

## Life & Mortality: A Teacher's Awakening

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### Abstract

This paper is a collection of pieces that contemplate life and mortality in the realm of education. A terminally ill, eight-year-old boy named Kole and his struggle within the confines of formal schooling inspires it. This piece of poetic inquiry gives voice to questions that need to be addressed in schools today, such as: In the face of mortality, what matters each day in classrooms? Why do terminally ill children need to come to school to prepare for the future? What does it mean to live well with children each day? This writing is a story that attempts to illuminate within each of us the recognition that mortality is nearer than one thinks, even for those of us without a terminal condition.

*Keywords:* education; life and mortality



## Life & Mortality: A Teacher's Awakening

I decided to become a teacher because I envisioned myself spending joy-filled days creatively living with children. Six years ago, I began my journey into teaching. Over time, I realized that my vision of education often lives in tension with the rigid confines of formal schooling. I experienced this discord in my first teaching practicum. There were many joyful experiences within my practicum, but with time, I began to feel inundated with workbooks, unit plans, reading intervention strategies, worksheets, behaviour management techniques, and so on. Seeing how dedicated many teachers around me were to this formulaic teaching regime, I began to feel that, despite my better judgment, this must be proper schooling. I began to believe that perhaps I needed to abandon, or at least scale back, my vision of creative and joyous living with children and adopt the mainstream attitudes that seemed to surround me.

So, like many beginning teachers, I latched onto what I was shown. Many of my first experiences in my practicums involved watching stand-and-deliver lessons that attempted to transmit general knowledge of targeted curricular outcomes from teacher to student. I mirrored this pedagogy and was praised. Despite how rigid and uninspiring it felt, I assumed I must be doing it right. Yet I knew this monotonous ritual of knowledge transmission couldn't be the world I put before children each day. I couldn't hop over the life world carelessly.

I began to study. I found reprieve within educational philosopher David Smith's book, *Pedagon* (1999). In one piece, Smith's (1999) words awakened something within me: "Young people want to know, if under the cool and calm of efficient teaching and time on task ratios, life itself has a chance, or if the surface is all there is" (p. 27). *Life itself*. I need to *live* with children. We need to *be* together. To talk. To share. To mourn. To laugh.

I also found solace within a close network of colleagues who shared similar questions about and visions for education. By routinely connecting with this group of educators, I began to realize I was not alone outside of the dominant discourse.

In 2010, I graduated with my B.Ed. and officially began teaching. I found myself living in the tension between curriculum-as-plan and curriculum-as-lived (Aoki, 2005, p. 159). It was joy and a struggle. I did the best I could to create a place where learning was sustained by experiencing genuine life together, trying to remember what mattered and what didn't. I continued to study. Poet Ben Okri's (1997) words reminded me of what I needed to do each day:

Learn some of the miracles. Survive. Weave your transformations in your life as well as in your work. Live. Stay alive. Don't go under, don't go mad, don't let them define you, or confine you, or buy your silence. If they do confine you, burst out of their prisons with wilder fatidical songs. Be a counter-antagonist, break their anti-myths. Where the enemies breed destructions, sow seeds of startling lights. Keep sowing. Time will reap. Weave your songs by whatever means you can. (p. 14)

In my third year of teaching, despite studying and networking with other educators in similar positions, I continued to grapple with the dichotomy between traditional schooling and what I wanted school to be for children. I decided to continue my education by taking some graduate courses. Now, through these graduate studies, I am gaining a richer understanding of the historical context of education, of how schools became the kinds of places they are, and also

of many kinds of educational research that might inform curriculum and pedagogy, including interpretive methodologies such as hermeneutics, life writing, and poetic inquiry. I have studied the works of many educational philosophers and poets, such as Ted Aoki, Maxine Greene, Wendell Berry, David Smith, and Dwayne Donald. Writing about my practice as well as reading and engaging in these inquiries with other teachers have enriched my work as a teacher. So has Kole.

In 2012, I met Kole. I was told by his parents that he had a terminal illness and would likely not live past his 18th birthday. I had the honour and the immense responsibility of being his Grade 2 teacher. I had no idea he would become my teacher, too.

The collection of stories that follow live within the tension between the stated aims and goals of schools in our society and our awareness of the fragile mortality of all of our lives. Kole illuminates a critical dilemma in our system of education: Why it is necessary that a young, terminally ill boy be required to go to school to learn how to become an efficient member of society? Why should he prepare for a future that he will not have?

This piece of poetic inquiry has emerged from the lessons that Kole taught me about life. I am drawn to expressing important topics through poetic inquiry because of the way it enables events and emotions to be explored in a non-rational, non-literal way. I have composed this piece for many of the same reasons that poet Carl Leggo (2012) writes:

I write poetry in order to share questions and insights with others. I write in order to learn to be still . . . as a way to know the world, as a way to be and become in the world. . . to create, to know, to engage creatively with experience.(p. 380)

In this writing, I meditate on what Kole taught me about what truly matters in classrooms each day and in the lives of each delicate human being. Throughout this paper, Kole offers a reminder of the fragile hearts beating within each of us at this very moment.

*beat.*

Version One: Kole

Curious. Imaginative. Mindful. Wise beyond his years. Has an instantly contagious laugh. Loves vehicles, drawing, creating his own books, learning about outer space, painting and building. Takes time to do careful work. Has cultivated a breathtaking, slowed relationship with time. Inspired by wonder-filled questions and theories about the world around him.

*beat.*

Version Two: Kole's File

Student Number 45324. Six-year-old male. Multiple concerns. Behavioural and medical disorders. Sees an occupational therapist weekly at the school to assist with difficulty cutting with scissors and holding his pencil properly. Socialization concerns. Interacts well with adults but not with children. Often defiant and does not complete his work. Questions the rules and does not sit still for more than five minutes at a time. Speaks out of turn and disturbs others while they are working. Requires support to complete most classroom tasks. Reads and writes at pre-Kindergarten level. Has missed over 50 days of school.

The words of Smith (1999) offer deeper insight into Kole's file:

We speak of "children" instead of Jane, Mary or John, so that John's particular reading problems are deflected into theories of reading difficulty rather than attending to the specifics of John's life. (p. 90)

Kole's file suggests that his academic and behavioural needs are critical while the specifics of his life do not affect his file nor do they matter enough to be noted.

### *beat.*

Kole was born with a rare congenital heart defect known as Hypoplastic Left Heart Syndrome (HLHS). He has already had over 23 surgeries and has spent much of his life in the hospital. He is doing alright now, but his life expectancy is uncertain.

The doctors say his condition is terminal.

### *beat.*

Kole's favourite part of our time together in Grade 2 was the start of each day, when the children would scatter throughout the classroom finding comfortable spots, each clutching a loved book from our classroom library. The children would settle into peaceful spots and transport themselves to the worlds within picture books.

Each morning, Kole would carefully scan the classroom, looking for one of the children in our class who was reading a book that he wanted to listen to. When he found the child with that special book, he would curl up beside them and listen intently. The child that Kole chose to read with would position the book in front of him and read to him lovingly.

The other children knew what Kole needed. They knew that he was only beginning to learn to read. They knew he had a hard time making friends. They knew he needed their love, so that's what the children did: They loved him. They didn't try to "fix" him, or rush to teach him how to read. They were patient. They simply read to him. And inadvertently, these children helped Kole learn to read, by nurturing in him a love of books, by spending time cuddled in close reading to him, loving him into a reader.

Put children and their natural curiosity together with a competent reader with the time and inclination to watch over the children as they come into contact with books and almost unaware, youngsters will confidently declare: “I can read.” Like any other form of learning, learning to read is a relational activity—it depends upon a relationship. (Smith, 1999, p. 71)

*beat.*

Individual Program Plan Goals:

Kole will remain seated for 10 minutes while completing a given task 4/5 times a week.

Kole will raise his hand before he speaks 80% of the time.

Kole will correctly identify 50 pre-primer sight words with 100% accuracy.

*beat.*

When a child is not reading in Grade 2, alarms go off. Intervention is established. Children are pulled from their classrooms for help because educators fear they will fall behind if they do not catch up. A routine of flash cards, phonics worksheets, and guided reading programs are implemented. Panicked teachers breathe a sigh of relief. With lots of rigorous practice and repetitive drills these children might be alright by Grade 3. They can be fixed.

But perhaps, as Smith (1999) suggests, “If we can become more at ease with things not immediately understood, more patient in dealing with life’s essential difficulties and more hungry for a simple love of the world itself as our earthly home, maybe we have a chance for taking one small creative step into the future” (p. 23). Maybe intervention needs to be replaced with time, love, patience and exploring together amidst beautiful books.

Poet John J. Guiney Yallop (2012) reminds us, “What’s important becomes part of us, part of who we are, part of how we live with ourselves and with others—how we live in the world” (p. 106). Children and teachers deserve more important work than phonics drills and sight word recognition activities. They deserve to engage in thoughtful learning that has the potential to become rooted within them and alter the way they live in the world each day.

*beat.*

December. It was Kole’s turn to bring something to share with the class. He began by standing up and confidently lifting his shirt, showing everyone his chest. Some of the children gasped.

Scars covered his chest, stomach, and even his back. “These are my scars from all my surgeries,” he explained.

He told everyone about a helicopter ride he took when he was a baby to rush him to the hospital, and he shared stories of his most loved nurses from some of his hospital trips. He explained how he was fed juice through a feeding tube in his stomach and that he almost died during two different surgeries.

The intimate conversation that was invited into our classroom after Kole’s sharing was one of sadness, joy, suffering, existential wonder, and love.

*beat.*

What matters each day in a classroom where a young child’s days are limited? Or even in a classroom where mortality is (seemingly) distant for all? What work calls to us?

How might teachers take up the careful, delicate work of life? Life that is concerned with stories, memories, grieving, joy and creativity. Life where we are not devoured by busy work, preparation for the future, consumerism and lethal promises.

Philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (as cited in Klagge, 2001) reminds us: “For life in the present there is no death. Death is not an event in life. It is not a fact in the world. Our life is endless, in just the same way that our field of vision has no boundaries” (p. 114).

*beat.*

“Cut along the zigzag line on this paper, Kole.”

“Why? What am I making?”

“Nothing. We’re just practicing cutting on different lines.”

“Why?”

“So that you improve your cutting skills.”

“For what? (pause) Can I be done now?”

“We need to finish this, Kole. It’s important.”

Children in today’s classrooms have virtually no time to simply dream, wait, think, ponder or learn to be still. There is so little opportunity to find one’s original face, because every space is seen to require some sort of instructional intervention. (Smith, 1999, p. 24)

*beat.*

Are we inspiring children to be sustained by imagining, creating, pausing, being joyful, peaceful, filled with wonder, love, and life?

Or are we forcing them to become driven by competition, progress, the future, globalization, consumerism, accountability, and fear?

Who are we inviting into our classrooms each day?

Who are each of these children who wait for us in single-file lines as the bell rings each morning?

Are we letting every part of every child come to school each day?

Or are we trampling these naturally curious, imaginative beings, brainwashing them with narrow worksheets and mundane, autonomous tasks that systematically teach children how to be efficient workers so that they can one day achieve some utopian sense of adulthood?

What does the institution of schooling tell children? It says, today doesn't matter. We're working for the future. Today you're just a student, in the future you can be more.

Maxine Greene (1995) asks us to consider: How many things do we do each day that contribute to our non-being (p. 23)? Filling in worksheets. Mindlessly regurgitating mathematical formulas. Surely children do not exist well in the world while participating in unauthentic activities meant to prepare them for tomorrow. How can we enhance our lives so that we do not exist only to cycle through the mundane tasks of day-to-day life?

As Annie Dillard (1990) reminds us, "How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives" (p. 32), making the moments we spend truly present in this world of utmost importance.

There isn't a set plan that we need to follow each day. It is within this unmapped space that "we are free to move, to breathe fresh air, to understanding this life, to live with one another and with ourselves. To imagine life differently. To be reinvented. To fall in" (Seidel, 1999, p. 13).

*beat.*

Time is neither young nor old,  
but simply new,  
always counting,  
the only apocalypse (Berry, 2010, p. 40).

*beat.*

I wonder how fast trains go.

I wonder what's inside the middle of the earth.

I wonder how our eyes work.

I wonder what I will be when I grow up.

I wonder what a star feels like to touch.

I wonder why we dream.

I wonder what heaven looks like.

-Kole

*beat.*

Kole has his own rhythm of time. I noticed throughout our time together in Grade 2 that his peaceful nature constantly clashed with the formalities of the institution of schooling.

During recess, Kole usually skipped into the school five minutes after the bell, usually followed by an irritated recess supervisor reminding him of the need to stop playing and line up when the bell rings.

Kole missed the bus a few times while in Grade 2 because he would take his time getting there, stopping to enjoy simple moments. One day he missed the bus because he found a fresh pile of snow along the way and decided to leap into the pile and play.

Another day, Kole was missing during lunch time. He was found playing outside when the children were all supposed to be in the gym eating. "I wasn't hungry so I wanted to go play outside early," he explained, not understanding why the lunchroom supervisor was so concerned.

Kole was always the last one out of our classroom when we went anywhere. He liked to take his time when we walked through the hallways, stopping to talk to other children or teachers, or simply to enjoy pieces of art displayed on the walls along the way.

Kole is deeply attuned to a slowed pace in the world and I watched his peaceful nature colliding with the rushed nature of formal schooling. Many times, Kole ended up in trouble with teachers or administrators because of his slowed relationship with time.

One can learn from the stillness with which Kole experiences life. He taught me that in order "to be attuned to life where grace may appear, one needs to learn a poetic pattern of attention to the surroundings of those lives, attention that turns and turns again" (Fidyk, 2012, p. 349).



Kole mindfully enjoys each moment of his fragile life. The structure of school, on the other hand, rushes him along, trying to rob him of these moments of simple joy.

*beat.*

If we knew the number of days we have to live, would we plan our days differently?

*beat.*

Jumping in a pile of brittle, autumn leaves.

Sharing a well-loved book.

Finger painting.

Catching an icy snowflake on your tongue.

“These moments might be appreciated differently were we not accustomed to sacrifice them to the future” (Loy, 2010, p. 19).

*beat.*

It was a bright June morning. Kole slowly walked into the classroom a few minutes after the other children, delicately carrying something in his hands. He slowly opened his hands and whispered excitedly, “A black beetle! I found him before school! I named him Todd!” The children gathered around, curious. The morning’s plans were instantly replaced by this invitation to wonder.

Together, we spent the morning observing Todd’s smooth shell, admiring his long antennae, sketching his shiny body and learning numerous beetle facts from Kole. *Can we keep him in our classroom?* the children wanted to know. Before I could answer, Kole’s voice called out: “If we keep Todd, he won’t have a fair life, trapped in a jar, walking around in circles. He needs to be free. We have to let him go so he can live like he wants to.”

The children nodded. They knew what was right. We followed as Kole carefully carried the fragile beetle outside, thoughtfully placing him at the base of a tree, watching as his new friend returned to the earth.

*beat.*

Kole loves to make imaginative and original books. At the beginning of Grade 2, he would draw intricate pictures that told magical and detailed tales. Once he had filled a book with careful, involved drawings, he would rush over to tell me the stories within his wordless books.

One day, not out of the ordinary, I felt Kole's gentle but persistent finger tapping at my side. He was eager to share his book with me, perhaps more fervent than usual: This time, accompanied by his detailed pictures, carefully sounded-out words filled the pages.

He explained. "I have been realizing that if people want to know my important stories forever, I have to write the words down, because maybe I won't always be here to tell them how my story is supposed to go."

*beat.*

The distracting, distancing vision of preparing for the future, of rushing ever forward, may create a sense that our own mortality will never come and can always be postponed, we can behave as if we, and those we teach, are immortal. (Seidel, 2014, p. 134)

Life cannot be postponed.

Mortality is nearer than we think.

*beat.*

Kole is now in Grade 4. Every time I see him bound through the hallways, I am reminded of the fluidity of life. With inspiration from Kole, I am able to see what is important each day. We are not immortal. Our time on this earth is uncertain. We have an obligation to time and to the difficult, important work of living well today. Canadian poet, Don Domanski (2002) echoes the transformative life lesson that Kole taught me in his writing about "the slender sadness:"

[It] runs through every moment of existence, about the fleetingness of lives lived in a world where nothing can be saved. [It is] entering that state of being with a joy and wonder that comes from that very impermanency, from the absolute dispossession of everything we love and cherish. The wonder is that anything at all exists. The joy is that it does, even if it is as momentary as a human life. We can live this as a mode of attention, we can live within its movements, its cycles and treasure the phases, the round of it. (p. 246)

*beat.*

My Promises

Inspired by Kole

I promise

to breathe

to dwell on the important

to be absolved of the *unimportant*

and to be still

I promise to remain in open spaces with children

where we can create beautiful things

that are worthwhile(ing) over

I will

play explore create imagine

I promise to plan for each day

creative and joyful experiences

I promise to question

Is there life here?

I will listen

I promise to let every part

of every child

come to school each day

I promise to cut the carrot  
when I'm cutting a carrot

I will pause  
I will wonder  
I will meditate

I promise to trust the journey  
and to live well  
*today*

***beat.***

“And this is when I see that this life is a miracle, absolutely worth having, absolutely worth saving” (Berry, 2001, p. 85).

***beat.***

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