

## *Editorial: The Promise of Phenomenology*

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The popular science fiction writer Douglas Adams, best known for his book *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, turned his attention away from the stars to focus on this world. In collaboration with zoologist Mark Cawardine he authored the book *Last Chance to See* (1990). The book recounts the trips Adams and Cawardine took to various locations in the hope of encountering species on the brink of extinction. It is in these pages Adams wrote, "Human beings, who are almost unique in having the ability to learn from the experience of others, are also remarkable for their apparent disinclination to do so" (p. 114). Whether human beings have an *almost unique* capacity to learn from experiences of others is debatable, but human reticence to actually do so is the larger point.

Our days are filled with recounting stories, anecdotes, personal vignettes, and gossip. They have the sole focus of relaying our individual experiences and the experiences of friends, family, and strangers captured in the narratives they share with us. Stories from the news, social media, and our favourite Netflix series all become the focus for everyday conversation. Our professional lives too are taken up with casting about for how others have responded to similar challenges we may be facing. What did they do? How did they do it? What was it like for them?

Sometime ago I wrote about how stories in the form of literature and poetry become an experience for the reader and result in their own *envisions* that elicit powerful new feelings, ideas and insights aroused by what is read. I asked then, "How do stories and poems exercise the moral imagination?" Essentially, the question is how do we learn from the experience of others, *vicariously*, through the written or spoken word? The word vicarious finds its roots in the sense of something changing, changeable, pliant, yielding, and only later did its meaning shift to the concept of experiencing something in the place of another. There was a vitalism and energy with which the word was originally imbued, counter to the contemporary notion of the word that is largely one of passivity, and distanciation, a stepping back to critically scrutinize that which has been shared with me.

The story, the narrative, the anecdote through which we learn from the experience of others, are as old as humanity. Joseph Campbell wrote volumes on the human proclivity for myth and metaphor as tales for the basic purpose of guiding the human spirit. Indigenous scholar Jo-ann Archibald (2008) explains in Aboriginal storytelling traditions, one specific character known as the Trickster embodies different characters depending on the First Nation in question. The Trickster may take the form of Glooscap, Raven, Coyote, Nanabozo, and Wesakejac. Trickster characters get into trouble by ignoring cultural rules and practices and by indulging in acts of greed, vanity, selfishness, and foolishness. The stories feature lessons learned the hard way. Yet

the Trickster can do good things for others and can be a powerful spiritual entity deserving of respect. The stories contain *teachings* and Archibald makes the point that the notion of the Trickster is “a ‘doing’ rather than a ‘being’ (p.8).” There is a dynamism in the learning connected to the stories. Yet, the teaching is not didactic; the learning is implicit, subtle, singular to the listener who incorporates the experience being shared in the spirit of creating openings for understandings and insights. People interact with the Trickster through the stories. The learning comes from the teacher’s mistakes as well as the teacher’s virtues and it is found in the *doing* rather than the *being*.

Shared human experience through narrative is core to human survival. It is how we, as a species, pass what is worth knowing to the next generation. At the heart of phenomenological inquiry is the capacity to bring forth a vitalism in that we seek to lay bare the distinctive spirit in a human experience. Through our most human of capabilities, language and imagination, we are able to bring experience into a vital presence. The written and spoken word, the image, painting, photograph, movie scene can evoke tears, laughter, fear, dread, and awe, or they can sit quietly within us, even pass us by only to resurface later when least expected. The pathic power moves through us in the moment and is the germ for the questioning and reflection to follow. They may initiate a thoughtful inquiry as to why I felt that way? What is it about that poem, story, painting that moved me in that way? Why and how was I spoken to?

Researchers turn to phenomenology to better understand pre-reflective human experiences by surfacing what lay beneath our awareness of the experience. And, ironically, phenomenologists do so by turning to that which often fails us when we seek to capture the meaning of an experience. “I don’t have the words;” “...there are no words to describe how it feels;” “...words can’t capture what that moment was like...;” “I’m speechless...” We hear these declarations often in moments when people are asked to speak to an experience – to describe it and articulate its meaning for them. And yet the phenomenologist sets out to employ the fallibility of words and language to capture experiences that are often elusive, ephemeral, ambiguous, complex, and multi-layered.

A way into human experience, a first pass at gaining the insight and understanding that may lay beneath the deep layers of lived experience concealed beneath quotidian pre-reflectivity, our natural attitude, is the story. Before we can step back and reflect and interpret, the story provides words that resist the conceptual – and it is with the conceptual we struggle when we are at a loss for words. The story, in the form of an anecdote, a brief narrative, illustrates an example of the experience. It is a powerful place to begin. Narratives can be gleaned and reconstructed from interviews, observation, focus groups, conversations, and fictionalized excerpts. The narratives represent experiential material that speaks to us in its vividness and ability to draw for us our own envisionments of the experience. There is a *doing* in the *vicarity* of the shared experience. Vicarity is a term used in the gaming world to describe how an avatar-self can approximate “body-ownership” and “know” an other’s bodied experiences. (Jarvis, 2019) The word speaks succinctly to the sensorial capture of a snapshot of a concrete experience - part of an illustrative exercise that sets the table for the phenomenological reflection to follow.

So, I can understand Adams’s admonition of what appears to him to be our abject failure to learn from other’s experiences. However, a phenomenological orientation to human experience

provides a space, a way of being and knowing through which we may learn from the experience of others. And by *learn* we can only mean to question human experience with a curiosity that guides how we come to know the world and live in the world. My experience expands in relation to exposure to the experiences of others. Phenomenological reflection invites us into the challenge of suspending our natural attitude, our everyday, pre-reflective, knee-jerk assumptions, judgements, prejudices, conceptualizations as barriers to opening ourselves to the experience of the moment. The late Lester Embree (2011) wrote in this journal, “...the epochē refers to a consequent change in the researcher’s attitude...” (p. 123). The attitude is one of openness of being attuned to our world by defamiliarizing the familiar. It also relies on accepting the givenness of an experience that is outside the sphere of our own knowing and being.

Phenomenology is a *living* tradition. We are connected in our humanity through our collective experience and the potential for experience. Derrida distinguishes between two ideas of the future – on the one hand, the future that is predictable and foreseeable, and, alternatively, the future that is undeniably unpredictable and announces the coming of something or someone that is unexpected (DeRoo, 2013). By deeply engaging with human experience and bringing a reflective awareness to everyday events and to the experiences of others we can envision and inhabit a particular future and open ourselves to what could not be expected in it.

In this issue we share in the richness and depth of human experience carried by lived descriptions- stories- that orient the reader as the authors seek to surface lived meaning. Both Megan Tucker and Wendelin Keupers in their articles invite the reader into shared experiences of intra-action through inter-involving kinship with both the human and the more-than-human. Janine Chesworth takes the reader into poignant moments of clinical and personal contact between the Speech-Language Pathologist and a child. For Line Joranger the contemporary healthcare environment provides the medium through which health care providers’ and patients’ everyday experiences can be described in ways to elevate corporeal, relational, situational, and enactive meaning. Michael McLane takes us into that most common of experiences - the daydream returns to previously known places.

We are living in a time when it is crucial that we learn from the experiences of others. We take Adams’s warning seriously. We may be disinclined to find meaning in the experiences of others and to enrich our lives with that newfound knowledge and understanding. But meaning does not make itself ready to hand. It requires work. Thoughtful reflection and seeking out the experiences of others can reveal the unexpected and the insightful with potentialities to enlarge our world and to shift our futures. This is perhaps another sense of what DeRoo (2013) means when he writes, “...phenomenology is, at its core, an essentially promissory discipline” (p.1).

## References

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