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Taking the Great Leap of Being: Finding Happiness and Hope in a Life of Thought

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Cover Page Footnote

Bruce Novak, a former teacher in grades 6-12, helped supervise English teacher education at the University of Chicago. He has taught Communications, Foundations and Philosophy of Education, Humanities, and Social Sciences at the University of Chicago, Northern Illinois University, and Truman College. Among other venues, he has published in the American Educational Research Journal and is co-author, with Jeff Wilhelm, of *Literacy for Love and Wisdom: Being the Book and Being the Change*. He has organized five AEPL conferences, including the one upcoming in Estes Park, CO, 2011.

OUT OF THE BOX

Taking the Great Leap of Being: Finding Happiness and Hope in a Life of Thought

Bruce Novak* ·

Over three years ago, I made a momentous decision—a decision that, as Frost has said, “made all the difference,” though I’m not sure, even yet, what the tangible results will be.

I had a job I dearly loved. Nominally, it was teaching courses in Philosophy and Foundations of Education to a range of students, from college freshmen to doctoral candidates. I had the freedom to make everything I taught center on the development of the inner wisdom of great educators. As these were all required courses, they met with resistance from a number of students. But others embraced this approach in no uncertain terms. Comments from student evaluations included:

- “A life-altering experience”
- “The first time since kindergarten I’ve been treated like a human being in school”
- “The first time I’ve ever been part of a community at school”
- “I learned the importance of the soul and of people, to be less violent, and that I truly do have a vocation to teach.”

As you can imagine, this was often challenging, but *immensely* fulfilling work; work I could have imagined myself doing for the remainder of my years. It wasn’t tenure-track and didn’t pay well, but I was more than happy to accept these material constraints for the intellectual and spiritual freedom I was given to *truly* teach.

Eventually, though, the School of Education changed the makeup of the majority of the courses I taught in ways that made that teaching *far* more difficult.¹ And, at roughly the same time in early 2007, Barack Obama declared himself a presidential candidate, announcing at least the possibility that momentous “change” was about to occur. I had known Obama since 1996. He spoke at a conference I helped organize: “Re-Awakening Hope in a Time of Cynicism.” And he took one of the central slogans for his presidential campaign—“We are the *ones* we’ve been waiting for”—from the Politics of Meaning

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1. I’ve written about this change and its effects on my teaching in “The Audacity of Thought,” *Philosophical Studies in Education*, 40, available online: <http://ovpes.org/2009/Novak.pdf>

movement that had sponsored that conference.² What I saw was that, if this saying was right—and not *just* a political slogan—we were going to need a national educational curriculum geared centrally to helping us *find* ourselves and one another. I had devised just such a curriculum for teachers to pass on to others.

Three years down the road, the insights culled from my teaching have kept spiraling upward and outward, morphing into a potentially transformative worldview: incorporating insights from evolutionary psychology regarding the centrality of wise, artful nurturance to the development of our species. I drew from the concrete history of wisdom laid out by philosopher Karl Jaspers, religious scholar Karen Armstrong, and political theorist Eric Voegelin.³ These thinkers, among others, helped me realize that there was an Axial Age, a Great Leap of Being, in the middle of the First Millennium B.C.E., in which the disciplined integration of the individual soul with the cosmos was first practiced in cultures across Eurasia—through Confucianism and Daoism, mystical Hinduism, prophetic Judaism, Greek tragedy and philosophy. I was also profoundly influenced by the “transactional” literary theory of Louise Rosenblatt, translated from the philosophy of the very late John Dewey, and further translated into pedagogical terms by Jeff Wilhelm in his *You Gotta BE the Book*.

Wilhelm and I now have a book coming out next year from Teachers College Press: *Literacy for Love and Wisdom: Being the Book and Being the Change*, playing on the title of Wilhelm’s first book and Gandhi’s famous saying “We need to *be* the change we want to see in the world.” In our book, we show that art and teaching help form what poet/anthropologist Lewis Hyde calls “the gift economy,” a transactional economy supervening upon and transcending the merely *interactive* market economy of commodities and information.⁴ And we’re both organizing and keynoting next year’s AEPL conference, of the same title. Following up on the 2008 conference that Stan Scott and I organized, “Reclaiming the Wisdom Tradition for Education,” we hope to show how the discipline that has been called “English” has always tacitly been a discipline for the cultivation of wisdom in democratic life, an aim which can and must be made explicit, in times such as these, when that wisdom is sorely needed and the possibility of “change” is upon us.

This journey has not been at all easy. In its course, I lost my partner of thirteen years, who never understood either what I was trying to do or the rather roundabout ways I set about doing it. I had to learn to actively seek, receive, and rely on the more diffuse forms of love that others could give me—particularly the love from many of my former students, whose lives had been touched and changed by my teaching; the love upon which my ideas centered; the love of the artists I had studied—artists of so many kinds, who had given so fully of themselves and from whom I had received so many transformative experiences over the years. These artists especially were for me “the company we keep,” as Wayne Booth would say, the “dead poets’ society” who, as Goethe often observed, may be *all of our* greatest friends.

2. From the epilogue to Jim Wallis’s *God’s Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn’t Get It* (2005).

3. Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History* (1947); Armstrong, *The Great Transformation: The Origin of Our Religious Traditions* (2006); Voegelin, *Order and History* (1956-1987).

4. *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property* (1979).

Related to this new-found ability to rely on diffuse forms of love, I had to learn to distinguish between financial and moral bankruptcy: the latter having to do with the often unnecessary selling out of our dearest hopes and dreams. I had to learn not to be overcome by anxiety—to recognize that I was living a life that was very much worth living. I was flourishing *humanly*, *intellectually*, and *spiritually* in ways I had never done before. And I would probably be all right, thanks to personal, familial, and social resources that would tide me over for the time it would take to complete the book and conference.

Voegelin writes of the Axial Age as The Great Leap of Being. Great leaps are always made into the void, without a material net—though, one assumes, there is a spiritual support, the waiting arms of the cosmos that will catch us if we only extend ourselves. If “we are the ones we’ve been waiting for,” *what* we’re waiting for may be for one another to take that leap. And if “change” is coming, what it might consist of in a major way is more and more of us following the bliss of wisdom rather than the seductions of the marketplace—assuming that there will be another kind of market for our bliss, if that bliss is wise.

