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Embodied Wisdom: Meditations on Memoir and Education: A Review Essay

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Introduction

Embodied wisdom: Meditations on memoir and education, Alison Pryer's recent volume, is an ode to pedagogy and the struggle to understand what that unique term can mean.

As she defines it, "Pedagogy takes place in diverse sites, not only in kindergartens, schools, and universities. I define pedagogy as that which acts upon and acts with human beings in such a way as to transform their embodied consciousness, thereby producing meaning in the process." (p. 8)

Her new book engages the reader around fundamental questions this topic raises, including:

What is pedagogy?

How has it been dualized in our post-Cartesian society?

What are the implications of that dualism to our educational system?

How is pedagogy embodied? Sensual? Erotic?

How is it of the earth?

What are the formal and informal arenas in which pedagogy is experienced across our lives?

How can memoir serve as a tool for pedagogical inquiry?

This is a modest (141 pages) and meaty (every page packs a wallop) volume, organized in ten chapters. Chapter 1 provides an introduction to the book and the notion of pedagogy. Chapter 2 offers an exposition on memoir and Pryer's particular twist on it. Chapters 3-9 are composed of seven unique essays using memoir as a platform from which to investigate pedagogy. Chapter 10 offers a very brief conclusion.

Embodied Wisdom is not like a novel in which all parts cohere toward a breathtaking conclusion. Rather it is more like reading the haiku of Basho, where each poem is of itself (self-contained) and of the larger journey (his immediate journey and/or life itself). That gives it a restful feeling, even when the content is painful. Each essay can be read separately, and yet each gains so much as part of the larger volume.

This is memoir. Pryer delicately extracts elements from her past to inform and provide background and depth to discussion of issues related to the central theme of pedagogy. As memoir, I found it to be distinct from autobiography, where the intent is to tell about self and the journey of self. It does that and more. As Pryer says, "Memoir is not so much genre as practice, far more process than product." (p. 13).

Personal issues that serve as the lens for her essays include: a personal history that is spread across several continents, experiences of a painful and abusive childhood, years as a young adult spent teaching in Japan, opportunities working with student teachers, the sports of her new country, Canada, and the practice of Ikebana (Japanese flower arranging).

In making such splendid use of memoir, Pryer provides us with the opportunity to understand critical issues in education through the lens of personal narrative. This is a powerful

educative tool—as we (human beings) are hardwired for paying attention to narrative. Thus, Pryer leads us with skill through personal and theoretical forests that would be much more difficult to navigate without the path she provides the reader.

When I speak of theoretical forests, I can't help but think of the deep, dense forests of the Northwest, where she now makes her home (Vancouver BC). Having grown up in Oregon, I am familiar with the fir, cedar, spruce, ferns, and spongy forest floors of that ecology. Her theoretical discussions are every bit as rich as this. The “nurse log” that she springs from is the University of British Columbia's School of Education—home to the likes of Ted Aoki, William Pinar, and Rita Irwin. The atmosphere provided by these mentors has nourished many good up-and-coming curriculum theorists. They have developed a legacy that Pryer's work honors and extends.

This book will lead you along pathways that will explore notions of identity, ritual, and location, as well as concerns with silencing, mindfulness practices, and poetics. But don't grimace—the discussions are not trite, politically correct, or hackneyed. Rather, you find yourself engaging with these fundamental concepts as if they were all new again. I come away from the book wanting to read every author she mentions that I hadn't encountered before. The bibliography is now marked with asterisks to remind me of new titles to investigate.

An interesting issue that reading this book has triggered for me is rethinking the distinctions between a therapeutic space, a space that opens up through critical juxtapositions (as posited by critical theory), a liminal space, and a “Third Space”. These spaces have related meaning from the perspectives of educational theory and yet each evolves from unique starting points and is discussed with different goals in mind. In thinking about the connections and disconnections these spaces raise for pedagogy, Pryer explores the tensions and the openings that occur within and around these forms of space. I thank her for the nudge she has given me to reconsider the meanings of these mental spaces as they exist in pedagogy.

I liked this book so much I even feel up to raising two issues I found difficult to fully embrace. The first is the critique of Madeline Grumet's work. This is in Chapter 4 (44-45). While Pryer praises Grumet for breaking new ground, she waxes lengthy on Grumet's shortcomings. The critique seemed overlong and a bit harsh. It's my bet that this was written early on in graduate school when Pryer was first sharpening up her critical chops.

The second issue is the discussion of dualism and pedagogy. Fundamentally I think I do believe in that Western dualism exists, and yet every time I encounter someone speaking at length about it, I start to raise questions in my mind. I think about Bruno LaTour's *We Were*

Never Modern. I consider Levi-Strauss' binary approach—and the various dualisms he found in primitive (non-Western) culture. As someone who, like Pryer, has lived in Asia—I think about all of the ways real hands-on modern Asian culture—defies the over-generalized mythology of the non-dualistic and mystic Orient. I chuckle as I think about what the writer Ian Frazier would do to this kind of naiveté in a New Yorker piece. This is all to say that I wonder if Pryer's discussion of this issue, in the future, might benefit from greater nuance.

In reading this book, I did feel at various points that this was “Déjà vu all over again.” To explain what I mean, I need to make some critical disclosures about my own past and why I might have a friendly bias toward the author.

I am from an Irish American family where the saying: “The only good Englishman is a dead one.” Has survived across several generations.

I struggled to survive in a family where chaos and danger were present.

As a younger person, I, too, lived and taught English in Japan—and was affected not only by the people, language, and culture, but also by the natural world in that unique setting.

I have also worked on issues related to the pedagogical concerns of embodied practices

I am working on a book project that uses memoir, but I focus on technology as opposed to pedagogy.

So, while I would not claim we were clones, I feel we are kindred spirits of a kind.

Finally, this book was also my first real introduction to Information Age Publishing, Inc., and I am impressed that they have released this volume, not only in paperback and hardback editions, but also in an e-book format. Kudos to them!

Read: Enjoy: Think. This book is well worth it.

About the Author

Judith Davidson is an Associate Professor in the Graduate School of Education, University of Massachusetts Lowell. Her specialty area is qualitative research methodology with an emphasis on Qualitative Data Analysis Software and visual data analysis. She is co-author of *Qualitative Research Design for Software Users* (2008).

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