



Bank Street

Occasional Paper Series

Occasional
Paper
Series

Volume 2021
Number 45 *Welcoming Narratives in Education:
A Tribute to the Life Work of Jonathan Silin*

Article 19

April 2021

Quintessential Jonathan

Virginia Casper
Bank Street College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://educate.bankstreet.edu/occasional-paper-series>

 Part of the [Curriculum and Instruction Commons](#), [Curriculum and Social Inquiry Commons](#), [Educational Assessment, Evaluation, and Research Commons](#), and the [Educational Methods Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Casper, V. (2021). Quintessential Jonathan. *Occasional Paper Series, 2021* (45). Retrieved from <https://educate.bankstreet.edu/occasional-paper-series/vol2021/iss45/19>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Educate. It has been accepted for inclusion in Occasional Paper Series by an authorized editor of Educate. For more information, please contact kfreda@bankstreet.edu.

educate

Quintessential Jonathan

Virginia Casper

It was only a year ago, but many worlds away, Jonathan and I took a few hours off from a conference to hike in the hills above Las Cruces, New Mexico. The conversation wandered around people we know in common, those we have lost, and ideas we shared over 25 years as friends and colleagues. We kept returning to the topic of legacy, however, based on Jonathan's recent reconceptualization of the term (Silin, 2020) and my interest in thinking more about it. As I listened to him explain his more generative version of this venerable notion, I remember thinking how these ideas were so quintessentially Jonathan.

Jonathan's life and work traverse many historical moments and social-historical movements. Born Jewish at the end of World War II, he came of age as a member of the "Stonewall Generation." Throughout his adult life, he has been a male teacher and teacher-educator in a female-dominated profession. He is a gay activist who was especially engaged during the turbulent decades of the HIV-AIDS pandemic and a queer theorist in the decidedly straight world of early childhood education.

With these multiple lenses, Jonathan alerts us to the ways in which social and biological reproduction weasel their way into seemingly simple and too often accepted concepts of our world. In the case of legacy, he rejects that one's body of work is the passing on of static ideas for another generation to use unexamined.

Shaping an unknown future around ideas of the moment is a bit like trying to predict who a child will become based on their current behavior. For example, when queer ideas first broke into the field of early childhood, many psychologists—for whom prediction can be a specialty—gravitated toward a determination/diagnosis of what it meant to be a young boy who enjoyed dressing in what were seen as "girls' clothes" or whose play activities were those traditionally categorized as female. In fact, such a child might become gay, straight, trans, or one or more of these over time. The multiple possibilities surrounding gender fluidity across the lifespan took a long time to come to light. Of course, Dewey advised against premature categorizations of children and encouraged adults to observe and help children to be in the moment (Dewey, 1897).

And legacy, too, is about the process of "becoming" along life's path and need not embody notions of mortality. Rather than focusing on passing the torch to another generation, Jonathan, throughout his career, has enacted reciprocity through intergenerational dialogue, validating new voices and welcoming "newcomers" of all kinds into a larger community of thought. Such a broad and global concept can be molded and reshaped as necessary in the future. I have marveled at the way Jonathan can pull together a seemingly disparate crew, helping them see the ideas they share by animating a topic or a symposium to synthesize what might otherwise remain only singular voices. Each person is challenged to plumb the depths of their own thinking, as well as create a whole enterprise of ideas that is most definitely greater than the sum of its parts (Casper, et al., 1996).

As someone who has benefited more than once from this generative process, I can say how much I learned from others along the way. In my individual thinking and writing Jonathan always pushed me and opened me up to the next level. In sharing his own struggles—from learning to read (Silin, 2003), to

taking care of a dying friend (Silin, 1995), to caring for his aging parents (Silin, 2006), to “stewarding” the photographic art of his late partner Robert Giard (Robert Giard Archives)—Jonathan helps others find authentic meaning as they grapple with their own life issues. Linking biography to the world at large and the world of the classroom using different ways of knowing—outside the canon—is a decidedly feminist, queer, and phenomenological stance.

What is it that provokes people to go deeper in their thinking? There are many paths, of course, but Jonathan’s is to raise questions about children, often from his own life, and to draw out predicaments early childhood teachers bring from their practice. They are the wonderings and contradictory thoughts that keep educators up all night—the very same ones they may be afraid to mention in the light of day. Unearthing what children are thinking, saying, and what they want to know regardless of adult fears has been a touchstone of Jonathan’s contributions that will indeed endure to be recast. He has helped so many understand that avoiding/resisting the heart of any “difficult” issue (whether it be sexuality, poverty, racism, illness, or gender identity) actually ends up distancing adults from children rather than “protecting” them from what they already know or have a sense of knowing.

At first glance, Jonathan’s early childhood world can seem dark, especially in relationship to society’s predominant emphasis on a developmentally graded portrayal of young children as adorable. But despite a world of increasing pain and anxiety, Jonathan leads us to see that it is actually hope that draws us to children. Being hopeful always involves risk (Silin, 2017). Drawing from Jose Munoz (2009), Jonathan writes that our hope for children, families, and education cannot be an empty hope, but can be an educated one.

Walking back down the trail that brilliant fall day, a huge tarantula crossed our path. Its sudden appearance in the middle of the trail stopped us in our tracks. This extraordinary, primitive creature had slow robotic movements and prickly legs. We didn’t even know what it was at first, which only emphasized that this creature was out of our daily experience and culture. A family from the area came by and among them was a tarantula expert, so we learned a bit about them. I intuitively viewed it as a foreboding omen. But we learned that in Southwest native cultures, there is a belief that this spirit animal encourages us to look beneath the surface of things and use what we find to raise up our life for examination and action in order to serve our true purposes. As the tarantula disappeared into the brush, oblivious to our focused attention, we were gifted with a new idea with which to play and find purpose.

Quintessential Jonathan.

REFERENCES

- Casper, V., Cuffaro, H. K., Schultz, S.B., Silin, J.G., & Wickens, E. (1996). Toward a most thorough understanding of the world: Sexual orientation and early childhood education. *Harvard Educational Review*, 66, 271-293.
- Dewey, J. (1897). My pedagogical creed. *The School Journal*, 54, 77-80.
- Munoz, J. (2009). *Cruising utopia: The then and there of queer futurity*. New York University Press.
- Robert Giard Archives. <https://archives.yale.edu/repositories/11/resources/1746>
- Silin, J. (1995). *Sex, death, and the education of children: Our passion for ignorance in the age of AIDS*. Teachers College Press.
- Silin, J. (2003). Reading, writing and the wrath of my father. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 38(2), 260-267. <https://doi.org/10.1598/RRQ.38.2.5>
- Silin, J. (2006). *My father's keeper: The story of a gay son and his aging parents*. Beacon Press.
- Silin, J. (2017). Risking hope in a worried world. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 18(1), 91-98. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1463949117692282>
- Silin, J. (2020). Queer legacies and their vicissitudes: On 50 years of teaching and learning. *Teaching Education*, 31(1), 54-66. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10476210.2019.1709812>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Virginia Casper has been a developmental psychologist and teacher educator for over 35 years. She served in instructional, administrative, and clinical teaching roles in the Bank Street Graduate School of Education, specializing in infant, toddler, and family development. Virginia has published in *The Harvard Educational Review*, *Zero to Three*, and numerous other journals. She also spent 10 years working internationally in early childhood education doing capacity-building professional development in China, Bulgaria, Bangladesh, Liberia, and South Africa, specializing in community-based research and learning. She is (also) a co-author of *Gay-Parents/Straight Schools: Building Communication and Trust* (with Steven Schultz), and a text on early childhood education (with Rachel Theilheimer) entitled *Early Childhood Education: Learning Together*. Since her retirement, she has returned to artwork and environmental activism.