

## The Best Years of Your Life: Education and Teething

Speech to Sarah Lawrence Alumnae/i

June 2016

Michael Davis

Once upon a time there were two lovely children—a boy and a girl (or, since this is Sarah Lawrence, you may select whatever genders seem appropriate to you). They were born quite beautiful and intelligent to families equally beautiful and intelligent. Neither was poor—nor rich. They were just right. The two were neighbors and, as they grew up, great friends. At just the right moment, before puberty could cause any pains of self-consciousness, the two fell in love. They went to high school together, where both won prizes for theater and awards for athletics. They were regularly recognized by their community for their many good works. In their senior year they (oh, let's call them Dick and Jane) were joint valedictorians and then went off to Harvard (ok, to Sarah Lawrence). Shortly after graduating from college, they married, which in no way impeded their careers in (fill in the blank here with whatever you think are the perfect jobs) in which both were successful at an unprecedentedly young age. Dick and Jane had two lovely children (let's say twins)—Dick Junior and Jane Junior. Jane's labor lasted only twenty-five minutes and, in any case, was quite pain free. And, to shorten this already too long story, Dick, Jane, D.J., and J.J. lived happily ever after (except of course for the matter of death, which we must omit as it does not really fit into this picture). Now, except for the parenthetical remarks (meant to amuse and ameliorate, yes, but also thereby to call attention to the painfully "perfect" character of the lives of Dick and Jane), this is not an interesting story. Indeed, it is scarcely a story at all, for, as Tolstoy warns us, "all happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." And, sad to say, it is unhappiness that we find interesting.

English borrows the word *pathos* (and from it “passion”) from Greek, where it derives from the verb *paschein*—to undergo, experience, or suffer. Even in English the word “suffer” is complicated. In the sentence “I will not suffer you to do that,” it seems to mean something like “allow,” “let,” or “bear.” That “I do not suffer fools gladly” suggests that I may well be happy to suffer others (the wise perhaps). Here “to suffer” cannot mean to undergo pain; it must mean something like to experience generally. And unless “sufferance” as “consent,” means consent is always compelled, here too there is suffering without pain. “Suffer,” then, has something of the doubleness of the word “passion”—which, on the one hand, refers to emotions like anger, love, and hate and, and on the other, is simply the opposite of action. This is true not only in English and Greek, but also, to name only a few cases, in French, Italian, and Spanish. In German “leiden können” means literally “to be able to suffer,” but as an idiom, “to like”—so, “to be able to bear.” Thus, while Goethe’s *Die Leiden des Jungen Werthers* certainly calls our attention to the sufferings of his title character, the book is also about Werther’s experience (in Thackeray’s wonderful words) of a “love for Charlotte such as words could never utter.” To suffer, then, means to be a passive receptor as well as to feel pain. Still, is there not a ground for this duplicity? Passive verbs generally announce passions. To act is to hit; to suffer is to be hit. This is not merely a quirk of language, for underneath it all there is something essentially painful about human experience. As we move through life, we are moved; we feel emotions as we inevitably hit resistance, and are hit hard by it. Dick and Jane are boring because they are not really living, for each real family is in its way unhappy.

That it is our plight to suffer threatens to mark human life as tragic, but resistance is not futile. Let us to turn to a tragedy to understand what this might mean. Perhaps it will ameliorate the threat, for tragedy, oddly enough, is something we enjoy. At the end of Act 5 in *Hamlet*,

virtually everyone is dead, and what do we do? Applaud. Aeschylus's *Agamemnon* is the story of Agamemnon's return home victorious after ten years of war culminating in the sack of Troy. Close to the beginning of the play a chorus of old men enter singing an ode—one of the most beautiful in Greek tragedy—in the course of which they utter perhaps the most famous words in Greek tragedy—*pathei mathos*. “Learning by suffering, or experiencing, or undergoing” is what Zeus authoritatively lays down as binding for mortals (176-78). Now, only about fifteen lines before this apparently objective pronouncement of the human condition, the chorus express their ignorance of just who this Zeus is (“Zeus, whoever he is, if it is dear to him to have been called this, this is how I will address him”—160-62). Accordingly, it makes sense that the only way possible for the chorus to learn what this anonymous power has in store for them is by living through it—by experience. A chorus of twelve men, too old and frail even ten years before to go to Troy with the army of Agamemnon, give a detached account of the origin of the war and in particular of the circumstances leading up to the sacrifice of Iphigeneia—a sacrifice as portentous for the Greeks as the attempt to sacrifice Isaac was for the Jews. Through Calchas, a prophet, the goddess Artemis had made clear that she would permit no Greek ship to sail from Aulis unless Agamemnon sacrificed his daughter. Now, in the course of this account, the chorus describe Artemis's anger at Agamemnon, but strangely never explain what crime he has committed so to offend the goddess. We are given only a metaphorical account. For being one of two eagles attacking a pregnant hare (114-21, 135-39), Agamemnon must atone with the sacrifice of his daughter—a real penalty for a poetic infraction. The chorus describe what immediately precedes this killing in exquisite detail—Iphigeneia's expression, her words, her robe—but of the deed itself they say only this.

The things thereafter I did not see nor shall I relate, but the arts of Calchas [that is, his prophesy about Iphigeneia] [are] not fruitless, and Justice metes out learning by sufferings (*pathousin mathein*). 247-51

Justice determines guilt; to learn is to feel guilt. About this Aeschylus and the Bible agree. The first thing Adam and Eve do after they are expelled from paradise for having eaten of the tree of knowledge of good and evil is to cover their genitals in shame. Their discovery of knowledge is their discovery of their own partiality. Neither of them is a complete human being, for there is no such thing as human being—*anthrōpos* (“man and woman he created them; in his image he created them”). We are partial and know that we are partial, which knowledge alienates us from ourselves—we feel shame. This is reflected in our quite ordinary double use of the word “self-conscious”—on the one hand, meaning simply “self-aware” and, on the other, what, in my day, seventh grade boys used to feel at school dances. All self-awareness is somehow an awareness of defect. So there is a connection between guilt and knowledge. The chorus immediately gloss *pathei mathos* by saying “there drips instead of sleep before the heart a distress that remembers the pain” (179-80).

Until this point, we have assumed the account of the chorus to be second hand. Unfit to accompany the army to war, they would not have been at Aulis where the Greek fleet gathered to set sail for Troy. And yet they conclude the parodos by telling us that they averted their eyes at the last minute to avoid seeing Agamemnon cut the throat of his daughter. So they must have been present? Argos is about two hundred miles from Aulis. How did they get there? When departing from Argos, surely Agamemnon had no idea that shortly thereafter he would be told to sacrifice his daughter. We cannot imagine that he took her along as insurance “just in case” he needed to sacrifice her. He must, then, have sent for her. And she would have needed an escort. Does this explain the presence of the chorus in Aulis? Were they responsible for ushering

Iphigeneia to her death? If so, far from being the objective observers they pretend to be (by the way, no tragic chorus ever are), these twelve old men are in this affair up to their necks, for their knowledge depends on their complicity. It is inseparable from their guilt. And we, who in the face of this puzzle ignore it and blithely assume their innocence, are complicit as well. We display our own guilt.

This is not the only time in the play where the detached disinterestedness of knowledge is called into question. When in their first exchange Clytemestra tells the chorus that Troy has fallen, they ask her how she knows. She gives them two accounts. In the first she explains in great detail the system of signal fires that Agamemnon arranged (281-316). When Troy fell a fire was to be lit on near-by Mt. Ida. When this fire was seen at the rock of Hermes on the island of Lemnos, another fire was to be lit. And from there one at Mt. Athos, at Macistos, at Messapion, and so on until (although, given the speed of light, all but instantaneously) fire was seen at Argos. This ingenious plan convinces the chorus not at all, for they say they “wonder much at these speeches” (318). Clytemestra relents and gives a second, less rational account—completely invented, but powerfully vivid. She depicts the chaotic scene unfolding at Troy, where cries are heard throughout the city as bodies of beloved family members fall all around. Now, Clytemestra cannot possibly know what she tells them to be true. She uses poetry to provide them with a fake experience—a *pathos*. This the chorus find altogether convincing. They respond with what they take to be a great compliment: “Woman, you speak with a good mind, like a sensible man” (351). It is only owing to this pseudo-suffering that the chorus (and perhaps we who are after all spectators of our own pseudo-suffering—the *Agamemnon*) are persuaded.

Because we learn by suffering, our learning is not entirely trustworthy. And yet, *pathei mathos*—human beings cannot learn without suffering. Our understanding is both enabled and

clouded by passion. Now, Aeschylus is not teaching us in a seminar or in an alumnae/i lecture. To learn from the *Agamemnon* requires that we be drawn into its story passionately. Poetry teaches us by faking experience. Having told us that all happy families are alike but each unhappy family unhappy in its own way, Tolstoy moves immediately to a rather humorous description of the tumult in the unhappy Oblonsky family, which is, in a way, a dry run for what will finally drive Anna Karenina, Oblonsky's sister and so a member of his extended family, to suicide. Fake experience may move us—but it is also fake. It allows us at once to suffer and to relish our suffering. Act 5 of *Hamlet*. To be a spectator of the *Agamemnon* is not the same as to be a character in the *Agamemnon*. To learn from tragedy is not to live tragically.

Like tragedy, learning is a peculiar mixture of pleasure and pain. In an explicitly mythical passage of his dialogue, *Phaedrus*, Plato has his Socrates describe human beings as constituted by an erotic longing to fly aloft to a place beyond the heavens where it will be possible once again to see things as they really are. As an image of learning it must involve suffering, but there is more. The hyperuranian voyage cannot begin until we grow wings—which growth Socrates describes as follows:

Now in this way the whole [soul] boils and spouts up, and the feeling [*pathos*] of those growing teeth . . . both itching and irritation about the gums, the soul of the one beginning to grow wings has felt the same thing—it both boils and is irritated and is tickled when the wings grow. Then, when looking at the beauty of the beloved . . . it is moistened and heated, it both recovers from pain and has rejoiced. But when it comes to be apart and is parched, the mouths of the passages in which the wing makes a start are dried up, and, closing, it shuts off the sprout of the wing. But the [soul] within, having been shut up with yearning, leaping like a throbbing pulse, pricks the passage . . . so that, being pricked all round, the soul is stung to madness and is pained. And again, having a memory of the beautiful [one], it has rejoiced. But having been mixed from both, it is in anguish, both by the absurdity of the feeling and, being at an impasse [*aporousa*], by fury, and, being frantic, it is neither possible to sleep at night, nor by day . . . , but, longing, it runs wherever it thinks it will see the one who has beauty. Yet, by seeing, [its]

yearning having been watered . . . , it leaves off both goads and pains and again . . . reaps the fruit for itself of this sweetest pleasure.

This is Plato the pornographer—the erotic imagery is palpable. So, learning is like teething (hence wisdom teeth?), and teething is like sex—a powerful pain oddly combined with a yet more powerful pleasure. But not just combined—the pleasure is unthinkable apart from its antecedent pain. The pain is prologue to the pleasure. If eros, as we are told elsewhere in Plato, is an awareness that we lack, and as it turns out, will always lack what we most need to make ourselves whole, and if eros is the defining feature of human beings, then eros would seem to be the sign that our lives are tragic through and through. And yet, *mirabile dictu*, we love being in love. Popular songs, scarcely a standard vehicle for tragedy, sing almost nothing other than its praises. Life may be essentially painful—it hits us like a ton of bricks—but nevertheless it hits the spot. Growing pains are the source of our deepest pleasures. Hence as Aristotle (or perhaps the pseudo-Aristotle) suggests (*Problemata* 30), melancholy is the disease distinctive for philosophers, poets, political men, and artists—for those characterized by longing.

Plato has a habit of drawing attention by way of punning to the deep parallel between to love (*eraō*) and to question (*erōtaō*) (see, for example, *Republic* 595c). That we question at all means, on the one hand, that we know that we do not know (Otherwise, why ask?) and, on the other, that we do not despair of an answer (Otherwise, why ask?). Genuinely to question, we must be at once pained by our ignorance and pleased by the possibility it affords us to think. And we can experience the second only because we have experienced the first. Thinking means recognizing that things that do not immediately seem to go together belong together. Good poets know this. Tom Stoppard writes a play called *Arcadia*. It seems to be preoccupied with two things: love and fractals. Love and fractals? Why should two such obviously disparate things go together? This puzzle is how Stoppard sets the stage for us to learn. Were everything already

neatly together, we would not need to put things together—their truth would be immediately obvious, although it is not clear to whom it would be obvious. Could there be a soul in such a world? On the other hand if things were simply different and at odds, the world would be utterly chaotic, we could not put things together, and the world would be utterly unintelligible. And so the truth of things, even this sad truth, would permanently elude us. Thinking requires that we experience a world of problems. We long to make sense of it and relish the prospect, but can do so only given the painful experience of its not hanging together. And so, we teethe; we bite down hard on our aching gums, and it gives us a great and sweet pleasure. We are only able to love the world because we are at odds with it. And as the beings put together in such a way as to long to close the gap between ourselves and the world, to be at odds with the world is to be at odds with ourselves. Alienation is apparently not an unmixed evil—it has its pleasures.

Now, in addition to having to do with everything, all of this actually does have something to do with you as alumnae and alumni of Sarah Lawrence College, for an educational institution, if it is to live up to its name, must have at its core a commitment to this activity—first seeing things as apart so as to be able to then put them together. It has to be all about thinking. The rest is incidental. Which is to say, genuine education has to be philosophic, not in the narrow sense—experience painfully reveals more than a few non-philosophic philosophers in the philosophy departments of the academy. I mean it rather in the sense that the best teachers of literature and physics, of history and art, of political science and music, of anthropology and mathematics, and of all the rest are philosophic. Of course, no matter how good it is, a college can never guarantee an education. You can lead a student to Plato, but you cannot make her drink. Indeed, there is something wondrously unpredictable about why education takes place when and where it takes place. We may like to think of ourselves as responsible, but if we are honest, teachers have to

admit that we are never altogether sure why we succeed when we succeed and why we fail when we fail. Still, we have to give it the old college try, and this means our deepest responsibility is to do what we can to increase the likelihood of thinking. But how?

Another story—I hope more interesting than the saga of Dick and Jane. Once upon a time, when I was a junior in college, I had a friend who was a senior, a particularly attractive ugly young man (had he been a French woman he would have been called a *jolie laide*; had he been a French man he would have been the masculine version, which my abysmal French leaves me unable to pronounce ), an ugly young man who moved with extraordinary grace—a hero with the unlikely name of Stanley, who wrote poetry like Wallace Stevens and sang the blues like Lightnin’ Hopkins. He and I shared a love of philosophy grounded in a sense that it might be not merely an academic discipline but a way of life. I admired Stanley enormously. I sort of wanted to be him. I had come from a very small town in upstate New York—the only one in my family to go to college. I was a hick, and Stanley seemed worldly. Now, at the time I was a double major in Philosophy and Government, but, as virtually all my courses in Government were in political philosophy, the truth was that I spent all my time on philosophy. For a while I had imagined myself something of a Raskolnikov, certain that I was engaged in my own battle to be Napoleon in the face of a world that was essentially meaningless, a world of nihilistic relativism where the only thing of value was the courage to acknowledge that nothing really was of value. Well, that was what I thought was going on, but my state of mind also no doubt had something to do with the fact that my girlfriend had just dumped me. In any event, it was Greek philosophy—in particular, Plato’s celebration of the philosophic life and Aristotle’s moral philosophy—that broke this fever. With a confidence not unusual in converts, I changed idols and began rather naively to emulate Socrates (another ugly beauty) and confound random others in argument by

revealing to them that they could not possibly believe what they professed to believe. I remember once drinking too much scotch with an acquaintance named Joe who had grown up in a working class home near Pittsburgh and who was extraordinarily (and rightfully) proud of having overcome the racism he had been reared on. This admirable self-reconstruction morphed subtly into the view that toleration was *the* great virtue and this because nothing was really in itself good or bad but only relatively so. That is, Joe had traded in the conventional view of his family for the conventional view of his contemporaries and made it the pillar of his moral life. Now, he and I were fetching a new bag of ice for our scotch (this was before I learned that it is a sin to spoil scotch with ice—scotch is another example of *pathei mathos*—the jolie laide of whiskies, for I cannot believe that anyone ever liked it when drinking it for the first time). But back to Joe. I'm afraid I was amusing myself by driving him unrelentingly to the conclusion that, given how much he valued his anti-racism, he could not both be so proud of it and at the same time really believe that all value was relative. I could see the contradiction hit him and was about to begin my quiet version of a victory dance, when, glaring with hatred, Joe threw the bag of ice at me. *Pathei mathos*. It's neither kind nor wise to play with people.

But I have digressed. The worldly Stanley knew graduate students before I even knew what a graduate student was. One evening he brought me to the apartment of a grad student in philosophy. It was off campus in what was called Collegetown. Now, at Cornell, while no one ever taught the philosopher, Wittgenstein, pretty much everyone in the Philosophy Department tried to teach as though he were Wittgenstein. This graduate student was a Wittgenstein in training—very intelligent and very good at smelling out the weaknesses of arguments. The details of our conversation that evening are not so important (it lasted for about three hours). Suffice it to say that my previous conversion had involved being rescued by Plato and Aristotle

from a view that because it did not admit the possibility of talking about essences and natures (let's say Platonic ideas), on the one hand, and about the soul, on the other, seemed to drain the world of all meaning and lead to a dark despair. Wittgenstein, however, is a powerful thinker who calls into question the ideas and the soul, these twin pillars of the metaphysics of Platonism. I wish I could say what followed was a battle of epic magnitude—Achilles and Hector. I tried to hold my own, but even if I had, it wouldn't really have mattered. I knew it was all bluster. I no longer really believed what I was saying.

At about one in the morning, we finally left. Stanley went his way, and I began to walk back to my apartment. I had taken only a few steps when I was overcome by an eerie impulse to run. I was moved by fear—not of anything in particular, but what Martin Heidegger, I suppose, would call *Angst*. My newly recovered world—my comfortable world—had been threatened. I also felt angry—soiled. I hadn't really been honest in my argument with the Wittgenstein in training, but, more important, I also hadn't been honest with myself in my celebration of the philosophical life. You can't really do it—philosophize, that is—unless your first care is always the truth. You can't adopt conclusions merely because you're afraid of the alternatives. Running had to do with acknowledging this fear and with cleansing myself. I ran to the point of physical exhaustion—through Collegetown, up past the libraries, across the Arts Quad until, a mile or so later, and pretty much spent, I ended up at Franklin Hall—the building with the artists' studios. Artists, of course, have notoriously strange habits and strange hours, and so in deference to them the building was open all night. At the front of the lecture hall in Franklin, on one side there was a lectern and on the other a large, probably ten foot tall, plaster reproduction of a Hellenistic statue of Atlas. I had spent many late nights in this room the previous year after my girlfriend had decided to put an end to our long distance relationship (she was in Ohio). Many self-

dramatizing nights in which I had had long one-sided conversations with Atlas. *I* would have found me tedious, but Atlas never shrugged. Don't worry; I have no intention of recounting the details of our conversation on this evening—it will remain between me and Atlas. By the end, though—I think it was now about 3AM—I had resolved to do a senior thesis the following year on Aristotle and Wittgenstein on the question of morality. In this admittedly academic way I tried to come back to myself.

In writing my senior thesis I discovered that Plato was not a Platonist, and Aristotle was not an Aristotelian. Philosophers generally are much more subtle in their views than their encyclopedia entries might lead you to believe. Plato and Aristotle were not without something to say in a conversation with Wittgenstein. And indeed Wittgenstein, far from being an agent of the Devil, had a very complicated view of morality. I discovered that he was the author of the remarkable sentence, “If a man could write a book on ethics that was truly a book on ethics, this book would with an explosion destroy all of the other books in the world”—hardly the words of a man insensitive to the importance of morality. I'm not sure how I would have learned of any of this complexity had my conversation with the Wittgenstein in training not so unsettled me.

*Pathei mathos.*

Why am I telling you about all of this? It's hard to believe that you would attend a reunion, if you were utterly miserable in your days at Sarah Lawrence. At some level you must remember them fondly. And of course the college, and I as its agent here, would like to encourage your fond memories—perhaps even encourage you to think of your time at Sarah Lawrence as in some way the best years of your life (we will gladly accept donations at the conclusion of the lecture). But while you renew old friendships and recall good times, it is worth thinking about how important the bad times were. As an undergraduate I met my future wife and

several life-long friends. I have a powerful image of Stanley walking gracefully past the Student Union—at that moment I understood that walking could be dancing. All deeply important to me and remembered with great affection. But what I remember perhaps most vividly is running from an apartment in Collegetown to Franklin Hall, for college is all about learning, and learning requires being at risk, being at odds with oneself, and suffering. If it is genuine, everything is at stake, and to put everything at stake is never safe, for as the Greek saying goes *chalepa ta kala*—“the beautiful things are hard.” So, when they asked me to give this lecture, I thought I should take the opportunity to remind you of how unhappy you were when you were here, and of how happy you were even then that this was the case. I hope my reminder has not been too unpleasant. I want to welcome you back to Sarah Lawrence, and also to warn you not to get too comfortable, for by now it is surely painfully obvious how this talk will end: *pathei mathos*.