

**Joys of Teaching Genius:
Walking on Water with Ivan Illich**

Dana L. Stuchul, Madhu Suri Prakash

I. Experiments with “Walking On Water” by Dana L. Stuchul

Where The Mind Is Without Fear¹

Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high;
Where the knowledge is free;
Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls;
Where words come out from the depth of truth;
Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection;
Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way into the dreary desert sand of dead habit;
Where the mind is led forward by thee into ever-winding thought and action -
Into that heaven of freedom, [*may children and teachers awake*].

- Rabindranath Tagore, Nobel laureate in literature

My strong suspicion is that Ivan Illich would wretch at what I’m about to share ... a brief window into my teaching life ... the way I aim to see. To. See.

In part Illich’s stomach upset might result from my effort to “square the circle” ... to make something more humane that is inhumane ... even perhaps, “moloch” (an all-devouring god, evil and insatiable) as Illich and Master Jacques Ellul² would pronounce.

My stories derive from my classroom where I work among mostly twenty-year olds who imagine themselves teachers one day ... in an American public high school.

¹ From Rabindranath Tagore’s *Gitanjali*. Dover: Dover Publications. 2000.

² See Illich’s “To Honor Jaques Ellul.” Based on an address given at Bordeaux, November 13, 1993

The undergraduate course is an introductory field experience in teacher preparation course ... every teacher certifying institution has its version. My own, utterly idiosyncratic, I title, “Unlearning for Understanding Teaching & Learning.” Now, this inclusion of the word “unlearning” does not intend cuteness, but rather my interest in having them question ... question everything ... beginning and ending with themselves. In fact, introducing myself on the first day, I share the Parker Palmer adage, “we teach who we are”³ as the large frame in which our metaphorical and actual journey will occur. They appear dumbstruck, even after my explanation. Furthermore, when I look further into this frame to reveal a question embedded within Palmer’s adage—who are you?—where some are noticeably intrigued, most have no idea what to expect next. In concluding the class meeting, I play my guitar and sing, they smile and leave. In the second week, I will shift gears, if only to peel back the veil shrouding our classroom experiences. I will endeavor to scare them.

Prompting them to take out the day’s required reading, I begin. Absent fanfare, I announce that I will call on 5 students to come to the front of the room and share with the class the reading’s central thesis. Everyone snaps to. Reading packets open. A flourish of attention to notebooks and book bags. Five now stand in the front of the room, somewhat awkwardly, having been excavated from their seats. I prompt them to begin ... to be succinct. To look not at me but at their peers. Meanwhile, I pace on the side of the classroom, occasionally raising an eyebrow. Appearing pensive. Asking for a clarification. Wondering aloud if anyone wishes to amend his or her response.

ALL of what has and will happen—the announcement, the instructions, the pacing—I intend as a considered and choreographed drama. A spoof. One in which the assembled students

³ From Parker J. Palmer’s *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher’s Life*. San Francisco, CA: John Wiley & Sons. 2007.

are the featured actors! The “performance”—how fear functions within classrooms—will last at most 10 minutes before I exclaim, “Stop! How many of you are afraid?” Semester after semester—over a decade of enactments—this “anything-but-play” never ceases to portray how young people within classrooms are governed by fear, particularly the school “winners”! So systematically have they been “seduced” (from the Latin *seducé*, to be led astray) from themselves—their own bodies, desires, interests, questions—in their advancement upward and onward toward the upper tiers of the educational pyramid, they have never thought themselves a topic for inquiry.

Once the fear ruse is revealed, I facilitate a “debriefing”—a series of questions intended to explore, phenomenologically, how fear operates—its subtle, insidious, habituated all-too-common traces. As we continue, we all become aware of the games students adopt—to avoid participation, to avoid peers’ judgments, to please teachers, the effects on their bodies, and, over time all of the ways they are seduced away from themselves. Many unlearning lessons follow the “fear lesson” including: “labels,” “judgments,” “separation & isolation” and more. And, always, I’m seeking NOT to teach them anything, not to have them test in a particular way, not to have them believe a certain way, but instead to simply return to themselves and to wonder. It is to this “wondering” that I turn next.

Fast forward twelve weeks where I introduce the final assignment, the “walking on water”⁴ assignment. Borrowed and adapted from author/activist/teacher, Derrick Jensen, the project is an invitation (more provocation) for my students to do the impossible, their impossible.

⁴ *Walking on Water: Reading, Writing and Revolution* by Derrick Jensen. White River Junction, Vt.: Chelsea Green Publishing. 2005.

Not the uncomfortable. Not the mildly challenging. Not the difficult. The IMPOSSIBLE!

Recognizing that they likely have no idea in the moment what to do to fulfill this course requirement (roughly 2% of their overall grade ... allowing anyone the opportunity to say, “no thank you” to the task), I offer assurance. You will know what is for you impossible and, likely it will arise in you by surprise as you move about your day, walking to class, showering, doing dishes, before you fall asleep. You’ll know that you’ve hit upon YOUR “impossible,” I suggest, when you have a physiological response—a racing heart, a flushed face, the inward thought, “Oh shit! Not that!” When you notice this in yourself, I explain, you will know what you have to do.

They look at me dazed still.

Ever so meekly, someone will, though somewhat self-consciously ask, “Can you give us an example?”

Stories follow. Stories of students committing their own “miracle” ... of “walking on water.”

The young man who defied his family’s pattern for how males express their love. Describing a recent visit by his parents, noting the minutes ticking away, their family weekend drawing to a close as first he escorts his mother to her car door, he describes coming around to the drivers’ side of the car, his father extending his hand for the customary “good-bye son” handshake and, then, his miracle. Opening his arms, he draws his father in for a hug, their first as one man to another.

Stories of women ending physically and emotionally abusive relationships. Stories of sons and daughters, estranged from parents who long ago ended marriages—perhaps for reasons of infidelity, for substance abuse, for love eviscerated—my students take the first tentative steps to reach across a river of pain, to build a bridge. Stories of giving voice—to

experiences of rape. Stories of their inquiring into their own conditioned shame in their healthy, though not the socially idealized bodies.

One story comes from a student who, upon being introduced to her teaching assistant—a black man and doctoral candidate from New Orleans—says to herself, “I hope he’s not my teaching assistant (TA).” At the semester’s end, a semester spent with the very TA toward whom she had harbored thoughts, racist “I can’t learn from you” thoughts ... thoughts born from her all white, rural, small town Pennsylvania upbringing... this young woman “walked on water” fifteen weeks later when she speaks of her racism to the TA, admitting all that she had indeed learned from this former teacher/administrator, while asking for forgiveness, expressing her regret and her gratitude, and also tendering and receiving a hug.

Students hear—are assured and re-assured—over and over and over again that they are always the author and editor of their own story. They share what they wish, how they wish. In my experience of many “walking on water circles,” I tell them, most will arrive with two stories to share—the “safe” story and the “real” one. I appeal that they share the real story of their doing “the impossible.”

These stories come, they do not come easily. Tears, years of accumulated grief, doubt, self-loathing, anguish block the stories’ emergence. Too, their understandable and conditioned distrust of classrooms and classroom inhabitants further dissuades story sharing.

Your stories are gifts, I pronounce. That in all my years, my experience, my knowledge and my commitments, all of this seats in me the certainty that those in the circle receive your stories as gifts. No one, I continue, receives a story, saying in his or her own mind, “That’s so lame.” “That’s a pathetic story!”

Rather, stories are received as gifts ... treasured, humbling, inspiring, less-isolating, bridging, generous gifts. In sharing of their authentic story, I suggest, they give permission, they create the opening for others to do the same.

It's the end of the semester. They've done much together—field trips to schools, many classroom “circles.” They've made friends within the class. They've revealed to anyone paying any attention, their genius. Utter genius as evidenced in their own stories, their “walking on water” stories.

Over and over again, I've repeated that YOU—you school “winners” must not expect your students—those who will one day share a classroom with you when you become “teacher”—please do not expect those souls to be like you. Remember, I urge, you are the “winners” (so evident by virtue of the fact that they're now sitting in a university classroom), you should not expect others to be like you—learners who are “motivated” (a deeply problematic and self-fulfilling label ... a “blame the victim” condemnation) in the way that you are, for the reasons you are, at the times that you are, seemingly on command as you are. You should not expect your teaching to be received by docile, obedient, compliant, passive, submissive—in a word, “motivated”—learners. It may be. But it just as likely may not be. Your students will not be you, I declare. They are NOT you! So, then, who are they?

But how will you learn that? Not by questionnaire. Or by staying after class. Or by attending sports or arts events. No. You will need to SEE them. To see them in an utterly new way ... even as you see yourself.

That way? ... To see genius. To see the common genius. The distinct, abundant genius. The genius that is as common as dirt (all credit to John Taylor Gatto⁵). To see not “deficit.” Not failure. Not loser. Not which is scarce, obscured, latent or unpolished. Abject genius. What WILL you see, WHO will you see, and WHO will you be and will those young people BE, when you begin to see genius that is as common as dirt?

To Illich, I would suggest a antacid. For all those who will spend considerable portions of their lives within schools and classrooms, I suggest questioning their beliefs about genius!

II. Experiments With Teaching Genius and Its Joys by Madhu Suri Prakash

And I think of each life as a flower, as common
As a field daisy, and as singular,

And each name a comfortable music in the mouth,
Tending, as all music does, toward silence,

And each body a lion of courage, and something precious to the earth.⁶

.....

A little known rock in New York City carries the inscription: “the universe is made NOT of atoms but of stories.” Close to my heart I hold Muriel Rukeyser’s words. They constitute one of the certainties or assumptions undergirding my philosophy of education about the **centrality**

⁵ John Taylor Gatto’s *Dumbing Us Down: The Hidden Curriculum of Compulsory Schooling*. Gabriola Island, BC, Canada: New Society Publishers, 2017.

⁶ An excerpt from Mary Oliver’s “When Death Comes.” *New and Selected Poems*. Boston: Beacon Press. 1992.

of stories: how we offer them to each other and how we receive them from each other. The stories that I live and the stories that are shared with me daily affirm, making more certain that other certainty undergirding my philosophy of education: “genius is as common as dirt.”

The moment we put aside the certainty or assumption about the scarcity of genius, the joys of teaching, learning and living grow by quantum leaps to infinity. One, among an unending treasure trove of joy filled stories compels me to invite you to an adventure flying high, up to 11,000 feet in the stark Himalayas; to Ladakh; the highest desert in the world; politically claimed today as legally belonging to India.

Under the current Indian educational regime, Ladakhi children are subject to the dismay of double neo-colonialism. *Schooling the World: the White Man’s Burden*, Carol Black’s film masterfully documents how and why 95 % of Ladakhi children fail the board exams: subjugated to a course of study that has nothing to do with their culture or place in the world. Instead, they must regurgitate facts, figures and theories that in colonial times, the British forced Indian youth to memorize; and, post-Independence, Indians browned them over to manufacture oreo cookies (brown on the outside, white on the inside) of their supposedly free citizens, now including Ladakhis.

Wisdom, we are often told, calls for making something good out of something really bad. At SECMOL (Students’ Educational and Cultural Movement of Ladakh), a residential school built of mud and other local materials on the beautiful Sind River, young and old are thriving together as they transform failures into geniuses of different stripes; all of them stars shining in unique ways; in all their singularity and particularity. The genius of SECMOL’s founder, Sonam Wangchuk, is to give a fair failing grade to the educational system that reduces 95 % of Ladakhi youth to becoming D’s, dropouts – essentially humans trashed.

The first pre-requisite for entering SECMOL is to be failed by the educational system. Once the dominant story is systematically revealed to be a horrible lie, it is possible to open up the imagination of each failure to the wonderful truth that each person has been incarnated with unique gifts; which, once shared with the community, grow an abundance of joy replacing the scarcity of genius that produces depression, anxiety and other forms of modern educational plagues / epidemics.

Imagine the gladness of failures discovering the beauty, goodness and truth about their dwelling: made of mud and local materials needing no fossil fuels to be comfortably warm at 15 degrees when outside temperatures drop to – 50! That they can grow food all year around without fossil fuels in off grid solar greenhouses and cook it with parabolic solar cookers; that they can create Ice Stupa artificial glaciers which melt in spring to nourish their fields when there is zero rainfall; that they enjoy food sovereignty and self sufficiency by learning how to herd, milk, and look after happy healthy sheep, cows and other animals; reforest their villages; and in all ways nourish their communities instead of abandoning them, lured by the illusion of exciting jobs in distant cities. Imagine the gladness of failures discovering that they count for something – actually a lot -- in their own places which, when they celebrate in films or music, gets them recognition far from Ladakh for their home grown excellence; for being invaluablely useful to where they belong; and the places that belong to them.

Having celebrated genius as common as dirt at 11,000 feet, it is time to come home to Happy Valley where I have lived, learned and taught for more than half my life. Here, the perennial question that has guided me daily on or off campus: What would it take to have every member of our learning circles enjoy the fullest success and flourishing? Questions like this one open up portals on to landscapes of learning where the joys of genius creating, limitlessly break

open our imaginations to infinite possibilities. Last week, reflecting aloud on our forthcoming AERA presentation with a small group of Music Education doctoral students just introduced to me by a loving, friendship-festing colleague, I asked them whether they had experienced “genius” first hand [vs. studying the genius of Mozart, Einstein, et. al] Tentatively, a music teacher who had moved North from Georgia raised her hand. Profusely, she apologized for NOT knowing my definition of “genius” while proceeding to offer her story of genius with utmost humility. The student she celebrated, like his siblings, constitutes the “below normal” learners that are normally the objects of pity and paternalism in “normal” teachers’ grapevines. They are the archetypes of those bound not to shine nor succeed. They are “troubled” kids from “troubling” homes – kids who do not even want to go home for fear of the hunger and violence that lurks there in every corner.

What piece of music could “break open” their hearts; send their spirits soaring? Daily searching for musical pieces to inspire her young learning circle with this question, she “chanced upon” a composition played at an Indian wedding[?]. Far from alienating his colleagues or him, this alien music got the troubled kid to slowly start drumming along. In a matter of moments, though, he was no longer drumming. Instead he was “being drummed;” his spirit freed from all school prisons of As, Bs, Ds, he let his arms, drums and music carry him to the heavens [where no human judgments are permitted to confine and limit genius with odious comparisons along today’s dominant curves for confining genius to a miniscule elite]. Every cell of his being came alive; living in that moment the genius of creation. In the South where I come from, she concluded, we call this being “broken open.”

“Broken open” did not enter my imagination in the first 3 weeks of the Fall semester when I an undergraduate student in my class, An Introduction to Philosophy of Education,

scoffed openly at the first readings assigned for the course. A daughter of a wealthy Asian family with a successful international school empire, she scorned my selection of readings opening with Summerhill: with the centrality Neill gives to cultivating authenticity, freedom and happiness at his alternative school. Equally, she had nothing positive to say about Craig Keilburger: who started an international organization at the age of 12 to “save the children” from sweatshops across the globe. Her responses suggested her complete contempt for Neill’s idiocy: giving happiness the importance that he did; and Keilburger was as easily dismissed as a do-gooder without relevance to “real life.”

Week 3 of the semester is scheduled for private conversations with each student who has decided NOT to drop the course –despite his or her discomfort with a radical pedagogy and curriculum. Certain of my abject failures in dis-covering my student’s genius, I hoped to do better in the personal one-to-one meeting scheduled. She entered with her usual posture of dis-engagement, face hidden by cap and disheveled hair. Parker Palmer’s “student from hell”⁷ was the first image that leaped up as she sullenly sat down. Next, Parker Palmer’s genius in discovering the student-from-hell’s genius guided me towards creating the context for hearing her story. I knew what was NOT working for her. Silently wondering to myself what bureaucratic noose had forced her NOT to drop the course despite her dismissals, very very gently I asked her: What is working for you in our story telling circle?

With all my decades of experience, I was not prepared for the flood of tears that were her response to this mildly offered question. Through long silences and copious tears, she shared her story of being transformed by the other members of our story circle: listening to and learning

⁷ From “A Culture of Fear: Education and the Disconnected Life” in Parker Palmer’s *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher’s Life*. San Francisco, CA: John Wiley & Sons. 2007.

from their depth, their breadth of imagination, profound compassion and joyfulness in their reflections and responses. I have been rigid and small-minded, she confessed. I am lucky that my fellow students share so much wisdom from their heart. And, I am grateful to a friend who took this course two semesters back and who urged me to enroll for this course. My friend, she admitted, had shared her story of complete success in moving beyond her depression and anxiety to genuine happiness – learning from other young people with such a different vision of a happy life.

Such stories are as common as dirt – if we choose to look down upon the soil beneath our feet and kiss it for the creative life force that springs out of it—announcing an ingenious abundance of genius. Most precious for me at this moment of my life and also the most threatened is the genius of peoples of the soil (vs. the “book” or the “screen”). To begin to recognize and honor this genius requires healing the sick mindset that plastics over soil with suburbia’s terror of weeds – perennially threatening the perfection of lawns with the irrepressible exuberance of April’s golden dandelions. The genius of those who heal with and savor dandelions for beauty and goodness and truth matters at 11,000 feet in SECMOL.

Peasant wisdom has cultivated this genius for generations. Its absence creates a vast loss of soil and loneliness in these halls of the Academy? What will it take us to make this genius sparkle? Do I ask a completely unwise question? Certainly, I seek no argument, re-member-ing what Master Illich urged: “Through arguments you can only get conclusions; only stories make sense.”

III. Walking on Water and Joys of Teaching Genius with Ivan Illich

The story of Saint Schindler⁸ Illich found very pertinent to understanding “do gooder” teachers. The “Schindler lists” are made by all too many caring, committed teachers, observed Ivan Illich, long after his ideas had moved far beyond *Deschooling Society*. Their strategies for helping some of their students survive, betrays their knowledge that millions are being sent to hell by a system systemically designed to be a most efficient sorting machine. Among the hellish design principles of this international global machinery is that only a few are fit to fill the “good” jobs—the rest are damned to the gas chambers of un-breathable urban ghettos, multiplying sweatshops, call centers, or prisons. Such is the hell that awaits the “dregs, wastes, and dropouts,” a hell designed by the school successes for the school failures.

Ivan Illich challenged every certainty that held up the institutions of secular salvation orchestrated by the credentialing global empires married to the global employment empires. “Refuseniks” of these systems continue to work and play, teach and learn guided and governed by other certainties, drawing upon their own genius ... genius as abundant as dirt. This certainty is a sure cure for joyless teaching and learning.

Genius is as abundant as dirt. Each of us – teachers and learners both simultaneously – are assured of abundant joyfulness as we extend and expand our capacities to see the abundance of genius within and without—within ourselves and in others, within and without classrooms, campuses, commons.

Our explorations celebrate teachers, learners, activists, community members—and their experiences and experiments with a vast array of genius. We invite, following Illich, Palmer,

⁸ See “The Educational Enterprise in the Light of the Gospel” by Ivan Illich (unpublished). Accessed July 16, 2016 http://www.davidtinapple.com/illich/1988_Educational.html

Holt, Olsen, Goyol et al., conspirators—those escaping the standardized instruments that flatten out diversity and humanity. How, we ask, are teachers now making their own creative footpaths towards Parker Palmer’s classic ”student from hell”—the non-conformist, “at-risk,” “low-performing” loser? How do we—as teacher learners—enter the “normal” classroom spaces of huge scarcities of genius and witness them transformed into places where all experience the surprise and delight of ripping the mis-classificatory masks hiding from sight the genius’s of the Bs, Cs, Ds, Fs et al?

Joys of teaching genius are highly contagious. Once unleashed, they cannot be contained by any State authorities. Once the genius is released from the bottle, the virus of joy-filled teaching and learning disregards all institutional rules conceived for creating artificial professional scarcities of genius. Once people discover the joys of “walking on water,” they are not limited by class, color, creed, rank, status, imagination and creativity that recognize no boundaries.

We invite a debunking and dismissal of the concept of scarcity within the context of teaching and learning—particularly scarcity of genius—now reigning supreme within the educational universe. Unabashedly, this exploration enjoys the audacity of saying “No Thank You” to all institutionally created scarcities of genius. In this rejection of scarcities, we intend to catalyze a conceptual shift in notions of “genius,” and “intelligence.” Power and knowledge together honor the political, linguistic, and social principles of abundance of creativity; and the surprising varieties of genius we have not even begun to tap into.

Decades ago, Howard Gardner challenged the myths of the educational establishment by opening up our attention and understanding of “intelligence.” Gardner’s Theory of Multiple Intelligences invited breaking from the confining molds of “standardized” curricula, pedagogies,

and modes of evaluation. In so doing, we now see how standardized anything flattens out our rich, natural landscapes (of mind- and land-scapes) into mowed down plastic lawns.

Howard Gardner's challenge invites the same audacity as Ivan Illich's or Parker Palmer's, Sir Ken Robinson, and Jiddu Krishnamurthi. Mediocrity is not a measure these thinkers and doers find useful, when the spark of life and learning knows no limits.

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