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The rise and fall of generation *now**

Before this lecture, you have all had coffee; after we've finished, we will all have lunch. "Before" and "after": no expressions can be more commonplace, yet none, when you come to think about it, can be more perplexing. Imagine you are standing in a queue. There are people standing ahead of you; they arrived before you did, and are that much closer to the future towards which we are all shuffling. Then there are people behind you; they arrived after, and are that much further away. The former came early; the latter came late. Perhaps, if we were to enlarge the scale of our metaphor, we could imagine generations queuing up like this. There are people of your generation, lined up in a row. Ahead, in serried ranks, lie the generations of your forebears. Behind lie generations to come, preparing to make their way. Not all of these people, of course, may still, or yet, be alive. But even those who have "passed," as we say, continue to cast their shadows over their followers, just as those who have yet to be born will emerge in the shadows of our own generation. But here's the puzzle. For we are just as likely to say, of ancestral generations, that they lived in times past, and of descendant generations, that they will be the denizens of times future. The generations ahead of us, whom we had followed, are now behind; those behind, who had followed us, are now ahead. Before and after, it seems, have switched places. What can account for this curious reversal of fortune?

The answer seems to lie in a certain switch of perspective. The first perspective, which sees ancestors ahead and descendants behind, is taken from a position in the queue. Like everyone else, you are shuffling along through life, measuring out your days in steps towards a future which, like a spatial horizon, nevertheless recedes as

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fast as you approach it. But now suppose that you turn around, through 180 degrees. The people who once went before you are now at your back, while you now find yourself face-to-face with those who were once following after. The future, which had formerly stretched away into the distance, along ancestral paths, now appears to be heading, on a collision course, straight towards you. Meanwhile the ancestors, upon whom you have now turned your back, recede ever further into the past. Their time is over. *The very act of turning, then, stakes a claim for the present.* There is no present in the ever-moving queue, only the future's past. The present is a hold-up, an attempt to arrest the passage of time. But no generation can hold its ground indefinitely. Eventually, the press becomes too great, and it is either pushed aside or forced to move on, to make way for the next generation that promptly does the same, turning its back on the one preceding only to face its own successor. The moment it turns, it takes the stand of a new present. History, then, reappears as a punctuated series of turning points, each a present moment.

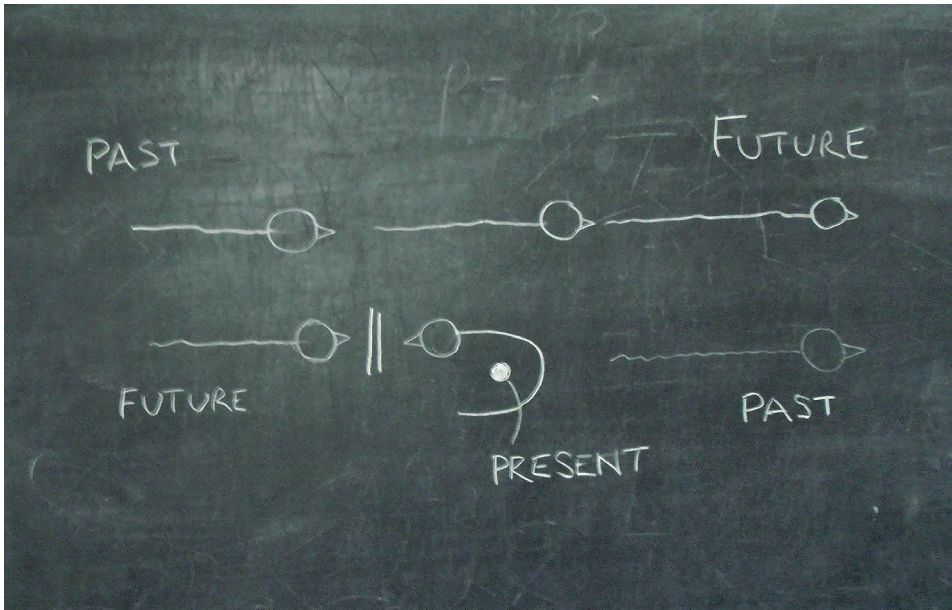


Figure 1. The turn on the present and the future's past

Source: drawing and photograph by Tim Ingold.

To join the queue is to observe a tradition. The proper meaning of tradition is not to live in the past but to follow those who have gone before you into the future. You may be retracing old ways, but every tracing is an original movement to be followed in its turn. It is the same with storytelling, in which every tale picks up the threads of previous narrations and pulls them through, in a looping

movement, into current life. Strictly speaking, then, to turn your back on tradition is not to relinquish what is already past. It is rather to deny the promise that tradition offers for the future. In other words, the “pastness” of tradition is not given a priori, but is produced in the very act of turning that stakes a claim to the present. This same turnaround, moreover, creates a future which, from the perspective of those still following traditional ways, is nothing if not backward-looking, sacrificing the possibility of ceaseless beginning for the finality of predetermined ends. We see this in education when the teacher, instead of inviting her students to follow in a gesture of companionship, turns to face them in a posture of instruction. We see it in architecture and design, which aspires not to resume the ever-unfinished work of predecessors but to cast the future as a project for the next generation either to complete or to abandon. And we see it in a science that proceeds not by following the ways things are going but through cycles of conjecture and refutation.

Such is the way of modernity. It is a way that measures time by the clock. Why, after all, does the clock tick? Its revolving movement, driven by the vital force of the spring, which wants always to unwind, or the weight of the pendulum as it gravitates to earth, is periodically stopped on the cog of an escapement wheel by a ratchet, only to be released again. The tick we hear is the sound of the ratchet’s engagement with the cog. And the measured time of the clock lies not in the unwinding of the spring but in the series of stoppages, each marked by a tick. So, likewise, do generations mark time by converting its onward movement into a punctuated series of escapements. With life as with time, the flow becomes a stutter. When life escapes, the entire series shifts by one notch. The foregoing generation, far from moving on into the future, vanishes into the oblivion of the past; while the generation to come, freed from the discipline of instruction, design and conjecture to which it had once been subjected, pivots to take its place in the present, inflicting its own discipline on its successor. That’s why there is such a compulsion to replace the old with the new: it proves that time is passing and that history is being made. Nothing catches the modern imagination more than the idea of step change. Thus does every present generation, having turned its back to the past, take its place as a gatekeeper to the future.

This future, in the eyes of the present, figures less as a path to be followed than as a problem to be solved. Had it already been solved by preceding generations, now consigned to the past, there would be nothing for the present to do. They would have only to fall into line with a project mapped out for them in advance. Such compliance would amount to the renunciation of any future they could call their own. The present’s ownership of the future, therefore, depends on the assumption that the past got it wrong. This is the default assumption of the modern age: that the road from the past is paved with mistakes. We always know better than they did. Yet the inevitable implication is that our present solutions will, in due course, turn out to be equally misguided. And while the generation that pro-

poses these solutions—that is, our generation—will pass, the effects of their imposition can linger, as have the impositions of generations preceding ours, leaving long-lasting scars not just on hearts and minds but on the world around us. Every generation, then, is fated to live among the ruins of outmoded futures. And although the predicament of coming generations will be no different, in principle, from ours, and ours no different from that of our predecessors, today's present is perhaps without precedent in the sheer scale of ruination it is bound to confront. Never before have solutions for the future, inflicted by our immediate antecedents, wreaked such destruction on the conditions of earthly life.

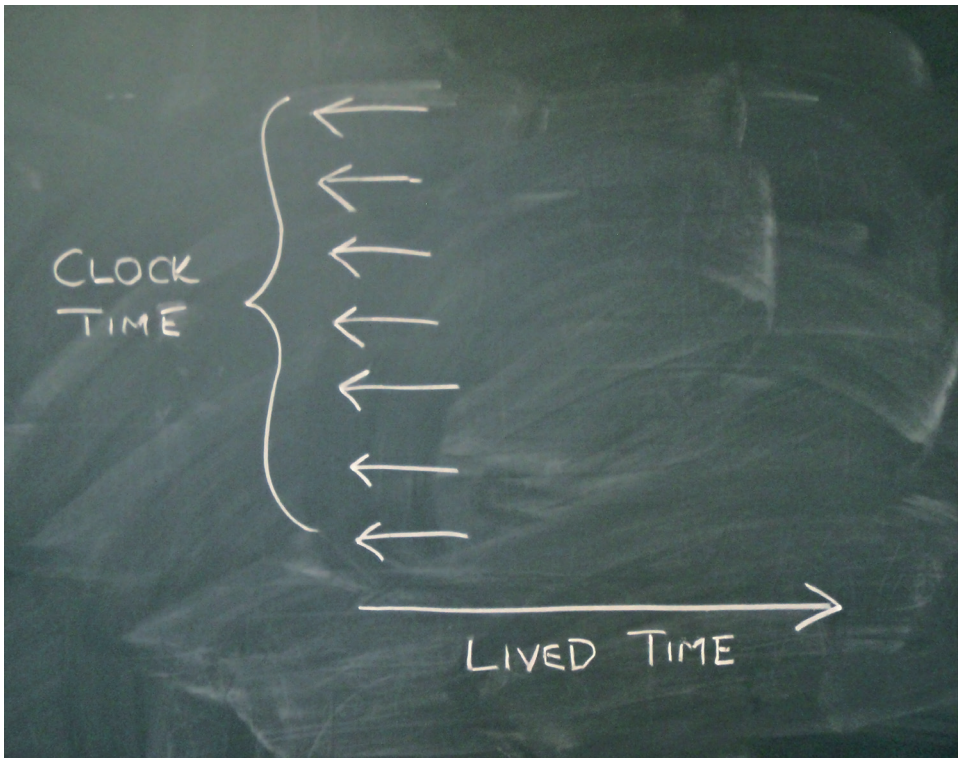


Figure 2. Lived time and clock time

Source: drawing and photograph by Tim Ingold.

Can there be any respite from the cataclysmic chain of ultimate solutions that generation after generation has inflicted on the planet, all in the name of progress? So long as we seek to shape a future perceived as coming towards us, by projecting our designs onto a world our successors are about to enter, the answer can only be no. We would be fated to the endless stuttering of the escapement mechanism. Stuttering, after all, is not a sign that progress is faltering; it is rather the way pro-

gress works, by serial replacement. Why else, along with the clock, are its iconic instruments the bulldozer and the crane? The bulldozer clears the ground of the traces of past interventions, leaving none to pick up and follow; the crane lifts new ones into place from above. If any traces remain of what has gone before, they are to be preserved as heritage. Preserving the footsteps of predecessors ensures, in effect, that we cannot ourselves walk in them. It is as though with every step, far from picking up ancestral trails and carrying them on, we roll out a new layer over the old, marked up with its own inscriptions. With each new layer, those already laid, if not obliterated, sink further into the past, never to come up again. That's why the other side of progress theory is antiquarianism. A land of sedimented pasts can be excavated with impunity, since it can have no bearing upon a future for which it serves only as an inert substrate.

This is not however the only side-effect of the layer-by-layer theory of progress. Etymologically, the Latin verb *generare*, meaning "to beget," has bequeathed the concepts not only of "generation" but also of "race." But only since we have come to think of generations of humanity supplanting one another like layers in a stack, each of progressively superior stock, has the idea of race been freighted with the toxic connotations it has today. It was not always thus. Originally, race meant lineage, house or kindred—people who could trace descent from a common ancestor, along a line of begetting and being begotten. Here, each generation issues from the one before, and into the one after, prolonging the former and anticipating the latter in a linear flow of vitality not unlike that of a running river from its headwaters to the sea. Like the river, the lineage flows downward. But generations, in their modern incarnation, stack upward, as each is slated to supplant its predecessor. Here, the life of each generation is expended in the present it has claimed as its own. No wonder the idea of indefinitely extending the life-span is so popular among those who consider themselves the smartest and most successful humans ever! Such an idea is only thinkable within a paradigm of human evolution that attributes advance to a ratchet mechanism which notches up superior variations while consigning the inferior to extinction. The concept of race, in its modern incarnation, is a specific pathology of this paradigm of human generational history, writ large.

Such a perverse conclusion is not however inevitable. There is an alternative, which is to think differently about time and generations. It is to respect the wisdom of ancestors rather than working tirelessly to refute it. What if we were to cease pivoting on the present, and to look for guidance instead to those who have gone before? We and they would then be facing in the *same* direction, rather than back-to-back. In overlapping our lives with theirs, we could work together with them, not against them, to find a path forward. The alternative, in short, is to reclaim the way of tradition. Critically, this is not a recipe for conservatism. People who continue to follow their ancestors are not backward. All too often, the belief that they are stuck in the past, left behind by history, has been adduced to

justify the colonisation of their lands. It is a belief that comes, as we have seen, from putting tradition behind us. To join *with* tradition, facing frontward, promises otherwise, to open a future that, far from converging on any projected end, is indefinitely renewable. This is what it means to say of the future that it is sustainable. A sustainable world affords the possibility for life to carry on, forever. This is not to substitute long-term for short-term solutions. Only in the rearward view of a pivotal present can time appear as a nested series of scales. Genuine sustainability cannot be balanced on any scale, for every moment contains within itself the promise of eternity.

The progressive view of the present generation, as one that casts its projects retrospectively upon an imagined future, while relegating its forerunners to a discarded past, is easy to state but hard to dislodge. While in human history it is more the exception than the rule, it is so deeply embedded in the modern constitution that shifting it will require a wholesale reorientation of our approaches to education, design and science. In education, the responsibility of the teacher would no longer be to articulate a new world, and to regulate students' access to it, but rather to introduce them to an old world, allowing them to renew their lives in the very course of following its ways. This is not about the transmission of knowledge, from one generation to the next, but about the growth of wisdom in intergenerational collaboration. In design, it would mean a way of working best described as composition, by comparison with musical works. The designer-composer may be *avant-garde*, in the forefront, not however because their work is innovative, unlike anything that has gone before, but for precisely the opposite reason, because it is hyper-responsive to the voices of fellow creatures, and answers to their calls. In science, it would mean a procedure not of conjecture and refutation, as required by the logic of positivism, but of opening up to things, as they open to us, by joining with them and following their lead. Science, then would not educate us about the world; it would be the way the world has of educating us.

We cannot leap-frog our way into the future, or jump the queue. There is something illusory about the conceit that we can plan the future from the standpoint of the present, whether in terms of the educational curriculum, the designs of architecture or the predictions of science. This is because the direction of projection is contrary to the flow of life. It amounts to a hold-up, which can only be broken by shelving the project and installing another in its place. Projection, in this regard, is the precise opposite of storytelling, in which the story and the life of which it tells are oriented in the same direction. To live the story is not to pivot on the present but, at every moment, to follow the thread of the future's past. It means acknowledging that we are ever behind where we will be, and where others have already been. A sustainable future lies before us, if only we are prepared to keep our eyes on the way ahead, and learn from the lore of those who have gone before. We are like mariners on the high seas. The mariner knows fore from aft, bow from stern, and ploughs a course through the ocean guided by currents, winds, the sun

and moon, stars and seabirds. What sensible mariner would place his aft in the future and his bow in the past? Yet this is what we do, whenever we project futures for ourselves. It's no wonder, then, that we have lost our way.

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Having turned on the present we walk backwards through life, choosing not to see the future that would otherwise lie before us. And from this backward-facing perspective, unable to see where we are going, whatever plans and projects we come up with appear fraught with uncertainty. It comes from our inability to face both ways at once. If only we could be more certain, if only we knew what fate awaits us, then we could plan ahead, prepare ourselves, perhaps even change things to weed out aspects of the future we don't like, and choose those we do. We could subject the future to a kind of artificial selection. Yet all of this remains contingent upon the only apparent certainty in life—that every one of us will eventually die! Even if death inevitably comes to everyone, however, at least we die in the knowledge that generations will follow, facing their own uncertainties just as we did. Whereas certainty augurs the dead-end, uncertainty opens up the field for life to carry on. For it is a defining property of life that it continually overreaches itself. Far from running from beginning to end, every ending, in life, issues into new beginning. As an elder from among the Wemindji Cree, indigenous hunters of northern Canada, told their ethnographer Colin Scott, life is “continuous birth.” It is pure excess.

The curse of uncertainty is to present this excess as a deficit. To say that the future is uncertain is to suggest that life is not yet fully destined, that there is still work to be done to determine where it will finally lead. The word conveys a sense of incompleteness, of unfinished business, of having not yet gained the full measure of the world that would yield to total predictive confidence. There are still gaps in our knowledge, missing pieces that remain to be inserted. Nowadays we look to what we call “the Science” to complete the picture. The Science should not of course be confused with what practising scientists actually do. Indeed, scientists would be among the first to protest that that they can never be certain about anything. Rather, the Science is an institutional apparatus, founded in ritual and rhetoric, that confers authority and legitimacy on governments which, even with the best of intentions (though often with the worst), claim to follow it. If the Science's predictions look grim, as they do today, it can propose mitigations to avoid complete catastrophe. Yet it admits to no future beyond the predictive horizons of the present.

Perhaps that is why today's younger generations are less inclined to see the future as a landscape extending indefinitely into the distance, than as a plateau bearing down upon them. No previous generation has been so starkly presented with the prospect of the end of history, even of life itself. The future, to them, seems all too

certain. Nor is any relief to be found in a stance of denial, through regression from certainty to uncertainty. Yet what the deficit model presents as uncertainty takes on a quite different hue in the light of excess. Then, *uncertainty reappears as possibility*. For the Science, radical possibility is hard to pin down. As the philosopher Henri Bergson put it, the domain of life is characterised by “incommensurability between what goes before and what follows.” Science, Bergson argued, is simply unable to cope with this idea of “the absolute originality and unforeseeability of forms.” It can work only on what repeats. And in the language of repetition, Science can only think possibility on a scale of risk or probability. On this scale, what cannot be determined is left to chance. Indeed, the opposition between chance and determination is deeply etched into modern thought. It is an opposition, however, that drains life of its creative impulse, reducing freedom to random variation within a phase space.

What would it take, then, to face the future as a realm not of uncertainty but of possibility? Young people, with their lives ahead of them, are often encouraged to think of the life-course as a process of “fulfilling their potential,” that is, as a movement of progressive closure, in which all possible paths are gradually narrowed down to the one actually taken—which itself, at life’s end, reaches its ultimate conclusion. As the anthropologist Clifford Geertz put it, in a now classic formulation, “one of the most significant facts about us may finally be that we all begin with the natural equipment to live a thousand kinds of life but end in the end having lived only one.” With one’s potential fulfilled, there is nowhere further to go. But what if, instead of heading towards destinations unknown, we were to push on from places already reached, along a path of renewal that knows no end? Could this be what the Pintupi, an Aboriginal people of Western Australia, meant when they told their ethnographer, Fred Myers, that life is a “one-possibility thing”? This calls for some reflection.

For the Pintupi, the contours of life are those of the country in which they dwell, a country created by the ancestral beings as they moved around in the formative era known as the Dreaming. Every existing creature, as the incarnation of the ancestral power from which its vitality is derived, effectively finds itself on the inside of an eternal moment of world-creation. And where the ancestors led, life is bound to follow. But this is not a movement from A to B, from a starting-point to a destination. It rather carries on. Life is a one-possibility thing, for the Pintupi, because possibility can only ever be one. The idea that people could initially be presented with multiple possibilities, like a menu of options from which to choose, only to be narrowed down as life proceeds, would make no sense to them. For Pintupi people, as they roam their desert landscape, are not fulfilling their potential but ever replenishing it. They may indeed have more power towards the end of life than at the beginning. How, then, can we express this difference between possibilities and possibility, between fulfilment and replenishment?

One way might be to call on a distinction between doing and undergoing, which was central to the philosophy of John Dewey, especially his essay of 1934

on “Art as experience.” In life, as Dewey acknowledged, we do all kinds of things. We do first this, and then that, and as with this and that, there is a degree of certainty in the ends to be achieved. Yes, we know what we are doing! Every deed is an intentional act, like shooting an arrow at a target. Yet in everything we do, there is an experience we undergo. We are modified in body and mind, perhaps even transformed, by the doing of it. And the question, for Dewey, was to figure out the relation between the two—between the doing and the undergoing. Do we put undergoing inside doing, sandwiched between the original intention and its final consummation? Is undergoing something that happens to us inside the act? If undergoing were thus contained within doing, Dewey thought, there could be no continuity from one deed to the next. Life would fragment into a scatter of disconnected episodes. Blink, and they’re gone.

What happens in reality, quite to the contrary, is that undergoing always *overflows* doing, to the extent that whatever you do takes into itself something of the experience of what you did before, and is in turn carried over into what you do next. With every doing, as Dewey put it in a later lecture on “Experience and education,” you are “a somewhat different person.” In short, undergoing lies precisely in the *excess* by which life overtakes the destinations thrown up in its wake. We could describe every act of doing by a transverse connection between an intention (I) and an objective (O). But the life of undergoing carries on, in a direction orthogonal to these transverse links. This is represented by the continuous wavy line (P). Here, P stands for possibility. Possibilities cut across, but life, as a “one-possibility thing,” is longitudinal. It goes on through. And a life tracked along this line is continually overtaking itself. It is a life of becoming rather than being, yielding up not to objective consequences—for these are but discards left along the way—but to further possibility, not just for itself but for all other lives with which it tangles, including, as we shall see, its generational offspring.

Crucially, while every transverse connection denotes a line of intention, the longitudinal trail of possibility is a line of *attention*. Now there are two sides to attention: exposure and attunement. I take the idea of attunement from the ecological approach to perception pioneered by James Gibson. For Gibson, perception is about noticing things in our surroundings that may help or hinder in the furtherance of our own activity. In a word, it is about picking up information that specifies what these things *afford*. And it can be learned. “One can keep on learning to perceive,” Gibson writes, “for as long as life goes on.” In the practice of a craft, for example, skill lies in becoming sensitised to subtle variations in the material that a novice might miss. The carpenter attends to the grain of the wood, the smith to the ductility of iron. The skilled practitioner’s perceptual system, in Gibson’s terms, becomes “attuned to information of a certain sort.” This fine-tuning of perception amounts, he says, to an “education of attention.” Yet in this, the momentum is entirely on the side of the perceiver. It is as if the things to be perceived were already there, laid out in the environment, merely awaiting the practitioner’s attention.

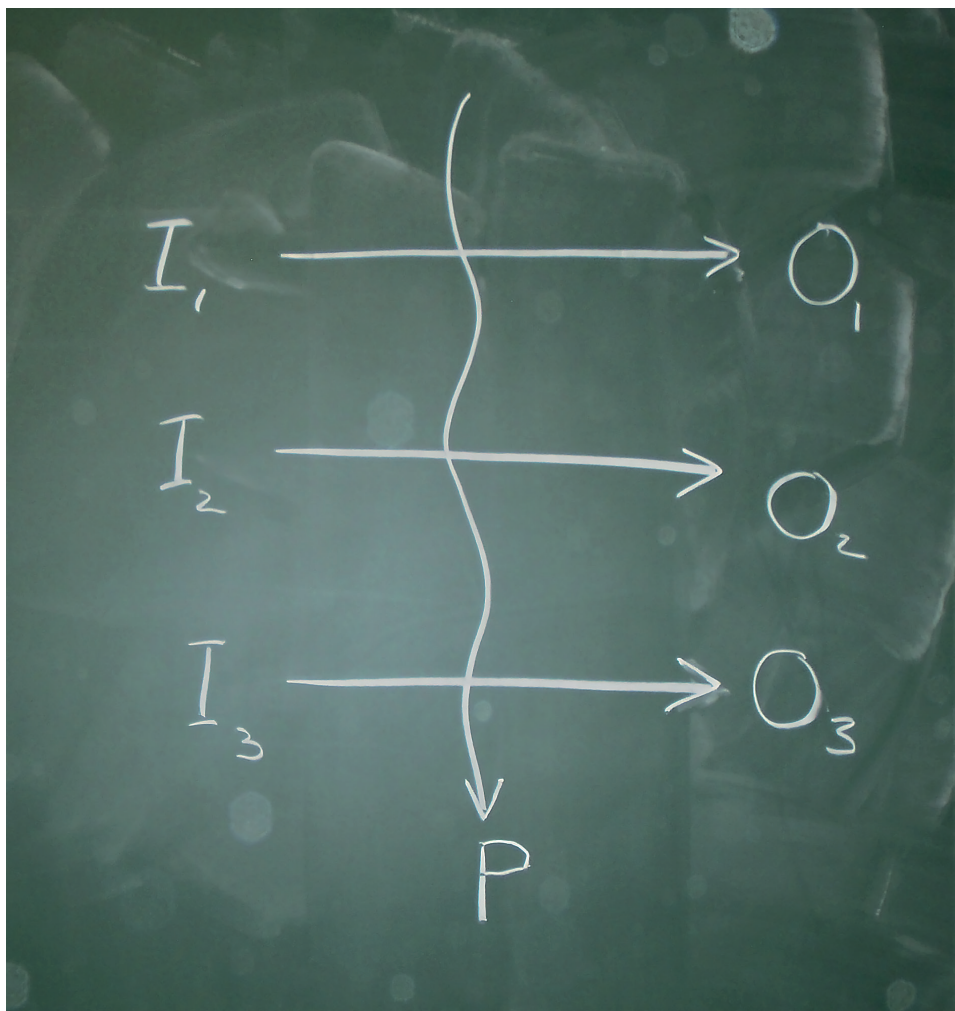


Figure 3. Possibility and possibilities. Transverse arrows connect successive intentions (I) with their planned objectives (O). Through all of them runs the longitudinal arrow of life itself, a “one-possibility thing” (P)

Source: drawing and photograph by Tim Ingold.

But what if everything is not already there? The world, after all, is not set in stone but restless and fluid, bustling with life. Think of the fluxes of the weather, the ever-changing skies, the turn of the tides, the run of the river, the movements of animals and the growth of plants. Immersed in these fluxes, it is the perceiver who must wait upon the world, attending to it in the sense of abiding with it and doing its bidding. This is attention on the side of exposure. As the philosopher of education Jan Masschelein explains, exposure (from the Latin *ex-positio*) literally means to be pulled out of position. To be or become attentive, writes Massche-

lein, “is to expose oneself.” In this condition, one can no longer take anything for granted. The sense of understanding—of having solid ground beneath one’s feet—is shaken, leaving one vulnerable and hyper-alert, wide-eyed in astonishment rather than narrowly focused on a target. For Masschelein, it is precisely in these moments of exposure that education occurs. It is not so much an understanding as an undergoing, that at once strips away the veneer of certainty with which we find comfort and security, and opens to pure possibility.

Yet if there are two sides to attention, of exposure and attunement, of waiting on the world and tuning to a world-in-waiting, then what is the relation between the two? Surely, to embark on any activity means placing one’s existence on the line. The safe course would be to stay put. No-one can live like that, however. To live we have to get moving, to push the boat out into the current of a world-in-formation. Thus, all undergoing begins in exposure. But as it proceeds, skills of perception and action, born of practice and experience, begin to kick in. We can see this in one of the most ubiquitous of all human activities, namely, walking on two feet. Every step entails a moment of jeopardy. Falling forwards on one foot, you tumble into the void, only to regain your balance as the other foot comes to land on the ground ahead. Here, the bodily skill of footwork comes to the rescue, just before it is too late. What begins in the vulnerability of exposure ends in the mastery of attunement, providing in turn the ground from which the walker can once again submit to the hazard of exposure, in an alternation that continues for as long as the walk goes on.

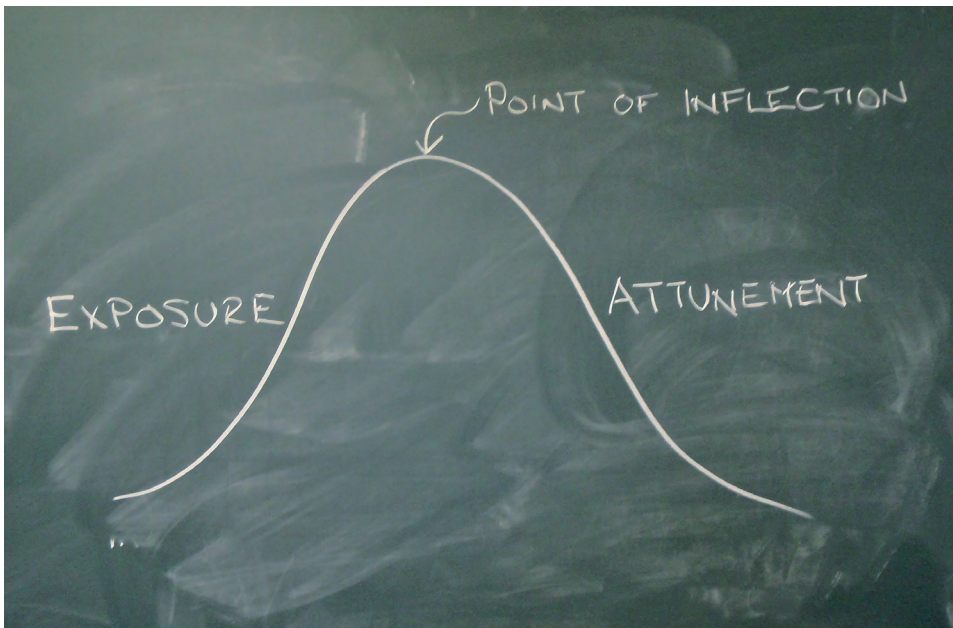


Figure 4. The structure of attention

Source: drawing and photograph by Tim Ingold.

This alternation, I believe, is fundamental to all life. Crucially, just as life is a one-possibility thing, it is also unidirectional. In real life, *submission leads and mastery follows*; never the reverse. Where submission casts off into a world in becoming, setting us loose to fall, mastery restores our grip so that we can keep on going. The first is a moment of aspiration; the second a moment of prehension. Out in front, an aspirant anticipation feels its way forward, improvising a passage through an as yet unformed world, while bringing up the rear is a prehensile perception already accustomed to the ways of the world and skilled in observing and responding to its affordances. And as submission gives way to mastery, aspiration to prehension, anticipation to perception, and exposure to attunement, there is what we could call a moment of inflection. I draw this sense of inflection from the writings of philosopher Erin Manning. Inflection is not a movement in itself but a variation in the way movement moves, coming at the point where a tentative opening matures, from within what Manning calls “the cleave of the event,” into a firm sense of direction. It marks the turn from undergoing into doing, at which the line of possibility discloses distinct and realisable possibilities.

The aforementioned terms “aspiration” and “anticipation” call for some further explanation. Literally, to aspire is to draw breath. It is an active, animated “taking in.” And to take in, as Dewey observes, “we must summon energy and pitch it in a responsive key.” With this summoning and pitching, aspiration calls upon what has gone before in order to cast a path of attention to follow. Brimming with as yet undirected potential, with possibility, aspiration anticipates the future, but does not predict it. Prediction, as we have seen, belongs to the logic of certainty and uncertainty—a logic which pivots on the claim to the present. Depending on the level of certainty, things may be predicted with greater or lesser confidence, or judged to be more or less probable. But anticipation belongs to the register of possibility. It is the temporal overshoot of a life that, going forwards, always wants to run ahead of itself. According to the philosopher Jacques Derrida, to anticipate is “to take the initiative, to be out in front, to take (*capere*) in advance (*ante*).” Far from predetermining the final forms of things, or fixing their ultimate destinations, anticipation opens a path and improvises a passage. It is a seeing into the future, not the projection of a future state in the present; it is to look where you are going, not to fix an end point.

All life, then, is held in tension between submission and mastery, aspiration and prehension, anticipation and perception, exposure and attunement. In every case, the first leads, and the second follows. What leads is an *aspiration that wells up in attention*. What follows is a *precisely directed and skilfully executed manoeuvre*. As a one-possibility thing, moreover, this life begins nowhere, and ends nowhere, but carries on for all time—for an “everywhen” that, in Australian Aboriginal cosmology, is identified with the Dreaming. Yet we know that every mortal being will certainly die. How, then, can the infinitude of life be reconciled with the finitude of individual life cycles? To answer this question, we have to

think again about generations. For there is a deeply held belief in many minds today—above all in those taught to follow the Science—that life is lived within generations, but does not flow between them. What passes between generations is a legacy of information and resources, which provides the capital from which successor generations can build lives in their turn. The information may be genetic or cultural, the resources material or immaterial (such as knowledge). Their sole common denominator is that they are available for transmission independently of their lifetime expression or achievement.

It is easy to see, in this view, a reflection of the idea that life is lived in the fulfilment of potential. This leads, as we have observed, to a dead end. With all potential exhausted, there is no life to be continued in coming generations; only the discards left along the way remain to be passed on. Each generation, occupying its own slice of time, is fated to replace its predecessor, and to be replaced in its turn. It is to think of generations, as we have already seen, like layers in a stack. Indeed, this kind of stratigraphic thinking is deeply seared in modern sensibilities, leading to an easy equation of generational layers with layers of sedimentation in the history of the earth, of deposits in the occupation of a site, of documents in an archive, and even of consciousness in the human mind. It is a way of thinking that feeds directly into a rhetoric of extinction that wonders whether the coming generation, or any after that, might be the last—be it for our own or any other species. It is the reason why we feel ourselves facing a future blighted by uncertainty. To lift the curse of uncertainty, and to restore a sense of possibility, we need to imagine generations differently.

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This, fundamentally, is the question of education. For education, after all, is the means by which a society ensures its own future. Do we want a future, then, in which every new generation is destined to supersede the last, or one in which generations run alongside one another, allowing young people and their elders to work together in the ongoing task of fashioning a future for all? One of the great tragedies of the modern age, cruelly exacerbated by the pandemic we have been experiencing over the last years, is that it has separated younger from older generations, or more particularly, grandchildren from their grandparents. The restrictions in place during periods of lockdown have prevented them from even meeting each other. But even before the recent emergency, they would often be living far apart, in separate households, even institutions, visiting only intermittently to renew their contact. It is as though a wedge had been driven between them. That wedge is the intermediate generation. Thrust between youth and old age, it is what I call the *generation of now*.

So busy are the people of generation *now* with their world-making, so preoccupied with the affairs of the day, that they pay scant regard to their elders or to their juniors. Their elders, they think, having already had their place in the sun, should fade away gracefully into years of decline. Their juniors, to the contrary, need to be brought up to speed, to face a future already prepared for them. The result is a picture of life shaped rather like a bell curve, roughly divisible into three phases. In the first phase, the capacities of young minds are both formed and filled with what they need to know in order to function in the new world they are about to encounter. In the second, intermediate phase, world-forming powers are at their peak. Everyone is hard at work, fulfilling their potential. But once this potential is exhausted, having nothing further to deliver, they enter the final phase, of deterioration and decline, as their capacities fade and their knowledge becomes increasingly obsolete.

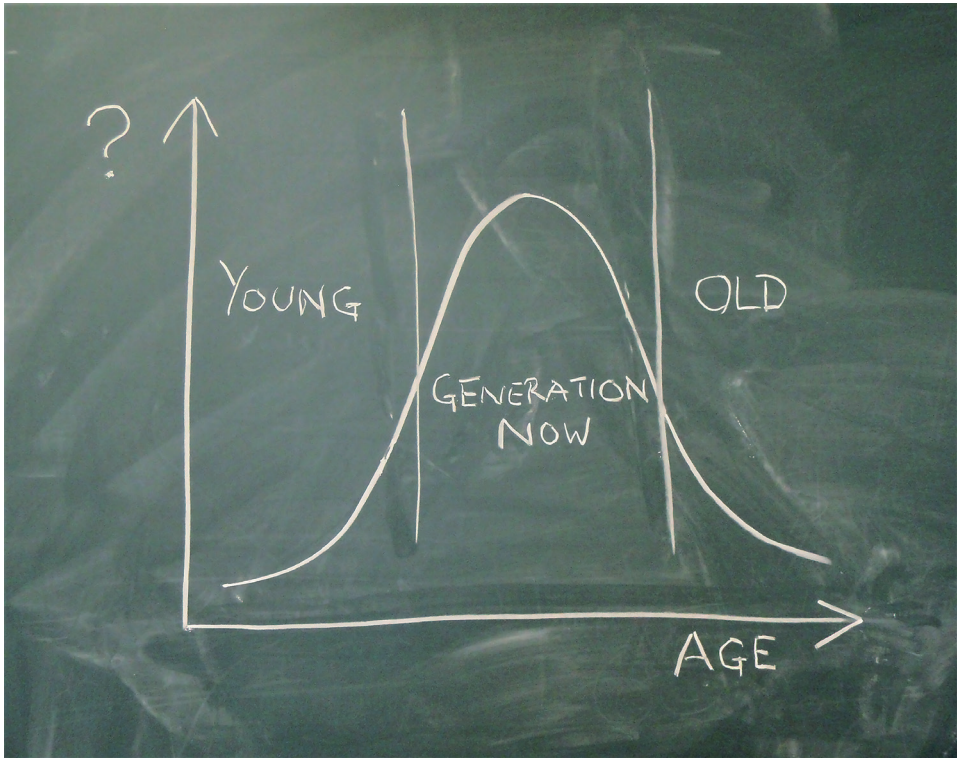


Figure 5. The bell-curve

Source: drawing and photograph by Tim Ingold.

As we have already seen, however, this model of generational succession contains an inherent contradiction. For if the present intermediate generation has al-

ready made a world for the generation to come, what is there left for the latter to do, save to fall into line with a future already mapped out for it? How can the new intermediates take up the baton of world-making, other than by either undoing or overwriting the work of their predecessors? With every passing generation, its forerunner's designs for the future must be obliterated while its successor, in its turn, is equally bound to bury the future that had been made for it. Indeed, if every future is a prediction, made in the present, then not only do all predictions fail; they *must* fail for every generation to have a future it can call its own. Positive science is supposed to proceed likewise, through conjecture and refutation. In science as in society, progress is founded on a history of predictive failure.

This kind of serial replacement—of futures conjectured only to be refuted—hardly amounts to a formula for sustainable living. Sustaining life means keeping it going, perpetually opening to new beginnings, rather than restarting, over and over again, on the back of past closures. As we are finding to our cost, sustainability is incompatible with the doctrine of progressive development. We cannot have it both ways. This doesn't mean that we should resign ourselves to a counsel of retrogression, or to the idea that since progress has reached its limit, the only way forward is back. But if we are to choose the path of sustainability, as I believe we must if we are to have any future worth living at all, then we need to think differently about generations and about the relations between them. And to help us do this, there is no better source than the educational practices that for so long gave continuity to the lives of so-called indigenous peoples.

Modern thought, as we've seen, tends to imagine every generation, in its active phase, as occupying the plane of the present. As it reaches its prime, it layers its own designs and constructions over those of generations past. Each layer establishes its own slice of time, while layer follows layer in a chronological sequence, burying those beneath much as in an archive, old documents are buried under more recent ones. Renewal can only come from superposition; from adding one layer after another to the stack. But what if, instead, we were to align successive generations longitudinally, allowing them to overlap and entwine along their length? No-one lives forever, but so long as new lives are introduced as old lives pass, life itself can continue without end. This is to liken the passage of generations to a braid rather than a stack. In the braid, each fibre is only so long, but by paying in new fibres as fast as old ones give out, the braid itself winds on indefinitely. So likewise, generations come and go, but life carries on. And just as the twist of its overlapping fibres gives the braid its tensile strength, so also in life, it is by carrying on their lives together that the old and the young can lay an assured path for generations to come.

Nothing, here, is inherited, nor does a break in the chain of transmission herald extinction. Rather, it is in the overlap of generations that the life process is carried on. As Bergson put it so vividly, in the braid we see "each generation leaning over the generation that shall follow." This leaning over is a gesture of care, even of

love. Herein, for Bergson, lies the true mystery of life—to which we would add, its true possibility. How much are our fears of the end of history, of biodiversity loss and final extinction a function of the way we have sliced up the generations, setting them over and against one another, denying both the productivity of their collaboration and the affectivity of their care? We need to bring them together again.

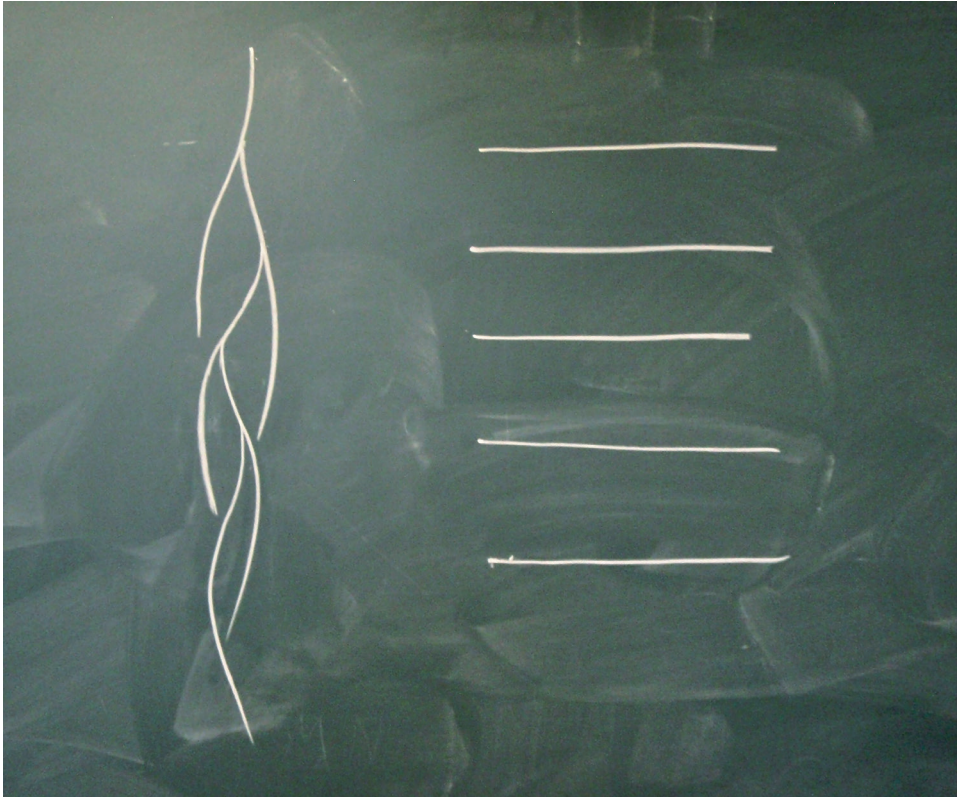


Figure 6. Five generations, as stacked layers (left) and as a woven braid (right)

Source: drawing and photograph by Tim Ingold.

Indeed, among peoples who have drawn a living from the earth and its waters—namely, those peoples whom we would nowadays call “indigenous,” but who long ago, would have included almost everyone—this is precisely how lives have been lived, at least throughout the greater part of their history. Youngsters would grow up hearing the stories and observing the practices of their elders, discovering the meanings of the stories and developing skills of practice in the passage of their own experience, and becoming storytellers and practitioners in their turn. Yet by and large, this is no longer true today. What happened? What led powerful agents of the intermediate generation forcibly, and in some cases bru-

tally, to cut the rope, to tear children away from the company of their elders, all in the name of progressive education? What fired the generation of *now* with such world-making zeal as to consign the wisdom of its seniors to a bygone past while treating its own juniors as creatures of nature, at ground zero of civility, in need of induction into a future they can have no hand in shaping?

Answers are not easy to come by. They likely have much to do with capitalism's erosion of domestic modes of production, with the redeployment of educational functions from the family to the state, and in the case of indigenous peoples, with colonial oppression. What's certain, however, is that generation *now* has little time for stories or for skills. These, it says, are the stuff of tradition, preserved only to entertain the young in enactments of heritage, or to indulge the old in flights of nostalgia. For generation *now* is target-driven. It lives by projects rather than stories, technologies rather than skills, ends and means rather than anticipation and aspiration. Yet as its ends expand, fuelled by ambitions of growth and progressive development, so its means contract. Its short-term objectives hold no promise that life can endure beyond a future already in its sights. Faced with a looming environmental catastrophe, it has no answer save to dream of a permanent geo-technological fix, or of finding new resource reservoirs on other planets, leaving the bulk of humanity to eke out a living on an irreparably damaged earth. Every competition has far more losers than winners, and for every individual smart enough to succeed, another thousand will fail.

A sustainable world, however, cannot be for some but not others, let alone reserved for a select few. It must have room for everyone and everything, not just for now but indefinitely. There is but one way, I contend, to bring about such a world, and that is to loosen the grip of the intermediate generation. Can we imagine a society in which young and old, grandchildren and their grandparents, currently excluded from the tasks of world-making, are once again enabled to work alongside one another in forging the conditions of collective life? Let's go back to that bell curve. What is measured by the height of the curve from the base? Intellectual prowess? Knowledge? The conversion of potential into effective power? Maybe all these things. One thing the curve does not measure, however, is wisdom. For knowledge and wisdom are not at all the same, and may even be at cross-purposes. Mainstream education values knowledge above all else. It is said to mark the triumph of reason by which humanity has historically asserted its superiority over nature. Knowledge confers the power to command, to tell others what to do. It arms us against adversaries, and serves as our defence in the face of a hostile world.

Yet walled up inside the encyclopaedic compartments of our knowledge, we pay scant attention to things in themselves, to the world's other inhabitants. Why bother to attend, we say, when we already know all about them? To be wise, to the contrary, is to throw open the doors of perception and let the world in upon the field of our awareness and deliberation. It is to welcome others into our presence, not to overpower them or to beat them off. It is to watch and listen, and to learn. Wisdom doesn't confer strength, or power to command. Quite the oppos-

ite, in fact. It makes us vulnerable. Where knowledge fixes things in place, or pegs them down, wisdom unfixes and unsettles. Yet wisdom also feeds curiosity. We are curious because we care. Young children are boundlessly curious because their attention has yet to be shut down by the education that generation *now* is ready and waiting to inflict upon them. And old people are wise, because they realise, as they age, that they know less and less. For them, knowledge already gained is tempered by humility.

What if the young and the old could put their heads together? What if we could break the barriers of their institutionalised segregation, allowing them to reassemble in the settings of everyday life in which these tasks are typically carried on? These questions, I believe, have massive implications for the way we think about education, about the wisdom of the elderly and the curiosity of the young, and about the potential of their collaboration. Parents are naturally keen that their children should do well in the world, and so the education they want for them is both rich and strong: rich in its knowledge content; strong in the power and security it affords. Judged by these standards, an education of attention is poor, in having little or nothing by way of readymade knowledge to pass on, and weak, in disarming our defences. But could there be strength in weakness, richness in poverty? And might this be what grandparents would rather wish for their grandchildren?

For both the young and the elderly, grandchildren and grandparents, are in touch, in ways that target-driven intermediates of the parental generation are not, with more enduring rhythms of time. This is a time not of succession and replacement but of continuous birth or renewal. It is the time of weather and the seasons, of breaking waves and running rivers, of the growth and decay of vegetation and the coming and going of animals, of breaths and heartbeats. We sometimes say of children and of old people, even as we sometimes say of nonhuman animals, that they live in the present, without recollection or forethought. Anthropologists would sometimes say the same of indigenous peoples, who were paradoxically portrayed as simultaneously childlike and ancient. Our response today is to dismiss such assertions as instances of ethnocentric prejudice, driven by a colonial mentality, as indeed they were. But the prejudice was directed as much towards generations as towards people deemed to be "other." Could it be that bringing together the curiosity of childhood with the wisdom of old-age, in a time that unfolds with the continuous birth or the world (rather than being punctuated by serial closure and replacement), is precisely the lesson that indigenous education has to teach us? This lesson is not about how to live in the present. It is about how to inhabit the future's past.

Indeed, it is perhaps because the minds of young children and old people are not yet or no longer cluttered with recollections and predictions that they are better able to attend to the world in its immediacy, and more ready to be addressed by it. In this attentiveness lies both the curiosity of the young and the wisdom of the elderly. Neither juvenile curiosity nor seasoned wisdom, however, hold

much esteem in a societal regime that values objective knowledge, and the operations of abstract reason, above all else. For knowledge, putting answers ahead of questions, stamps out curiosity; while reason, privileging cognition over attention, leaves wisdom diminished by comparison. Indeed, within the prevailing value system that underlies our mainstream institutions of education and social care, dedicated respectively to preparing children for a predetermined future and sequestering the elderly for whom this future came too late, the innocence of curiosity is assessed as a deficiency of knowledge, and the humility of wisdom as a deficiency of mind—the former branded as ignorance; the latter as senility. And for the generation of *now*, in command of the present, the idea that the senile and the ignorant might together forge the future would be manifestly absurd.

To unite wisdom and curiosity, however, appears not only prudent but necessary for the renewal of life for generations to come. This is not nostalgia, or hankering for a lost past. Nor is it a utopian fantasy for the future. It is rather a foundation for hope. If we are to turn hope into reality, however, the first and most essential step must be to bring old and young together again, making their productive and mutually transformative collaboration into a force of renewal for the common good. This task, I believe, is by far and away the most important of our times.

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