

On “What Happens Between Us” and the Experience of Being Addressed

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While acknowledging that relations do matter in education, in “No Education Without Hesitation,” Gert Biesta cautions us against the temptation to focus too much on the relational — for example, when we seek to know as much as we can about our students, “about their history, their background, their identity, their feelings, their sense of self.” The risk, he writes, is that:

[B]y focusing too much on the relational dimensions of education, we lose sight of the gaps, the fissures, and the disjunctions, the disconnections, and the strangeness that are part of educational processes and practices as well; and, more importantly, we run the risk of losing sight of the educational significance of these dimensions.

Central to Biesta’s essay, and drawing on the work of Jacques Rancière, is an assumption that the child is already a speaking subject. If education starts from there, Biesta says — rather than from an assumption that the child is one who cannot yet speak but is moving toward that capacity or ability — an entirely different educational project opens up. He goes on to explain that the claim, “the child is speaking,” is a political and educational claim, not an empirical one, and he describes three different ways in which we might enact it: listening, recognition, and the experience of being addressed.

The first two, listening and recognition, have been taken up within a variety of philosophical traditions, including important work by members of the Philosophy of Education Society.¹ However, in Biesta’s view, listening and recognition are limited in their capacity to foster what I take to be a common thread throughout his scholarship — a concern for education as an ethical encounter, not only an academic one. While learning clearly can and does take place within educational frameworks that highlight listening and recognition, both of these approaches risk positioning the educator as the ultimate beneficiary of the encounter. In other words, even though listening and recognition require the teacher to reach out to the child, the act ultimately returns to the teacher by affirming her status as the one who listens or recognizes the child as speaker. The experience of being addressed, on the other hand, goes in the opposite direction. The initial gesture goes not toward the child, but rather toward the teacher who, in recognizing that she is being addressed, finds herself in a position of responsibility to respond to the child-as-speaker.²

Recognizing the address as something that calls me out of myself — out of my self-interested projects and preoccupations — requires a particular kind of passivity that Bernard Waldenfels calls “primary passion.” In *The Question of the Other*, he writes:

The dative structure of what happens to me or to you leads to the suspension of some other distinctions. Let us begin with the distinctions between the own and the alien, between *action* and *passion*. What happens to me is from the beginning interspersed with what is alien to

me... What happens to me is anything but my action, but on the other hand it is not a mere passion either, taken in the sense of a reversed action which I spontaneously impute to another agent or actor.... We may call what precedes all these possibilities primary passion (*Urpasion*), a sort of "being affected by;"... which escapes from the usual schemes of spontaneity and receptivity, of action and passion.³

Waldenfels' concern here is with a particular kind of intersubjectivity, with "what happens between us."⁴ "There is an *entretien* in the fullest sense," he says, "only if between what happens to me and how I respond there is a hiatus interrupting the flow of words and actions, even when I speak to myself... This gap leaves space for interventions which are more than the pure product of our own already existing wishes and visions."⁵ Unlike a conception of the distance between self and other as a gap to be bridged, "the between," as Waldenfels describes it, is an acknowledgement of "distance-in-proximity and proximity-in-distance."⁶

In my view, Waldenfels' emphasis on "primary passion" as the experience of being affected by another, and his insistence on the importance of a hiatus between "what happens to me and how I respond" fit nicely with Biesta's emphasis on the experience of being addressed and the importance of hesitation in the educational encounter. But what might it mean to shift our stance as educator from being the one who reaches out to the child to the one who is being addressed? And what might this susceptibility, vulnerability, and openness to the address of the other look like? As I tried to think this through, I was reminded of a story a student recounted in class earlier this semester.

Leo grew up in a town in Greece. In his town also lived a man named George. George was born blind and never went to school, but he would regularly entertain his neighbours at the local tavern with animated retellings of the epics of Homer. Everyone in the neighborhood knew George and, although his blindness was sometimes the source of good-natured jokes which George himself often initiated, there was no doubt that beneath the joking lay a deep, albeit unspoken, sense of shared responsibility for George's well-being. In his day-to-day life George relied on his finely tuned senses of smell and touch to navigate through the crowded marketplace, and Leo recalled that most of the time it appeared that folks were not even paying attention to him. Cars, however, provided an altogether different challenge for George. In Leo's words, if George heard a car,

he would freeze (in the middle of the road if that was the path he was on) and look fiercely disoriented. Drivers who knew him patiently waited until he moved. Sometimes they came out of the car, moved him to the side and then proceeded with their business. Drivers who did not know him [perhaps because they were from a different town] were challenged to drive around him, on occasion sounding the car horn. "Don't you see I am blind?" he would scream and swear at them. There were many such times, [Leo recalls] that I and the other kids would run and guide him to safety.⁷

My point in telling Leo's story is that I think it points toward the kind of "primary passion" — the active passivity and susceptibility to the other — that I see as a precondition for the experience of being addressed. The town kids were not sitting around waiting for something to happen; they were not necessarily paying attention to George or even aware of his whereabouts. They went about their daily

business of playing and hanging around the shops, the tavern, and the marketplace. But their ears were tuned — perhaps not even consciously — to the possibility of George’s call, which might come, and when it would, it would come not as a direct appeal for help, but sometimes only as a scream of frustration and anger.

Near the end of Biesta’s essay, he invokes the notions of transcendence and revelation in relation to teaching, and I am going to use another term that is often associated with religion — the vigil — to think a bit further about the experience of being addressed. Vigils play a central role in many traditions. Sometimes vigils take the form of people sitting overnight with the body of someone who has died, but is not yet buried or cremated, so the one who is dead will not be alone. Other times vigils serve as ritualized reminders of a community’s obligations. In Judaism, for example, the Passover vigil is both a time of remembrance and a time of anticipation; it is a reminder, as Stephen Binz puts it, “that God acts unexpectedly and that God’s people must always live in *vigilant expectation*.”⁸

Coming back to Biesta’s essay I want to focus on the conceptual similarities between a vigil and the hesitation that makes space for the experience of being addressed. Both the vigil and the hesitation are marked by time. In one sense it is “empty” time, time not filled with predetermined thoughts or actions. But vigils and hesitations are also characterized by a particular state of mind. They are intentional acts characterized by an openness or readiness for the incoming of the other who may or may not arrive — a watchful attention without guarantee of return. They are characterized, in other words, by a position of active passivity similar in many ways to Waldenfels’ conception of “primary passion.”

In Leo’s story, the children might not have been consciously aware of living in a state of primary passion or vigilant expectation, but whatever activity they were involved in, when addressed by George’s yelling from the road, they dropped what they were doing in order to run to his rescue. And this is precisely the kind of readiness, susceptibility, and openness to the address of the other that I think we should attend to more closely, and attempt to cultivate, in teaching and teacher education — as a way, in Biesta’s words, of enacting the assumption that the child is already speaking. The experience of being addressed is a particular kind of encounter in which I do not move toward the other. Rather I recognize the other’s coming toward me, and in so doing, I recognize that his or her rights have priority over my own. As Biesta reminds us, it is not a matter of choosing whether or not to be responsible — the responsibility is already there — but the question is how we take responsibility for that responsibility.

There is much more I could say here — especially about the role of the face in the experience of being addressed, and about the Levinasian themes of heteronomy and asymmetry in Biesta’s discussion of revelation and teaching.⁹ But instead let me close simply by thanking Gert for encouraging us to think about how the “unrelational” dimensions — the hesitations, gaps and fissures, the disjunctions, and disconnections — might actually facilitate education in unforeseen and unforeseeable ways.

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1. For work on listening, see various essays by Sophie Haroutunian-Gordon, Leonard Waks, Audrey Thompson, and others; and on recognition, see Charles Bingham, Chris Higgins, Josh Corngold, and Kevin McDonough.
 2. See also Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981).
 3. Bernard Waldenfels, *The Question of the Other* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press), 46–47.
 4. *Ibid.*, 47.
 5. *Ibid.*, 49.
 6. *Ibid.*
 7. Leonardo Hutchinson, “George the Blind Man” (unpublished).
 8. Stephen J. Binz, *Feasts of Judaism* (New London, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 2006), 16, emphasis added.
 9. See, Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1969); and Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*.