

Between Interlochen and Idaho: Hermeneutics and Education for Understanding

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I would like to share an excerpt from a radio essay I recently heard by commentator Bill Harley.¹ As we pick up the narrative, Harley is describing his conversation with a 17-year old boy, seated next to him on an airplane heading west.

“Where are you going?” Harley asked his seatmate.

“Home,” the boy replied, “to Idaho.”

“Where’ve you been?” Harley inquired.

“I was at Interlochen [music camp],” the boy said. “I play trumpet. I played with some of the best people I’ve ever met. And you know what? Last night, I played first chair. Last night we played the ‘Planets’ by Holszt. Do you know it? It’s so big. It’s so beautiful.”

As the boy spoke, Harley noticed that he sat forward in his seat, spreading his arms in an effort to express himself. But he couldn’t. He sat back again.

“Now,” the boy said, “I go home. Back to school. And the farm.”

These last words were spoken without affect, Harley observed. “When does school start?” he asked.

“On Monday,” the boy replied, staring out the window. “I don’t know how I’m going to stand it.”

Harley’s voice grew soft. “Poor kid,” he thought. “In six weeks the world has opened up for him and he didn’t realize how big it had become. Until he got on the plane to go home. And seeing something like that for the first time hurts a whole lot, even when what you see is beautiful.”

Harley’s thoughts turned to the boy’s parents, driving three hours to the Boise airport to fetch their son. “Poor parents,” Harley mused. “Poor parents, who think [their son] is coming home, but don’t know yet. He’s gone.”

As I listened to Harley’s account, my imagination jumped to Monday: the boy’s first day of school. How would I respond to him, if I were his teacher? What would I say to his parents, were I to meet them on “Back To School Night?” How might I help them and their son understand what it means to be a high school senior, not quite estranged from a place, but no longer at ease there? What is this liminal experience? What does it mean for being seventeen and indeed, for being human?

These questions, I suspect, resonate with us all. But we tend not to ask them in the context of school, judging them to be the responsibility of families, religious institutions, community centers, and summer camps. To the extent that these questions are raised in school, they typically are compartmentalized within the purview of guidance counseling. Yet, educators daily engage with kids like this boy from Idaho, who find themselves neither here nor there, but someplace, nonetheless.

How, then, might we educators respond? More to the point, on what kind of *understanding* might we draw if we are to respond fully and well? Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics provides a rich framework for exploring this question.² What makes Gadamer's hermeneutics compelling is the way it enables us to construe "Interlochen" and "Idaho" and to understand why being in between them is educationally exciting. What is Interlochen, in light of Gadamer's hermeneutics? What is Idaho? To appreciate Gadamer's answer, it is helpful to situate it within his overall philosophy of understanding.

Understanding, according to Gadamer, is not an optional behavior for human beings. Neither is meaning something that we deliberately set out to produce. Rather, we human beings cannot help but engage in understanding the people, events, institutions, and practices that comprise our everyday world. As Gerald Brunns puts it, "one can hardly *not* understand."³ Understanding is possible and indeed unavoidable, because we are born or "thrown" into sociohistorical contexts that are saturated with meanings which always already have been interpreted. "Human beings always have inherited a way of looking at things around them long before they begin to modify that way of looking," Brice Wachterhauser observes. "Our very ability to understand at all comes from our participation in the contexts that make reality meaningful in the first place."⁴

Our everyday world, then, is infused with meanings that are intersubjective, publicly available, linguistically constituted, and deeply familiar. We do not so much analyze or thematize the meanings that comprise social life as we pre-reflectively integrate and participate in "ways of acting, thinking, and feeling that are local and current."⁵ In this respect, understanding is a mode of ordinary practical experience. We understand in and through the experience of being involved with and concerned for people and events. Gadamer calls such understanding "know-how," knowing one's way around situations and forms of living (*TM*, 260).

As a mode of practical involvement and experience, understanding is never disinterested. Knowing my way around requires not only that I recognize the parameters of a given situation, but that I have a sense as well of my own possibilities. What is this situation asking of me? How do I stand, in light of what needs to be done? Am I willing or able to respond? Why or why not? These questions may not be formalized or even conscious. Nevertheless, they shape and reflect all understanding. Gadamer calls this type of ongoing negotiation "application" or self-understanding. In his words: "*all such understanding is ultimately self-understanding... Thus it is true in every case that a person who understands, understands himself (sich versteht), projecting himself upon his possibilities*" (*TM*, 260).

In short, prereflective understanding is a mode of practical experience that construes both contexts and relations with which we are involved and also how we see ourselves in light of these contexts. Insofar as understanding is ordinary practical activity in which we cannot help but be engaged, it remains to a degree prereflective and situationally conditioned. This does not mean that we are bound by that which is familiar. Although we tend to take our expectations and assumptions for granted, they are not straight jackets. Presuppositions are more like horizons: situated, yet

open, amenable to being surfaced and critically examined (*TM*, 302). Gadamer calls such awareness, “hermeneutic consciousness” (*TM*, 295).

Gadamer believes that hermeneutic consciousness “must be awakened and kept awake” (*TM*, xxxviii). Under what conditions does prereflective understanding wake up? For Gadamer, the kinds of encounters that tend to “break the spell of our own foremeanings” are those which surprise, question, challenge, resist, or refute what we take for granted (*TM*, 268). Familiar assumptions, in other words, come face to face with “the strange.” In the meeting between familiar and strange, hermeneutic consciousness is realized.

What does this meeting look like? How are assumptions shaken loose? Sometimes, it is another individual who challenges us. Sometimes, it is the world that defies our expectations. Unforeseen opportunities come our way. Desires fail to materialize, are thwarted, or reversed. All these experiences, Gadamer says, suggest that examining our assumptions is not something we can do alone through introspection. It is only in the experience of being practically engaged with people and events that our deep-seated biases, together with the sociohistorical interpretations out of which individual understandings are constituted, become available for inspection.

Like pre-reflective understanding, then, hermeneutic consciousness is deeply relational. But whereas pre-reflective relatedness is an experience of comfortable connection, hermeneutic consciousness can be painful. This is so because that with which we are connected nonetheless differs from us. An “other” is there resisting us, reminding us that we are fallible. We do not like to be resisted, Gadamer observes. “Every person is then a little distressed and doubts himself more than he usually does.”⁶ Self-doubt arises because what is challenged in these connections is never external or incidental to how we see ourselves. Insofar as recalcitrant persons and events touch us at all, they do so because they criticize, distrust, or dismiss our self-understanding. The persons and events that strike us as most threatening speak precisely to the qualities we fear most in ourselves.

Being connected with another thus returns us to ourselves, often by calling up qualities we would rather repress. It is crucial, however, that we acknowledge the full range of our possibilities, even tendencies we would prefer to forget or deny. Gadamer explains:

It is truly a tremendous task which faces every human every moment. His prejudices — his being saturated with wishes, drives, hopes, and interests — must be held under control to such an extent that the other is not made invisible or does not remain invisible. It is not easy to acknowledge that the other could be right, that oneself and one’s own interests could be wrong.⁷

Seeing ourselves thus is important, because this is what allows us to see others. Acknowledging others, in turn, helps us to acknowledge ourselves. As an intellectual principle, this idea may seem obvious. Living it, however, can be very hard.

There is another reason why hermeneutic consciousness is painful. Not only does being awake call up our fallibility. More profoundly, the experience of being challenged by others reminds us that we are finite. Facing our finitude, Gadamer says, is like “being pulled up short” (*TM*, 268). Our sense of unlimited possibility

is startled and even shattered. "The idea that everything can be reversed, that there is always time for everything and that everything somehow returns, proves to be an illusion," Gadamer writes.

To acknowledge what is does not just mean to recognize what is at this moment, but to have insight into the limited degree to which the future is still open to expectation and planning or, even more fundamentally, to have the insight that all the expectation and planning of finite beings is finite and limited" (*TM*, 357).

Disappointment, frustration, and suffering often follow. But being pulled up short need not shut down understanding. While breakdowns and ruptures are painful, they also represent openings for "insight into the limitations of humanity, into the absoluteness of the barrier that separates man from the divine" (*TM*, 357). As an experience of limitation, then, encountering the strange can make us more aware and perhaps more accepting of being human.

Even an experience of limitation has its limits, however. As understanding cannot be awake if it is sunk in complacent familiarity, so conscious understanding ceases if it is too badly shaken by strangeness. In both these extreme situations, we feel indifferent, distracted, absent, unable to fathom or clearly see the meaning of encounters and events. Understanding that is awake, by contrast, requires us to "be there": wholly involved in and responsive to our situation. When we are fully present, we see that the familiar *and* the strange are in play. Acknowledging both, we are neither so paralyzed by the unexpected that we cease to know how to get around in life, nor so lulled by our assumptions that we lose the capacity to recognize life's extraordinary moments. "In this Between," Gadamer declares, "is the true place of hermeneutics."⁸

In sum, hermeneutic consciousness is practical experience in and of the world in which self-understanding is both shaped and implicated. In this respect, hermeneutic consciousness resembles prereflective understanding. But whereas prereflective understanding is only of the familiar, hermeneutic consciousness is cognizant of the ruptures and refusals out of which it is constituted. Being awake thus consists in a negotiation between familiarity and strangeness. This negotiation, Gadamer says, does not require specialized technical expertise. Like prereflective understanding, hermeneutic consciousness is available as part of ongoing daily experience. Both kinds of understanding attend our being human, the former because it is an activity in which we cannot help but engage, the latter because it requires us to be consciously present. Both experiences might therefore be called "lived" or "existential" understanding, understanding that is part of our very being. As Gadamer puts it: "*Understanding* is not a resigned ideal of human experience.... Understanding is the original characteristic of the being of human life itself" (*TM*, 259).

Much in Gadamer's philosophy gives me pause. Most striking is how he imagines familiarity and strangeness. Gadamer's interpretation of these terms differs from conventional definitions. Usually, familiarity and strangeness are construed as opposite and even contradictory ways of evaluating objects that confront us. Objects are deemed familiar when they are close to, in common or identical with, what we already know. Objects are considered strange when they are

sui generis, far or different from what we assume and expect. The strange, moreover, is not typically associated with understanding. Indeed, the whole purpose of understanding is to dissolve, however temporarily, that which is puzzling or fractious. Differences are negotiated until they are compromised or resolved, brought under the umbrella of familiar intelligibility. This negotiation, we believe, neither affects nor is affected by self-understanding. Indeed, insofar as what we are trying to understand is separate from us, self-understanding biases and prevents successful comprehension.

Gadamer, by contrast, holds that familiarity and strangeness are not evaluative terms that we assign objects in order to understand them. Familiarity and strangeness rather circumscribe ways of being oriented in the world, modes of existing within interpretive situations we cannot help but inhabit. Defined as an existential event, the familiar is not a proximal object or something we have grasped before. The familiar is that which we live through as an experience of affirmation and comfort. Familiarity is a condition of belonging, of being at home in the world. Strangeness, no less than familiarity, is emblematic of human existence. That which is strange is not an objective problem we solve or dismiss. Strangeness is an experience of disorientation, exile, or loss. We live through and are implicated in a situation in which we feel confused, unable to find our bearings.

To be awake, Gadamer says, is a liminal experience of being not quite at home in the world, yet not quite estranged from it. The world, of course, is our abode, the medium of our lives. Thus on some level, it always is deeply familiar. Nonetheless, the world in which we live continually exceeds our expectations, assumptions, and desires. A degree of tension obtains between what we believe or hope to be and what the Greeks called destiny or fate. As the saying goes, "Life is what happens when you're busy making other plans." The existential circle or tension between exile and home at once distinguishes our human situation and also is the very condition that makes understanding it possible. As Gadamer puts it, "The hermeneutic task consists in not covering up this tension...but in consciously bringing it out" (*TM*, 306).

With this overview in mind, let us return to Harley's essay and see how we might view the educational import of Interlochen and Idaho. Generally, I think, we would say that Idaho constitutes background knowledge. Interlochen represents new information. On this reading, the boy faces a problematic situation: He must use new information to progressively organize and enrich what he already knows and can do. The teacher's task is to create the conditions wherein to meet this challenge. Music class, for example, becomes an opportunity for the boy to take what he learned about composition at Interlochen and try his hand at arranging pieces for the school orchestra. Math becomes an opportunity for him to undertake a project in which he demonstrates the geometric structure of the "Planets." A problematic situation thus facilitates growth of intelligent judgment and action.

Gadamer, I believe, would respond that while this way of construing the issues may be exciting, it nonetheless misses the meaning of Harley's essay. Interlochen and Idaho are not simply facts or events we deliberately cause to interact. The boy

lives through Interlochen, and he lives through Idaho. Depending on where he is, these places are “exile” or “home.” Understanding what it means to be in between home and exile is not strictly a cognitive challenge or a problem that can be reasoned away. To understand, rather, is to live an inalienable tension. This tension is not a theory to explain or a puzzle to logically resolve. Living through it is not a skill to master, a task to discharge, or a strategy for predicting and managing future dilemmas. Living through existential tension is an experience we acknowledge or deny. Which position we choose depends not only on what we know: it depends on how we are oriented in relation to where we ought to be.⁹

Reading Harley’s essay through the lens of Gadamer calls on us to reconsider “education for understanding.” What might education for understanding mean if understanding were not defined exclusively as a cognitive performance, an intellectual achievement, an exercise in information-processing, or a method for acquiring disciplined knowledge? What if understanding also were viewed as emblematic of our “being” in the world? What kinds of pedagogic purposes, practices, structures, and relationships might we imagine, if we were to regard understanding as an existential position that both expresses and shapes how we are oriented? I would like to conclude by raising four educational issues that come to light for me when we conceive understanding from a Gadamerian perspective.

First, Gadamer’s conception of understanding underscores questions we might not otherwise address or even imagine. How do I negotiate the tension between self-satisfied know-how and paralyzing alienation, such that it becomes possible to be fully awake and present in the world? Where am I in relation to what I need to do or be in order to enjoy a meaningful life? Currently, questions such as these are considered incidental and even an impediment to the “real work” of education. Gadamer suggests that for education, understanding the existential meaning of Interlochen and Idaho ought to be pivotal.

The second educational issue concerns the cultivation of self-understanding. What we understand about events and encounters cannot be divorced from how we see ourselves in light of these situations. How we see ourselves, in turn, opens and limits how we interpret contexts in which we are involved.

Increasingly, educators and teacher educators are exploring the role that self-understanding plays in teaching and learning.¹⁰ Typically, education for self-understanding asks, “Who are you?” This question may seem self-evident. Nevertheless, framing self-understanding this way emphasizes the individual and tends to repress, however unwittingly, the situated relationships through which self-understanding is constituted. “Who,” moreover, becomes an attribute that modifies “you” or “self.” In the process of modification, one’s “self” is reflected upon and understood.

For Gadamer, this set of “Who” questions is confused. Individuals are not isolated agents. The self is not an object on which we can reflect. Self-understanding rather is constitutive of our being, an indication of how we are situated in relation to people and events. Self-understanding is an expression of practical engagement that illuminates and shapes our moral orientation.

The key question for Gadamer thus is not “Who?” but “Where?” Where are we? We are always someplace. Are we present? Or are we hiding? Do we acknowledge times when life pulls us up short? Or do we pay attention only when things are going our way? Do we take responsibility for our words and actions? Or do we fool ourselves into believing we are more responsible than we are? How might our boy from Idaho go into hiding? Would we, his educators, recognize what he is doing? How might we help him accept his situation as a chance to become more alive and awake?

My third point concerns Gadamer’s treatment of the strange and what this might mean for how we define “educative experience.” With Dewey, I agree that experiences become educative when we are able to connect them to prior learning. The principle of continuity expresses Dewey’s belief that education ought to enable persons to deal intelligently and effectively with experiences they have yet to encounter, “to select and order means to carry chosen ends into operation.”¹¹ In this regard, educative experiences are not radically “other.” Indeed, Dewey asserts, “As an individual passes from one situation to another, his world, his environment, expands or contracts. He does not find himself living in another world but in a different part or aspect of one and the same world.”¹²

Gadamer’s idea of being pulled up short challenges Dewey’s vision. Being pulled up short confronts us with the possibility that our way of being in the world no longer works or makes sense. The strange is strange precisely because it is discontinuous with and indeed disruptive of desires and assumptions. Those assumptions that we judge most efficacious often prove to be our greatest deceptions.

This does not mean that the strange annihilates the familiar. Gadamer, no less than Dewey, disdains an “either/or” stance; his concern is to live with integrity “in between.” For Gadamer, however, living in between requires acknowledging rupture. Life’s refusals and reversals are not miseducative. On the contrary: They constitute openings for insight.

Gadamer thus does not ask: Is this experience continuous with previous learning? The educational question becomes: What does continuity mean, now that I’ve lived through a breach? How ought I to go on, given defeat or loss? How do I spend senior year meaningfully, in light of my summer at Interlochen? What is home for me, now that I have played the “Planets?” This kind of education attends to normative questions that we wrestle with all the time. It is less a cognitive reconstruction of experience than an experience of existential healing that can and should orient us to live deeply and well.

This leads to my last question. Gadamer is clear that hermeneutic understanding is not an accomplishment of logical reason. “As a rule we experience the course of events as something that continually changes our plans and expectations,” Gadamer says. “Someone who tries to stick to his plans discovers precisely how powerless his reason is” (*TM*, 372). Indeed, Bruns tells us, the strange refuses to be appropriated by or confined within “the conceptual apparatus I have prepared for it.”¹³ By calling into question what I know and am, the strange “explodes” my intellectual resources.

This explosion seems to be more radical than an experience of “Socratic not-knowing.” It is more akin to King Lear’s experience of exposure, or to Oedipus’ horrifying recognition that he has run straight into the fate he planned to avoid.¹⁴

What, then, for Gadamer is the relationship between understanding and knowledge? Do they speak to separate domains of human experience? Are they complementary, opposed, or irreconcilable? Our boy in Idaho may be well prepared for his SAT’s. Does his competence bear at all on his existential dislocation?

The four issues I have sketched are philosophically interesting. For educators, I believe they are practically compelling. They call not only to our students: They call us to ourselves. Where do we stand?

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1. Bill Harley, “Readjusting,” All Things Considered, *National Public Radio*, 26 August 1997.
2. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2d rev., ed. and trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1993). This book will be cited as *TM* in the text with page numbers for all subsequent references.
3. Gerald L. Bruns, *Hermeneutics Ancient and Modern* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 3.
4. Brice R. Wachterhauser, “History and Language in Understanding,” in *Hermeneutics and Modern Philosophy*, ed. Brice Wachterhauser (Albany: SUNY Press, 1986), 22.
5. Bruns, *Hermeneutics Ancient and Modern*, 3.
6. Hans-Georg Gadamer, “The Ideas of the University — Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow,” in *Hans-Georg Gadamer on Education, Poetry, and History: Applied Hermeneutics*, ed. Dieter Misgeld and Graeme Nicholson, trans. Lawrence Schmidt and Monica Reuss (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992), 58.
7. Hans-Georg Gadamer, “The Diversity of Europe: Inheritance and Future,” in *Hans-Georg Gadamer on Education, Poetry, and History*, 233.
8. Hans-Georg Gadamer, “On the Circle of Understanding,” in *Hermeneutics Versus Science? Three German Views*, ed. John M. Connolly and Thomas Keutner (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 76.
9. I am indebted to Bruns, *Hermeneutics Ancient and Modern* for helping me appreciate this dimension of Gadamer’s thought.
10. See, for example, Robert V. Bullough, Jr. and Andrew Gitlin, *Becoming a Student of Teaching: Methodologies for Exploring Self and School Context* (New York: Garland, 1995); Arthur T. Jersild, *In Search of Self: An Exploration of the Role of the School in Promoting Self-Understanding* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1952); and Jerome Bruner, “Autobiography and Self,” in Jerome Bruner, *Acts of Meaning* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 99-138.
11. John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (1938; reprint, New York: Collier Books, 1963), 64.
12. *Ibid.*, 44.
13. Bruns, *Hermeneutics Ancient and Modern*, 180.
14. *Ibid.*, chap. 10.