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Reviews

Julie J. Nichols

Charles Suhor

Edward Sullivan

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REVIEWS

Meaning and The Evolution of Consciousness: A Retrospective on the Writing of Owen Barfield

Julie J. Nichols, Utah Valley University

Barfield, Owen. *History in English Words*. London: Methuen and Co., Ltd., 1926; 2e London: Faber and Faber, 1953. Faber Paperback, 1962. Reprinted 1964, 1969; also Massachusetts: Lindisfarne P, 1967; 8th printing, with a foreword by W. H. Auden, 2007.

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“
A mid all the menacing signs that surround us,” wrote Owen Barfield in 1961, “perhaps the one which fills thoughtful people with the greatest foreboding is the growing general sense of meaninglessness. It is this which underlies most of the other threats” (*Rediscovery of Meaning* 11). This sense of meaninglessness—which hasn’t gone away in the intervening years, I would venture to say—has its basis, according to Barfield, in the “habit” of “meticulously observing the

facts of nature and systematically interpreting them in terms of *physical* cause and effect” and in no other terms. Though this habit has produced “incalculable and largely beneficial results for the accumulation of practical knowledge, or knowledge enabling the manipulation of nature,” it has also solidified into the assumption that there is no other way to interpret our observations, or even (which is worse) to observe at all (11, original emphasis). The cost of this limitation is equally incalculable: since “there is usually little connection between the [physical] cause of a thing and its meaning,” our modern emphasis on the measurable and tangible seems to have obviated the need to seek for meaning at all (12). And that, declares Barfield, is egregious ignorance.

“The Rediscovery of Meaning” is the title both of the essay quoted above and the book into which it was collected with eighteen other essays in 1977. Here—and, progressively more strongly, in all his works—Barfield reminds us that human beings have not always founded their thinking on the materialist assumption. “The study of the transition from medieval to modern thought is the study of the great and painful wrench” from Aristotelianism to positivism, he says; “it is a mistake to suppose that we are more open-minded today; we are merely open-minded about different things” (*Rediscovery of Meaning* 14-15). In short, Owen Barfield is an iconoclast. He urges us to “unthink” the habits of thought that bind us to materialism so that we may begin to believe, again—to perceive, again—to participate, again, in meaning. The theory that human consciousness is in the process of evolving from what he calls “participatory consciousness” (*Saving the Appearances* 41) to “final consciousness” (133-37) is, in fact, the core of his contribution to twentieth and twenty-first-century thought.

Owen Barfield’s life and work span the entire twentieth century. He was born in 1898 in North London, and his first major works, *History in English Words* and *Poetic Diction: A Study in Meaning*, were published in 1926 and 1928, respectively. Educated at Highgate School (where Coleridge and Hopkins were students in their time) and at Wadham College, Oxford, he is often remembered first, by those who recognize his name at all, as a friend of C. S. Lewis. Like the other Inklings, he was interested in literature and language. But as G. B. Tennyson, a Barfield editor and scholar, puts it in his introduction to *A Barfield Reader*, this was no ordinary interest: “He saw in the nature of poetry and in the deepest nature of language itself . . . elements that no materialist philosophy could explain” (xvii). In a concise online introduction to Barfield, Gary Lachman says Barfield’s “belief in language as an archaeological record of ‘the evolution of consciousness,’ and as a means of translogical insight, was as at odds with the reigning [positivist] *Zietgeist* as you could get.” For those of us who teach language—whether explicitly or implicitly, modern education foregrounding language and literacy above all else—Barfield’s writings deserve more exposure than they typically receive. In a time when “meaning” is often downplayed as the least important thing about a text, Barfield advocates the primacy of meaning in an unfolding set of arguments whose cumulative effect is a profound integrity.

History in English Words, to begin at the beginning, is not another Bill Moyers journey through the “history of the language.” The preposition *in* (rather than *of*) is key here. Barfield employs this preposition deliberately throughout his *oeuvre*, reminding readers that it is necessary to think from *within* the worldview of the writers we read—essential, in fact, to break the habit we have developed of imposing on earlier times and earlier writers our consciousness:

It has only just begun to dawn on us that in our own language alone . . . the past history of humanity is spread out in an imperishable map, just as the history of the mineral earth lies embedded in the layers of its outer crust . . . language has preserved for us the inner, living history of man's soul. It reveals the evolution of consciousness. (18)

This notion—already identified as “evolution of consciousness” and first hinted at in *History in English Words* (86)—is central to Barfield's argument. Barfield read and approved of Julian Jaynes's *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind* because it was one of the first books to suggest from a materialist point of view what Barfield asserted was obvious if you looked at ancient languages and philosophies:

[The] larger process . . . told by the history of the Aryan languages as a whole . . . is the shifting of the centre of gravity of consciousness from the cosmos around him into the personal human being himself. . . . [This] general process . . . can be traced working itself out into all kinds of details; not only in that intimate, metaphysical change of outlook which it is so hard for us to realize now that the change has taken place—in the appearance of words betokening a sharper self-consciousness—but also in the moral and personal sphere. (171-72)

In its first four chapters, *History in English Words* provides a co-chronology of the English language and British consciousness. Copious examples in the last five chapters, from such categories as “myth” (specifically the ways mythological consciousness is still present in such English words as *panic*, *day*, and *sky*), “philosophy and religion” and “devotion” (*cosmos*, *initiate*, *mystery*, *conscience*), and “experiment” (*attraction*, *dubious*, *analyse*, *distinguish*), offer ample evidence that since consciousness and language evolve together, these concepts and perceptions did not exist before the words for them appear. And the order in which words appeared chronologically suggests that consciousness has *devolved* from a state in which humans saw themselves as undifferentiated from their environment to our current habit and assumption that only our differentiatedness matters.

But there is reason to see this in an affirmative light; and the affirmation lies in language itself.

If the thesis of *History in English Words* is that language reveals the evolution of consciousness, *Poetic Diction* starts with the premise that the aesthetic effect of “poetic” language happens because of a “felt change of consciousness” (48-49). Scientific language (i.e., “the human being needs nitrogen and oxygen in a particular ratio in order to live”) is tautologous. It does not add to the sum of consciousness or knowledge. Its purpose is to engender subjectivity or self-consciousness (i.e., “this is what each thing consists of in external form—the only important kind of form”). But for Barfield, “the poetic does not *handle* terms; it *makes* them” (*History in English Words* 31, emphasis added). Considerable time is spent in *Poetic Diction* distinguishing between knowledge, perception, wisdom, and aesthetic pleasure. “[The] actual moment of the pleasure of appreciation [of ‘the poetic’] depends upon . . . a kind of discrepancy between two moods or modes of consciousness” (52, 54): truly poetic reveals by the poet's choice of

words a meaning so different from the reader's habit "that, for a moment, [the reader] sheds Western civilization like an old garment and beholds [his] perceptions in a new and strange light" (49).

Since words and consciousness co-evolve, these genuinely expansive poetic moments (which include but are not limited to figurative language) actually re-create the world for those who experience them. The thesis of *Poetic Diction* is that

reality, once self-evident, and therefore not conceptually experienced, but which can now only be reached by an effort of the individual mind—this is what is contained in a true poetic metaphor; and every metaphor is 'true' only in so far as it contains such a reality, or hints at it. The world, like Dionysus, is torn to pieces by pure intellect; but the poet is Zeus; he has swallowed the heart of the world; and he can reproduce it as a living body. (87-88)

According to Barfield, just as we observe in children the growing awareness of self, of separate identity, as a necessary feature of the development of individual consciousness, so the principle of differentiation is an inevitable and desirable feature of the evolution of human consciousness. In fact, it's inextricable from the development of language. Appreciation of "the poetic" *requires* this splitting of subject from object. But for Barfield, "the poetic" moves the individuated soul *through* the splitting process into an expanded consciousness. Barfield calls this "final participation" (*Saving the Appearances* 137). Though this process is never complete, since final participation always carries in it the seeds of more differentiation, it is nevertheless the goal of the evolution of consciousness. Whatever obstructs this cycle—such as the assumption that *differentiation* is final—requires correction. It requires transformation.

From 1929 to the late 1950s, Barfield made his living as a lawyer. During this period he wrote little, but his family and social life were active and busy: he and his wife adopted three children, and he spent much time with literary friends in Oxford and London. In 1957, when he retired from the law, he published the third of his foundational works, *Saving the Appearances: A Study in Idolatry*. It won him a following with invitations to lecture as a visiting professor throughout North America.

In the history of philosophy and science, when we look back at early statements about the place of the earth in the universe, and its shape, and the role of mankind on the earth, what we see, according to Barfield, is not a naive worldview proven false by later, smarter, truer scientific experimentation. What we see are theories that best "saved the appearances" of the perceptions and experiences people had, of the phenomena in which they lived and moved—of, in short, their consciousness. For Barfield it is crucial to remember that former human perceptions differed from *ours because the world was different*. It is simply inaccurate to impose upon our study of the past our current perceptions. Barfield illustrates this in a discussion of the technique of perspective in art. He says:

if, with the help of some time-machine working in reverse, a man of the Middle Ages could be suddenly transported into the skin of a man of the twentieth century, seeing through our eyes

and with our “figuration” the objects we see, I think he would feel like a child who looks for the first time at a photograph through the ingenious magic of a stereoscope. “Oh!” he would say, “look how they stand out!” We must not forget that in his time perspective had not yet been discovered, nor underrate the significance of this. True, it is no more than a device for pictorially representing depth, and separateness, in space. But how comes it that the device had never been discovered before—or, if discovered, never adopted? There were plenty of skilled artists, and they would certainly have hit upon it soon enough if depth in space had characterized the collective representations they wish to reproduce, as it characterizes ours. *They did not need it. Before the scientific revolution the world was more like a garment men wore about them than a stage on which they moved. In such a world the convention of perspective was unnecessary.* To such a world other conventions of visual reproduction, such as the nimbus and the halo, were as appropriate as to ours they are not. It was as if the observers were themselves in the picture. Compared with us, they felt themselves and the objects around them and the words that expressed those objects, immersed together in something like a clear lake of—what shall we say?—of “meaning,” if you choose. (*Saving the Appearances* 94-95, emphasis added)

The “idolatry” this book examines, then, is the positivistic assumption that only the material is “real.” Such an idea is not borne out by language or history:

The English words *diurnal*, *diary*, *dial* are derived from the Latin “dies” (day), while *journal* comes to us, via the French language, from the same word. These syllables conceal among themselves the central religious conception common to the Aryan nations. As far back as we can trace them, the Sanskrit word “dyaus,” the Greek “zeus” (accusative “dia”), and the Teutonic “tiu” were all used in contexts where we should use the word sky; but the same words were also used to mean God, the Supreme Being, the Father of all the other gods—Sanskrit “Dyaus pitar,” Greek “Zeus pater,” Illyrian “Depaturos,” Latin “juppiter” (old form Diespiter). We can best understand what this means if we consider how the English word *heaven* and the French “ciel” are still used for a similar double purpose, and how it was once not a double purpose at all. There are still English and French people for whom the spiritual “heaven” is identical with the visible sky; and in the Spanish language it is even a matter of some difficulty to draw the distinction. But if we are to judge from language, we must assume that when our earliest ancestors looked up to the blue vault they felt that they saw not merely a place, whether heavenly or earthly, but the bodily vesture, as it were, of a living Being. (*History in English Words* 89, original emphasis)

Now, if your fundamental assumption is that the material world is the only reality, and always has been—that we are the most right population in the history of the planet, and our use of measurement and quantification is the only and most accurate source of evidence and proof, so that every hint of an immaterial reality must be “falsified” for the sake of academic inclusion—then you must play the doubting game eternally. For, according to Barfield, the tautological nature of this assumption allows you to perceive nothing that cannot be measured, even though language, history, and the poetic experience offer irrefutable proof that there is, and always has been, an immaterial reality behind and within and underlying the physical world we live in now. In prehistory and certainly in written history, humans—in fact all things—were immersed in “original participation” (*Saving the Appearances* 41), participating co-creators of and in realities constituted of a great deal more than any one-time material moment. (He was very interested, before his death, in the implications of quantum mechanics.) The descent to the materialism of our time, even to the declaration that robots and electronics technologies can take over our human capacities better than we ourselves, is all part of an evolutionary trajectory of contraction into separateness. Further, “this contraction seeks to be followed by an expansion from the separate new centers thus created. This involves realizing that the centers—human beings—are still, in their subconscious depths, transpersonal” (*Rediscovery of Meaning* 5). In Barfield’s system, then, “believing” in the sense of “participating” in perceived phenomena is the original activity of human consciousness and the final, co-creative one to which it aspires.

We must be clear that Barfield doesn’t call this activity “believing.” For Barfield, “belief” is a blind behavior, not associated with *thinking*. He considers thinking a central and necessary development in the evolution of consciousness. But I think *willed, thoughtful “participatory consciousness”* is another way of naming the believing game. I think Peter Elbow would rejoice in the logic that drives Barfield’s points to their fascinating home.

There is one other way Barfield’s work can be called upon to support a certain variant of the believing game. Barfield declared himself an agnostic as a young man. He was not raised as a Christian; he denied any conversion of the type his friend C.S. Lewis experienced and wrote from so powerfully. But in “Philology and the Incarnation,” found in *The Rediscovery of Meaning* (262–71), he writes that his investigation into the history of language led him inevitably to accept the birth, life, and death of the man called Jesus Christ as “the moment at which there was consummated that age-long process of contraction of the immaterial qualities of the cosmos into a human center” (270). He speaks of “a man . . . who startled all those who stood around him, and strove to reverse the direction of their thought—for the word *metanoia*, which is translated ‘repentance,’ also means a reversal of the direction of the mind” (271, original emphasis). And he says “that if [a person] had never heard of [the story of the birth and resurrection of Christ] through the Scriptures, he would have been obliged to try his best to invent something like it as a hypothesis to save the appearances” (271). To say it a different way: Barfield saw, in the development of language and the patterns of history, irrefutable evidence that the story of a fall from oneness, with the resultant need for transformative re-birth—the Christian story—is the planetary story. The implication is that “believing” (in the sense of willed participatory consciousness) is not a game. It’s the most important thing we can do.

That consciousness is the basis and foundation of this planet's evolution; that language yields up evidence for the direction of that evolution; that it is not a chance or random evolution but one whose goal is "final participation," possible with the aid of the kinds of powers embodied in poetic diction, these are always his propositions. Rejecting the materialist philosophies that deprive our work of inner meaning, offering reasoned and reasonable proof that meaning evolves and can be recovered, restoring the reality of innerly-felt meaning through imaginative exegesis from within the history of our written texts, Owen Barfield submits the believing game to our most severe testing. In Barfield, believing wins because thinking and consciousness win. Reading Barfield, our sense of our place in the world widens and expands; we experience the "felt change of consciousness" he names as early as 1928 in *Poetic Diction*. Suddenly everything we read feels a little different—not because we perceive it to be, but because it is.¹ ☐

¹ N.B.: David Lavery, Owen A. Barfield (grandson of Owen Barfield), and other Barfield scholars presented and participated at the Rocky Mountain MLA October 2009 at Snowbird, Utah.

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Charles Suhor, Retired, National Council of Teachers of English

This is a review essay in two senses. Karen Armstrong's *The Great Transformation* was the subject of several teleconferences for AEPL members arranged by Bruce Novak prior to the June 2008 conference. Riane Eisler was a keynoter. I was unable to attend, but my reflections on relationships between the Armstrong book and Eisler's *The Chalice and the Blade* took shape. Those mental reviews morphed into an essay that deals with common themes in the books, the teleconferences, and related readings.

Both Armstrong and Eisler provide insight into the wisdom traditions that AEPL continues to mine and assess critically because of their rich implications for personal and professional growth. The obvious contrasts in Armstrong and Eisler's works are the historical periods they cover and the differences in their emphases. The span of the Armstrong/Karl Jaspers's Axial Age is vast, 1600 BCE-220 CE. Those years of development of our wisdom traditions exclude the transformative spirituality of earlier times, notably, the Old Europe and Cretan civilizations described by Eisler. Eisler's closer focus is on scholars' neglect of the early partnership societies in which men

and women were properly regarded as equals, and peace and prosperity were dominant. Historians, anthropologists, and social theorists found numerous ways of ignoring, marginalizing, or dismissing those civilizations. They were seen as having little evolutionary merit in themselves, in contrast to the androcratic/dominator Axial Age cultures that followed, and they were not seen as possible models for building partnership societies today.

Armstrong recognizes her neglect of women's roles in the Axial Age but rationalizes it in an odd way. In the introduction she writes, "the question of women was so peripheral . . . I found that any sustained discussion of the topic was distracting" and "intrusive" (xvi-xvii). Eisler, in contrast, shows significant but widely neglected contributions and roles of women throughout history (Chapters 8-10).

Beyond that, it is hard to accept Armstrong's basic idea that the periods and cultures described (Greek, Hebrew, Chinese, and Indian) could be viewed as a coherent "age" of heightened spirituality. On the one hand, reservations abound as Armstrong acknowledges that the Axial peoples "did not evolve in a uniform way" but "sporadically, by fits and starts" and that they were not as "contemporaneous" as Jaspers (originator of the Axial Age idea) believed (xvii). But she then proceeds to trace parallel developmental trends moving in eight stages toward more expansive spirituality in each culture, measured out in years (ritual, c. 900 to 800 BCE; kenosis, c. 800 to 700 BCE; knowledge, 700 to 600 BCE; suffering, 600 to 530 BCE; empathy, 530 to 450 BCE; concern for everybody, 450 to 398 BCE; all is one, 400 to 300 BCE; empire, 300 to 220 BCE). Her data are rich and dazzling, but the claim of comprehensible spiritual breakthroughs in the four cultures is belied by the many misrules and atrocities, often at peak Axial times, that Armstrong acknowledges. And again, she barely addresses the dominant androcentrism of the Axial cultures.

Armstrong's descriptions seem less like a discernible "age" than a historic ebb-and-flow, with stunning stumbles forward and uncertain falls backward, and concurrence of contrary forces within particular time frames. Eisler appropriately acknowledges the messiness of it all, noting for example that much of what was excellent in Greek culture was from "feminine" influences, often carried over from the values and practices of earlier times (106-17).

Sociologist Robert Bellah addresses Axial Age cultures from a different perspective, one that throws a different light on Eisler's ideas about why the moral brilliance of Crete and early European partnership cultures has been poorly acknowledged. Bellah sees Axial Age cultures as the first in history in which there was "a clear emergence of theory as an alternative to mimesis and myth" in religious experience (57). The reflective, theoretic element took different forms and had varying degrees of influence in each of the Axial cultures, but it transcended particular contexts.

A reading of Eisler from Bellah's perspective suggests that the archeological and other evidence of the early partnership cultures lacked a theoretic dimension. Or, if it was there, it wasn't preserved in well articulated oral or written forms as were the ideas of Confucius, the Buddha, the Hebrew prophets, Plato, and other Axial figures. Eisler seems in accord with Bellah in stating that the idea of gylany was "*operationally* expressed in more equalitarian and peaceful societies" (164, emphasis added). This does not denigrate the partially inferable theoretic ideals of partnership cultures, but it helps to account for their lack of

primacy in the writings of scholars who studied the more accessible spiritual-theoretic roots of our civilizations.

Other perspectives avoid Armstrong's claim of a coherent Axial Age. Ken Wilber cautions against supposing that the cutting edge thinkers, sages, artists, and groups in any era represented the spirituality of the majority. Many leaders were in fact often countercultural or were viewed as ideals rather than the normative influence. Seen this way, the Axial period marked the emergence not of societies transformed in developmental stages but of key thinkers whose ideas lived on in a markedly untidy way. Guided by Eisler's use of systems theory, we might say that many of the Axial transformations, like the early gylanic societies, did not become well-embedded "static attractors" but were "periodic attractors," more "like a plant that refuses to be killed no matter how often it is crushed or cut back" (137).

The blurriness and nonlinearity of social evolution is also expressed by Charles Fisher in a recent book, *Dismantling Discontent: Buddha's Way Through Darwin's World*. Taking a long-range view, Fisher says, "We know that, as civilizations failed, some of their inhabitants went back to earlier modes of subsistence. We know that many changes which underlay civilization were irreversible and affected even those people who continued to live as hunter-gatherers" (314).

Surely, Axial wisdom traditions and early gylanic societies are inspirational and can offer much guidance to educators as we witness dazzling changes and daunting challenges in our own time. We can, in fact, make use of the traditions in trying to shape current change. Many theorists and researchers cite evidence that we are straining towards new wisdom (Ardagh; Beck and Cowan; Wilber), that a crucial tipping point is at hand, and that we can midwife the birth of an expanded human consciousness. My sense of the work of AEPL is that few believe that the answer is a return to or recapturing of idyllic yesteryears, whether cast as Axial times, gylanic societies, or lost Edens. As Wilber notes, the task in authentic transformation is to "transcend and include" (25), not harken back.

The countless social, philosophical, and technological problems that have evolved are not nuisances to be reversed but the raw material of transformation today. There's no reclaiming of the wisdom traditions without reshaping them in our time. New questions and crises unimagined by Axial peoples have arisen, and new possibilities for solutions are being offered in areas like human sexuality, distribution of wealth, ways of governance, religious experiences and institutions, relation to the environment, nationalism and globalism, the uses of technology, and more. As citizens of the world and educators in the here and now, we can see these interesting times not as a curse but as a crucial opportunity and an exciting invitation to the unexpected. ☯

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Edward Sullivan, Lebanon Valley College

About fifteen years ago, I saw the film *Searching for Bobby Fisher*. The movie is based on the (then) young life of Josh Waitzkin, a chess prodigy. It depicts the highly competitive world of children's chess and traces the boy's path to winning his first National Chess Championship at the age of nine. From time to time, I would think about that film, especially when a news story appeared about the eccentric grandmaster and one-time world chess champion Bobby Fisher. I wondered what happened to Josh. I suspected that he burned out, but I was wrong. It turns out he stayed very busy. In the subsequent years, he racked up eight National Chess Championships, and then he did something *really* interesting: he all but abandoned his chess career and began studying the ancient Chinese martial art, Tai Chi Chuan.

Even if you are not familiar with Tai Chi, you have probably seen it performed. Tai Chi is often depicted as a graceful set of flowing motions performed very slowly by a group of senior citizens on television ads. It does not look martial at all. Practitioners claim that Tai Chi, among other things, promotes good health by restoring flexibility and stimulating a person's life force or *chi* (Japanese: *ki*). Because so many people practice Tai Chi for its health benefits, it is easy to forget its martial aspects. Tai Chi is considered one of the "internal" or "soft" martial arts because of its reliance on *chi* rather than muscle to generate power. Only after learning "the form," the sequence of flowing motions described above, does one move on to the more martial and competitive aspect of this practice called *push hands*. Push hands is performed by two players facing each other with their opposite arms touching. The idea is to use your skill and chi to "push" your opponent off balance and away from you. At the competitive level, push hands bears little resemblance to the graceful movements demonstrated in the form. It is a fast and furious competition that can easily result in injury to the opponent being pushed. In 2004, Waitzkin won or tied the Tai Chi Chuan World Championship in two categories of push hands (fixed step and moving step, respectively). He is the first westerner ever to win these competitions. Besides a couple of trophies and some bragging rights, what did Tai Chi teach Waitzkin? He writes, "On a deeper level, the practice had the effect of connecting disparate elements of my being" (102). As one delves further into his story, Waitzkin becomes a man searching for harmony and identifying its principles.

Besides giving the reader a peek into the two somewhat obscure worlds of competitive chess and Tai Chi, this book offers Waitzkin's principles for learning just about anything. Some of his principles will be familiar to any educator, while others less so. Either way, I found this book to be an entertaining and occasionally insightful read.

After a brief review of his career as a chess prodigy in the opening chapters, Waitzkin grounds his method by reviewing two well-known ideas in developmental psychology: the entity and incremental theories of learning. According to the first theory, some individuals see their intelligence or abilities in a discipline as a fixed entity, something that cannot be cultivated or grown. In contrast, the

incremental theory argues that, by dint of effort, skills can be developed systematically and incrementally. Of course, most educators subscribe to the latter theory. Yet, as someone who teaches quantitatively-oriented courses (economics and finance), I am dismayed by the number of students who believe in the entity theory. Too often I have heard students give up on challenging material, echoing the familiar refrain, “I’ve never been good at math!” Why do so many of our students believe this nonsense? I suspect they have heard it from a solicitous parent who also “wasn’t good at math,” or it is simply an excuse to avoid working hard. Waitzkin, a prodigiously hard worker, holds himself as a living proof of the incremental theory. Of course, hard work that is not smart work merely exhausts and frustrates the novice. The rest of the book is Waitzkin’s suggestions for working smarter.

Early on, Waitzkin poses the question: what is it that differentiates a world-class performer from others? One of Waitzkin’s more interesting ideas is the notion of investing in failure. Simply put, if you want to get better at some activity, then practice with people who are better at it than you are. Yes, you will lose a lot, but, more importantly, you can learn a lot. What seems to distinguish the great from the good is that the great are willing to fail. In other words, as someone becomes proficient and successful in an activity, there’s a tendency to stay within the comfort zone. Once this happens, excellence becomes unattainable. While the “comfort zone” critique is not particularly new, it does tie into the entity theory of learning neatly. The problem with some people, naturally gifted individuals, is that, when they encounter failure (as we all inevitably do), their self-confidence is easily shaken. As a result, they will either avoid meaningful challenges and plateau in their performance, or drift away from their activity. Not so for the incremental learner. By not being naturally gifted, the incrementalist learns resilience through failure and success through hard work. In other words, world-class performers are incremental learners.

Another unique aspect of Waitzkin’s prescription for success is applying “beginner’s mind.” The notion of beginner’s mind is traced to the well-known Japanese Zen master Shunryu Suzuki, who said, “In the beginner’s mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert’s mind there are few” (21). As educators, we become so comfortable in our chosen fields that we forget what it is like to be a beginner. Unless we take up some new study or activity that challenges us, it is difficult to reclaim beginner’s mind. Waitzkin ventured into the beginner’s domain while preparing for the World Under 21 Championship in Chess. His motivation: he was starting to burn out. He began to practice meditation and, eventually, Tai Chi in order to relax and find some serenity. Little did he know that his career choice was about to change. But why would an expert want beginner’s mind? Because it transforms our point of view. It forces us to see things differently; in that process, it makes us better teachers. Waitzkin had a similar learning experience when he took up push hands. Imagine being a world-class performer and then taking up an activity where you begin as a world-class putz. The ego takes quite a beating—and that’s the point: by failing, by investing in failure, we attain beginner’s mind, and then we improve. Waitzkin observes:

My whole life I had studied techniques, principles, and theory until they were integrated into the unconscious. From the outside Tai Chi and chess couldn’t be more different, but they

began to converge in my mind. I started to translate my chess ideas into Tai Chi language, as if the two arts were linked by an essential connecting ground. . . . My growth became defined by barrierlessness. Pure concentration didn't allow thoughts or false constructions to impede my awareness, and I observed clear connections between different life experiences through the common mode of consciousness by which they were perceived. (xvi-xvii)

Barrierlessness is a provocative way of perceiving learning: looking for the inter-connectedness of seemingly disparate knowledge and experience. Beyond the occasional interdisciplinary course, the academy zealously guards its departmental turf. Physicists teach physics, and philosophers teach philosophy. I suspect in Waitzkin's eyes, higher education does not invest enough in "essential connecting ground."

At times, Waitzkin sounds like a mystic. If he is, then he is a very practical mystic. While most of his book offers common-sense suggestions for improving performance, every now and then he shares a not-so-obvious insight, but an insight born of experience. While reading this book, I started to think of Michael Jordan, arguably the greatest guard in basketball history. Years ago, I remember legendary coach Rick Pitino making two compelling observations about Jordan. First, Pitino said he never saw an athlete with more natural ability than Jordan. Then Pitino said he never saw an athlete train harder than Jordan. Of course, this comment squares with every coach's advice: there is no substitute for hard work. Pitino's next observation was less expected. He said that when Jordan missed a shot, it was impossible to tell by looking at his face; it betrayed no emotion. Pitino contrasted this behavior with many other athletes who wince, curse, or act-out after missing a basket. Jordan was not rattled by a failure. Every shot was his first shot. At some level, Jordan had realized beginner's mind. Can beginner's mind be cultivated in our students? Can we valorize it? Just as importantly, can we, the educators, cultivate it within ourselves? Waitzkin thinks so. ☐

Work Cited

Suzuki, Shunryu. *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*. New York: Weatherhill, 1970.