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Words are Sometimes Mightier Than Weapons

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Words are Sometimes Mightier Than Weapons



Seacliff State Beach. Circa 2012 Photo by Edward M. Perez

Edward M. Perez

Senior Capstone

Practical and Professional Ethics

A Research Project

Professor Qun Wang

Division of Humanities and Communication

Fall 2016

Dedication

To my wife Megan for whom I could have never become the person, husband that I am and to my sons that have shown me life as an interconnected reality.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Professor Brandi Kary, Professor John Berteaux, Professor Debian Marty, Professor Qun Wang, Professor Olivia Davalos, Professor Sriya Shrestha, Professor Patrick Belanger at California State University, Monterey Bay and the many professors at Cabrillo College, including Professor Claudia Close, all of whom have been instrumental in my education beyond the canned instruction that is K-12. Although there were some standout teachers in the primary schools that I know meant well.

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Senior Project Proposal

1. Name and Area of Concentration

Edward M. Perez - Concentration in Practical and Professional Ethics

2. Capstone Title

“Words are Sometimes Mightier than Weapons” - A Research Project –

3. Project Description

I have chosen for my senior capstone the Research Project Option. As a Human Communication major with a concentration in Practical and Professional Ethics, I will be using this research to show how previous works and theories written in the past and the present can be cross correlated to begin future vision. I will show how intellectual endeavors coupled with an ethical practice will prevail over past ways of being, especially in Western Civilization.

4. Alignment with Common Theme

The theme of the capstone class is Search for Identity which I will explore by examining how we come to understand that we do have an identity and that we can choose to accept the identity that has been imposed on each one of us or we can, beginning with an ethical foundation found in religious or practical way of being,

build an authentic identity that is “bulletproof”. An identity that stands solid in any situation.

5. Expectations

I will present people specific to the building of an authentic identity either through exploration of the self, or pushing the boundaries that Western Culture has come to accept as the way that civilization is understood. I have been exposed to ideas and concepts in higher learning institutions that have allowed me to see the boundaries both I and society have placed in the way of my progress toward full human expression.

6. Specific Skills Required

In order to complete my Research project option, I will show that I have learned and followed the California State University of Monterey Bay’s Division of Humanities & Communication / eight required Multi - Learning Outcomes /MLO 1:Critical Communication Skills, MLO 2: Media, Narrative, and Ethnographic Skills, MLO 3: Relational Communication Skills, MLO 4: Philosophical Analysis, MLO 5: Critical Cultural Analysis, MLO 6: Comparative Literary Analysis, MLO 7: Historical Analysis, MLO 8: Creative Writing and Social Action. The combination of these core concepts all together will have exposed me to material that I, on my own would not have come across especially

in an academic setting which allows me dedicated time to examine and reflect on these concepts.

Final Synthesis Essay

In thinking about how to proceed with this project I actually began conceptual work back in the very first semester at California State University Monterey Bay. I transferred from Cabrillo College in Aptos, California. The study that I initially began with at Cabrillo College was in the Digital Media Department. I learned how to write HTML and work with programs such as Photoshop and Illustrator. Digital Media was what I thought was going to be my path toward self-expression but the more I learned the more I began to realize that the power of graphical design has a direct manipulation intended to influence the “consumer”. This is where I started to rethink the path that I choose for the ability to provide for my wife and sons.

When I first started my path at the local community college I thought that I might want to teach people since I had many positive experiences with my teachers in primary schools. The first two years were not positive, I received more failing grades than passing ones. I had to go back to life outside of the higher institution because I was not mature enough to attend classes. I was the distraction to the other students. This time away from school was not much more positive because I fell into habits and a circle of friends that enabled my “bad” habits. Thinking back

to this time I do see some gems in the heap of crap that I lived through. These gems are the very experiences that I had during the time my enablers and I had together.

I returned to school this time taking a general education path that if completed would enable me to transfer to a UC, preferably UCSC in Santa Cruz, California. This is where I grew up. I registered for many classes and when I registered for a philosophy class I knew the reservations that I had earlier were in line with the way in which I had come to interpret reality. The consumerism that society had shown me was not something that I could participate with willingly. I had to do it on my terms, as much as I could impose upon the very reality that surrounds us all.

So studying concepts in philosophy such as ethics, critical thinking, and how these ideas could be used to reconstruct myself is where I began to discover a more authentic self. And this is where my education comes full circle at CSUMB because I started with philosophy and now I have narrowed the study to be more focused on ethics, which is foundational to my Buddhist practice. I can now research the very things that have lead me to this very institution, like Latin American philosophy which has shown me the importance of the practicality of the theories of philosophy, especially in a time when the very progress that has been achieved by humans seems to be lost to living life with instantaneous expectations, quick turnaround.

Words are Sometimes Mightier than Weapons

“My voice is my weapon of choice”. This has become one of my daily mantras spoken in thought, whispered under breath. But why, especially when I exist in a world where physical power and direct violence, bullying has given results that the savage look for. Understanding that we as humans communicate using symbols we can now see that we are also symbols. Symbols to ourselves and symbols to society, which includes our families, our friends, and society. These symbols, including our self, carry definitions or specific meanings which place a role and specific behavior to the object being defined. Using the concept of Symbolic Interactionism, a concept offered by George Herbert Mead, I will show how an internal conflict between societies’ definition of our symbol and the definition that we have of our self-symbol begins. This is the point at which each one of us can begin a discovery for an authentic self, one that matches a definition of our self that we know to be true, and maybe with joyous effort and fierce vigor we can envision an even greater self. A self based on education and practicality, a practice in ethical behavior and intellectual achievement. This is how we can be “bulletproof”. “I have a moral vest.” (Fidel Castro, 1979).

George Herbert Mead (1863-1931) was an American philosopher, and social theorist during the early twentieth century. (Aboulafia). He was steeped in the philosophy of Pragmatism. Pragmatism is considered an authentic American

philosophy that seeks out truth according to the practicality of its use. Of course there are many definitions of Pragmatism, “The core of pragmatism was the pragmatist maxim, a rule for clarifying the contents of hypotheses by tracing their ‘practical consequences’.” (Hookway). Mead offered a concept which was later named Symbolic Interactionism by his students and later social theorists. Symbolic Interactionism begins with the idea that we humans communicate using symbols. We understand the definitions of the symbols as the same or similar meaning and react accordingly. These symbols can be through written communication, verbal communication, basically any object can carry with it a definition that other humans can understand so that we can convey messages to each other. Mead goes from this supposition to include people and specifically the definition of our very own symbol as compared with the definition of our self that our family, our friends, and society has placed upon us. “For Mead, the development of the self is intimately tied to the development of language.” (Aboulafia). Through the development and learning of language, especially speech, we come to give “significance” to the words that we use because these words carry a meaning that others agree upon. Here Mead makes a distinction between the self, as we know our self and the individual, or how others know us. He also says that if we only take to our self as the individual then we never take on the role as our authentic self. (Aboulafia). As we grow up we also take on roles specific to our age and

position in our family and society. This language gives us and others an easy way in which to categorize ourselves and others. But what happens when this language, these definitions do not correctly define who we have come to know as our self. What happens when the definitions for the symbols that we have come to know as fact are now in conflict with a new fact, or definition? What happens when these definitions are trying to describe who we are and we have come to know our self as someone else, and different definition? “For Mead, if we were simply to take the roles of others, we would never develop selves or self-consciousness. We would have a nascent form of self-consciousness that parallels the sort of reflexive awareness that is required for the use of significant symbols.” (Aboulafia). And then what is the goal for achieving this self that we only can, subjectively validate? The goal of creating or least identifying an identity is personal freedom, liberation. An authentic self that is not given to us by others definitions of us but is discovered by understanding our role to our own existence. A self that is created or authored by us in reaction to others is the proto-self according to Mead but then we can create and author a true self that we build from the experiences and influences that we live through and choose. The education that exposes us to thinkers and peoples that we might have never have known about otherwise by our limited experiences.

What is freedom, liberation? Why is it necessary for us to be not only the individual but to go beyond to find our authentic self? Is this really of any

importance and why cannot we simply exist as the individual that society has come to define us as? There are many different perspectives to begin in this line of inquiry. There are social ways upon which to see liberation or freedom. There are political ways of understanding liberation or freedom. There are also spiritual ways of understanding freedom or liberation. More closely related to the spiritual way in which to understand what freedom, or liberation, there is an ethical foundation upon which a sort of protection or There are as defined by Karl Marx liberation is, “a totality of manifestations of human existence, tries to explore the many different forms of human sensuous experience, and tries to give free reign to its multiple possibilities.” (Lilly). Liberation, then is the freedom to create and explore all the possibilities that a human is capable of and to be able to expand upon this exploration to discover even more creativity humans are capable of. This includes settings that are social, such as family and friends. This also includes political, such as community building and maintenance. And this also includes, at a very personal level, spiritual, of which there are many iterations of religious and non-religious ways. All these paths of freedom or liberation lead from a strong foundation based in ethical behavior. Here ethical behavior is, generally speaking, a way of personal conduct that is in line with a pragmatic and subjective truth. Truth that will probably be framed in accordance to some earlier practice. Practices that are either gleaned from a religious study, a non-religious study, or from many

institutional influence. Ethical behavior is emphasized here to begin a habitual way of action that is at first in line with what Mead describes as a response by the self to the individual that is defined in reaction to the system in which the self sees themselves in. A role is constructed in fit into this system in an efficient manner but the “Me” that Mead describes as a solitary, subjective identity needs to begin construction in response to systems the individual chooses.

Ethics are foundational ways of conducting ones’ self, vital to creating a social environment that incubates understanding and cooperation among its people from varied cultural backgrounds to lead them toward liberation. This begins with the individual which in turn translates to behavior mirrored by others because of the familiarity of the action. Liberation of a people can be understood in many ways, of a liberation based within a social context, of a liberation based within a political context, and of a liberation based within a spiritual aspect as well. Liberation, generally, is a freedom from any type of suffering that has the possibility to lead a person to complete expression. All three types of liberation are genuinely gained from acting from an ethical way of conducting oneself at all times. This ethical structure has varying descriptions but fall down to a few simple concepts. One, the person’s existence in this world, their level of education, and their capacity to learn. In order for these basic concepts to be offered and available to all other

people, existence, history, and education there has to be a basic level of conduct by all, an ethical way of conduct.

Now piecing together freedom, ethics and a true self we can begin to seek out ways in which to construct an identity that is more of who we may or may not know yet who we are. These influences include building up the dignity and knowledge of our inherent self-worth. For this I begin with the Transcendentalist because they were specifically seeking an authentic thought, body of work that was free from the British paradigm that the U.S. had just gained independence from. Henry David Thoreau was especially critical with power structures, including governmental institutions because of their capacity to “impose” a role, or identity upon the citizens that kept them in a “proto-self” existence. Thoreau based this concern on the fact that the only reason that the governmental institution had any power was because it was in fact derived from its citizenry. The citizens held the within them the value that the government needed to be validated in the eyes of other nations. Next I bring to your attention to understand that our education is very crucial because of the very way in which we are educated will teach us to interpret the world in very specific ways. These ways are almost never analyzed by the student and so permeate their lives and gives the student specific ways of interpreting both old and new concepts. Then I offer, from a specific religious perspective, a training of behavior that teaches a turning away from thought

patterns based on material wealth and material gain as a measure of a person's self-worth. Here in the West we have slowly over time been consumed and have become consumers of material objects. This has allowed us to see ourselves and others as consumable objects, useful in terms of labor production, and net gain or monetary wealth. Finally I introduce Feminist Ethics and specifically the Ethics of Care as offered by Virginia Held. The Ethics of Care and Feminist ethics give us a final push, specifically away from the patriarchal, individualistic point of view that we in the West have interpreted our world with. The Ethics of Care gives us a relational perspective that emphasizes care of others and ourselves within a network or familial setting that describes our "facticity" allows us to also be cared for and to know how to treat each other.

I begin with ethics because ethics gives us a foundation, a point of departure from our "proto-self" as Mead defines it to our greatest self that we can be the authors of along with other explorers of the human expression. There are various ways of understanding ethics, or morality. The one I will focus on first is non-religious. This liberation is a state of mind that is free from negative thoughts that open up possibilities for all to become their true self and express themselves in all sorts of creative ways. This line in education first emphasizes a basic inherent dignity, a self-worth that is recognized by each of us. Also, an education that allows us to express this to others and to discover more influences in line with our

own nature. As Henry David Thoreau says in his *On the Duty of Civil Disobedience*, “Governments show thus how successfully men can be imposed upon, even impose on themselves, for their own advantage.” Thoreau uses the word “men” but the idea can be transposed to all people in that all people can either be authors of their existence or allow something other than themselves to “impose” a reality upon them. The very idea of the possibility of an imposition or an advantage being options give value to the existence that we all are born with. This value of existence is our birthright of being someone that has inherent validity. This validity can be owned by the person or it can be given to another in exchange for something that the person has been taught to believe is of greater value.

On Education we in the West are presented, generally speaking with an education that Paolo Freire calls a banking method of education. In this method of education the teacher or professor is a retainer of ideas and concepts of which the student is an empty vessel that is filled with. This type of education is more akin with memorization and less of critical thinking by the student. In Paolo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, he says, “In order for this struggle to have meaning, the oppressed must not, in seeking to regain their humanity (which is a way to create it), become in turn oppressors of the oppressors, but rather restorers of the humanity of both.” This regaining of ones’ humanity, which is missing by both the

oppressed and the oppressors, through education that is not of a oppressors technique and character but an education based on an equalizing dialogical exchange between the teacher and the students. The gaining of an education where we take upon ourselves the role of actually selecting the curriculum we are at a very critical point because we can become the very persons that have placed us in a powerless position. We can become the new elitists that then, Thoreau said, “impose” our ways of being on others. Freire has offered to us a path of practical education with a mutual authorship.

The second type of liberation, or freedom I will focus on is religious. This liberation is a state of mind that is free from negative thoughts but also understands that we have certain duties with others that cannot or do not have the resources to help themselves. This opportunity opens up availability for all to become their true self and express themselves in all sorts of creative ways because they are not preoccupied with basic survival needs, specifically food, clothing and shelter. On the specific spiritual context of liberation Gustavo Gutierrez’s *A Theology of Liberation*, which was directly inspired by Freire’s work, goes in to the concept of gaining liberation by people whose motivation is not based on material goods, “And so there are emerging new ways of living poverty which are different from the classic ‘renunciation of the goods of this world.’” This is not to say that the basic necessities of life and living are not required but that the value of material

goods should not lead to living in extravagance. Gutierrez points to the poverty of the self when we give our self to the imposition of society and settle for a self that will not express the self that we know is living within, the potential will not be set free.

Howard Zinn describes in his speech titled “The Problem of Civil Obedience” some of the circumstances that have been brought about in history when citizens blindly obey the status quo imposed on them by society. Human liberation comes full circle from Thoreau’s ideas of, “Must the citizen ever for a moment, or in the least degree, resign his conscience to the legislator”, Zinn says, “Let us start looking at the rule of law realistically, not with that metaphysical complacency with which we always examined it before.” Zinn claims a complacency has been utilized when examining the rule of law. If there has been a complacency then people following the rule of law have allowed for an opportunity for others to take advantage of the situation and have given allowance for the imposition of the will not of one’s own and therefore separate from their ethical foundation. When each one of us come to understand that the governmental power being exercised on its citizens and other nations is derived from the population that comprises it then we can, as such, hold that power and wield it in accordance with a nature that is more in line with the ways that we have come to expect of ourselves.

And to give the final possibility of achieving a freedom that can truly break the boundaries of imposed self I bring in Feminist Ethics. Virginia Held, a Feminist philosopher, gives us a view of people as from a relational perspective. A life where we have a mother and father or don't, a sister and brother or don't and so on which give us a view into each of our reality that closer resembles each of our complexities as such. "They are, characteristically, actual flesh and blood other human beings for whom we have actual feelings and with whom we have real ties".

A unifying code of conduct, an ethical way of being must be in place in order for a society to operate at its fullest and this will include each individual realizing their self-worth through literacy, historical, and spiritual education. Thoreau says, "Let every man make known what kind of government would command his respect, and that will be one step toward obtaining it." He is showing that the governing entity only gets command of the individuals respect by the individual allowing for it to be known or given to the government. Each individual has the basic worth of this respect and should step into this rightful position. Thoreau also points out that, "Now, what are they? Men at all? Or small moveable forts and magazines, at the service of some unscrupulous man in power?" He asks, "Why has every man a conscience, then?" It is for the very reason for every "man", person, to have power over themselves first. This conscience is the measure by

which all people can make decisions, which either hurt or help all others and themselves. If this conscience is distorted by a lack of basic education and a contorted view of history then the person cannot begin to take their rightful position as a person worthy of respect.

Others could disagree, as Thoreau says, “Men generally, under such a government as this, think that they ought to wait until they have persuaded the majority to alter them.” Here Thoreau is speaking of a mass movement that could carry the change necessary for progress to occur but in waiting for this mass momentum will only leave each individual in contrary to what their conscience is telling to act on. Individual discord leaves in place an unnatural system that keeps self-awareness from humanity. On this discord Howard Zinn says, “So you lose your perspective after a while. If you don't think, if you just listen to TV and read scholarly things, you actually begin to think that things are not so bad, or that just little things are wrong. But you have to get a little detached...” The capacity for an individual to think for themselves and not just “consume” ideas that are fit for thought is an inherent ability that if not advanced becomes the prison of that individual.

Although people are not all at the same level of intelligence people all possess the same level of value and rights. This commonplace is where to begin in the motivation for a new understanding of reality and how to behave in it. This

motivation will set in motion a new way of conduct with oneself and with each other. This will lead people out of their personal prisons toward a path of liberation.

I believe throughout human history people have been striving toward a common goal of liberation in sync with creating an identity that can express a self that only humans can. How each society has learned based on the courage, and sometimes necessity of its citizenry, to step closer toward this endeavor has been varied and has changed to conform to encompass a more diverse society. One tool that has stayed the same has been the need for a code of conduct that all persons interested could follow with the idea or definitions of each other based simultaneously from the system we find our self in and the need from within each one of us that needs to be discovered. These codes and definitions that create the self have come to societies by different names and from different religions but the morays have and are converging as the planet continues to become more unified, or at least more aware of all of the goings on. And when we choose to move beyond the imposed reality that claims might makes right and that force is the way in which to attain anything then we can truly make progress not only as a person but also as people.

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