

# **SEIZING AN ALTERNATIVE Toward an Ecological Civilization June 4-7, 2015**

## **Section VIII: Reimagining and Reinventing Education**



**“All We Need, The Earlier the Better: Process Philosophy, Early Childhood Experiences, and Alternatives.”**

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“All I really need to know about how to live and what to do and how to be I learned in kindergarten. Wisdom was not at the top of the graduate-school mountain, but there in the sandpile at Sunday School. These are the things I learned:

Share everything.

Play Fair.

Don't hit people.

Put things back where you found them.

Clean up your own mess.

Don't take things that aren't yours.

Say you're sorry when you hurt somebody.

Wash your hands before you eat.

Flush.

Warm cookies and cold milk are good for you.

Live a balanced life—learn some, think some, and draw and paint and sing and dance and play

and work some every day.

Take a nap every afternoon.

When you go out into the world, watch out for traffic, hold hands, and stick together.

Be aware of wonder. Remember the little seed in the Styrofoam cup: The roots go down and the

plant goes up and nobody really knows how or why, but we are all like that.

Goldfish and hamsters and white mice and even the little seed in the Styrofoam cup—they all die.

So do we.

And then remember the Dick-and-Jane books and the first word you learned—the biggest word

of all—LOOK. (cf. Yogi Berra, ‘You can observe a lot just by watchin’.’)

Everything you need to know is in there somewhere. The Golden Rule and love and basic sanitation. Ecology and politics and equality and sane living.”

(Fulghum, All I Really Need to Know, pp. 6-7.)

Even though Fulghum’s observations were written down some 25 years ago; it turns out that both process thought and more recent research lend much support to these guidelines for “sane living.” More on each of these areas (process thought and more recent research) later in this paper. For now: one of my adventures, 1974-1984, was in the field of early childhood education, working in a variety of positions—infant caregiver, 18-24 month old caregiver, bookkeeper, cook, summer day camp coordinator, janitor, and director of a day care center (1975-1981).

I had been reading process thought, primarily Whitehead, for a few years before my early childhood career began, and I was not looking for any particular insights into education, early childhood or otherwise. Yet when I became involved in early childhood education, a couple of Whiteheadian notions immediately seemed applicable: (1) that all experience counts, all experience has some kind of influence—short-term, medium-term, long-term, or some combination thereof; and (2) that habits/behaviors developed early in life are more difficult to change since such habits are “buried deeper;” these early habits become, or at least heavily influence, unconscious patterns of behavior. Given both (1) and (2), it follows that providing as many positive and helpful experiences in early childhood is an appropriate path to follow. So, no matter what happens later in life, the person will have had some positive experiences, patterns of behavior, which are still exerting some influence and may be helpful in these future situations. Also by instilling (via appropriate modeling and in other positive ways) the kinds of behaviors that Fulghum notes, children stand an improved chance of leading more fulfilling lives as adults. Or so I believed then and still believe, though I fear the more helpful experiences have become fewer and farther between than they used to be.

While I migrated to other careers (community college teaching, office manager, business manager, adjunct seminary teaching) I remained, and still remain, interested in early childhood education--an interest to which both my dissertation and this paper attest. (The dissertation is entitled *Implications of Whitehead, Whorf, and Piaget for Inclusive Language in Religious Education* and was published under the title *I’d Rather Be Dead Than Be a Girl*).

Over the years I have heard, as I suspect you have, many stories demonstrating the importance of early childhood education. For example, there is the claim by some religious groups to the effect that “give us a child till age 5 (or 7) and they are ours for life.” I also have seen a few formal studies, or summaries of studies, discussing the importance of early childhood education (be it Head Start, day care, pre-school, nursery school, etc.). Sometimes the studies focused on the benefits, both short-term and long-term, of early childhood education; sometimes the results of the study were mixed; sometimes the results were primarily negative, for example, indicating that such few benefits as there may have been lasted only a short time and were not worth the cost of the program. (Searching the internet can provide samples of the various conclusions, sometimes even with reference to one or more studies.)

Within the year preceding this conference (2014-2015), early childhood education has been more in the news: (1) in December 2014, President Obama announced a \$1 billion public-private initiative to increase the number of quality pre-kindergarten programs available to children and parents in the low income brackets; as part of his announcement, Obama mentioned that studies clearly show the importance of the pre-k years; (2) the January 2015 issue of National Geographic included an article on the importance of the first year of life, especially for brain development (Bhattacharjee, “The First Year”); and (3) articles/opinions on the Philadelphia Inquirer website urging the PA state legislature and the new governor to provide more support for education, esp. for the pre-k years.

My personal observations & experience, infused as they are with Whiteheadian notions, tend to confirm the Fulghum commentary with which this paper began. Though “All I Really Need to Know . . .” refers overtly to a Sunday School kindergarten experience, viewing all pre-kindergarten situations with a Whiteheadian lens would suggest that the same guidelines should apply to and be part of the learning in pre-kindergarten environments—home schooling, play dates, day care, pre-school, Head Start, etc.

Structurally, the remainder of this paper is divided into 4 sections: (1) a discussion of some process notions that are particularly relevant to early childhood experience; (2) a brief presentation of recent research into the value of early childhood education, focusing on the work of James Heckman, et al, and the work of Lise Eliot; (3) a short discussion focusing on the development of morality in babies and young children involving the work of Paul Bloom and the work of Dacher Keltner; and (4) concluding remarks, including recognition of the negative experiences that often happen in early childhood, reflections on the observations made in the earlier sections of this paper, and on hope for the future. (Since there is no way to cover all the bases or follow all the rabbit trails that reveal themselves, there will be time for discussion.)

## PROCESS PHILOSOPHY:

In Whitehead's philosophy of organism, also known as process philosophy, one's metaphysical views not only influence how one interprets the world, but one's views also influence how one behaves in that real world (cf. Cobb, "Practical Need"). Further, everyone has a metaphysics, a worldview or lens so to speak, through which the world is interpreted. "It is not a question of whether philosophy will be used, but which philosophy will be used." (Suchocki, *What Is*, p. 4)

For the purposes of this paper, elaborating on the complexity of a process metaphysics is not necessary. However, there are three notions to be highlighted: (1) the "power of the past," (2) "novelty," and (3) The Rhythm of Education. (The following presentations of the power of the past and of novelty is based upon Sweeney, *I'd Rather Be Dead*, pp. 21-24.) [A fourth notion, not discussed below but fundamental throughout this conference and a process worldview, is our *intrinsic interconnectivity*. This interconnectivity includes not only our interconnections with each other and with the world around us, but our interconnections with our earlier selves and with our later selves.]

### The Power of the Past

In process philosophy, the past exercises a powerful influence on the present. The past insists on having itself repeated in the present, and into the future. One of the sources of this power of the past is in the sameness that occurs between previous events and subsequent events; sameness increases influence. The "power of the past" is especially evident in the notion of repetition. Repetition involves patterns of thought and patterns of behavior, including linguistic behavior, being repeated and repeated. Repetition involves individuals incorporating only minimal change into themselves. With ongoing repetition, the power and influence of the pattern being repeated builds. With sufficient repetition, the pattern becomes a habit and correspondingly more difficult to alter; the more intense the repetition, the more difficult it becomes to alter that habit.

One more facet of the power of the past, implicit in the discussion above and important for the discussion below, is that each experience that occurs then becomes part of the past that, in turn, influences the present, and whose influence carries into the future: "the many become one, and are increased by one" (Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, p. 21). All that we do, think, feel, say becomes part of the past and of potential use for ourselves and others in the future.

The power of the past is neither completely deterministic nor completely detrimental. The power of the past is responsible for the stability of the world in which we live. For example, the chairs and tables/desks that we are using today and the building in which we are meeting maintain their stability due to the power of the past, due to the events

that compose these desks/tables, chairs, and this building repeating themselves with little novelty. Individuals with less freedom, or less awareness of freedom, are more likely to repeat the patterns of the past. However, eventually, in time, the chairs, the desks/tables, and the building would deteriorate and collapse, unless there are novel interventions to keep the chairs, the desks/tables and the building stable.

For human beings, consider the various habits that we develop. There are habits that we would like to change, for example, those habits which affect one's health, such as overeating. There are habits of which we humans tend to be unaware, such as breathing or the use of language, unless those habits are interrupted in some way. Only then do we become aware of them. The ongoing repetition of previous patterns can be, and often is, such that changing those patterns in any significant way is very difficult.

## Novelty

Alongside the power of the past, process philosophy affirms the possibility of "novelty." - One of the primary ways by which novelty occurs involves the role of individual freedom. Some philosophies, such as scientific materialism, suggest that the power of the past, as found in efficient causality, automatically results in a complete determinism. In contrast, process philosophy integrates the self-creative role of the individual within the network of connections that constitute reality. As part of the description of "freedom," Whitehead suggests that each individual has the ability to contribute something, - however minimal, to its own creation as well as to the future creation and self-creation of other individuals. This self-creative aspect is complicated; feelings and relationships are integrated in various ways with varying degrees of complexity. Despite the power of the past, individuals have the ability to affect themselves and future individuals. Freedom also involves the individual's being able to select from among the various repetitive and novel experiences that are flowing into the developing individual. Complex individuals, such as human beings and orangutans, have more potential freedom than less complex individuals, such as sea slugs and subatomic particles, in choosing from among the available options.

One of the benefits of a process view of novelty and freedom is that it allows for the notion that human beings are, in varying degrees, morally responsible beings. A complication of the process view of novelty and freedom is that moral responsibility, in varying degrees, also occurs in non-human creatures. In a completely deterministic system, no matter the source of the determinism, there can be no moral responsibility, since there is no real self-determination.

Process Philosophy balances the power of the past, which is the basis of order and permanence, with novelty, as it occurs through an individual's choosing from among the possibilities presented in their experience. While the past provides an inhibiting context, the individual's own inherent freedom provides opportunities for change.

## The Rhythm of Education

Among the many interesting educational observations and suggestions made by Alfred North Whitehead which can be found in *The Aims of Education and Other Essays*, one of the more prominent/famous suggestions is that of the rhythm of education, also known as Romance-Precision-Generalization. Simply put, perhaps over simply put, Romance has to do with one's initial interest in, fascination with, a subject; Precision has to do with learning the details, acquiring the technical information of which the subject is composed; Generalization has to do with the application of details to other situations/topics, with perhaps a renewed period of interest in the subject, related subjects, and in delving even deeper into the subject. And so on.

Throughout my educational adventures—as a student, an administrator, and a teacher, I have found, sometimes in hindsight, the rhythm of Romance-Precision-Generalization to be both accurate in describing how and why a class went well and helpful in preparing for a new class.

Three examples from my experiences follow:

Example #1: In Fall 1975, I became director of the Panhandle Day Care Center (PDCC) in Scottsbluff, Nebraska. PDCC served children mostly in the 3-5 age range, but also included care for elementary school age children, especially during summers and school holidays. PDCC served children from a variety of socio-economic situations as well as most of the ethnicities found in western Nebraska: African Americans, European Americans, Mexican Americans, Lakota Sioux, and Mexican migrant workers. The staff was composed of European Americans, Mexican Americans, and Lakota Sioux, ranging in age from high school youth to senior citizens.

With my studies of Whitehead interacting with my early childhood education studies and activities, I realized that learning (especially during the preschool years) could and should be fun. The children are going to learn anyway. So, what will be the content of that learning? Also of importance is how to entice (Romance) children into activities in which they were not interested (such as cooking) or of which they might have some fear (such as playground equipment). Further, no child was forced to do any activity (unless required by health & safety rules, such as fire drills). However the vast majority of children participated in every activity, with romance.

At the time I did not expect much in the way of precision or generalization from the children, and their natural curiosity provided the most of the romance. Still, I wondered if, for example, all the reading, drawing, and scribbling that occurred at PDCC was a kind of unintentional precision. The vast majority of the 3-5 year olds who attended PDCC did learn to read and print well enough to get into kindergarten. (Yes, the Scottsbluff public school district at that time did test potential kindergarteners on

knowing the alphabet, printing their name, tying shoelaces, etc.) All these years later hindsight suggests that, indeed, precision and generalization did occur in the course of the reading and drawing; the children learned enough for kindergarten, a type of generalization, that is, the application of the details learned via precision.

Example #2: In Fall 1988 I began adjunct teaching in philosophy and religion in the California Community College system; this teaching continued until December 1999. Within a few years of teaching, I intentionally began implementing Romance-Precision-Generalization within each course that I taught. Required classes, such as critical thinking courses, needed much help in generating Romance; elective courses usually did not require much generated Romance. I learned that within each unit of study, sometimes within each class session, Romance-Precision-Generalization could be practiced. Romance could be generated by showing students how the course material was relevant to their lives; Precision consisted in studying the details, with regular infusions of Romance while Generalization is found in the application of the details to real-life situations. In my teaching, one of ways of encouraging Generalization is the use of small groups to apply material studied to other situations.

Example #3: From Fall 2004 through Spring 2013, I was an adjunct instructor in process theology at the Claremont School of Theology (CST). Given that Process Thought frequently has a reputation of being rather complex and difficult to learn, the beginning sessions of each course were focused on Romance, demonstrating some of the interesting aspects to the students. Given that most of the courses that I taught at CST were electives, there was a greater degree of interest already present than when the courses were required (as in the community college teaching in example #2 above). As would be expected, the middle 50% of the class sessions were focused on more technical material--Precision; the latter sessions intend to be applications of the technical material, recombined with interest--Generalization.

Additionally, Whitehead made it clear that Romance-Precision-Generalization is not a rigid set of phases, nor is this rhythm an all-or-nothing situation. That is, this rhythm occurs in a variety of ways and within a variety of contexts. Being contextual, what counts as Precision in a day care center is not the same as Precision in a graduate level course in Process Theology. Whitehead suggests that “. . . the quality of our teaching should be so adapted as to suit the stage in the rhythm to which our pupils have advanced.” (Aims, p. 27). And again, “Of course, I mean throughout a distinction of emphasis, of pervasive quality—romance, precision, generalization, are all present throughout. But there is an alteration of dominance, and it is this alteration which constitutes the cycles.” (Aims, p.28)

Further, while early childhood primarily involves Romance, pre-kindergarten children usually learn two very challenging tasks—walking and talking, both of which require a fair amount of Precision. These Precision learning cycles are followed regularly by

Generalization as young children test out both the use of their legs and the use of language, much to the chagrin of adults in many situations. Much study has been done regarding the development of language in infants and toddlers. (Please see the works of Roberta Golinkoff and of Kathy Hirsh-Pasek, both together and individually, for details.) Two of the more important factors involved in early childhood language learning, and in how well a child does later in school and in life, are the number of words that a child hears by the time of entering kindergarten and the conversational nature of those words; basically the more conversational between the child and the adults (parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, teachers, etc.) involved in the child's life, the better. (Golinkoff & Hirsh-Pasek, *How Babies Acquire Language*.)

## PRE-SCHOOL AND SOCIALIZATION

More recently, James Heckman (et al.) of the Department of Economics, The University of Chicago and of University College, Dublin, has investigated the impact of early childhood education programs. (Heckman, 3 articles, see below) In short, Heckman notes that adults who learned “soft skills” as children do better on a variety of measures, such as the ability to get and keep a job, having lower criminal records, and being more healthy/less sick. Soft skills include “being able to pay attention, and focus, being curious and open to new experiences, and being able to control your temper and not get frustrated.” (Planet Money Blog, *Preschool*, 2) Other important skills being learned include “how to resolve conflicts, how to share, how to negotiate, how to talk things out.” (Planet Money Blog, *Preschool*, 2) Heckman became interested in the long-term effects of pre-school by way of studying the success, or lack of success, by those folks undergoing job retraining = why were some successful at retraining and others not successful. From there he was led, eventually, to their pre-school experiences. Perhaps another instance of the old adage that “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.”

In *Pink Brain, Blue Brain: How Small Differences Grow Into Troublesome Gaps—and What We Can Do About It* Lise Eliot investigates the differences that are present from birth between infant girls and infant boys. By reviewing a comprehensive array of studies, as well as providing a careful analysis of the strength and weaknesses of these studies, Dr. Eliot demonstrates that there are statistically insignificant differences between infant girls (taken as a group) and infant boys (taken as a group). Accordingly, it is through socialization by parents, extended family, peer groups, media/screen sources, the school environment, the culture more generally, and other socialization factors that these small differences are grown into the more significant gaps. One such gap occurs in spatial ability where, as they grow older, males are generally much better than females; another gap occurs in fine-motor coordination wherein females, as they

grow older, are generally much better than males (Eliot, *Pink Brain*, 2009). Again the socialization begins very early and becomes more ingrained, harder to change.

## MORAL DEVELOPMENT

A second area in which the importance of early childhood education occurs concerns the development of morality, of the sense of right and wrong. Whitehead observed that humans have a “principle of rightness”, an innate sense of right and wrong, of better and worse, of ideals (Griffin, Reenchantment without, pp. 87-88, pp. 189-191, pp. 380-381; Whitehead, Religion, p. 65; Whitehead, Modes, p. 103). This claim by Whitehead has received, unintentionally I suspect, support from two recent sources: (1) Paul Bloom in his recent book Just Babies: The Origins of Good and Evil and (2) Born to Be Good: The Science of a Meaningful Life by Dacher Keltner.

Just Babies suggests that babies are born with an innate sense of good and bad. Bloom provides a number of studies to back up this claim. Also, babies are born with some traits that can lead to evil, so to speak. It is their early socialization that enhances the various traits, increasing the likelihood of becoming good or evil or some combination thereof. Again what happens early in life influences how the good and/or evil traits develop in any given human being. The socialization involves more than the parents; it involves the extended family (whether by blood or by choice or by some combination thereof), the various communities (church, child care, the public, etc.) in which the child grows, as well as “the screens” (television, computers, cell-phones, etc.) to which the child is subjected.

Similar points are made in Born to Be Good. In this work, Dacher Keltner proposes that our possibilities for being good are both connected with certain innate emotions and with the evolutionary development of those emotions. And yes, it is possible for these positive emotions to be perverted, especially in the pre-k years. Keltner focuses on the studies of facial expressions, in a variety of age groups, including very young children, to support his claims.

If Bloom and Keltner are accurate, then there is a “principle of rightness,” as suggested by Whitehead. However there is no guarantee how this principle of rightness will evolve, what forms it may take. The exemplification of this principle of rightness in the world depends upon how the power of the past interacts with novelty within any given context.

K. T. Rinpoche makes related points from a Buddhist perspective, that there is an “inherent selflessness” within all beings. However, the expression of this selflessness usually is difficult.

Sentient beings’ natural, spontaneous expression of affection and compassion proves the presence of this (innately pure and selfless) quality. All beings without exception express this inherent selflessness, although it is expressed in most cases

only to a limited degree. You might expect a cruel being to *always* work in his own

interest. But even dangerous predators sometimes express kindness towards certain

people—toward their children, for example, or toward another treasured family member. At times this kindness is offered even to the extent of self-sacrifice. So even the cruelest and most selfish of beings have the capacity to be gentle and altruistic.

If ego or selfishness existed substantially as the true nature of our minds instead of being simply an illusion, acts of selflessness would never be possible. . . . Bodhicitta takes our usual limited expression of affection to a universal level through the genuine feeling of lovingkindness and compassion not just for our child, parent, or friend, but also for all sentient beings without exception.”

(Rinpoche, tricycle, pp. 37)

## CONCLUSION

### Observations

If the information presented above is as accurate as it appears to be, the pre-k years are so very important. What happens within a child’s life in those first few years will have effects. Further, the more that unpleasant or bad habits develop, the more lousy experiences dominate, the more difficult will the child’s life tend to be as they grow. This is not to say that persons cannot change; people can and do change. But changing habits that were established very early (pre-k) becomes more difficult as one gets older. Similarly, the good habits and the good experiences that were felt early also exert influence later in life. The studies by Heckman et al, as well as the studies by Eliot, Bloom, and Keltner, demonstrate the importance of pre-k experiences, building upon the genetic givens. A child is neither a blank slate (Locke) nor born evil (Original Sin).

Within the process metaphysics, all experiences are added to, included in the “power of the past”; hence, the more good experiences that are included, the more likely will the

child continue to be “good” and/or will have some “memories” (both conscious and unconscious) upon which to draw to help one get through the tough times. Most of what occurs in early childhood occurs unconsciously, yet intentionality is there. (cf. Bloom, Just Babies).

Further, given the interconnectivity of the process worldview, experiences have widespread influence, not only for the later selves of the individual, but also for other individuals both near and far, both more or less, both positive and negative. Balancing the power of the past with novelty within the Rhythm of Education is a difficult task, but we need to try so to do. Appropriately encouraging the innate Romance that young children demonstrate, combined with both intentional and unintentional Precision, results in a greater chance of better Generalization.

### Problematic Effects

Since the information presented above focused generally on the potentially positive outcomes of early childhood experiences, it would seem appropriate to present some information regarding potentially negative or problematic effects. Four stories to illustrate some of the negativity:

(1) There are foster care situations in which the 10-12 year old is in a much healthier situation than they previously were (food, clothing, no abuse, no drug use in the environment, etc.); the foster parents would like to adopt, but the child wants to go back to the situation and to the people that led to the child being placed in foster-care in the first place. Children often want to return to the context with which they are familiar and within which they spent their pre-k years.

(2) In 2005 David Roy, a pastoral counselor with many years of experience, gave a presentation at the Center for Process Studies presentation, during which Dr. Roy commented upon the occurrence of early childhood trauma in many of his patients. Recent work by Darcia Narvaez and Allan Schore, among others, further supports the importance of early childhood experiences and the dangers involved from the traumas experienced in those early years (Darcia, et al, eds. Evolution, 2012). Ameliorating the damage done in early childhood also is important. Repairing the damage, insofar as it can be done, will be both costly and long-term.

(3) In her work Evil Genes, Barbara Oakley reminds us, among many fascinating insights, that even in the best of environments sometimes the genes exert themselves in ways that result in psychological disorders, and these disorders can show themselves in very young children.

(4) As Fulghum suggests “LOOK.” So, looking at the current political scene, it would appear that, while many politicians give some lip-service to education generally, and occasionally to early childhood/pre-kindergarten education in particular, they are unlikely to deliver any substantial positive changes. Looking at the stalemates that occur at different levels of government gives little reason for optimism. The drive to privatize and to control critical thinking, under the guise of reform, is merely one way to divert attention from the real issues. I occasionally wonder what kind of childhood experiences were undergone by the politicians and the privatizers for profit.

### Hope in the Alternatives

John Cobb has remarked, on more than one occasion, that China represents the main hope for humanity. The importance of early childhood education is being recognized in China, via the work of the China Project of the Center for Process Studies and of the Institute for the Postmodern Development of China, where Whitehead Kindergartens have been established.

(For more information on the Whitehead Kindergartens, contact the China Project, Center for Process Studies; also, please check the [jesusjazzbuddhism](http://jesusjazzbuddhism.com) website.)

In the West, there are examples here and there of good pre-k programs--Headstart, Montessori, any number of pre-schools both public and private, religious and secular, some forms of home schooling. But the need and the demand, for quality pre-K education, appear to outstrip the availability. Still, further efforts can be made through religious institutions and through private non-profit institutions. I expect to learn about the additional options through this track.

Process Thought has devoted a fair amount of attention to education generally, but little attention focused directly upon the pre-k years. (cf. CPS thematic bibliographies on education and religious education.) Also, in true (I hope) process both-and fashion/style, I am making a plea for more attention to and focus on resources directed towards early childhood experiences.

Fulghum observed that fundamental learning occurs in Kindergarten. Recent studies suggests early childhood, pre-kindergarten experiences are even more important than previously believed.

And with these assessments, process thought concurs.

### Whitehead notes

Education is the guidance of the individual towards a comprehension of the art of life; and by the art of life I mean the most complete achievement

of varied activity expressing potentialities of that living creature in the face of its environment. . . . Each individual embodies an adventure of existence. The art of life is the guidance of this adventure.” (Whitehead, *Aims*, p. 39)

And for this adventure in comprehending the art of life, in overcoming the issues that arise out of early childhood, *All We Need (to know), The Earlier . . . . The Better.*

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