

“Don’t Disturb my Masterpiece!”



“Don’t Disturb my Masterpiece!”:  
Towards an Ecology of Learning

By

Paolo Palmieri

**CAMBRIDGE  
SCHOLARS**

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P U B L I S H I N G

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Towards an Ecology of Learning,  
by Paolo Palmieri

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## PREFACE

*The most progressive force in life is the idea of the past set free from its local and partial bonds and moving on to the fuller expression of its own destiny.*<sup>1</sup>

—John Dewey

Over the last few years, I have been in the fortunate position of being in constant contact with an exciting group of learners, namely, young undergraduate students to whom I was supposed to teach a variety of subjects. Soon it dawned on me how oppressive the current system of academic education can be, to the point of negating the essence of its mission. Learning, I finally realized, can only be an individual, free, and autonomous process. In it, the teacher plays the role of an assistant, helping out in the construction of a masterpiece by providing raw materials, tools, and drawing tables. But the masterpiece is solely the learner's achievement. And there are times when the learner has the right to yell at the teacher: "Don't disturb my masterpiece!"

As I quickly found out, there was nothing original in my conclusions. I have borrowed the language of masterpieces from one of the greatest educationists of the modern era, Maria Montessori. She put forward similar views about a century ago. Her revolutionary pedagogy has inspired the project of this book. The decision to write it came when I confronted the successes and failures of my teaching experience, pondering the rediscovery that learning is about the crafting of masterpieces—a reconstructive process that appears to be concomitant with the recognition of a vocation, the acquisition of a taste for interests, and with moral and emotional achievement. That rediscovery pointed at facts that, I believe, are central to all human experience, and perhaps to all biological life on our planet. It cast light on learning as part of human nature. Hence I must emphasize from the outset that this book is not about technical matters such as pedagogy and its history, the advent of mass education and the industrial revolution, vocational vs. liberal arts schools,

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<sup>1</sup> Dewey 1971, p. 104.

or about how to improve curricula. It is a reflection on the meaning of learning and a proposal to rethink its foundations. Thus, I regard learning in a broad sense as the motor of growth in human nature.

In the book, I explore a philosophy of learning which focuses on the learner's active engagement with experiential domains and actual situations. In the first two chapters, I investigate transformations in the history of Western civilization that have exposed the dynamic relation between conscience, emotions, and learning. In the third chapter, I propose an ecological model of learning. In the model, I regard moral, emotional, and cognitive learning as a holistic process, fuelled by an open-ended intercourse with experiential domains. Unlike traditional views that lay stress on the formation of character as a monolithic self, the ecological model looks at character as relational, dynamic and infinitely pliable; in other words, as a potentiality for creating, sustaining, and evolving an ecology of diverse forms of life. Hence the model emphasizes the pragmatics of learning, that is, the creativity of improvisation, the communion of orality and dialogue as opposed to the isolating effect of writing, rhetorical mediation as opposed to direct experience, emotional settings, and the education of the senses as means of setting free the aesthetic dimension of learning.

In Western civilization learning has taken a centric approach—a phenomenon that is clearly discernible throughout Western history. This approach has tended to reduce the learning process to a linear movement towards an abstract centre of interest, such as truth, happiness, or justice. The tendency was not affected by the relatively recent incorporation of the natural sciences into the structure of institutions such as the universities. The lecture, for example, has thrived for centuries while bearing its medieval imprint, namely, the reading and exposition of an authoritative text. Sometimes the role of the teacher has been privileged, at other times that of the learner or of the learning institution, but the abstracting thrust has rarely been questioned. Mainstream educational systems in Europe and North America have all too often failed to harmonize the epistemic, emotional, and moral aspirations of pupils, their refreshing and centrifugal openness towards the richness of particulars, in the name of more or less overtly ideological and/or economic agendas. The book suggests that a renewed attention to the learning process should take centre stage in society at large, thus creating a momentum towards freeing learning from the pull towards an abstract centre of interest. As twentieth-century music has been set free from the shackles of a tonal centre, thus becoming more concrete and open to the universe of sound in all of its manifestations, so we should think about inventing more concrete structures of learning that



do not privilege abstract centres of interest. Such a reorientation would help us accept human diversity in its multifarious manifestations. Perhaps it would also reinforce a spirit of tolerance among ethnic groups.

As it happens with all voyages of discovery, this book too has made landfall not entirely in accord with the original navigation plans. But the island it finally came to was inhabited by strangely happy people, most of them knowledge-seekers, caregivers, and passionate lovers, all juggling their commitments masterfully. This book does not purport to transcend travel-guide literature. It offers an ethnographic account, bordering on a Utopia, of how a new philosophy of learning can help human beings craft masterpieces.

Knowledge acquisition does not exhaust the manifold processes of learning. Yet in contemporary educational settings, particularly within our industrialized societies, knowledge acquisition is especially singled out. Knowledge, emotions, and morals are all too often thought of as dimensions of the learning process that are orthogonal to one another. For example, a molecular biologist investigating the genetic make-up of a species in a modern research facility is typically regarded as an individual pursuing knowledge for the sake of knowledge, or sometimes for the sake of money and career. A molecular biologist does not fall in love with the genetic make-up of a species, nor does she care for it—at least not in the sense in which people may love, and care for, one another. That a molecular biologist may or may not fall in love with the genetic make-up of a species should not concern society at large, so long as biological knowledge is valued *per se*, or else believed to be useful in the search for better medical treatments. Another striking example of received learning wisdom is afforded by teaching practices in modern universities. While in ancient Greece Socrates and his pupils could experience love as exalting their mutual search for enlightenment, modern academic instructors must beware of intimate relationships with their pupils. There are rules of conduct that discourage professors from entering into emotional relationships with students. It looks as if such rules are motivated by the presumption that emotions are but a hindrance to the mutual cultivation of talents and values. Perhaps the unstated assumption is that education is no more than mechanical transmission of doctrines from teacher to pupil. What does love have to do with the cogs and wheels of education, then?

Although the conviction that morality, emotions, and knowledge should not be confused during the learning process is widespread within industrialized societies, the reasoning underlying its justification is unclear. The hidden premise seems to be that knowledge *per se* can be acquired regardless of whether knowledge-seekers feel concern or

deference, fondness or affection, respect or disrespect, both for the objects under investigation and for themselves and other fellow humans. Further, educational productivity is obstructed if teachers and pupils question their socially acceptable roles. Far from being desirable—so the argument seems to go—emotional attachment, the underpinning of empathy, might become a hindrance to dispassionate inquiry and learning. Rather, it is detachment that appears to be desirable if objectivity is to be achieved. This way of reasoning about us and our relation with the natural and social worlds is characteristic of modern Western civilization. It is a relatively recent historical development. It became prominent over the past few centuries, together with the branching out of modern science from the trunk of late medieval natural and theological thought. It can be labelled the *scientific* worldview. The late medieval trunk still nourished the life of teachers, poets, musicians, philosophers, theologians, magicians, and doctors alike. But the scientific worldview forgot all about its own roots, thus growing into a fascinating yet monstrous tree.

This book is based on an inclusive worldview that aims to preserve the fascination with the wondrous newcomer but harkens to the past in order to prepare us for a better future. Its fundamental tenet is that rational inquiry, emotions, and morality are never mutually exclusive processes because they do not emanate from knowledge of abstract archetypes. Rather, they emerge in infinitely different guises from particular situations, and hence understanding their genesis and unity is vital to a healthy learning process. Their dynamics is conducive to richer and richer interactions of living organisms with their social and natural environments; in other words, it is conducive to genuine learning.

Thanks to the successes and failures of my teaching experiences, I have come to recognize that learning is not only about knowing things (whatever “knowing” means). It is also about living through emotions with full satisfaction, and about pursuing values while doing justice to the values of others. Genuine learning mobilizes fantastic energies, especially in passing from childhood to adulthood. But it need not be confined to young age. It shapes our being in the world throughout life. Like universal gravitation, it is holistic, integrative, and multi-dimensional. Genuine learning is a primeval phenomenon, an obdurate urge to resist the separation of consciousness and the unconscious. It continually forges our being human by preserving some aspects of our personality while reconstructing others—a creative process by which we come to mark off our disciplined personae from the wilderness around us.

Because learning is an emergent process based on experience it remains unclear whether and to what extent it can be optimally controlled.

However, means of controlling experience should not be rejected when available. What is to be rejected is the intellectualist fallacy of singling out knowledge as a privileged mode of experience and its corollary that learning can only be the terminal result of following well-defined rules of scientific method. Thus, the spirit of the book encourages both individuals and communities to experiment with original patterns of attunement—moral, emotional, and epistemic. We should all become responsible for working out daring harmonies that need not resolve into the separation of ourselves and the world. We need to turn into explorers beyond the confines of customary cultural niches such as the family, the working place, the church, or the school. The book advocates fostering situations that allow unpredictable qualities to emerge from a plurality of competing factors. The challenge is to learn experimentally which qualities are desirable. The emphasis here is not on getting better and better at predicting which situations will yield desirable qualities, for the efficacy of prediction as a means of moral deliberation might well be a delusion. There is nowadays a lot of a misplaced hope encouraged by the myth of science as inevitable progress towards a better world. Rather the emphasis is on the willingness to risk that an uncertain situation, a cross-section of a genuinely indeterminate world, might not work, for the sake of learning if it does and, in the process, of attending vigorously to the vital tension between our habits and ideals.

In sum, the book wishes to draw attention to the learning process as a transformative force for the amelioration of individual life and for the instauration of a more satisfactory social ecology. The book's project adumbrates a future society of learners, politically decentralized, and loosely regulated both by the right of all its members to participate in the reconstruction of epistemic, emotional, and moral institutions, and by the duty to contribute to a perpetually ameliorative process. Insofar as the book envisions novel scenarios, where learners are valued for their genuine struggle to realize their masterpieces, and where they enjoy the intellectual and political freedoms to remain true to their own vocations, it can be read as a Utopian manifesto for a happier society. Insofar as the book recovers and restores, or rather recycles the concrete materials of past thought and action, liberating them from the bonds of their original use, its intent can be qualified as historical. For, history can scarcely be the objective narrative of past events. But it can be the honest appropriation of the past for the purposes of the present. That is, the carefully laying out of our motives and aspirations for public scrutiny. It is in the struggles of the present that the meanings of past events are objectively revealed. In a nutshell, the vision that guides the book's project is political, pedagogical,

historical, and philosophical at the same time, where the adjective *philosophical* is here to be taken naïvely, in the sense of love for wisdom.

*Outline of the book.* There are three chapters. The first is about the emergence of deliberative conscience in the history of Western civilization and its implications for our understanding of the moral life. The second is about the intellectual mastery of emotions, namely, the tendency in Western thought to regard emotions as dangerous phenomena that must be brought under rational control. The third chapter presents pathways to learning that challenge the tendencies revealed in the first two chapters, and which together I call an *ecology of learning*.

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# INTRODUCTION

When we learn something we undergo a transformation that challenges our presuppositions and affords us the opportunity to reconstruct our lives. I have been a university professor for ten years. The idea of the book was born when I felt the urge to reflect on what it means to teach and learn in an academic setting. But it soon dawned on me that reflecting on my experience called for a historical-philosophical exploration of learning. The book gives an account of that exploration. This introduction reports some teaching experiences that fuelled my imagination.

The constant contact with students from all sorts of academic and social backgrounds and my attempts to explore their universe of expectations and anxieties brought home to me that teaching does not mean transmitting doctrines. The idea that there is a content that is lodged somewhere in the mind of the teacher (or written down in a textbook) and which has to be learned by the student is hopelessly misguided. It is based on the ontological presupposition that the object of learning exists prior to and independently of the act of learning. A striking consequence of this insight is that the teacher must get rid of the assumption that the object of learning is known to him prior to the actual activities in which he and his students will be involved. I will come back to this. It should be noted that the ontological presupposition is rooted in profound social and intellectual changes in Western civilization that marked the passage from late antiquity to the early modern period. The emergence of work and professional specialization in the late Middle Ages contributed to the affirmation of the ontological presupposition. Medieval guilds and universities protected their privileges by establishing bodies of theoretical and practical knowledge that were sanctioned by legal frameworks, which would then regulate the right to belong in a guild and/or teach others. The social innovations brought about by the emergence of capitalistic economies and religious denominations in early modern states exacerbated the tendency to partition human work and regulate access to qualifying knowledge. Education and learning were caught in confessional diatribes and in the capitalistic mechanisms of the production and exchange of goods. Disciplinary knowledge became a marketable good on a par with other spiritual and material goods. But we need not accept the havoc wreaked upon our educational systems by professional learning. To begin

with we must challenge the ontological presupposition and claim the right to reconstruct the meaning of the act of learning.

If the object of learning is unknown to the teacher prior to the actual activities in which he and his students will be involved, then it must be the activities that confer meaning on the learning process. The latter is a social process entangling the students and the teacher in subtle ways. Both the students and the teacher learn together. The learning process is somewhat similar to improvisational creativity. When great jazz players convene together to play, they do not exactly know in advance what an original piece of music will sound like. Unsatisfactory attempts will be set aside. Often they are motivated by the challenge of the process of discovery. Learning together is like playing together in an improvisational setting. But this does not mean that players come to the table in a state of innocence. In fact the opposite is the case. One must have become fluent by dint of playing if one is to feel comfortable when improvising together with others. One must have become fluent by dint of learning if one is to feel comfortable about the meaning of learning together.

I have taught for years a class about Galileo and the creation of early modern science. Recently I was able to obtain the resources to set up a laboratory for the recreation of landmark experiments in the history of science. With the help of graduate students I built an inclined plane as faithful as possible to the one described by Galileo in his celebrated book *Two new sciences*. I take the students in small groups to the lab and show them the apparatus. They perform the experiment and collect the data. When we all convene together a week later, I write the experimental data on the blackboard. Then we embark together on the process of discovering how Galileo might have reasoned in order to extract from the data the law of falling bodies. It is still unknown how Galileo was able to formulate the law from his experimental data. It is all up for grabs. I do not know how he did it. I do not have a content to teach. I must try and hope that one day we will learn together how Galileo did it. Not all of our performances have been satisfactory. However, one was inspiring, I think. Last year the discussion moved on to the issue of small numbers. They are easy to manipulate. Galileo did not have pocket calculators. Arithmetic was tedious in those days. Calculating ratios was a boring task. Hence small integers sound like promising tools for manipulating tables of raw data that report the grams of water collected in a beaker while the balls roll down the inclined plane. We began to prune the data on the blackboard. We eliminated the idiot numbers that would not fit the simple, tentative schemes of ratios formed with small integers. After an hour or so of pruning and of merciless sacrificing unfit candidates, we were left with the



times-squared law of falling bodies. All falling bodies fall along distances that are as the squares of the times of fall. Magic! I am still convinced that of all the weird hypotheses put forward by historians and philosophers of science who have dealt with Galileo's epoch-making experiment, this is the most satisfactory. It took an open act of learning together to come up with a brilliant historical hypothesis.

Modern university education has its own drawbacks. It's a platitude. One of the most dramatic ones is the large class. If anything negates the spirit of learning it must be the large class, the one where you do not see the faces of students sitting in the back rows of the lecture theatre. I teach one that is about the commonalities among the traditions of magic, medicine, and science in Western civilization. It is one of the most fascinating subjects that I have ever taught. It catches the imagination of students though they often do not know what to expect at the beginning of the semester. It is vague and amorphous enough to leave me plenty of room for manoeuvring with the material and teaching techniques. The latest edition of the course was a huge experiment in learning. I lectured in the first meeting of the week and asked the students to do a structured tutorial under my guidance in the second meeting. I had been struck by recent statistics about our young students increasingly having recourse to the counselling services of the university. So I decided that it would be appropriate to raise issues in the class that might be pertinent to their problems. One issue concerns moods and anxiety. There seems to be an epidemic of discomfort due to moods and anxiety among young learners. I thus lectured on anxiety and suggested the possibility that anxiety has a positive side, and that it might be constitutive of what it is to be human. I wanted the students to experience anxiety in a comfortable way (if this is not a contradiction in terms) and learn for themselves. But what can be learned about anxiety? Let us begin with everyday language. For example, we say "he is in a cheerful mood", or "a sudden change of mood", or "the piano was playing mood music", or "she was in a very bad mood". These examples are revealing. Natural languages allow us to cast a glance at phenomena such as moods which are otherwise hard to capture because it is difficult to think of them as objects. Moods are not objects, for it is hard to manipulate them as we manipulate objects. Students who have recourse to the counselling services learn this pretty quickly. If we are in a bad mood there is no easy fix. Moods, then, are ideal examples of the impossibility of teaching contents. They afford an opportunity to test what learning might be like in the absence of a content to be transmitted. I set up the following experiment in the form of a tutorial.

I wanted to gently induce a mood of anxiety in the students so as to create an environment in which they could learn for themselves about it. To do so I prepared a sound track based on a challenging piece of music by the contemporary American composer Steve Reich (*Different trains*, for string quartet and tape). Reich says that the “concept for the piece comes from my childhood. My mother moved to Los Angeles and my father stayed in New York. Since they arranged divided custody, I travelled back and forth by train frequently between New York and Los Angeles from 1939 to 1942 accompanied by my governess. While these trips were romantic and exciting at the time, I now look back and think that, if I had been in Europe during this period, as a Jew I would have had to ride very different trains. With this in mind I wanted to make a piece that would accurately reflect the whole situation. In order to prepare the tape, I had to do the following: 1. Record my governess Virginia, now in her seventies, reminiscing about our train trips together [...] 3. Collect recordings of Holocaust survivors Rachella, Paul and Rachel—all about my age and now living in America—speaking of their experience. 4. Collect recorded American and European trains sounds of the 1930s and ’40s. [...] The strings then literally imitate the speech melody. [...] The piece thus presents both a documentary and a musical reality, and begins a new musical direction” (Steve Reich, *Liner notes*, from the CD *Different trains*, Elektra/Asylum/Nonesuch Records, 1989). The piece is about half an hour long. It defies description. It is mesmerizing and thrilling. The tutorial consisted in listening to the piece of music trying to understand the words and fragments of dialogue that were part of it, write them down on the page of the tutorial book, figure out a situation and finally come up with a personal story. The students knew that they would have to turn in the assignment as a part of the course grading requirements (though of course the tutorial was not graded). But they knew nothing of the structure of this avant-garde piece, and they would have been unlikely to recognize it. So they would not have been helped by prior knowledge. The following are a few examples of the responses that students came up with during the twenty-seven minutes of the anxiety tutorial.

“Everything that came to mind was very indistinct, hazy. Strangely, I felt my family and loved ones with me. There weren’t more than a few of us. I don’t know where we were or where we were going, but I knew we were going toward something. Not a definite thing, but toward more of a feeling, a positive feeling or energy. We walked toward this, and we were together, just us. I don’t know what will happen to us upon arrival, or if we will even get there.”

“Two guys from New York are travelling to Los Angeles on a train. They stop in a Chicago hotel overnight and are thankful for their stay. The next day, when they approach LA, they gain a feeling of control in their lives. They anticipate living in Los Angeles to be like living on ecstasy. When they enter the city, they realize their presumptions have been proven to be true. Everything moves very fast in Los Angeles and the two of them could not handle it. They find themselves frightened on the streets, smoking cigarettes and acclimating to their new world”.

“I'm travelling with a small group of about three people, bottled up in the fastest thing: a cab. The cab came from New York and was going from New York to Las Vegas. There was a train captain with us who drove from Chicago to New York on the midnight train. Little did we know that we were actually in a time travelling cab! The cab travelled back to the year 1959, then to 1940, then forward to 1941, then back to 1940. We began to lose track of where we were in time. A warning through the cab radio told us that the Germans were invading. It might now have been 1917, and to calm ourselves down we practiced acupuncture with plastics. I looked out the window and saw a black rose in a graveyard-themed setting. I was sure it meant death, and a maelstrom of emotions overtook me. I wanted the driver to tell me what to do. I grabbed my gun and didn't let go, shouting. Don't move! I said don't move! He told us that his machine was dirty, and that things that are not neat will leave us trapped in time like a limp fish floating in a lake. I don't know where we are anymore. I hoped we would be saved, but I smelled smoke. We were lost in time—forever!”.

“There were four of us. I think it was 1939, no...1940. 1941? Doesn't matter. 1941 I think it was. We had been lost at sea, our ship destroyed. We floated there in our raft that night. The reflection off of the water made me feel as if we were floating in the full moon. Behind us sank the wreckage of our ship, smoking. Pure sadness on my friends faces. The enemy picked us, put us on a boat, and sailed us straight for land. When we hit the docks they filed us onto trains. Whistles blew constantly in the distance. Trains every time. No air-raid warnings; no intruder alerts. No one was coming for us. We rode in the train for a long time. When you walk somewhere, you understand where you're going and how long you have been at it. Not in a train. In the cars you can't see. Can't hear. What the hell was going on? We had no way of knowing. Sadness again. You could feel it. Off the trains we went. Signs in a foreign language lined the station. Were these the camps? Scenes of genocide. We didn't get much of a chance for rest. They called names then. I ignored my name as much as I could. The main officer there paused towards the end and asked my name.

When I told him he said that was my fourth call. I didn't understand. Herded into a long road with fences on either side, we headed towards the camp. And through tall towers billowing smoke (or was it ash?) we saw the full moon again. I saw friends' faces in that moon. Sadness reflected and magnified. Every full moon I saw them. And every full moon I cried".

"I was walking down the street but the night was dead. There was not a sound to be heard anywhere not even in my head. All we could hear was silence. I was with three other people. A psychologist, a clown, and a chief. An eclectic group we were determined to conquer the darkness that was a head. We were travelling to a tower in the distance, the only light we could see for miles. We hope that it were a refuge, a place of peace and of light but we found out it was just resting station. For we were only at the start of our journey, a journey to a destination that was unknown but we sojourned on knowing we could escape the darkness".

"Between 1939 and 1940, a gang from New York and myself travelled from New York to Los Angeles. We did this to get away from the gambling problem in New York, which the whole gang was involved in. I asked if everyone was sure, there was eleven of us, not including myself. Everyone agreed that they were sure. We caught a train in New York to take us to Los Angeles. When I got onto the train, I had a very uneasy feeling that someone's life was going to end. When we finally reached Los Angeles, we ran into four men. These four men were trouble, but we decided to stay with them due to us not having anywhere else to go. When we moved into their place, something tragic happened. We woke up one morning to find one of the men yelling, 'Did I do this?' As we looked on the bedroom floor we saw four black girls laying on the floor. Dead. One of the women who was with these four, made it out alive, and reported the crime to the police. When the men were in a line up, they pointed to one of the men and said, 'It was him!' As his mother looked on, she began to cry that, 'He was a good boy!' As the police charged him with the crime and took him away, he was crying and yelling for his mother not to leave".

"I pictured the story being in reverse order. The story started out as my flying on a plane, which was landing in New York. The grass finally looked green in America and the skies were clear as can be. New York was very bustling and confusing at first to me, but it was very energetic and lively, unlike the homeland that I had left behind. After staying in New York for only a short amount of time, I had to continue my journey. I boarded a freight train to Los Angeles. For the most part, the train ride had been quite pleasant. However, all of a sudden, I felt an eerie feeling in the air. There was a dangerous-sounding noise approaching the train from beyond. In no time, there was a very loud thump and violent shake on the

train. Something very strange was happening... 'Oh, no!', something had hit our train. Suddenly, before the destruction continued, the scene suddenly shifted, and I found myself on a new, safe train. The new train was approaching Chicago. The year was 1941, and I found myself beginning to live the American dream. New Music created new setting, etc. but is still related to the first story. Although, I am not Jewish in real life, I pictured myself as a Jew in Europe, right as World War II was breaking out. The story started out very normal. I was in my small little house one morning, preparing breakfast with my family. Suddenly, the Germans had dropped a bomb in our town. My eardrums ached and all I could hear was a high-pitched, continual ringing noise. Once the ringing diminished, I heard numerous sirens, screeching tires, and muffled voices. My family (mother, father, and two siblings) were running frantically around the house in chaos. For some reason, my body was motionless. I was frozen in my spot, while my mind was racing. I experienced every emotion possible during that moment. I then heard, 'The Germans are coming!' Then, almost immediately, I heard, in an accent, 'I hate the Jews,' and 'Damn bastards.' Next, the door of my home slammed open, the room being flooded with German soldiers. I made eye contact with both of my parents, who simultaneously screamed; 'Go!', as they were grabbed by the soldiers. I yelled, 'Don't leave me!', while back away from the scene. Then, I turned, ran to the back door, and never looked back again. I ran and I ran, while being cursed with the thoughts of leaving my family behind. I finally ran towards a frantic group of fellow Jews who were boarding buses, in an attempt to escape the German attack. A man grabbed my coat and pulled me onto the bus. I said, 'But, but, but....my family!' He looked me dead in the eye and said these dreadful words: 'You're never going to see your family again'. I continued onto the bus and my fantasy came to a sudden halt".

"This story begins in the 1940s. During this time I am travelling with three other people from my family, my mother, my father, and my younger brother. We are travelling by train because at this point in time, it is the fastest form of transportation. Currently, there is a war going on in America, so my family and I must relocate as soon as possible. We relocate to numerous cities, trying to stay safe. We are originally from Chicago so we depart from there. We then travel to New York; from there we go to Los Angeles. Eventually, the war is over, and there is peace. America is once again safe. Once we are sure the war is over, we begin our journey home and travel from Los Angeles back to New York. Finally, everyone was back home safely, and there was no need to run away; no need for trains, and they were gone. The hardships were in the past and all

that was heard was a beautiful girl's voice. Everyone loved to listen, as it brought peace and tranquillity".

"Every year, a family of 3 travelled together for vacations. They would drive and take flights and trains to New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles. The mother, father, and son alike enjoyed the family vacations very much. Their vacations were perfect up through the year 1939 and even 1940. However, in 1941, WWII began to affect their travels. No longer could the family travel across the country worry free, as the nation was in an alerted state of war. One particular day, there was a warning for an air-raid, and the sirens could be heard all over town. The son associated these sirens with the whistles of the trains he would always ride with his parents on vacation. He didn't know any better at the time, so the air-raid got him excited to get up and start exploring. As much as his parents tried to restrain him, telling him not to move or even breathe, the son escaped their grasp and ran out into the neighbourhood. The parents, instead of running after their son to save him, decided to leave him to fend for himself".

"Words jotted down: dates, year 1930s, 1940s, travel, Chicago, Los Angeles, New York, sirens, explosion, train. Sometime around the year 1934 I embarked on a cross-country journey with my male companion, our small beagle, and a friend. We are leaving the warm sunshine of Los Angeles en route to New York City. The first leg of the journey is by train. The compartments are small and the monotony creeps on as the landscapes blend together. There are several interesting characters on the train, mostly gentleman smoking cigars and engaged in raucous conversation. We are all relieved when after several days we arrive in Chicago. Our dog Archie is pleased with the taste of fresh air as we take in the charming riverfront ambience that Chicago has to offer. We then travel a short while to my childhood home in the near suburbs. We claim the rugged car bestowed to me by my mother after my father's recent death. After packing up the car and saying our goodbyes, we embark on the last leg of our journey to our final destination of New York City. The travel days and our momentary stops blur together as the anticipation for our arrival builds. As we descend upon the city through a hulking tunnel, the change of pass is immediately noticed. There are people everywhere, all types of sirens in the distance, and the afternoon sun darting in between the large buildings. We are salivating at the surroundings, eager to join the masses and begin anew".

"A small group of people are running, running to get away from the troubles behind. They run as fast as they can. Their new life is ahead. The group runs to catch a train from New York to Los Angeles, somewhere far away from what they know. The arduous trek of the 1000s of miles is sleepless, just hoping the evasion pays off in the long term. It is a constant

sweat looking at their casting shadows behind, hoping not to see any pursuit, but also looking at the future with the same level of worry about what may come of them. They stop in Chicago after riding/hiding for a year time. To their dismay, the city is overrun by an invasion they had feared would not follow. They did not escape. The roads are black from the trodden souls that have been stuck as they now are. This is not their way to a new home, but one worse than before. They are told not to move because they have just become the newest slaves of the region. After years of work, their plan of escape finally took its shape, one that could surely let them live long and prosperous lives on the outside. The slaves run in the middle of the night. The plan is executed as well as it possibly could have been, with one exception. They did not have a chance from the very beginning. They had been failed before they were even given a chance by one fellow slave, who could not hold up against the angst of the overly absurd oppression added to what had already been her everyday life. They beat her to death, and before they could do the same to some other lowlife they gave two shits about, they had found her notes regarding the escape under her bunk. The group ran right into a trap of sorts they couldn't have even imagined. All fifteen people of that courageous group were burned alive one by one. The oppression was over".

"It is France 1940-41 and France is about to fall to the Nazis. The Germans are invading and Europe is in danger. Tyranny is spreading from Moscow, to Berlin, to Oslo, and now Paris. This I do not believe will stop just at Paris. We must get out of Paris now and get out of France. Additionally, we are travelling from Paris with 10 other refugees. We are attempting to flee on the fastest train that France has south and eventually out of the country to Africa. However, we hope to eventually get to New York and then possibly take a train to Los Angeles or Chicago. The German forces have begun attacking the capital and we have to stay down in the underground platform to stay safe from the shelling. The train is late. I get frustrated because I like a train on time and unfortunately the train has stopped somewhere down the line due to the fighting. My uncle, to distract us from the current situation, tells a story of when he was in America in 1939, I believe, and he took a freight train from New York that he thought was quick. He believes the French trains are much faster. As we continue to wait for the train someone screams and the entire station shakes from the shelling. The tunnel down the line collapses and injures several people. Smoke fills the station air. The other people in the station begin screaming and become hopeless and hysterical saying that we can't get out. I try and send for help but the stairs are blocked. The roof collapsed preventing us from escaping. I come back to my travelling party

and say in a silent hopeless way: “We can’t leave”. As the smoke fills the station I begin to think there must be some way out”.

“In 1940 a small group of about 10 people are travelling with me to the wild west. Along the way we pick up some new members thinking that the more people the better. Part of our journey was blocked by a mountain range so we decided to take a shortcut through the canyon instead of travelling around the mountain. But on our way through the canyon we ran into some trouble. The trail led us to an abandon looking camp. I saw a little cabin with the door open and went in to explore. I and one other person were looking around in the dark and found a treasure map laid out on the table. Before we could react a man appeared in the room with us and asked us what we were doing there. We told him we were just passing through and didn’t mean to snoop but it was too late. He called out to the rest of the bandits hiding in the canyon and they began to attack our group of travellers. During the fight someone managed to escape and go for help while the rest of us fought off the bandits. We lost a few people in the battle but we finally overcame them with a little help from the neighbouring town members. I live out the rest of my life normally until I turn 41, then I decide to turn the experience in the canyon into a book. I write an eight part series of adventure books and get rich. The rest of my life is spent drinking wine, recounting the glorious battle victory and doing whatever else I want”.

“It is 1939 and I’m told to take a train, the best, fastest. It will go anywhere from New York, Chicago, even to Los Angeles. The train is packed and everyone is a little on edge, but still excited to go to any of the places. The type of people on the train are Jewish. They didn’t lie, the train is fast, fast like lightening. When we get there we’re told to stand on this black road, the Germans start invading. People are scared, screaming, and crying. People are falling to the ground, this is cut throat. There has now become a river of people on the ground. The ones that haven’t died are told to move, I don’t understand what is going on. This is all too strange. Days go on, I’m not sure how many, it could be 1940 or 1941 at this point. We live like we were dirt and slaves. I have rags on, a number instead of a name, and I lost a significant amount of weight. This isn’t fun, I wish I had my old life back. I was a respectable person and well feed. They lied, I thought I was going to America and go to one of the big cities, this is definitely not that. I stopped making friends in this place because sometimes they don’t come back and I can’t imagine what happened to them. Today I’m getting led to a building with strange human beings with masks on in front. I don’t want to think what is going to happen, it can’t be good. This is it, they’ve showed us. We’re all going to



die. Look at all these people, my friends, they were all together in this room. It's started to smoke in this building and after a while it began to burn my skin. I can't see, but I hear people screaming and crying. I start to cry it hurts. I'm going to end it here because I put myself in the story. I was in that building, I died and so I can't write the ending because a dead person can't write".

"It is 1939 and fate is taking me away on this quick move. My fiancé does not want me to go. I got home and he was outraged, but I told him fate has a way of bringing people back together so I must go. It is now morning and I am taking the train. I see the smoke in the distance and then all of a sudden the train is here. He started to cry but I told him life goes on. This journey will take 4 days and 4 nights as I travel from New York to Los Angeles. First I will go from New York to Chicago and change trains to L.A. This journey is just what I need to reflect on life. This is the fastest train in the world, and I thank God because I need to escape my life back home as fast as possible. In 1942 my fiancé and I meet again. I am emotionally more stable now and am ready to be the wife he deserves. Fate brought us back together and we live happily ever after".

"Brought together by a phone call, 4 of us were aboard a train. It'd been a while since we'd seen each other, but it was comforting in those times of hardship. It was 1941, and everything seemed to be falling apart right in front of us. From war to work.... To the event we had all been summoned for. We were on our way to New York to see an old friend, a man that had been there for all of us through all sorts of hardship. There was one thing different about this visit though, something none of us wanted to admit was real. The reason for this trip from our respective cities (Chicago, Los Angeles, etc..) was for a funeral. We showed up to the funeral home which was on the shore of Long Island. The procession was that of sadness and loss, a man of such stature departing from us was almost unbearable. The man's favourite colours were that of a contemporary taste, very dark, very simple. The decor of the coffin was as mysterious as the history of his life. All black, with hints of white in various places, but there was one small thing that caught my eye. Across the man's chest was a sight I hadn't expected... Black roses. It was a beautiful evening as the sun fell below the horizon, casting shadows on the grieving individuals slowly recessing back into their cars. I stood thinking about the times he used to take me to Yankees games as a child. I was going to miss him immensely. Caught deep in thought, I began to wander around the grounds and towards the shore. There she was. The one girl I had always thought was so strong... So nurturing. She was smoking a cigarette while the sun threw its dying rays on her. I began to approach her

when all of a sudden she started to walk closer to the water. I stopped and just watched wondering what she would do next. She finished her cigarette and quickly reached into her purse for another one. Or so I thought. What she did next was unimaginable and still haunts me to this day... The girl's funeral was almost harder than the man's was a week before. It seemed as if every good piece of my childhood was being taken away from me all at once. The funeral was held at the same place with most of the same people and the same décor, a majestic tribute to the relationship the two had together. There again across her chest were the symbol that I now think of in times of grief, black roses. It was a hard goodbye as the four of us departed. We hadn't seen each in so long only to be brought back together by such a tragic event. I had missed my siblings, it was hard being separated for so long with no contact. But I missed the two who's funerals we'd attended the week before even more... Good bye dad. Good bye mom. I love you both. Now rest in peace. I hope to see you again some day”.

“I can recall a story my grandmother once told me that happened back in the early to mid twentieth century during WWII. She told me the story of her family's arrival in America from Poland, a place to flee and to fear living within back in those times. Her family consisted of two parents and eleven children, not including the ones that had died during childbirth or from miscarriage. They were originally supposed to embark on the voyage of the Titanic, but due to some unforeseen circumstances, ended up missing the boat. Lucky for me. When they arrived that fateful day in Chicago, from a shoddy boat ride across the Atlantic, they knew no English and only spoke Polish in their house. They lived day-to-day, and the eldest got the first picks of food and the youngest the last. My grandmother was second to youngest, but she was the first born in America two months after their life changing journey. My grandmother failed all of her classes—mostly because her English was poor and her living circumstances were little better—and she ran away from home when she was only fourteen. She worked odd jobs (they offered very little during that time for women and they were menial at best) and eventually saved up enough to afford her own place. She ended up marrying a truck driver and had three children, two boys and one girl. The little girl would be the youngest and would never know her father. He died six months after her birth from a heart attack (the sound of sirens in the background) and my grandmother was forced to raise three children on her own. She would never remarry. Hardly did I know, that little girl with no father would become my mother and she would join the Navy at 21, where she

would meet her husband-to-be and soul mate, my father. The slightest turn of events and I would not be here today. I guess for that, I am thankful”.

“The three of us go on an adventure. Me, my boyfriend, and the girl with yellow skin and eyes. He is captivated by the girl with yellow skin and eyes. He describes her eyes as flames, going slowly, smoking, smoking, swaying, swaying. You may say my boyfriend did what. But you don't understand. He is fascinated by her because she is mysterious. He is repulsed and entranced by her yellow skin and eyes, as if her being was a scab. He just can't get enough of the 107-year-old who looks young enough to be playing on the swings in a schoolyard. Boys, so hard to understand. But this story is not about him, or her. Listen, and I will tell you of this adventure... I become aware that I am in a funeral parlour, which reeks with what can only be described as a heavy black roses scent. Funeral parlours are ideal wormholes for travel through space and time, you see, they already serve as portals for arriving bodies and departing souls. It is quite cold. Around me I sense cold things. I guess I can no longer call them people. But they may be too. I seem to be able to hear their thoughts, so they must be conscious. Ow! Ow! they say. I wonder what has hurt them, what their stories are. I turn my eyes to look beyond the boxed corpses, and realize that there is no door to the place where I am, and in the room there are no walls. On all sides the funeral parlour is surrounded by water, it's own little island. I remember what my great grandfather told me once. He said, don't visit the island of death, once you go, you never return. Death is not a state, but a place. One of isolation. But then I remember that my great grandfather died in 1940, long before I was born, and could not have told me that. I look around and my boyfriend and the girl with yellow skin and eyes are gone. I am alone. Around me stretches an eternity of water”.

“If, in my cognition, there were ever a destiny more strewn with tyranny, then I am not aware. This is the tale of my being sanctified. In light of terror, I can breathe. Back in 1940, maybe 1941 the Germans got me. They told me you will be separated, and proceeded to take me that way to their crazy scientist... called himself the Boddhidharma of the new world religion. This man was raw terror, as if asbestos ran through his blood. Said something about the Axe-hand Aura and how it would make me see the way. I would be his greatest investment, the making mark on his epitaph. I was injected with a strange substance, and before I could ask: ‘Is this insecticide?’, I felt like I was in a snowstorm with a flamethrower spewing its blaze upon my eyes. My mind was filled with black holes, and my mouth was dryer than an ashtray. At this point, I began to experience many deep voices promising me power, saying that I

would be a great murder weapon against the Russians. I tried to scream: ‘I don’t want you!’, but the evisceration of my soul had already commenced. He is at the door, trying to get into me. He tells me, you see destiny; and thus I see destiny. He has taken over my mind and my soul. We exist, and we shall obey. Such a sweet and bitter nirvana. We stand in awe of that which cannot be seen and we respect with every fibre what cannot be explained, yet I have been given the gift of sight and understanding. Thus we reign”.

“The light begins to fade as the sunsets on another day. My companions and I begin to make camp so that we can survive the night. As the few tents we have begin to take shape and rise into the sky, our memories of the journey begin to come back to us. How we started with so many more than we have now. How our once large village of tents that would spring up every night now looks like more of a rundown ghost town. We look around at each other and see the faces of people we have known our whole life and people we just recently met but that fate has thrown us together tighter than we ever thought possible because of the hardships we have faced together. As I settle into my blankets, the anxiety of what tomorrow will bring begins to seize control of my body. All of my muscles begin to constrict and my breathing becomes forced, short stabbing breaths just trying to get some air into my lungs. But then sleep comes and I escape from the world for a few peaceful hours to try and recharge so I can better face the coming dawn”.

“There were two of us travelling from New York to Los Angeles. We had been messaging for a while and decided to take the trip. We decided to take the train, so it would be a long trip and on the way we stopped in Chicago. We went to get a hotel for the night and found this nice little place that wasn’t too expensive. We got our room, said thank you to the front desk worker and went up to get some sleep. The next morning, I got an awful call telling me that there had been a death in the family and I needed to head home to New York. We had to cut the trip short and so we headed to the airport to get a ticket back to New York. Security was a big hassle, as we had packed for the train and not an airplane. The security people asked me why I was going to New York, and I said I was headed home for a funeral. After finally getting through, we were fortunate to just barely make it on the plane. When we made it back to New York, we headed home to get ready for the funeral. The next day, we went and got some flowers and then went to the funeral. It was all very sad and I had to comfort my sister who was having a really hard time. There were a lot of people who showed up to pay their respects and share stories of how their lives had been affected by my family member. It was actually quite

beautiful to see how so many people felt. The next week went by slowly, each day seeming slower and slower than the one before, but before I knew it, it had been a whole week since the funeral. I went back to work and went on with my life. It was not until my trip to Los Angeles the next month that I really started to think about it again”<sup>1</sup>.

And now, how can you begin to delimit and define the objective contents of anxiety? Can we teach our students about moods such as anxiety? How could we possibly know in advance how anxiety is going to be experienced under particular circumstances? Until the activities of learning are in full swing (yes, like the *swing* so highly prized by jazz players) there is no epistemic or moral or emotional contents that can be defined a priori. The anxiety tutorial was followed by intense discussions during the week, under the guidance of teaching assistants, with the students assigned to small recitation groups. What stirred up debate the most was the challenge of seeing the mood of anxiety in a positive light as force for good that enhances our lives. The activity of writing a story is a powerful motor of discovery. But that activity was under the influence of a moderate state of anxiety induced by the pressing task of understanding the background words of the sound track while knowing that a submission of the tutorial was also required. The teacher has to give up a lot if he is to learn together with his students. I am not suggesting that the teacher should not have a definite role in the classroom. I am suggesting that he has to learn everyday anew. He cannot accept to play a role that puts him in a position of labouring under the delusion that he knows better than his students. There is no such thing as knowing until we interact dialogically with somebody else who questions us and who is open to our answers and questions. Dialogue is the verbal vehicle of active learning but only if it is genuine dialogue. Socratic dialogues such as those invented by Plato are but fake dialogues. Socrates is always the foregone winner; he learns nothing. It was the great Maria Montessori who realized that in the learning process the learner is left to his own devices. This does not mean that he learns in solitary confinement. In Montessori's classes children would learn together. It means that the process of discovery is a personal adventure that nobody knows where it will lead. The achievement is individual but the process is collective.

This book is the result of a learning process that I have enjoyed for a decade together with my students. Its argument is my own responsibility.

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<sup>1</sup> All stories have been reported with the students's permission. They were written during the anxiety tutorial and submitted later on. I have intervened occasionally with minor editing.

