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On the Very Pleasure of the Unexpected and Strange

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The following is a journal entry from a Mr. Henry David Thoreau (1906), on the return from a walk near Walden Pond. He writes, “It commonly chances that I make my most interesting botanical discoveries when I am in a thrilled and expectant mood, perhaps wading through some remote swamp where I have just found something novel and feel more than usually remote from town. Or some rare plant which for some reason has occupied a strangely prominent place in my thoughts for some time will present itself. My expectation ripens to discovery. I am prepared for strange things” (p. 54).

I have to smile each time I read this “strange” account of reality. The very things of the world—remote, mysterious, and rare—waiting to present themselves to a mind that is joyfully curious, thrilled and expectant, speak to convictions I hold myself to, and beliefs I have about teaching and learning. It has commonly chanced in my own life as a teacher and musician that my greatest discoveries occurred when I was lost in thought, confused in class, or working through an impossibly dense tangle of sixteenth notes. As we speak here about the realities of teaching, I would like to ask our listeners to consider a simple

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but direct question, *When are we happiest? When are we at our most expectant and joyful?*

If I may render a suspicion, we are likely to be at our happiest when, like Thoreau, we are at furthest remove from town, in the Walden Pond of our choosing, lost in a tangled swamp of problems and possibilities. Of course, “town” in this scenario, evokes more than a rustic New England cityscape; towns can be seen as unwild places, alienating in their schedules and routines, where the business of work circumscribes the romance of discovery. The great project of Thoreau and American transcendentalists like him, was to throw off sleep, to live deliberately, to be wide-awake (see also: Kierkegaard, 1962; Greene, 1995).

Yet, to protest today against [say] the intrusion of technology or the ways in which governing bodies function to discipline knowledge and protect us from the “strange,” may be to lose sight that this problem is a deeply human, indeed historic “reality,” a struggle that has always pitted man and womankind as free agents against the forces of “town”—the forces of conservation and socialization. Thoreau warned against the work-a-day appliances and sleepy routines that remove us from a closer grasp of appearances. In evoking an attitude of happy revelation, it behooves the teacher to ask, who or what can be revealed when class time is too efficient and too methodical? What strange and wondrous things have we missed?

In our fight to shake off sleep and cultivate a sense of receptivity in a world of competing forces, I think of Estelle’s democratic classroom, where mutuality, forbearance, freedom, and justice are commonly chanced upon. Her conception of schooling seems far away from the realities of “town”—the mandates of NCLB, the

National Standards, Nyssma ratings, and tenure files. Her classroom reality, perhaps like yours and mine, is a kind of Walden Pond, a tangled bank, where the stuff of learning—its rare and strange discoveries—make for life’s happiest moments.

But let’s be clear—this vision of public schooling is not an isolated place, rather it is a veritable riot of mutuality and opportunity. Such a democratic community, Dewey (1938) would remind us, is not simply a location where we exercise our “freedom *from*” but a place where we are “free *to*.” In other words, we are not educational recluses, hiding in our classrooms, running *away* from the obligations and responsibilities entrusted in us by the mandates of our profession. Rather, schools and classrooms operate as ideal communities, where teachers and students practice *for* a better reality. Just as Walden Pond was Thoreau’s way of practicing a deliberate and wide-awake life, democratic classrooms are ways to practice deliberate and wide-awake learning, places where students and teachers are “prepared for strange things.”

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