

How Dear the Gift of Laughter

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Like thousands of other Chicago children, my two daughters took the admission exams for Chicago’s public gifted and talented schools when they were four years old. After my elder daughter, a precocious reader, took the test, I asked her, “How was it?,” and she recalled words she had read correctly and logical puzzles she had solved. When she got home, she threw up. Six weeks later, we were informed that she had a spot in a gifted program. When it was time to enroll my younger daughter in kindergarten, she also took the exam, though at age four she was more interested in playing with her toy animals than in learning how to read. “So,” I asked her in the car afterwards, “how did it go?” “*That was stupid,*” she said.

Unlike her sister, she did not qualify for a place in the gifted and talented schools. But I have to ask: who is smarter? The early reader or the budding social critic? I am not really looking for an answer. The point of the anecdote, rather, is that any sorting mechanism selecting for natural talents, regardless of its accuracy, will pick out only those talents that the group of people designing the assessment recognizes as worthy of further development.

“Natural talents,” after all, are multiple and as varied as humanity. The meritocratic process of sorting *people*, therefore, needs to begin by ranking *talents*. And once some gifts are determined to be better than others, it becomes rhetorically possible to reduce the multiplicity of human talents to a single quality: talent. Some children can then be deemed talented, others not, and resources distributed accordingly. In this age of inequality, it is no accident that our schools identify and hone mainly those talents that privileged children develop precociously and consistently. Resources that could be used to enrich the school experience of all children so that their *many* talents are developed — physical, social, political, artistic — are instead poured into an assessment industry focused exclusively on picking out the math and reading skills that privileged parents are exceptionally adept at passing on to their children. Education researchers, meanwhile, are pouring considerable resources into answering questions about parental involvement, grit, and other factors contributing to inequality, questions that all boil down to this one: how can schools equalize children’s ability to master the math and reading skills that qualify them for a share of the pie? Ken Howe’s essay pauses the machinery, picks out a faulty gear, and offers sound advice to theorists and researchers hoping to reconfigure the machinery’s outcomes. After demolishing the foundational premise of the egalitarian meritocracy on which assessment and sorting rely, he articulates an egalitarian perspective that includes political agency, which outpaces numeracy and literacy in its potential to undermine entrenched inequalities of power.

Howe’s analysis shows how “the idea of natural talent . . . works hand in glove with an ideology in [Charles] Mills’s sense of a ‘set of group ideas that reflect, and

contribute to perpetuating, illicit group privilege.” After debunking the notion that *real* natural talents can be picked out with sufficient accuracy to justify using them as a means to distribute resources, Howe asks what purpose the *idea* of natural talents actually serves. As an idea, he says, natural talent “functions within the meritocratic conception to rationalize educational inequality” in at least four ways. It makes it possible to explain unequal academic performance in terms of nature, that is, some children are just not as talented as others. Ironically, it also makes it possible to blame nurture, especially given recent research on early childhood learning, and thereby to shift the blame for inequality onto parents whose active vocabularies are smaller. In presuming an “additive” model of skill accumulation rather than a “categorical” model that accounts for political and economic as well as educational inequalities, it supports an overestimation of what schools can do to counteract inequality, and not incidentally shifts blame onto teachers. And in adopting the metaphor of education as competition, it legitimates a system of winners and losers.

In lieu of meritocratic egalitarianism, whose mechanisms could plausibly be invented, engineered, and operated exclusively by a crew of philosophers, technocrats, and the Pearson Corporation, Howe endorses a model of democratic egalitarianism elaborated by Elizabeth Anderson and others. Democratic egalitarianism does not rely on an idea of talent and, as Howe notes, “need only assume that, in general, human beings have the potential capacity to participate in effective democratic deliberation. It then requires that the conditions — social, cultural, political, educational, and economic — required for the development and practice of deliberative capacity be in place.” Production of this model of equality would require a much-expanded crew because democracy calls for a plurality of talents, many of which are lacked by philosophers and technocrats, as well as by elite parents and their children. Democracy calls for judgment, which is always a developed talent. (If talent is represented by success on a test, judgment is represented by calling a stupid test stupid, recognizing that those in power have interests that are not one’s own, and refusing to be a sucker.) It cannot be picked out on aptitude tests, and it is accessible to the masses. It is inaccessible to technocrats and philosophers working alone and demands, therefore, that teachers, parents, and citizens also take part in the project of keeping a system of public education running.

If one of the projects of philosophy is to expose theoretical holes that need patching and to pull on loose threads that unravel faulty arguments, another project is to articulate justifiable alternatives. In this essay, Howe ably does both. Plato, that great idealist, might dismiss this as *poesis*, but he did it too. Poets, however, usually sound better. They have also, more frequently than philosophers, expressed perspectives marginalized by ideal theory. I would therefore, and in tribute to the Michigan roots of this year’s president of the Philosophy of Education Society, now like to turn to two poems by Michigan’s great poet of blue-collar labor, Philip Levine. Read in tandem, I think, these poems evoke the kind of democratic egalitarianism that Howe’s argument supports.

In “Among Children,” Levine visits a classroom in Flint, Michigan.¹ There, he sees the children with “bowed heads,”

sleeping through fourth grade
 so as to be ready for what is ahead
 the monumental boredom of junior high
 and the rush forward, tearing their wings
 loose and turning their eyes forever inward. (1–6)

Levine contrasts the children's present limitations with their fresh, undeveloped talent for living on the day of their birth. When he first saw them in the neonatal ward of the hospital ten years earlier, "[t]here was such wonder/in their sleep, such purpose in their eyes" (31–32). Now, though, "[y]ou can see/already how their backs have thickened,/how their small hands, soiled by pig iron/leap and stutter even in dreams" (10–13). Levine does not romanticize poverty; these children have lost something valuable. What he wishes for them, however, is not higher reading scores nor a better junior high school, but rather a vision of agency. "I would like to arm each one," he says,

with a quiver of arrows so that they might
 rush like wind there where no battle rages
 shouting among the trumpets, Ha! Ha!
 How dear the gift of laughter in the face
 of the 8 hour day, the cold winter mornings
 without coffee and oranges, the long lines
 of mothers in old coats waiting silently
 where the gates have closed. (19–27)

A not unreasonable objection to reenvisioning natural talent as a plurality of talents — a quiver of arrows, if you will — is that it is an unrealistic approach, given the importance of academic skills to the world of work. To call laughter "dear," after all, is ambiguous. Is laughter *valuable* when coffee and oranges are out of reach? Or is it *expensive*, a habit that expresses a refusal to accept one's subordination within an unjust system but that ultimately replicates that system? That, of course, is precisely what tripped up Paul Willis's lads; expressing their agency by thumbing their noses at school success, they wound up in the same low-paying jobs as their fathers.

In "What Work Is,"² Levine imagines standing

... in the rain in a long line
 waiting at Ford Highland Park. For work.
 You know what work is — if you're
 old enough to read this you know what
 work is, although you may not do it. (1–5)

Having included you in that waiting line, Levine switches to the second-person voice. You think you see your brother waiting ahead. You realize it cannot actually be your brother, who is at home sleeping off a miserable night shift. But, on thinking this through, you are suddenly stricken with love for your brother and led to wonder

How long it has been since you told him
 you loved him, held his wide shoulders,
 opened your eyes wide and said those words,
 and maybe kissed his cheek? You've never
 done something so simple, so obvious,
 not because you're too young, or too dumb
 not because you're jealous or even mean
 not because you're afraid of crying in

the presence of another man, no,
just because you don't know what work is. (33–42)

With that final line, the poem hands the reader a puzzle. If the poem's title suggests that here at last, halfway through the book, the reader will find the explanation of "what work is" that the collection's title promises, the poem itself offers only an indeterminate answer. The opening lines' implication that work is productive labor, the manufacture of machines, is replaced with the possibility that work is reproductive labor, the maintenance of collective well-being through relationship. Or perhaps both, or something else? Levine leaves that to his readers to figure out. Appropriately, as the arrangement of work and its compensation is, like education, a political matter for citizens to deliberate. If our children laugh at our answers, they can come up with their own.

Howe's essay, like Levine's poems, provides answers that open up new questions. Ideal theory has left many philosophical readers waiting in the rain for potential openings that never seem to come. It promises to get to the real problems faced by mothers in old coats, workers whose pay is too low to cover pleasures the well-off take for granted, children whose wings are torn, but, as Mills points out, it never seems to get there.³ It promises that it will welcome in women, scholars of color, those whose scholarship reaches outside the canon, but when the talents they bring are not the talents that have been predetermined to count as talents, the gates slam shut. It holds up gleaming ideals-as-idealized-models of the citizen, educated person, autonomous self that fail to resemble those people who are raised to stand up for friends and kin, those whose verbal fluency is expressed as bilingualism and spoken-word poetry rather than high SAT scores, those dependent on others, which is to say all of us at some point in our lives. To live well as such persons requires agency and a multiplicity of talents. In shifting focus from the positions available inside the gate to the people waiting outside, excellent work in non-ideal theory such as this Presidential Address opens philosophy to new questions, new talents, and new approaches. I hope that in bringing it to the attention of the Philosophy of Education Society, Ken Howe's essay opens our gates wider as well.

1. Philip Levine, "Among Children," in *What Work Is* (New York: Knopf, 1991), pp. 16–17.

2. Levine, "What Work Is" in *What Work Is*, pp.18–19.

3. See Charles Mills, "'Ideal Theory' as Ideology," *Hypatia* 20, no. 3 (2005): 165–184.