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Dividing by Too: Extremophilia and Environmental Education

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Abstract

Words do not stand alone. As humans we make meaning of language and have the choice to wield it as a tool of inclusivity and justice, or as a tool of division and subjugation. To that end, language should be used with thought and intention. This paper examines the word “too” and its place in interpersonal and intrapersonal power struggles. “Too” has an inherently anthropocentric bias and serves to separate us from each other and from the natural world. Environmental education also suffers from “too,” but there exists the potential for the field to be bolstered by it instead. If environmental education can embrace the “too” nature of its students and learn from the earth’s unconditional acceptance, we as educators may teach the whole person in an authentic and engaged way.

Keywords: environmental education, language, too, landscape, emotion, division

I feel deep gratitude to have written and shared this story in the region of the United States where my parents come from: Cascadia. My mother hails from southern Oregon and my father from western Idaho. My family’s roots run deep in this pocket of the country, but not nearly as deep as those of the Shasta, Modoc, Klamath, Paiute, Chinook, Wasco, Umatilla, Nez Perce, Shoshone, Cayuse and Bannock tribes. Similarly, I thank and honor the people who called both ends of the Skagit Valley home for thousands and thousands of years: the Coast Salish and Upper Skagit peoples. The Nooksack, Lummi, Samish, Swinomish, Sauk, and Suiattle, among others. I am a member of a colonizing people, but I offer my voice in allyship and recognition of the deep and rich Indigenous history of western Washington.

The question of my road to environmental education is a heavy one, fraught with failures, successes, and my characteristic over-thinking. When I began to approach this topic, I felt only apprehension. As the daughter of two unfailingly well-spoken parents I grew up with a tremendous respect for the power of language. I loved to write – even the simple physical act of it – and thought that the ability to put the right words to one’s feelings was one of the pinnacles of human accomplishment. It seems appropriate, then, that my understanding of the strength, the potential, and the pitfalls faced by environmental education boils down to just that: language.



As educators we find ourselves searching for the right words to convey a concept or those that will engage even the most resistant of students. In our relationships we grasp for the words that will communicate our deepest fears and our greatest hopes. Words give voice to our passions, our love, and the causes for which we fight.

But words do not stand alone. Words, like any tool, can become a weapon if wielded with anger. A word that seems harmless may become a means of separation, division, and alienation when mishandled. In my path to, and through, environmental education, one such word emerges. It is a deceptive word: three letters long and utterly commonplace. Yet is one shot through with unspoken judgment and hierarchy. And it does not stand alone.

Too

I want to pick on this word today. I want to hold it accountable.

The word “too” comes to us early in life. Whether at home or at school, our social interactions begin to send us messages about where we fit within our communities. We become aware, while still young, about the ways in which we are different from our peers – shorter, rounder, louder, less popular. As children we may let it stop there. Or we may not. As long as I can remember, I have carried the word “too.” My stomach was too big. My skin was too oily. I was too bad at sports. As I grew up, I gathered new toos like picking up rocks on the beach. Too slow. Too weird. Too uncool.

As I entered high school, “too” began to take on new dimensions. No longer did I simply use “too” punitively, as a way to berate myself for all the ways in which I did not measure up, but I developed a compulsive need to occupy a different “too.” I needed to be “too” weird and “too” loud because that was a space of protection. To be “too” weird is to be left alone. To be “too” loud is to drown out the rest of the world. To be this kind of “too” also meant escaping what I saw to be the biggest and worst possible trap: being ordinary. It is a uniquely strange experience to both punish yourself with a word *and* obsessively seek it.

I emerged from college in 2008 having survived sexual assault. At that point I could barely carry all the toos I’d collected. No longer limited to the toos of childhood, I now had a new suitcase full of them. People were too untrustworthy. I was too broken. I had been too trusting. Too blind. Too *something* that made this person think he could do to me what he did. Time passed and the toos became a suit of armor – a way to talk myself out of anything and insulate myself from the world that had simply become too scary. I moved to Portland, Oregon and those toos followed me. Too unmotivated. Too broke. Too socially awkward. That winter I followed a momentary whim and signed up for a weekend-long cross country skiing course which baffles me to this day, having never before put skis on my feet.

While the weekend didn’t do much for me as a budding skier, it introduced to me to Greg, a mild-mannered man who suggested I join the Mazamas – a local

mountaineering club. Still being stuck in this weighty space of “too,” I could barely imagine myself on a mountain. Too cold, too windy, too dangerous. Too risky to let anyone else have a hand in my fate. Yet, I found myself saying yes, and that following spring found me throwing myself down hillsides to practice the art of the self-arrest. In May I set off for my first glaciated peak, Mt. St. Helens. As it is not a particularly challenging or technical ascent, I had several hours to just think. I spent much of the climb up wondering what on earth I’d agreed to. I wondered about the time and money I’d invested in a hobby whose true climax I’d never actually experienced. I wondered: what **would** that summit hold for me?

As it turns out, it held the rest of my life.

There are moments that are indelibly imprinted on our brains. Transformative, pivotal moments that change us to our core. That summit on that beautiful day in May of 2009 was one of those. I remember actually dropping to my knees and sobbing. For what, I’m not sure. The sight from 8,500’ is one to behold. Below me, a 3,000 foot vertical drop to a yawning crater. In the distance, Mt. Adams, Mt. Hood, Mt. Rainier. But that summit meant something much larger for me. It introduced me to a life I’d never imagined – the life that starts above tree-line. It was the life in those mountains that led me to environmental education.

That summit was the first of many. For the next two years I sought out the cold, snow, and risk of summits throughout Oregon, Washington, California, and even Mexico. During this time I found some measure of relief from my distrust, for distrust has no place on a mountain. Your climbing partners remind you to keep yourself warm and they are the ones on the other end of your rope. In the mountains, the mere act of survival becomes a group effort. If I do not trust you, I cannot climb with you.

These years saw the birth of my identity as an extremophile. My love of the intense hardly came as a surprise to me. I boarded my first airplane, to move to a foreign country, at the tender age of 12 days. I spent my childhood in the vast desert of the Middle East and am the daughter of a man who completed his Ph.D. in only three years. At Princeton. I have been steeped in intensity my entire life, and mountaineering was the outlet I never knew I needed.

From that point, all my free time was spent in search of challenge. I sought out the places that demanded my determination, my technical knowledge, and formidable stamina. Aside from the feeling of accomplishment I gained from my successes in each landscape, I also experienced profound learning. In such environments, there is no curriculum. No structure. There is no “too” in such settings. There is only wind and snow and cold and depth and heat and dust and vertical relief. By immersing myself in these environments I began to understand my body’s resilience and the capacity for humans to not only exist, but thrive, under duress. With this I started to experience a sort of liberation from the limitations of “too.” I came to see “too” as a challenge instead of a reason not to try.

In 2011, my extremophilia took me in an unexpected direction. It led me to the field of wilderness therapy. To be a wilderness therapy guide means to live and work in the backcountry with a group of students 24 hours a day for 8 to 16 days at a time. Students enter into such programs for a minimum of two months during which time they will never enter a building or see anyone other than their fellow students, their guides, or other program staff. The students who are referred to wilderness therapy range from 14 to 28 years old and suffer from a host of conditions ranging from addiction to schizophrenia to eating disorders. It is not light work. It is not easy work.

My job included physically restraining students from jumping off cliffs, receiving death threats, enduring emotional breakdowns, evacuating students who refused to eat, and trying to keep a group of low-functioning students alive in temperatures that not infrequently dipped below zero degrees.

This was a new extreme. This was an extreme *emotional* landscape the likes of which I had never experienced. The physical challenges were few: we were lucky if we traveled five miles a day and those hikes were always punctuated by tears, fits of anger, and the occasional student who refused to take another step. These intense, unrestrained, raw emotions were unlike any I'd experienced besides my own. Holding their emotions, and my own, became its own horizon to navigate. The stunning peaks of a simple game of tag. The crashing waves of a young man spewing vitriol at those who tried to help him. The deep, dark waters of untreated depression. River dams breaking as groups of students wept together: for themselves, for each other, sometimes for nothing at all. This was unfamiliar territory and presented all the mystery and adrenaline I could have wanted. I was hooked.

Each of these students came to me mired in "too." They were deemed too broken, too hostile, too depressed, too dysfunctional, too difficult to handle. They and their families had fallen victim to the sinister nature of "too."

Some of you might be wondering about that choice of word: sinister. Some might argue that "too" is even pragmatic, as we frequently use it to describe a hot stove to children or the weather outside. But I would argue that even within such usage, there exists an invisible prejudice.

The first of the dictionary's listed definitions of "too" is "to a higher degree than is desirable or permissible."

Well, desirable to whom?

Permissible by whom?

By asking these questions we begin to uncover the inherent prejudice of 'too.' Encapsulated within the word is a sense of entitlement and even selfishness. Is the

desert too hot? Not for the sage grouse or the gnarled juniper. Is the rainforest too wet? Not for a dizzying array of flowers and medicinal plants. Is the water too hot? Not for the tubeworms that surround hydrothermal vents on the ocean floor where the temperature of the water, originating from inside the earth, exceeds 360 degrees. But the wonder of these organisms doesn't end there. Unlike the vast majority of life that depends on the energy of the Sun, these tubeworms depend on chemical energy contained within the water emanating from these vents. Through their process of chemosynthesis, instead of photosynthesis, they produce the sugars necessary for their survival. At the time of discovery, this process of chemosynthesis was a revelation. A new form of life found in one of the most inhospitable environments on earth.

These organisms can help us illuminate a different side of "too:" the side of deep potential and unfolding. Like the tubeworms, our own extremes hold treasures that are constantly evolving, but it is an evolution with no timeline and no end point. In fact, I see these tubeworms as a mascot. Perhaps a spirit animal for those of us still blind to the value and the magic hidden in our own extremes. If we consider the sage grouse or the juniper or these tubeworms on the ocean floor, we begin to see that our understanding of "too" is purely human.

Each of our uses of "too" employs human-centered judgment. The water is too hot **for us**. It is too cold outside **for us**. Not only does this word situate humans as the standard against which all else is measured, but it works against the establishment of a sense of holism. By viewing ourselves as separate from the natural world, we lose connection and a sense of oneness with the planet that births, sustains, and ultimately receives us. "Too" is a rejection of unity and a wall that we build both to keep ourselves in and to keep the world out.

There is another aspect to this version of too, even more pernicious. You see, by casually applying this word to other people with the frequency that we do, we enter into a systemic power struggle. We either seek to take power away from others, or we relinquish our own. We may judge someone as "too sensitive," "too conservative," "too unattractive," or "too narrow-minded." By doing this we impose limitations on others. We fail to make space for them, their opinions, or their contributions in our lives. We fail to recognize the knowledge we may have to gain from them. We use "too" as a tool of division: to highlight our differences instead of the commonalities that might unite us.

Conversely, many of us make similar statements about ourselves. Our hips are too wide, our necks are too short, our hair is too frizzy, we make too little money, we are too afraid to take a new risk. By doing this we impose limitations on ourselves and we allow others to dictate what is permissible or desirable. Why would we do this? Why would we give up our voice and our autonomy in our own lives?

In this way, "too" seems to be the most neglected political issue today. It is an issue of environmentalism and all the issues that are interwoven within it: feminism, racism, classism, activism, and so much more. It is critical to acknowledge this deep

interconnectivity that exists among all social justice issues ranging from food and water to climate change and education. Wangari Maathai, the first African woman to ever win a Nobel Peace Prize, speaks to this. She writes that “in a few decades, the relationship between the environment, resources, and conflict may seem almost as obvious as the connection we see today between human rights, democracy, and peace” (Nobel Women’s Initiative).

Maathai’s is not the only voice calling for recognition of the interconnectivity of all life. Vandana Shiva, Indian author, activist, and feminist, speaks at length in her work about the relationships that exist between all issues of justice, equality, and access. During an interview on *Democracy Now* with Amy Goodman, she comments on the interconnection of such topics as seed monopolies, global warming, poverty, hunger, and soil degradation. She states that the awareness and naming of this interconnectivity is a crucial step towards the cessation of resource wars, war on the environment, and war on women’s bodies. Only then, she argues, might we see lasting global peace (Capitalist Patriarchy, 2013).

In October of last year, Cameron Schaeffer, a freshman at the University of Vermont penned an op-ed for the Huffington Post describing the ravages of the word “too” on women.

She referred to the “unobtainable one millimeter-wide mark of perfection” (Schaefer, 2015) that women are expected to obsessively seek. The responses were predictable. “Feminism has gone too far!” “She’s too sensitive!” However, I find real weight in her argument. As nearly every woman falls on one side or the other of this millimeter-wide mark, most spend their lives lamenting their toos. Too lumpy. Too skinny. Too freckled.

This use of “too” enforces an idea that a woman’s value comes from her appearance. Though hardly a new idea, it is one that has become especially damaging. Women frequently see themselves in competition with other women instead of recognizing a bond of sisterhood. But the struggle for perfection does not begin or end with appearance. “Too” is used to police women’s behavior, attitudes, beliefs, and preferences. Women are encouraged to not be “too bossy” within the workplace, lest they intimidate their coworkers. Interesting that “too bossy,” reframed, simply means a strong leader. The scientific field offers us many examples of such shortsighted visions and narrowly-defined parameters of women and their abilities. Following the publication of her seminal work *Silent Spring*, Rachel Carson was decried as too radical, too unpatriotic, and a Communist.

Feminism, at its core, encourages collectivity among women. It is a framework of inclusivity, justice, equality, and empowerment. It is a space that reminds us that we are exactly enough: no more, no less. In short, it is no space for “too.”

Immigration is another topic beset on all sides by “too.” Open any newspaper and you will find headlines asking, “How many refugees is too many?” and “Are our regulations too lax?” Presidential debates showcase candidates accusing each other of

being too soft on the issue, or calling immigrants “too dangerous to the American way of life.” Once again, “too” is used as a divisive tool, intended to shame, exclude, and limit. By wielding “too,” we impose limits on ourselves as a nation. We limit our own receptivity, warmth, openness, and spirit of generosity. We let “too” enable us to sell ourselves short.

Sir Paul Collier, the former head of Development Research at the World Bank, told Al-Jazeera in August of 2015 that “too much diversity,” resulting from frequent migration internationally, results in an “erosion of cooperation” (Immigration, 2015). “Too much diversity” seems a uniquely human concept. In the non-human world, biodiversity is a cornerstone of life on Earth.

It is the phenomenon responsible for the myriad food, shelter, medicines, and fuels available to humans. It enables scientific progress by providing new opportunities for innovation, research, and adaptation. So, too, does human diversity provide us with rich opportunities for cooperation, empathy, and the exchange of ideas. Would we impose the idea of “too much diversity” on the non-human world? I doubt it.

“Too” even plagues the world of activism. On March 3rd, 2016, Berta Caceres, an Indigenous Honduran woman and co-founder of the Council of Indigenous Peoples of Honduras, was murdered in her home. Her activism included the battle against the construction of Agua Zarca Dam, a project which would have cut off Indigenous populations in the community of Rio Blanco from water, medicine, and food supplies (Peralta, 2016). Caceres was deemed too effective in her work. Too much of a threat to development and to so-called economic progress. And these “toos” cost Caceres her life.

To be both an educator and an activist is a difficult line to toe. All my life I’ve been labeled as opinionated and quick to argue. Initially, I denied this. I claimed that I, too, could go with the flow. As I grew up, though, I began to not only accept these labels but wholeheartedly embrace it. I felt, and still feel, proud to not count myself among the apathetic. I came into the field of environmental education feeling so sure that I would finally find myself surrounded by like-minded individuals: riled-up, indignant pot-stirrers who would join me in calling for change and instilling that ethic in our students. I was shocked to find a very different world. In some of my early positions I was called “too radical” and “too alternative” by my employers.

Supervisors suggested that I not bring up veganism or alternative relationship models or social justice issues or anti-consumerism or composting. I brought up white privilege with a group of students one week and received an official reprimand. In a field that I so deeply understand to be one of empowerment and connection, I felt trapped and alienated. Those toos imposed upon me by my employers not only limited my ability to develop authentic relationships with my students, but robbed the students themselves of a fundamental experience: that of communicating, living, and cooperating with people with wildly different worldviews.

These stories represent the myriad threats that “too” poses to environmental education. But they do not end there. Countless environmental education programs, beholden to federal funding for their continued operation, often fall back on “too.” “Global warming” is too controversial a topic, presenting a realistic picture of human degradation of the natural world is too gloomy a subject for young children. David Sobel, one of the developers of place-based education and a prolific education writer, even offers the maxim of “no tragedies before fourth grade” (Sobel, 2008, p. 141). It is my belief that such guidelines situate “too” as a pernicious limitation. By assuming that children are too sensitive for honest information, we take away an opportunity to teach them authentically, honestly, and realistically. This might paint a bleak picture of environmental education, but I believe “too” can also represent an opportunity.

I want to return for a moment to wilderness therapy. In retrospect, sometimes I still wonder what on earth caused me to accept that job offer. With no formal training in mental health I wondered what I could offer to these troubled kids. Day after day I fell to wrestling with language, thinking I needed to offer the perfect Zen aphorisms in the vein of Thich Naht Hanh. But over the two years I spent in that position, an amazing truth became clear: transformation occurred when I encouraged my students to bring all their toos to the table.

In wilderness therapy, these toos begin to fade away. “Too” emotional, “too” depressed, and “too” angry could not exist when students were met with unconditional acceptance. None of my students could say anything too shocking or something too awful to continue being held by their fellow students. By allowing each person to see themselves not as “too” but as just enough, profound changes ensued. The resistant softened, the hostile relaxed, the crushingly sad opened to new joy. Above all, students placed newfound trust in each other and hungered for challenge. No longer was the frigid high desert “too cold,” but a new medium through which to assert their independence and fortitude.

But, such acceptance is only the beginning. An entry point into a much larger and longer journey. Each one of us has carried our toos for our entire lives. The goal, I believe is not to smash these toos but to rebuild them as opportunities or even assets. Much like the land is shaped over time by water, wind, and the very foundational movement of the earth, our own internal landscapes change and shift. It is *this* relationship with “too,” this unconditional acceptance of struggle and variability, that the field of environmental education so sorely lacks.

Here, once again, I want to draw on the wisdom of Wangari Maathai. In *Dirt! The Movie*, a documentary that explores the relationship between humans and soil, Maathai tells the story of a hummingbird. As the forest is on fire, all the animals look on in horror. Hummingbird chooses to act and flies back and forth from the river to the fire, carrying one drop of water at a time, in an effort to subdue the flames. The other animals berate the hummingbird, telling it that its wings are too small and it is too little to make any difference. Hummingbird responds by saying “I am doing the best that I can” (I will be a hummingbird, 2011). I love this story. Not only for the hummingbird’s

refusal to fall victim to “too,” but the reminder that all of us are doing the best we can, and that these actions, no matter how small, matter. Although I only recently stumbled upon this documentary, this lesson is one that has shaped my teaching philosophy.

Although I came into the field of environmental education with large-scale ambitions, I have come to know this: that my greatest accomplishments are the small ones and the most personal.

The high desert of southeastern Utah. It is the best office I’ve ever had, it is the landscape I most dearly love, and it is a landscape rife with “toos.” Edward Abbey, despite his poorly drawn female characters, has always captivated me with his depictions of the American southwest. Long maligned as too hot, too dusty, too barren, and too lonesome, the desert was the landscape of Abbey’s dreams. In his book *Desert Solitaire*, he writes:

Water, water, water... There is no shortage of water in the desert, but exactly the right amount. A perfect ratio of water to rock, rock to sand, ensuring that wide, free, open, generous spacing among plants and animals, homes and towns and cities, which makes the arid West so different from any other part of the nation. There is no lack of water here unless you establish a city where no city should be (Abbey, 1968, p. 126).

Abbey speaks in this passage, and in much of his writing, to the desert’s fine balance of challenge and acceptance. The desert challenges us to our core, demanding that we sweat and thirst and climb. But it also accepts us just as we are. There is no “too” in the canyon’s walls.

Terry Tempest Williams, a southern Utah native and one of the most loving proponents of the southwest, wrote that, “There is a resonance of humility that has evolved with the earth. It is best retrieved in solitude amidst the stillness of days in the desert” (2001, p. 17). Perhaps that is the desert’s secret. Perhaps the desert does for me what I try to do for each of my students: offer unconditional acceptance. The desert allows us to move beyond the egocentricity of “too” by imagining something greater than ourselves. It reminds us, sometimes harshly, that no part of us is *too* much to be held.

It is in this humility and acceptance that my greatest hope for environmental education lies. There is magic that occurs when we embrace the totality of each student and, like the desert, offer unconditional acceptance for who and how they are at that precise moment. I refuse to accept that environmental education stops at science, leadership, or sustainability. To me, it has the potential to touch us, our students, and each other, to the very core.

I want to return again to the definition of “too.” In addition to meaning “to a higher degree than is desirable or permissible,” too means “in addition; also.”

Let's think about that for a second.

What would it look like to reframe all our own toos? Or to tear down the walls of our toos and rebuild them as pathways? Many people, both my peers and my students, will tell you that I walk too fast. But maybe I simply have constant opportunities for cultivating intentional slowness. Maybe it's not that I'm too emotional, but that my mind and body have simply fully opened to the pure experience of feeling, without reserve.

So I want to leave you with this challenge: to gently and lovingly explore *your* toos. Look for what magic might be unfolding within them, and what strength may be obscured within their depths. Take a page from the desert and unconditionally accept yourself, just as you are, right in this moment.

My name is Petra. I, too, am emotional. I, too, am protective. I, too, am opinionated. And I don't need to change the world. I just need to make some small difference in those lives that I touch. And that isn't too little. It's just enough.

A handwritten signature consisting of the letters 'S2SS' in a cursive, flowing style. The signature is enclosed within a light blue, semi-transparent diamond-shaped border.

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