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A Pedagogy of Astonishment—Rubem Alves, Iemanjá, Obaluaê/Omulu, Pearls and Oysters’ Places: Part I

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Rubem Alves was a Brazilian theologian who became a psychoanalyst, educator, and writer of children’s stories. In one of his short stories called *Happy Oysters Don’t Create Pearls*, he tells the story of an oyster that was different from all the others. This oyster could not be happy like the others and was always very sad. The cause of his sadness was a grain of sand that had entered his body. He felt that excruciating pain day and night. As a way to survive the pain he sang sad songs. His songs were so sad that they tormented the oysters that sang happily. “Why is he so sad?” they asked. But the truth was that he had to live with the pain caused by the arrival of that unexpected grain of sand that was plaguing his life. One day, a fisherman threw his nets and took all the oysters, the happy ones and the sad one too. At dinner, the fisherman was eating oyster soup with his family when he felt something hard inside his mouth. When he took that stone out of his mouth, he realized it was a pearl! And he gave it to his wife. Rubem Alves then says that happy oysters do not produce pearls, only those that suffer a piercing pain in the flesh.

In the Bantu and Yorubá traditions, it is said that the Orixá Obaluaê, also called Omulu, is the Lord of the Pearls. There is a story where Iemanjá, the Orixá of the seas, adopts Omulu when he is sick. She washes his body and heals his body with the water of the sea. But Omulu, who goes around the world offering healing and producing plagues, is poor and sad. Iemanjá takes

compassion on him for she doesn't want to see her son poor and his body covered with wounds. Iemanjá gets all her riches, her pearls, and makes beautiful necklaces to cover Omulu's body so he could go around shining.

These two stories can help us figure out a certain pedagogy of astonishment. Four ways to think about it:

First, education as an oyster space that listens to human suffering

The stories of Alves and Iemanjá and Omulu, in such different and diverse ways, tell us that pain and suffering are central issues of our existence. We must be attuned to the ways of suffering in our time. We are seeing so much suffering everywhere and COVID-19 has not only eroded so much of what we knew but also expanded poverty, stretching the already frail social threads of our communities. Our political and economic organizing systems are creating forms that deny the ways we recognize pain. We live at a furious pace of life, giving more to get much less. We are so alienated from nature. Our illnesses shift and expand in uncontrollable proportions. We live in a world of depressions, refluxes, panic attacks, heart attacks, barbiturates, anti-depressants, antihistamines, and painkillers. We medicate every form of feeling and morbidity, we lose the capacity for wonder.

More than ever, we need to find "oyster spaces," to transform our sadness into pearls and songs of sadness and joy to sustain our lives. Education thus can be this oyster space, when hearing and exchange provides possibilities for the remaking of ourselves. Education becomes this oyster space when the hearing is also seeing, understanding, going deeper, creating empathy and compassion. When that happens, the classroom becomes this oyster-like environment, conducive to the metabolization of pain in other forms of life, sustenance, imagination, resistance, and forms of living in the world. For the pearl is that amalgam of the body, mind, heart, and soul that learns from itself, and is able to remake itself from the experiences of pain and suffering.

If the oyster is that place of astonishment that turns itself into pearl, the attentive classroom can also help us wonder, turning the pain of life into a delicate and strong stone, rare and beautiful. In this way, each teacher who feels and even perhaps can come close to understanding the pains of the world and the pains of the students, is also a therapist who listens and engages in the process of transference; the teacher is also a healer who offers symbolic exchanges; is also a clown who activates other forms of lightness and laughter; and is a magician at reordering worlds so that the life inside the oyster can continue the symbiotic movements of life. In this oyster space, the pearl becomes the capacity for continuous amazement with the potential of life that is continuously remade.

Second, education as the oyster place to produce beauty

Omulu had his body covered with sores and that is why he lived hidden under his straw clothes. Iemanjá, as an affectionate foster mother, wants to see her precious son shine with his healing gifts. The queen of the sea creates pearl necklaces that cover Omulu's entire body so

he would be honored, and live happily and proudly. His body would continue to be marked by the wounds of his scars, but now he shines the light of pearls, that like white flowers adorn his skin; the shiny stones made from the pain of oysters now caress his skin and adorn his suffering body.

From here, we can regard education as the care of Iemanjá for her son Omulu. Education as production of beauty that helps us to move around the world. Educators as oysters, who use their own pearls, gestated by the symbiosis of their bodies in pain, and offer their precious, beautiful, luminous pearls to decorate their student's lives. The same way in which students offer their own beautiful pearls to decorate their teachers' lives. Often educators cannot change the situation of their students, but they can pay attention to their wounds, hold their bodies in care, enlarge their thoughts, help their knees to walk and fly, strengthen their hands, illuminate their eyes with the sparkle of astonishment, bewitch them with words of life in resonance with the words of death, and pace their heartbeats in a rhythm other than the destruction and annihilation that often surround their worlds.

The educator is not all-knowing of everything. The hope is that the educator has already learned to be in awe with life and has been astonished in many ways. If that has already happened, then the educator becomes a double path, or a bridge, that helps others to be astonished and is wide open to be astonished by others. If the educator is ready to engage this double path, pause and listen, be astonished by the very presence of the student, the educator will see this encounter always as a thrilling surprise, as the production of desire that changes and transforms, creates mutuality, brings spells, charms, and *chistes* to life, providing tools of defiance and self-sustenance, building paths for new trajectories. In this way, the educator and the classroom as this oyster space will not be voyeurism of one's suffering, but rather be a mutual singing of songs of sadness, a mutual creation of pearl necklaces for mutual survival.

The healer in history is not Iemanjá. Omulu receives healing from the forest and from Olorum. But it is Iemanjá who takes care of the healing symbology, covering Omulu's wounds in beauty so his joy would be full. In the same way, we educators must strive to be like Iemanjá, looking for beauty, for pearls in the sea to put on the wounded bodies of our students. Pearls that come from inside our own bodies like oysters that learned to make pearls, pearls that come from the history of our people and other people, pearls from ancient wisdom, pearls from below, and pearls produced by the students themselves. The pedagogy of astonishment is thus the crafting of necklaces of thousands of forms of beauty in multiple pearls and of several places for entire bodies, both individual and collective, to shine.

Third, education to open ourselves to engage the different, the uninvited grain of sand

Fourth, education that helps us hear the suffering of nonhuman forms of life.

To be continued...

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