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Crises and Suffering as Sources of Learning

Current learning theories tend to focus on the intentional learning of curriculum contents. They never make thematic other human experiences. Yet in everyday life, we (a) experience disorder, pain, and afflictions to our bodies; (b) feel emotions, including the strong ones denoted by the nouns desire, hate, fear, anger, rage, affection, love, and enthusiasm; and (c) are subject to external forces and agents. All of these experiences denote various forms of – and collectively are referred to as – passions. The passions are an important, if not the most important form of human experience and perhaps the constitute experiences that are most foundational for the way we are. Their considerations, as form and content of experience, take us beyond the limits of what learning theories currently in vogue can explain in terms of human knowing and understanding. We understand pain precisely because we have been subject to pain prior to all thoughts about pain, prior to any conceptual development of any kind, including the concepts of pain. Someone who has never experienced pain may be able to hear the word when the sound /peīn/ is produced; the person may even be able to construct sentences using the word 'pain'. But they would not be able to experience *com*passion, suffer together with another person and *participate* in her suffering. This is so because they would not know how suffering feels. But, without culture, I do not know how to talk about how I feel. This is so because 'I cannot identify the behavior of the other as choleric without adopting at first an exterior point of view over my own affects, that is, from this other himself. Only under this condition can I understand this carnal manifestation of another as choleric' (Franck 1981: 157). This also means that the conscious self-presentation of experiences – a self-presentation in consciousness – that I have in flesh and blood are interlaced with the forms of descriptions, collective *re*presentations, that I have available. We see this at work at the end of the preceding chapter, where I write about how the singularity of the event on the butte vanishes and becomes nothing other than a collectively possible experience, which, for this very reason, no longer is mine. My pain, however, is my pain, and nobody else can feel it. All they can share is the talk about pain.

The passions, including experiences through the senses, *are given to* me, come to me through the unpredictable forces of the environment upon me. I do not have to intend exploring something through touch if I can anticipate what it is to touch the substance; I do not have to taste a whiskey, olive oil, or other food if I can anticipate that I will not like it. Learning means confronting and subjecting oneself to the unknown. In Part I of this book, I exhibit methods for exploring the senses, which constitute one aspect of the passions. In this chapter, I am more concerned with other forms of passions that we often do not think about until we actually experience them – such as the experience of suffering some illness or the experience of a life crisis. In these cases, I do not really know what suffering or experiencing a crisis feels like unless I have felt it myself. This is so because I know and practically understand suffering and crisis, as all other passions, only through experiencing them. Otherwise I only have symbolic knowledge and, literally, 'do not know what I am talking about'. For there is no other way of incarnate knowing what it is to suffer than through suffering, no other way to know addiction than through living an addiction, and there is no other way to know how joy grabs hold of the incarnate body as a whole than through the intense sense of joy.

The passions may therefore teach us something; and they do so in ways that the theories we know today, built on intentionality and representation, cannot explain. This is so because '[f]rom the perspective of intentionality, non-intentional experiences or real contents of experiences – whereby experiencing and experiences, sensation, and the sensed become one – are nothing other than formless and functionless materials that contribute nothing to the constitution of an object' (Waldenfels 1999: 40). From such intentionalist perspectives, therefore, suffering and experiencing crises are nothing but qualities that cannot be ascribed as properties to some entity or process. In this chapter, I exemplify the first-person approach by means of two analyses, one focusing on suffering and the other one on crisis.

Pathos, Empathy, and Sympathy

Throughout my life, I have been a very active person, someone who took things into his own hands. I had never been 'afflicted' by something that I would have experienced as such. Most people who have come to know me also would say that I am a 'strong-willed' person, very much in control over himself, and task-oriented. As a world-class athlete, I have carnally experienced what the popular diction 'no pain no gain' denotes. Pain, therefore, has not been an experience that made me stop in view of some ultimate result. As an athlete, I repeatedly moved across the threshold of pain, winning some championship, but subsequently being unable to walk because of exhaustion. Training was often hard, and there were instances in which the idea of giving up emerged into consciousness – but I have never allowed such an idea to take hold. Outsiders, such as television viewers and sports journalists often use the expression 's/he is suffering (right now)', but I have not experienced such instances of suffering themselves. They only have symbolic knowledge of such instances, perhaps arrived at through the metaphorization from other experiences. Despite all of these experiences, some of which have driven me

to extreme exertion, I have not really known suffering until one summer day in 2002, during an instant when I find myself robbed of every bit of intentional agency that I have had.

On that day I have come to the university to teach. I am in my office when, all of a sudden, an immense feeling of fatigue is flooding and overcoming me. The sensation is strong, stronger than any fatigue I have ever experienced. Something is overtaking me, stronger than any 'I' or 'me'. I wonder what to do but cannot hold onto or enact any of the fleeting thoughts invading me at the time. The sensation is so intense that I am completely overwhelmed. I am no longer able to consider any thought. Strangely, I experience myself in this situation, as if watching myself. There is a complete absence of intention. Standing in the middle of my office, I consider lying down, but cannot; I consider sitting down in my office chair, but cannot take the decision to do the two steps that would get me there. I actually realize that I am aware of what is happening without being able to do anything for my intentionality to return. I cannot seek help or plan what to do next. Any intentional capacity I might have had in the past has left me at this moment. I give up and allow myself to drop. Two hours later I wake up on the floor, in the middle of my office, right where I remember having stood when the event began.

Several weeks later, during the same summer, I am subject to another, very similar episode. I am at home, in the center of my kitchen. An incredible fatigue is surging within and overcoming me faster than I can think. Before I know it, my intentionality has left. From where I stand I can see the couch in the family room. It is but ten feet away from where I stand. But I am unable to take the decision to walk to the couch and lie down. As before in my office, I abandon myself. Falling is the last thing I remember. Upon waking up, I find myself lying on the floor in the middle of the kitchen.

In this experience, all will has vanished. I cannot decide on realizing the simplest one of the fleeting thoughts, such as taking a few steps to lie or sit down. I experience as my self abandons itself, in the way it abandons itself while falling asleep (into sleep). Whereas sufficient awareness remains for taking note of what is happening, there is insufficient capacity left within me to do anything about it. I am *subject to* forces that I cannot control or to which I can offer some resistance. I am *subjected to* an experience that I have nothing left for to mount resistance. I can only let go, as the result of the last little bit of intentionality and agency left in the situation. When all of these have gone, there is still one thing left: the capacity to suffer, to experience passivity, being subject to experiences and subjected to forces and conditions that we have no control over whatsoever. That is, whenever everything else is gone that makes my everyday normal consciousness, being subject to the conditions, suffering, and pathos remain until there is no sense of anything left. During the sleep, there is no 'I' that could be subject to suffering, pathos, or conditions. What remains when 'I' come to my senses again are the recollections from the instances preceding the departure of consciousness. The very fact that I can recall these instances points us to their syncopic nature, where sufficiently enough remains to provide echoes in my conscious experience.

I am now thinking about the experience of birth, which we do not and cannot experience in a conscious manner. It is the perfect example of an event, inherently unpredictable – on the part of the parents, doctors, or the child, subject of the event

(Marion 2010). It is an instant of my life where I am literally thrown into the world without the capacity to experience it in the way I experience today. I am enabled as a subject precisely at the instant when I am most subject to the conditions and literally e*jected* (thrown) from the womb. The foundation, therefore, of the knowing and agential subject begins precisely in the total absence of agency, in an instant of passivity more radical than any form of willed passivity associated with non-action. Thought in this way, the pathos and the pathic are the origin and source of two opposite forces: 'wanting to' and 'having to' (von Weizsäcker 1973).

The verb 'to suffer' derives, as so many other words of our language, from the Latin, where it existed in the form *suffere*, to submit to, endure, to suffer. It is a composite word consisting of the particle *sub-*[1], under, underneath, at the bottom of, below + *ferre*, to bear, bring with, endure. The prefix, derived from a preposition, points us to the fact that the *sub*ject is under the effect from the outside, is under something that it has to bear, endure. *What* we suffer, therefore, cannot be understood from the perspective of the sufferer, who, being under the effect of something else, also is subject to and subjected to the experience. In fact, the etymology of 'subject' – from *sūbicere*, to place below, to place under, based on the verb *iacere*, to throw, cast, hurl – should point us to the fact that we are 'under the dominion of' something or someone else, 'thrown to the lions', as Christians were during the Roman empire.

When I ride home after having finished teaching on the day of my collapse, many fleeting thoughts enter and leave my mind. I am thinking about the members of the various First Nations bands that I see almost daily upon riding through their villages, about their teenagers who attended classes in the schools where I did research. The villages are not nice and tidy as those populated by the dominant Western-style culture just a little further down the road; and the teenagers do not engage with anything while they are in school, but merely sit as if letting the events go by. At this instant, while I ponder my collapse earlier on during the day, a sense of empathy overcomes me, as the thought crosses my mind that their experiences in our world may be like mine: being subject and subjected to conditions over which one does not have any control whatsoever and about which one cannot do a single thing. I think about drug addicts, and about our cultural non-understanding of what it means to be addicted. Perhaps someone who needs a next shot is in a situation as I have been just prior to sliding to the ground, when I can just note what I experience but cannot do anything about it. Is this sense of being subject and subjected to something similar to what the child molester or other sexual offender experiences when they cannot but commit what we denote as perpetrations of the law?

Since these experiences, my understanding of the world has changed. Whereas previously, I could see the world only through the lens of agency, these and similar episodes taught me that there are situations that we experience not as intentional subjects of activity but that we experience as patients, the pathic subjects who are subject to forces that they do not control on their own and who are subjected to situations that they cannot but suffer. We may talk about a 'crime of passion', but

[1] The 'b' in 'sub-' changes to an 'f' under certain conditions, such as when an 'f' follows in the subsequent word stem.

cannot really understand, through compassion and empathy, what it is to be subject to this spell; and, consequently, whereas we may be able to gain symbolic mastery over this type of experience, we cannot have sympathy or empathy. Etymologically, the term 'sympathy' derives from Greek, *sumpathés*, having a fellow feeling, a compound word from *súm*, having the same form + *páthos*, suffering, feeling. Who has ever had sympathy for a person who has committed murder in and out of passion? Who has had sympathy for a thief? Who has had sympathy for a person who, despite already weighing over 300 pounds cannot but stuff himself with more food, thereby gaining even more weight? Why is it so difficult to feel sympathy for a drug addict? At this moment on my way back home from the university, I think: precisely because, as the etymology suggests, one has to *feel* what the other is feeling, and without feeling what the other feels, we cannot feel in the same form!

'Empathy' is a relatively recent word translating the German *Einfühlung* ('empathy'), literally meaning '[getting] into the feeling [of another]'. The structure of 'empathy' emulates that of the word 'sympathy'. *Em-* translates the German 'Ein-', in, into, whereas the second part, 'pathy' is based, as in sympathy, on the Greek term *pathós*. Empathy is subject to the condition outlined above that I cannot recognize the pathos of another until I have seen my own pathos from the perspective of another. That is, empathy, in the same way as sympathy, requires that we have experienced the specific form of passion, for otherwise the *em-* and *sym-* parts of the phenomenon denoted by the terms cannot be ascertained.

Understanding Agency | Passivity

A catastrophe constitutes an event in which a current order or system of things is subverted and overturned. A crisis, therefore, is of syncopic nature, because we have a turnover from one order to another order that occurs in a single instant. Precisely because the old order is subverted, it can neither explain nor anticipate the new order. The new order is created precisely in the transition between two orders – such as the transition during birth or that during death. The experiences of these catastrophic changes cannot generally be told, because, in the first instance, there is no capacity yet for making the presence of birth present again; and, following death, nobody remains to talk about it. But there are forms of catastrophe in which we are completely changed, 'become a new person', that we can at least describe even though we are subject to conditions over which we have no longer or only very limited control. I had the opportunity to experience one such event during the 1970s, which I recount elsewhere in this way:

> On this afternoon, in the same way as on other afternoons during that period, I begin by smoking a joint while reading one of Carlos Castañeda's ethnographic reports on the culture of the Yaqui Indians and their shamanist practices – including *The Teachings of Don Juan, A Separate Reality*, and *Journey to Ixtlan*. As the drug takes effect, I *all of a sudden* have the sense that I am no longer breathing myself but something else outside of me is doing it for me. Or, rather, I am being breathed. Then a new sense emerges in an un-

> anticipated fashion, the sense of being taut like the drumhead of a steel drum. It bulges outward toward one side, being a little larger than the shell that fixes and defines the outer edges of the drumhead. I am the drumhead, pulsating slowly. Each movement brings me closer to the normal resting state. I sense that if the drumhead-I moves through the equilibrium state, it will be my end. Death. A second image emerges, suddenly, existing side by side with the drumhead image. It is that of going through a singularity – the biblical camel that goes through the eye of a needle. My whole body squeezed through a hole with zero extension. Death again. I can feel my whole living/lived bodily self resist. I do not want to die. But the vibrations toward the equilibrium state of the drumhead become stronger. I am moving/being moved closer to the singularity where, as I anticipate, I will vanish. I resist. I do not want to die. But each movement occasioned by the unknown, imperceptible but *felt* outside force brings me closer to the state that I anticipate to be death. Then, all of a sudden emerges a question: 'Why resist?' I sense that I am ready to die. I let go. I no longer remember what follows. I do not even remember loosing consciousness. I find myself again waking up. In finding myself waking up, I am finding my Self, my consciousness; but it is also a finding of something that exists against a ground that makes it possible in the first place. I am conscious against the unconscious state that preceded this instant. (Roth 2011: 211–212)

In this episode, we immediately notice the pathic dimension of the experience, which penetrates such fundamental experiences as breathing. Or, rather, the experience of breathing is already one that we are subject to. We can hold our breath, some time, in particular even for long periods of time, such as some yoga practitioners or divers. Unless we attempt to die by somehow forcefully stopping breath, we eventually gasp for air.[2] At birth, we do not automatically breath. It is a common practice to slap the newborn so that it begins to breath with its lungs, something that becomes necessary when the umbilical cord is cut. The very condition for being alive, breathing, is not, in the end, a function of my will. It is something given to me, enabling my existence. The recognition of the fundamentally pathic dimension of breathing is heightened to the extreme in this experience.

The next experience articulated in this narrative account of a catastrophe in the making, too, is also a pathic one. I am no longer an agent but subject to forces and conditions: like a drumhead, which is brought into motion by a drumstick and forced into a particular movement by the points of suspension. It is an image that repeats the pulsating nature of life itself, including the thought of death, which itself cannot be anticipated, lying beyond the threshold of what can be thought with the tools at hand. There is a sense that the point when the drumhead flips to the

[2] In obstructive sleep apnea, the tongue and throat muscles collapse, stopping all breathing. When there is not enough air available, the person 'goes for air', wakes up medically speaking (generally not being conscious of it), and then falls asleep again. As in the case of a dream, the apnea reaches into the present – when my heart rate is increased and when I find myself intensely breathing. But I am not generally aware of the apnea episodes: medical tests showed that I used to have 20 or more of them per hour and yet I have never been consciously aware of them and know about them only through the medical tests in a sleep clinic.

other side is a point of death, a point of singularity. A second image of singularity emerges: being pushed into and through a point, the eye of a needle with a diameter of zero. It, too, is accompanied by an association with death.

In the account, we observe vestiges of agency, such as when I attempt to resist for a while to being pushed 'over the edge', that is, to flipping through the resting position of the drumhead or moving through a point of zero extension. The movement toward the singularity becomes stronger, and much as I attempt to resist falling after tripping, there is still an attempt to resist the experience of death associated with the singularity. I do know what is on the other side, but there is a sense that the singularity means death. And then a final act of decision: abandoning to the conditions and to the inevitable. Just as I have let go overcome by this infinite fatigue, which allows me to slide to the floor, I let go in the present instance. When I return to consciousness – in fact, when consciousness returns to me – I am not merely finding a 'self' but a different self, as evidenced in the very different form and content of the poems that I am writing before and after that incident in my life. In fact, already at that time, more than thirty years ago, the poems before and after are separated by a leaf carrying the inscription 'Transcendence' and the preceding section is entitled 'Before the Great Divide'. This afternoon, when I lived through the crisis, became a syncopic instant, where my former self died and a subsequent self emerged both being one and the same at the point of passage.

Describing such events is not easy, as we do not tend to have an appropriate language for it (Bakhtin 1984). What we require instead is a language that allows us to produce 'the conception of the world as eternally unfinished: a world dying and being born at the same time, possessing as it were two bodies' (ibid: 166). Such a language creates dual images. A 'dual image combining praise and abuse', for example, 'seeks to grasp the very moment of this change, the transfer from the old to the new, from death to life. Such an image crowns and uncrowns at the same moment'. Our traditional language, representative of class culture, is problematic for 'there is no place for it in the culture of the ruling classes; here praise and abuse are clearly divided and static, for official culture is founded on the principle of an immovable and unchanging hierarchy in which the higher and lower never merge' (ibid: 166).

In the decisive instant of this episode, the irreducible relation of agency and passivity and the source of agency in passivity become apparent. I am subject to the experience, but still make the decision to let go; even if I had not decided to let go, I would have fallen into the singularity. The decision is to abandon myself to what remains, in fact, to return to the beginning, where only pathos remains. At this point, the experience of death (of the old subject) and sleep coincide, irremediably fused into a single and singular experience.

From the first-person perspective of the living subject, the experience of catastrophe and crisis allows us to understand that there is not just agency, the will and power to act. Rather, a slow reading of the events shows that there is a series of verbs that we have to think together to understand human experience. This series is captured in statements such as 'I intend to . . .', 'I want to . . .', 'I have to . . .', 'I can . . .', 'I may . . .', 'I am supposed to . . .', and 'I ought to . . .'. Thinking agency dialectically means acknowledging that each of these forms is only a manifestation of an irreducible whole that encompasses all of these forms simultaneously. There

is no 'I intend to . . .' without also an 'I have to . . .', even when the latter is not salient at the moment. If 'I', for example, '*intend to* hammer a nail into the wall for hanging a picture', then there are many constraints to which this intention is subject to. My arm, hand, and finger joints constrain movements in particular ways and only some things are useful as hammer when a 'real hammer' is unavailable. If I intend to hammer, I have to overcome the resistance of my body to movement, and I cannot but acknowledge this fact. Even the most accomplished carpenter, who has learned to hammer with minimal effort, still requires *some* effort to do the job. This effort is required to overcome the resistance of the body, the resistance of the hammer to being moved through the air, and that of the wall, which resists accepting the nail. The source of resistance is sometimes indistinguishable, coming from the outside or from our own bodies. On the bicycle, for example, three different contexts may give rise to the same feeling: riding uphill, riding against the wind, and riding on the flat but with legs tired from a long ride on the preceding day. And the movement is a good movement only when it is controlled, but this control, as we know from expert hammering, is not executed by the mind.[3]

Framing our condition through the dialectic of agency | passivity, where the verbal expressions in the preceding paragraph constitute its manifestations, allows us to understand the emergence of intentionality in passivity. This is so because to be able to say or imagine 'I intend to . . .' I already have to be in the position of 'I can . . .' or at least I have to be in the position to anticipate the possibility of an 'I can . . .'. I cannot intend something that I cannot already do, either practically or symbolically. But the 'I can . . .' is given to me. I find myself able to do something, but this ability precedes my finding or intending it.[4] I become conscious, but I cannot intend consciousness because intention requires consciousness; I cannot intend the learning object, because intending it requires knowing it, and to know it is precisely what I want to or am supposed to do during a teaching-learning event. That is, learning is a pathic experience rather than the agential experience that current learning theories make it out to be.

Coda

In this chapter, I use two forms of experience as a means of inquiring into the nature of learning and into the relation of the subject to the events at hand. Both

[3] 'We have absolutely no experience of a *cause*; psychologically speaking, we derive the entire conception from the subjective conviction that *we* are cause, that is, that the arm moves. . . But this is an error. We differentiate ourselves, the actors, from action, and we make use everywhere of this schema' (Nietzsche 1954: 767).

[4] Intentionally pointing to some object, for example, is the result of a societal relation (Vygotskij 2005). At first, the infant moves his arm and hand in a haphazard way resting in some position. The mother hands the infant an object that lies in a line extending the orientation of the hand or arm. After repeated experiences of this kind, the infant begins to intentionally point. Here, 'pointing' has emerged from random positions of the hand and arm, which are socially reified as pointing gestures because they come to be associated with things that have a particular orientation with respect to infant, hand, arm, and finger.

forms of experience allow us to understand pathos as an essential aspect of all experience, and, in fact, as the origin, source, and end of any having of experience. We literally do not know in any carnal sense what a form of experience is – pain, passion, crisis – unless we have had the experience rather than having merely heard the words that name them. Experiences such as the ones analyzed here have allowed me to understand the world and human existence in a different way, not only with respect to such experiences but, more broadly, with respect to the phenomena that I research as part of my professional life. It is through such experiences that I have come to understand the problematic and paradoxical nature of learning, which we cannot ever resolve unless we also make thematic its pathic dimensions.

In the instances of suffering, pain, and (personal) crises, first-person methods appear to be the only way in which we can validly say anything at all concerning the phenomenon of interest. We need to have experienced affection, have been in the state of being affected, of being subject to the condition without any remaining form of agency to truly understand what we are talking about. This may also be at the heart of the experience with doctors, who find themselves exceeded by what the patients intend to communicate. My family physician could not understand my experience and responded to my accounts by saying 'Anyone who lives as healthy as you do, and who exercises as much, *cannot have such an experience*'. Even more ironical, the rheumatologist that I have been sent to, after having looked at the x-ray images, suggests that there is nothing I have – even though I am sitting in his office with so much pain in the shoulder joints that I hardly can move my arms. In each case, I am sent home without any further action being taken, as if I had faked illness or told a lie. Neither doctor exhibited empathy or sympathy, and perhaps if they were able to feel such, they would prevent themselves from doing so.

From the methodical point of view, the sources of data in this chapter are single and singular events that are interrogated with the intent to uncover invariants of human experience. That is, the point here is precisely not to find out how 'I' felt being subject to an extreme fatigue, which turned out to be a chronic condition that lasted for a decade, or to find out how it is to have a death experience under the influence of a drug (and fatigue). The point of the investigation and the reason for the first-person method employed is to uncover and extract the general and invariant properties in the specific cases (Bourdieu 1992). This interrogation requires some systematicity. Among others, it requires attention to those dimensions of experience that tend to be hidden or disregarded as too mundane. Such generalization is not achieved by applying routinely existing conceptual constructions, often empty and merely formal, but by thinking the particular as particular, as particular instantiation of the possible.

As in other chapters, I also exemplify those aspects of the first-person approach that draw on, explicate, and elaborate on the etymology of words. These in fact are remnants from the time when humans first became conscious of a particular form of experience. They are part of the sediment that forms the memory of the past (Husserl 1939). Sometimes the words are or have experienced metaphorical extensions (e.g., 'sympathy'); and at other times, they have been constructed more recently based on the patterns in which other words are put together (e.g., 'empathy'). In this chapter, the analysis shows that without having had a particular form

of experience, we are not truly enabled to experience empathy and sympathy, because this means that we have been subject to the same *pathos*, the same *pathic* experience. But, as in any other field, there will be people who claim sympathy and empathy because of their symbolic mastery of the discursive domain. However, in the same way that knowing the formulas for the flight of a soccer ball does not mean a person can actually play soccer, the ability to talk *about* a pathic experience – i.e., showing mastery of the discourse – does not mean that we also feel the pathos associated with the term we use. Claiming otherwise means being in contradiction with an age-old wisdom, which says, as quoted in chapter 8, 'the Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao. The name that can be named is not the eternal name'.