

Learning Between Two Worlds: The known and the not-foreknow

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There is a fundamental assumption that I have held about the role adult learning plays in society. That the sinuous stuff between personal and societal transformation is made up of the connections that learning makes. This assumption has been shaken over the as the past two years, as ruptures of civil unrest and the cloud of the global Pandemic have revealed weaknesses in the power of learning that makes the vital connection between the personal and societal, transformative. I wonder more than ever how to reveal and make real the learning that connects the two worlds I feel we live in. The world that is known and that continues to be reproduced with all of its inequities and exclusions and the world not-foreknown that wants to be different, liberating the creative potential that learning unfolds.

In this writing I offer a personal experience of penetrating the underlying assumptions I have about learning in between two worlds. I practice a method that I have created, in-scending, a practice of staying close to undergoing experience (Nicolaidis, Forthcoming; Yorks & Nicolaidis, 2013), experiencing experience while experiencing experience would be another way to describe what Dewey (1934) meant. In-scend(ing) is a word of my own making. It is the felt sense of moving beneath experience to undergo it. A tool of generative knowing (Nicolaidis, Forthcoming; Nicolaidis, 2015).

I explore the arising of awareness that emerged through the practice of in-scending, beneath an inquiry about my relationship to being secure in these times of insecurity. Undergoing is a less known aspect of reflection from Dewey's pragmatist philosophy of learning through experience. Dewey discusses a necessary aspect of learning from experience in terms of undergoing an experience (Nicolaidis, & Lim, 2020). Undergoing describes the felt sense of experiencing an experience. Having an experience is necessary for learning, and most assuredly for transformative learning to take shape though the meaning-making process that includes reflection on experience, and going beneath the experience with head, heart, and body. In this short offering I reveal what I learn by inquiring beneath what it means for me to be secure in times of insecurity. I do so by reviving Dewey's (1934) concept of undergoing experience while also risking the conventional epistemologies that undergird transformative learning to consider a way of knowing that begin beneath experience (Nicolaidis, 2015).

A deep personal reflection

I identify as a Greek-Palestinian woman who feels deeply my own close relationship to displacement, something my people, Greeks of Anatolia/Asia Minor Greeks and Christian Palestinians, of which I am one, have experienced repeatedly throughout the 19th and 20th

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century. I am taking some time to reflect and inquire into my own closeness with systems of seeming security, that in their extreme, can lead to feeling insecure while grasping for a state of security in myself and in the world. The longing for feeling of security has been ruptured by a global pandemic and global distress that have brought feelings of insecurity closer to all in some way and differently. I in-scend into my own lived experience with structures of security, inquiring into what I have internalized as half-truths and limiting views. Here is what was revealed.

I do not love that I care so much about security. I do not mean being safe from physical threats. I mean the security of having resources that I need to live life the way I imagine. The security of employment, financial remuneration, flexibility, and access to resources that will keep me from being a burden on my family, friends, and society in my elder years. The security that comes with privilege and power to have access to more privilege and power; that is the security I seek because that is what I have let seep into my structures of meaning. That I am in control of my security and must keep it that way if I am to survive in the world that feels at times hostile. Where did I learn this? Why do I believe this?

As I write this, the ruptures of a global pandemic, political polarization, climate crisis, and the displacement of people around the world continues. These ruptures have made more explicit the moments that keep me in a state of stay-eyes-open to the pain and anguish of keeping some people in-security and others insecure. These ruptures turn my gaze into me. What role do I play in keeping these structures secure and in place?

This inquiry returns me to a first, and then later, second moment in my lived experience when I was certain that my commitment to inquiry and action (learning) was not about preserving my security. I think these two moments have something to do with how I unconsciously/consciously worry about security that in turn justifies how I also leave structures of oppression secure in their place. Reproducing what is known.

My commitment to learning (inquiry and action), manifests sometimes in my willingness to take risks on behalf of others. This impulse arrived with me upon birth. If you ask anyone to describe me from those early years, they would probably say that I was passionate about pursuing just causes by speaking the truth and correcting wrongs (some will say that is still true). For example, ensuring that my siblings got what they wanted when they were afraid to ask; that the neighborhood kids had access to the puppet show my sister and I would put on even if they did not have the 10 drachma fee; sharing my favorite and only green ten-speed Peugeot bike with others who wanted to learn how to ride it; making sure that when we played war in the empty land next to my grandparents' home that all the kids from around the neighborhood could play and that we all won somehow and the invisible enemy would lose. You get my gist, I was a warrior of justice and everyone was included, unless you were mean, a bully, or somehow, I had figured out how stupid you were because you did not follow my lead. I had power in the grips of my small hands and I did not let it go easily even when I was challenged by my older uncles, cousins, and family elders about geopolitical reality and my passionate defense of the underdog. I remember one time from my younger years when I leaped into the sea flying over rocks that were just barely far out enough for me to dive over to rescue a beach ball carried out to sea by a sudden mistral. I was eight or ten years old on my usual patrol of the beach, in Pythagorion, on the Island of Samos, GR, looking for ways to put my super swimming power into action to save the day. That day I managed to save a beach ball and place it back into the kid's hands who was screaming to have it back. I defied the rocks and the waves and the sure-to-be-swimming-close-enough-to-the-beach sharks that

day - my commitment to action in the face of peril made manifest. I have always felt ready to take on something dangerous for some greater good. Making a child happy to have his ball back, swimming out to return my sister on a canoe gone too far out to sea, walking my brother up the hill to get ice cream - those kinds of life-saving events - were illustrations of my commitment to courageous action. I have always felt fearless in the face of injustice, loss, brutality, and the use of power and privilege. I am after all the daughter of Greek-Palestinian parents and a lineage that has survived systems of oppression for hundreds of years.

Holding onto my power by imagining righteous action and justice for all led me to my first study of political science and black feminist literature, then my graduate degree in conflict resolution, the study of Gandhian Satyagraha (lifeforce, nonviolence), and finally to the deep inquiry into how adult learning makes society better during the completion of my doctorate. This brings me to another risk in the name of a greater good.

While pursuing my graduate degree in conflict resolution I interned with a small grassroots organization whose focus was bringing peaceful attention to the injustices and the slow genocide of the Palestinian people. As a daughter of Greek-Palestinians, you can imagine I was drawn to do something to right this injustice. After all, I was a 20-21year old educated woman whose cultural roots were in Palestine. I belonged; it was my duty to make things right. Believe it or not, I managed to get a grant to study a learning intervention of my own making to bring together Palestinian and Israeli youth activists for a week-long intensive training putting principles of Satyagraha to work to reframe their relationship. Putting learning into action in the midst of intractable conflict, I was sure learning would win!

There are two significant moments in this story that challenges my righteous courage to make things just and to question my own security. The first was a waking dream while I was asleep in my aunt's guest room in her house that shared a wall with the Holy Sepulcher Church in Jerusalem. That night I was visited by three Palestinian boys/men; a 9-year-old, a 16-year-old, and a 25-year-old. Do not ask me how I know these young men's ages, I just do. The first visitation was from the 25-year-old - he held a bag of rocks in his hands and was filled with piss and vinegar, frothing at the mouth, looking at me with steely eyes, his face dirty from soot and grime. He had no voice. He stood in front of me at the edge of my bed, in full display for me to see him. I did. My heart was beating fast, I remember that. I was a little afraid. The second visitation came from the 16-year-old. He was wearing a T-shirt with some basketball star on it, maybe Michael Jordan, and a pair of Van sneakers, the checkered kind that was just coming to be in fashion those days, he was "kool" in the James Dean kinda way; rugged, filled with pride and self-importance. He looked at me from the edge of my bed and offered me a rubber bullet. I can still sense it's odd shape and slimy feel in my hand. The final visitation came from the 9-year-old boy. He had a wise smile, sparkling eyes, long black eyelashes, sweetness oozing out of him, I felt like reaching out to hug him when he walked to the side of my bed and sat down, took my hand and spoke. He said, "Madame, we are not ready for peace. We need our voices to be heard and the stones to break our silence". And he handed me a small rock. I woke with the sensation of a small rock, dusty from the ground somehow in me. This dream lives in me still today. What happened next is rather strange.

The morning I woke from this waking dream was the start of the week-long program of my design that I was in Palestine to facilitate with a group of 8 Palestinian youth and 8 Israel youth between the ages of 9 and 25. On my way to the place where we were to gather with the participants and their parents to discuss the purpose and approach of the week's program and the logics of our daily encounters, I was approached by two young Palestinian men, faces

wrapped in Palestinian keffiyeh's (traditional head covering), brandishing knives. One of them pinned me up against a wall, a knife pointed close to my face, the other looking out to see if anyone was coming. I had several Arabic words in me that I strung together clumsily to communicate that I was Greek (pointing to the cross around my neck) and Christian and my family name and where I lived while in Jerusalem. The knife came closer to my face, some more Arabic words were spoken, when the long end of a walking stick pushed the knife away from my face. A tall distinguished-looking elder man began to yell at these two young men to leave me alone. They ran and I gasped for air since I had stopped breathing a few minutes before. This man, took my hand, like a child, walked me to my aunt's home, and saved my life. Later that day, the second Intifada started in Bethlehem. My program came to an abrupt end and I had to sneak my way back to Tel Aviv in a church van to catch my flight back to Washington DC where I was attending university.

In recollecting these experiences now in times of a global pandemic and all the suffering that is unfolding around the world, I remember how insidiously I moved from seeking justice to seeking to become secure. As I move deeper beneath these recollections of my lived experience, I am surprised to recognize that I have become a woman holding on to being in-security. How slippery the move from impulsive, passionate, fearless activist to seeking the privilege of being in-security. It occurs to me that in that moment of fear of a knife to my face and failure to launch my educational program in Jerusalem due to the second intifada, that I turned myself towards seeking security, to be in-security and keep insecurity at bay. I was cognizant of my birth privilege to hard-working parents who immigrated to America at a time when you could be penniless, brave, and seek a new life making something out of nothing. I had the privilege of being born in that America, raised in Greece, educated in Singapore, and then my life unfolds with all the privileges of access, experience, and the opening of doors that have allowed me to make a life with the grit and grace of participation in society and life.

I loath to admit it, I hold onto my privileges in whatever form they come in when they do. When my class, race, ethnicity, gender, and experience ensure that my working hard keeps me being in-security. I wear my privileges like costumes I can take off and put back on when it suits me. That is the pinnacle of privilege. I like it when my privilege gives me access to something I covet and or when I long to be included. I have come to know that I do not love being excluded.

I wear privilege like costumes. Putting on the one most suitable to the context so that I may hold onto being in-security while feeling also insecure. I remember when I first came to America to pursue my undergraduate degree after spending a year in England pursuing a law degree that did not suit me at all, how I embellished the slight lilt of an English accent so that I could be different in a sea of American undergraduate students, I could play with my multi-linguistic skills to fool others into thinking that my difference was special and therefore invited into the fold of a particular group of seemingly kool people.

I do not love that my insecurity seeks to be in-security to distance myself from the things I do not love. I do not love poverty, I do not love stupidity, I do not love litter, I do not love intolerance. My privilege of being in-security means that I have secured meaningful employment, right livelihood by pursuing my vocation as an educator. I do not love that I am afraid of losing that privilege in the face of COVID and the ruptures of people hurting from being left behind. I love being included. I pursue being included and reject being left behind by sometimes leaving someone else behind. I notice a pattern in my life of entering cultures of privilege - whatever the flavor; race, class, ethnicity, gender, ancestry, profession; then leaving

that culture behind when I have ravaged it of what I need to secure my security. When I was in my early to mid 20's I was lucky enough to use my mother's hard-earned privilege into the local Singaporean wealthy women's community to gain entry into making friendships with the daughters of these women. This led to my own jumping ahead of the grind of working my way up society in the usual ways that keep many out. I was in, instantly just by virtue of my mother. I loved that privilege and the access it gave me. I do not love that I wanted to hold onto it even when I willingly left the cozy safety of that security to pursue something with greater integrity. I do not love unpleasant smells. Smells that sometimes come off rotting fish, or garbage, or homeless people. I do not love the homeless. They remind me that I fear poverty.

I want to dis/continue hoarding security as a way not to feel the insecurity I also feel by grasping at my privilege anyway I can get it. Privilege is a tyrant. It keeps you working to reproduce what is known, the crack of the whip stings against the vulnerability of my insecurity. The sting keeps me seeking to be in-security. To have more privilege, to hoard more special accolades, to accumulate wealth so that I can keep myself away from poverty, to keep the stench of being dirty far from me, to hold onto positionality and the illusion of power that I am in control of keeping me in-security.

To be secure, justly, is a journey that insists I bring everyone along if I am to enjoy the freedom that comes from being in-security. As long as my security keeps others insecure, I am colluding with structures of oppression that are a constraint of everyone's liberation. I affirm that I have also bought into a narrow world of access, in the mythology of a meritocracy that is based on the rights of privilege and not of participation, that I both want to make more space for wholeness in myself and others and that I keep some costumes on hand just in case the world is insecure. I affirm righteous rioting, hating, and crying as forms of protest that makes me notice my own insecure security. The ethics of seeking to be in-security is not to relinquish the security I long for, that I have worked for, that I have inherited, that is my karma; the ethics of security are to affirmatively acknowledge that I too have kept people out so that I can stay in. Whatever form of privilege I have used to do so - my class, ethnicity, race, gender, and positionality to name a few. This recognition is not one of relinquishing what I have, the ethics of recognition is to receive how others have not had that privilege and to begin to create systems of mutual privilege, of differences that we learn together to embrace and receive, of righteous action for participation in society in all the ways society needs all of our engagement. To generate knowing as ways of being and becoming catalyzing potential creatively, that is what learning must do as we live in between worlds, the world as we know it and the world not-foreknown yet ready to become through all of us.

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