



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 20

April 2021

The Times of Our Lives

Deborah Britzman
York University

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

Britzman, D. (2021). The Times of Our Lives. *Occasional Paper Series, 2021* (45). Retrieved from <https://educate.bankstreet.edu/occasional-paper-series/vol2021/iss45/20>

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

The Times of Our Lives

Deborah Britzman

I recall a remark Anna Freud once gave around the age of 85. She said there are two ages that are most challenging for the human and require the most strength: the times of early childhood and the times of old age (Sandler, with A. Freud, 1985). Within these bookends of life, Anna Freud exchanged the ideality of strength as might for that of care for vulnerability. Strength becomes the capacity for tolerating, as in living with bodily fragility, care, and dependency. Here, perception of time, or our feelings in time, are other to the function of time. It is, after all, no small act of courage to link together early and late time.

A few years ago, my mother's 82-year-old friend Gigi told me that when you get to her age, everyone looks 20 years old. I suppose the opposite is also the case: by the age of six, everyone looks 80 years old. The idea I am exploring and the one that brings me to think with Jonathan Silin is that everyone has difficulty with narrating time because we are in the world of others. We can feel both young and old, and this brings to the telling of time an emotional situation of development as uneven (and as opposed to linear progression). It is here that the capacious writing of Jonathan Silin opens the pedagogical crypt and dusts off the erasures. How may we in education learn to know our own time? Silin might reply, Let's posit the life of the mind as always in relation to the life of bodies with the lives of other bodies. Let's welcome any body in illness and health, for this is the human condition.

It must be said that for the field of education, time is felt as a terrible harried matter and a time of anxiety. If having to tell time grates on our nerves, it is mainly because the body and its pleasures and dangers tend to be ignored, and then because we feel time as lost before our time can even occur. Indeed, it is typical for students and teachers to worry there is never enough time, that we are too late, that we wait too long, and that we are unprepared. We may worry that knowledge comes too early before we know how it may be handled. We are urged to consider a future we do not yet know.

If one could magically blow away the concept of development which, after all, keeps time running in place, the entire edifice of schooling would crumble. Our way of telling educational time does seem to be a Foucauldian matter of discipline and control, even as telling time must still belong to situations of transience, say, the time for conception and birth and life and death. Of course, a great deal happens within each of these events and Jonathan Silin's (2018) *Early Childhood, Aging, and the Life Cycle: Mapping Common Ground* carries time into its relationality. He thinks of common ground as holdings of soft situations made from being with others in vulnerability, dependency, curiosity, and care. This common ground might overtake our passion for the disavowal of bodies, so operative in education. Scenes of both recognition and disavowal continue to be his major themes; they can all be traced back to his 1995 groundbreaking book, *Sex, Death, and Children: Our Passion for Ignorance in the Age of AIDS*. One can even go back even further to the ways Silin's other work returns to his New York Jewish childhood, his parents both young and old, his young adult self, his longtime loves and losses, and his creative work with teachers and children in early childhood education. We learn there is no division, for narrative is able to tolerate the streams of ongoing life.

Within his books and many essays, consultations, and community projects, Jonathan Silin's writing signifies the courage and warmth needed to bring into discussion the care and regard for wide-ranging

personal experience that we all lean upon to create meaningful relations with friends, lovers, and strangers. They are, however, experiences not usually admitted—even as personal experience calls us to narrate what most of the field of education tends to ignore, such as emotional situations of love and loss, the teacher’s grief, and the situation of being an adult under the sign of uneven development. Silin’s insistence begins by opening new terms for our earliest choices of loving, caring, and protesting. His focus is also a desire for weird continuity, since while we cannot remember our infancy, we still carry on its signs, traces, and gestures.

Perhaps more than any other psychoanalyst, it was Melanie Klein who insisted upon the infantile roots of the adult mind and the fate, over the course of our lives, of feelings of helplessness, dependency, and care. Klein was able to hold in mind both the early and late problems of our emotional situations that accompany learning to live from infancy to maturity. Indeed, for Klein, the mind is our emotional situation. She argued that mental life and the fantasies that render it urgent are deeply influenced and formed by our earliest situations with others, made from not understanding yet needing to know without knowing why. These scenes, where Klein saw our reaction to having to learn as calling on the defense of confusion, have a second life in adulthood. Both confusion and the surprise of realization characterize what learning is like for teachers and students, specifically in times when the learning mirrors difficult knowledge and hard topics that require us to change our minds.

One of Klein’s (1959) last essays, “Our Adult World and its Roots in Infancy” argues that infants begin their emotional situation as a relation to the object world of others, that the baby expects (anticipates) love and understanding, and that quite quickly the baby creates from the breast a prelinguistic frame of good and bad, of presence and absence that eventually, over the course of life, provides not only an aesthetic frame, but also a desire for beauty. Learning is also an embodied experience and involves time to tolerate ourselves as subjects of feelings of anxiety. We are also lifetime delegates of our ego defenses and so do communicate our hostility and fear. Klein wrote, “Both the capacity to love and the sense of persecution have deep roots in the infant’s earliest mental processes...Mutatis mutandis these emotions are still operative in later life” (1959, 249). Because beginnings are an emotional situation, attachments and separations from our first others are our fundamental means to tell time, lose time, remember time, and of course, both imagine time and, dare I say, dream of developments. We narrate time as already gone: “Once upon a time” and “Long ago and far away.” We speak of killing time and also of fearful time when we are apt to project experience as anxiety with conditions of “what if?” There is also an unconscious self that is driven, timeless, and without contradiction or negation. The unconscious may be the basis of our imagination and of dreams, fantasies, wishes, and fleeting impressions of things not known. The inner psychic world is complex and wondrous. And Jonathan Silin’s gift is to explore the agentic dilemmas of early age and old age. He shows us why we are so complicated and so affected by the larger world of others.

In Jonathan Silin’s hands, the story of development is one of consideration, retroaction, deferral, protest, and of working through as working within the deeds and imaginative acts that give us purpose, as well as the pain of incompleteness. I can go so far as to say that the idea of working through serves as an opening to stories we could not have known at the time. In this awareness of loss, working through must also recognize and repair what has been denied and unclaimed.

I hold deep personal ties with Jonathan; we have been friends for more than 30 years. And we have both been affected by good and bad education. I know what it is like to be a writer at work, and I can say that Jonathan is a writer's writer. It is indeed high praise and, while I'm not yet 70-plus years old, a few years ago I became a senior citizen and can now think of feelings I could not anticipate or even worry about when I was young. Now, I think, how terribly strange and funny that old and young can mean so many different lively experiences. How fast and slow time has become. Still, I have retained my infantile life and know I am never so far away from my infantile roots and the depths of emotional situations that bring pathos to love and loss. I appreciate Silin's idea of being "hailed" or addressed and wonder, as he does, which self will answer or which story will be heard and told, which stories will be remembered and retold, and which stories will be denied.

What persists, and Jonathan tells us why, is the history we have found and feel that we have made. You see, Jonathan and I grew up in the beginning of gay and lesbian rights, in the AIDS pandemic, in feminism and civil rights, and in dramatic and sometimes maddening challenges within our field of education. We have both tried to urge the ways in which education and selves may be rethought. From another perspective, Raymond Williams (1961) described these generational emotional situations as structures of feelings, or the special generational events, sounds, songs, smells, sights, and thoughts that say, "Yes! I, too, was there. What a time we had." And because we were both there, because of this common ground that is after all so hard to share, I think we hope to communicate to younger generations of educators and their students something of what it is like and something of what has happened to us. I think we both hope to convey how we learned to care.

To return to the writer's aesthetic, I appreciate how long it can take to write an evocative sentence that opens onto the times of our life and the lives of others, such as the one Jonathan Silin (2018) wrote in his last chapter on aging: "I grew up in a worried world...but every world is worried in its own way" (165). And in Jonathan's writing, readers are challenged to think of why we do worry in our own way. Given his grace and generosity, we are invited to think, but this time with feeling. Indeed, we are invited to think as feeling. To be affected is our only choice lest we become subject to the passion for ignorance that still plays so strongly in our field. With Jonathan Silin, we are requested to think on purpose with what chance has created. And that thinking renews the ways we can narrate our own time, as if it could become a gift to those who come after and a gratitude for those who are no longer here.

REFERENCES

- Klein, M. (1959). Our adult world and its roots in infancy. In M. Klein, *Envy and gratitude and other works, 1946-1963* (pp. 247-264). Hogarth Press, 1975.
- Sandler, J. with A. Freud. (1985). *The analysis of defense: The ego and the mechanisms of defense revisited*. International Universities Press.
- Silin, J. (1995). *Sex, death, and children: Our passion for ignorance in the age of AIDS*. Teachers College Press.
- Silin, J. (2018). *Early childhood, aging, and the life cycle: Mapping common ground*. Palgrave.
- Williams, R. (1961). *The long revolution: An analysis of the democratic, industrial, and cultural changes transforming our society*. Columbia University Press.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Deborah Britzman is the distinguished research professor at York University in Toronto, fellow of the Royal Society of Canada, holder of the York University Research Chair in Pedagogy and Psychosocial Transformation, and a working psychoanalyst. Author of nine books and over 100 articles, Britzman's scholarly area of expertise is in psychoanalysis with education and the Freudian and Kleinian histories of psychoanalysis, both applied and clinical. Recent books include: *Freud and Education* with Routledge; *Melanie Klein: Early Analysis, Play and the Question of Freedom* with Springer Press; *A Psychoanalysis in the Classroom: On the Human Condition in Education* with SUNY Press; and *Anticipating Education: Concepts for Imagining Pedagogy with Psychoanalysis* with Myers Educational Press.