

SECOND THOUGHTS ON SECOND THOUGHTS

In a year of a pandemic, a writer and teacher ponders what's revealed when we step back from the moment and consider it at arm's length.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, I've been teaching on a screen, and like many educators, I find myself in a perpetual state of uncertainty about a practice that has defined much of my life. Under normal circumstances, there would at least be the welcome distraction of the drive home with music to mark the transition between satisfaction with class and second thoughts about it. But now, lessons, activities, texts, the classroom itself—everything is on my laptop. It's even possible to record every session. With all this evidence at hand, I could reflect on my teaching frame by frame until what's needed comes into focus.

In its earliest English usage, “reflect” meant to bend or turn back. As when we use the word today, it names what light does when it strikes a surface. But “to reflect” also applied to surgical procedures. Flaps of skin were reflected to reveal infection. The coccyx folds back—reflects—during the delivery of a baby. It is instructive to think of reflection in this way, as a bending. Although something may be revealed upon reflection, something that we missed the first time around, the process may also distort the image. When I look back on a class, the flaws draw the most attention: the activity that fell flat, the moment that my mind went blank in midsentence. The face of the student who didn't hide his discontentment multiplies and swarms all the others like fruit flies. The blemish blossoms, as in those horrifying mirrors in hotel bathrooms, backlit and magnified.

Inspected closely enough, all smooth things prove to be pockmarked (remember Gulliver among the Brobdingnagians?), and the most successful class includes an embarrassment. A prerequisite for teaching is (or should be) humility. The humble are disposed to reflect critically on their work regardless of rubrics and performance reviews, the stuff of the modern corporatization of teaching. Accrediting agencies and administrators require evidence of “reflective practice.” It's possible that doubling down on reflectiveness

through systems of surveillance has something to do with decreased job satisfaction among educators and declining applications into the profession.

Time and space are necessary conditions for thought, let alone thinking about your thoughts. If a teacher (or writer—we have a lot in common) is to be a “reflective practitioner,” as they say, we must digress. Like planning a lesson and writing a poem, reflection is inefficient, and mechanizing it militates against authenticity. We need to wander around long enough to encounter alternatives, brood on them and cast some aside, so that in the fullness of time, we gather better ideas and brighter words. Walking a dog or rocking a baby is good for this. Everyone claims to be busy at all times, as if it were honorable, rather than merely American, to give your entire life to the business. But even the busy mind will wander. Workaholics daydream without pleasure. Better to be intentional about it and walk the dog while you reflect on the day and its anxieties.

Then again, there's the time I was walking Wagner, my nervous dachshund puppy, by a busy road, and he slipped his leash. I was replaying something in my mind. I don't recall what—an iffy lesson, stalled essay, unresolved argument. It doesn't matter now, and mattered less than I realized. Terrified by an oncoming runner, Wagner managed to pop out of his collar and dash under an oncoming car. Its rear wheel grazed his back, he rolled several times, and kept going. Traffic, walkers, and joggers screeched to a halt, everyone heartstruck by the dashing dachshund and his distraught owner. As I reflect on this now, I recall being suddenly focused, my eyes tracking Wagner. The driver apologized, and I made some sort of reassuring remark—not your fault, it was an accident—but I was determined not to let Wagner out of my sight. When I caught up with him, alive but battered, he was panting at our apartment door. He was still so young that I was surprised that he knew where

we lived. It took months to convince either of us to go for another walk. I let him sleep on the bed for the rest of his life.

Why did my mind wander to that contrary example—the walk that proves it's risky to let the mind go? Sorrows and failures are shiny objects. Trusting the discipline of reflective practice to the indiscipline of wandering requires a will to wind up nowhere that you expected.

The Romantics understood that wandering could release an artist from the grip of self-consciousness and into creativity—as much a prerequisite for pedagogy as for poetry. There is a difference between brooding in a study and brooding in the woods, where the body is subject to weather and bugs, and the surroundings pull at the attention. To wander in thought was essential to an artist's finding the right path through her work. Wandering became a subject in itself, a means of investigating states of consciousness. Consider the German Romantic painting, *Der Wanderer über dem Nebelmeer* by Caspar David Friedrich. A gentleman in a cinched overcoat stands at a precipice and gazes out on mountaintops shrouded in billowing fog. In the distance are the shadows of two peaks; close to the foreground are modest signs of flora. It is a canvas of crags and clouds, blue and gray hewed, representing vastness,

Der Wanderer über dem Nebelmeer by Caspar David Friedrich



In a season of online classes, it's easy for a teacher to hit the rewind button, which can bring insights and complications all their own.

and yet what dominates the scene, forming the axis of the picture's composition and filling most of the space, is the wanderer. He has a cane, which seems merely decorative, and his hair is tousled. His back is to us.

Why does Friedrich paint him from behind?

The wanderer looks at the sea of mists. We look at him and the sea. Of the landscape, we see what he sees, or is able to see, except that we cannot see through him. Something remains forever hidden from our view, a lacuna we must fill in. Presumably it's more stone and cloud, but Friedrich wants us to consider how he sees it, his frame of mind, this wanderer who does not know we're behind him. He confronts the sublime: enormity, disorder, a cold, wild, nonhuman space that sharply contrasts with his mannered dress and form. He is a product of the Enlightenment, of capital. Education and money have secured him the ability to wander out to this vista; he stands at its center. But the obscurity and complexity of the landscape far exceed comprehension, let alone representation. If he has conquered a peak, it does not rate as an impressive conquest. The sea of mist could swallow him and his reflections.

Let us assume that the wanderer thinks these existential thoughts. So far, he is our proxy. What then do we notice that he cannot? Why be placed in a position to gaze upon him, gazing? Friedrich would have us contemplate the act of contemplation. Here is the importance of the lacuna created by the wanderer's body: He sees something that we can only imagine, and yet we constitute his awareness of being someone who wanders and gazes. We think all that the wanderer thinks, and we think of his and our thinking. In this way, we stand above the sea of mists and above ourselves embodied in the wanderer. Reflecting upon reflection, we wander back into the grip of self-consciousness.

Sometimes the body knows best how to silence the self-critical mind. For many years I trained as a distance runner, and about an hour into the run, the monkey on my shoulder would stop chattering. There would still be thoughts, but most often they were triggered by the surroundings. I was aware of my pace, the rhythm of it, and of landmarks on my usual routes. But mostly I was quiet in motion. This would last until the distance began to push the envelope of my training, when shins or lower back or shoulders began to signal the need to stop.

After the race, there's time to reflect—what could have been better or different. But not while it's happening. And in my experience, as an amateur athlete, the reflectiveness never canceled the achievement. In 1996, I defended my dissertation and ran my first marathon in the same month. By all accounts, the dissertation defense was the greater achievement. But the dissertation is an argument, and so is the defense, as the name implies, and in the course of graduate school, your chief

lesson is that your work will always need more work. You leave a defense knowing that a book must follow. In contrast, the last leg of the Marine Corps Marathon is uphill past the Iwo Jima Memorial. Soldiers are lined up on both sides, cheering; a band is playing; yes, it's melodramatic and contrived, but it worked on me after months of training and 26.2 miles in the Washington, DC, heat and humidity. No one cared that I was several minutes shy of my goal. Even I didn't care, at least not until I started training for the next one.

At the top of the hill, exhausted and dehydrated, I might have been peering out on a sea of mists. Nothing was on my mind, just exuberance, which, as William Blake said, is eternal delight. It was like the moment that the final sentence finally comes to you, and you write it down, quickly, in the night. Or when you finish a semester and the students clap, and you join them, pleased to have been a part of it, even the imperfections.



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