

Awakening to the Hero's Journey in Teaching and Learning*

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The year was 1982. I (Chris Uhl) had just accepted a faculty position at Pennsylvania State University (often called Penn State, or PSU) in the Biology Department. Shortly after arriving on campus, I was informed by my chair that I would be teaching Environmental Science (BiSci 3 for short). The course had an enrollment of 400 and was expressly targeted to non-science majors.

I had never taught a college course, much less attempted to *profess* to 400 students, packed into an auditorium, filled to the balcony. In my trepidation, I assumed that I had no choice but to adopt the pedagogies I had been subjected to during my own years of schooling. Yes, I would lecture to my students, aspiring to play the role of the “sage on the stage,” filling their empty heads with facts and figures, with a few anecdotes tossed in.

Reading the evaluations at the end of my first year of teaching, I learned to my surprise that more than a handful of my students did not like my course very much. They thought it was a waste of their time and characterized me using words like *arrogant*, *distant*, *boring*, *depressing*, and worse. Ouch! Though I was dismayed to receive these kinds of evaluations, the voice of my ego—“these kids are lucky to have me”—was grander than my capacity to learn from my students’ critique. And besides, I reasoned, my primary job as a biology professor was to conduct research; this teaching gig was just a side act. Indeed, in those early years, every chance I got, I went off to the Amazon Basin to figure out ways to help tropical forests grow on lands badly degraded by careless land-use practices.

In sum, my posture as a fledgling college teacher conveyed that my views, my questions, and my assessments were all that mattered. Ironically, my judgments of my students—that they were disinterested, lazy, ignorant, self-absorbed—was an apt characterization of myself. I was the one who was disinterested, lazy, ignorant, and self-absorbed, particularly when it came to truly *seeing* my students.

It is only now, decades later, that I am able to grasp the ways in which this seeing of the other is essential for effective teaching. Real teaching is a relational act. This understanding is situated in the very word education—the root *educere* meaning “to draw out” (not “to fill up empty heads”). Specifically, it means to draw out the innate curiosity, the subsurface yearnings, the burning questions, the capacities for reflection, feeling, caring, and intuitive knowing that lie within each of us, teacher and student alike.

A Fundamentalist

As a beginning teacher of Environmental Science it never occurred to me to ask such foundational questions as: What is the “environment?” Where did it come from? What is “science?” Who says? What does it mean to teach? What is worth teaching? What is worth learning? How does genuine learning occur? These questions never arose because I, like many people in academia, had been successfully conditioned to believe that there was only one way to teach, one way to learn, and that “environmental science” was whatever the textbook writers said it was. Yes, I was a fundamentalist.

So it was that with an environmental science text in hand, I proceeded to “cover the material.” There was certainly no dearth of “material” to cover, especially when it came to environmental threats. Everywhere I looked, I saw (or read reports of) wounds—forest clear cuts, acid rain, ozone thinning, polluted rivers, toxins in our food, horrendous waste, wars on all continents—a world seemingly hurling toward its own demise.

All of this woundedness began to get me down; I became sad, angry, and indignant. Indeed, back then, a good class for me was one where I delivered a rant about the latest environmental calamity. I say “good” class because my venting enabled me to experience some measure of personal catharsis. But the larger truth, now self-evident, is that by dumping my angst onto my students, I was acting in an insensitive, self-absorbed way.

Can you imagine being me—Dr. Death—year after year tracking the deterioration in the earth’s vital signs? Or perhaps worse, can you imagine being a young person, filled with your own angst, and having to sit in a room with 400 of your contemporaries, receiving information about how the planet is in decline and that there is probably nothing you can do about it?

My Awakening

This phase of my teaching ended when I realized, to my horror, that rather than promoting an ethic of respect and caring for the earth, my negativity was, more likely, engendering a dislike for the environment within my students. One epiphany occurred when I encountered the statement “we teach who we are” in Parker Palmer’s seminal book, *The Courage to Teach*. Could that be true? I thought about my most outstanding teachers and realized that, to a person, what they modeled for me (more than the particulars of their prescribed subject matter) was a *way of being* in the world. When it came to their subject, and life more generally, they were curious, reflective, enthusiastic, authentic, vulnerable, compassionate, and more. And what about me? If we teach who we are, as Palmer posited, could it be that I was teaching a way of living imbued with suppressed anger that surfaced as sadness and despair?

A second awakening occurred on the last day of class at the end of my sixth year of teaching BiSci. From my perspective it had been a good year. I had incorporated some new material into the course, and I was becoming more comfortable responding to student questions during class. So, there I stood in a self-congratulatory stance as my students sat with their heads bowed, laboring over their final exam. As the hour wound down, students began to come up, one by one, to hand me their test sheets. I was feeling light-hearted and ready to wish them well and to thank them for taking my course. My students, on the other hand, appeared sullen and downtrodden. Only a handful even made eye contact with me, and, yet, only minutes earlier, I had convinced myself that I was at the peak of my game.

A few days later, still feeling forlorn, I strapped on my backpack and headed to the mountains for a week-long walkabout. The simple act of ambling in Penn’s Woods reminded me of the wonder, kinship, and full-bodied delight that I had experienced on sojourns in the wilds, years earlier. It was on this woodland retreat that I realized that I had been teaching BiSci upside down; I was asking my students to care about something—the earth—with which most had little contact, little connection, and to which almost none felt relationship. Like almost everyone else in the United States, my students were indoor people, domesticated, out of touch with rock and soil, free-running water, unfiltered sunlight,

gusts of wind, woodlands, and wild animals. How absurd of me, then, to expect them to care about an earth with which they had almost no relationship!

I further realized that by grounding BiSci in the ethos of fear and guilt, I was engendering hopelessness, revulsion, and numbness in my students. What would happen if I were to center my pedagogy on awe, delight, compassion, wonder, and possibility? What if my intention was to help my students fall in love with the earth, to draw back in awe in the presence of a rainstorm? To fall down on their knees, opening their senses, in response to a hilltop oak?

Inviting Students on a Journey

I returned from my walkabout energized and anxious to re-imagine what might be possible in BiSci. Questions bubbled out of me: Did I really need to use a standard environmental science textbook? And, if I found the current texts arid and lifeless, what was keeping me from creating something new? What if I got rid of exams? And how about if I moved away from the safety of the podium, from time to time, and ambled around the room? Too, what would happen if I opened the curtains in the auditorium to let sunlight in? What if I built the course around questions students were harboring? How would it be if I created time for students to explore their feelings, ideas, and experiences during class? And what if I recast my role, not as information broker, but as midwife: one who draws forth understanding from within my students, rather than depositing information into their heads? With all these ruminations, I was, in effect, asking: What's possible here? These deliberations led me to imagine my course not so much as a subject to be taught as a journey to be taken.

A Course Journal

It occurred to me, then, that if my intention was to invite students on a journey, it would be helpful for them to have a journal to record their story. That first year my enthusiasm for journaling, combined with my growing disillusionment with testing, prompted me to announce that I would give no tests in BiSci (yes, there was applause). Instead, I explained, their grade would be determined by the caliber of their journal reflections. To this end, I required that students reflect on each class meeting and on all course readings. So it was that on the last day of class that year, my TA and I collected 400 student journals. This was about 300 pounds of journals, roughly 40,000 total journal pages. The two of us had four days to access these journals. Think of it as reading and offering commentary on seven journal pages a minute for twelve hours a day over a four-day period. Think of it as impossible. Many students received "A"s that semester. It was a fiasco but also a triumph, because I was no longer held hostage to limiting beliefs. In truth, I was ebullient. I had not found a solution, but I had given myself permission to imagine something different. And how fascinating to be finally reading what students were writing about their lives, their discoveries, their long-suppressed feelings. Said one former BiSci student, "I think what helped me the most was the journals. . . . You go home and you think, you have to sit there and think about everything you've learned and put things together and how it relates to your life."

Students Leading Each Other

Anxious to initiate still more experiments, I announced on the last day of class (at the end of the fall semester,) that I was looking to recruit student volunteers to serve as teaching assistants when BiSci was offered again the following fall. Much to my delight, a cadre of volunteers actually did step forward, but then panic struck. Had I once again let my enthusiasm and desperation for change cloud my judgment? After all, these were undergraduates! How could they act as legitimate teaching assistants? Wasn't this status reserved for graduate students? But my fear dissipated as I listened to these TA candidates describe how they had encountered something real in BiSci for the first time since coming to college. Some even spoke about how they were on a journey—their own journey—and they were not done! Moreover, to a person, they wanted to bring something of the awakening they had experienced in BiSci to their peers. Said one TA: “I wasn't ready to stop learning. I wasn't ready to stop my journey yet. . . . This is the best experience I've had in college, I want to stay with this. I feel like BiSci is an underground way of life and I want to bring it to the light and show people, and be like, look at this, this is great. You could do so much, and you have no idea. You have no idea how big you are.”

It was January, and I had a semester to prepare these nascent TAs to teach, single-handedly, two weekly break-out sections (with twelve students each) in the fall. Because Palmer's “we teach who we are” dictum had been formative for me, I decided to use it as the centerpiece for the TA course.

We met for four hours on Monday evenings for fifteen weeks. Each night we shared a meal together and then devoted ourselves to experiential learning activities aimed at cultivating relationship with self, the human other, and our planet. By virtue of this simple format, we created a community of care and mutual trust as well as a set of “lab” exercises that TAs would bring to their students in the fall. The labs were designed to allow the TAs to share with their peers experiential approaches to such things as accessing body intelligence, relating to trees, exploring the power of questions, calculating an ecological footprint, practicing the art of truth-speaking, discovering the benefits of slowing down, and creating an ecological meal. By the time the fall semester arrived, the TAs were ready to rock. What they lacked in expertise they more than made up for in enthusiasm and commitment.

Looking back, I realize that each of the fifteen in that first cohort of TAs was, in their own way, embarking on a Hero's Journey, as Joseph Campbell would call it. In the classic formulation, the hero leaves home and endures hardship, ultimately dying to his/her former self (i.e., breaking from his small or false self) before he or she is able to bring home a soulful gift that serves the common good. In doing so, the hero comes to understand him/herself as a part of a much larger whole.

These days, when I begin working with a new cohort of TAs each spring semester, I invite them to see their work as part of a larger quest for self-knowing, and challenge them to seriously question all that has limited them—for example, who they think they are, their so-called certainties, the beliefs that have heretofore limited their understanding of reality. And I warn them that in this process of questioning, they may experience confusion and anguish, as well as the seemingly paradoxical freedom that results when we, as humans, open ourselves to suffering, surrender, and vulnerability. Said one former TA, “BiSci allowed me to see things I didn't want to see, to address things in my life, and also in our society, that I really didn't want to address. I think by becoming involved in BiSci, I realized I could address those issues and face them.” This really is a modern-day hero's journey.

The Content of BiSci

A while back, a colleague asked me about my teaching approach in the course. Rather than attempting to offer a sophisticated answer, it occurred to me that the most important thing I do is to simply give my students permission to do cool stuff with the potential to transform their relationships with themselves, with the human other, and with the earth. This simple act of granting permission provides a space for students to awaken to life, challenge their limiting beliefs, and explore what is personally and deeply meaningful to them. Here are three examples: ²

1-One-Hundred Questions: Geniuses—from Plato and Socrates to Leonardo da Vinci—have known that the cultivation of a questioning mind leads to self-knowledge and wisdom. I share this insight with students by asking them make a list of 100 personal questions, things about themselves that they would like to understand. Their handwritten list can include any kind of question as long as it is something they deem significant: anything from “How can I save money?” or “How can I have more fun?” to “What is the meaning and purpose of my existence?” I instruct them to create their entire list of 100 questions in one sitting, writing quickly, without worrying about spelling or grammar.

When asked, “Why 100 questions?” I explain that the first twenty or so will be off the top of your head; in the next twenty, themes often begin to emerge; and in the later part of this exercise you are likely to discover unexpected and perhaps profoundly important personal questions (Gelb 2002).

Part of the richness of this exercise comes afterward as students study their questions, noting themes and paying special attention to questions that seem to bubble up from some deep place. As students review their questions I ask them to consider such things as the feelings they experienced as they were doing this exercise, the patterns or unifying themes they see in their questions, the things (perhaps unexpected) that their questions reveal about them, the questions that hold the most energy for them, and the steps they could take to begin to answer some of their more intriguing questions. A TA recorded this journal entry: “I think that the course is helping me to develop my relationship with myself. . . . Along with the questions, that whole writing 100 questions thing for the first field study, I complained about that to my friends so much, but then when I sat down and actually did it, I was shocked at how much came out.”

2-A Class on Insects: I start my class on insects (the most species-diverse life form on the earth) by asking students the first words that spring to mind when they hear the word, “insect.” Students shout them out: *gross, annoying, creepy, itchy, frightening*. Hearing such reactions, I suggest that this is a case where the things that we fear may have important things to teach us. In this vein, the Dalai Lama, when asked what he thought was the most important thing to teach our children, responded, “Teach them to love the insects!” Taking this spiritual leader seriously, I suggest that loving an insect could begin with an invitation to be in relationship with one.

I then invite the fifteen TAs down to the front of the room and give each one a Madagascar hissing cockroach to hold. Adults of this species are about two inches long with a lustrous deep-brown carapace. While holding one of these beautiful creatures in my hand, I tell students about their fascinating biology. My intent is to prompt students to question common stories about cockroaches

being dirty, dangerous, or disgusting. Next, the TAs introduce students to the delicate beings that they are holding. At first there is chaos in the room, but gradually class members summon the courage to transcend the strictures of their stories by holding a cockroach in their hands. This act of extending one's hand to an insect, which for many is the ultimate "other," represents a giant step away from fear and toward relationship.

The cockroaches especially [changed my point of view]. It was so interesting when [Dr. Uhl] said it's not actually the cockroach that scares you, it's your perception of the cockroach. Because he brought them in, and we looked at them, and there was obviously nothing to be scared of. And so you looked at them, and you knew, okay, they're not going to hurt you, but there was this intense fear. It makes you more aware of your perception of things in the world, and how they might be disabling you. . . . The journey was definitely about discovering yourself, but at the same time, it was about the world around you, too.

3-Walking on Water: When it comes to giving students permission, the biggest challenge I give my students is to "walk on water," the final assignment of the semester. The assignment, inspired by Derrick Jensen, (2004), asks students to "commit a miracle"—to do the impossible! I introduce it by positing that what we are unwilling to experience limits our lives. For example, if we are afraid of failing, we close off possibilities for learning and growth; if we are afraid to make ourselves vulnerable, we live without intimacy. Each fear that we give in to diminishes the potential fullness of our lives. Students begin the Walking on Water Project by filling in the following open-ended sentences:

-If only I had the guts, I would _____

-If I didn't care about how people might judge me, I would _____

-If I weren't worried about my future, I would _____

Their responses to these questions point toward how they might walk on water. In the process of choosing what to do, it is common for some to detect a little voice inside that says, "No, not that, I absolutely could not do that!" When this happens, I suggest that this little voice is actually revealing what it would truly mean for them to walk on water.

On the last day of class, students gather in circles with their TAs to tell their walking on water stories. Imagine the scene: Rachel begins by saying that prior to this project she has never told her mom and dad that she loved them, nor had her parents ever spoken these words to her. Rachel's walking on water plan was to speak "I love you" to her parents during a weekend visit. She described how she fretted and agonized during their first meal together on Friday night, the words, "I love you," trapped in her throat. On Saturday, she waited for the right moment; it never came. Then, suddenly, it was Sunday

afternoon and her mother and father were getting into their car to drive home. It was then that Rachel finally did what she had deemed impossible to do. She declared, “I love you,” first to her mother and then to her father. Hearing her words, Rachel’s parents embraced their precious daughter.

After Rachel, others step forward with their stories: Sarah tells how she had been led to despise Arabs after her Israeli cousin was killed in the Middle East, but now she has done the impossible: she has befriended an Arab student. Josh, who was freaked out by the sight of blood, walked on water by volunteering to donate blood. Sam summoned the courage to tell his parents—both doctors—that he was not going to follow in their footsteps but instead pursue his own passion, theater.

Walking on water, doing the impossible, shows students that they do indeed have the capacity to respond to the call for heroism.

Wrap Up

My own journey since 1982 has been a process of asking questions about what it means to teach, what it means to learn, and what is worth teaching. The journey is ongoing.

I now know more clearly than ever that my mission in BiSci is to ground my teaching in the healing of the fractured relationships we have with ourselves, each other, and the earth that is our larger body. This involves coming to realize that it is *not* the earth that belongs to us, but *we* who belong to the earth. As Richard Nelson (1991, 249) puts it: “There is nothing of me that is not earth, no split instant of separateness, no particle that disunites me from the surroundings. I am no less than earth itself. The rivers run through my veins, the winds blow in and out with my breath, the soil makes my flesh, the sun’s heat smolders inside me. . . . The life of earth is my own life. My eyes are earth gazing at itself.” I tell students that being able to say, “I am earth,” and to realize the deep truth in this statement necessarily expands and deepens their identity, their consciousness. As all of us—student and teacher alike—begin to step into this new consciousness, the work to create a sustainable world will no longer feel like a chore. Why? Because we will see the earth not as object, not even as *other*, but as the beloved—our beloved—and that will make all the difference!

I should be clear: I am not suggesting that a college class with 400 students and a cadre of undergraduate TAs can singlehandedly create self-actualized, ecologically conscious adults. It cannot. What it can and does do, I believe, is validate for many young people that there really is more—much more—to life than our culture has led us to believe. It can help them activate aspects of their humanity that have become atrophied—such as their capacity to express curiosity, creativity, innocence, lightness, awe, and compassion. It can encourage them to consider that often things are not as they at first seem, and, in so doing, challenge them to question the so-called certainties—the untested stories—that have governed their lives. It can invite them to cultivate the habit of truth-speaking—only speaking what is authentic, genuine and free of hubris. It can affirm that each of them has a gift to give the world, and that their gift is to be found where their deep joy in living meets their felt pain for the world’s suffering. It can coax them to slow down—if only a little—and explore what it is like to be a genuine human *being* rather than a mindless human *doing*. In all these ways BiSci can awaken an appetite in young people for growing into full and resplendent human beings who feel a kinship with other beings and the earth.