

## The Creative Option and *Touching the Void*

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Recently, when the students in my Environmental Literature course were exhausted by the semester's many demands—and when their instructor was equally worn out and ready for a break—I showed for the better part of two entire class sessions the highly acclaimed and incredibly powerful documentary *Touching the Void*. The 2003 award-winning film presents the story of two British climbers—Simon Yates and Joe Simpson—and their daring, mostly disastrous attempt to scale Siula Grande in the Peruvian Andes. It is truly a riveting tale of extraordinary toughness that makes a person feel like a wimp for complaining about such first-world difficulties as having too many papers to grade or discovering on a Friday morning when working from home that you have left your computer chord back on campus, *an hour away!* And I believe I'm giving nothing away here by noting that, after completing the first-ever ascent of the 6,344 meter sheer slope of the West Face—when negotiating the narrow mountain ridge in route back to basecamp—Joe badly breaks his leg. After all, it is Joe himself who allows that his “knee was very, very painful” because “the bone went into [my] tibia [and] split the tibial plateau straight off and carried on up.” (Bloody hell!) Nor am I spoiling your viewing experience by adding that Simon, when faced with leaving or dying, must leave his partner for dead. I may, however, be saying too much by suggesting that the film is really less about a climbing adventure gone horribly wrong and more about the spiritual dangers of taking risks, especially

when doing so in the wild, where, as John Krakauer so incisively states, “mountains make poor receptacles for dreams.”

Much better than I had ever anticipated—too well, in fact—the film dramatized many important ideas common to the literature we had read to that point, including Krakauer’s *Into the Wild*, Annie Dillard’s “Eclipse,” John Muir’s “A Wind-Storm in the Forest,” John Burrough’s “In Mammoth Cave,” Edward Abbey’s *Dessert Solitaire*, and, as you might’ve guessed, excerpts from Thoreau’s (mis)adventures on Mount Katadan, wherein our erstwhile denizen of Walden Pond had the holier-than-thou smugness scared right out of him. Like the film, each of these books and essays examines in depth the idea of the sublime, a concept that insists on humility and, by extension, reverence for the subversive nature of ecology.

I should likewise add here, in light of how things came together in my course this spring, that *Touching the Void* also resonated indirectly with several less literary—though no less powerful—readings with which the students had wrestled, works that direct the blunt effect of their disquieting messages at the head rather than the heart. Among others, these included Neil Evernden’s “Self, Place, and the Pathetic Fallacy” (1978), Joseph Carroll’s *Literary Darwinism: Evolution, Human Nature, and Literature* (2004), and Harold Fromm’s “The New Darwinism in the Humanities: Part I and Part II” (2003) (subtitled something to the effect of “How Could You Possibly Believe in God, Allah, Foucault, Derrida, The Easter Bunny, or Anything or Anyone Else, You Moron?!”).

The enervating and even traumatic effect of the readings, when combined with the viewing of the film, proved to be almost too much to bear. One young woman—our group’s only senior in this sophomore-level class—asked near the end of our discussion of the film, “Colin,

what are you trying to do? You keep, like, having us read this stuff that says there's nothing else, just this. And then you say something like, 'But maybe the fact that the stories are beautiful, or constructed or aesthetic'—or whatever you said—maybe this means there is more than just this." After this diatribe, she stared me straight in the eye from her seat at a table in the back row before asking, "So, which is it? Is there more? Or is this it?"

I honestly didn't know what to say, though this didn't stop me from babbling from that point until the class ended fifteen minutes later about my beliefs in such ideas and ideals as hope, trust, true love, beauty, and, above all, art.

*Whatever*, she and her classmates seemed to say as they put away their notebooks and pulled on their coats before making their way out of the classroom and into the weekend. Trying to undo what our readings and the film had done, I sung out after them as they moped out the door, "Have a great weekend!"

Granted, there were a handful of students who, unlike their peers, seemed as pleased as ever to be heading into Friday evening, eager, no doubt, to party hard that night, to go shopping on Saturday, and, odds are, to sleep through most of Sunday. These were the same ones who had elected earlier in the term to forego taking part in our efforts to go off of the grid for a week, the very same who also chose to opt out of the Ten-Day *Walden* Experiment, one wherein students were for the sake of simplicity, simplicity, simplicity challenged to wear the same outfit every day. "But my clothes are a huge part of my identity!" one young woman had explained in her journal, echoing the thoughts of a classmate who stated that "seriously, shopping for new outfits and stuff at the MOA [Mall of America] is what makes me happy, way more happy than camping or going off the grid or whatever."

Why, I had wondered when reading through their journal entries, were these champions of clutter and capitalism so hesitant to consider other ways of being and thinking in our mechanized and modern society? What were they afraid of? But then, as disillusionment among the all-in gamers began to spread like a bad flu bug, I began to think that maybe my less daring students were on to something. In truth, I was starting to worry that perhaps the unexamined life *is* worth living.

That weekend, I tried to take my own advice, to enjoy a pair of mindless days at home, away from campus and classes and readings and all other forms of stress and guilt; I even went shopping at Target, one of my least favorite things to do. But I couldn't stop thinking about my Lake Wobegon students and their general wellbeing, my worries coming around on numerous occasions to the thought—the hope really—that things would be better the next week, when they would be presenting their all-important creative projects. Of course, because of how I had presented the assignment to them a month prior, I did not have a great deal of confidence that things in Environmental Literature were about to go from bad to good.

This was, I had explained to students on the day I passed out the assignment sheet, to be a “*truly* creative project”; as such, I told them, “it has the loosest of loose guidelines,” which is to say pretty much no guidelines at all. The students could, for instance, “imitate the style of a favorite environmental writer or poet,” “illustrate a scene from something we’ve read,” “put several writers in conversation with one another,” or choose “Option Three,” the option that has “no limits but only high expectations and even higher hopes” attached to it.

Certainly, giving such an unhampered, largely un-assessable assignment in an actual course with points, grades, outcomes, and implications is dangerous. It threatens to expose the

whole of the humanities in much the same manner confronting the materialism of mountains tends to make us modest to the point of timid. It really does. Because when the students start asking hard questions about the particulars of the project—when, for instance, they want to know how it will be graded and whether or not you can give them formative feedback—they are in so doing indirectly questioning the legitimacy of other purportedly more analytical assignments, tasks with ostensibly more rigorous methods for evaluation attached to them. In this regard the students are, one might argue, causing us to acknowledge the void in our corner of the academy, which returns us to the film.

When, Joe Simpson is forced by his situation to confront his reality—when he comes face to face with the fact that he is on his own and nobody is coming to save him—his thoughts turn to his faith, or lack thereof. He states that, though he was “brought up as a devout Catholic [and] had long since stopped believing in God,” he nonetheless “wondered, if things really hit the fan, whether [he] would, under pressure, turn around and say a few Hail Mary's, and say ‘get me out of here.’” But he didn’t. In fact, as he concludes with some sadness, doing so “never once occurred to me.”

And what does this in the biggest of big pictures mean, then, for Joe? “It meant that I really don't believe. And I really do think that when you die, you die. That's it, there's no afterlife. There's nothing.” It’s no wonder my students sulked out of the classroom after we finished watching a film that was to be our respite from all of the work and seriousness of the semester.

Still, not one student during my eighteen years of teaching has yet to confront *me* about how I grade tests, quizzes, presentations, projects, or even poems. None has inquired with any

inquisitional ardor as to how I know the difference between, say, a 93% and a 95% on a literary analysis paper, or between a 14 and 15 out of a possible 20 on a short-answer essay. Nor has anyone drilled down at the end of the term and demanded more information about a final grade, the one that—when added to the others and averaged out—helps determine whether she’ll get a job or be admitted into her preferred graduate program. In short, I have yet to be in Joe’s situation, with no safety net, no excuses, no help, no nothing but hard, cold, indifferent facts. To be sure, plugging relatively indiscriminate numbers into Moodle—or whatever program you hide behind—and then cross-referencing the results with an equally arbitrary grading scale of letters tied to averages does not magically convert any of it into something ontologically real and verifiable. Right? Nor does using a cover sheet or a set of “criteria for success” (or even a rubric!) render the random more statistically reliable and thus assessable.

Concerned the students might ask about how I would score the creative projects, and anxious that such a discussion could become the slippery slope on which we would slide into talk of how, precisely, I score the other assignments, I headed to class that next Tuesday saying Hail Mary’s and wearing my lucky teaching sweater, just in case.

To that point, according to the “assignment guidelines,” the students had 1) developed a draft of their project, 2) written up a brief explanation of what they hoped to have accomplished through art in terms of our course content, 3) ensured that two classmates read/experienced the work and responded in writing, stating what they thought it meant and how well it worked, and, finally, 4) responded to the responses, which is to say squared what *they* thought others would make of their work with how it was actually understood. This process was designed to prepare

the students to 5) present the project to the rest of the class, at which point we would all enjoy and critique it.

For better or worse, nobody had throughout the unit asked a single question about these guidelines or about his or her topic. So, I should've been fairly relaxed. I wasn't. I was uneasy. I was uneasy not merely because I didn't know precisely how I would evaluate the projects; I was uneasy because I wasn't sure in the least if the students—when given such a wide berth—would produce works that weren't simply awful.

The first to present was one of the better-than-average set, an overachiever on whose Summa committee I had participated the previous week; this was the very same student who had asked why on earth I would assign so many depressing texts, a young woman who—thanks in larger part to our course readings and related discussions—was now wallowing like never before in what-if scenarios. Her creative project was, as expected, excellent—a mix of still shots that used irony and juxtaposition to illustrate themes specific to Abbey's *Desert Solitaire*.

The next student's was equally impressive. An Honors Program freshman who composed on the piano an original musical accompaniment to compliment and, as importantly, enhance the tone and themes of Wendell Berry's "Into the Woods." As impressive, I must note, was her use of course-specific terminology to explain how, precisely, post-cognitive narrative theory allowed her to delineate the ways that "music as a form of discourse enhances Berry's text by altering the ways that it is experienced by reader/listeners." Fine. So far so good. But what about the other students, especially the hesitant ones who seemed stunned into submissiveness by the many readings we had discussed to date?

The third to go was a student from the back row. A Theater and Technical Design major who mostly kept to himself the entire term, this student approached the front of the room with a laptop that looked to have been run over more than once by a bus. He plugged it into the projector, folded it open, inserted his jump drive, mumbled something about using sound-bites collected from the internet to tell the collective story “found in our readings of moving from nature to cities to chaos”; then, we waited while everything loaded. After a couple of long minutes, up on the screen materialized a single row of sounds. It was the sound of a lone bird, the waves rising and falling with each chirp and call. Then, faintly, deep in the background, you could detect a second sound, that of a jackhammer. This second sound was likewise illustrated by a bar and waves. Eventually, there were dozens of overlapping sounds and corresponding bars full of waves. We watched in astonished silence and followed along in our mind’s eye (ear?) as a city was built out of the wilderness. Soon enough, we were in that city. Then, it slowly returned to nature, and the seven-minute presentation ended with the sound of one bird. It was brilliant. And without saying a word, the student removed his jump drive, folded his PC, and returned to his seat. Who knew he had these technology skills or, more importantly in this context, this in-depth understanding and genuine feel for the materials we had been discussing?

Into the quiet stepped the shyest of shy students, a young man on the wrestling team who, in truth, hadn’t strung together three sentences the entire term. Short, muscular, and looking both old and young, he worked his way between chairs and tables to the front of the room absently carrying something in his one hand. It was a picture. Or, it turned out, a large painting. He set it on the chalkboard tray and walked from it toward the tables where everyone sat waiting. His body language implied that he brought it in for somebody else. “This is just a painting I did for



‘The Big Two-Hearted River,’” he said sheepishly. The class looked on in silence, as did I from the back row. We were amazed. It was beautiful—a perfectly indistinct and impressionistic rendering of a man fly fishing at a bend in a river. The painting aptly illustrates the story’s scene and, much, much more than that, its overall feel.

“What?” asked the student, his hands in his pockets. “It’s bad isn’t it?”

“No,” said a young woman—one of my shoppers—it’s not. It’s incredible. We’re not talking because we’re speechless.”

“How did you do this?” asked another shopper, impressed.

“Oh, I don’t know. It was easy, I guess. I mean, I’m not a painter or anything. So, I just worked on it a couple of hours each day, you know, until I couldn’t see the colors any more. Then I would come back to it the next day.”

Again the students were stunned, as was I.

Here we had—or perhaps it was just me and my own insecurities—come right up against that void, the knowledge that there is no there there, nothing empirical or even actual beyond the rubrics, letters, grades, or even literature, all of it a big, flimsy soap bubble susceptible to the slightest prick from a single blade of grass or a question from a student.

How, I wondered after the students left the room looking and feeling visibly better than they had in weeks, can a person sit through a class such as this one and not know, rather than merely believe, that creativity is real, that it leads to art, that art is life, that life is at its best beyond good?

And how, I wonder now as I type on this keyboard, can having the risky, out-there, no-net kind of job that we as English teachers enjoy not be proof of something real and great, *something* beyond this page your reading?

My outlook, like that of my students, turned around that day because of the creative project presentations. I stepped back from the edge. After honestly considering the possibility that this assignment and all of the others are, in the words of Harold Fromm, merely another set of “muses and spooks,” I have become a born-again educator, one whose belief in the humanities is stronger than ever.

As for the grades, nobody received a perfect score of 100% mostly because I wanted to give the reassuring impression of objectivity (not everyone involved in our shared undertaking drank as deeply from the Koolaid as I did); that said, the painter and musician came pretty darn close to flawlessness, my gut telling me to give the one a 98 and the other a 97. Good work, gut.