

THE MENDHAM EXPERIENCE: TRANSFORMATION AND RETURN

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Abstract:

This paper focuses on an event that makes us re-think our most important practices: a workshop in a retreat established in Mendham, New Jersey, under the direction of the IAPC (Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children) of Montclair University to facilitate the pedagogical goals of Philosophy for Children (PFC). The aim of this paper is to clarify and reconfigure a personal experience of what happened during those ten days. The sense of the author is that something extremely significant, that touches on the nature of pedagogy, and the fate of philosophy takes place in such a workshop.

Key words: philosophy for children; Mendham; teacher education

A experiência de Mendham: transformação e retorno

Resumo:

Esse artigo foca num evento que nos fez repensar nossas práticas mais importantes: um workshop em um retiro estabelecido em Mendham, Nova Jersey, sob a direção do IAPC (Instituto para o Desenvolvimento da Filosofia para Crianças) da Universidade de Montclair para facilitar os fins pedagógicos do programa de Filosofia para Crianças (FpC). O propósito do texto é clarificar e reconfigurar uma experiência pessoal do que sucedeu durante os dez dias do curso. O autor sente que algo extremamente importante, que toca a natureza da pedagogia e o destino da filosofia, teve lugar durante o workshop.

Palavras chave: filosofia para crianças; Mendham; formação de professores

La experiencia de Mendham: Transformación y retorno

Resumen:

Este trabajo se centra en un acontecimiento que hace repensar nuestras más importantes prácticas: un taller en un retiro establecido en Mendham, New Jersey, bajo dirección del IAPC (Instituto para el Desarrollo de la Filosofía para Niños) de la Universidad de Montclair para facilitar las metas pedagógicas de *filosofía para niños* (FpN). El objetivo de este trabajo es aclarar y re-configurar una experiencia personal de lo que sucedió durante esos diez días. El sentido del autor es que algo extremadamente significativo, que toca la naturaleza de la pedagogía, y el destino de la filosofía está en juego en ese curso.

Palabras llave: filosofía para niños; Mendham; formación docente

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Jason J. Howard

I imagine that few events in life seriously challenge us enough to re-think our most important practices. I want to turn my attention to an event that accomplished just this feat in terms of how I envision the practice of philosophy. The event I am speaking of is the August session of Mendham, which – as many of you may know – is a retreat established in Mendham, New Jersey, under the direction of the IAPC (Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children) of Montclair University to facilitate the pedagogical goals of Philosophy for Children (PFC). The introductory ‘session’ runs every August for ten days from August 17th to the 27th. I want to clarify and reconfigure my experience of what happened during those ten days because I have the sense that something extremely significant took place that touches on the nature of pedagogy, and the fate of philosophy.

Since departing from Mendham on that rainy Sunday afternoon I have tried to formulate for myself what actually transpired there. Even now, some weeks later, finding the proper word to describe my experience of Mendham escapes me: serendipitous, felicitous, inspiring, romantic, disarming. All these adjectives work but none of them are a precise fit. I also have the distinct impression that I am not alone in my difficulty of defining the Mendham experience, but that almost all of the participants, and even many of the IAPC facilitators, have found themselves similarly overwhelmed by an experience that occurred at so many different levels it resists any easy classification. What does this shared experience of ‘over-determination’ mean? Does the sort of wonder and bewilderment our group collectively experienced at this August’s Mendham happen every year? Is cultivating this type of multivalent experience even the goal of Mendham? Whether or not there is a definitive answer to any of these questions, I am convinced that the learning experience Mendham offers, both on a personal and inter-subjective, as well as philosophical and pedagogical level, is



truly exceptional in terms of positive transformative potential. In what follows I want to indicate where within the Mendham experience this transformative potential roosts, discerning the living indices that allowed it to appear, as if from nowhere, and seduce us into becoming better people.

The first thing to note about Mendham is that even from a logistical point of view it is unique. For someone like me, who is married with children, ten days away from home without the family is already an extremely rare experience. Bracketing that much time out of my daily schedule is certainly asking a lot (just ask my wife). Moreover, the fact that the session takes place at an actual retreat house that sits across from an Episcopal Nun's convent, isolated miles from town with no television, radio, local newspapers or e-mail access, also adds an element of uniqueness to the event. Given these facts aside, I must confess that I did not pay much attention to my upcoming Mendham experience. It was certainly on the radar the moment I was awarded a 3M grant that would finance the trip, but it would be false to say it occupied my thoughts. In fact, the event really sprang up on me, having almost forgotten about it by early August.

I assumed Mendham would be an extended conference or an intensive training program. It turned out to be both of these and neither one. If the logistics of Mendham was surprising, the make up of the participants was even more so. I assumed everyone would be going to Mendham for the same reason: to learn how to teach children to appreciate philosophical reasoning. Of course, in a sense this *is* the reason why people came to Mendham, yet it meant something different for almost every participant there. First off, other than the facilitators who organized Mendham and me, no one was, for lack of a better designation, a "professional academic philosopher." Some people had years of experience effectively using Philosophy for Children (PFC) as a pedagogical methodology without any comprehensive knowledge of philosophy, and simply sought accreditation. There were Europeans, some of them implementing PFC in the classroom, while others just testing the possibilities that PFC might have on the practice of philosophical counseling. There were master and doctoral

students writing on PFC, and a high school teacher from Brooklyn who knew almost nothing of philosophy other than the potential it might have for his students.

What is interesting to me in hindsight is that although I expected that all of the participants would be university professors similar to myself, seeing Mendham as an intriguing way to broaden the scope of philosophy, I was not terribly disappointed to discover the lack of academics. To be sure, I felt it rather exciting that so many people should take an interest in philosophy who were not academic philosophers. In that sense we were all new to PFC, just in different ways. I came with a reasonably decent knowledge of philosophy but knew virtually nothing of how to instruct it to children, whereas others knew a lot about the pedagogy behind PFC but almost nothing of traditional philosophy, while some knew nothing of PFC or philosophy. I imagine that such a motley population is actually typical of Mendham, as an educational venue that finds itself, in the words of one Mendham facilitator, stuck with the difficult task of being all things to all people. I think this conglomeration of different abilities, talents and motives is one of the first places that the potential I indicated above came to roost. To my knowledge, there was never any sense of competition between us from the very beginning. In the end we all tried to show what we knew, but no one appeared to do so out of any motive than sincere interest in the topics we discussed. That so many participants of such different histories should bring such a common openness to the same experience I think is very rare. This was something, like so many aspects of Mendham, that was out of anyone's immediate control. From this shared spirit of adventure and openness the experience of Mendham took root.

The routine at Mendham is easy to follow and very transparent. The day is taken up with philosophical discussions from 9:00 AM until 1:30 PM, which continues in the evening from 7:45 until 9:00 PM. Although the topics change the daily schedule rarely does. The debates were heavy: the nature of time, the ambiguity of evil, the purpose of education, the role of authority, form and



function in human beings, the limits of language, and the features of aesthetic experience, just to name a few. What was amazing to me is that no one had any idea which questions would be pursued beforehand, since all the questions were generated on the spot in reference to short texts read aloud in class. No famous philosophers were directly appealed to during the discussions, which would only have alienated many of the participants, but rather a concerted effort was made to explore the various angles of the problem in a reasonable and feasible manner, using the approach of PFC as our guide.

The method of the Mendham IAPC is completely hands on: the best way to learn about the PFC pedagogy and its distinctive approach is to engage repeatedly in PFC, continually re-creating the community of inquiry that is PFC's most enduring feature. The ingenious thing about this approach is that one ends up doing philosophy rather than just learning about it. As far as I can tell, the entire approach behind establishing a community of inquiry is to empower people in such a way they can discern the transforming potential of discourse in its full rationality. It is the happening of speech and disclosure in the irreal space of meaning and truth. This, as my astute peer pointed out in her thick Italian accent, is philosophy pure and simple. As she went on to say, quoting Hegel, philosophy is always about the beginning, about returning again and again to negotiate the possible guises of the true, which in the language of PFC are called "contestable concepts." These contestable concepts are the traditional concerns of the philosophy canon, such as, justice, love, knowledge, selfhood, and so on, yet the students discover these concepts for themselves through formulating specific questions in response to the issues raised in the readings. The result is that students learn to discern philosophical themes and discuss them critically, rather than memorize specific philosophical theories. At its best PFC educates us to the multiple interpretations and qualifications through which ideas emerge in discussion, and how these ideas are transformed and indexed as the moves of articulate thought. The wonder which Aristotle spoke of that gave rise to

philosophy is re-enacted as the energy of communicative dialectic, whose motivating power only awaits the vigilance of sustained inquiry to awaken it.

It was undoubtedly here, in the spontaneity of philosophical discourse that the transforming potential of Mendham was most powerfully at play. What none of us could have predicted, however, is the life this creative tension and spontaneity would take on after the discussion sessions had ended. Somehow the intensity and transparency that emerged in the repeated community of inquiries we shared refused to go away, and it circulated in a sufficient number of us to bring the entire experience of Mendham to other more visceral and intimate levels. No doubt the late nights and red wine also helped break down some barriers, but the many conversations that continued past the witching hour drew their true energy from the invigoration of disclosure more than anything else. Reflecting on our experience at Mendham, my friend said that she felt as if she had experienced the entire course of a lifelong friendship in just ten days. I agreed with her. In discovering the various ways in which we were interested in philosophy, it seems we discovered aspects of ourselves. This discovery was not always pleasant and at times it was disconcerting and even alienating, yet it always had the unexpected outcome of bringing us closer together.

And if the power of philosophical discourse were not enough, the Mendham retreat house itself lures participants in through its own multiple identities. Long hallways lead off to narrow corridors that contain the sleeping quarters, which are flanked by winding staircases that flow into rooms of different purpose and portent, with the entire structure enclosed by forests and silence. Originally the retreat house was an orphanage at the turn of the century and there are ghost stories still told of the young orphan boy who continues to wander the east wing at night in search of something. This atmosphere of nostalgia and mystery, of hospitality and penance, cannot help but get under your skin and arouse your imagination. As the presence of the retreat house grew, we were also inevitably drawn into the biorhythms of the other participants. One eats and drinks with the same group of people, sleeps across



the hallway from them, hears them get up in the middle of the night, and inevitably becomes spectator to their most intimate routines. In such close quarters we come to inhabit the lives of others whether we want to or not and so being a stranger makes less and less sense. Eventually one comes to the point where it is almost easier to give in and embrace the silent invitation these others extend by way of their intimate habits than deny the invitation of community their routines create.

The crowning festivities came on the last Saturday evening where different groups were given the chance to put on a 'pixie' play for the other participants, as well as for some old alumni of Mendhams past. We were given an evening and two afternoons to prepare and our only instructions were to use the different 'creation stories' outlined in *Pixie*, a philosophical novel by Mathew Lipman, as our guide. As someone who was never involved much in theatre, the last time I performed a play was in elementary school. The humor and camaraderie to come out of the preparation and performance of those pixie plays was really inspiring and was an ingenious way to cement the ties that had formed between so many of us.

Mendham is an initiation. It is an initiation to the novelty of communal philosophical inquiry. It is a place whose meditative atmosphere encourages all manner of introspection, yet it is an introspection that is not primarily confined to oneself, but engages the lives of the other participants as well. In this way Mendham allows one to gain familiarity both with the details of communicative inquiry as well as the values and assumptions of the other members. By the end of the ten days one has come to know not only the mundane details of the other participant's lives, whether they take a shower in the morning or the evening, and whether they prefer coffee or tea, but also what the source of those pregnant pauses might be that occasionally arise in the middle of philosophical discussions. It is because of the multiple levels of discovery offered at Mendham that I feel David Kennedy, a longtime proponent and leading author on PFC, is fundamentally correct when he equates Mendham and the experience of PFC as

a return to the sources of childhood. Like childhood, Mendham is an experiment in the novelty of discovery. The combination of patient dialogue and concerted introspection, enacted through the effort of complete strangers, put us in contact with the malleability of our own desires, where logos and eros became inseparable in everything but name. It was in the living fragility of this balance, where strangers respected one another long enough to speak truly about the issues rather than just themselves, that the transformative potential of Mendham revealed the wondrous spontaneity of the child. And so if a name can be given to the experience I shared with thirteen others at Mendham, I can think of no less a word than spontaneity to describe it; or rather the hospitality of spontaneity that only the genuine promise of new beginnings could hazard with such ease.

Flying out of Newark on the last day of Mendham the irony of the whole experience finally hit me. Although I was the only so-called professional philosopher among the group of participants, I had learned more about the practice of philosophy from these 'beginners' than I had my entire academic education. It remains one of the greatest embarrassments that Philosophy, as an academic discipline, spends virtually none of its respectable energy on the details of its own pedagogy, this from a discipline that seeks transparency in everything else than its own scholastic politics and practices. Although I may be in the minority on this, I believe one of the greatest contributions that philosophy can make rests in its potential to transform the nature of pedagogy and through this the entire purpose of education. This can only be adequately recognized once philosophers begin to see the living practice of philosophical dialogue and communal inquiry as just as essential to its identity as sound knowledge of the philosophical tradition. That one does not necessarily learn how to practice philosophy as a living form of inquiry just because one knows the philosophical tradition.

What PFC does is to gradually initiate students into the complexity of reasoned dialogue, where the conceptual moves of clarification that one engages in through philosophical debate are explicitly specified and perfected, so that one



becomes attuned to what one is doing when one engages in conceptual inquiry, whether giving examples, providing analogies, supplying counter-arguments, addressing assumptions, re-clarifying positions, and so forth. In taking this approach the 'dialectic' of inquiry is mapped out in such a way that its practitioners can re-claim the rationale of communal inquiry for themselves, seeing this inquiry as not just one simple activity of reasoning but as an array of possible conceptual moves and options.

As I see it, the concern of PFC will always be philosophical, and not just generic critical thinking, since the pedagogical orientation is deeper than answering questions well, but seeks to cultivate a host of capacities such as a sensitivity to the subtlety of language, an attunement to the complexity of experience, a respect for other participants, and an appreciation for precise conceptual analysis, to name just a few. What's more, the underlying orientation of these capacities for communal inquiry cannot be separated off from the traditional ethical and conceptual concerns of philosophy without the risk of losing direction and authenticity. If learning a language is learning a form of life, as Wittgenstein suggests, then learning how to philosophize as a community holds the potential of radically transforming the way we engage both 'I' and 'world'. By introducing students to the living speech of philosophy first through practicing its forms of articulation with others, the appeal and scope of philosophy as a discipline will be that much greater: the knowledge of philosophy as a tradition of master thinkers will be that much more appealing if it grows out of an actual disposition to philosophize. In this way the almost endless resources of the tradition can take root in the language of everyday discourse, anchored in the speech acts of children and adolescents.

I was lucky enough to talk with Mathew Lipman, the founder of Philosophy for Children, while I was at Mendham. His story was one of incredible leaps forward and unexpected set backs and stalemates. The eventual fate of PFC lies well outside of any one person's hands. Whatever that fate may be I will always be grateful for the time I spent at Mendham. I, like the other

participants there, took its promise seriously. Perhaps this, more than anything else, was the deciding factor in its enduring impact on us. I certainly am no expert on PFC and whether every August Mendham meets with the same success as we experienced is difficult to say. For my part, I left with the sense that PFC could very well be the future of philosophy and its final metamorphosis, in which the promise of what philosophy could be takes up its rightful task where it has always been needed most—liberating the true potential of childhood from the weight of those authorities whose purpose is to pillage it. At least then philosophy could finally return to its native soil and face its true detractors, those who charge it with corrupting the youth.

Recebido em: 23/07/2006
Aprovado em: 12/09/2006