The Evolution of a Philosophy of Education: One Mother-Educator's Story

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Context

For many years, I have wanted to articulate my philosophy of education. Despite reflecting upon, writing about, and practicing a philosophy of education for the last twenty-five years, a journey you will read about in this paper, my goal of summarizing it all in a cohesive statement has remained elusive. In the fall of 2023, nearing the end of my master's degree program in Educational Studies, I took a course where I had the chance to do this work that had been nagging me for many years. Although some of the course readings would provide "an understanding of historically significant philosophical ideologies and their application to problems of teaching and education", the course's primary focus was to "cultivate a desire and commitments to engage in philosophical thinking as it applies to matters of concern to teachers and teaching" (Naseem, 2023). I had already fulfilled the latter before having ever stepped foot into that class, probably part of the reason I enrolled in the first place. The syllabus' intention that we would use a "variety of sources to help us construct our own 'philosophies' of education" got me really excited (Naseem, 2023). I decided to use the open-ended final assignment to do just that, taking the opportunity to scratch this personal and vocational itch of many years, while meeting course requirements.

Even with my enthusiasm, the work was very challenging, partly because philosophy as a discipline presents certain barriers to entry, which I discuss briefly in this paper. More than that, however, my philosophy of education arises from my background and experiences, as all philosophies do, and articulating it would require a deep examination of self and my origins. I have been examining "self" for years in personal reflection, private journaling, and public memoirist blog writing so that vulnerability is not new to me. However, personal examination

through an academic lens is new, where criteria of validity, reliability, credibility, dependability, confirmability, transferability, and other verifiers of knowledge necessarily complicate simple memoirist reflections. This paper is not reporting a research project in a *"and here are my findings"* kind of way, a type of inquiry requiring careful attention to validity and reliability. Instead, I adhere to the principles of a constructivist research paradigm that emphasizes reality's subjective nature, positing that individuals actively construct knowledge through their unique experiences, perceptions, and interactions with the social and cultural environment. This subjectivity feels inherently vulnerable because, quite obviously, I am not removed from the object of study; I am the study.

This vulnerability is mentioned briefly in the paper but deserves further explanation here. Firstly, I do not want to academize my life; it is not lived that way, and writing about it through that lens can feel disingenuous. Relatedly, I never want to bend my analysis of self and experiences into an academically approved framework to legitimize my experience. It is ironic then that I tend to seek the validation of my experiences in academic discourse to ameliorate my insecurities and self-doubt. This tendency is not surprising given that the modern era, the effects of which still ripple through postmodernism, inculcated Western culture citizens and colonized populations in the value system of objective validity. The tension of this internal contradiction is just one of the vulnerabilities I experienced during this paper's research, analysis, and writing.

The other primary vulnerability is exposing the people I love to criticism. To be clear, this is not a paper about other people; it is about me. However, I came from people; I am in relationship with people. I am not an isolated self to examine; I am a self in relation, and all those relations are implicated in my writing, especially in explaining my background. I have already critiqued the cultural, specifically religious, context of my upbringing in my blog

writing. However, analyzing that experience within an academic framework feels almost like an unfair scrutiny, especially when I use that framework to fortify my position. My loyalty to the people I love makes it hard to critique or analyze the underlying philosophy of their beliefs, even though I disagree with that philosophy.

In addition to these vulnerabilities, writing with several audiences in mind added to the challenge of this paper. Primarily, I wrote this paper for my professor as evidence of having satisfied the course objectives. As such, I reference course readings and themes that could benefit from more contextualization for other audiences. Additionally, I wanted this paper to be intelligible to a critically thinking homeschool educator because this is my educator background, but also because after a master's education in studying the education system, alternative education, including homeschooling, is where I see the most potential for realizing and practicing my philosophy of education. However, I could not tie in the number of homeschool references I would have liked due to word count constraints and primary audience considerations. Regardless, I feel very satisfied that one of the outcomes from this course, and more specifically the research that went into writing this paper, is that I now have an adequate foundation in educational philosophies and feel confident that I can analyze and summarize the philosophical antecedents of most any homeschool educational philosophy or practice I encounter. I love having this knowledge, like an x-ray vision, of the foundations of a structure.

Writing for multiple audiences is challenging because although what I write for one does not need to be easily accessible (in terminology) to all audiences, it must be *true* for all audiences. What I mean is that I should be telling the same essential story to my parents, my children, my extended family, my friends, professors, colleagues, and classmates. Although, as a writer, I employ different terms and phrases for different readers, I never want the audience to

define my experience. I am susceptible to subtly changing the narrative when I apprehend the audience as having authority over me. With its familial, religious, and academic inquiries, this paper unearthed multiple instances where I projected onto the imagined reader this position of authority. I do not want my writing to be a kind of supplication to someone else or to something else, where I cloak or filter myself with the validated discourse in an attempt to be approved, to belong, or to look smart. Wrestling with all this while writing a deeply self-reflective piece increased the difficulty of the writing process.

Lastly, this paper lacks an angle of analysis I would have liked to include. I wish I could have identified and examined the influence of neoliberalism in my philosophy of education. The influence of neoliberalism within education is as ubiquitous and pervasive as it is through society at large, and it is undeniably infused into much of the homeschooling discourse, a claim I can substantiate with my homeschool writing through the years. It would have been illustrative to analyze these textual instances, identify their neoliberal underpinnings, and quantify the implications, especially for a homeschool educator audience who may be unaware of neoliberal ideology, as I was for the entirety of my active homeschooling years. Despite my ignorance, much of my educational practice rejected a neoliberal value system. Nevertheless, I can find evidence of that hegemonic discourse in my writing. This discrepancy is curious to me. Given more space, I could have explored how my philosophy of education demonstrated neoliberal influence in the conception of self while also resisting neoliberal precepts and how this particular aspect of my philosophy of education evolved along with the other evolutions and changes analyzed in this essay. As they say, that is a subject for further research.

With all that context out of the way, I give you the essay I submitted to my professor, with some minor revisions and post-submission improvements.

Introduction

Articulating a philosophy of education can be a difficult undertaking. One reason is that, like all others, the discipline of philosophy has specialized vocabulary and terminology, which takes effort to acquire. Additionally, the common perception of philosophy as a separate and disembodied activity from concrete experience and action, an idea that itself stems from a particular philosophical viewpoint, contributes to the problem. Kincheloe et al. (2000) suggest that a philosophical understanding requires "rigorous thinking, extensive reading, ongoing dialogue, critical analysis and intuitive reflection" (p. 27). This intimidating prospect is one of the reasons why over the years I have looked to Eleanor Roosevelt's (2011) adage that "[o]ne's philosophy is not best expressed in words; it is expressed in the choices one makes" as a means to discern my underlying philosophy (p. unknown). However, as this paper will show, the possibility of incoherence or inconsistency between thinking and action complicates the simple proposition that our choices and actions can reveal our philosophy.

Investigating the integrity of one's actions and ideas is part of what constitutes living an examined life. Although Socrates famously said the *un*examined life is not worth living, I would qualify his endorsement for the examined life with a warning that philosophical reflection requires "courage" to face what is revealed in one's "intellection expansion" (Kincheloe et al., 2000, p.16). This paper is an autobiographical tracing of the evolution of my philosophy of education. Courage has been required for both the decades-long examination and intellectual expansion of this philosophy and in writing this paper. Similar to feminist philosopher Christine Overall (2008), whose scholarship includes autobiographical philosophy, I have found that in doing this writing, "the more of myself I put into my work, the more vulnerable I become" (p. 231).

I have long desired to articulate my practice and philosophy of education within a larger philosophical framework. In this paper, I work towards this goal by analyzing my ideas and personal experiences with various philosophical, theological, sociological, historical, and pedagogical sources. Where my autobiographical account adds to cultural knowledge and understanding, this paper is also an autoethnography. Through vulnerable reflection and investigation of personal history and texts, this paper answers the following questions about my philosophy of education: *What factors contributed to its formation and ongoing evolution? What lived experiences have been most salient in its development? What are the main ideas of my philosophy of education, and what are its foundational axes?*

Where I come from

> I believe that absolute knowledge and truth exists and that our goal as humans is to come to an understanding of these…Teaching is a two pronged process. Firstly, there is the issue of subject matter as defined by the curriculum. Teaching involves passing on this body of knowledge to students, not through expository telling but rather guiding. My goal as a teacher is to lead students to an understanding of concepts. In addition to knowledge, teachers must assist in developing students' character… Teaching is essentially molding young lives and shaping humans to become moral, positively contributing members of society (see Appendix A). (Tougas, circa 1999)

In 1999, I graduated with a Bachelor of Education from the University of Alberta. The above quote is from the assignment in one of my classes to write a personal philosophy of education. However, although this text is a snapshot of my thinking at the end of my young adult formal education years, influenced in part by my pre-service teacher training coursework, it is also a

reflection of the familial culture and context of my upbringing, which is where this autobiographical account must start.

Born and raised in a small city in central Alberta, Canada, I grew up in a macro context of conservative political, economic, and social discourses and a micro-familial context of devout Christian belief. It was instilled in me that the Bible was *the* sacred text given by God as the truth for all humankind and that the text was inerrant. I was immersed in the ontological, epistemological, and axiological claims of Christianity, where the nature of reality, how we come to know that reality, and how we determine what is good and right were all revealed in the Bible, and most especially through the life and teaching of Jesus, with whom we could have a personal relationship and connection. I note here that many of these axiological claims were ideals, as in practice, most of Jesus' teachings, especially those from the Sermon on the Mount[1], were considered impractical, controversial, and disputed in the conservative cultural context of my childhood. The belief in an inerrant text did not negate scientific empiricism, reasoned logic, or other ways of knowing out of hand. However, the conclusions from those ways of knowing had to align with our sect's preferred interpretations of the biblical text.

My family's pentecostalism was an important facet of my religious upbringing, which adds nuance to an unmediated reading of ancient text and propositional claims as the foundation for faith. Pentecostalism is the belief in direct and personal experiences with God through the baptism, or in-dwelling, of the Holy Spirit. These can manifest in very non-rational practices such as glossolalia or "speaking in tongues". In addition to this phenomenon, pentecostalism's belief in personal experiences of God opens the door to subjective narrative, or testimony as it is called, as a central practice of pentecostal faith. According to Smith (2017), "narrative is a way of understanding the world that draws upon an affective or emotive faculty (rather than a

[1] This collection of teachings can be found in chapters 5,6 and 7 from Gospel of Matthew in the Bible.

judgement about the world affected by the intellect)" (p. 612). Additionally, pentecostalism "engenders doxastic practices that are beyond the ken of the modes of knowing usually accounted for by modern 'intellectualist' epistemologies…that are most at home in the rationalist assumptions of the Enlightenment" (Smith, 2017, p. 609). As summarized by Frestaduis (2016), the pentecostal epistemology is embodied, affective, and narrative, though any knowledge received and disseminated this way is only valid "by the extent to which it accurately corresponds to and coheres with the Bible" (p. 108). Although I would eventually come to challenge the necessity of coherence between personal experience and the biblical text, this pentecostal way of knowing was deeply formative to my religious upbringing and philosophy of life.

My religious formation around an inerrant biblical text contributed to cognitive dissonance. Where the inevitable confusion and contradictions arose, I sought intellectual and spiritual refuge in the idea that although Christians were in the world, we were not of the world[2]. Therefore, irreconcilable ideas and beliefs were bound to occur, and not all of them could be mediated with intellectual knowledge but required faith. In church teaching and through my parents' modeling, I was also encouraged to focus on the two most important commandments, as summarized by Jesus, which were to love God and love other people[3]. Where the biblical text might be inconsistent or irreconcilable with contemporary cultural beliefs or scientific knowledge, the love of God and others was instilled in me as the ethics and the evidence of my faith. Knowledge, theories, and experiences might remain irresolvable with the text. However,

[2] This idea is common in Christian subculture and it is referencing Jesus' teaching to his disciplines as found in the book John 15:19 and John 17:14-16.

[3] As found in Jesus' teaching in Gospel of Matthew 22:36-40.

our actions in the world mattered and should be honoring to God, which meant treating people with the dignity and worth endowed in them as being created by God.

Religion and philosophy have a long history of shared concerns where "philosophers and theologians alike ask questions about epistemology, axiology, and political theory, as well as about metaphysics and fundamental ontology" (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2021). Spoken more simply, philosophy's questions about knowledge, reality, meaning, truth, and ethics overlap and intersect with religious belief, thinking, and practice. Cultural conservatism and the Christian pentecostal religion were the formative values of my childhood. My family of origin's devout belief in the biblical text, the person of Jesus, and personal experiences of the Holy Spirit, with an ethical application of loving God and loving people in practical actions, was not just my religious inheritance but my philosophical inheritance.

My undergraduate philosophy of education clearly shows a positivist epistemology and an emphasis on moral character development consistent with a conservative religious axiology. In other parts of that document, I also state my belief that "schools are institutions where students should acquire knowledge," and I affirm the importance of curricular objectives. These perspectives find resonance with the "executive approach" to education that prioritizes subject matter, where "knowledge is typically treated as something 'out there', external to the teacher and the learner", and where the teacher serves as "conveyer of that knowledge to the student" (Fenstermacher & Soltis, 2009, p. 17). However, my commitment as a pre-service teacher to "guiding" my students to absolute knowledge presents a possible inconsistency that hints at the future evolution of my ideas. While Fenstermacher & Soltis (2009) maintain that "[w]hat appears to be mutually exclusive or inconsistent in theory is not always that way in practice", my own

experience proves that inconsistencies can become points of disruption in our belief systems (p. 74). Further, these disruptions can catalyze the emergence of new ideas and perspectives.

While it would take years for the inconsistencies between my religious beliefs and emergent ideas to breach the surface of my life, other disruptions and changes that would completely upend my philosophy and practice of education had already been set in motion. As I finished my undergraduate studies to become a teacher, my husband and I decided to homeschool our children, and I was pregnant with our first child. The role, relationship, and experiences of being a mother and parent-educator would create the conditions where the seeds of more embodied and affective pedagogical epistemology would flourish.

Becoming a parent-educator

My trajectory and experience as an educator are different from the typical one, where a person studies to be a teacher or studies a subject in depth and then gains employment as an educator in a classroom context. By the time I had reached the final courses of my degree in education, I had decided to hold off on starting a career as a teacher as we were planning to have children, and I wanted to give my full attention to the work of raising them and keeping a home, especially for the first few years. Additionally, my husband had introduced me to the idea of homeschooling, and we had decided, before our children were even born, to try this out for ourselves. As I was reaching the end of my undergraduate degree, I used the opportunity of open-ended student assignments to research and learn all I could about the practice of homeschooling while somewhat incongruously completing practicums to become a classroom teacher. Both my teaching experiences and investigations as a pre-service teacher convinced me that a learning environment where a student could receive one–on–one instruction from someone highly attuned to their needs was an excellent means by which to meet the ends of working

through the curriculum at a pace suited to the individual, affording the student maximum opportunity for success. This aim of individualized student success was the constant tension in my teacher training: how do we balance the needs of students *and* teach the curriculum *within* the given constraints of the education system? Here was an answer: Do it outside the system.

As someone who has always valued family and caring and loving relationships, I was also attracted to home education to preserve and build strong family bonds and culture. Homeschooling would allow us as parents to steer the ship of our family life instead of being subject to the demands and expectations of institutional school culture. We were drawn to the freedom it afforded. It must be said, since false conclusions might be drawn otherwise, that despite my Christian upbringing and my early adult years' commitment to similar beliefs, I did not identify with the conservative religious homeschooling movement that had contributed to the rise in homeschooling during the 1980s and 1990s (Kunzman, 2010; Gaither, 2017). This movement of Protestant fundamentalists "disenchanted with the increasingly secular nature of public schooling, turned to homeschooling to ensure that their children were exposed to religious teachings, and to shield them from societal excesses that they deemed to be anti-Christian" (Davies & Aurini, 2008, p. 64). Although there was overlap with this perspective in valuing the primacy of family in the socialization of children, along with shared Christian belief, our main motivations for homeschooling our children were pedagogical and familial, not religious. In summary, we thought we could do a better job academically, sidestep much of the stress that schooling introduces to family life and children's lives, and build a strong family.

Family life and the opportunity for academic excellence were the starting point, but the journey was about to take us in an unintended direction. Although the path of homeschooling

would affirm much of what I had been taught about learning in my pre-service teacher training, it would challenge and undermine my ideas about the means and purposes of education.

A humanistic psychology

> Our hike today was a great example of homeschooling at its best. The kids explored science, geography and were physically active. Not to mention the enjoyable conversation we had while hiking and picnicking which included the above "subjects" but also just general life stuff. Sometime later I will expound more on our homeschool philosophy but very briefly it's not school at home. It's learning together through play, conversations, reading, exploring etc. (Tougas, 2004)

I wrote these words in a private blog post-cum-personal letter to our extended family when our children were 5, 3, and nearly two years old. Having moved far away from Central Alberta to the Northeastern United States, I would send little updates about our daily lives to our family to keep them informed. A few years later, I migrated these writings, and that homeschool enthusiasm, into a public blog platform where I have continued to publish, until the present, personal stories and reflections, as well as produce instructional texts[4], many of them attempting to "expound more on our homeschool philosophy". I draw from this nearly twenty years' worth of material in tracing the principles of my philosophy of education as they developed in response to motherhood and my parent-educator experience.

Before becoming a mother, as a student in an education program, I was taught theories and practices of active, hands-on, and experiential learning as supportive of a student-centered approach to education. I learned about Piaget and constructivism, the idea that learners construct

[4] I use text in the academic sense meaning written, audio and visual materials.

their knowledge of the world based on their activity in it. I was taught Dewey's experientialism, where learning arises from direct engagement with the environment. These ideas were to inform our future classroom practices as we were assigned to create hands-on lesson plans and assessment rubrics to facilitate and evaluate experiential learning. Student practicums, not to mention my recently completed K-12 education, revealed the vast gap between the theory and the discursive community of actual schools with their administrative oversight, curricular constraints, and accountability of standardization. Though my school experiences up to that time had evidenced something different, my teacher training emphasized a humanistic psychology based on "freedom, personal growth, and the development of emotional and mental health", stressing an integrated personality and uniqueness of individuals (Fenstermacher & Soltis, 2009, p. 31). Unsurprisingly, my philosophy of education circa 1999 reveals that I had not integrated humanist ideas into my understanding. I had not seen them modeled or experienced them directly. However, the subjectivity of motherhood was about to give me a genuinely hands-on, experiential learning in humanistic psychology.

Immediately following my formal education, in my direct observations and experiences as a mother of babies, toddlers, and preschoolers, it was obvious that children had a natural and insatiable curiosity and appetite for learning. I was seeing this through the subjectivity of being a mother. Subjective knowing is the opposite of objectivism, where "truth is something we can achieve only by disconnecting ourselves, physically and emotionally, from the things we want to know (Palmer, 2017, p. 51). Motherhood allowed me to observe up close how humans have a "natural propensity to assimilate and integrate knowledge", in other words, an intrinsic motivation to meet their individual developmental goals and needs (Deci & Ryan, 2017, p. 354). Riley (2020) summarizes Ryan and Deci's (2000) definition of intrinsic motivation as "an energy

orientation, a display of the positive attributes of humanity which include curiosity, vitality, and self-determination" (p. 21). In motherhood, I came to accept this premise as true, not just theoretically, but in its practical application that learning is not something we need to impose upon children or require of them.

I found affirmation and support for these ideas within the writings of counter-cultural homeschool parents and education critics. Influenced by the work of John Holt and others, I became committed to learner-centered pedagogy, where the transmission or acquisition of specific knowledge was not the goal for my children's education. Instead, the goal was to provide and maintain the conditions to nurture and facilitate my children's natural learning inclinations. We decided that our children's education was going to be driven by the learner's own interests, innate desires, and needs, where they could "explore subjects, ideas, and hobbies that are of particular interest to them, and can spend as much time as they would like on their own self-determined learnings or skills" (Riley, 2020, p. 54). Unbeknownst to me, as I was unfamiliar with these philosophical terms at the time, my ideas about education aligned with an existentialist philosophy of promoting human freedom, where education should enable individuals to shape their future, develop their inner authority, and assume responsibility for their actions. I did not then, and still do not now, see these ideas as incompatible with particular teaching methods or the learning of specific subject matter. Instead, I hold that methods and subject matter are dependent variables, subject to learner needs and, more importantly, autonomy and choice.

By the time our oldest child was the age she would have started grade one in a formal setting, I had rejected a standardized curriculum and compulsory education. As I have shared on my blog and in my online teaching materials, "we have a curriculum, a course of study, it's

called life… we live it, study it, take it apart and put it back together, every day", and "forcing kids to go to school, forcing kids to do many things seems the antithesis to creating free-thinking adults" (Tougas, n.d.; Tougas, 2019). There is a strong presence of romanticism in this pedagogy with its appeal to "nature over civilization's artifice, a celebration of individuality over the mass…and the privileging of the sincere and authentic self over status-quo conformity" (Gaither, 2017, p. 164). The philosophical influences of Rousseau, the ideals of the early 20th century Progressive Education movement, the non-authoritarian philosophy of J. Krishnamurti, A.S. Neill's *Summerhill*, the Free School movement, and the writings of left-leaning education critics and intellectuals from the 1960s and 1970s, all bear resemblances to my philosophy of education. I see the pedagogy inspired by these philosophies as the logical application of humanistic psychology, what Fenstermacher and Soltis (2009) call the "facilitator approach" to teaching unshackled from the constraints of delivering a school system curriculum. Though the psychological and philosophical foundations for this education had been planted during my pre-service teacher training, the integration and practice of these ideas resulted from the subjective and relational experience of motherhood.

A Relational Ethics & A Theological Reckoning

Homeschooling allowed us to practice an education of self-actualization, self-determination, and self-direction for the realization of specific normative ends. As sociologist Mitchell Stevens writes (quoted by Gaither, 2017):

> At the heart of home schoolers' elaborate conversation about children is a faith that deep inside each of us is an essential, inviolable self, a little person distinctive from all others and, on the basis of that distinction, worthy of extraordinarily specific care. (p. 165)

The extraordinarily specific care invested into the growth and flourishing of our children's individual well-being was for more than their self-satisfaction. Early in our homeschool practice, the articulated goals for our children's education were that they would develop "[a]n understanding of who they are, an awareness of their gifts that can be used to help and serve others, and to see their place (one of love and mutual need) within our family and community" (Tougas, 2009). Years later, in a course I was teaching for parents, I echoed those goals, as well as text from my very first philosophy of education document, in a statement that children "need to grow up to be contributing members of society (we all contribute in different ways) because meaningful contribution and connection is our calling as humans" (Tougas, 2019). Education is a preparation for the fullness of life, which can only be experienced in relationships and care. This position coheres with an *ethics of care* developed and advanced by feminist scholars Carol Gilligan and Nel Noddings, who argue for "relational caring as the dominant ethic for the human species" (Fenstermacher & Soltis, 2009, p. 35).

Not surprisingly, motherhood has been one of the primary roles, responsibilities, and relationships in my life, which embodied the care theorists' claim that "to care is to be in relation to another", where the "needs of the one being cared for become the abiding interest of the one who is caring" (Fenstermacher & Soltis, 2009, p. 36). A pedagogy of care supports a normative vision of educational practices and outcomes that challenge institutionalized and compulsory education through a differentiated curriculum and a recognition of "attention, status, and care" to a multiplicity of talents, occupations, interests, and types of intelligence (Noddings, 1999, p. 14). Notably, it critiques "universal policies that require coercion, because coercion produces resistance and weakens the relation" (Noddings, 1999, p. 13). I came to this position and conclusion in my own pedagogy and parenting. Coercive means would work against and

undermine my aims of raising free-thinking, self-directed learners committed to the care and well-being of others. My guiding questions throughout more than two decades of parenting and educating have been: How does this interaction, my approach, this resource, or the teaching method influence my child's relationship with learning, their relationship with themselves, and their relationship with me? Is what I am doing consistent with the end goal of connection?

A pedagogy of care oriented toward a relational ethic has been more than just a means to facilitate a humanistic education; it became an approach to parenting and life with profound philosophical implications. Parker Palmer (2017) writes about living and educating as an undivided self where one's inner and outer worlds, values and external practices respectively, are integrated. In reviewing Palmer's writing, Badley (2012) states that Palmer "builds on and repeatedly reminds his readers that an ontology is realized in an epistemology, which shapes a pedagogy, which leads to ethical outcomes" (p. 273). There is an integrity between ontology, epistemology, pedagogy and axiology, proceeding from the former to the latter. In an inversion of Palmer's theme, my pedagogy of prioritizing relationship, arising from my experience of motherhood, would reveal the actual nature of my epistemological and ontological claims. These beliefs were contrary to my religious foundations, bringing to the surface a long-submerged cognitive dissonance and incoherence, demanding a reckoning between my inner and outer worlds.

Prioritizing relationships as a pedagogical practice has been well articulated within the homeschool discourse. One of the contributing influences to this was the distribution, by homeschoolers for other homeschoolers, of Charlotte Mason's writings by Andreola (1998) and others. Mason, an early 20th-century Christian British educator, was a counter-cultural influence advancing an "ennobling vision of education rather than the narrow, utilitarian practices" that

helped reproduce the economic, political, and social injustices of her context. (Cooper & Van Pelt, 2023, p. 97). In our homeschool, we incorporated many of Mason's methods, including nature study and reading "living books", from her learner-centered approach, emphasizing the importance of respecting and nurturing each child's individuality. Notably, Mason believed "the best education would be designed around inviting all children in a relationship with God, with humans, and with the universe" (Cooper & Van Pelt, 2023, p. 99). Mason's ideas helped me articulate and frame my own pedagogical and parenting experience. However, a differentiation was slowly materializing in my thinking between developing *a* relationship and being in relationship, where the latter revealed the philosophical shift taking place in me.

My pedagogical documents and writing illustrate this evolution. Take, for example, our son's high school portfolio[5], where I write, "learning's highest aim, and primary purpose, is to build relationship; with self, God, each other, and with knowledge itself" (see Appendix B). I might phrase it differently now, replacing "build relationship" with "recognize relatedness", but both speak to the underlying idea that relationship is the end goal. Earlier in my blog writing, I wrote about the importance of building *a* relationship. "If I could choose to be an expert in just one thing during this stage of our homeschool journey, I'd choose to be an expert in knowing my kids and building a better relationship with them" (Tougas, 2013a). My experience as a parent-educator allowed me to practice a pedagogy of relationship, where the learner developing a connection with self, ideas, others, and the world was the goal. This goal would be facilitated by the relationship we had with one another. More than that, however, motherhood and a pedagogy of relationship revealed to me relatedness as our condition of being. This was an understanding that necessitated a theological reckoning.

[5] A form of student record keeping that documents educational progress, illustrating what was learned, how it was accomplished, what resources were used and how much progress was made.

Condensing theological precepts of my inherited faith into a simplifying framework feels fraught because of the vulnerabilities discussed in the Context section of this paper. Additionally, an in-depth treatment of these beliefs is outside my scope. However, as an autobiographical accounting, such analysis is unnecessary. The religious teachings of my childhood and a portion of my adult years taught me that humanity is born into sin; our nature is one of depravity. This is the doctrine of *original sin*, an inherited stain that separates us from God, who is perfect and in whom there can be no sin. This fundamental state of separation is "fixed" by Jesus Christ dying on the cross, reconciling humanity to God. Only by believing in and personally accepting Jesus' sacrifice will humans be saved from a literal hell, which is the consequence of both their inherited and willfully chosen acts of disobedience to God. I feel shame and disgust in writing these words because I now see this as a gruesome story of an angry God demanding blood. I feel the pain and sorrow for what these ideas have wrought in the lives of myself and others where "[i]gnoring the force of spiritual mothering in the world leads to distorted images of God that perpetuates dehumanizing cosmologies, materially reductionist ideologies, violent philosophies, and totalizing political worldviews" (Langston Bombino & Bombino, 2023, p. 38).

The understanding I acquired as a mother, which was practiced and developed in my pedagogy, proved to be incoherent with my formative religious beliefs. As I started raising children, I tried to ignore the ontological claims of separation (God separate from humanity, believers separate from non-believers) and the concomitant dehumanization and violence, burying all of it in the basement of my psyche with the other accumulated incoherencies of my religion. This dissonance is alluded to by Gaither (2017) in his book on the history of American homeschooling in his observation that "if asked, many conservative Christians will say they believe in original sin, but at the deepest level they tend to think of their children as precious

gifts of God, full of potential" (p. 122). In motherhood, I came to see that my children did not just possess potential but existed in a state of original blessing, belovedness, and belonging, and nothing would sever or disconnect my love for them. I publicly stated my rejection of a separation ontology and my conscious decision to draw from lived experience in conceptualizing my spirituality when writing, "if [your theology] doesn't resonate with my reality as a mother, I'm not having it" (Tougas, 2021). Original sin was replaced with an embodied knowledge of goodness, relatedness, and non-separation.

Connection as the *condition of being* between all creation and between the divine and creation is my ontological position. When I rejected original sin, I thought I might leave my faith entirely for that theological discrepancy as well as other divergences from the orthodoxy of my inherited religious framework, including my dismissal of biblical inerrancy. However, a childhood and adult years experience of unflagging parental love and acceptance, along with the discovery that an original blessing, belovedness, and belonging ontology is supported by the biblical text, Jesus' teaching, and the Christian tradition, made it possible for me to resolve the incoherencies and continue to self-identify as a Christian (Fox, 2000; Shroyer, 2016; Rohr, 2019).

Philosophical Axes & Where do I go from here?

I have been writing about a philosophy of life and a philosophy of education in a public format and private documents for almost 25 years. In all those years, I found it hard to pull together a philosophy of education that coheres with a larger philosophical framework or axes. "I still haven't written down my complete philosophy of learning, and I don't know that I ever will. There are bits and pieces of it all over this blog and in our learning binders and that's good enough for me, for now" (Tougas, 2013b). This difficulty is partly due to the natural evolution of

my thinking, which is sometimes hard to explain until after the dust has settled. It is also due to the inherent effort of philosophical articulation - all those big words. These reasons are why I often kept my writing to what I was doing, if not always the larger philosophical framework for those actions. “Homeschooling incarnates, it embodies, my life philosophy. Even when I can’t necessarily give words to that philosophy” (Tougas, 2017). Echoing Eleanor Roosevelt, our actions can express our philosophy. This helps explain another reason why I had a hard time pulling it all together. My life’s underlying philosophical and theological claims did not align with my experience or actions as a parent-educator. A thorough explication of my philosophy of education would demand an examination of that inconsistency. As an illustration of Kinchloe et al.’s (2000) claim that philosophy is an “ongoing process of discovery, revision, deconstruction, recreation and reconceptualization”, it was not until I went through deconstruction and rebuilding of my theological antecedents that I was able to formulate foundational axes for my philosophy of life that cohered to my philosophy and practice of education (p. 52).

What follows are my core philosophical axes. Autonomy, freedom, self-determination[6] are the human drive and aim. Relatedness and belonging are our state of being and existence in the world. The directionality of freedom within the condition of non-separation necessitates, predicates, and indicates a relational responsibility, where self-sovereignty is oriented to the flourishing of all. Many details and specifics are missing from this three-sentence summary. However, I call these my *axes* because they help me plot a trajectory toward answering various philosophical inquiries and their application to my life, if not always an arrival at a specific destination. Therefore, my philosophy of education, as it stands today, is not a written one-page summary of ideas about learning, education, or homeschooling. It is not a blueprint to be

[6] A rigorous philosophical text would demarcate these terms. Although they do not all mean the exact same thing they all speak to the same underlying principle of human will.

reproduced but an orientation where educational ideas and the actions they inform must be consistent with human freedom, relatedness, and relational responsibility.

In this paper, there were many things I could not include due to time and word count constraints. I could not explore the ideas of trust and fear in the evolution of my philosophy of education, specifically how fear is heavily implicated in an original sin ontology. In contrast, trust is the coherent response to original belonging and relatedness. My conscious decision to not be governed by fear and choose trust in parenting, as much as in pedagogy, helped reveal my actual ontological beliefs. There was very little space to discuss methods, materials, and subjects. Though important, these were primarily dependent variables in our pedagogy, chosen to the extent that they aligned with our commitment to freedom and relationship. Likewise, I did not share the many parenting and educational decisions along the way that were misaligned with my philosophical axes. These axes emerged in response to those errors, misdirection, mistakes, and failures. These ideas, like myself, my children, and my relationships, are still evolving. Where failure can be an indictment of our philosophical integrity or practicality, receiving it as an invitation to learn, adjust, and re-orient as necessary is more generative. Finally, there is the inconsistency of presenting a philosophy developed in specific relationships from only one side of the relation. I acknowledge this as a limitation of autobiographical writing.

My philosophy of education has evolved in the communal practice of family life and through writing, reflecting, and recalibrating to lived experience. It has demonstrated emergent qualities in its self-organizing and productive response to the psychological, philosophical, spiritual, and emotional dissonance created by an embodied knowledge that is incoherent with an inherited theology. For Palmer (2017) the integration of our inner and outer worlds, the living of an "undivided life", may require us to center our life on something "external to the institution

and its demands" (p. 167). Palmer's referring here to the institution of schooling but this can apply also to an institutionalized religion. In my adult years I distanced myself from both institutional schooling and institutional Christianity. Homeschooling and a life centered on my family oriented me away from "the institution and its demands", allowing me to find a path of integrity.

I developed the foundational axes of my philosophy of education as a homeschooler, a context that allowed for an integration between pedagogy and philosophy. I entered this graduate program with the desire to direct my attention beyond family life and into broader society, specifically the education system. My philosophical axes inform a way of living and educating that is decidedly against maintaining and reproducing our society's social, political, and economic status quo. My philosophy of education, which values human freedom and responsibility for others, both arising from and supporting a reality of fundamental relatedness, shares commonality with emancipatory education, where education is not simply about initiating youth into society but is to "encourage and enable them to critique its shortcoming and to act to realize is promises" (Fenstermacher & Soltis, 2009, p. 51). Having learned about this theory in my graduate studies, I now identify my parenting and pedagogy as a *praxis*, "wherein one's understanding of an idea is completed through action" (Fenstermacher & Soltis, 2009, p. 52).

My philosophy also has much in common with democratic education in the shared claim that democracy "alone extends to each and every person the opportunity to realize his or her full potential and render both service and advancement to the entire human race" (Fenstermacher & Soltis, 2009, p. 54). However, I am critical of the emancipatory and democratic theorists and pedagogues in their failure to critique the coercive social action of compulsory schooling as inconsistent with democratic and emancipatory ends. I am also critical of how these scholars

privilege and uphold institutional norms, particularly in K-12 education. This oversight and institutional bias leads to an ignorance of, but also misunderstanding and dismissal of extra-institutional and non-publicly funded and facilitated liberatory and democratic educational initiatives (Puga, 2019). Palmer (2017) reminds those of us who are seeking integration that "making common cause in a movement does not require partners whose vision matches our own" (p. 179). I have been reflecting on this as I think about how to work in education while maintaining the integrity of my philosophical axes. The path is not entirely clear, but I trust that my commitment and experience with the challenge of philosophical inquiry will keep me in good stead as I seek to extend my praxis from home to society.

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Appendix A

Renee Tougas, circa 1999

Professional Knowledge
Based on a Personal Philosophy of Education

My personal philosophy of education is based on beliefs about truth/knowledge and human nature. More specifically, I believe that absolute knowledge and truth exists and that our goal as humans is to come to an understanding of these. I also believe human nature has the capacity for great good or evil and as such positive character traits must be molded and shaped. These foundations form a framework that helps answer the following questions.

- *What does it mean to teach?*

Teaching is a two pronged process. Firstly, there is the issue of subject matter as defined by the curriculum. Teaching involves passing on this body of knowledge to students, not through expository telling but rather guiding. My goal as a teacher is to lead students to an understanding of concepts. In addition to knowledge, teachers must assist in developing students' character. Perhaps this is even more important than the program of studies. Teaching is essentially molding young lives and shaping humans to become moral, positively contributing members of society.

- *What does a teacher need to know in order to teach?*

1. Teachers need to know what they believe about learners and knowledge. In other words, they should be directed by a personal philosophy about teaching and learning. This not only guides their approach to teaching but gives them motivation for the immense challenges that teachers face everyday.

2. Teachers need a basic understanding of the content matter they are teaching. They do not need to know all the answers; they simply need to know where to get answers. An interest in the content is helpful but many teachers have successfully taught subjects they didn't have a natural affinity for.

3. Teachers need a basic understanding about how individuals learn. This includes cognitive development and learning preferences/styles. This knowledge equips teachers to adapt and accommodate for the different needs of each learner.

- *What are schools for?*

The role of schools is directly linked to an understanding of knowledge and human nature. I believe that schools are institutions where students should acquire knowledge, develop skills and positive character traits. Schools are to work in partnership with parents and the community at large to see these goals achieved.

- *What does it mean to be a member of a community of inquiry?*

Teachers, perhaps above all others in society, should be seekers of knowledge and truth. If we expect our students to incorporate learning into their everyday lives we must model that mindset and behavior. Teachers should do this both individually and cooperatively with other teachers as well as community members at large.

Appendix B

High School Portfolio

[redacted]

2019

Parent-Educator Philosophy of Education

Foundations, Curriculum and Methodology:

We believe that learning's highest aim, and primary purpose, is to build relationship; with self, God, each other, and with knowledge itself.

We believe the most successful and satisfying learning experiences are those that are self-motivated, driven by learner-interest and engagement, and facilitated by trust.

Fundamentally, we believe this kind of education is a student-centered endeavour.

Education is to develop the independent thinking and autonomous action of the individual in the collective context of family, community, and society; and is to equip the individual with the skills, knowledge and perspective that enables one to fulfill a life purpose in service of that collective context.

In our homeschool, the curriculum and the methodology by which we teach are designed and delivered primarily around the needs of the child. As parent-educators, in intimate contact with our child since birth, we depend on that close connection, while accessing a myriad of resources and tools, to help us meet the academic, social, physical, spiritual, and emotional needs of our child.

We have been highly influenced by the philosophy of John Holt, who said, "Since we can't know what knowledge will be the most needed in the future, it is senseless to try to teach it in advance. Instead, we should try to turn out people who love learning so much, and learn so well, that they will be able to learn whatever needs to be learned."

The main purpose of our homeschool curriculum and methodologies is to teach our children how to learn.

With the rate at which information is expanding, John Holt was right, we can't know what knowledge will be most needed in the future. Even so, we have educated our children with the overarching goal of establishing literacy in the following areas: English language fluency, fundamentals of math and personal finance, the scientific method and application, computer and technology use, world history and geography with a focus on the Canadian context, aesthetic awareness and appreciation, citizenship, Christian theology and faith in a pluralistic society, and caring for personal health and well-being.

Our children engage with subjects and knowledge well beyond, and in addition to these "basics"; studying second languages, advanced and applied science, ethics and religion; engaging in sports and rigorous physical activity; participating in theatre and music; creating fine art and textiles.

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Our aim has been to teach [redacted] how to think and how to learn, more than teaching what to learn. What to learn was largely directed by [redacted] own interests and readily available community resources. And the pursuit of those interests facilitated the acquisition of knowledge and skills, both the basic literacy (as defined above) and advanced study.

[redacted] has gained a high school level education through various methodologies including: interest-led learning and inquiry facilitated by research and reading; small group discussion and conversation; community engagement and leadership training; classroom-based courses with a homeschool co-operative; apprenticeships and mentoring; online courses; and mindful media engagement.

Assessment:

In our home-learning environment [redacted] was encouraged to explore various and diverse interests. Not all of those were assessed for comprehension or progression. Those subjects and topics he choose to study in-depth, were either graded by course teachers, with more traditional assessment tools, or evaluated informally by mentors and learning facilitators. These type of assessments included oral presentation and discussion, demonstrations, project completion, observation, interviews, and self-evaluation.

The goal is not the grade. The goal is learning. As parent-educators working one-on-one with our student we were able to assess learning in both short and long feedback loops, and provide immediate correction, teaching, and assistance as necessary.

Summary:

It has been our deepest privilege and joy to facilitate, oversee, and guide [redacted] through his formative years of life and education.

The greatest accomplishment of these years was nurturing and building a relationship with our son, kindling and fanning the flame of his inherent curiosity, artistic talent, and desire to learn; and nurturing the development, through example and practice, of the mindset and skills for lifelong learning.

Renee Tougas
Parent-Educator
B. Ed.

[redacted]
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