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## *Consciousness the Trickster: Or, Tailors for the Emperor*

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We can admit that meaning has no existence of its own beyond its utterance and its interpretation...meaning is not immanent to a text as a message, but as a situation of communication including, moreover, a transmitter and a receiver...as well as a set of conditions (norms, including the textual genre and determined social practice). Rastier, p.5, 1997

In the general schema of things as they are, what I am going to relate happened not too long ago, and unfortunately can still happen, perhaps is happening to someone else—if not in the same way, then in a Bach variation on the theme. The children I am going to discuss are growing up, or at least with the passage of years they are moving toward adulthood. I wonder, Trickster paper that this is, what that means as far as understanding the strange form and dynamic of Consciousness, who I perceive as the master of all game players. Consciousness seems to me to be a devious, evasive, slip-sliding being, nothing as well-conceived as raven, wolf, or coyote, or many of the other forms the Trickster so often takes. Consciousness lurks shadow-like, suddenly thrusting itself forward, sometimes unbidden and too often unrepentant. I am going to explore my meetings with two nine year old children, referred to me by their teachers. These children had to be both self-aware and at the same time suppress consciousness in order to cope with the dynamics of the world they existed within. As children they could perceive the world with clarity of vision and yet, that perceptual awareness did not necessarily allow them to be able to dictate the course of their lives. As for the adults around them, although they were often insightful and certainly conscious of the constraints and the plight of the children, they were nevertheless limited in their ability to act upon what they knew.

### Ian

It was, as it can be, very hot in November in Western Australia. The school I was visiting did have shady areas and the room the principal had placed me in benefited from the shade provided by several trees that blocked the sun. I was

conducting a series of interviews on what children know about their everyday world and how they make decisions—who they chose to play with, what they did when they had a disagreement with a friend, to whom did they go to help them resolve an issue, what made them happy, and was there anything that made them unhappy? The principal had showered me with statistics on how well the children did in their studies, how many went on to “good” high schools, meaning privately funded schools, and how many of those went on to university. It was a fairly new school, a church funded school, with surprisingly few signs of any religious connection—no statues, icons, crosses, even the name, Genesta, had little obvious religious orientation.

Ian was nervous. He was slight, quick, and somewhat wary. Although I had asked to interview a broad cross section of the school’s population it became obvious that the children I met with had been deliberately selected by people the principal’s office. All the children were all verbally fluent and all did exceedingly well in school. Ian was quite bright—he raced through the questions, almost sniffing to ascertain a trick question, to get the answer more than right. When I asked him what made him unhappy, he paused and to my surprise answered, “My father, he hits me too hard sometimes.” I held my breath a little, “What,” I said, “do you mean by that?”

I: Well, he replied, the mark shouldn’t last that long. I know that.

L: What do you do about that?

I: Oh, I know what to do alright. I should have stayed in m’room, waited to see, ya know, how he was when he got home...how the day went. We have a shop and and m’dad and mum work hard. It isn’t always so good. So, if I stay in m’room, do m’ work, and get good grades then its okay. He went on: I’m going to work hard at my maths and do well, real well. Then, with good maths, I can get into uni [sic university] and I’ll leave and not come back. And with good maths I’ll have a real good job with good money and I’ll show him.

I asked Ian if he was angry with his father and mother and he said no. At nine he had a keen appreciation of the struggles of maintaining a small business and knew he was going to a good school and he “had things.” Interestingly, he blamed himself for misjudging the pattern of how he should act at home. There were strategies of behavior that, although not formalized, he believed he knew he should follow. This meant staying in one’s room until a particular tone or sound signaled that the circumstances of his parent’s working day had been eased. Also, he had a plan—he saw himself as capable and “knew” his skills at mathematics were valued by society. Although a child, he could envision a future where his skills were going to make him safe and even more powerful than his father and mother. He did speak caringly about his parents, as well as the acknowledgement of the “things’ that his parents provided, such as the private school, his own room, summer camp, and there was also his conscious awareness of the effort and stress to their own lives that providing those “things” brought to his parents. But, at nine, sometimes he forgot the informal

operating strategies and went racing down the stairs or “bullied his little brother a bit and made too much noise.” That was, in his opinion, his fault. He knew what his end of the family contract was; get good grades, be quiet when parents first return home, and wait to see how their day went.

At nine, Ian was a fairly accomplished sign reader. He “knew” the discrete tonalities of safety or danger; he sensed the atmosphere. Sometimes, something that excited him caused him to “forget” the unwritten rules that governed family life—those rules came with strategies for providing safety—neither his mother nor his father stormed into his room nor railed at him as a release from stress. He was very self-contained with his awareness centering on himself. He did not mention care-taking for his younger brother. It was interesting to note that when he violated the ritualized and non-formalized ways of being that he and his family enacted, he immediately saw that as an error, his error. And conscious of those errors, he consciously planned how he would direct his energy, even to the selection of a particular discipline that he believed would eventually provide him help. However, Ian’s keen sense of conscious awareness of the family dynamics did not operate all the time. And at the points of fracture, when the stressful day of his parents collided with his nine year old self, Consciousness acted in a dual and duplicitous capacity.

I see Ian as losing Consciousness by being at times, what he was, nine years old. Obviously, he could be a nine year old boy sometime, within boundaries. However, his connectedness to his mother and father as just a nine year old boy, or only a child, did not always work. Ian also needed to be good at deductive reasoning and listening. Consciousness included his awareness of himself as a boundary keeper. What are the limits and expectations of being nine? Did the Consciousness the Trickster act to lull and lure Ian into being just a child? As children’s lives are also times of training in socio-political skills and expectations, when and how does the reality of a child’s society intrude? In what little and big ways do parents prepare children for the trials and tribulations of adult life? If the trickster in this case wears a Janus face, a two-faced being, one face is that of childhood innocence and thoughtless fun, whilst the other face is the awareness of what will happen when particular rules and regulations are violated. Are parents the very people who introduce the limitations of being, making certain that fun is conditional, that the seriousness of daily being is inescapable? When do parents and children establish those patterns and how can those patterns be structured so that arenas of safety and negotiation can occur? When does the parental consciousness of the limitations and exuberance of having a child override the consciousness of a difficult day?

Consciousness as represented in countless formats, novels, philosophy, and in my current concern as teaching about Human Development using a typical educational text for beginning teachers, it is often cast as an ideal or almost idyllic status for human beings. In many theories one seems to just arrive at consciousness; it forms with and without reason. (Piel and Green, 2002) It is represented in a variety of theories (Freud, Erikson, Piaget, in Piel and Green) as a time or state of full awareness and conversely, also as non-consciousness, or as irrational urges and

drives that paradoxically can never be known but nevertheless influence human behavior.

In the special case of Consciousness as awareness, being consciousness also bears the burden or implication that the individual knows a range of possible choices leading to subsequent action, as if the individual in being conscious is also responsible of all the choices and appropriate actions to be taken. Is this really possible? Is it a state anyone can achieve, simply arrive at, or be expected to have achieved? And, what does it mean to be conscious in the moment, at a critical time? Riceour (1983) writes of time-within-ness as a measure of “our Care and the world in which it is ‘time to’ do something (p. 62)” but he also points out that time has an abstract quality, and we often care about something that may happen, that we are “awaiting” or even in our preoccupation with one thing we nevertheless do other things. We can have our consciousness “retained” upon one interest whilst we are doing something else. Thus, Ian can be seen as attempting to discount the present, the slap that lasts “too long” as he maintains, as best he can, an abstract reality, the future, where he will be safer because he has made himself safe.

Consciousness too often is represented as a singular dimension, the reified now, as if we could be totally alert to being—“as if” (Riceour, 1983) we can be conscious, now and now and now, moving from one totally alert now to another. Once conscious, does a human have the ability to be conscious at all times and in all terrains of interaction, the physically present now and existential reality? Ian often forgot the family strategies for social interaction when he became too involved in being a nine year old chasing his brother. Bakhtin (1987) wrote about the self as conditionally present, events always poised to become, or not, part of a life text, as having a potential for forming into meaning and understanding. He utilized the example of someone writing in a journal and asks us to which self we write when we write in a journal? How does the self that writes to the self of understandings and perceptual acuteness, the self that allows one to “know” who and what one is, become the very same self that in the immediacy of daily discourse will forget or not know, not be at all conscious of and to what was thoughtfully worked out in the journal? For instance, if Ian had kept a journal and written in it that he had to remember to stay in his room after school until after his parents got home from work, there still would have been times he would have ‘forgotten’ what he knew and would have acted and interacted as a ‘thoughtless’ child. However, as soon as his parents entered the door, he would ‘immediately’ remember those rules. Is this the master trickster at work? Is Consciousness a cunning and even necessary arbitor between ourselves and a chosen potential reality—is multidimensional reality too much to achieve and therefore Consciousness weaves between potential knowing, not needing not to know, and even not daring to know?

### Angela

Angela was a well-rounded nine year old—dark brown unruly hair, somewhat untidy, and huge brown eyes. One of the reasons I interviewed her was because she

was one of the success stories of CAP, or the “Controlled Anger Program” at her elementary school in Western Australia. The program came into being when the area school psychologist adapted a group session program for adults into a program that could be teacher-directed at the school level for children who had problems having friends or problems with anger. Angela told me she loved CAP (Rogers, 2001).

L: Why?

A: Before CAP I didn't have any friends and I hated everyone—everyone was better than me.

L: Better?

A: Well, no one liked me and I didn't like anyone.

I asked Angela to give me an example how CAP had helped her. She told me that before CAP, her mother, her beautiful mother, used to yell at her and called her fat and ugly. She mimicked her mother, “How could I have had such a lumpy clumsy girl!”

A: And when she called me fat and things it feels like my heart goes flat and chips break off and fall through me.”

L: I was startled. “Did the teacher, or Mr. Denton (the school psychologist) talk to your mother?”

A: Sometimes, when I got in trouble. When I ripped up my homework or yelled at her. But now, now I don't have to do that anymore, because of CAP ... I can think and say to myself, ‘Angela, what do you really want?’

L: Can you give me an example?

A: Well, the other day when I went home m'mum said, ‘Angela, you have to help me with the groceries’ and I said, ‘But mum, you promised I could play after school.’ And she said, ‘Angela, you have been nine for two whole weeks, when are you going to grow up? That was true. An I said, okay...but when we got home from shopping instead of letting me go out to play she said, ‘Angela, I want you to put the groceries away and I was really angry an’ before CAP I would have yelled and run in the house and hit my hand against the wall and gotten into trouble. But, now, I thought to myself, ‘Angela, what do you really want?’ An, so I thought, I want to go out and play but I need to tell m' mum why I can't put things away. So I said, ‘Mum, I am nine but I still have to stand on the chair to put things away and you get angry when I do that, so what should I do?’ An' she said, ‘Oh, I forgot. Well, you go and play.’ So, see, I didn't yell, my mum didn't say mean things, I got to go

out and play and I didn't even hurt my hand hitting the wall.”

Angela looked me, both expectantly and with triumph. I asked her if her mother went to the classes on anger management as well. No. I think Angela seemed to register some surprise I would even ask that question. However, Angela was happier and in being happier, she was able to escape being constantly conscious of her “ugly self,” and, the new less angry self was more conscious of others. Angela began to experience friendship and had the psychological flexibility to acknowledge others. She was able to experience, in my opinion, a loss of personal consciousness, or rather she could now not be always conscious of the self that she was unhappy and ashamed about and she could become aware of, or enter into, the consciousness of another person. She began to develop the emotional energy to risk entering into relationships with students in her classroom. As she progressed, she began to form friendships and Angela expressed her delight at having friends, and her pleasure with her teacher who told her that she had nice handwriting. She was formulating a self that she knew was capable of strategizing and providing actions that brought her into emotional safety and with more ways of being conscious about herself—her skilled self which was not ugly. At that point, where Angela could begin to structure herself consciously as a student and a friend, she paradoxically became both less Angela and more of a potential Angela that she wanted to be. The signs of Angela's being were opening to change, Angela was becoming part of the on-going semiosis of every day life instead of just being hurt and angry Angela over and over again. This semiosis or sign activity (Sebeok, 1994) meant she was able to successfully negotiate changing her identity and the signs of it, such as bumping into things, dropping things, etc, into new signs and representations of herself that she and others around her recognized and acted upon and even came to expect.

Angela began to develop multiple narratives, intertextual narratives of being. She could be Angela the friend, Angela with good hand writing who could help others, and even Angela the daughter who was ironically the unconscious agent working on changing her mother's interactions with her. Was the mother conscious of the role reversal, the daughter leading the mother into appropriate interaction? The trickster, Consciousness, delights in inversion (Doty and Hynes, 1993). Ironically, it is the only the non-conscious Angela that begins to shape the mother's behavior into an appropriate relationship and discourse. The deliberate, conscious cruel commentary of the mother is also an inversion—the mother, instead of being the protector and model for the child, is instead in a strange and terrible competition with her daughter. The mother is conscious of her child only as a mirror or non-mirror of herself. She continually represents her child as an imperfect image compared to her own loveliness and elegance. And in that very act of representation, the moment the mother speaks and acts upon her belief, Consciousness, the Trickster, who is the dangerous inverter and taboo breaker (Markarius, 1993), catches the mother contradicting the very role, “the perfect mother,” that she believes she is enacting. It is in this act of exposing contradiction that the Trickster has such a powerful impact. The trickster exposes the reality of the presented myth. The good mother image is deconstructed with force and stunning suddenness by the mother's own words and the

listener/viewer is forced to confront the reality of the situation despite the image that the mother believes she has so carefully constructed.

David Bohm wrote of thought as active, as *participatory* (Bohm, 1992, pg. 5). He discusses thought as knowledge but cautions, “The information takes over. *It runs you*. Thought runs you. Thought, however, gives the false information you are running it.” He particularly warns against fragmentation of thought, dangerous as, “creating divisions out of itself and then saying they are there naturally (pgs 5-6). And of course, the knowledge we hold could be wrong. I see Angela’s mother as holding a fragmented thought, “I am beautiful, my child is not.” She is not engaged in participating and exchanging information that would mediate and create other categories of knowledge that would be helpful to herself and her daughter. She is a self-satisfying unit, feeding upon her own thought processes and consciously seeks signs and symbols of her clumsy daughter. It did not occur to the mother that holding those thoughts and acting upon them made the daughter clumsy and even, in the mother’s perception, lumpy and ugly. She did not see herself as being “run” by her thoughts and in fact, the creator of her daughter as less than perfect. Bohm sends us out into experience, to examine our thoughts, to question our consciousness by being participatory and checking to see how our perceptions work and influence people, to not allow the devious trickster to hold us in our own thrall. As McGinn (1999) states, consciousness or deliberate thought is only “a means of representing reality (pg. 32).”

And, of course, our representation of reality could be wrong. Seeking after meaning and knowledge is, “an enterprise fraught with difficulties and pitfalls, because reality does not always yield up its secrets,(McGinn, pg 32)” and McGinn points out, “there are facts that no one can know (pg 32).” That could be the perfected role of the ultimate trickster, Consciousness, the saving grace for all of us in the dynamic of living moments, and especially for children, a necessary semiotic miasma, a rich deep swamp of not knowing, therefore, all things can be possible. In Angela’s case, what if she really knew, appreciated fully the nature of her mother’s regard for her? Could she, at nine, sustain that terrible knowledge?

For Ian and Angela, I see Consciousness as having an awesome presence. It can be an awakening into wisdom, a reciprocity of gained and tested knowledge within particular environments, public, witnessed and expressed. The ultimate trick of course is gaining that experience. In order to arrive at a point of personal wisdom and conscious life, paradoxically, one must often be non-conscious to the full implications of events, people’s motivation, and of the dangers and perils of everyday living. We also need, perhaps, some protection from being fully aware of what the future may or may not bring. We each walk out of our dwellings every morning expecting to return. We also expect children to grow up, physically and developmentally, into a life of chosen activity. What will become of Ian and Angela? Is it possible that Angela is really the proverbial ugly duckling? Will she actually become the mother only more beautiful and consciously aware? Will she forgive her mother, or will she try to “understand” her mother? Or perhaps the trickster will perform the ultimate trick of erasing too painful memories? And for Ian, will he be

even more powerful than his father? What does that mean? Will he have a bigger house, a more prestigious position? Will he be at home with his children more often than his father was for him, or will his future life as a scientist be predicated on spending vast amounts of time doing research, and writing papers for learned organizations instead of spending a quiet evening at home discussing and pondering the mundane discoveries of the day with his children?

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