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For Elliot: A Valediction Forbidding Mourning

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Elliot loved this poem:¹

Come to the edge.
We might fall.
Come to the edge.
It's too high!
COME TO THE EDGE!
And they came
And he pushed
And they flew.

¹ Although often attributed to the French poet Guillaume Apollinaire, it is the work of the English poet Christopher Logue, see Louge, C. (1969) *New Numbers* (pp. 65-66). London, England: Jonathan Cape

I recall him reciting this at graduation gatherings that he held in the backyard of his home in Palo Alto, or in the intimate get-togethers that he and his former students would organize at national conferences like AERA or NAEA. Sometimes, he or one of us would insert it into a private conversation. Often, there was no need for him, or for us, to recite it in its entirety. Simply to say, come to the edge, would be enough for any of us to understand. We knew the reference.

The poem has special meaning for me. When I first met Elliot, in an interview prior to my admission to the Masters program at Stanford, he asked me why I wanted to pursue graduate education. I said, "To find my voice." Years later, as I approached my own doctoral graduation, it appeared to me that instead he had bestowed me wings: a remarkable sleight of hand that had switched my original request. I had asked to speak from where I stood, and now he had given me the ability to travel to previously unimaginable lands.

In the period following Elliot's death, I was in contact with several people who had been touched by Elliot. A group of us wanted to discuss how we wanted to remember him at the upcoming Tenth International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry. Our discussions included attention to his vivacity for living and keen wit, as well as his contributions to forms of qualitative research and evaluation. However, what stood out for me in these conversations were the stories of his generosity in opening doors.

Recently, I had published my thoughts on John Dewey's aesthetics:

Dewey reminds us that inquiry is not a series of steps that draws us nearer to the distance. Inquiry is the process of constructing a point of transition. Inquiry is an effort toward making a border crossing. Through the compression of experience, in our reflective undergoing, we forge this entryway. The hope of inquiry is that it may be possible to step through this portal, stand in an arc of time, and behold a possible future that synthesizes our past. This is a measure for the success of research.²

Now, in thinking about how we wanted to remember Elliot publicly, the stories that were told were not of wings, but of how Elliot had revealed a portal and invited us to step through (not just his students, but anyone whom he reached out to or reached out to him). Some of us did; some of us did not. I could remember how I made a hash of my first invitation. I also remembered how Elliot too, with grace, could recall and laugh at my initial fumbling. But eventually, I too came to the edge.

² Siegesmund, R. (2012). Dewey through a/r/tography. *Visual Arts Research Journal*, 38(2), 99-109, (p. 108).

In the poem, the master does not give anything to the apprentices. Nor did Elliot give anything away. The master may push, but what comes forth, comes from the students. And so, I now realize that the words I spoke at Elliot's retirement party in 2006, when I thanked him for the wings he had given me, were mistaken. He had not given me wings. I always had the wings. I always had the voice. He took me to a Deweyian moment where I could step through a portal of time and behold a moment where an imaginary future—that has now become empirical (imagination transformed into fact)—has synthesized my past.

These acts of opening the door to personal transformation are the stories that I have heard in the past weeks. They are more than about giving wings; these are tales of the creation of minds.

These days have also led me to recall a poem that I have long loved, *A Valediction Forbidding Mourning*, written by the metaphysical poet John Donne. Donne addressed the poem to his wife, as he was about to embark on an extended trip that would take him away from England. As Donne so often did in his poetry, he began in empirical reality, in this case his looming departure, but closed the poem with a vision of timeless spiritual constancy:

Such wilt thou be to me, who must,
Like th' other foot, obliquely run;
Thy firmness makes my circle just,
And makes me end where I begun.³

Elliot will remain such an anchor to me whose firmness will continue to hold the promise of making my oblique meanderings a just arc. Each day when I step into a classroom, I hope that I am worthy of Elliot's legacy: that I can lead others to portals of transformation, as he had done for me.

About the author

Richard Siegismund is Professor and Division Head of Art+Design Education at Northern Illinois University's School of Art. He has received individual fellowship awards from the Getty Education Institute for the Arts, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the University of Georgia's Willson Center. He has been a Fulbright Scholar. He is a member of the Council for Policy Studies in Art Education and serves as a Research Associate to the Research Institute of the National College of Art and Design in Dublin, Ireland. He was

³ John Donne, *A Valediction Forbidding Mourning* (written c 1612, published 1633).

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