

Teaching as a Hermeneutic Calling

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The problem that concerns Deborah Kerdeman is how white teachers can become more aware of their privilege. Here, good intentions don't take you very far. Many teachers *want* their classes to be free of the misrecognitions, microaggressions, and epistemic injustices prevalent in our structurally racist society. However, white privilege is precisely a form of obtuseness. One can participate in the racial caste system even as one denounces it. Good intentions won't save us at this second level either—willing ourselves to become aware of our blindness—since privilege involves not only the inability to notice the inequalities before our eyes, but also the inability to notice this failure to notice.

The key factor is proximity to oneself. I can digest, if uncomfortably, the fact that black students are disproportionately suspended, restrained, and (in the 19 U.S. states that still allow corporal punishment) beaten, that the new voter suppression laws are part of an evolving but uninterrupted Jim Crow, that (in a chilling study out of Columbia) heart attack rates were shown to be in correlation, directly for African Americans and inversely for whites, with indicators of structural racism.¹ Information about racism *out there* makes me depressed, or fills me with righteous indignation. And I can even handle the abstract idea that every white person shares responsibility for this state of affairs. But now try and tell me that my own conduct and way of life has helped cause these weeping sores on the body politic and I become disbelieving, if not outright deaf, to the suggestion.

What concerns Kerdeman, then, is a particularly difficult form of self-knowledge (DSK): incremental awareness of our deep, motivated structures of ignorance. To get at this, Kerdeman offers us an autobiographical case and a précis of Gadamer's account of dialogue, discomfiture, and self-knowledge. Reading this case through Gadamer, she suggests, helps us understand how white teachers might achieve DSK.²

At the heart of Kerdeman's account is her personal narrative, which we can divide into three parts:

1. The Backstory: Kerdeman taught for years under the impression that her own classes were progressive spaces where all students met as equals. During these years, she was attending the meetings of the Philosophy of Education Society (PES) and was well aware that some of her colleagues—Audrey Thompson, Barbara Applebaum, Cris Mayo, Kathy Hytten, Ron Glass, and others—were doing good work showing how even well-intentioned teachers can reinforce racial hierarchies. But she did not think that she necessarily had to read this work and apply it to her own teaching.
2. The Pulled Up Short Moment: Twelve years ago, she was teaching a doctoral class that seemed to be going well even if she had sensed some tension in recent discussions. Then four students of color approached her to explain that they had been feeling silenced, misrecognized, and treated as objects of knowledge rather than as subjects and knowers in their own right. They were pointing the finger not at Kerdeman but at their classmates. However, given her teacherly responsibility for the tenor of the discussions, she still felt on the hook. “I had to do something,” she writes. “I didn’t know what”.³ This is when the students handed her, of all things, a pile of articles on anti-racist pedagogy and whiteness, papers written by these very friends and colleagues at PES.
3. The Aftermath: Debby began to read the articles and eat the humble pie that they represented. She sought out local colleagues working on anti-racist pedagogy. She made social justice more central to her teaching. She started to have flashes of insight into her own participation in white privilege. While candidly admitting how she continues to struggle with race, she also reports that her classes have improved, and that this growth has also made her life richer.

To interpret this case, Kerdeman turns to Gadamer. As she reminds

us, Gadamer's account is helpfully situated between two others. One is the view that with the right method of critical reflection we could see the world as it is, undistorted by prejudice, ideology, and received ideas. The other denies that critical reflection can attain such an Archimedean point outside of history, language, culture, and power. While these two camps disagree over whether we can escape our situatedness, they share the key assumption that true understanding requires such an escape. It is just this assumption that Gadamer denies. He concurs with the second camp that all of our attempts to understand—even those aiming to disrupt prejudice—are framed by the prejudgments constitutive of our nature as cultural and historical beings. Despite the pirouettes of reflection, Gadamer writes, the majority of these prejudices will remain “behind my back.”²⁴ Gadamer denies that our situatedness precludes understanding for two reasons. First, prejudgments are not simply blinders. They have a productive power, opening up some aspects of the world even as they close off others. Second, we can learn to notice dimensions of inner and outer worlds that our prejudgments have foreclosed. For Gadamer, though, this is not accomplished by stepping back to polish the mirror of representation before engaging. If such progress occurs, it is only in the midst of our dialogues, through concrete and contingent fusions of horizons. We engage across differences about an object of common concern and our conversation, our loving contestation, begins to reveal, as it were, a blurriness in the object caused by the superimposition of our two angles of approach. If we persist, we may learn with our partner a new focal length. What becomes clear is something of the framing assumptions we have each brought to the dialogue, which can lead to a reframing and to being able to perceive the phenomenon more fully.

In other words, true understanding is transformative. Expanded understanding comes not through simple addition but through insight, a process that is as much unlearning as learning. There is a familiar version of this idea—picture little Piagetians more or less happily letting go of their ideas about non-conservation of volume—but the unlearning Gadamer has in mind requires a painful form of self-knowledge. As Kerdeman has explained in previous work, being pulled up short punctures our “self-inflation” and “false

pride,” disrupts our illusions of “control” and “invincibility,” and “discloses attitudes, qualities, and behaviours we would prefer to disown.”⁵ To glimpse your vanities and failures—to confront the emptiness of your promises, the contingency of your projects, and the mortality of your existence—is to feel disoriented, threatened, empty, exposed.

So, being pulled up short is no fun. But the experience can also leave one feeling enriched and hopeful: freed from illusions, in touch with a fuller reality, reconnected with oneself. So where do we sign up? As Kerdeman’s narrative nicely illustrates, the experience Gadamer describes cannot be prescribed. There is no technique for pulling oneself up short. You would have better luck throwing yourself a surprise party. Kerdeman’s encounter with her students came unbidden. So is it just a matter, depending on your preferred vocabulary, of contingency, or grace, or moral luck? Shall we simply conclude that some of the socio-economically lucky, born into the form of moral blindness that is privilege, are also morally lucky enough to have an experience that breaks through their obtuseness? On my reading, this is not how Kerdeman sees the matter. True, she is careful to avoid turning Gadamer’s description into a prescription. She is not selling us a gadget by which we can somehow hoist ourselves with our own petards. But she does seek to identify preconditions for DSK as if to suggest that, while there may be no *techne* to counteract *tyche*, if we can at least put ourselves in the right situation, we might improve our odds.⁶

To this end, Kerdeman identifies three preconditions of her DSK moment:

1. Relation. The interlocutors meet neither as strangers nor as adversaries, nor even as the direct objects of each other’s interest, but as partners caught up together in trying to understand some independent object of common concern. Partnership does not imply symmetry, though, as the interlocutors differ by race and inhabit the asymmetrical roles of teacher and student.
2. Call. The subaltern students issue a challenge to the superaltern teacher: “you are not offering the course you think you are offering.”

3. Response. The crucial step is perceiving this challenge not as a practical problem to be solved but as an address, from a Thou. It is only after the narrator in Rilke's poem moves from observation of the archaic torso to feeling observed by it, from grasping it as an object to suddenly finding himself in its grips, that he hears its voice: "You must change your life."⁷

This works fairly well as a description of *what* occurred, but we also want to know *why* it occurred. After all, in many classes this partnership never develops and students don't feel able to approach their teacher with their concerns. And no doubt it often happens that the first two conditions are met but the third movement still fails to occur. The students ask to talk but the teacher puts them off, or perhaps she asks them on the spot in front of their classmates with the result that they decide against sharing their experience. Or, the meeting happens, but as soon as it becomes clear to the teacher that the students blame not her but their classmates, the teacher thanks them and says that she will be sure to be talk to any students that she *sees* being intolerant. So why was Kerdeman able to interpret the challenge as involving precisely her inability to see? She offers us an interesting answer on this score, namely that it has to do with her identity as a teacher.

In the narrative's turning point, Kerdeman first wants to be reassured that her students are not accusing her directly of these acts of racist misrecognition. Though relieved at their response, she still feels on the hook? Why?⁸ "I was my students' teacher," Kerdeman explains. "While seeing the racial dynamic in our classroom was disorienting, this insight also appealed to the responsibility I feel as a teacher to create opportunities for my students to learn"⁹ But this doesn't quite answer our question, as we can easily imagine a teacher who interprets this responsibility differently, reading the student challenge as a garden-variety complaint, which may or may not lead to some tweaking of classroom management, but not as a call to self-examination. This suggests that Kerdeman's phenomenology includes a key prescriptive claim, a normative conception of teaching.

What must teaching be in order to play the role it does in Kerdeman's

argument? I believe the answer goes something like this. To be a teacher is to choose a life with tremendous risks but also great potential for personal growth. It is to make yourself accountable to your students and to the subject matter. However, to do justice to either requires productive failures. You must risk, even court, exposure of your blind spots. The teacher is committing to creating and sustaining spaces in which teacher and students alike can take such risks. Teaching then is one determinate form of the quest for self-knowledge, one where we seek out a confrontation of ourselves not through withdrawal and reflection but precisely through engagement and the search for true contact. One cannot plan to be pulled up short, but one can ensure that one's teaching concerns a genuine object of common concern. And one can practice a pedagogy that opens live questions, which create the dynamic force that makes teacher and students into genuine partners. Practices are structures of attention and regimens for honing that attention. The hermeneutically minded teacher will still, like anyone, be dependent on the contingencies of the dialogue and grace of the other. But the practice of teaching can ready us to better notice the call when it comes, and to face up to its implications.

1Alicia Lukachko, Mark L. Hatzenbuehler, and Katherine M. Keyes, "Structural Racism and Myocardial Infarction in the United States," *Social Science & Medicine* 103, (2014): 42-50.

2At one point, Kerdeman's asks: "does my experience offer lessons for how educators could help other whites recognize their investment in privilege and work for racial justice" [Kerdeman, this volume]. This misleadingly suggests that we can promote DSK through consciousness-raising teacher education, when Kerdeman's own Gadamerian account insists that DSK arises, when it does, from the address of the subaltern students to the white teacher in an actual dialogical situation.

3 Kerdeman, this volume.

4Hans-Georg Gadamer, "On the Scope and Function of Hermeneutical Reflection" (1967), in *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, ed. David E. Linge, trans. David E. Linge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 38. This phrase is emphasized in the original.

5Deborah Kerdeman, "Pulled Up Short: Challenging Self-Understanding as a Focus of Teaching and Learning," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 37, no. 2 (2003): 293-308, 296.

6"Techne loves tyche (luck), and tyche loves techne." This is Gadamer quoting Aristotle (1140a20), quoting Agathon. See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. rev. by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald Marshall, 2nd Rev., Continuum Impacts ed. (NY: Continuum, [1960] 2004), 313-14.

7Rainer Maria Rilke, "The Archaic Torso of Apollo" (1908), in *The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*, ed. Stephen Mitchell, trans. Stephen Mitchell (New York: Vintage Books, 1984), 61.

8Though I will follow Kerdeman's lead to consider how we might view teaching itself as preparation for being pulled up short, it is worth noting how her narration guides us to this conclusion. This may well have been a singularly important moment of pushback and it may be her identity as a teacher that enabled her to turn this moment into an occasion of personal growth. At the same time, we are led to focus on her vocational identity in part simply because other aspects of her identity are omitted. We do not hear about her countless, less dramatic circuits around the hermeneutic circle, though cumulatively these may be the decisive factor.

9 Kerdeman, this volume.