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The Confusion of In-Between

Wendy Ryden

“I noticed that it’s humid out,” reported a student of mine, “but then there was breeze and it was a little cold, too.” He added, “It was confusing.”

My student had just been outside trying his hand at recording what long-time AEPL associate Irene Papoulis, in her wonderful new book *The Essays Only You Can Write*, terms “noticings”—those fleeting thoughts and observations we have throughout the day that can be mined and pursued for interesting writing material. Although several students found themselves paying attention to the seasonal change and the Northeast September, I particularly liked this student’s admission and phrasing about “confusion.” I “noticed” how apt his characterization is of not just the weather. We are living in a time of in-between, I think, and it *is* confusing. The weather was once the quintessential topic we relied on to keep our conversations with others civil and light. But even that has changed. Are we having a not atypical, warm September day, we wonder, or is it the harbinger of the ever-increasing temperature that is drastically affecting all life on this planet, fueling human and nonhuman species migration of flora and fauna, forever altering ancient patterns? Suspicion and concern run deep.

I myself am transitioning from a long academic life of research, teaching, and service into a retirement that I imagine will include a lot of reading and writing, but also a lot more time spent outdoors enjoying, learning about, and caring for the natural world, as well as more cooking, and a lot of discarding and repairing—of possessions and home but also of habits and self. Although it will be an adjustment, I am mostly looking forward to these changes, but I have no doubt there will be bitter-sweet moments and that I will sometimes feel lost, scared—confused.

But this personal example is far more hopeful or, at the least, benign in comparison to many other confusions reigning in tumultuous times. We continue to wonder whether America and the rest of the world will find their better angels and resist the bedazzlement of charismatic authoritarianism and the necrotic pleasure of malice. We continue to wonder what we are becoming and what kind of reality we are creating; whether we will have the knowledge and means to live ethically on this planet with both other people and the more-than human. Many of us do more than wonder and actively try to intervene in what sometimes feel like overwhelming odds. In secondary and higher education, we struggle for the academic freedom—and the courage—to confront censorship and book bans enacted and fomented by bureaucrats, grasping politicians, and useful idiots. Universities continue to twist and manipulate curriculum in their never-ending quests to make their institutions financially viable, ignoring best practices in favor of bottom lines. The promises and threats of AI loom large for us. We are optimistic that this advancing technology will create opportunities for teaching and learning and yet fearful for the radical change it could mean for our profession. Will we recognize ourselves in the transformations that are happening now?

What is education, reading and writing, becoming? The Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning and this journal have an important role to play in answering this

question, as this issue attests: the role of assessment, long a bug-a-boo and political hot potato, must not be the domain of governmental box-checking and so-called accountability but a truly human activity that helps teachers understand their students better; in a writing world transformed by digitalization, illness and physicality remind us of our ever-present bodily selves that confront traditions of disembodied educations; as we take up challenges to work towards justice, we must also expand our perspectives about what resistance might look like and why it takes the forms it does.

We have long taught our students that confusion and its liminality can be generative, a beginning, an opportunity to deepen ourselves if we can take on the hard work of it, see more than tedium and fear and find the beauty and meaning that lies in the difficult and overwhelming. Our challenges show no sign of abating, and we hope they present opportunities as well. I wish us all the best in rising to the occasion and finding our ways into and through.

Work Cited

Papoulis, Irene. *The Essays Only You Can Write*. Broadview Press, 2024.