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Releasing the Imagination: Essays on Education, the Arts, and Social Change by Maxine Greene

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BOOK REVIEW

Editor: The book review below was first published in Educational Studies 27(3), Fall 1996, 292-301 and reprinted with permission from the journal. The reviewer is Barbara Thayer-Bacon, an editorial board member of the Journal of Educational Controversy. While our other three book reviews give the reader an original, new perspective on the books, we thought it would be interesting to see a book review written at the time the book was published. Professor Thayer-Bacon also reviewed another book that came out around the same time and used it as a source for comparison. The editorial board believed that both reviews provide an historical perspective on the work of Maxine Greene in the years just following its initial publication.

Peripheral Visions: Learning Along the Way. Mary Catherine Bateson. New York: Harper Collins Publishers, Inc., 1994.

Releasing the Imagination: Essays on Education, the Arts, and Social Change. Maxine Greene. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1995.

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How does imagination help us as inquirers? Assuming the value of imagination for inquiry, what should teachers and schools do to help encourage and further develop students' imaginative abilities? These are two questions I have been considering lately, and I have found two excellent sources to help me. I want to share them with you, the reader, first on an individual basis (as they are each worthy of their own review), then together to highlight their common bonds. Mary Catherine Bateson uses *Peripheral Visions* as an opportunity to reflect on her life and some of the key experiences she had that helped her learn to meet uncertainty through responsible improvisation and to develop a habit of reflection. Maxine Greene also writes *Releasing the Imagination* as a series of essays reflecting on art that she has experienced through the years, especially literary art, which helped her learn to be wide-awake, open, and attending to the world around her.

Both Bateson and Greene are influential, insightful thinkers who have contributed significantly to peoples' understanding of others. They continue to challenge us to experience the world in new ways and to stir "to wideawakeness, to imaginative action, and to renewed consciousness of possibility" (Greene, p. 43). Both of them offer us suggestions to help us see the world through peripheral vision by using our imagination. For both, their hope is that what they have to say will open spaces and room for us to appreciate each other and empathize with each other, especially in our school classrooms. Can teachers learn to "revise our sense of ourselves as learning beings, following a path from birth to death that is longer and more unpredictable than ever before"? If we can learn to revise ourselves, and be in-the-making, focusing on modeling "learning rather than authority" and providing "models for multiple kinds of attention," we can be in a position to reconstruct educational systems (Bateson, p. 212-13). They offer us a vision of a community we can strive for, an ideal democratic community that is always in the making, and is one in which we feel at home.

I begin with Mary Catherine Bateson's *Peripheral Visions* because it is very readable and is interwoven with many personal stories. I always begin my classes this same way, with something we can grab hold of and begin to relate to our lives. M. C. Bateson has had an unusual life, as the daughter of Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson. She has become a force in her own right, in the fields of anthropology and English. Bateson wrote much of *Peripheral Visions* while in residence at the MacDowell Colony, the artists' colony in Peterborough, New Hampshire. In her small writing studio she places tokens around herself to give something concrete to hold on to, as well. These tokens have been carefully chosen to remind her of the memories she wants to connect and write about. *Peripheral Visions* has fifteen chapters, each of which is around fifteen pages long, making the entire book, including Acknowledgments and Sources, 243 pages. She shares with us experiences in Israel, the Philippines, and Iran, as well as in America.

The methodology Bateson uses, participant observation, is from her background in anthropology (and actually was how she was raised^[1]). She tells us that participant observation "is more than a research methodology. It is a way of being, especially suited to a world of change" (p. 8). She has learned to use this methodology to help her be "able to attend to something new or see the familiar in a new way," which is for her a creative act (p. 6). She begins to show us this through an experience she had while living in Iran.

The setting is a Persian garden, in 1972, with Bateson's two year old daughter, Vanni, where they were invited by their landlords to observe the Feast of Sacrifice. "That trip to Iran was not the first time I had entered a strange culture, but it was the first of many moments when the double identity of mother and field-worker led me down new paths of reflection" (p. 2).

In this religious ceremony, Bateson observes the death and dissection of a sheep, which she has never observed before, with her child standing beside her, her landlord as hostess, and the village gardener and his family in attendance performing the sacrifice. She worries about how she can help Vanni experience this sacrifice so that she will not be frightened of a place she will be living in for several years, as well as worrying about not offending her landlord or the village family, who come from very different world views.

Out of that tense multiplicity of vision came the possibility for insight. . . . What I tried to do that day, stringing together elements of previous knowledge, attending to catch every possible cue, and exploring different translations of the familiar, was to improvise responsibly and with love. (p. 6)

Bateson allowed herself to see her experience from several different perspectives, attending to her new experience in a caring manner because of the people she was sharing this experience with. She tried to value what she was experiencing, and be receptive to it, so she could be sure to understand it. She was forced to improvise, and to use her imagination to make connections and associations between what she already knew and what she was experiencing for the first time. She had to be adaptive to the new experience and willing to be patient and allow a pattern to emerge. She explains how a participant observer methodology asks us "to live in ambiguity, a life that requires constant learning" (p. 13).

Bateson shares stories of her research work in the Philippines intermixed with stories of her own personal life at the time. When she was living in the Marikina Valley, at the edge of Manila, she learned how the Filipinos discussed death openly and frankly, and was forced to compare bereavement patterns between their culture and her own at a very personal level when she became pregnant and lost that child, Martin, while living in the Philippines. The Filipinos have a world view that treats death as an inescapable fact of life, whereas "Americans treat grief almost like a disease, embarrassing and possibly infectious" (p. 22).

When Bateson wants her students to challenge themselves to see things in new ways and reflect on their own perspectives, she introduces them to experiences that cause them to acknowledge strangeness by experiencing discomfort and surprise.

One of the best ways of doing this is by looking at familiar patterns of growth framed in other cultures, so I may ask them to read life histories like the life of the Winnebago Indian Crashing Thunder, or the life of the San woman Nisa, or to interview acquaintances with different backgrounds. (p. 31)

In Iran she had her students observe different infant-mother pairs and their childrearing habits. This opened her students to understanding their own cultured values on childrearing in new ways. First, we must participate in new and different experiences; then, we learn from our strange experiences. Her goal is "to enrich students with new learning skills, not to replace the old ones, and this demands an awareness of differences" (p. 43). When we open ourselves to strangeness and newness, we cannot expect that we will understand them.

Learning outside the classroom is not like that. Lessons too complex to grasp in a single occurrence spiral past again and again, small examples gradually revealing greater and greater implications. (p. 30)

Bateson also wants to encourage us to develop "the capacity for awed experience of the ordinary" (p. 56). This she shows us through another story, again connecting a working experience to one from her personal life. While attending a conference in New York at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, Bateson was asked to preach to the congregation at their Sunday service, with conference attendees in the audience as well. Her topic was perception. What Bateson found was that, in looking up and across the cathedral, she saw "the epiphany of blue, a huge blue 'rose' window at the back end of the church, a celestial firmament" (p. 49). This blue is connected to a story Bateson dictated to her mother as a young child. The child's story was of a princess being born into a kingdom where no one saw colors, but she did. She learned that "where she saw differences other people saw sameness" (p. 46). The child realized after many years that "she might know more than others, and then that she might be able to make her vision of the world available to them" (p. 46). The princess was able to teach her mother to see colors first, by getting her to see that her eyes looked different and naming that difference as blue. Just as experiencing strangeness helps us see things in new ways, so do people help us when they ask us to attend to that which has become so familiar. Young children help parents see the world again in new ways, and people who are terminally ill help us see the ordinary in our lives with fresh insight. Bateson recommends that we keep alive and cultivate our capacities to see the ordinary as different and new, to find awe in what is common experience.

Other themes Bateson focuses on include a discussion on change and continuity, which she describes as "two sides of the same coin" (p. 89). She uses her experiences of living in Israel as a senior in high school, and returning thirty years later to help us understand Gregory Bateson's concept of a balanced cybernetic system, which is able to improvise and adapt along the way, with the help of corrective feedback. M. C. Bateson looks at topics such as boredom, action and inaction,

Thayer-Bacon: *Releasing the Imagination: Essays on Education, the Arts, and Soc* diversity and congruity, cooperation over competition, the sharing of limited goods, empathy, and contextual learning. Several chapters focus on the Western world's tendency to view person's as autonomous, individual selves. Bateson encourages us to see "the self in relationship" and "the reality of interdependence" (p. 63). There are "flexible boundaries" of the self (p. 74). She uses the word

person for the focus of a pattern of relationships. Caring and commitment are what makes persons, and persons in turn reach out for a community. Personhood arises from a long process of welcoming closeness and continues to grow and require nourishment over a lifetime of participation. (P 62)

The overall theme of Bateson's book is to encourage us to allow ourselves to be "attentive to multiple demands" for this peripheral vision becomes a source of insight (p. 97). Our Western model for insight tends to focus on sustained concentration and being single-minded. Yet, Bateson argues that intelligence "depends on the skillful use of peripheral vision. Strategy depends on recognizing change" (p. 106).

I believe that if we can learn a deeper noticing of the world around us, this will be the basis of effective concern (p. 109). . . . (T)o compose lives of grace we need to learn an artful and aesthetic pattern of attention to the environment . . . we need a broader vision. (p. 110)

If we can learn to see how human beings all over the world create patterns and order, we will learn to see the aesthetic in our lives. If we will learn to see the patterns human beings create as adaptive behavior, then we begin to see the square patterning in the poverty of the Manila slums as human achievement of survival. "We have come to lack faith in the resilience and creativity of human order so we lack too the willingness to recognize it where forms differ" (p. 221). If we can maintain an attitude of wonder and a readiness to respond and a quality of attention that makes recognition possible, then the unfamiliar becomes a resource rather than a threat, and improvisation can be both creative and responsible. This is what Mary Catherine Bateson has learned from her parents and her lifetime of living, and this is what she shares with us in a very personal, approachable way, through her book *Peripheral Visions*. I recommend it highly.

Maxine Greene's *Releasing the Imagination* helps us to understand at a more philosophical level how we can help students further develop their attending skills and their ability to respond to ordinary and unusual experiences, as well as recognize patterns and commonality that exist in our diverse world. Greene describes her book as "narrative in the making" and informs us that her goal is not to construct a desired common world, but rather to arouse readers' imaginations. "Imagination is what, above all, makes empathy possible. . . . (I)magination is the one (cognitive capacity) that permits us to give credence to alternative realities" (p. 3). She teaches us how to encourage students to use their imaginations to help them be more empathetic of others through the use of the arts. She describes a mode of utopian thinking where students can learn to reconceive and revisualize better states of affairs and "acknowledge the harshness of situations" as they are (p. 5). Her focus is on teacher education. Her concern is for active learning. Her goal is "a community always in the making-the community that may someday be called a democracy" (p. 6).

Releasing the Imagination is a collection of essays, fourteen to be exact, that adds up to a 198-page book, minus the references and index. Some of these essays have been published elsewhere and will already be familiar to the reader. Readers who know Greene's work anticipate that she, like Bateson, is also an excellent writer; you will not be disappointed by these essays. They are powerful and poignant. They help us imagine new possibilities and point to problems that exist in our schools and our world around us. Greene has categorized these essays into three parts: Part One: Creating Possibility, Part Two: Illuminations and Epiphanies, and Part Three: Community in the Making. Part One focuses on descriptions and discussions of imagination and its central role in understanding. Part Two turns to curriculum issues, and Part Three focuses on plurality and diverse community issues. I will highlight what Greene discusses, and then bring the two works together for a final focus.

Part One: Creating Possibilities begins with Greene giving us a sketch of the current scene in education for teachers. Like Thomas Mann, the author who helped her see the world big and see the world small, Greene is interested in helping us do the same. She is interested in "shifting perspectives and different modes of seeing," to seeing things close and from a distance, to viewing people "in their integrity and particularity" and not just as numbers, or objects in school systems (p. 10). She warns us that her interpretations are provisional. "All we can do, I believe, is cultivate multiple ways of seeing and multiple dialogues in a world where nothing stays the same" (p. 16). Then Greene begins to show us how the arts can be used to release imagination and open up new perspectives. A call for imaginative capacity is a call "to work for the ability to look at things as if they could be otherwise" (p. 19). Imagination is "the gateway" (Dewey) to active learning, the opening of possibilities, and "problem posing" (Freire). Greene describes her method of instruction as a collaborative search for consciousness, "a reaching out, an intending, a grasping of the appearance of things," which involves both

teachers and learners (p. 26). She is concerned that teachers do not use the arts to resolve students' visions, but rather to awaken students and help them develop new lenses.

In chapter 3, "Imagination, Community, and the School," Greene helps us understand how "lack of imagination results in an incapacity to create or even participate in what might be called a community" (p. 37). She turns to Dewey's concept of democratic community to help us "imagine a democratic community accessible to the young" (p. 33). She refers to Hannah Arendt's concepts of "in-between" and a "web of relations" to help us understand how students can begin to understand each other and develop what Seyla Benhabib calls "enlarged thinking" (p. 39).^[2]

All we can do is to speak with others as passionately and eloquently as we can; all we can do is to look into each other's eyes and urge each other on to new beginnings. Our classrooms ought to be nurturing and thoughtful and just all at once; they ought to pulsate with multiple conceptions of what it is to be human and alive. They ought to resound with the voices of articulate young people in dialogues always incomplete because there is always more to be discovered and more to be said. We must want our students to achieve friendship as each one stirs to wideawakeness, to imaginative action, and to renewed consciousness of possibility. (p. 43)

Greene begins to search for answers with images, and she turns to images from literary art inasmuch as those are the images that have helped move her on to new awarenesses. Anyone familiar with Greene's work will recognize these literary images as favorite references by her: Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Richard Wright's *Native Son*, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, and *Beloved*, Melville's *Moby Dick*, Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*, Tillie Olsen's *Silences*, and Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, *To the Lighthouse*, and *Three Guineas*. One of her images is a "noxious cloud" (from Don DeLillo's *White Noise*, 1985), which stands for tradition, what is given. She also uses Woolf's "cotton wool" of "non-being" to symbolize the smothering and silences that results from our being submerged in the taken-for-granted. Knowledge concealed in various ways is represented by "the labyrinthine library" in Umberto Eco's *Name of the Rose* (1983). The desire not to know reality is described by Marlow with the three nameless auditors in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902, 1967). Her image of possibility is the "sunlit garden" at the end of Walker's *The Color Purple*.

In "Shapes of Childhood Recalled," Greene even shares with us verses from poems and stories that have special meanings for her personal life. Melville's *Moby Dick* reminds her of hours staring at the ocean and moments of hopelessness and melancholy, "a damp, drizzly November in my soul" (p. 76). Elizabeth Bishop's poem, "In the Waiting Room," reminds her of wanting to crawl into her mother's lap as an older child, but having her mother's lap full of baby twins. Nathalie Sarraute's *Childhood* triggers memories of performances and recitations her father required her to make on the family radiator cover, which she shares with us she loved to do and hated to do.

In some strange way, by grasping them, by making them objects of my experience, I have imposed my own order, my own context, as I have pursued my own adventures into meaning. The narratives I have encountered in my journey have made it possible for me to conceive patterns of being as my life among others has expanded: to look through others' eyes more than I would have and to imagine being something more than I have come to be. (p. 86)

Part Two: Imaginations and Epiphanies is a collection of essays that are meant to help us see how the arts further our understanding of others and open us to "untapped possibilities." When we consider the curriculum, which Greene defines as "an undertaking involving continuous interpretation and a conscious search for meaning" (p. 96), we find the arts' role in the curriculum is to help us gain multiple perspectives. Art helps us name what we see around us, for it helps us become conscious of the margins and the silences, and "to find our own lived worlds lacking because of them" (p. 111). "To conceive the arts in relation to curriculum is to think of a deepening, and expanding mode of tuning-in" (p. 104). However, it is not enough just to have different art forms present in our curriculum; there must be "conscious participation," and "thoughtfulness" is needed. Students need to be taught art, not as pedestal art (Dewey), but as art that is experienced and is in our lives. They also need to learn to be critics of art, as criticism helps us elucidate our thoughts. "It is my conviction that informed engagements with the several arts is the most likely mode of releasing our students (or any person's) imaginative capacity and giving it play" (p. 125).

Greene shows us how imagination helps us create new orders as it helps us bring parts together that seem to be severed, as it helps us see patterns where there appeared to be none. She says that we need "to give imagination its proper importance and grasp what it means to place imagination at the core of understanding" (p. 140). This is exactly what her book does for the reader. She cajoles us to "be fully present" and refuse to "play things as they are" (her "blue guitar" metaphor). She calls on us to cut ourselves "free from anchorage through choice and action" (p. 142). How do we do this? The arts will help us. The arts subvert our thoughtlessness and complacencies. The arts make images visible and accessible. They open doors

Thayer-Bacon: *Releasing the Imagination: Essays on Education, the Arts, and Soc* and move us to transform ourselves. They help us develop a sense of agency. They give us a way to expand and deepen our curriculum, thus opening spaces for students to express themselves and enhance their experiences.

Greene ends in Part Three: *Community in the Making* by addressing Americans' fear of plurality and multiplicity. We are a land of diversity; this is a given. However, we seem to be alarmed and uneasy by this. We fear that if we make room for the arts in our curriculum we will lose excellence. We worry that if we create spaces for differences to be expressed what we will have is noise and chaos. Greene encourages us not to be afraid of the passions of plurality, "the realm of face-to-face relationships," of experiencing authentic personal encounters. Opening ourselves to "existential possibilities of multiple kinds" is "to extend and deepen what each of us thinks of when he or she speaks of a community" (p. 161). Democratic communities are a struggle to attain the life of "free and enriching communion" (Dewey, 1927, 1954, p. 189). They are not communities that lead to conformity; they must be attentive to difference. They are "always a community in the making," and they can only be kept alive, "energized and radiated by an awareness of future possibilities" (p. 166).

How does teaching fit into this vision of a democratic community always in the making? Teachers cannot obliterate the diverse voices. However, through "reflective and impassioned teaching" we can excite the young to reach, to open, to seek, to create, to look wider (p. 172). Teachers can encourage "live communication" and "the reflective taking of initiatives," which is how Greene defines action (p. 177). We can help students develop these qualities: "tentativeness, regard for evidence; critical and creative thinking; openness to dialogue; and a sense of agency, social commitment, and concern" (p. 179). In the end, we find that, like Bateson, Greene still believes:

that the ground of a critical community can be opened in our teaching and in our schools. It is out of such thinking that public spaces may be regained. (pp. 177-78).

Bateson and Greene use their experiences to help us understand the role that imagination plays in our understandings of our experiences and of each other. Both of them are inspiring models for teachers and scholars of many fields, for they live full and interesting lives, and they share their experiences with us through their writings. The reader will put down both of these books feeling like she knows the authors better, both professionally and personally. They show us how to have respect for others and be open to learning from others. They explain how attending to others so that we can learn from them involves an openness, and what I call "an act of care."

Both Bateson and Greene have a vibrant, youthful quality about them because they are willing to adapt and change, and they continually challenge themselves to be more flexible. They are always seeking to broaden their visions. How they do this are the lessons that they have to teach us. Bateson uses exposures to other cultures to help her develop her peripheral vision, through her field work, her travels, and her seeking to get to know others who are traveling in her country. Greene uses the arts, especially literature, to expose herself to new possibilities and further her imagination. These two dynamic, vibrant women have taught me to trust in the value of all I experience and consider all of my life full of valuable resources for my inquiry. They have taught me to embrace difference and disharmony, as it will continue to provoke me to new questions and growth. They remind me to play and allow myself to be distracted, for in those moments I open up new possibilities and afford myself chances of seeing things in new ways and finding patterns that before had gone unnoticed. They reaffirm for me a hope we share in common, that schools can help to make our world a better place.

Of course, there are many who do not share such hope in our schools. There are many who have found schools to be smothering, damaging, constricting places. There are many who find that there is no space for their voices to be heard in our public schools. When we think of public schools, many of us do not think of them as environments that encourage creativity and imagination. Schools are known to be conservative, fearful places where people debate what should be included and excluded from the curriculum, and Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* and J. D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* are still up for debate.

There are many who will read Bateson's book and find the experiences she describes quite ordinary. They will struggle with what is unique and original about what she is describing. And there are many who will read Greene and not find her literary references broad and inclusive, but rather too academic or mainstream for their tastes. They will notice what Greene is not reading or exposing herself to. Many will consider Greene's positive description of the arts too optimistic and naive. They will be reminded of art that does not open spaces, but rather is loathsome, disgusting, and insulting to our creative minds. Certainly such forms of art exist, and Greene weakens her argument for the value of the arts because she assumes art is only good.

However, Bateson and Greene offer solutions to these problems, often in the manner of challenges. Both authors are acutely aware of oppression, pain, and suffering. Their hope for schools does not come out of a lack of awareness but out of

their openness to new experiences and their willingness to challenge and critique their experiences. Both have been teachers for many years and have strived to continue to adapt and change and learn what their students have to teach them. No one is offering truth here. No one is offering answers. What the reader will find in both of these books are challenges to take risks. Allow yourself to get involved and be distracted. Trust that, if you use your imagination to help you be receptive and attempt to understand with care, you will develop greater insight.

I highly recommend both of these books, and encourage you to decide for yourself: Is imagination important for inquiry? If so, is there anything teachers and schools should do to help encourage and further develop students' imaginative abilities? Do schools offer us hope for learning how to attend to the unfamiliar in each of us, so that the unfamiliar becomes a resource rather than a threat, and recognition is possible?

Beyond either relativism or the search for absolutes, learning can be practiced as a form of spirituality through a lifetime. (Bateson, p. 234)

References

1. Mary Catherine Bateson, *With a Daughter's Eye: A Memoir of Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson* (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1984).
2. Seyla Benhabib, *Situating the Self* (New York: Routledge, 1992).