Saying Yes to Life: The Search for the Rebel Teacher

Sean Blenkinsop and Marcus Morse

Abstract The chapter starts with suicide and ends in rebellious possibility. We begin by highlighting Albert Camus's consideration of suicide, and in particular his assertion that in the act of choosing not to exercise our ever-present radical freedom to commit suicide there exists both a negation, saying no to suicide, and an exaltation, of saying yes to life. Camus's purpose in this is to have us actively consider why we are choosing to stay alive and, as such, rebel against the possibility of suicide—and with purpose, choosing to say yes to life. We then focus on the distinction Camus draws between revolution and rebellion to allow us to more deeply explore his concept of the rebel and the shared role that negation and exaltation play therewith. By exploring Camus's existentialist concept of freedom in order to name both a particular negation and exaltation for our times, as he was doing for his own time, we meet Camus's challenge to consider, name, and act upon that which we choose to say yes to. The chapter concludes with an exploration of implications for

S. Blenkinsop (✉)
Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, Canada
e-mail: sblenkin@sfu.ca

M. Morse
Outdoor and Environmental Education, La Trobe University, Melbourne, Australia
e-mail: M.Morse@latrobe.edu.au

B. Jickling, S. Sterling (eds.), *Post-Sustainability and Environmental Education*, Palgrave Studies in Education and the Environment,
DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-51322-5_4

environmental educators who want to adopt, and build upon the initial work presented in this chapter in pursuit of becoming creative, rebel teachers.

Keywords Education · Environmental · Ecological · Sustainability · Camus · Existential · Pedagogy

Albert Camus, the French-Algerian philosopher, writer, director, and Nobel Prize winner died at 46 in a car crash. Yet before this tragic accident he produced a body of work that continues to engage, provoke, and challenge Western thought. His is a powerful voice for justice coupled with the life lived as an activist. It is likely that his history as a child in a single parent home and growing up poor in a French African colony influenced him in these directions. Throughout his career, Camus tended to write novels and philosophical essays in tandem and it is from one of these pairings that this chapter arises: *The Plague*, the story of how a town and its people respond to an outbreak of the bubonic plague, and *The Rebel*, a series of philosophical essays exploring how individuals and communities might change their culture. Both books (first published in 1947 and 1951, respectively) are deep explorations into what humans should/could/might do in the face of the seemingly insurmountable challenges[1] both to respond to the immediate problems and to work to create a different culture such that those same problems did not reoccur.

Underneath these explorations is the question that Camus places at the centre of his work and of all philosophy. A question that he suggests is really the only one of importance for all philosophers—suicide. Now at first blush this may seem depressing, potentially nihilistic, and too narrow in scope for philosophy and our purposes of opening new terrain for environmental educators beyond the well-trodden, at times lifeless ground of sustainability and stewardship. But Camus, in his own blunt and provocative way, is asking a significantly more expansive question, one that parallels the classic Socratic/Platonic question of the good life, only through the methods of a rebellious existentialist and more secular mind of a twentieth century theorist. As humans we have the ability to freely commit suicide, to exercise "our radical freedom," and thus the question is why, on this day or the next, do each of us individually decide not kill ourselves. Why are we choosing to live, and by extension, what is that choice saying about what we think is of value and about how a life should/

could be lived. Camus's point is to have us actively consider why we are staying alive and, as such, rebel against this possibility of suicide and with purpose, say, "yes" to life. It is this combination of negation, saying no to suicide, and exaltation, saying yes to life, that informs Camus's concept of the rebel and that might influence environmental educators who see the need for a substantial change in pedagogy, curricula, and even educational culture to better think through how to enact this freedom to which, for Sartre, we are all condemned.

In *The Rebel,* Camus (1956) sets out to understand the times in which he lived and examine the crime of his time, the extermination of tens of millions of people. He examines the apparent acceptable logic of such a crime and takes up the challenge to understand how this crime could occur and be accepted by so many; "on the day when crime dons the apparel of innocence—through a curious transposition peculiar to our times—it is innocence that is called upon to justify itself" (p. 4). Camus begins with the question of suicide because without a workable formulation for suicide, then murder cannot be critiqued.[2] The consideration of suicide is used as the starting point because its avoidance, or for Camus, its active negation (one is choosing not to kill oneself for express reasons) involves a necessary affirmation and decision to say yes to life. And for Camus, it follows, that if we are to recognize and assert that there is something good in life, something worth saying yes to then the same is true for others; "from the moment that life is recognised as good, it becomes good for all men. Murder cannot be made coherent when suicide is not considered coherent" (p. 6). And we shall see the implications of this mutual involvement in saying yes to life and freedom as the chapter progresses.

So it is this question of suicide that ignites the thinking in this chapter and not in the same way Camus initially intended, but in a way that reflects our current times and of which he would likely have approved. If, and the scientific and non-scientific evidence seems quite convincing, we are in the midst of an environmental crisis of global proportions then, to echo Camus, we suggest that the only real question for environmental educators is this question of suicide. Not so much our own ability to commit it, although that remains critically important for each individual, but what appears to be the direction for our species: we are committing mass-suicide.[3] The question for this chapter then is what can we learn from Camus that might help us respond to this crisis of suicide and find ways for this species[4] to say "yes to life?"

In this chapter we focus on the distinction Camus draws between revolution and rebellion to allow us to more deeply explore his concept of the rebel and the shared role that negation and exaltation play therewith. We explore Camus's existentialist concept of freedom in order to name both a particular negation and exaltation for our times, to meet Camus's challenge of considering, naming, and acting upon that which we choose to say yes to. The chapter includes a brief exploration of implications for environmental educators who want to adopt, and build upon, the initial work presented in this chapter in pursuit of becoming creative, rebel teachers.

Part 1: Revolution Versus Rebellion

Camus, in *The Rebel*, traces the story of rebellion and revolution through history, the arts, and a study of metaphysics. His goal is to paint a picture of who the rebel is, how rebellion works, and to articulate the pitfalls of revolution. For Camus, those who revolt and the revolutions that result are not and have never been overly successful. This is for several reasons, two of which are important here. First, revolutions tend to be about the destruction and annihilation of an entire current system, culture, or way of being and therefore lack, in the way of nihilism, a positive impetus, replacement, or possibility with respect to the future. And the second reason is because revolutionaries forget that any change must start from where things are. For Camus, not only does revolution usually begin with an absolute negation, say of an entire class or culture, but also attempts to respond by assuming that living, breathing humans can leap, at will, directly from one paradigm/way-of-being to another with no bridge, support system, or intermediary structures. For Camus this presumed "absolute flexibility" is flawed and arises because the revolutionary theorizers have forgotten that these are real people, always and already in the world and, we add, they are ignoring the educational nature of cultural change.

Camus (1956) contrasts revolution with the idea of rebellion that involves an understanding that change is much more messy and conflicted—but also more grounded and practical. He suggests that rebellion "starts with a negative supported by an affirmative" (p. 251). Change happens not as complete overthrow of history or metaphysics but as an ongoing paradoxical project of negation and exaltation at the same time, "it says yes and no simultaneously. It is the rejection of one part of existence in the name of another part, which it exalts" (p. 251). In a similar way to the rejection of

suicide, whereby if we decide to say yes to life it is because there is something good worth living for. For Camus, if we decide to rebel—it must be because we have found something worthwhile in our culture, environment, and/or each other worth fighting for. In both cases, though, these exaltations are not given; rather, they are arrived at via the act of living within the world. The challenge is to select the best negation and exaltation for the given moment in an overall rebellion. For, as Camus points out, rebellion is a process with a distant goal of a better way, what he calls unity, but it must honour those engaged in the process of change that cannot leap from here to unity in a single bound: "we can act only in terms of our own time, among the people who surround us" (p. 4). In recognizing the actual state of the human, Camus is acknowledging the reality of being human/alive and returning what he calls our dignity and beauty to us; "but the affirmation of a limit, a dignity, and a beauty common to all men [sic] only entails the necessity of extending this value to embrace everything and everyone and of advancing toward unity without denying the origins of rebellion" (p. 251). It is this recognizing of the other as unique, as situated, and as limited which allows for a genuine noticing of the other. And this noticing brings with it the proffered recognition of this other's subjectivity thereby conferring the dignity of the individual so necessary to Camus's formulation of justice and freedom.

For Camus, most of the revolutions one thinks of throughout politics, history, or art result in everything coming to a standstill as the previous is completely negated and then, eventually, there is a return to the *status quo* for there was nothing positive upon which to build, and the magnitude of the change required is too great. In response to this negating destruction Camus wants to posit the rebel and their rebellion. The rebel acts creatively through rebellion not to the entire system or culture but consciously names and negates the parts of it that they deem to be most problematic, troublesome, and unjust at this time, while also actively exalting something else which might replace that which has been negated. We must, then, engage in the process of understanding a suitable negation and exaltation for our times.

Take the sentiment being echoed by Hay (in Newton & Hay, 2007):

> We are called the anti-folk. Anti—this, that, everything. But we are not. We are for, not against. For a tangible, physical place. For the riotous, loving dance of life. For the beauty that will settle anew upon the island when the present horrors pass. (p. 22)

Here the author is responding to the way in which some sectors of the culture in Tasmania are talking about the environmental movement. His point is that there is an assumption and an attempt by the government, press, and business interests of the time to position environmentalists as being anti-everything, as being dreamers, nihilists, or utopians. Or as Camus would say, revolutionaries, whereas Hay is in fact claiming place, life, and beauty as the things which he and other environmental thinkers are, to use Camus's term, *exalting*. And for Camus (1956) it is this combination of negation—the active naming of those things which one wants rid of in the current system—and exaltation—the active naming of those things that are of value, significance, and importance—that makes up the way of rebellion. Rebellion is about changing that which is into that which is desired without making the gap impossible to jump across for real humans. For Camus this is an in-formal rule, or a guide, which he thinks "can be best described by examining it in its pure state—in artistic creation" (p. 252). Thus rebellion is a creative undertaking that makes everyone a part of a process that honours and wants to raise each individual, that understands this as a shared endeavour, and that sees this change as a process already in play even with the first act of saying "No." An act that says no to a specific and identifiable component of the culture, community, or way of being rather than a grandiose negation of its entirety. In this case, the first "No" might be to our shared suicide and then to the critical components of our culture that are so clearly contributing to our deaths. But not without at the same time clearly naming, as Hay does above, that which we are exalting, that which we might seek to build upon as we move away from that which we negate. This step of choosing the first sets of negations and exaltations in this process of change is rife with challenges. This chapter humbly proposes to explore these challenges a little further and offer a couple of possibilities.

Part 2: Seeking Negation and Exaltation

At this point, following Camus's suggestions, it would behove us to locate, or settle upon, the initial negations and exaltations that might propel the process. And this process must involve all affected, everyone and everything, to rise with the tide. With this in mind, coupled with the fact that we are at a different historical time facing a different crime, we are proposing a further radical postulate: that everywhere, in every argument in this discussion we push to think of humans and all other living beings.

Thus, in Camus's discussion about rebellion we are not solely talking about humans. And, in the upcoming exploration of freedom, it is implied that freedom is sought not just for all humans (including the marginalized, colonized, and victims of myriad violences), but also for all living more-than-humans.[5]

We are seeking the potential starting points for a rebellion against the non-environmental, colonizing, imperialistic cultural ethos of the North and West, and its trajectory towards suicide for humans and murder of myriad other species. In particular, we are seeking rebellious starting points within the educational system through which the troublesome culture is sustained and supported. The hints that Camus provides are that, (a) we are not seeking absolute negation, that is, that Western culture is all bad, (b) we need to bear in mind this work is going to be done by real beings who are immersed in real places, (c) this work needs to be done with a view to all, and (d) given the limits of humans we must make the specific negation recognizable and workable while also finding the good, even great, components that can be exalted, drawn upon, even, with a nod to Val Plumwood, actively foregrounded. We have a clear first step in the process, negation—a no to suicide, and some indicators from Hay of possible exaltations—place, life, and beauty—but these seem both fairly generic and hard to enact. As environmental educators, naming the crisis for what it is, a suicide, and using that as impetus might be an important first pebble into the pond. Yet it appears we need something more graspable, more workable if we are really going to take this project forward, and it is here that we turn back to Camus's idea of freedom because it reverberates with a sense of interconnectedness that reminds us of recent eco-philosophical work.

Part 3: From Freedom to Flourishing

Although our impetus for exaltation is taken from freedom in our time, Camus again offers provocations to assist. Quite early in Camus's 1949 play *The Just*, we hear a character make a claim that freedom is not an individual achievement, prerogative, even reality but that it is connected to and contingent upon others, or as Sartre (1992) suggests; "I am not free unless others are as well" (p. x). This interconnection is important to our discussion here in at least two ways. The first is that freedom only exists if there are others who recognize one as something other than an object.[6] To be a chooser in an automatic, pre-programmed, solely instinctual world empty of

others, to recognize and share this ability, is to create art in a world with no audience or to make a noise where nobody hears. But, this presence of others is not just about having an audience, but is about being recognized by, and implicated in, the processes of enacted freedom. For if I recognize an other as being free, and this must happen in order for my own freedom to exist in turn, then I have the responsibility to weigh my decisions, actions, and ways of being in light of their possibilities, just as their decisions, freely made, impact my own possibilities in potentially limiting/restricting or opening/expanding ways.

The second way in which the other is necessary to freedom is in its coupling with responsibility such that freedom is about the ability to choose to act and not act, to be and not be, such that every actor/being has the same opportunity and range of possibility. For by extension, if I am not free in a world of automated objects so, too, am I not free if I am the only one able to engage in a full range of possibility in a world of deeply limited others. For what does it mean if I alone am the one who can create what I am? Or if in that process of self-becoming I have made it impossible for others to do the same? Or if only a small portion of living beings, the portion that are not dis-enfranchised, colonized, or marginalized in body or spirit, can exercise it? For Camus this second point is positioned within a social justice conversation and yet Camus himself has opened the door to including not just humans in this project of freedom but also more-than-humans. What if in exalting the possibility of freedom for all we actively include the more-than-humans?

The exaltation we propose, then, is mutually dignified flourishing. This is a rewording of freedom for all, but it makes clear that the freedom being sought is one that comes coupled with responsibility to oneself, to others, and to one's larger community (read ecosystem). The addition of "dignified" reminds us that this project of rebellion is about living and letting live in order to create who we are, and that in losing this ability any specific living thing loses the dignity implicit in being, their ability to self-create, and to be recognized as such beyond simply existing for others or as an unchanging object.

The negation we propose, while less developed in this chapter, is there by implication: individualistic anthropocentrism. This builds upon the message of interconnection and the idea that one is never free, self-becoming, or in rebellion alone. The addition of anthropocentrism may be a surprise, but for the reader willing to recognize that the more-than-human world has created a place where humans can actually exist, that it is made up of myriad unique

individuals doing their own thing, and that it is more than simply an amorphous backdrop of objects, then this might in fact be an obvious first negation. We are proposing that we actively begin to undo everything that places the human at the centre and alone while extending the idea of connection, dignity, and increasing possibility for all.

Conclusion: Environmental Education and the Rebel Teacher

Camus's novel *The Plague* is the story of a town facing death. The plague has arrived, people are dying, and there appears to be little that can be done in response. And yet, in the book, we come across myriad people each responding in their own way to this seemingly overwhelming crisis. Most commentators suggest that Camus is commenting upon French resistance to the Nazi regime as it expanded across Europe, but even if it is not, the responses of Camus's characters to the plague map nicely onto the challenge of climate change and the environmental crisis today. There are those who try to obfuscate and undersell the challenge, those who deny what is going on, those who cynically profit through manipulating fears, those who resign themselves, those who try to escape elsewhere, those who anticipate the solution arriving from elsewhere, and then those who respond in ways that might be considered heroic and rebellious even though they are quite understated. It is to them, and to the main character, Dr. Rieux, that we turn in order to think through some of the characteristics of the rebel environmental educator while also integrating our proposed negation and exaltation.

Teacher as Witness

The narrator's identity in the *The Plague* remains hidden for much of the novel, but it goes to the heart of the rebel hero's character, Dr. Rieux, to learn he is the author, and he "resolved to compile this chronicle, so that he should not be one of those who hold their peace but should bear witness in favour of those plague-stricken people; so that some memorial of the injustice and outrage done them might endure" (Camus, 1960, p. 251). Quite early in the novel Rieux, having seen the dying rats and the growing number of sick and dying patients, is called into a meeting with several doctors, politicians, and leaders of the community. The point of the meeting is to

discuss strategy in response to the challenges being faced. It was at that meeting that, in the face of another doctor wanting to temper the diagnosis and several politicians wanting to understate the challenge and limit the financial expense, Rieux simply bears witness to what is happening, names it, and recommends that the city respond in the ways it must (e.g. closing its gates, setting up a quarantine system, isolating the sick, etc.).

And so one of the first acts of Camus's rebel hero Rieux was to speak truth to the politicians, other doctors, and even his patients. Unwilling to ignore its presence he named it and from then on worked in response to that named reality. Sadly, others are unwilling to respond, yet Rieux continues to name the plague, gather allies, and put the needed responses into place. Intriguingly for environmental educators, what Rieux is doing is really just following the protocols and Hippocratic Oath that exist for medical doctors in plague situations. How might that look for educators in a time of ecological crisis? By naming the environmental challenge and by using the negations and exaltations proposed above we are beginning to form the basis upon which the actions of any educator can be judged and determined with respect to the environment. For example, does the curriculum I have chosen for tomorrow appear to acknowledge, respond to, and take into account the environmental crisis? Or, did the answers I gave to my students' questions today honour their dignity and provide room for the dignity of the more-than-humans that we worked with? Or, how did I notice and respond to instances of anthropocentrism, hyper-individualism, and environmental backgrounding in the structure of our classroom, the responses of the students, and my own choice of metaphors?

Teacher as Artist

Throughout the novel, Rieux is pushed by the situation to find creative solutions to challenges as they arise. One of the clearest examples is his involvement of unexpected people. He knows that he needs people to organize the teams that are involved in gathering, transporting, and caring for the sick and he locates a previously quiet, ignored, and somewhat odd fellow to take the lead in this challenging role. In doing so, Rieux undermines the way this person has been "created" by the community and allows him to flourish in an unexpected way. For Camus, rebellion is a creative process made up of a multitude of creative acts, often unexpected, that move the community forward. And he clearly sees the focus as being on the result rather than on the artist. The point is to get a system for dealing with

the ill and not about how brilliant Rieux was in choosing the person. Camus (1956) suggests, "art consists in choosing the creature in preference to his [sic] creator. But still more profoundly, it is allied to the beauty of the world or of its inhabitants against the powers of death and oblivion. It is in this way that his [sic] rebellion is creative" (p. 267). For Camus, this is a call to be in the world, in all of its beauty and complexity, with all of its denizens, and a call to assist, even if completely futile, in creating a shared mutual flourishing. In this, Camus looks to Proust, whom he admired, and to how Proust, as rebel creator, exalted life, its particularities, its uniquenesses, and its sensualities by de-centring that which, at his historical time, was the nexus around which everything else was supposed to revolve—the image in which all else was created, the metanarrative that undergirded all other stories—God. The point here is that, for today's environmental educator, there is still a creator, a metanarrative, around which everything else revolves and is understood today, and that is us: the human. In this modern, postmodern, neoliberal world we are creators and we have made the natural world—the more-than-humans—into creatures of human subjugation. We are the creator and it is this problem—this profound anthropocentrism—that the artist rebel teacher must respond to.

How might educators creatively de-centre this metanarrative and exalt mutually dignified flourishing. The environmental educator might ask—how am I inviting the local more-than-humans to be part of my teaching practice? How am I considering and creating learning environments that demonstrate that the human is not the single centre of the world? How, in honouring the chosen negation and exaltation, am I focusing on that which is created—even if it pushes me into the background? Or, how might assessment and evaluation look if we consider mutual flourishing and push individualism into the background?

Teacher as Rebel Hero

Throughout *The Plague* there are opportunities for Rieux to prioritize himself and choose to escape, stop engaging, or benefit himself in different ways, yet he does not. He is a humble, quiet hero working alongside many others in response to what appears to an overwhelming force that is killing his city. But it is clear as the novel progresses that, although the odds seem slim for survival, the only chance that exists is for everyone to find, in their own ways, something to do in response to the challenge. There is a shared foundation that supports this work and that acts as a kind of lens for

the city and for each individual. It is through this core foundation that we hope this chapter has moved us a step closer to naming—exaltations, those things that we say yes to, and negations, those that we do not accept. We suggest that it might be through bearing witness and negating our own suicide as a result of our individualistic anthropocentrism, while at the same time allowing all to exercise their freedom through exalting mutual dignified flourishing, that we can, as living beings on this beautiful wild planet, survive and even thrive.

Notes

1. Camus wrote *The Myth of Sisyphus* 5 years earlier.
2. For instance, and to push Camus's thought here, at the individual level if you cannot tell me why you are alive/what you are saying yes to then potentially your murder be allowable.
3. And murder of myriad species as well.
4. It is clear that there are cultures and peoples within the species that are more and less responsible for the destruction wrought globally. This chapter is likely aimed at those peoples that have historically taken, and continue to take, a "colonizing" position towards the more-than-human world.
5. Note: This extends Abram's concept of the more-than-human to include the uniquenesses and individualities of said members, hence the pluralized form.
6. Care is taken not to reconstruct a subject/object dualism both to remove human exceptionalism and maintain existentialist integrity.

References

Camus, A. (1956). *The rebel* (A. Bower, Trans.). New York: Vintage Books.

Camus, A. (1960). *The plague* (S. Gilbert, Trans.). Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.

Newton, M., & Hay, P. (2007). *The forests.* Hobart: Self-published.

Sartre, J.-P. (1992). *Notebooks for an ethics* (D. Pellauer, Trans.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Sean Blenkinsop is Professor of Education at Simon Fraser University and a visiting professor at SFU's Centre for Dialogue. He has a long publication record in the areas of environmental, outdoor, and experiential education as a philosopher of education. His current research interests are coming together around a discussion of significant change in education through an educational philosophy that

brings together continental existentialism and eco-theory. He is also the principal investigator at two publicly funded nature-based outdoor schools, the Maple Ridge Environmental School (http://es.sd42.ca/) and the NEST program at Davis Bay Elementary (http://www.sd46.bc.ca/index.php/nature-program).

Marcus Morse grew up in Tasmania, Australia, where early journeys along the island's rivers, coastlines, and mountains, combined with the political and environmental movements of the state, inspired a long-term commitment to environmental education. Currently Senior Lecturer and Academic Programme Director of Outdoor and Environmental Education at La Trobe University, Australia, his teaching focuses on ways in which education can promote the social and cultural change required for sustainable and ecologically healthy futures. He is a lead member of the La Trobe research programme "Remaking Education" and his current interests are in the areas of environmental education philosophy, understandings of meaning-making, dialogue in education and forms of paying attention within outdoor environments. He has received a research award for his work on educational curriculum and pedagogy and is Associate Editor for the *Journal of Outdoor and Environmental Education*.