

**GOING FORWARD.
MOVING BACKWARD.
STANDING STILL.**

*Notes for a keynote address at the McGill Education
Graduate Students Society Conference, March 2010.*

GRADUATE STUDENTS, faculty members, distinguished guests! I'm delighted to be here today. I want to thank the Conference Committee of the McGill Education Graduate Students' Society, and particularly Lydia Meldrum and Shakib Ahsan for making it possible.

When I received the invitation to address this august gathering, I have to admit I was startled. My connection with the world of formal education ended very early, and very long ago, when Stanford University and I came to an inimical parting of the ways. As it turned out, it wasn't only with Stanford that I experienced such a parting. In fact, that turned out to be simply a dress rehearsal for my precipitous departure from the country of my birth, the United States.

For that reason, I was startled.

What claim can a person like myself, who has consistently fled the educational milieu, have on the attention of graduate students in the McGill Education Faculty? Somebody out there appears to have intuited that such a person, almost completely lacking in formal credentials, might provide a counterweight to the nostrums of the educational establishment, with which you are all, no doubt, intimately familiar.

Not that I don't respect the educational establishment. Don't get me wrong. It's just that my oil and its water never could emulsify. But in reading the prospectus for this Conference, I noted with pleasure that it reflects a determination to move beyond the strict boundaries of the field, to test and perhaps even to transgress them. Well, I'm here to encourage you to do that.

I'm also here to tell some stories.

Going Forward. Moving Backward. Standing Still.

The title I chose for these remarks is not only the working title of an upcoming memoir, but my immediate response to the questions raised by the theme of this Conference: *Interdisciplinarity: Reality, Imagination and Diversity*.

As much as I was startled by the invitation, I was pleased by the request it contained. The conference organizers wanted me to be inventive; that I intend to do my best to achieve. And besides, what better way to remind ourselves of the old journalistic maxim: "When in doubt, make it up."

So I am taking the Conference title literally, and interpreting broadly the factors that combine to posit interdisciplinarity: reality, imagination and diversity. These I see against the conceptual background of the title I've chosen.

As you've surely noticed, going forward, moving backward and standing still are all states whose common denominator is time, in its inextricable relationship with space. In fact, time cannot be liberated from the constraints of space and set free to fluctuate on its own any more than ideas, values and belief systems can exist apart from the human beings that believe them and carry their message.

My first sharp awareness of the paradox of "*going forward*," which suggests awareness of the future, dates back to a sign tacked to the wall of the barbershop in my hometown of Pasadena, in California, next to the mirror. "Free haircut tomorrow," it read. And yet, when I went back the following day, no matter how early the hour, tomorrow fell as far beyond the temporal horizon as it had the previous day.

Likewise, as a lad, I would walk to the bus stop to meet my grandmother, who would come visiting from her rented room in Hollywood. Granny, as we called her, had been a pioneer in the movie industry in Southern California, the land of my birth. She was full of stories—maybe they were tall tales—all of which were firmly rooted in a past that partook more of myth than of history.

There, sitting in the crook of a tree, I would calculate how many years I would need to catch up with her in age. For with great age such as hers, I hoped, would come a stock of memory, and perhaps even wisdom. It all made perfect sense: if I

could invest the figures with just a bit of elasticity, then within a decade it could be done.

Those were childish illusions. But they gave me a first glimpse into the greater paradox of time, and of the conundrum of future, past and present encapsulated in the title of these notes.

You have all noticed, I'm sure, that as children we inhabit a present that seemingly never ends. Time passes so slowly that even sundown seems improbable. Next week is beyond comprehension; next year as remote as the farthest star in the most distant galaxy. Our parents are distant and incomprehensible beings, radically distinct from what we know ourselves to be: creatures of the here and now, of immediacy, of the moment, sliding like surfers along the cusp of the wave.

Childhood and youth, in their inability to posit the future, and in their rejection of the past—*going forward; moving backward*—are a time of standing still, an age of the contemporaneous, the fixed and unbending. Thus it has always been and thus it will always be, for we are trapped. We are standing still.

You will surely come one day to observe, as I have, that age dramatically inverts this proposition. Now, the present becomes porous, immaterial, frayed at both edges. No sooner has it arrived than it becomes the past; no sooner have we reached the future than it becomes the present. Where once, as children, we stood at the meridian and the sun cast only a small pool of shadow at our feet, now the shadow we cast is a long one; a shadow that stretches behind us into the past we are always attempting to revive but that is constantly receding.

When we re-examine, from the vantage point of old age, certain incidents from our childhood, the immateriality of time can assume the most powerful of material forms. Such is the territory explored by Marcel Proust, whose art, as it burrows deep into recollection, attempts to trap the past in the snares of narrated memory, to transform the it into immortality.

I would have been a boy of ten, and my brother, three years younger, when our father drove us, of a summer evening, to a railway level crossing not far from our home. The age of steam had not yet ended, and the freight trains that came puffing up the grade out of Los Angeles on the Santa Fe line would roar through the

crossing, to the clanging of bells. Terrified and enchanted, we waved to the engineer high in his cab. Unfailingly he waved back, and gave the whistle a short blast as the massive, oily black locomotive swept past.

That locomotive was like the invisible vertical plane of the present as it swept through the dimension of time/space, driving the present before it, and sucking the past into the vacuum created by its passage.

And we were at once the train, that is to say, the vector of time moving through space, and the onlookers, immutably rooted in the present, standing still, as time swept by. Of course, we heard its call. The sound of the whistle, which echoed across the nighttime countryside, beckoned us. And the warmth of our home held us fast.

Was that the moment when reality, in the guise of a changeless present, encountered imagination, in the form of time's freight-train passing through a level crossing under a full head of steam?

Or was it when, perhaps twelve years later, I first took the overnight boat from Piraeus, in Greece, to Crete:

“When I sailed into the harbor at Iraklion for the first time on a spring morning I entered into a world where time and death had been abolished. The moment, the forever-immobilized present, severed from the past and not yet attached to the future, embraced me as I stood at the rail and watched dawn break over the jagged mountain crest to the south. Streaks of blue and pink riffled across the slate-blue sky as inexorably the dark waters swallowed up the night.

“Never would that moment be repeated; never would it end. Hardship, sorrow, illness and old age: all were part of a shadowy continuum that I may have subliminally intuited but could not yet comprehend. Was I not immortal, residing in an eternity fashioned from the here and now, cut off from my family, my country, from all that had gone before, as though they had ceased to exist, deaf to the muffled rumblings from beyond the horizon, there where night had not yet completely given way to day?”

It may be time—some would argue that it’s always time—to examine the ways in which reality and imagination interact and intersect. That they do so in time seems to me beyond dispute. That they do so in space, and that interaction and intersection are inextricably linked seems no less certain.

But what of their intimate relationship? Which comes first: reality or imagination?

Don’t you think that a case can be made for imagination?

Speaking as a writer, and latterly, as a memoirist, I’m becoming more convinced of it with every passing year. And, as some of you might intuit, when one reaches a certain age, a year has the approximate value of a childhood day...

Childhood is the empire of imagination, a blessed (and sometimes cursed) state in which our tiny world consists entirely of parental supervision and the narrowest geographical boundaries. And yet we yearn to break free from that world, and to fashion our own. It escapes our imagination that such a world could be utterly at odds with what we see and experience around us. But such is the creative power of fantasy that we believe it.

Storytelling, in the form of literature, provides us with a powerful tool for liberating the power of imagination that alone can give us a measured grasp of reality. Or confirm our darkest fears or most unutterable impulses.

I grew up in the pre-television era. As children, our active entertainment consisted of what we could piece together from miscellaneous scraps of wood and metal, of exploring our immediate surroundings on foot and later, on bicycles, of picture magazines like *Life* and the *National Geographic*.

But rare was the self-generated diversion that could equal the radio my younger brother and I would listen to at night, while crickets chirped in the bushes outside our bedroom window and coyotes howled from the dense underbrush of the nearby hills.

Our favorite program was a science-fiction series called Dimension X. It featured dramatizations, very vivid, live dramatizations, of classics of the repertoire. One of them so embedded itself in my consciousness that it is as fresh and chilling today as it was then, sixty years ago: an adaptation of Ray Bradbury’s short-story *Zero Hour*.

A little girl—Mink is her name—is playing busily in the backyard, borrowing pots and pans and utensils from her mother’s kitchen. She and the neighborhood kids are building a machine, a space/time machine, although she cannot articulate it. The game is called “Invasion,” and zero hour is to be at five o’clock, she tells her mother, breathless with excitement.

At first, mother laughs it off. Then she calls a friend in a nearby town. Surprisingly, the friend’s children are playing the same game. It must be all the rage with the little ones, they laugh. But a note of concern has crept into their voices.

The afternoon wears on, and Mink, panting, rushes in to look for more tools. Drill is stuck in the machine, she says. We have to help him get through.

Finally, the clock strikes five. Dusk is falling; silence settles over the neighborhood. Daddy returns from work. The family meets around the supper table, but Mink is distant and evasive. Later, the parents retire to their upstairs bedroom. There’s nothing to be worried about, they tell one another; guess our daughter’s in one of her moods.

But they lock the door.

Soon after, the sound of voices, and footfalls on the stairs and a sudden, blinding light shining under the door. Then a laser beam melts the lock and the door slams open. Mink stands silhouetted in the doorway, and behind her, a lowering figure. “Mommy, daddy, I want you to meet Drill.” Then we hear screams, fading out.

In the story, imagination—or was it imagination?—has engendered reality, a fact that Mink’s parents realize only too late.

Who among us never dreamed of summoning extra-terrestrials, Martians for instance, to eliminate the encumbering presence of our parents? Not that we ever would go as far as the girl in Bradbury’s tale. Though my mother died young, my father lived to a ripe old age.

As imagination created a superior reality, so in turn reality stimulated imagination.

My childhood unfolded, in all the majestic slowness of an immovable and immutable present, against the background of the Cold War and the construction of the American national security state.

For the military-industrial complex to consolidate its grip on the country, a perpetually terrified citizenry was necessary. The process of terrorization—I hope you’ll note my choice of terms—began with us.

In our elementary school classroom, in the midst of an arithmetic lesson, or as we labored through our readers, the teacher would shout: “Drop!” and we would scuttle under our flimsy desks. They would protect us from the atomic bomb burst, the blinding light brighter than one thousand suns, and the shock wave that would sweep away the walls of our school as though it were a sand castle. The incarnation of evil, then the Soviet Union, was determined to destroy us. We should trust our leaders, and drop when they told us to drop. And in our imagination, we conjured up scenes of scorched earth and ruin.

Such was the reality of childhood in Southern California, and across the country known as the United States.

As I entered adolescence, that reality took on the attributes of the weather, a force as evanescent and immaterial and yet as palpable as time itself. Our family and our neighborhood replicated, metaphorically, the genetic imprint of the broader society around us. Intuitively I realized, though I could not articulate it, that the present moment resembled a bright, still, hot summer’s day: a day that dawns cloudless, but will end with a violent electrical storm.

That violent storm was the Vietnam War, and it broke with a fury that swept me out of the realm of imagination and into that of reality. By the time the blood-letting ended in 1974 with the military defeat of the United States expeditionary force, some two million Vietnamese had been killed, and as many as one-hundred thousand Americans died, either on the battlefield or later, from wounds to the spirit. Among them was my younger brother.

Looking back, I am struck by the way a tiny, particular tragedy embedded in a larger one evolved over time, cumulatively, through a process of accretion that became apparent only after the fact. It was impossible to say at precisely what

moment the colonial conflict that the United States took over from France became a full-scale military confrontation between two unequal adversaries. Just as it is impossible to trace one man's lonely death back to a clearly identifiable point.

One thing we do know is that the Gulf of Tonkin incident, in which North Vietnamese patrol vessels attacked American warships off Vietnam, never happened. Yet the non-event served to justify the invasion and occupation of a much smaller, weaker country that had dared to claim its national rights.

There was a greater danger, of course. Those who taught us to scramble under our school desks assured us that Godless communism was to blame. In its Soviet or Chinese variant, it was hell-bent on world conquest, in reducing us to mindless ciphers, blue-clad ants scurrying to and fro on some gigantic kolkhoz. No need to dwell on what might happen to dissenters.

I didn't see it that way. As news from Vietnam began to filter back into our happy and insouciant community, a different reality, one grounded not in imagination but in actuality, asserted itself. Young men of my age were beginning to die in the mud and the dense jungle of Vietnam. Conscription was in force then. When your number came up, you reported for military service.

If we examine the sequence of events closely, we will see why my respect for the educational establishment was early on dealt blows from which it could never recover. For though I feared communism as much as the next person, I could see no good reason to kill young Vietnamese men of my age. They had uttered not the slightest threat against me; they were not wading ashore in full combat dress on the beach at Santa Monica.

In fact, I thought to myself, if communism were so horrendous, I should learn all I could about it. So I bought Marx's *Capital*, which made turgid late-night reading, and later, the *Communist Manifesto*. What they said didn't seem immediately applicable to our situation, and our comfortable middle-class Southern California existence, but what they implied made some sense.

Thoughts like these were subversive. They were not heard in the echoing halls of high school, nor on the bucolic Stanford campus. The distant roar we heard came from the stadium, where a football game was in progress. Half-consciously, half

blindly, groping, I encountered awareness, or to frame it in today's context, reality transmuting itself into imagination in the form of a catalyzing event that was to thrust me, shaking me like a seizure, into a universe of diversity.

Events are like the steam-powered freight trains of my youth: they sweep by us with a rush, and suck us into their back draft, carrying us with them, whether physically or emotionally. Stanford was behind me now; a fast-receding memory. One early summer morning I found myself in a bookstore in Hollywood, a place whose dusty, dusky atmosphere created ideal circumstances for browsing.

A book caught my eye. Its title was "The Greek Passion", and its author was a man called Nikos Kazantzakis. I'd heard of him, distantly; but I was unsure of how to pronounce the name, less sure still what kind of passion he was writing about.

Over time I have grown to believe, with great certainty, that we do not choose the books we read; they choose us, and devise ways to find their way into our hands. Though I hesitated for a moment, it was as though the book had come halfway to meet me. As if resigning myself to the ineluctable, I bought it.

Several days later, I began to read. I'd heard of passion before, in both senses of the word. Kazantzakis had taken as his subject the hard, historical definition: that of the crucifixion story, as it is played out in a tiny, isolated Greek village in Asia Minor on the eve of the cataclysmic events that would witness the forced migration of millions of Turkish Muslims and Greek Christians.

Reality lay all around me, faintly making its claims on my attention; from far afield the sounds of war echoed. But I kept reading, drawn into the imaginary world Kazantzakis had brought, fully wrought, into being. The characters were truer to life than life itself. The narrative breathed a fierce, redemptive fire. By the time I'd finished it, a month later, I had resolved to leave my home and country, travel to Greece, and learn there the language and its culture that had created this remarkable book and its author.

A little more than one year later, I walked down the gangway in the harbor at Piraeus, and into an old new world. I would be the last to deny that I had moved forward, driven by imagination into reality.

“A Greek chorus of horns and whistles welcomed me, and the cries of itinerant vendors, the incomprehensible rustle and lilt of a language utterly strange and foreign now being spoken, laughed, shouted and wept, sneezed, coughed and spat by all around me. There, at the foot of the gangway, I emerged into an entire self-contained, self-defining and immense microcosm in which characters like those brought alive by Kazantzakis swam like so many fish in waters now turbulent and troubled, now limpid and calm.”

Such was the universe of diversity into which I’d stepped. Greece in 1960 was, I thought, an ethnically homogenous society. I knew then little about the country’s pockets of Albanian, Slavic, Aroumani and Turkish-speakers, often regarded as second-class citizens when not identified as threats to the unity and purity of the state.

In fact, the Southern California I’d left was far more diverse, with its large Mexican American and African-American minorities, and its continuous flux of immigrants. But when one belongs to the majority group, one’s perception of diversity is necessarily colored by social considerations, not to mention those of privilege. We see it where it is convenient.

Greece opened to me the door to diversity, not in the vertical sense that we experience it in our daily lives as residents of a cosmopolitan, multi-racial urban setting, but horizontally, as an opening onto a landscape in which I would serially encounter women and men of strikingly contrasting—and thus diverse—ethnic, linguistic, social, intellectual and religious identities.

The moment was pregnant with possibility: moving backward was out of the question, and even while I stood still, I found myself going forward, as if swept along by a surging current.

What are the dimensions of time? Like emotion, it has neither width nor breadth, neither thickness nor substance; it cannot be studied beneath a microscope or apprehended from afar by the most powerful telescope. It is the locus of music, which exists only in time, in a constant state of future melding into present to be instantly replaced by a past whose harmonics and dissonances resonate in our ears.

Would it surprise you if I asserted that Greece, then, was like music? Fleeting, intemporal, its melody unforgettable but unrepeatable. No recording, whether by analog or digital means, can safeguard experience. As opposed to computer memory, ours is friable, constantly fraying at the edges, perpetually being reconstituted by later events as they are absorbed, suppressed or reshaped by our subconscious.

Time and memory would be the field upon which I would encounter diversity, and across that field I would go forward, move backward, and occasionally stand still.

By now it should be apparent that what I am describing is a process of education. Not, certainly, of the kind you have experienced here, in the McGill Education Faculty, but an intuitive, spontaneous process we can describe as self-teaching or experienced-based learning.

To my immense good fortune, when I left the United States and settled in Greece, I entered an institution that provided precisely this kind of a non-programmatic program. In Greek it was called the *Laïko Panepistimio*, which I would translate as the “university of the street.” Having no campus, its courses were held in coffee houses and *tavernas*, in rented rooms and in rattletrap intercity buses, in barbershops and public markets, in basement dives and around frugal village tables. No registration was necessary; I had simply to show up.

That my grades were mediocre did not reflect on the excellence of the teaching staff, whose patience, good-humored skepticism and judicious critical eye made the learning experience anything but laborious—though never before had my powers of observation and absorption been so tested.

Never before, nor since, had the osmotic filter that we place between experience and knowledge been so porous; never before, or since, had the diversity of experience seemed such an intimate function of observed reality and the profound workings of imagination.

Unlike the prestigious institution in whose hallowed halls we find ourselves gathered today, the *Laïko Panepistimio* issued no degrees, either of the graduate or post-graduate variety. But in contrast to McGill, students paid no tuition fees, wrote no exams, were awarded no diplomas, submitted no Masters dissertations and

defended no doctoral theses. How could they? There were no required courses, no syllabus. As a student, I had full freedom to move ahead at my own speed, which was top speed.

As does a sponge, I sluiced up the minutest details of what I witnessed unfolding around me. The political science course, for instance, consisted of looking on with horror as police violently dispersed student demonstrators, some of them the very students who had befriended me and thereby become my most beloved teachers.

There comes a point in the learning curve when, after x-number of hours—some argue that a minimum of 10,000 is needed—, we acquire proficiency in whatever we have chosen to study, be it language or playing a musical instrument or even educational theory. I wasn't counting hours, but by the time two years had elapsed, I'd suddenly broken through into full understanding of the previously foreign idiom that surrounded me.

Now that this new and very ancient tongue lay within my grasp, I could with confidence embark on my own accelerated post-doctoral fellow's program. When Nikos Kazantzakis's book *The Greek Passion* thrust itself into my hands in the bookshop in Hollywood, and when, upon reading it, I made up my mind to travel to Greece, I'd resolved to read his work in the original. Now that was possible. I could then embark on the outrageously over-ambitious second part of my promise to myself: to translate a book by the same author.

As will you, in the years to come, look back upon the work that crowns your academic career in the form of a report from the field or an investigation into personal narrative as a teaching strategy and ultimately, your PhD, as part of the educational process, today I can point, on my bookshelf, to the translated book that emerged two years later, in 1964: Kazantzakis's *Journey to the Morea*.

My three-year non-academic academic career in Greece gave me an introduction to interdisciplinarity as practical as it was broad. In my course of study, there existed no compartmentalization of knowledge, no single approved method of apprehending reality. Like terrace doors that give onto a sunlit garden, it opened directly onto diversity, and imagination nurtured it.

Now, I want to shift register for a moment. So far, I've placed the notion of going forward, moving backward and standing still within the context of the immediate; that of the moment, or at most, of a lifetime, which, against the continuum of deep time is more ephemeral than the life of a fly.

My Greek experience awakened me to what we can call historical depth, to the immense verticality of time, to the determining power exercised by the past in shaping our present and in turn, the future. That country, a rocky, sea-girt land at the southern tip of the Balkan Peninsula had, more than two thousand five-hundred years before, witnessed the flourishing of a civilization that the Global West claims as its inheritance.

That brief flowering gave us, so we retrospectively claim, the bases of our sciences, of our philosophy, of our political systems; even, if we are to believe the Pope (I caution you against doing this, by the way), the essence of what separates us from that shadowy Oriental Other, the world of Islam, which is claimed to reject reason, though in favor of what His Holiness never made clear.

Still, as in any libel, there's a speck of truth to the Greek claim, even though it is self-validating and conditional. The minuscule proto-democratic civilization of ancient Athens paid women short shrift and was built on the labor of slaves. Public debate belonged to a tiny, property-owning handful of citizens. Democracy lasted about as long as the flutter of a disenfranchised Athenian housewife's eyelash, before giving way to tyranny and oligarchy, those two other quintessential Greek inventions people don't talk too much about.

The main proponent of Hellenism, Alexander the Great, could hardly be called a paragon of the democratic ideal, even though Aristotle, his private tutor, did all he could to lend the conqueror intellectual respectability. As he swept through what we, in our Euro-centric conceit, call the Middle East, the Macedonian paraded himself as a demigod...or worse. And when he reached the great Iranian ceremonial city of Tahkt-e Jamshid, which the Greeks called Persepolis, he burned it to the ground.

That, I think we would agree, makes for a troubled pedigree.

Greece's civilizational lineage grows even more complicated with the arrival of Christianity in that ancient land. The new doctrine that had emerged from Judaism

took as one of its first tasks the destruction of the Olympian pantheon that had heretofore coexisted with human impulse, from the loftiest to the most base. Statues were smashed, temples ransacked. Their fine carved marble was recycled to build churches, many of which were erected on former pagan sites. The gods became orphans.

Byzantium, the new Rome, soon made the Christian doctrine imperial dogma.

I must point out that I am here telescoping centuries of complex historical development into a few sentences, but I am sure that you will bear with me. For my purpose is to suggest how deep and multifaceted is the cultural heritage of this tiny country.

When, in 1453, the Muslim Turkish army commanded by Sultan Fatih Mehmet, the Conqueror, captured Constantinople, what we know today as Greece gradually but inexorably came under Ottoman administration, where it would remain for four hundred years, until the third decade of the 19th century.

The country that welcomed me in 1960 still bore the indelible marks of the Ottoman province it had once been. Greek food advertised itself as “oriental”, and indeed it was little more than an often-crude variant of the sophisticated Ottoman imperial cuisine. Greek music, the kind that my friends and the people around me listened to, that I heard on the street, and in smoke-filled night spots where only the men danced, shared the same scales and the same tonalities with that of the wider Ottoman cultural sphere.

Of course, a nationalist reaction had taken place. Even though the Greek language had continued to thrive under the Ottoman administration, which essentially let its Christian subjects do what they wished as long as they paid taxes, cultural purists set about purging Modern Greek of its Turkish components. The purge slipped over from language and into the broader society when, in the aftermath of the First World War, Greece expelled its Muslim citizens to Turkey, which obliged by expelling its Christian citizens to Greece. Tens of thousands died; millions took to the roads, or crossed the Aegean in every kind of vessel.

If I’ve spent time on this issue, it’s because I hope to suggest that the present, in which we stand still, can never be innocent of the past, and that the past, into

which we are constantly moving backward, is continually giving new form to the present as it points toward possible futures.

The entry of the tiny and enfeebled Greek state into Europe struck a sharp blow to diversity. The post-enlightenment theory of identity construction could now be applied in a real-world laboratory.

At the time, my theorizing propensities weren't what they are today, but I reasoned—rightly, I think—that if I wanted to understand Greece, I had to move beyond it, to attempt to understand the world in opposition to which it had constructed its identity. That world was the Ottoman State, and beyond it, the world of Islam.

The opportunity to explore it came knocking twenty years later, when revolutionaries who proclaimed themselves to be motivated by the religion propounded by the Prophet Muhammad toppled the Pahlavi dynasty in Iran, and set up an Islamic Republic.

Nothing in life is simple, or straightforward. Getting from here to there, from poor, pre-tourist Greece to Tehran and beyond proved to be as complicated a task, and as necessary, as had been my departure from the United States.

It took twenty-five years, a long interval of domesticity, involvement in radical politics and the trade-union movement before a series of decisive events occurred.

To be faithful to the theme of this Conference, those events can be subsumed under the general rubric of the struggle between reality and imagination. Once more, the diversity I'd apprehended in Greece was to burst upon me, and, like a time bomb within me. Like many historical events, they unfolded in exquisite slow motion, rotating slowly in mid-air like boulders before impacting around me with an earth-shaking thud.

Some of you may have noticed that wherever there is oppression, there will be resistance. This would appear to be a universal law, operative in all times and at all latitudes.

In the late 1970s, it was certainly operative in Iran. The Shah, that esteemed friend of Henry Kissinger, purveyor of caviar to the mighty and of hunger and torture to his own people, faced a massive popular uprising led by a most unlikely coalition

of revolutionaries: constitutionalists, nationalists, Marxists, and Shiite Muslim men of religion.

The dictatorship had foreclosed all avenues of protest, silenced all critics. Only the mosques lay beyond the immediate control of the secret police. They became the organizational nodes around which the upheaval agglutinated.

Then, in a series of peaceful public demonstrations, first involving thousands, then tens of thousands, then hundreds of thousands, then millions, the tyrant was forced to abdicate and flee. “The Shah has gone, the Imam has come”, read the headlines. The Imam was, of course, Ayatollah Khomeini.

From Montréal I looked on with fascination as, in less than six months, public opinion shifted, from the deserved opprobrium for the Shah and admiration for his overthrowers to fear and loathing of a “medieval” religious regime. We could say that imagination here had overwhelmed reality, that the story had slipped its moorings and was now dangerously adrift.

But reality was what interested me. What did we really know about the social dynamics of that far-distant country that, under the Shah, aspired to emerge as a “Great Civilization” and now sought to be free of foreign domination? Very little.

There are times in a man’s life when he must leap into the void, what the Italians call a “salto mortale.” I leaped.

It was not long before I was striding across the tarmac at Mehrabad Airport in Tehran under a blackout; the heat of a July night enveloped me like a velvet glove. I had come to see for myself. What I discovered so outstripped what I recognized as the parameters of reality that at first I thought I was walking through a land of imagination. But no! All around me I saw, smelled, heard, touched, tasted. Not enough time remained in a day, a week, or a month to absorb it all. I would have to come back; I did, again and again.

Some argued that in setting up a religious government—what amounted to a semi-democratic theocracy—Iran had moved backward one thousand four hundred odd years. Others, myself included, likened the creation of an Islamic Republic to the Greek revival in architecture that grew out of the Renaissance, and flourished in the newly democratizing countries of Europe and North America.

Architects and their wealthy patrons, or the civic authorities that engaged them, did not attempt to recreate the appearance of classical Athens, but to apply the elements and proportions of the Greek heritage to the present day. The aim: to create a symbolic unity between a supposed “golden age” and their present, and to confer upon that present an atmosphere of moral authority. Lastly, these buildings evoked the democratic ideal, as if that ideal could be expressed only in marble columns and exquisite proportions...forgetting that the crowning glories of Greek architecture were religious structures, temples and ceremonial buildings having nothing to do with democracy.

Iran’s religious revolutionaries attempted something similar. Manipulating symbols that resonated among a devout population, they introduced startling theological innovations, which were not a function of doctrine but of political power. Far from attempting to return to a distant past, they went boldly forward into the uncharted territory of modernity.

In Iran, we could argue, the imagination of an idealized past helped give form to a new reality. That reality I reported on for twenty-five years, and finally, when my notes had attained a critical mass, I transformed them into books. One of them, *Takeover in Tehran*, tells the story of the capture of the United States Embassy by Iranian students from the vantage point of one of the student leaders, Massoumeh Ebtekar, who went on to serve as Minister of the Environment in the government of Mohammad Khatami, between 1997 and 2005, the highest-ranking woman in Iran.

It cannot have escaped you that in the last few minutes our narrative has drifted away from the subjective toward the objective; from the self to the group, the collective, and the nation. From the *Laiko Panepistimio* of Greece, my alma mater, the educational environment had shifted, and now encompassed an entire region and religion, although the same teacher-student ratio was in effect. Far from being a monolith, the field over which I moved proved almost limitless in its human diversity.

Some of you will bridle, I’m sure, at the notion of objectivity. Once claimed by journalists, the concept has not been able to withstand the assaults of post-modernism. And yet, if we attempt to understand phenomena on their terms—which

can roughly be compared to the scientific method—the results will surely not be the same as if we impose our terms on phenomena.

You'll remember, I'm sure, the imperial ideology that flourished during the Bush years. "We create reality now," its Master Singers boasted. "And it's up to you, the academics, to write about it." That same spirit still stalks the land, of course; better than anything else, it illustrates the distinction I'm attempting to draw.

Do you infer from what I've just said that imagination when it becomes the handmaiden of power can be dangerous? I certainly hope so. The *soixante-huitards* in France, when they shouted "l'imagination au pouvoir" could not possibly have intuited how reckless was their behavior, how disastrous their slogan.

But let's nudge ourselves back toward our elliptical, looping story.

Greece's Ottoman heritage opened for me the door to the Middle East, to what we commonly call the Muslim world. But in traveling to Iran, I had bypassed the primary object of my quest: the Ottoman Empire's successor state, Turkey.

Naïvely, uncritically, I assumed that because an Islamic revolution had occurred in Iran, a similar development would take place in Turkey. In doing so, I'd failed to differentiate between widely varying histories and cultural backgrounds; in a word, I'd overlooked the factor of diversity that, interestingly enough, Muslims are called upon to recognize as a source of knowledge.

Where in Iran I had encountered a mass movement, in Turkey what caught my attention was the lonely figure of an old man who had lived the last twenty-five years of his life in prison or in exile.

Though he'd been dead nearly forty years when I encountered him, we met in the south-eastern Anatolian city of Urfa, which was once a caravan stop on the great trade route leading from Mesopotamia to the Mediterranean.

Bediuzzman ("the wonder of the age") Said Nursi had come to this town to die, close to what some claim is the birthplace of the Prophet Abraham. Three days after arriving he did die, and was buried close to a ceremonial pool that legend dates back to the patriarch to whom the three monotheistic religions trace their roots.

Several months later, following a military coup d'État, army units smashed his tomb, removed the body and spirited it away to a hidden site.

As a writer, when I heard the story, my ears began to tingle. Who was this old man that even in death the Turkish secularist state seemed so terrified of? Then and there, I assigned myself the task of following in his footsteps, both historical and spiritual.

There was nothing overtly or even covertly revolutionary about Said Nursi. Having seen and experienced violence at first hand, he abjured it. Unlike the Iranian clerics who had overthrown the Shah at the head of a broad-based popular movement, he preached a doctrine of absolute powerlessness. Reserve your hatred only for hatred, he told his followers; and your love, for love; strengthen your faith in the crucible of reality. He spent long hours perched in a tree house, in the community of birds.

Instead of seeking violent overthrow of Turkey's iniquitous and anti-democratic secularist regime, he painstakingly laid the foundations for a community that, like a rising tide, would eventually float that regime out to sea. Today, in minute increments, the once-mighty Turkish military is being edged away from the commanding heights, to be supplanted by elected representatives who profess Islam but make no claim for it as a governing ideology.

Since this is a gathering of advanced students and would-be or soon-to-be educators, it is certainly worth our while to observe the educational strategies that Said Nursi employed. I noted with pleasure that one of the papers to be presented at this conference deals with *bricolage*, which, if I understand it, is similar to the methodology of the Bengali crows who gather a wide diversity—there's that word again!—objects such as coins, shiny buttons or colorful pieces of thread to structure their domestic environment. Another popular French term for this method is “*Système D*”, for *débrouillage*, that is, for making do with what one has at hand. Or, if you like, for applying imagination to an often grim reality.

Back, then, to Said Nursi, who in exile in tiny Anatolian villages trained the barely literate peasants, fishermen and small craftsmen around him as theological students, scribes, and clandestine messengers. The method proved fabulously successful: within a few years an entire underground network, a kind of graduate

education faculty of the spirit that branched out across Turkey like a rhizome, had been put in place.

When I found this out, I understood why the Turkish army had smashed his tomb and stolen his body.

The societies I've been telling you about are complex, deeply rooted in time and place; each one possesses unique qualities and characteristics. Each is a human construction inscribed in the continuum of going forward, moving backward and standing still. They command our attention because of their outstanding achievements as civilizations, because of their rises and falls, their collapses and rebirths. And, perhaps most important, they can only really be understood through the prism of interdisciplinarity.

We may think: Oh, interdisciplinarity! What a novel idea! As though it hadn't been attempted before, as though to utter the word were not an alarm bell ringing in the firehouse of the educational establishment.

Our system, our "culture", our "civilization"—though sometimes I feel reluctant to use such words to describe what Europe and its monstrous offshoot, the United States, have wrought on the world—prefers that we should not seek out the links between disciplines, cross the lines, violate the taboos. We might start asking the right questions, which for them are the wrong questions.

Our system prefers monomaths to polymaths, medical specialists who can tell you all you would ever care to know about your toenail to those who would approach you as a living organism existing within a broader social system that in turn exists within an even more complex ecosystem. Thus I take it as an immensely positive sign that doctrine is being challenged here today, that the hidebound, traditional ways of interpretation are being undermined.

We'll need, if you'll allow me, all the interdisciplinarity, all the awareness of diversity that we can muster in the days and years ahead. One of the things gentlemen of a certain age do best is to complain about the present; since that's my demographic niche, I certainly intend to exercise my prerogative.

But as you will have gathered, in the course of these random remarks, I won't be making an argument for a golden past to which we should aspire. I grew up during

what the late Lillian Hellman referred to as “scoundrel time”, when fear and loathing of communism was the national ideology, when people lost their livelihoods on the basis of a whispered accusation. The aim was to justify eventual war. Anyone who experienced the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 will remember what a near thing it was.

Happy days are not here again. We have entered what some have described as a “through the looking-glass world”, where up is down, right is left. Where state practitioners of terrorism wage war on shadowy, though dangerous, terrorists they themselves helped to create and nurture. Where countries lecture about human rights while practicing torture, disappearance and remote bombing of distant lands from pilot-less drones. Where fear has, once again, become the dominant note in social discourse.

You, as educators, can do something about it. You can use the tools of interdisciplinarity to transform yourselves into polymaths, into physicist-authors and mathematician-poets, into educational specialist-composers, into people who cross boundaries and violate convention with every intention of challenging iniquity, inequality and oppression.

That challenge, to conclude, is the key to grappling with the identity debate that rages just outside these walls. What is this urge to define ourselves by excluding and demonizing others? By declaring their beliefs to be radical, political, prompted by dire motives?

“Identity,” as the late Edward Said wrote, “is what we impose on ourselves through our lives as social, historical, political and even spiritual beings. The logic of culture and of families doubles its strength.” Today, the resurgence of the identity debate in Europe, and now in Québec, points to a reality that dare not speak its name. For, Said goes on, “identity is the process by which the stronger culture, and the more developed society, imposes itself violently upon those who, by the same identity process, are decreed to be a lesser people. Imperialism is the export of identity.”

We began this rambling, casual exploration of some aspects of one man’s life experience with a discussion of time and place as abstractions, seen against the

theoretical field of the Conference theme. Now, nearly one hour later, we've migrated into the rather more concrete and thus uncomfortable circumstances that surround us today, which I define as the broader canvas of our collective awareness and conscience.

The stuff of that canvas is time in its perfect immateriality. On it we—I, the writer and teller of tales, you the educators—must do our work.

We have no other.

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