**Graduate School as Bardo: Contemplative Inquiry, Ecology, and Justice**

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During my 22 years of graduate teaching and thesis supervision, I have had many occasions to make the following recommendation to prospective and incoming graduate students: “Come and do graduate school instead of mid-life crises.” Some other variations: “The best way to do your mid-life crisis may be through your graduate program.” “You are wise to choose to do graduate school over mid-life crisis” and so on. I confess that I made these statements at times as part of graduate school promotion on those occasions of student recruitment. Other times, I made them to new magistral or doctoral students on the first day of their first course in the program to encourage them to sow the existential seed in the rich soil of their research. This advice usually accompanies my observation that the intellectual requirement of research and writing for their theses is very steep while their personal life’s demands may turn out to be complex and complicated, if not downright agonizingly stressful. Given such a situation, many students find it challenging to not lose sight of their research focus and to sustain the work required. In particular, if their research topic is not personally engaging, even deeply gripping, they may find it difficult to sustain the research interest to pull through the long marathon that’s required. Hence my advice to integrate their existential quest with their academic research, especially in a field like ours that’s all about human flourishing (and or lack thereof): Education.

My own graduate studies history is an example. I didn’t mean to go to grad school, but my family circumstance was such that my enrolling in grad school was deemed to be advantageous to my family. But within six months of becoming a graduate student, my marriage unexpectedly blew apart, and I became largely a single parent with two children, nine and five. I was so consumed by hurt, grief, and anger that tending to my self was an emergency. My doctoral research and writing became the medicine that I was decocting for my critical condition. Since I couldn’t take my mind off my trouble, I decided to write about how to change my tormented and tormenting perception of self, others, and the world. All this became an epistemological and moral quest. And it turned out to be such a massive project and undertaking that it’s still gainfully occupying my attention to this day.

In the meantime, my choosing, by some sense of practical necessity, to write my life into my thesis opened the door to re-thinking what education must be, what philosophy could be, and what philosophy of education can be. Honestly, I didn’t mean to be an educational philosopher. I didn’t even know, before I stumbled onto, that there was such a discipline as philosophy of education. In my youth, when I was doing my honours degree in philosophy, I studied philosophy mostly as an intellectual pursuit, which was usual and expected, but coming into Education decades later to teach philosophy revolutionized my understanding of and approach to philosophy. I came to see philosophy differently: that to study philosophy is to “know, love, and heal,” to quote Raimon Panikkar, one of my intellectual heroes. And I also came to embrace *Bildung* or self-formation and -cultivation as the essential and vital conception of education: philosophy and education go hand-in-hand.

Typically, things happen under confluence and in synchronicity, especially if we are in the practice of looking out for them. My new (although it turned out it’s not so new, as it was part of my cultural heritage based on classical Asian philosophy) understanding of Bildung or self-formation and cultivation as central and foundational to education then led me to see the ill consequences of conceiving education as mostly an enterprise in knowledge building and transmission and instruction delivery. Of course, there is always the instructional side of education, but to define or largely identity education with instruction is a big mistake. Such identification leads education down the road of instrumentalization and technicization, concurrently of losing sight of and neglecting the very ideal of education as cultivation of the best and the most of humanity in *homo sapience sapience*. Lose sight of humanity; dehumanization quickly sets in. And dehumanized human beings dehumanize other beings, both human and non-human. In therapy, we express this simply: hurt people hurt people.

Etiologically speaking, dehumanization is what happens when we lose warm, empathic, and compassionate heartedness. Often, this loss may be combined with the deployment of cognitive intelligence or intellect to destructive ends. The latter phenomenon points to the dominance of instrumental rationality in modernity, of which Charles Taylor and other philosophers have spoken at length. The loss of empathic qualities and humane heartedness is none other than emotional numbing. Here I offer a justifiable generalization: crimes committed out of numbing are far more destructive, in scale and goriness, than crimes of passion. Ecocide and genocide, both of which are being practiced today, are the case in point.

I started to talk about making a best use of one’s existential crisis in graduate school, and here, I ended up talking about dehumanization. Some of you may wonder, “How did Heesoon drift off from A to B?” What connection, if any, is Heesoon making between A and B? I respond to this question by giving an interpretation of what existential crises is about. They are a sign, or a symptom, of our inherent humanity engaged in and suffering from its struggle against dehumanization. Just as our cold symptoms are an indication that our body is fighting the invading germs, existential crisis is the humanity within valiantly wrestling with invading forces and influences of dehumanization from without. If it’s not already apparent to you that you are engaged in this struggle, then I’m inviting each of you to examine the depth and breadth of your inner life to locate a site of existential conflicts, struggles, and resistance. I’m sure these are all there! And I would like to invite you further to see if these conflicts and the like are in fact a sign that your being is protesting and resisting the such forces of dehumanization as instrumentalization, collectivization, bureaucratization, and commodification. Once you confirm the location of existential crisis, then I invite you to sow the seeds of your research questions and interests there. These existential matters can provide a humus-rich soil for watering and nourishing the research seeds with your graduate school learning and experience. This is the way not to waste any potent suffering and crises in which you found your self, but deploy them for transformational learning.

Thus a crisis connotes a turning point, indicating that things can’t go on as before. No straight line forward extends from where you stand. You come to a point of decision, such as a fork in the road, an impasse, a bend. Basically you are blocked to go forward, and you are forced to take a pause and contemplate a transition. This pause takes you to a liminal space, *bardo* (in Tibetan, and the concept of *ma* in Japanese also corresponds to this), between what was past (but ready to leap in to perpetuate itself) and what is yet to come (but hasn’t arrived). As such, it is not a comfortable place, for sure. Depending on our comfort levels, we may feel, on the one hand, excitement of anticipating something new, and on the other hand, anxiety about, or even terror of, the unknown. Most likely we feel both, and a certain happy combination of them may make us feel very alive. One of the graduate students I worked with does skydiving, and he told me that he would feel most alive in the few moments of hanging from the bar over the airplane door, just before letting it go and jump into the sky. To experience that level of aliveness, unmatched by anywhere else in his busy and responsible professional life, he would go skydiving every weekend in the summer.

What characterizes bardo experience is unprecedentedness: not knowing. What tends to rule our ordinary moments of going about our business is automaticity, which is the domain of the unconscious. All successful learning becomes automatic by virtue of being unconscious: we don’t have to think about which foot to place next; we don’t have to think about what words come next when we sing the anthem, Oh Canada (once we have learned and memorized the verse), and so on. The power of the unconscious is that we don’t have to do much to make things happen: they just happen. Before I know, words come out of me, and with little effort, actions take place. By the same token, if we don’t want the same words and the same action come out of us automatically and repeatedly, then, we need to make the unconscious conscious and intervene in the usual speech and action production. Easier said than done. Anyone who tried to change his/her habits would know how difficult this is! Before you had a chance to stop your self, you said it again; you did it again . . .. Over and over, the same story and the same action are repeated. This is the power of learning and the difficulty of unlearning.

The art of transformational learning requires a successful suspension of the habitual, and therefore, the rule of the unconscious. Roughly, there are two ways of doing this: by chemical means (what’s your drug of choice?) or by awareness training. I won’t comment on the former as I lack the experience: an unfamiliar territory. Awareness is that part of consciousness that acts as witness (also known as ‘mindfulness’ or ‘witness consciousness’). With sufficient training, awareness can become very stable, very clear and expansive, and non-reactive and wide-angled. It can “step back,” “sit,” and “watch” what’s happening on the screen of ordinary consciousness (or more like, the unconscious). It can also be more ‘active,’ and intervene in the drama of the unconscious that’s being enacted, and play a role in trying out different voices, moves, expressions, postures, and actions: in short, different modus operandi and modus vivendi. This is the domain of creativity, and new concepts and theories, such that we encounter in graduate school, can be utilized to effect different ways of seeing, knowing, doing, and being. All this is what existential crises are crying out for: *Don’t go on, unconsciously repeating the same old; especially, the unjust, hurtful and hurting practice! Try something unprecedented.*

So, here we are in graduate schools whose requirements are that we do “original research.” Moreover, we are gifted with all sorts of rich and substantial concepts, theories, and methodologies that we can apply to bring about significant changes both internally and externally. As well, we have our graduate programs’ learning community in which we can be there for each other, support each other, sharing our learning. But most of all, we have the gift of our existential crises that prevent us from moving smoothly forward on the same old track, and force us to pause, gather up and refine our awareness to look and notice the previously unseen, unthought, and unfelt. These are the gifts for graduate school as bardo-crossing. In the remainder of my short talk, I shall talk about awareness training, as the quality of awareness is what will make the difference in how well we do bardo-crossing.

In a recent book chapter (an edited volume by Professors Samashima, White, and Sinner, published by Routledge) that my partner and I wrote on the Japanese concept of ‘*ma*’ (*ma* is the entrance space supported by two gateposts (and the door) into which moonlight or sunlight streams), we wrote: “[M]a represents dynamic change moment. A person entering the ma “space” [needs to be] in attunement with dynamically changing transformative possibilities moment-by-moment and can work with unfolding possibilities. Perspicuous action follows perspicuous perception.” The most crucial quality of consciousness for navigating the bardo the liminal and transitional space is being present to reality and attuned to the dynamics that’s taking place, and being able to feel and resonate with what’s happening. Presence, attunement, and resonance. Contemplative practices, such as labyrinth walk that we did this morning, help us to become more present, attuned, and resonant.

*Thank you very much!*