANGLING

sitting on the edge
of the stage
legs dangling
face a big grin

star in the school play,
You're okay, Mr. Oggel,
a story written collaboratively
with my students, about
a teacher who hears his call:

visions of hockey stars
politicians corporate ceo's
prance and preen
in my dreams

always surprised
I am a teacher,
I learn my call

after the play,
Edith, another teacher, says,
That's the saddest play I've ever seen

more surprise

legs dangling
open face
looking into
a corner of the gym
looking through horizons

I am filled with hope
I think

the play's script long lost,
no photographs even

What is the truth?

a persistent calling,
magnetic pulling from what I do,
I am always called away

called by Bob Barker,
come on down, Carl

called up, like a soldier
in the Salvation Army

I called called called,
but nobody heard me,
only when I stopped calling,

I heard a whisper like breath,
light dwelt in me
like light in a stone
when April sun seeps
into winter cracks.

a call can shriek scream stop
summon name utter
demand payment of a loan
awaken visit phone
call a shot, call a hand
call together, call to gather
God-breathed duty

I can be called
back down for on forth in off out up
always on call, within call
perhaps I am called into question
a call for questing

I never wanted to be a teacher

I am not a teacher on call
I am a called teacher
a calling teacher, a teacher calling
always calling for students

I am a caller
at a barn dance
like Calliope
Muse of poetry

Teacher-researchers call to one another, a chorus of voices, calling out, calling together. Frederick Franck in a delightfully wise book titled *A Little Compendium on That Which Matters* writes about "The New Order" which he describes as "the anonymous, unorganized, organic network of awareness beyond all ideological labels" (23). I recognize my own connection to Franck's "New Order": "It is a network of loners, encompassing those who reflect on the meaning of being Human in our technotronic rat trap, who dare to fathom the depths of life, of

death, in order to attain a life-praxis, an ethos suitable for this end-time: a religious orientation to existence. Without badge, without watchword, they recognize, hearten one another" (23-24).

As a teacher-researcher I am part of "a network of loners." A loner, but never alone, I call out, not as part of a caucus voice that mimics another's voice, but as part of a network that gives heart to one another, listening to the rhythms of blood and oxygen in the heart.

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One of the most encouraging books I have read in the past year is Sandra Dean's *Hearts and Minds: A Public School Miracle* in which Dean narrates the extraordinary experience of South Simcoe Public School in Oshawa's inner city. Once regarded only as a school riddled with problems, Dean, as the new principal, lead what she calls "a revolution of the heart" (190). Dean explains that "the key to all that we accomplished at South Simcoe was our focus on respect" (40). "Our Respect program was graphically depicted as a series of concentric circles . . . with Respect for Oneself at the centre. Radiating from this were other circles, representing Respect for Others in the Classroom; Respect for Others in the School; Respect for the Family; Respect for the Local Community; Respect for the Environment; and Respect for Others in the Global Community-- different cultures, races and backgrounds" (155-156).

Circles are infinitely generative. We can think of circles as concentric, like Sandra Dean, who remembers her grandmother in Trinidad drawing her attention to the way that circles emanate from a centre when you place your finger in water. We can think of circles as links in a chain. We can think of circles as planes that comprise a sphere, an infinite enfolding and unfolding of circular possibilities.

I often feel like Winnie the Pooh when he was lost in the forest with Tigger and Piglet. They searched for home and always returned to the same hole. Finally Pooh suggests, "Let's look for this hole, and perhaps we'll find home." That's what I am doing. I am looking for the (w)hole, and I am finding my sojourn a wholesome way to live.

CLIFF EDGES

I went away. Falling water imagined
me in other places I have been,
I wish to be. My moonshone spirit
leaps off cliff edges without even
looking for a river to fall into.

The world is a hot, noisy place
like a pulp and paper mill. Still
the only place I want to be.
I will not write the world
with a refusal to lean on light,

like Caitlin who filled binders
with scraps of disaster and dread,
like a deranged disciple

of Peter Mansbridge, well-paid
to point out a world of woe,
perhaps no longer recognizes joy,
like the colour-blind, can't even
comprehend whole bands of possibility.

I will not record the lines only
of shadow's sadness, leaning on light,
a rumination of rough cut stones,
all always recalled in the blood
with its own circular course.

What is pedagogy? In ancient times, a family servant called a pedagogue lead the child (Gr. *paidagogos*, paidos=child+agein=to lead) to the teacher, to the place of teaching and learning. The pedagogue journeyed with the student. And lately, I have been ruminating on another lovely Greek word, *paraclete*, which means the one who walks alongside of you, interceding, advocating, calling, comforting. Teachers and students live in the space ecologists call the ecotone, the space where diverse ecological habitats, such as a meadow and a forest, intersect, a space of tension, a space of fecundity, a space of complex and intense liveliness, only possible with the overlapping of distinctive differences. Like the blood's circular flow, the pedagogic journey flows in circles.

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Thornton Wilder wrote a well-known drama titled *Our Town*. Emily has died, but she is granted one day to return to her home. She observes the people of her town, and as she returns to the graveyard, she asks the stage manager, "Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it?" The stage manager replies, "No. The saints and poets, maybe. They do some."

I begin each day with the question, How will I live this day? I seek to live each day with energy and imagination and creativity and purpose. I live each day with the memory of two grandmothers. Their stories continue to teach me important lessons about how to live. Just after I was born, my mother's mother, Maudie, moved in and lived with my family for the rest of her life. When she moved in, she was fifty years old. She moved in with my family because her husband had been killed in an auto accident. For the next twenty-five years my grandmother almost never left the house. She spent her days looking out the window of her bedroom. For twenty-five years she mourned the death of her husband. For twenty-five years she ate and slept and looked out the window of her bedroom. Even as a young boy I understood that my grandmother had turned her back on new adventures, new friendships, new emotional experiences. In contrast, consider my wife's grandmother, Amy. She mourned the loss of her husband when she was about sixty years old, but unlike my grandmother this woman refused to surrender her life. Instead she married a school sweetheart she had not seen for decades, and with

her second husband she travelled to Alaska and Utah. And when he died, she married for the third time. And when husband number three died, she married for the fourth time. When I last saw her, she was living in a little house overlooking the harbour of Britannia in Trinity Bay, Newfoundland, and she and her fourth husband, about ninety years old, were a laughing, romantic couple who filled the air with the warmth of their affection.

I tell this story about two grandmothers, one who turned her back on new adventures and one who enthusiastically embraced new adventures, because I am convinced that all of us, of all ages, must live with dauntless imagination and creativity and openness to change. I want to live my life fully in the adventurous way that my wife's grandmother has lived hers. Out of this conviction I frequently find myself questioning and challenging all that I do as a student and teacher and poet and researcher.

As a teacher-researcher, I seek to live with the wisdom of the Native poet Chrystos who writes in *Fire Power*:

"Telling the truth is powerful medicine. It is a fire that lights the way for others" (130).

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Think about the prefix "re" in research (searching again), and also the word "ear" in research, as well as the word "ear" in heart.

In "Three Days to See" (first published in 1932) Helen Keller writes: "Now and then I have tested my seeing friends to discover what they see. Recently I was visited by a very good friend who had just returned from a long walk in the woods, and I asked her what she had observed. 'Nothing in particular,' she replied. I might have been incredulous had I not been accustomed to such responses, for long ago I became convinced tha the seeing see little" (426-427). Keller concludes the essay with words of advice that can inspire all teacher-researchers: "Use your eyes as if tomorrow you would be stricken blind. And the same method can be applied to the other senses. Hear the music of voices, the song of a bird, the mighty strains of an orchestra, as if you would be stricken deaf tomorrow. Touch each object you want to touch as if tomorrow your tactile sense would fail. Smell the perfume of flowers, taste with relish each morsel, as if tomorrow you could never smell and taste again. Make the most of every sense; glory in all the facets of pleasure and beauty which the world reveals to you through the several means of contact which Nature provides" (435-436). Helen Keller not only reminds us to be sensually receptive and perceptive in the world, but she also suggests how much our senses are connected to our imagination, spirit, and humanness. While it is true that we see and smell and touch and taste and hear with our physical senses, we should never forget that each of us has a body that is inextricably connected to a heart. In our researching and writing we need to see and smell and touch and taste and hear with our hearts.

Henry David Thoreau wrote in 1862, the year he died, an essay titled simply "Walking" in which he acknowledges the inexhaustible wonder of the backyard, the neighbourhood, the familiar location of home and community. "My vicinity affords many good walks; and though for so many years I have walked almost every day, and sometimes for several days together, I have not

yet exhausted them . . . . There is in fact a sort of harmony discoverable between the capabilities of the landscape within a circle of ten miles' radius, or the limits of an afternoon walk, and the threescore years and ten of human life. It will never become quite familiar to you" (9). And I am also encouraged by Thoreau's perspectives on knowledge: "We have heard of a Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge. It is said that knowledge is power, and the like. Methinks there is equal need of a Society for the Diffusion of Useful Ignorance, what we will call Beautiful Knowledge, a knowledge useful in a higher sense: for what is most of our boasted so-called knowledge but a conceit that we know something, which robs us of the advantage of our actual ignorance?" (42-43).

As teacher-researchers we need to grow in self-reflexivity. I like the Norman Rockwell illustration in which Norman Rockwell is drawing Norman Rockwell as he observes Norman Rockwell drawing in a mirror. I am thinking here, not about Narcissus and destructive self-absorption, but about the model of Socrates walking in the garden, a train of students in tow, questions rising like soap bubbles. We need to create a community of questioners committed to the truth that beyond every question is another question, the truth that, while truth is never wholly attainable, the striving for it is the true way.

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Whenever I grow pessimistic or cynical, I return to Paulo Freire in whom I hear a voice full of passion and hope, compassion and concern: "Each day be open to the world, be ready to think; each day be ready not to accept what is said just because it is said, be predisposed to reread what is read; each day investigate, question, and doubt" (*Politics*, 181).

What is everyday? Is there any other kind of practice besides everyday practice. Living is the stuff of everyday. So, our research ought to focus on a curriculum of joy, a curriculum of hope, a curriculum of ecology, a curriculum of community, a curriculum of living, a curriculum of the heart.

THE TEACHER'S WAY
lingering in the spaces of the sentence
(for Ted Aoki)

on the edge of morning
a heron stands still
in the slough near the dike
where I walk daily.
gulls hang in the sky.
a sea lion rests with the river.
an eagle watches from the tallest alder.
the whole world lingers.

this is the teacher's way

I too wait and watch,
my image upside down
in the smooth river,
all the world
topsy turvy but
still in balance,
learning to be still, even
in a vertiginous world.

this is the teacher's way

I meet an old woman
who asks, can you tell me
where to find the slough
with chocolate lilies?
they only flower in April, she says.
I have never seen chocolate lilies,
I confess. I look for them.
I am glad she invited me to look.

this is the teacher's way

on the edge of the day I
dance and laugh all the ducks
in the slough in the air.
our wild line scribbling
writes the earth, writes us
in the prepositions
which connect all
the parts of the sentence.

this is the teacher's way

spring light fills the aspens alders apples
along the dike where I loiter,
the world conjured in ancient stories,
a space for play where
the past is remembered
for wisdom in the present
and hope for the future, knowing
always the possibilities of verbs.

this is the teacher's way

I seek research that asks the question, What does it mean to be human? Frederick Franck recommends that we learn how "to live in radical openness to pure experiencing in kitchen,

bedroom, subway, newspaper, that is: to everyday life, inside as well as around oneself" (10), to live, as my friend, Celeste Snowber, reminds me, in "the erotics of the everyday." And in that practice I have been profoundly influenced by Ted Aoki who understands that "living in the spaces is what teaching is" (10). For Aoki "the important thing is to understand that if in my class I have 20 students, then there are 21 interspaces between me and students. These interspaces are spaces of possibilities. So what we allow to happen, what can be constituted and reconstituted in those interspaces is what we mean by life in the classroom" (10). Of course there are also interspaces between each student and all the others, constituting a tangled and complex network of lines and spaces of connection and interaction, perhaps without end.

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In *Moby Dick,* Herman Melville describes an episode in which a rowboat is scudding across the ocean in pursuit of a whale. The oarsmen are passionately driven by their single-minded aim to capture the whale; they are groaning with their exertion. The episode is violent and turbulent. Melville observes that the success of the hunt requires that one person do nothing. The person is the harpooner who must sit quietly in the bow of the boat. Melville explains: "To insure the greatest efficiency in the dart, the harpooners of this world must start to their feet from out of idleness, and not from out of toil." Our world is a frantic world, frenetic and frenzied with false hopes and facile solutions. Such a world aches for harpooners who can rise out of stillness to engage in wise and worthwhile action.

A few years ago I visited my daughter's secondary school in order to meet her teachers. When I returned home I told Anna how much I was impressed with her teachers and with the atmosphere of the school. Anna replied, "When you enter my school, you feel that people care about you." Anna's description of her school is a tribute to the efforts of teachers and administrators and students at her school, as well as a poignant reminder to me that an effective or successful school is a humane space where people know the experience of caring and being cared for.

For too long curriculum has been equated with textbooks and teacher's guides and teacher's resources; in other words, curriculum is conceived as a noun, but curriculum needs to be conceived as a verb, an action, an ongoing process, shaped and influenced by the dynamic relationships of students and teachers. Curriculum is not static; curriculum is dynamic. Everything that happens in a school is curriculum.

For a long time I considered teachers to be the primary agents of educational change. The Ministry of Education and education textbook authors and Faculty of Education scholars could pose and pontificate all they wanted, but I was convinced that teachers in their classrooms either perpetuated tired practices or nurtured creative changes. But Anna's words remind me to ask, What about the students? Are the students significant agents of educational change? Teachers need to listen to students, teachers need to be taught by students. I am beginning to realize, like Sandra Dean, that everybody involved in schools is an agent of educational change. We are all teachers, learners, researchers.

My hope is to find ways to invite students and teachers and administrators and parents and support staff together to exercise authority as the authors of their own narratives as well as

collaborative narratives based on dialogue and desire for connection. In *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* bell hooks writes, "The first paradigm that shaped my pedagogy was the idea that the classroom should be an exciting place, never boring" (7). Hooks claims that "as a classroom community, our capacity to generate excitement is deeply affected by our interest in one another, in hearing one another's voices, in recognizing one another's presence" (8). Therefore, she notes, that "there must be an ongoing recognition that everyone influences the classroom dynamic, that everyone contributes. These contributions are resources. Used constructively they enhance the capacity of any class to create an open learning community" (8).

Nel Noddings develops an innovative approach to curriculum in *The Challenge to Care in Schools: An Alternative Approach to Education* where she calls for "engrossment" (16): "When I care, I really hear, see, or feel what the other tries to convey" (16). Noddings proposes that "education should be organized around themes of care rather than the traditional disciplines. All students should be engaged in a general education that guides them in caring for self, intimate others, global others, plants, animals, and the environment, the human-made world, and ideas" (173).

Everyone involved in education needs to work together to create schools as caring places where the curriculum is the ongoing process of the school's life, a dynamic process that celebrates the diversity and creativity of the people who live and shape the curriculum, who are the curriculum.

We live in a world that honours a cult of expertise when we need a culture of experience. I return to a personal experience. Years ago when my son was about 6 years old (he is now 20) he complained about a persistent headache, and my wife Lana took him to a doctor, a specialist in pediatric neurology. The doctor examined my son and declared him well. My son continued to complain about a throbbing ache on the left side of his head. My wife returned to the doctor who examined my son again, and again declared him well. But the doctor was not so confident about the mother and expressed concern that my wife, not our son, had the real problem. He sternly suggested that she stop bringing a healthy boy back to him for checkups. After several more days of complaints about a headache, my wife suggested that our son have an eye examination, even though his glasses had been changed only a few months earlier. The optometrist reported a significant deterioration in eyesight. With new glasses our son's headaches disappeared. Why was my wife Lana able to diagnose Aaron's problem when the specialist, a pediatric neurologist with a wall papered in medical school diplomas, could not? Simply because my wife cared. To the doctor my son was one more body, a patient, a file folder, a name reported by his receptionist and forgotten before the next patient's name was reported. To my wife my son is the child she bore in pain and fear and blood, the child who was born of her body, the child she nursed through frequent illnesses, the child she loves beyond the telling.

Epilogue

In a recent issue of *Maclean's*, Diane Francis wrote: "Education is . . . one of society's most fossilized, rigid and change-averse institutions" (50). That is a strong indictment.

But by living the research in everyday practice, and researching the living in practice everyday, and practicing the living in everyday research, we will engage in change, in "a revolution of the heart." And the heart's revolution is the circulation of blood and oxygen, the curriculum of life, the calling of circles, based on celebration, conversation, cooperation, community, creativity, collaboration, compassion, caring, and constancy.

May we listen carefully to our own hearts and the hearts of one another, calling calling calling. Always all ways.

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