

**THE POSTMODERN MUSINGS OF A TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY YOGI:
DISCRIMINATION AGAINST CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES, AHIMSA AND ADVOCACY**

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Introduction

Albert Einstein once said, "The only life worth living is a life in the service of others."

This essay addresses the need for action to change subtle practices in American public education that obscure actions of discrimination and 'political violence' against children with disabilities. Many may find it difficult to believe that schools and educators discriminate against children with disabilities. More specifically stated, this essay will deconstruct the apparent lack of care that many educators implicitly and explicitly exhibit concerning children-with-disabilities and special-education law. The path of this essay winds through a combination of theory, application, and personal reflection.

Postmodern Enquiry

For several years, my discourse, my thoughts, words, and actions emanated from the single perspective of postmodern enquiry, which is not a discipline or method of research that is commonly studied in this country making informed discussion with colleagues extremely difficult. Traditional statistical analysis on the other hand is much more popular. It appears to be more direct and precise in a country where numbers and efficiency are in fact king. From my perspective, at least, A number is a number, is a number, with a single designation stipulate by placement and base. Words, on the other hand may mean many things dependent on tone, definition, sign, signifier and place in the abyss. According to Jean Francois Lyotard, even the spaces within the print and the spaces between the letters carry meaning. But I will save that discussion of the texture and grid for a future time and place.

Viewed through the simplest lens, the postmodern perspective is fairly straightforward. Language is king, controlling everything in this world, including all humanity, whether in the past, the present or in the future. Despite the extensive work of Kant, scientists, mathematicians, clerics and all those other endless experts throughout history who have sought to define and stipulate what counts as knowledge, beauty and truth, there are no absolutes, no Meta narratives, no certainties. In Postmodern enquiry everything is possible. There are infinite possibilities with many players playing and speaking in endless simultaneous language games. It is that which will have been presented and that which is never really is—never really

finished, always in process, always yet to come, much like the tantric tradition in yoga in which the yogi is constantly in the process of writing her path to her truth and peace.

Once I began to understand the basics of postmodern enquiry, I erroneously thought that I was set and would continue in this single perspective for the rest of my life. It had been a difficult journey and an enormous mental effort to reach this understanding. To be honest I was relieved that I would no longer feel the pressure to stretch for the sublime. But, of course, I was not correct, this was not to be. Even this line of thinking was to give way to even more reading, listening, and thinking about how things relate one to another and my endless journey to understand life.

Yoga

About five or so years ago, the voices of the ancient yogis beckoned to me. I had heard their whisper many times over the years and managed to ignore their call with inaction. Yet, this time I found that I had a very small piece of unscheduled time in which I could begin the study of yoga. I was fairly sure that I could be successful since for years I did aerobics and even stepper classes several times a week. There had been a rather large amount of time in which I became more and more inactive, always with an excellent reason to just sit and think. Nevertheless, I am flexible, so I could handle yoga. And so on a foggy Friday morning I took my first class with much enthusiasm, high hopes of success and honestly some fear, for I am very competitive and really did not want to be embarrassed. I had not accurately anticipated the depth of the physical and mental challenges involved in this decision. Flexible or not, during that first class I had extreme difficulty assuming the poses. I could not even do 'child's pose' the most basic of all the poses. By the end of class, I was sweaty, exhausted, and pretty much a yoga dud, unable to do any of the *assunas*, except for *shavassana* 'the corpse pose' which was a grateful relief. Strangely, despite the discomfort and failure of my overly mature and squishy body, to assume the correct positioning in the *assunas*, I persevered, and found myself doing the same class the next week. Child's pose was less difficult that time. Soon I was practicing yogi, one very small step at a time. The number of classes grew from one a week to an average of three and on a very good week four. Surprisingly, a desire to fully understand the teachings,

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history and meaning of these ancient practices began to grow in my mind and heart. And perhaps more important, a desire to know, to learn to comprehend the philosophy, message and peace that I glimpsed grew in my soul. As a result, yoga gradually began to enter and permeate the language games of my life. The philosophy and strict moral code inherent in yoga are a comfortable yet challenging fit in my specific belief system and influence my daily life. Sometimes I am able to hit the mark and sometimes I do not. My path continues. Yoga is changing me, not taking me away from postmodern enquiry, rather entreating me to view life from an additional deeper perspective.

My own personal value system has now evolved into a composition of Yoga, Christianity, Postmodern Enquiry, a dash of Buddhism and of course, liberal thought. This combination makes an interestingly unique philosophical cocktail, with which I am currently quite comfortable. In my mind at least it fits together quite nicely. Yoga is a spiritual journey that encourages me to develop a clearer vision of my nature, the world and find peace. My natural mind is very much like a pinball machine, never stopping or silent. It is in constant fluctuation. Yogis call this *chit*, noise and 'monkey mind'. The great sage, Patanjali says, "Yoga is the cessation of the fluctuations of the mind."¹ Yoga allows me to shake the *chit* (noise) out of my mind and view the universe with fresh eyes and a renewed spirit.² Simply put, yoga keeps me sane, peaceful and as balanced as possible in this world of contradictions and chaos.

Yama and Ahimsa

The teachings of yoga have existed for centuries, past down from Hindu monks to their students through the oral tradition. The goal of yoga is to find peace and knowledge of your true self, thus peace without distraction or suffering. Two centuries before the birth of Christ, Maharishi Patanjali recorded the beliefs of yoga in the *Yoga Sutra*. He listed guidelines for living and described the Eightfold Path of Yoga as a structure that involves "shift(ing) your internal reference point from restriction to expansion."³ On the first path of yoga, Pantanjali suggested five things to avoid (the *yamas*) and five things to embrace (the *hisyamias*) if one desires to purify the mind and the body and thus end suffering.

The first *yama*, *ahimsa*, translates as 'nonviolence' or, to put it another way, 'Do no harm.' *Ahimsa* is part of the three fold objective of this lecture. On the surface it may seem that *ahimsa* is a simple concept, for few of us purposely harm others. But *ahimsa* is in fact a deep

precept, extremely difficult and very complex. It encompasses all violence and unkindness including but not limited to: actions (including aggressive gestures, postures, or actions such as assault, murder, suicide, fighting or mutilation of self or others), words (including threats, gossip, sarcasm, looks, put downs or verbal abuse) and negative thoughts, about anyone including ourselves or any other creature.

It seems to me, that the most difficult part of living *ahimsa* is embedded in thought part, that is stopping those nasty little judgmental, angry, or fantasy get-even thoughts that creep silently into our minds and happily take hold spreading negative energy evolving into a putrid, poisonous joy, easily evolving into negative attitudes, words and actions.

In order to follow *ahimsa*, we must not only, 'do no harm' which is difficult enough in itself, but additionally we must step past neutral, over into the positive side of *ahimsa*, that is helping others, undoing harm, and alleviating their pain of distraction or in yogic terms suffering. Patanjali writes that suffering is the sorrow of distractions yet to come. Suffering consists of all things that interfere with or block our search for our true nature and peace. If we lessen that distraction, we can lessen negativity. Our thoughts, words and actions can change, and allow for the possibility for positive energy and compassion to develop.⁴ Anger and hate can be replaced with peace, not only in our selves, but also in others. Mahatma Gandhi expresses it well, when he writes:

If you express your love in such a manner that it impresses itself indelibly upon your enemy, he must return that love ... and that requires far greater courage than delivering of blows.⁵

Postmoderns do not write about compassion, directly but rather they address discourse that binds and suppresses individuals and groups. If postmoderns made statements of the absolute, it is likely that postmoderns would say that freedom and autonomy are basic to human and happiness. Postmoderns write about truth and reality in a different manner than does Patanjali. For Postmoderns, truth is relative and determined by culture, for Patanjali truth lies within each individual. Are these perspective really different, or do they each examine a similar belief from a different view? Postmoderns believe that discourse, especially the overpowering discourse of a meta narrative, can keep humanity from individual truths or the little narratives that comprise a truth, while Patanjali believes that suffering clouds our true nature. Thus from a postmodern perspective, one could say, suffering is a form of discourse or a meta narrative that interferes with or clouds truth and peace

and our true nature.

Truth and values

Lyotard writes that truth is established and maintained in a community by declaring it to be so.⁶ People establish truth through their right to speak, to be heard, and to have influence upon the outcome of any situation. Simply their right to participate in any of the endless language games that are being played by each individual at any moment in time allows them to determine their future. Thus there are many, many simultaneous realities and truths, as many as the endless players in the universe. The many possibilities of postmodern discourse are commensurate with each person's possession of an individual true nature. The multiple simultaneous postmodern truths are in flux, changing as the players change, as all things change and flow in the universe. Yogis say that permanence an illusion that masks the true reality of impermanence and the inevitability of change. Like justice, change is an idea, intangible and individualized. Change can occur as quickly as death or as slowly as rust. Change is impermanence. Impermanence is reality.

Change and the Technical Game

In education, things move rather slowly. We are accustomed to encountering impermanence through a new policy or a sweeping systems mandate usually attached to governmental funding. For example, one such change is the No Child Left Behind Act. Making sure all children are on a steady path of learning, improving student achievement and the notion of educational accountability are all wonderful goals. The reality is that the original policies of No Child Left Behind have morphed into a monster meta narrative, whose discourse is grounded in high stakes testing and goals of excellence that appear to be impossible to achieve. It is clear that the discourse of NCLB is firmly grounded in the technical language game, which is contrary to its stated goal of justice. Thus in the language games genera, NCLB is incommensurable within its own discursive practices. Jean Francois Lyotard describes the technical language game as one that strives to:

Achieve optimal performance by maximizing output (the information or modifications obtained) and minimizing input (the energy expended in the process)... The true goal of the system, (that is) the reason it programs itself like a computer, is the optimization of the global relationship between input and output—in other words, performativity.... (Thus), (t)he game of scientific language, becomes the game of the rich, in which whoever is the wealthiest has the best chance of being right.⁷

The unspoken but absolutely clear message of the performativity principle is, 'those who cannot perform are not important to the system'. They will be silenced and cease to exist. The performativity principle is a form of terror.

Unfortunately, schools seem to be one of the natural habitats where the technical game of scientific language thrives. In this competitive game of funding and accreditation, often output value weighted mechanisms such as high stakes testing are more in control than pedagogy or knowledge or thinking. Of course, those schools with the most money have the highest chance of being right and winning the high stakes testing language game. Speaking from the power position of addressor, our government, has identified 'what counts as the correct knowledge' for all the school children and has imposed these ideals on all students in public schools.⁸

Reality of schooling

The reality of schooling in modernity is that not all children are learning as predicted because all children do not learn in the same manner and at the same rate. Often children with disabilities are not making 'Adequate Yearly Progress.' Some of the children with disabilities are easily identified, just by a quick visual scan. Some have physical disabilities, or perhaps they have developmental disabilities associated with any of numerous syndromes. There are other disabilities that are not immediately evident to the causal observer and may be invisible to the naked eye. Children with disabilities, whether the disability is immediately identifiable or invisible, desperately want to be like everyone else. They have the same hopes, fears and civil rights as every other child. They want to belong and be accepted for who they are. Instead they operate on the outside of the tightly woven social and academic circle.

Political Violence

The school day for most children with disabilities is much more than just unpleasant, or difficult, or empty. School can be a terrifying experience from the beginning of the morning bus ride until the long awaited arrival home each evening. Many endure teasing, failure, unkindness, inadequate education, and shunning. Most playgrounds are not accessible. Often instruction is not adapted, modified, or differentiated to suit their specific needs. Michelle Foucault identifies all these actions and attitudes as 'hidden political violence' exercised against children with disabilities and challenges educators to take action against any institution in which children are treated in an unjust manner. He writes:

It seems to me that the real political task in a society ... is to criticize the working of institutions which

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appear to be both neutral and independent; to criticize them in such a manner that the political violence which has always exercised itself obscurely through them will be unmasked, so one can fight them.⁹

Most educators are at least peripherally aware of injustices that exist in schools, yet few speak out against them. Lack of action, does much harm to children with disabilities, reinforcing injustice, it tacitly projects a message that these children are worthless in the system of schooling.¹⁰ Cleo Cherryholmes, a contemporary scholarly author, comments on how power precedes and establishes itself through omission:

When the origin of discourse-practices are ignored, the material basis of discourse is ignored, the way in which power precedes and invades speech is ignored, and ethical and ideological dimensions of speech are ignored; the result is that discourse-practices are determined, often invisibly, by rules, interests, commitments, and power structures of time and place.¹¹

Employing power structures of time and place instead of ethics and justice perpetuates the language game of efficiency.

When graduate students in my classes, remind me of the continued problems faced by children with disabilities every day in schools, I am saddened that there is so little tolerance of unalterable differences. I think of the first *yama*, *ahimsa* and its message of 'Do no harm'. Clearly children are harmed when teachers refuse to individualize curriculum, or make unrealistic demands on the children, or send the child to the special education teacher instead of providing inclusive instruction as stipulated in the IEP, or punish and shame the child because of unalterable conditions, or send the child out of classroom. Administrators who write children out of programs because of the high cost of special education are doing much harm and condemning those children to lives of struggle and suffering.

Tolerance for Differences

The Southern Poverty Law Center "fights prejudice (of all kinds), and supports equitable school experiences for our nation's children." The SPLC demonstrates the ethic of tolerance which is sorely needed in our schools. Often the child with a disability requires the services of an advocate to access those fundamental educational rights guaranteed in legislation and regulations of IDEA. The role of the advocate is to solve problems and help all sides arrive at a solution that is in the best interest of the child.

Advocacy requires crossing the lines of

'unanimously-agreed-upon protocol' to address the needs of others and specifically in this case children with disabilities. It is a very tricky business, for often schools, teachers and administrators do not welcome the presence or interference of an advocate. In fact one can see the displeasure on the faces of school officials and feel the tension mount when someone is introduced as an advocate. From the perspective of the school, the presence of an advocate says to the school, 'The parents are not in agreement with the school which translates into the school is wrong, untrustworthy, incompetent and must change.'

I serve as an advocate for children with disabilities. With as much calm and professional attitude as I can muster and often it is very difficult, I quietly and calmly question the actions, interpretation and implementation of policy within the school. Sometimes this is a smooth process with conversations that result in positive changes for the child and sometimes it is not. I will very briefly describe one example that resulted in positive change and one that did not. September 2007, I accompanied a parent to the initial IEP meeting for her fourth grade daughter, who had been diagnosed as learning disabled in the areas of written language and reading comprehension. The parent had been informed that her child could only have services to address a reading disability for a minimal amount of time each week. The diagnostic summary clearly demonstrated a significant disability is the area of written language but that area was to be ignored because of a scheduling issue. When we arrived, I was pleased to discover that the teacher in question was a former Webster student which proved to be an advantage. Suddenly the scheduling issue evaporated. The IEP was written, all needs addressed beyond my initial expectations.

In November of 2007, I began to advocate for another child with different issues and needs. He has severe ADHD and all the accompanying characteristics that most individuals with severe ADHD demonstrate. He is on medication which does offer some relief. This has been documented for the last eight years by his physicians. He is gifted as documented by the school. He has an established history of minor behavior difficulties. With all the history and documentation, this should have been a very quick and easy conversation with all issues immediately resolved. The entire issue is covered by the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. The parent requested that a 504-intervention plan be written with modest accommodations for the child. This process should have been very simple. But this advocacy process was complex and drawn out over eight months

with five meetings with the superintendent, one meeting with the school board, two meetings with the diagnostic team and the district attorney and one meeting with the entire evaluation team. After all of these meetings, the superintendent refused to allow a 504 to be written. He was sure that he could just work with the parent. It is not clear whether the superintendent purposely decided to deny the child his civil rights or whether he was convinced that the child did not need or deserve the 504 plan. What is clear is that this child qualified for the accommodation plan and the plan was denied. There was no chance for meaningful change for the child in this school. This superintendent and many of teachers engaged in causing harm to the child. There was a clear pattern of discrimination against the child by the teachers, administrators and school board.

Advocacy, Detachment and Perception

Advocacy is a complex multi leveled "self-transcending action" in which "we engage in a deep connection to others and [thus] to life itself."¹² One cannot predict how deep the connection will be or of the outcome of the advocacy. Whether advocacy results in positive change or no-change, advocacy is not about the advocate. Advocacy is always about the child. The advocate must detach herself from the results in order to seek what is true about the situation to determine the next steps if any. Judith Lasater a noted yogi, physical therapist and expert in East/ West Psychology, explains this process like this:

Truth is a matter of perspective ... the way you think things are. When you do, (let go of you preconceived ideas), you get out of your own way and can experience another perspective. All spiritual traditions talk about enlightenment or realization. One way to view enlightenment is as a radical shift in perspective. Nothing outside you has changed: you have changed. And yet, paradoxically, you have not changed, but rather you have become what you already are. You have removed the smoke screen of ignorance so that what was always present has become apparent.¹³

When we let go of our perceptions of the way we think things are, such as someone else will take care of the problem, or the principal or superintendent knows best and will act in an ethical manner, or even that the superintendent and board are unjust, we may then be able to begin to see reality in a different way. We may

question our previous assumptions and may be able to seek a new and different language game to solve the disagreement. We may be successful and we may not be successful. But once again we will have tried to undo the damage of violence against a child with a disability in this world of impermanence.

Quantum physics explains that the universe is ephemeral. Nothing remains the same at cellular or sub cellular level. The distinction between matter and energy is nebulous and waves and particles blur as each behaves like the other. With each inhale and exhale our bodies change. Every thought makes an impression on our neural circuitry. As glucose is use to support electro chemical reactions in our brains, thoughts occur in our minds sending electrical impulse energy through our bodies and into the universe. Our energy connects with and influences other energies and beings, connecting us one to another (whether human or nonhuman, animal or plant, or mineral, past present or future). Nothing happens in isolation. We are all part of the impermanence of change and the hope of transformation.

Summary

Hopefully this essay has provided a glimmer of awareness of the pressing need for advocacy and transformation in our schools. About 15% of the children in our schools have a disability whether diagnosed or not. When you see a school, I hope you will think of all of these children. And consider how you would want your child to be treated if he or she had a disability. If you agree that transformation is needed then please join in the effort to change schools.

Subsumed in the hope of transformation, there are three questions for each of us who desire change to consider. The first is, "What can I do to change the system of schooling so that each and every child will be able to benefit from school?" The second question is "Do I possess the courage and tenacity to fight this intolerant system of schooling that is disposing of so many children?" And the third question and perhaps the most important is compound, "What is my role in the process and where shall I begin?" Once these questions are addressed, we are on the way to undo the harm of the silent discrimination against children with disabilities and more fully understand Albert Einstein's message, "The only life worth living is a life in the service of others."

ENDNOTES

1. Budilovsky, Joan and Eve Adamson, (1998). *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Yoga*, (NY:Alpha Books). p.37.
2. Ibid. p. 10.
3. Deepak Chopra, and David Simon, (2004). *A Practical Guide to Healing Body, Mind, and Spirit: The Seven Spiritual Laws Of Yoga*. (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Publishing). p. 32-34.
4. Judith Lasater, (2000). *Living Your Yoga: Finding the Spiritual in Everyday Life*. (Berkley, California: Rodmell Press). p. 136.
5. Chopra and Simon, (2004). pp. 32-34
6. Jean-Francois Lyotard, (1984) *The Postmodern Condition : A Report on Knowledge*, trans., Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press. Originally published in France as *La Condition postmoderne : rapport sur le savior*, (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1979). 4.
7. Ibid, p. 46.
8. Elementary & Secondary Education Act, (2001). <http://www.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/esea02/107-110.pdf> (Accessed May 14,2009)
9. Michel Foucault, (1974). "Human Nature: Justice Verses Power," in *Reflective Water: the Basic Concerns of Mankind*, ed., Fons Eiders, (London: Souvenir Press). 171. cited in Paul Rabinow, ed., *The Foucault Reader* (New York, NY: Pantheon, 1984). p. 6.
10. Michele Foucault expressed the view of discourse as language and as the language expressed through practices. This type of discourse differs from the *langue* and *parole* of Sassure. Foucault's discourse, communicates both meaning and rules of expression. Discourse and its rules of operation are embedded in instructional relationships of the specific episteme in which the discourse in formed.
11. Cleo Cherryholmes, (1988) *Power and Criticism Poststructural Investigations in Education*, (New York: Teachers College Columbia University, Teachers Press). p.48.
12. Judith Lasater, p. 111.
13. Ibid. p. 19.