

# **“Between Eye and Eye Stretches an Interminable Landscape”: The Challenge of Philosophical Hermeneutics**

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*While conducting phenomenological interviews on the experience of being a parent with children in school, the author comes to a deeper, more personal understanding of the tradition of philosophical hermeneutics. How people use language—the form, content, and context of the words they use, whether in their interviews, analytic memos, or theoretical writings—is crucial to how they understand. As such, language is always communicative, relational, interpretive, and dynamic. The challenge for interpretive researchers is incorporating in their understanding of a topic the physical, emotional, situational, and relational conditions within which communication and thus understanding occur. In a series of poems, the author provides an aesthetic account of some of those conditions.*

Between eye and eye stretches an interminable landscape. From pelvis to sternum lies the terror of great structures, and from the arm to ankle to the center of the brain is a whirling axis. To discover these marvels, to search the maze of man's physicality, to wander the body's magnitudes is to search for the image of man. And in the act of discovery lies the act of communication.

—Leonard Baskin (quoted in Jaffe, 1980,  
pp. 38-39)

## **THE CORRIDOR**

Reaching an understanding in conversation presupposes that both partners are ready for it and are trying to recognize the full value of what is alien and opposed to them. . . . This means finding a language that is not only [the interpreter's] but is also proportionate to the original. (Gadamer, 1975/1999, p. 387)

I try to walk you down the corridor  
I had prepared  
And you try to follow me there too

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We step slowly  
 Together  
 Through the doorway  
 You speak about your troubles with your son  
 Your fears for your daughter  
 Your toddler pours juice upon my foot  
 You barely care

You offer me  
 A vision of your life  
 So poignantly  
 So poignantly  
 Indeed I fear to let you go  
 As I fear to let you take me there

It is when I take your hand  
 Into mine  
 That I lose you

I call out  
 A word I had engraved  
 To guide our way  
 And hear only the murmur  
 Of my voice  
 Fading away  
 I speak once again  
 Out of habit  
 Out of fear

I grab out to reach you once more  
 The surface of your skin  
 Or is it the wall?  
 Surrounds me  
 Menacingly

Why couldn't I think what to ask? Why do I say too little or too much? Why is interviewing so complicated? From what standpoint do I judge an interview to be "good" or "bad"? I plop down my coat, my tape recorder, my pen and my pad, and dutifully label my tape. Then I sit down and write. Like Richardson (1994), I write to make sense of my experience. I write impressions, reflections, poetry. I write because without writing, I can't begin to know what it is I am even struggling to know. This article is the result of some of those writings. In a series of poems, I relate how my understanding of the relationship that is interviewing and my understanding of philosophical hermeneutics nurture each other, side by side.

Eleven parents have met with me to speak about experiences they have had with a particular elementary school. As unique individuals with very dif-

ferent stories to share, each one has more or less pushed me to consider in new ways what it means to be a parent with a child or children in school. Gadamer (1976, 1975/1999) states that to seek understanding by means of hermeneutic conversations ideally ends in a form of "fusion of horizons," which is the condition of having one's present perceptual horizon reshaped or expanded by virtue of a particular kind of contact and engagement with others. As we strive to open ourselves up to new forms of understanding of the topic of inquiry through contact with a variety of people, the contact itself takes on a variety of forms; forms that in turn inform our understanding of the topic.

Much has been discussed about the process through which qualitative researchers turn their field experiences into text and the legitimacy of such texts when the texts presented are other than the traditionally structured social science reports (Denzin, 1994, 1997; Ely, Vinz, Downing, & Anzul, 1997; Glesne, 1997; Richardson, 1994). For many theorists, however, this "crisis of representation" is not comprehensible without also including a "crisis of interpretation" (Denzin, 1994). Interpretation begins before and in the very event of communicating with participants and is not a separate event from understanding, meaning, and representation. In response to this crisis, several researchers have sought to make sense of the communicative and relational aspect of the research experience in words and forms that capture the depth and multisensed nature of that experience (Ceglowski, 2000; Freeman, 2000; Porter, 2000; Saukko, 2000).

Writing about the researcher-participant relationship, Ceglowski (2000) pointed out how our selves as researchers often place us at odds with our embodied selves; selves that can't help being relational, emotional, and subjective. Likewise, Porter (2000) argued that assumptions about research as a relationship, such as the view that we and our participants are distinct, separate identities, affect how we engage with the data and make sense of them. How we make sense of our data cannot be separated from what we as inquirers believe that "making sense" means. As Richardson (1994) wrote, "Knowing the self and 'knowing' about the subject are intertwined, partial, historical, local knowledges" (p. 518); they do not occur separately or in a succession.

To use and dismiss our questions and interactions as data-gathering devices limits in dramatic ways how we as inquirers can contribute to our understanding of "what it means to understand" (Schwandt, 1999, p. 463). In philosophical hermeneutics, understanding, Schwandt (1999) explained, is an existential experience, one that goes beyond a cognitive or critical kind of analysis and involves the whole self as a feeling, thinking, speaking, sensing, experiencing subject who does so always in relation to others and the world. Understanding does not occur separately from the communicative practices in which it takes shape (Gadamer (1976, 1975/1999). And, as I have discovered, this process is not a neat give-and-take moving reflectively toward some grander state of consciousness. Rather, understanding is often a slap in the

face, a painful awakening to ourselves, forced open not by the stories of others as they lie open next to ours but by the pull of our performance as we seek to communicate in telling ways in the presence of others.

Poetry taps into the experiential nature of the relationship to understanding that Schwandt (1999) wrote about, and it promotes what Rosenblatt (1978) called an "aesthetic" rather than an "efferent" reading of the text. "*In aesthetic reading, the reader's attention is centered directly on what he [or she] is living through during his [or her] relationship with that particular text*" (Rosenblatt, 1978, p. 25). By conveying my experience in poetic form, I argue as others have for an expansion of the possibilities of expression and representation in theoretical and scientific writing (Brady, 2000; Denzin, 1994, 1997; Glesne, 1997; Richardson, 1994). According to these authors, part of the goal of poetic or other experimental texts is to evoke response at an emotional, physical, and intuitive level and to encourage subjective reflexivity (Denzin, 1997). Doing what Brady (2000) termed *anthropological poetry* provides a way for researchers to portray anthropological activities such as the "cross-cultural circumstances and events of their fieldwork in an authentic and penetrating way" (p. 956). And in doing so, Brady wrote, potentially awakening in the reader comparable experiences and a fresh understanding of those experiences. Poetry evokes different responses because just as "life is incoherent unless we give it form" (Langer, 1953, p. 400), poetry is not just a form for expression; its form is the expression (Glesne, 1997; Langer, 1953; Richardson, 1994). Poetry provides a different dimensionality and shape than, for example, a narrative would (Baff, 1997) and therefore provides a different meaning to that experience.

## HERMENEUTIC INTERVIEWING

A conversation is not merely a human interaction, it is also a display of something, and the success or failure of the conversation is a success or failure in the manifestation of the thing in question. (Sokolowski, 1997, p. 231)

It is not really a conversation  
Over coffee  
Or the sampling  
Of individual opinions

Nor is it the careful brush strokes  
Or a looking glass  
Affirming who is there

Concealed within each story  
Is more than a life  
Waiting to be told  
It is living itself

Lived out  
Striving for expression

It is a transformative event  
Engaging  
Who we are  
With who we might become

Forcing a turn upon ourselves  
As we stretch forward into space  
A circular journey  
A painful journey  
Eyes everywhere

## WALTZ À FAUX PAS

Only the support of the familiar and common understanding makes possible the venture into the alien, the lifting up of something out of the alien, and thus the broadening and enrichment of our experience of the world. (Gadamer, 1976, p. 15)

It seems a simple thing  
Doesn't it  
To ask about school  
What it means to you

*I looked forward to going to school  
To be with my friends  
I loved being in the band  
I loved sewing and cooking*

I am stunned and unprepared  
Has everyone liked school but me?  
I had expected otherwise from you  
I had hoped otherwise  
I ask what you liked so much  
But the choke in my question  
Is hard to conceal

*I was sent to the girl's program  
With all the troubled people  
I had fun in the girl's program  
Those people were kind of like  
Who I wanted to be  
Reckless and dangerous  
I had to know everybody  
I mean I had everybody as friends*

I'm not interested in your friends  
And ask you instead to talk about  
Current school interactions

Something that stands out  
Maybe about your son  
Now that he's been kicked out

*I haven't really gotten to sit down  
And talk to his teacher  
About any of this actually  
I don't know what's  
Going to go on  
I don't know what  
They're going to do*

I barely acknowledge  
Your lack of contact with his teacher  
And pluck away for some other interaction  
Some other hue  
Of your story/my story  
The story I'm creating of you

You lean away  
And gaze up into the smoke of your cigarette  
You speak words  
From afar

*Not really  
I've just had a couple of meetings  
Not really  
Nothing that stands out*

It is only in the quiet of my car  
That I feel your story  
And reveal mine to myself  
The ache of my insensitivity  
Still ringing in my ear

Sometimes our horizons  
Are more like waves  
Crashing up against the shore  
Deafening our footsteps  
To ourselves

## LEARNING TO LISTEN

Understanding is not an act of subjectivity but a mode of being. (Gadamer, 1976, p. 125)

I listen

The stories of people  
Open to me  
Unfold  
Rippling outward  
Experiences I know nothing of  
And have never had

I think that I listen

Absorbed and well-meaning  
I travel these landscapes  
Extracting scraps and segments  
Reshaping their form  
Seeking out words  
Not even spoken

I have not learned to listen

A fusion of horizons  
Is not the engulfment  
Of a valley  
Or the taking of a soul  
When we hear  
Entirely with our mind  
We hear only a  
Fragment  
Of the possible

## UNDERSTANDING

Questions always bring out the undetermined possibilities of a thing. That is why we cannot understand the questionableness of something without asking real questions, though we can understand a meaning without meaning it. (Gadamer, 1975/1999, p. 375)

Our eyes meet  
Mine stretch beyond hers  
Trying to see behind her words  
Hers pause  
Acknowledging me

She speaks

I follow the trail of her words

*My son has always had difficulty with reading  
I had thought of keeping him back last year*

*And I'm contemplating that again this year  
The teacher keeps reassuring me that it will click  
Eventually it will click  
Well he's in his second year with her  
And things are still not clicking  
And I don't want him to be like one of those students  
I graduated with at high school  
That could hardly read or can't write  
Or if the calculator goes off  
They can't figure out for themselves  
How to add and subtract  
I don't want that for my children*

*I feel her concern  
And ask her to tell me more  
About her son  
About her efforts for her son*

*It got to the point  
Where I would have to fight with my son  
I'd have to drag him in from outside  
And sit with him to get any work done  
And I worked with the assistant principal, Mr. B.  
And he would take my son to his house  
And they would do stuff  
Talk about stuff  
And it was really helpful for me to have him there  
Because I'm not in the school setting  
I'm not there  
So I can't control everything that goes on  
I can try to influence what goes on at school  
But I can't control it  
And Mr. B. continues to be there  
For my son and myself*

*I am impressed with her advocacy  
And the nature of her relationship with the staff  
I am unsure where to go  
And ask about her need for control*

*I guess I want  
My son and my daughter to have people  
Where I didn't always feel that I did  
And numerous times  
When my son was having difficulties  
I would call the school and say:  
My son is running late this morning  
Or things are kind of stressed at home*



*Or he's really afraid this kid's going to hit him  
And I want you to know  
That he can leave the class  
And talk to somebody if he needs to  
Or perhaps somebody can come in  
And just speak with my son  
And see how things are going*

I am not satisfied with control  
And imagine a struggle  
To make her son known  
I ask this of her

*I can't stress enough how tender-hearted he is  
And I understand that he has to get tougher  
And he has to fill that image  
That people feel that males are supposed to have  
And I just want them to be attuned to him  
He's a good boy  
But when there's problems  
I think that he gets thrown in a stereotype category  
That boys at that age are going to do things  
And I guess part of it too  
Is that the expectations that I have of him  
Versus what the school expects  
And maybe mine are a little bit more  
And I get frustrated sometimes  
When I feel like what I'm trying to do at home  
They can't always do at school*

I hear  
The efforts of a woman  
To develop a strong and supportive relationship  
With her children's teachers  
Mirroring her belief in the importance  
Of personal contact between teachers and students  
Seeking for her children what she has not always  
Had herself

I hear her frustration  
When the school's actions  
Or her own  
Do not achieve  
The desired results

And while my understanding of her experience  
Has changed and deepened my understanding  
Of the experiences of parents with schools

It doesn't mean that I know  
 Any better than she  
 What this all adds up to  
 Words spoken in an earlier interview  
 Remain her focus

*I don't know what to do  
 Even after all we've done  
 My son is still falling through the cracks  
 And it's nobody's fault per se  
 It's just happening*

## I, THOU, AND IT

Understanding, like any understanding, is not an acquaintance derived from knowledge about them [Others], but a primordially existential kind of Being, which, more than anything else, makes such knowledge and acquaintance possible. (Heidegger, 1962, p. 123)

We are who we are  
 Historically  
 Possessed

We understand  
 Long before  
 We understand ourselves

Always we travel within  
 Understanding  
 It is not in  
 I and thou

It does not lie  
 In your oak-brown eyes  
 Your heavy restlessness  
 Or in the stiffness of your neck

I do not hang  
 My prejudices at the door  
 Or lay them open on the rug  
 For all to see  
 Nor do you rehearse  
 What it is  
 You plan to say

We do not come to an understanding  
 By traversing similar landscapes

Nor do we leap over  
The great chasm of difference  
That lies always  
Between I and thou

Understanding is  
A swirling momentum  
An impelling  
That fights the limits  
Of self-definition  
Tugging  
Stretching  
The fabric of our tightly wrapped garb

## BEGINNINGS

The nature of the hermeneutical experience is not that something is outside and desires admission. Rather, we are possessed by something and precisely by means of it we are opened up for the new, the different, the true. (Gadamer, 1976, p. 9)

The mist rises slowly  
Pierced here and there  
By the bluish hues of sunlight

Apprehensive and eager  
A mourning dove cries  
Signaling day

I step lightly onto the pine soft path  
Still shaking  
From the downpour yesterday

How could I know it would be so difficult?  
I do not take this journey alone  
Although blindfolded and alone  
Would require less effort  
I trip forward  
Feeling the grasp around my foot  
How foolish to think  
I was on my own  
How arrogant

Those who have come  
This far with me  
Are even less sure  
But lift me willingly

I discard the map  
Damp and crumpled  
From being held so tightly

I laugh when I think  
That I feared  
They'd get lost  
When I have never known  
Where I was going

## EPILOGUE

We think we speak  
Our own words  
And exist  
In our bodies  
But like the pawn  
On a chess board  
Or the queen  
Or the bishop  
Each move we take  
Opens another

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