Afterword(s)?[1]

William F. Pinar

Perhaps our complicated conversations are all prefaces—stories of the processes and difficulties in which we engage as we write ourselves.[2]
Alan A. Block

It was a series of prefaces Alan Block had planned to write, "summaries of anticipated adventures." Was anticipation the motive, or was it the experience of the threshold through which one walks to undertake the journey? Perhaps neither, as Block confides to us "what I had originally thought of as a preface turned out to be more of an afterword." So maybe *this* is a preface, and maybe not only to this work, but to Alan's *oeuvre* overall?[3] No, that would take a book. I hope to see the first of these before I die.

Fifteen years ago, understanding education "as the opportunity of getting lost"[4], Alan Block had abandoned – indeed he "renounces"[5] – home and even the idea of "path"[6] for the sake finding the way, elsewhere.[7] "The capacity for lostness," Block insisted, "is the beginning of educative experience."[8] What takes us there, to the land where one becomes lost and undergoes educational experience? It is "books," he tells us; they "send me out from my native land to the land that they might show me."

Anticipation may remain as one reads – and writes[9] – but it appears to be anticipation emptied of expectation concerning the specificity of destination[10], as, he emphasizes, "I *shouldn't* know exactly where I was going if I were going to learn anything along the way: I couldn't write a preface until the end of the journey. But I had taken no journey; I couldn't write a preface." Anticipation doesn't disappear but here the reflective gaze turns backward, toward the past not the future: "What I had originally

thought of as a preface turned out to be more of an afterword." I had imagined these were beginnings, but now, I realize, they are the end.

No self-pity: looking back provides opportunities for the acknowledgement of blessings. In the 1387 Christian definition of "preface" (that Alan quotes) that was indeed the practice; it was, he explains, an "exhortation to thanksgiving." For Jews, the *P'sukei d'zimrah* serves as a "preface" in that they are "prayers of praise that precede the formal service." For both traditions, Block notes, "a preface serves as preparation for the main event." Anticipation becomes prolonged – indeed institutionalized - through ritual. Even an afterword prepares one for the main event, an event that occurs in part within the reader. Perhaps it is the "afterlife" of the work.[11]

"The chapters that follow," Block prepares us, "represent some of the markers at which I have paused for various amounts of reason and time throughout my life, but which for any number of reasons and time from which I have also moved." They are "autobiographies in disguise," he adds. "For Thoreau, as for Montaigne, Adams and Roth, our responsibility in this life is to know our selves, and I believe that that knowledge includes a keen and critical awareness of our place in the world."[12]

That place is material, historical,[13] subjective,[14] and always relational. "Reading engages us in relationships," Block understands, "and we are always changed by these intimacies."[15] Perhaps we learn from them, but as we "read" the relationships in which we are embedded, we learn what we had not anticipated. We enjoy *educational* experience.[16] "When we read we find something we did not know to look for because we had not known it had been even lost." By being lost we can find our place: "My readings send me out into the world," Block recounts, and in so doing "my imagination grows and

my reality deepens." There is almost a dialectic here: "To the books I bring the life I have lived and thought, and it is from these books that I go back changed to the world of reality." For Block, that world is also temporal, and the imagination we need is a prophetic one.[17]

The Question My Life Presents

To speak to another is to hear that other's voice in the form of a question or a demand addressed to me.
Block (2007, 69)

"What I am interested in at present," Block confides, "is the manner and motives by which those who do read and who *choose* the books to be read. And I believe that the answer to this query remains a question: we choose our reading to answer a question that has been posed to us." This is probably no ordinary question, as it is one that in facts structures one's entire life: "I choose my reading by the question my life presents to me about my existence, and from my reading I seek some response." That question is not always audible, and so one keeps reading, hoping not only for an answer but to hear the question.

One day after class – a class during which Professor Block's questions went unanswered - a student named Hannah asks Alan about Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, wondering if he knew what the point of it is. Was she also asking about the readings in the class? Was she searching for a bridge to her professor's world, a world she couldn't comprehend? Or was she expressing what she has been trained to ask: what's the answer to the test question? No longer "an open activity engaged in for its own

sake," Block laments, "reading is performed in order to 'get the point' so that some question posed by some authority might be correctly answered."

One way to understand this book – Blocks shifts from Hemingway to himself - is regard "writing" as "open activity," as "engaged in for its own sake." In an age of instrumentalism[18] – where activity is reduced to a means to an end – affirming the intrinsic significance of study - including reading and writing - constitutes progressive education.[19]

"Have we organized education," Block asks (knowing the answer), "so that students only proffer answers rather than ask questions?" To Hannah, you recall, Professor Block pauses, then replies: "Hannah, perhaps the book doesn't have a point." Perhaps the book itself is a question. After all, "a question is … the beginning of knowledge." In our Weimar time, knowledge not "skills", questions not answers, subjective presence not virtual Internet identity become markers of progressive education. Lost, the question is not what's the point. The question concerns place and time: where are we? what time is it?

The Curriculum Question

I think we must be careful of the questions we pose each other, and the questions to which we demand response.
Alan A. Block (2010, 525)

Where we are, Blocks knows, is in "a society that is not interested in questions." Moreover, "we have come as a society to expect and to value only the answer into which we have placed all of our faith, and have reserved little respect for the unanswerable question." The unanswerable question – it is simultaneously spiritual, subjective, political

and educational – is the curriculum question: what knowledge is most worth? Posing that question keeps us attuned to time and place, including to the past[20] where the future lies buried.

Wandering in the desert[21] – lost, timeless – requires keeping the faith, and in a secular age the medium of faith is the imagination. Block knows: "I am driven to the book by not knowing, for though I know I cannot know, I can imagine. To imagine is why I read." This is not imagination only as occasion for creativity or fantasy, this is the medium of religious experience: "Reading and writing stretches me to the limits of my consciousness." As theorizing was for James B. Macdonald, study – reading and writing – is for Alan Block a form of prayer.[22]

Prayer plays a primary role in Block's thought, ritualizing the anticipation embedded in "study[23]," restructuring education as reverential, as acknowledgement of being lost, alone[24] and together.[25] "Study is," Block explains, "a stance we assume in the world…. Study offers us moments of insight and chances for direction." Study is not test preparation but meditation, not a means but an end. "Study emanates from the silence of awe and wonder." It may sound like we're in a church or synagogue, but actually we're in "school."

Not school deformed by "reform," this school is a place for study. Its classrooms may not look like classrooms; they could be cabins. "The ideal cabin came to serve as the escape from the reality of the library and laboratory," Block reports. It could became a place "where original, unmediated experience might be enjoyed." Such a place is perhaps metaphoric: "As much as they are physical places, cabins and shacks seem to be psychological spaces, locations that occur as much *in the mind* as in the actual world."

For Virginia Woolf, Alan reminds, that cabin was a room of one's own. This place of promise prompts a caution and Alan asks: "What if the imagined retreat into the cabin was nothing more than a dangerous delusion?" He admits: "My cabins have not ever been places for peaceful retreat, and my occupancy in them is not a tranquil one." So maybe not meditation, but thinking?[26] "I am thinking, and it is in the cabin that my thinking best occurs." In fact, "It is in these cabins that I enact the idea that all deep, earnest thinking is the effort of the soul to maintain the openness and freedom of a life."

That is the question, is it not, "the effort of the soul to maintain the openness and freedom of a life"? For *that* effort, what knowledge is of most worth? That is the question that keeps us open, attuned to the historical moment, aware we are lost, anticipating what we don't yet know we even want. It is the question of study. "There is nothing beyond the answer," Alan Block reminds, "but by the question the world is open to possibility." In such a curriculum teaching becomes "prophecy." Alan Block's work is such teaching.

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Endnotes

[1] To Alan A. Block's *The Classroom: Encounter and Engagement* (2014). Palgrave Macmillan.

[2] Unless otherwise indicated, all quoted passages are from this volume.

[3] In terms of books – and there are many articles (including a groundbreaking exposition of study [2001]) and book chapters (including a superb study of Maxine Greene [1998a]) – Block starts in Marxism with his subtle and insightful study of the radical novel in twentieth-century America. He moves to reading – working with Frank Smith and Jeanne Chall and other key figures - which he reconceptualizes through Dewey, James, and concludes memorably with "three readers reading." Next came an unexpected psychoanalytic turn (1997), not with clinical coldness but heartfelt fear, including (I suspect) for his school-aged daughters. The "religious" turn followed. First he stripped Schwab clean of simplicity (2004), contextualizing that canonical work in Judaism, turning afterward to Torah study to rethink American – indeed Western – education (2007, 2009). It is scale and sophistication of scholarly achievement few can claim and by which the field is forever enriched.

[4] Block 1998bb, 328.

[5] Block 1998bb, 329.

[6] Block 1998bb, 330.

[7] "Thoreau notes," Block (1998bb, 330) reminds (quoting his alter ego), "how quickly the single path he had worn to the pond for his morning ablutions supervised and determined his way, and how he then knew how that he would have to leave Walden, for 'I had other

lives to live.' I think that as teachers, we must accept Dylan's charge, and offer it challengingly and triumphantly to students." From there he moves into Marxism (1998bb, 333-335) from which it seems, for a while, there is nowhere to go until he returns to being lost and the creative expressivity it offers, referencing the" dadaists, the affichistes, the collages of Robert Rauchenberg and Richard Hamilton, and the graffiti artists of the 1980s" (Block 1998bb, 336).

[8] Block 1997, 119.

[9] "Writing always denies home and paths," Block (1998bb, 331) believes, "because to write is to understand that meaning is situationally dependent."

[10] "The presence of objectives," Block knows (this volume), "suggested that there should be no adventure in education. In fact, I thought, objectives obstructed the educational journey rather than facilitated it: they kept asleep the curiosity so essential to learning."

[11] This is an idea associated with Walter Benjamin (whose work Alan quotes in several paces over the years: see for instance 1992, 122; 1995, 118). To situate the concept in Benjamin's life, see Eiland and Jennings 2014, 109, 158.

[12] "As did Marx from the other side of the world," Block writes, "Thoreau argued that most importantly we must own ourselves, and that this accomplishment derives from a self-knowledge that might prevent a life of servitude and quiet desperation. Men may make their own history, but not in the circumstances of their choosing: we must learn our circumstances to understand our freedom." Put another way, as Alan does in chapter 1, "reality does not rupture my imagination but comes to substance through it."

[13] "*Until* the historical [becomes] personal," Block writes, one has "no idea where [one] is." History doesn't disappear into autobiography, but entering History it does become personal.

"To understand the word," Alan suggests, "one must always go into the past. And sometimes, that past is not even my past!" In an age of presentism, the past provides a place of momentary escape, a "cabin" where "thinking" might occur. "Unreflective thought," Block warns, "mires us in the immediate sensory present and leads only to eventual dissatisfaction and no future." Presentism is not being in the present moment but absent from it.

[14] "I would prefer to replace the notion of subjectivity with the idea of identity," Block (1998bb, 332) admits, affirming relationality and materiality. In this volume he focuses on "the complex codes … that bound my life." The "lost book" might "afford me precious insights" into these, and, he tells us, "I read regularly to find this book."

[15] Those intimacies can originate in family, as they evidently did for Alan: "My mother used to adore telling others how I would run to her (to *her,* of course!) with a book held out in my hands and cry, "Read to me, read to me!" I cannot say what led me to books in the first place, though I now suspect that it was the opportunity to be held in her lap whilst she read. Perhaps books were the means to receive warmth and attention." It would seem so, as in another place Alan confides: "I loved reading with my daughters—I love reading." When leaving home does one retain – through reading - the sense of intimacy associated with the family? "I read somewhere that the book written is meant to repair the rift that exists between the word and the world," Block remembers.

[16] "The purpose of [reading]," Block 1995, 103) reminds, "is the production of meaning."

[17] "We are in schools," Block (2007, 199) writes, "much in need of the prophetic imagination: perhaps it is the prophetic tradition to which teachers might adhere rather

than that to that of the statisticians." Statisticians reduce children's learning to scores on standardized tests. School "reform" is not about learning but about "control" and "mastery," as Thorndike was unafraid to say straight out in 1913: "Tables of correlation seem dull, dry, unimpressive things besides the insights of poets and proverb-makers – but only to those who miss their meaning. In the end they will contribute tenfold more to man's mastery of himself" (quoted in Block 1995, 95). "Control," Block (2007, 77) laments, "that is the only answer in the classrooms of the United States."

[18] "We have assumed an instrumentalist stand," Block knows.

[19] Historical context construes conceptualization. In an age of recitation and memorization, the early-twenteith-century emphasis on projects, skills, process were in fact "progressive." In an age where students know nothing except how to do what they're told – to find "answers" as Block puts it – then "knowledge" becomes of intrinsic importance. What had been "traditional" a century ago is now "progressive." As Block (1992, 20) notes in his study of the American radical novel, "radicalism … is a product of a particular historical context and that the form of that radicalism – and its production in and as literature – alters with changing conditions and not with particular parties. In an age of stupidity, preserving the past – once the definition of conservatism – becomes progressive: "To teachers is given the almost religious task of guarding and fostering intelligence."

[20] The "past" is not only what we remember – History – it is, Block (2009*,* 67) notes, also what we don't: "I think we are always burdened by the past that we don't remember."

[21] "Education is our means out of the desert," Block (2009*,*111) affirms. "While we study, there is no desert. And this study built upon faith is the substance of curriculum."

[22] See Macdonald 1995. Block (2004, 2): "Study, I aver, is a prayerful act."

[23] Part of the problem of the present is that "study ha[s] become secular and not sacred. Study ha[s] lost its base in wonder and awe and ha[s] become mundane." It is about "measurement." (In his study of reading Block [1995, 95) quotes William James: "Never were as many men of a decidedly empiricist proclivity in existence as there are at the present day … our esteem for facts has not neutralized in us all religiousness. It is itself almost religious. Our scientific temper is devout." Add technology and profit-at-any-cost to this religious faith in "evidence" and welcome to the twenty-first century, also, like James' time, a "Gilded America.") For the Rabbis, Block reminds, "study is not merely an essential and practical enterprise but rather, is a holy one."

[24] "Thoreau," Block (2009*,* 47) points out, "lived a life of solitariness amidst great sociability…. He decries the current insistence on society and sociability, finding too much company distracting."

[25] In fact relationship can be primary. "But for Yohanan and Lakish," Block (2007, 181) explains, "education had been a relationship and the acquisition of knowledge as participation."

[26] "This pedagogy of thinking," Block argues, "should be the center of curriculum work."