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ADULT LEARNING ON THE EDGE OF A PRECIPICE: AN ECOLOGY OF LIVING AND LEARNING

ABSTRACT: This article considers adult learning from a ‘long-life’ perspective. Stepping out of contemporary frames that position adult learning as ‘life-long’ or even ‘life-wide’ enables a discussion of adult learning as an evolutionary informed, ecologically meaningful activity. In taking this approach, the paper shows how adult learning has evolved and been maintained by trouble, indeed how the human condition is under continual existential threat. The paper will draw on writings that discuss the evolutionary origins of adult learning, particularly the paradox that humans are both part of, and separate from, the ‘more-than-human’ world (Abram, 1997). The focus of this paper will be on the experience, conscious or unconscious, of living under the continual threat of annihilation and how this may have provided the motive for adult learning behaviours in both our hominid ancestors and contemporary society.

The paper begins with a discussion to highlight the nature of human life as one that is always under threat by drawing on religious symbolism, poetry and (in the UK at least) an ever-expanding genre of ‘nature writing’. Having explored what it may feel like to live a life where survival is uncertain, the paper then draws on ecological and evolutionary principles to provide a theoretical ‘long-life’ understanding of adult learning. It is admitted at the outset that the route set out here may appear contradictory, even confusing, but the author asks the reader to first enter into an uncomfortable and troubling world, before the author, finally – despite what might sound like a bleak prospect for humanity – provides resources of hope grounded in the paradoxical potential provided by adult learning.

KEYWORDS: Long-life learning, evolution, ecology, ecologogy, nature writing, the more-than-human.

Introduction

In this article I shall consider contemporary adult learning from a ‘long-life’ perspective, typically situated within capitalist societies dominated by industrial processes and the commodification of social structures. This approach will position adult learning as an ecologically meaningful adaptation that has evolved and been maintained in response to an ever-present experience of existential threat. I will draw on previous writings (Bainbridge, 2019, 2020; Bainbridge & Del Negro, 2020) to discuss the paradox that humans are both part of and separate from the ‘more-than-human’ world (Abram, 1997). The focus of my thinking in this paper will be on the experience, conscious or unconscious, of living under the continual threat of annihilation and how this may have provided the motive for adult learning behaviours in both our hominid ancestors and contemporary society.

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To do this, a hypothetical net is cast far and wide, across space and time, to imagine how early human ancestors engaged in informal and formal education. I shall begin this imaginative journey with a discussion drawing on poetry and (in the UK at least) an ever-expanding genre of ‘nature writing’ to consider the human experience as one that is always under threat. Having hypothetically explored what it may feel like to live a life where survival is uncertain, I move towards ecological and evolutionary principles to provide a theoretical ‘long-life’ understanding of adult learning that acknowledges education as inherently damaging to human flourishing. I admit at the outset that the route I have set out may appear contradictory, even confusing, but ask the reader to first enter an uncomfortable and troubling world. Then, finally, despite what might appear like a bleak prospect for humanity, I provide resources of hope, grounded in the paradoxical destructive and transformative potential offered by adult learning.

The Precipice

In a sermon to undergraduates on the outset of the Second World War, British academic and theologian C.S. Lewis (1949) asked his congregation to consider the importance of continuing their studies at a moment in history when spending time studying to be philosophers, scientists or critics seemed frivolous. It is striking that at the very outset of his sermon, Lewis chastises those who refuse to think, even to speak about the possibility of a Christian hell. He argued that it would be “Tomfoolery” (foolish) for Christians to think only of heaven and avoid the unpleasant possibilities of hellish damnation. For Lewis, the crisis created by the onset of war only served to highlight another permanent feature of the human condition that too often ignored how:

Human life has always been lived on the edge of a precipice. Human culture has always had to exist under something more important than itself (1949: 38).

Lewis alludes to two central principles that will frame this article; the first is that human life has always been troubled, tottering on the edge of a metaphorical precipice with the risk of falling to our death, or even into hell. The second principle is to acknowledge that humans may not have mastery over the world, that there is ‘something more important’ to consider than human frames of reference. In *Becoming Animal* (2011), David Abram is equally clear about the perilous nature of being human, noting:

We are too frightened of shadows. We cannot abide our vulnerability, our utter dependence upon a world that can eat us. Vast in its analytic and inventive power, modern humanity is crippled by a fear of its own animality, and of the animate earth that sustains us (2011: 69).

Abram’s quote articulates Lewis’s observation that it is “Tomfoolery” to ignore the possibility of hell, by revealing the fearful prospect of human vulnerability in the

presence of a vast unknown other on which we depend, and yet also threatened. Equally, seminal English nature writer Richard Mabey (Barkham, 2021) draws on the Covid-19 pandemic to remind us that:

Bacteria and viruses and man-eating tigers and predatory Asian hornets are also all part of nature. At times we need to defend ourselves from ‘nature’ ...

Mabey is aware of the fine balance, the tightrope that must be negotiated by the human condition, acknowledging that “...we need the whole thing kicking together if the biosphere, including us, is to survive” (Barkham, 2021).

Much of what is written here must be speculation, particularly in relation to how our ancestors experienced their world and what may have motivated their actions, but even in this brief review the troubled nature of being human and learning to live in a dangerous world can only be hypothesised to span, at least, the course of written human history. Ancient religious texts (Bainbridge, 2020), C.S. Lewis’s (1949) sermon, poetry, through to modern nature writers such as Abram and Mabey, acknowledge and appeal for a heightened awareness of the permanent nature of human fragility.

I shall move on to use poetry to explore the human experience of living on the precipice. In *The World is a Beautiful Place* the American poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti (1958) exposes this often-avoided dark side of being human in a world where the other might be more important and potentially destructive:

The world is a beautiful place
to be born into
if you don't mind happiness
not always being
so very much fun
if you don't mind a touch of hell
now and then
just when everything is fine
because even in heaven
they don't sing
all the time (1958: 88).

Ferlinghetti (1958) evocatively captures the paradoxical duality of happiness/sadness, of safety/danger where “even in heaven they don't sing all the time.” The questions that must be asked in the context of this paper are: why there is a tendency to ignore the possibility of a human life experienced and lived on the precipice; why is it, even in a church context, easy to avoid references to hell; and why is it difficult to acknowledge that humans are not in control of the world they inhabit?

To begin to answer these questions and move towards a long-life understanding of adult learning, I shall take a side-step away from the human and attempt to consider the more-than-human experience. As with our hominid ancestors, what follows can

only be conjecture as this is not the territory of empirical truth; but as best I can, from an admittedly anthropomorphic stance, I attempt to present an experience of the world through animal senses. Ted Hughes's poem, *Hawk Roosting* (1970) steps into the experiential world of a hawk:

The sun is behind me.
Nothing has changed since I began.
My eye has permitted no change.
I am going to keep things like this.

As the hawk sits high up watching the world below, the hawk does not wish to change and would like “to keep things as they are”. The poem suggests contentment for a hawk-world that has never changed and there is no desire for change. The hawk does not seek to alter its world, there is a harmony between it and the ‘something more important’ or the ‘animate world that sustains.’ Unlike the hawk, the human experience is one of discontent and of precipices, hell and death by bacteria and stinging insects. According to John A. Baker's evocative phrase, the animate other's experience of humans is one where: “We stink of death. We carry it with us. It sticks to us like frost. We cannot tear it away” (2015: 113).

Baker, observing peregrine falcons over many years comes to this conclusion as he approaches a badly injured heron. Despite being unable to move and near death, the heron responds in terror and tries to escape. Baker concludes that the animal kingdom is fully cognizant and alert to how humans have upset ecological harmony along with the subsequent threat to themselves and the more-than-human world. It is the potential for humans to interfere with ecological harmony that will later lead to a long-life understanding of adult learning.

The jarring awkwardness of human interfering with the more-than-human is brought into focus by Henry Sharp (1988) describing the incursion of Canadian white colonial settlers who came to exploit and regulate all animate being. Of humans, Sharp notices that:

It talks too loudly, its posturing is wrong, its movement harsh, and graceless ... Its presence brings a stunning confusion heard deafeningly in a growing circle of silence created by a confused and disoriented animate universe (1988: 144).

The blundering ‘modern’ human seeks to control yet only succeeds in confusing and disorientating the world they enter. Unlike the hawk, content with what it sees and to “keep things like this” and the heron who perceives the human ‘stink of death’. The human experience can be argued to be not only of discontent but also a refusal to acknowledge or accept the damaging impact of their actions on the more-than-human

other. Erich Fromm (1949) also noted this discontent and desire to manipulate the external world, claiming that:

Man's life cannot 'be lived' by repeating the pattern of his species; he must live. Man is the only animal that can be *bored*, that can be discontented, that can feel evicted from paradise. Man is the only animal for whom his own existence is a problem which he has to solve and from which he cannot escape. He cannot go back to the prehuman state of harmony with nature; he must proceed to develop his reason until he becomes the master of nature, and of himself (1949: 40).

Unable to find the contentment of the hawk, or the heron's awareness of the human stink of death, Fromm perceives the uncertain human condition as one trapped in an endless cycle of problem-solving and tampering with the world from which there is no escape. If we are to return to where this section began, I offer the possible conjecture that the human fear of living on the precipice is self-perpetuating, and that the bored human is responsible for the unthinkable – for digging their own grave. When perhaps The Sex Pistols (Matlock et al., 1977) sang:

We're the poison
In your human machine
We're the future
Your future

only to end the song by repeating:

No future
No future
No future for you

No future
No future
No future for me

No future
No future
No future for you

– can the nihilism of punk music be argued to identify with an ancient, ever present, yet often avoided encounter with the possibility of hell and existential vertiginous precipices? It is from this position where the move back towards a consideration of adult learning now begins. A move that will explore Fromm's claim that "Man is born as a freak of nature, being within nature and yet transcending it" (1968: 61). Furthermore, an attempt will be made to explain what appears to be a self-willed destructive desire to control and change the external world.

A Long-Life perspective of adult learning

This section explores the long-life genealogy of adult learning by drawing on C.S. Lewis's observation that "Human life has always been lived on the edge of a precipice" (1949: 38). Literature and contemporary nature writing has already been drawn on to explore the metaphor of the precipice, hypothetically presented here as the result of discontented or bored humans, attempting to control an external natural world that is perceived as more important than the human self. A paradox will be shown to emerge through which the well-intentioned actions of humans to avoid the precipice – of being consumed by nature – only serves to increase the likelihood of humans damaging the natural world and in turn hastening their demise. Despite the bleak outlook it will be shown later that there is hope, both for humans and the more-than-human. To understand where these resources of hope sit, it is first necessary to cast an imaginary net deep into the human ancestral past, to catch a glimpse of the possible educational processes our ancestors engaged with and consider how this influenced contemporary adult learning. I shall draw on what I have previously (Bainbridge, 2019) rather awkwardly defined as an *ecology* of human learning, providing a synthesis of ecological and pedagogical principles that will be discussed in more detail later. The focus here though will be on attempting to understand the lived experience and educational response to environmentally induced existential threat.

Before continuing, it is important to position the world view I draw on, particularly emphasising the Western/Industrial/Global North, or even English perspective this article takes. I acknowledge my limited world view but also consider that in taking another position, I would potentially be guilty of clumsy and careless misuse of cultures and epochs I have little or no experience of. The thesis presented represents a long-life understanding of education processes, suggesting that the recent influence of neoliberalism as a reified object is a result of ecological processes, leading to a particularly damaging commodified type of formal education that has contemporary global significance. Consequently, human actions and processes are embedded with, and cannot escape, the ecological systems they are part of. I am aware that my premise sounds bleak this early in a paper, but hope is offered later. It will be noted that within ecological time frames, all education systems and their supporting pedagogical stances will lead to increasingly damaging human attempts to manage and control the planet. To explain the paradox that education provides hope, while also damaging the planet and human flourishing, I return to Fromm before discussing the ecological significance of 'open and closed worlds'.

As the human mind leaves no fossil record, what is written here is largely conjecture, but it is hoped that such an approach will provide a sufficiently novel insight to

support a re-imagining of what adult education and the impact of its outcomes might be. The point of departure provided by this approach is to consider Fromm's contention that there is something 'freakish' about the human condition that has its origins in the complex interrelation of human/nature interactions. It would seem incongruous during a global pandemic to question the very intimate relationship between all living things, as human life across the planet is currently being determined by the impact of a microscopic organism. Yet, the freakish aspect Fromm refers to is how, despite scientific and experiential evidence, humans appear to transcend the natural world. A brief return to the global pandemic offers some insight as, although humans are being infected and dying as a result of a rampant virus, we have learned to change our behaviour and develop vaccines to reduce the potentially devastating impact. Abram (1997) would argue that the transcendence Fromm refers to is not only a physical distancing but also a psychological, even spiritual distancing between the human and more-than-human. The hawk in Hughes's poem (1970) apparently experiences no such transcendence, viewing its world content to be part of a never (or at least geologically slow) changing world, unlike Sharp's (1988) blundering humans who confuse and distort the animate universe.

The answer to the question about the origins of the human discontent whose associated blunderings disrupt the more-than-human other will never be fully known, but there are reasonable theoretical grounds to draw on an ecological understanding of human learning. My thinking has been influenced by Peter L. Berger & Thomas Luckmann's (1966) social constructionist 'open and closed world' theory to provide insight into learning experiences situated within the ancient and contemporary human/more-than-human relationship. In earlier work I positioned the development of formal education settings within open-world experiences suggesting an ecologogical hypothesis of human learning. In summary, I argue that the human tendency to learn about, act on and be educated about their world is a response to the open-world experience (more details of which can be found in Bainbridge, 2019, 2020 and Bainbridge & Del Negro, 2020). I propose that the survival of our early hominid ancestors was threatened by environmental changes, leading to Berger & Luckmann's (1966) definition of an 'open-world' experience. Confronted with such menacing environmental changes threatening their survival, early humans were required to engage in world building activities that would ultimately have negative impact on themselves and their environment. To understand this paradoxical situation, it helps to consider the 'closed-world' experience first, representing, as it does, how most animals live their lives.

Animals other than humans are born into 'closed world' (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) environments in which they are content and thrive. For example, the hawk in Hughes' (1970) *Hawk Roosting* has no desire or need to change or modify their world declaring,

“My eye has permitted no change, I am going to keep things like this”. Ecological definitions would describe these animals as being adapted to their habitat. The actions of the hawk are part of a complex and self-adjusting ecological system supporting the hunting hawk, and all other plant and animal species whose survival is dependent on intimate interrelations developed over geologically long evolutionary periods of time. Importantly, despite being an apex predator, killing and feeding off other species, the actions of the hawk do no lasting harm to their habitat or wider supporting ecology. This will be seen to not be the case for life in a human manipulated open world.

Due to environmental changes, possibly linked to availability of food (Kendal, 2011; Tomasello, 2014), the habitat ancient hominid ancestors experienced could not directly support them. Individual and species survival was therefore dependent on active attempts to modify the external open world, for example by the development of agriculture (Tomasello, 2014). Insight into why humans have continued to change (and damage) their external world, unlike in the closed world of the hawk, can be found in Berger’s (1967) discussion of human world construction. Berger notes that the internal logic of human physical and psychological products conflict with the properties of the external world to disrupt human flourishing. An example will make this clear: although humans may have designed the plough to make the job of cultivation easier, Berger argues it will ultimately disrupt agricultural lifestyles and damage soil ecology as human activity now conforms to the logic and efficiency of the plough and ploughing.

Compared to most animals, where learning takes place via simple stimulus/response actions or imitation, humans are continually changing and disrupting the world they live in, thus continually requiring creative and novel learning behaviours. Early in human evolution, familial informal learning would have been sufficient to support most aspects of early human life. Over time this response was no longer sufficient to meet the ever changing and urgent demands of living in increasingly complex cultural and technological worlds. Behaviours therefore evolved (Tomasello, 2014: 33) where care, support and nurturing began to extend outside the family, ultimately leading to a process of formal education where adults, or more knowledgeable others, learnt with and from each other.

Unfortunately, the internal logic of the physical and psychological products resulting from formal education have only served to continue to alienate humans from the complex and interconnected natural world in which they once thrived. Fromm (1994) also observes this tension, noting:

... the nature of man is a contradiction rooted in the conditions of human existence that requires a search for solutions, which in their turn create new contradictions and now the need for answers (1994: 100).

C.S. Lewis (1949) also recognises the relentless human urge for learning and that despite times of crisis the search for knowledge and beauty is still pursued, even to the telling of metaphysical jokes and paying attention to beauty by combing their hair on the way to the gallows. From this context, education – particularly involving adult learning – can be imagined as an adaptive response over an ecologically long-life to modify the external world from one that threatens human survival, to one that encourages human flourishing and meaning-making. Adult learners are therefore those learners who according to Fromm (1968) seek to replace the principles of instinct with the principles of action and decision making by imposing their imagination on the external world. Adult learning might now be seen to orientate in a uni-directional imposition of the self onto the other, potentially asking only how the world can be made better for them, while ignoring the desires of a groaning and depleted planet.

Richard Mabey (Barkham, 2021) bemoans what he increasingly acknowledges as an inability for humans to recognise and learn from the non-human other, and his exposition is eloquent and emotive:

OK, you're face to face with a violet helleborine in a wood you know very well. What is going on between you and it? How are you framing its existence in relation to your own? Do you have any thoughts about what the violet helleborine may be perceiving about your presence – your scent molecules, your carbon dioxide emissions?

Like Laura Formenti and Linden West (2018), Mabey is asking a fundamental educational question: “Who am I to you, and who are you to me?”, the response to which requires dialogue with, and understanding of, the other. Macfarlane regards this dialogue as “continual traffic between the outer landscapes of the world and the inner landscapes of the spirit”. (2011: xxi) This is not intended as some Disney-esque “talking to the animals” fantasy, rather as a thoughtful consideration of the other. Highlighting what Gert J. J. Biesta (2013) would argue is the grown-up purpose of education, enabling each individual to consider their desires and the impact these may have on the desires of the other and on the world they share.

In summary then, the long-life ecological hypothesis of adult learning was initially framed within the possibility that the human condition is a life always lived on a precipice and that this precarity is to a large extent self-inflicted. Unlike the more-than-human that is content and flourishes within its external world, a distant ecological event has caused humans to attempt to build a world that better suits them. In a cruel paradoxical shift, the learned ingenuity and creativity of human actions over the ages has not led to greater contentment but instead continues to contradict and disrupt planetary functioning. As a result, the long-life outcomes of adult learning are complicit in making the world a more troubled place – and will continue to do so. The final section will

explore if the steepness of the precipice can be minimized and what the role of adult learners might be in helping to do that.

Towards a Future Worth Living

Arguments can be made that acknowledge the considerable impact young children can have on adult life: see for example, Freud's (1914/2001) description of the narcissistic child who controls family interactions as "His Majesty the Baby", while more recently, Watts' (2021) detailed observations show how very young children lead adults into engaging with the natural world. Yet, due to the personal and political agency afforded to most adults, it is within the realm of adult education that individual, local, and global transformative change is more likely to emerge (Evans, Kurantowicz & Lucio-Villegas, 2016), including the influence on social movements, education policy and practice. Central to the thesis set up in the early part of this paper is an acknowledgment of the unintentional negative effect of human activity, including education, and in this context particularly adult education, on the more-than-human world. Consequently, the probability of a metaphorical descent into hell, or falling from an existential precipice, is unlikely to be reduced by the outcomes of contemporary education, as paradoxically education has been argued here as making this descent more likely. Drawing on Fromm's (1968) observation about the freakish nature in which humans are both part of and yet transcend nature, a radical re-telling of education will be one that confronts the absurdity of the educational freak who appears to be "digging their own grave" (Bainbridge, 2020).

A significant step away from the abyss would be to acknowledge Mabey's (Barkham, 2021) plea that to be able to live with nature requires a balance between protecting ourselves from obvious dangers, such as COVID-19 and Asian-hornet stings, while also 'keeping the whole thing kicking together'. It would seem that a future worth living for is neither an Edenic fantasy of lions lying down with lambs, nor one in which the 'open-world' motivated human desire to build a protective and supportive environment is cast off in favour of the inevitability of ecological entanglement in which disease, unfavourable environmental conditions, and being devoured by apex predators are potential outcomes. In Thomas Berry's *The Great Work* (1999) a plea is made that education's role is to transform dominant modes of mainly Western post-industrial thinking from a mindset that wishes to control and exploit the more-than-human other, to one that has an appreciation that it is the planet that sustains and brings us joy. It is through taking this approach that despite the inevitability of human-induced damage to the planet and our own species, the awareness of an ever-present precipice can be tolerated, and its effects ameliorated. In *Digging our own grave* (Bainbridge,

2020) I curate the evolution of education from an ancient historical perspective in which human ancestors sought to dominate and control the ecological other, only to arrive at education's comparatively recent entrapment by capitalist and neo-liberal assumptions. I will discuss the nature of this entrapment and how to diminish its effects later, for now, I shall focus on the outcomes that if not endemic across the planet are certainly globally significant. Michael Bonnett (2021) confirms the views of many contemporary educational thinkers by identifying how neo-liberal assumptions have led to the commodification of a standardised education system that is now delivered in small consumable parcels of knowledge and skills metered out in a way that reflects what are anticipated future requirements (2021: 151).

These are not new ideas, but they are ones currently 'metered' out creating an increasingly suffocating global educational monoculture.

A brief return to C.S. Lewis' (1949) sermon will clarify how his message to undergraduates at the outset of war can guide our thinking towards the role of adult education in preparing for a future worth living. At a time of crisis, Lewis' message to his undergraduate congregation is to value their roles and to study the past and not live in a future that is largely unknown. In a telling and emotive phrasing, Lewis notes how scholars have

... lived through many times ... and [are] therefore in some degree immune from the cataract of the nonsense that pours from the press and the microphone of the age (1949: 43).

For Lewis, the avoidance, or denial of the possibility of hell was to deplete the human experience that had always been lived on the precipice. Likewise, the desire to turn away from academic study, no matter how prescient, would only serve 'the cataract of nonsense.' In this sense, adult educators must not avoid the possibility that the process of education to some extent serves to threaten human and therefore planetary flourishing. The importance of studying, despite the impending crisis is to enable them to question, and perhaps, resist the 'nonsense that pours from the microphone of the age.' In the context of education this turn to the nonsense of the age represents the shift from a semantic to syntactic understanding of human learning, from an education where individuals have agency to one that attempts to control and manage an inherently unmanageable process. No doubt reflecting an anthropocentric mindset that the more-than-human world can be managed and exploited.

Central to an ecogological understanding of education is how evolutionary factors have motivated humans to manage and control their immediate environment in an attempt to build a world that is more likely to ensure their survival. One outcome of this mindset requires human thought to focus on future possibilities alongside a dissatisfaction with current conditions. In *Digging our own grave* (2020) I argue how this

ultimately represents a Marxian understanding of capital's entrapment, where educational outcome negates the purpose of education. Ironically, as I write this article the UK government is promoting policies (FE News Editor, 2021) that focus on syntactic outcomes: universities are being encouraged to focus on the 'practical' STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) at the expense of arts and humanities; additionally, up to £65 million is to be allocated to the 'Skills for Jobs' initiative. Each initiative has as its focus a hope that an appropriate post-compulsory education can, in Prime Minister Boris Johnson's words, 'Build Back Better'. Evidently, the fantasy to dominate and control, even the future world, reaches to the highest levels of power while also positioning education, particularly adult education, as the site where these miraculous transformations might occur. From an ecological perspective this appears as an arrogant conceit in the belief that anthropocentric educational actions are the source and solution to 'Build Back Better', and while not necessarily articulating it, ignoring, or denying the millennia of negative human impact on the more-than human world. Perhaps this is the Disney-esque fantasy, that 'we' can atone for past actions by using education to solve the problems of the past and to side-step evolution's grip.

The framing of education as the solution to a whole host of individual, local and global problems positions education, according to Biesta (2013), as a process that is 'strong' having clear and predictable outcomes. There are parallels between 'strong' education with my (Bainbridge, 2019) distinction between syntactic and semantic education. As noted above from the UK context, it can be a particular feature of adult education to focus on vocational, even marketable, skills and knowledge. Biesta (2015) confirms the additional uncomfortable contention that education cannot be organised on syntactic skills alone, yet it is this aspect of education towards a fantasised future that remains largely unknown. Biesta offers instead three fundamental dimensions that he argues have been and always will be features of human life, and it is these that will guide this paper towards considering education's role in a future worth living: these are *democracy, ecology, and care*.

Democracy considers how different peoples with different values can live together, the *ecological* focus is on how humans can live sustainably on a planet that has already been exploited, while the final question asks what role education might have in the *care* of those unable to care for themselves. Biesta (2015) does not offer educators an easy-to-follow guide outlining details of classroom activities, instead he simply asks that educators consider these questions. Importantly, what Biesta also highlights through his identification of democracy, ecology and care, is the distinction between education not being about adaptive survival but about life and meaning. It is from the position of this distinction that brings the discussion back to C. S. Lewis (1949) and the importance of engaging in education even at a time when war is imminent, a reminder that the

human condition has always been lived on a precipice, and that a meaningful life is to be found in acknowledging, not denying our perilous state between life and death.

The motive for education has its origins in a distant past, where in response to an existential crisis, hominid world building activities accrued evolutionary advantage, yet these actions continue to have a negative impact on the wider biosphere, now paradoxically threatening and not supporting human or planetary flourishing. The role of education has been to provide the means for the rapid cultural transmission of knowledge and skills, a process made even more efficient as a consequence of the shift from semantic to syntactic approaches. Human world building is no longer simply about survival but instead the realisation of individual and cultural imaginations driven by fantasies for a future world that are now deeply embedded within education policy and practice. A number of authors including Stephen J. Ball (2015), Biesta (2015), and Bainbridge (2020), have discussed how cultural fantasies for future worlds have entrapped and commodified education within the assumptions and practices of capital and neoliberalism. There is not the space here to re-visit these arguments but what is important, particularly in the context of Biesta's meaningful purpose for education is the current focus on adult education as a driver for vocational outcomes. Consequently, it can be argued that the principles of neoliberalism that encourage individual competition and exploitation of resources have replaced those of democracy, ecology, and care.

The commodification of adult education has hidden from view, if only from influential policy makers, the meaningful function of education, replacing it instead with fantasies of accumulating qualifications, that then lead to high earning employment. I argue (Bainbridge, 2020) that this capitalist-induced entrapment of education has parallels with Marx's identification of the entrapment of workers and their labour to produce surplus value and profit for their employers. Erich Fromm (1961) discusses Marx's concept of man, noting that Marx's original aim was the spiritual emancipation of man, through liberation from the shackles of economically determined work that was of greater benefit to the mill owner than the employee. Fromm's reading of Marx did not reflect what he argued was the dominant 'western capitalist' thinking but Marx's original thinking, noting Marx's clear positioning of human flourishing within a harmonious relationship with nature and through individually meaningful work. I make a similar claim, but now from the context of educational activity as work, where spiritual emancipation requires a turn from ego- to *eco*-centric andragogical thinking and a return to precipices and the possibilities of a semantic education (Bainbridge & Del Negro, 2020).

The move from an ego- to eco-centric understanding is not to return to an Edenic fantasy of humans and nature living together in harmony. Instead, it considers what features of this learning experience can be applied as the consequence of living and

learning on the precipice. The preceding discussion has suggested that during the course of evolution human action on the external world has led to a system, of at least formal education, that has the potential to separate the learner from the semantic process of learning. This has been replaced in recent times by syntactic principles of neo-liberal informed accountability, and what is being lost in this process is an understanding of human learning as something that cannot be entirely controlled by syntactic rules. Instead, human learning is complex and unpredictable, involving knowledge, anxiety, passion, spirit, and bravery.

The epistemological shift from ego- to eco-logical thinking focusses on complexity of interconnectedness and moves away from the dominance of subject silos and simplistic notions of cause and effect. This requires learners to be open to take risks with their learning, including being able to sit with not knowing. This is the site of adult education's transformative potential, where anxiety and new thinking can be expected and held, and the desires of the individual and non/human other can be thought about. It is not a place of replication, model answers, or indeed 'excellence,' it is a place to listen to those with whom we share the planet and think about how to make it a better place for all. Such a stance requires teachers and learners to acknowledge that human learning is troublesome, situated as it is in complex and risky ecologies needing time and space to be thought about. This 'wilder' education acknowledges, just as C.S. Lewis encouraged his congregation to accept, that the human experience involves a search for knowledge and beauty, requiring a recognition of both heaven and hell, and that life and death/learning and non-learning are intimately connected.

Therefore, the paradox that adult education is required to navigate is to be reminded that the processes and outcomes of education can be as much part of the solution as they are the problem. Abram (1997) calls for us to become apprentices to our local environment – to look and listen closely to what is around us, not to name or control, but simply to be able to come into its presence from a sensitive awareness of equality. Equally, an ecologically informed adult education requires learners and teachers to accept that we remain apprentices, not experts, of the worlds we inhabit. To assume mastery and nurture a desire to dominate the human and more-than-human other serve only to bring the edge of the forgotten or ignored precipice ever closer.

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