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The adventure of responsive teaching: lessons from Cora and Julie Diamond

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ABSTRACT
This essay has several related goals. The first is to contribute to the philosophy of education literature on Cora Diamond while introducing the work of her sister, Julie Diamond, to the field. I introduce Julie Diamond’s work by connecting it to the work of John Dewey, and a secondary goal of the paper is to test lines of connection between Dewey and Cora Diamond. Finally, by developing Cora and Julie Diamond’s thinking on teaching and the moral life, I hope to contribute to conversations in teacher education, especially ongoing conversations about the meaning of responsive teaching. The first half of the paper discusses and engages Cora Diamond’s thinking on the moral life drawing on a range of her published work, the middle of the paper builds a bridge from Cora Diamond to Dewey as a way of introducing Julie Diamond, and the final part of the paper offers an engagement with Julie Diamond’s work. I discuss teaching throughout the paper, and my hope is that a vision of responsive teaching, one grounded in the work of Julie and Cora Diamond, emerges that allows teachers to come alive to aspects of their work that can disappear in the rush and whirl of classroom life. The paper begins with a personal story as a way of connecting with the style of Cora and Julie Diamond’s approach to teaching and the moral life.

Each year, during Lent, my church staged a passion play.¹ I narrated the play in high school and was always struck when Christ asked his disciples to stay awake and they couldn’t (Matthew 26:40). My adolescent mind, one that had trouble quieting itself at the end of each day, didn’t comprehend how the disciples fell asleep, especially at such an important moment. It is not as if He was asking a lot. Jesus just wanted his friends to be awake when he needed them; he needed them to be alive to his pain.

My feelings on this story have changed since then, because I have more of a lived appreciation for the difficulties of staying awake to the world. For example, I more fully appreciate my own failure to be present when someone I love is in pain. Jesus wasn’t asking his disciples to be heroes; he was just asking

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them to be there. Staying awake to another’s pain often means not trying to solve their problems. Being present to their pain often involves making ourselves vulnerable, because if we can’t offer a solution, it can feel as if we are powerless. Sitting beside someone often feels woefully inadequate given the enormity of what the other is going through. As well, I’ve also grown in my understanding of the ways that the course of one’s life can close off one’s sense of the possible. In the process of putting away childish things and becoming an adult, we can convince ourselves that we must habituate ourselves to ‘reality’ in ways that make us insensitive. We let our fear of appearing weak or tender put possibility to bed. Staying awake, remaining vulnerable, means opening ourselves up to being wounded when our sense of the possible is mocked, thwarted, left unrealized. Better to fall asleep than appear foolish or be disappointed.

Cora Diamond is not a Christian writer, nor am I. But when I read Diamond, I see more clearly how ways of thinking, or doing philosophy, can lead one away from appreciating the significance of staying awake. Her work, as I read it, reminds the reader to risk appearing naïve or foolish when judged against going standards of philosophical thinking or philosophical argumentation, and encourages readers to make the attempt to probe those places of real pain and confusion, finding a language for that, instead of winning by standards of thinking or argumentation that don’t connect back up to ‘our real need’ (Wittgenstein 1953, §108). This is a theme that runs across her work but has received renewed attention with the publication of ‘The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy’ (Diamond 2003). In that article, Diamond once again challenges ways of doing philosophy that would narrow philosophical thinking to just one thing. She makes this point by showing the limitations of treating literature as little more than dressed up philosophical argumentation. Diamond’s work demonstrates that philosophers can do more than hunt out (or construct) and then evaluate arguments in a piece of literature using the frameworks most familiar to philosophical thinking. Instead of deflecting the complexity of literature into familiar frameworks, they can open themselves up, allowing literature to teach them how to engage and respond.

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Admittedly, the concepts Diamond develops in ‘The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy,’ concepts like exposure, deflection, woundedness, and being haunted, are challenging to fit into going philosophical frameworks. In order to engage these concepts and her way of thinking, the reader must be willing to step outside of their familiar frameworks in ways that call on aspects of their self that they may not be used to exercising, especially when reading academic writing. Diamond’s writing exemplifies the way she reads literature. She doesn’t write in an impersonal voice to the impersonal reader. Rather, her prose demands that the reader learn what it means to be awake to her
concerns, otherwise the reader remains outside, asleep and away from the action.

Readers familiar with Diamond may find it both odd and apt to describe her work with the term ‘action.’ Odd, because Diamond emphasizes that our ways of doing moral philosophy, with its emphasis on action, can limit our appreciation for the varieties of moral experience (Diamond 1997). Where moral philosophy can be consumed with thought experiments and other forms of high-stakes ethical decision-making, Diamond turns our attention to the significance of how being a certain type of person matters in its own often quiet yet deeply significant way (Diamond 1991b). The way a glance that leads to a moment of understanding – captured by authors like Leo Tolstoy – can make a great deal of difference in a situation (Diamond 1988, 264). Diamond suggests that moral philosophy often lacks the resources to understand wide, yet important, swathes of moral experience. A teacher, for example, may find that their style of listening deeply and intently to a student has more moral significance than many of the more charged moments discussed in case studies related to the morality of teaching (Hansen 1993). This is not to say – and this is a point that Diamond’s critics often overlook – that action is not important or that moral philosophy should not concern itself with helping us understand how to act, especially in situations that are clearly demarcated as moral. Turning back to teaching, case studies that allow teachers to reflect on morally complicated situations and construct hypothetical courses of action are important (Levinson and Fay 2019) but this type of thinking doesn’t circumscribe the world of moral significance for teachers, students, or schools (Hansen 2004). Seeing morality as almost wholly concerned with acts and actions unduly limits our understanding of the ways in which our presence in the classroom can make a moral difference.

At the same time, using the word action to describe Diamond’s thinking is apt, especially in light of her discussion of how philosophers who aren’t awake to the varieties of the moral life, especially as it is expressed in literature, can ‘miss the adventure’ of living fully alive to life’s possibilities (Diamond 1991a). Here one might think back to my brief mention of Diamond’s discussion of the power of a glance. A glance isn’t a major action, but someone alive to its significance experiences its adventure when others may feel nothing at all. I often find myself reflecting on this point when I observe classrooms. Some teachers are absolutely alive to the adventure of their classrooms – the way a child walks into a room speaks volumes to them – while others remain insensitive even after a child tries to spell out how to read and respond to their feelings (Hansen 2005). One of the challenges of making the case for seeing the adventure of small things like glances is that they can feel insignificant at best to someone who isn’t alive or awake to them. To begin making the case for their importance, we need to understand the small things that allow us into another person’s world or that keeps another person out of ours. The ways that someone looks us in the eye or refuses to, the words people use to
minimize or enlarge our experience, the small ways that we are dismissive or express our respect. Diamond (1983) uses the concept ‘texture of being’ (162) to describe the ways that small things like word choice, something often not given the status of the moral, matter a great deal to the moral life. ‘Texture of being’ can be dismissed by moral philosophers for being overly vague or lacking the substance necessary to deserve a place in moral philosophy (John 1998, 340), but I find it speaks very directly to the work of teachers who I admire.

A teacher alive to the adventure of making themselves responsive to the ‘texture of being’ in the classroom is someone who notices significances where others remain unmoved. These teachers appreciate that each student brings a sense of humor to the classroom and these teachers enjoy discovering the student’s humor in the subtle ways that something like a sense of humor is disclosed (Cohen 1999). They learn what each student enjoys or finds offensive without having to be told; they can tell when they’ve hurt or inspired a student, simply by the way that student shifts in their seat or asks a question. One of the reasons I find Diamond’s work so important for education is because she draws our attention squarely to this dimension of classroom life. Not only that, she is not afraid to label this dimension of classroom life moral, thus giving teachers and philosophers of education permission to pursue this side of classroom life with the seriousness it deserves. A teacher who is responsive is one who is alive and awake to the adventure that is always going on, often beneath the surface or between the words spoken and unspoken in the classroom. These teachers realize that there can be monumental significance in failing to notice – worse, dismissing – when a child is trying to express the truths of their experience (Diamond 1993), and that strong connections can be built without fanfare. A few sentences of genuinely responsive feedback – a human speaking to another human in order to help that human grow and develop as a thinker and a person – can have a lasting impact on a student’s trajectory.

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To continue developing our appreciation of Diamond’s significance for education, I turn to a short section of ‘Missing the Adventure: A Reply to Martha Nussbaum,’ where Diamond discusses the concept of fixed possibilities (Diamond 1991a, 312ff). At the heart of this paper is a belief that moral philosophy can distort the moral life. In particular, Diamond urges us to rethink approaches to philosophy that place an agent in a situation where they must decide between two options. The most obvious example of this approach to moral philosophy is the thought experiment, where a reader is asked to choose how they would act in a hypothetical scenario. While thought experiments can be useful to test and explore our moral intuitions, they are often wildly unrealistic. In some ways, this is obvious: how many of us really think we will be on a life raft and asked who to throw off, or at the controls of a trolley, or connected to a violinist without our consent but who needs us in order to stay alive (Wilson 2020). But Diamond’s point is deeper than this. She writes, ‘The idea of
possibilities as fixed in advance and built into the situation locates the moral agent’s responsibility and his freedom in quite a different place from where one sees it if one takes the capacity for improvisation as essential in any account of our moral life’ (Diamond 1991a, 312). In case Diamond’s point isn’t clear, I will contextualize it with reference to classroom. If a teacher believes that life in their classroom will take the form of selecting between two fixed options, then they may lose sight of the role that improvisation plays.3 For example, imagine a student who shows a great deal of potential but is often disruptive. The fixed options a teacher may appear to have is to ignore the behavior or punish the behavior. This is simplistic, but I paint this picture to suggest what most teachers will already know: there are many other ways to make sure a student isn’t disruptive, many which may have very little to do with classroom management narrowly understood. A teacher open to improvisation will work very hard to find ways to more fully engage the student. So engaged, the student will lose interest in being disruptive. What initially appears as a discipline problem with fixed options dissolves when the teacher exercises vision and decides to improvise in the classroom.

Diamond wants us to see how much of the moral life is like this. We may feel forced to choose between a set of fixed options given the picture of moral thinking we operate under, and this can cause us to forget the ways that we might create new options that are more responsive to our values by exercising vision. New teachers, in particular, need to see that the fixed options they are often offered by well-intentioned experienced teachers may foreclose more than they make possible (Frank 2018). Importantly, seeing the classroom as a realm of fixed options where the teacher is the arbiter of justice can take the adventure out of the room. The teacher then sees their work as applying principles and meting out justice instead of exercising vision that creates a classroom culture that is responsive to the teacher’s values and the unique natures of the students in the class. Diamond (1991a) very beautifully puts the point this way:

The sense of adventure … is closely linked to the sense of life, to a sense of life as lived in a world of wonderful possibilities, but possibilities to be found only by creative response. The possibilities are not lying about on the surface of things. Seeing the possibilities in things is a matter of a kind of transforming perception of them. The possibilities yield themselves only as it were under pressure. (313)

As I mention, I think this is beautifully put and a wonderful way to think about the work that responsive teachers do. To a responsive teacher, very little is fixed, and very little is lying about on the surface of things. In order to live in a world of wonderful possibilities and to extend this world and those possibilities to students, the teacher must exercise ‘transforming perception.’ I think we are all familiar with the idea of self-fulfilling prophecies. If we don’t believe a student is capable of doing good work, they often meet that standard. What is less
familiar – and too easy to forget – is that the opposite can also the case. We can believe a future into existence. When a student trusts that we see them and that we believe in the importance of the subject we teach (Arrowsmith 1967), they can create exceptionally good work, work that may appear impossible to someone without a ‘transforming perception’ of the student, the subject they teach and the possibilities of education. But this is not easy work. As Diamond notes, ‘possibilities yield themselves only as it were under pressure.’ A teacher who sees something in a student who has been rejected or written off by other teachers or the student’s peers; a teacher who is tested and challenged by the very student who has been socialized to believe very little in their own worth, that teacher runs the risk of appearing foolish for believing in that student. This teacher puts themselves under the pressure of real failure and rejection in the effort to empower a student to see something in themselves they’ve been socialized to reject or discount.

Here is why I titled this paper the adventure of responsive teaching. A teacher fully alive to the full possibilities of their classroom will never be bored and will always have new significances to explore and new depths to reach with their practice. They will run real risks to empower their students. They continuously put their identity as a good teacher on the line by opening themselves up to the types of experiences and lines of thought that are genuinely unsettling. This, to me, is one of Diamond’s biggest lessons for teachers and philosophers of education. A teacher inspired by Diamond will walk into a classroom and look beyond the surfaces to the texture of being that exists in any classroom. Exercising transforming perception, this teacher will resist approaches to teaching that see options and students as fixed; they will take the opportunity presented by a glance from a student hoping to connect. The teacher will build a relationship from that glance that has the potential to change everything for that student. This may sound like hopeless unrealistic romanticism, but it isn’t. Rather, it is the adventure that teachers experience when they are fully alive to their calling (Hansen 2017). It is something that I hope readers are familiar with. As a student, you may’ve had a teacher who saw something in you that you didn’t know existed, and because of their vision, you grew into an idea or a sense of self you couldn’t have brought into existence without that teacher’s transforming perception (Frank 2019a). As a teacher, I also hope you’ve had the experience of giving a student the gift of newfound confidence, engagement or interest because you notice something in the student that unlocks aspects of their self and their potential they’ve never experienced and maybe didn’t know existed (Frank 2019b).

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To make this point more concrete and connected to the life of teachers and teaching, I turn to the work of Julie Diamond, Cora Diamond’s sister and a lifelong educator. To bring Cora and Julie into conversation, I will take a brief detour into the work of John Dewey. At the risk of making everything
in philosophy of education somehow lead back to Dewey, I want to suggest that Diamond’s position on ‘fixed possibilities’ allows us to appreciate an important aspect of Dewey’s philosophy of education that connects Cora and Julie Diamond. The work of Cora and Julie can initially appear disconnected, because Julie’s philosophical framework is broadly Deweyan (Diamond 2008), and a gulf seems to separate philosophers like Diamond (and Stanley Cavell) from Dewey.  

When Dewey is understood to be someone who sees the practice of philosophy as narrowly concerned with problem-solving, or as someone who aspires to make philosophical thinking scientific, then there may indeed be a chasm separating Dewey from Diamond (and Cavell). But other aspects of Dewey’s thinking put him far closer to Diamond (and Cavell), and if we take Dewey at his word, this is the way he intends to be read. Here is Dewey (1935) writing in an introduction to a book on Renoir published by the Barnes Foundation.

Since my educational ideas have been criticized for undue emphasis upon intelligence and the use of the method of thinking that has its best exemplification in science, I take profound, if somewhat melancholy, ironic, satisfaction in the fact that the most thoroughgoing embodiment of what I have tried to say about education, is, as far as I am aware, found in an educational institution [The Barnes Foundation] that is concerned with art.  

Like Cora Diamond, Dewey is critical of approaches to philosophy that make it appear as if we must decide between fixed options. Rather than being forced into either side of an unappealing dualism, we can – like an artist – create other possibilities (Frank 2020). Science is an important example of exercising creativity to solve problems, but it is not the only – or even the most important – method we have. A teacher doesn’t study the classroom in order to fix it in place so that solutions can then be applied. Rather, the teacher – like the artist – creates environments that disclose new possibilities that unlock potential that doesn’t – and possibly cannot – exist outside of that environment.

Readers sympathetic to this side of Dewey’s thinking won’t need much convincing to agree that this is the case (Granger 2006; Rodgers 2020). For Dewey, a classroom is charged with possibilities that the artful teacher works to remain awake and alive to. As such, Dewey’s thinking is very much aligned with Diamond’s perspective on the moral life as an adventure and an exercise in transforming perception. For Dewey, taking an interest makes all the moral difference (Hansen 2006). Returning to his brief introductory essay to the Barnes Foundation’s book on Renoir, Dewey (1935) writes,

To learn to see anything well is a difficult undertaking. It requires the activity of the whole personality. Learning to perceive demands the interaction of the whole personality with things about it. This is true whether one is seeing a picture or painting it, mastering golf, building a new type of bridge, or reading the poetry of Keats.  

Whole personality – like texture of being – can appear overly vague, but to a practicing teacher, I think it helps us make sense of life in classrooms. When
a teacher is fully awake to the classroom, they are able to respond with their whole personality and this creative responsiveness is what transforms the environment of these classrooms. The teacher’s ability to truly see their students well calls on their whole personality. Where one teacher only sees ‘trouble-makers’ (Shalaby 2017) or lets a student’s current test score define their potential, other teachers enjoy a ‘difficult’ student’s observation and forms a bond from an appreciation of that observation. Instead of punishing the child, the teacher shares a glance that lets the child know that they understand what the child is doing, that they won’t accept behavior that negatively impacts other students or the life of the classroom, but – nonetheless – the observation holds interest. From this one small connection new pathways of possibility emerge that the student may then walk down. As you might imagine, being alive and awake to all of the potential of every student at every moment can feel daunting and exhausting, but it is also a genuine adventure. Teachers can exercise their whole personality in ways that unlock the whole personalities of their students, and this – according to Cora and Dewey – should fall under the umbrella of the moral and challenge the ways we approach, theorize, and live, the moral life.

As I mention, this is just a brief foray into one aspect of Dewey’s thinking to suggest that Julie Diamond’s grounding in Dewey’s philosophy of education doesn’t necessarily lead to a gulf between her and Cora’s work. Instead, aspects of Dewey’s thinking are close to Cora’s thinking and bringing them together – I hope – allows us to see aspects of Dewey and Cora Diamond that Deweyans might not see in Diamond, and vice versa, while also building a bridge from Cora to Julie. I will suggest that Cora’s expanded understanding of the adventure of the moral life offers teachers the opportunity to live more fully into the adventure of responsive teaching, something very movingly presented in Julie Diamond’s (2008) autobiographical account of one year in her classroom, after many years of teaching, Welcome to the Aquarium.8

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To give a sense for the range and the depth of Julie Diamond’s thinking about education, I focus on three points in her text, though there are moments on almost every single page that are absolutely arresting in their insight and could be included here. The first passage comes from the introduction.

Complexity doesn’t lend itself to a clear moral. It strikes me as significant that in telling the story of Henry, who is at the heart of the book, I don’t draw one clear-cut, conclusive lesson. But this is the conclusion: we work to see who a child is and to make a place for that child in the classroom. We confront our limits and make whatever use we can of our strengths. The central story is continuous, not heroic or definitive. In learning who children are, we learn who we are, as teachers and people. This is the challenge of teaching, and it’s also the reward. In the long run, for me, it was enough. (Diamond 2008, 6).

In this passage we hear very clear echoes of Dewey (1935) – ‘To learn to see well is a difficult undertaking’ (504) – and we also see the ways in which the
transforming perception Cora Diamond focuses on cuts every way and is always ongoing in the classroom. Learning to see the children that come into the classroom transforms the teacher, even as the teacher’s transforming perception creates conditions and environments that allow the student to confront their limits and realize their strengths. It is an always ongoing challenge and reward. I am tempted to say that teaching is nothing more – though nothing less – than trying to see our students and make a place for them in our classroom and in relation to the subject we teach. Julie's thinking resonates with Cora’s, as Julie insists that teaching is not heroic in the ways that thought experiments often imply (the weight of the world in on our shoulders and in our hands!), but it is charged with significance. Learning to make sense of the significances that only disclose themselves as one becomes ever more committed to seeing the texture of being that exists in the classroom makes a teacher responsive to students and the moral dimensions of the work of teaching. Though the teacher may only rarely be confronted with clearly demarcated moral decisions – especially decisions between fixed possibilities given in advance – the daily work of responding to the challenge of seeing each student can prove transformational to the teacher and students.

One way that Julie Diamond’s autobiography breathes life into this idea is when she discusses how she gets ready for the start of each school year. A reader may think that an experienced teacher is able to draw on her experience in ways that make each year a little easier than the last. What Diamond – and every truly committed teacher that I know – exemplifies is the opposite. As a teacher more fully realizes the possibilities of teaching, they are more aware of their inabilities to respond in ways that draw out the possibilities they know exist but don’t know how to bring into being. Far from approaching the next year with a sense of ease, the teacher is alive and awake to just how demanding responsive teaching is. What follows is a long passage, but one worth offering in full. Here Diamond is getting her classroom ready, with only her roster and experience to guide her.

It’s intriguing to know the names but not the children. Some of them may not turn up (the no-shows), and I may get other children. As we get closer to the first day of school, I print the names on yellow oaktag. All these preparations, around a central core that’s missing: Getting the room physically ready, sharpening the pencils, labeling the cans. As I’m setting up the room, I’m aware of my state of mental readiness, of being, as Linda put it, a blank slate. Tolerating readiness. Tolerating, because anxiety is a component of this state. My dreams wake me with anxiety: school opens, and I’ve got eighty kids in the room; school opens, and the room is totally unready. But anxiety is a part of not knowing, and no knowing is essential: I have to make a space, I have to not be my summer self—active, occupied with my own interests. Emptying myself, in a way. Being a blank slate is work, take effort. I’m struck by Linda’s analogy. Traditional education pictures children as the slates, teachers doing the writing. If we’re receptive—to children, to what they bring to school—the relationship is reversed. We’re the slates,
they do the writing. Just as I create a space in the room for the work children will do, I have to find it in myself. (Diamond 2008, 13)

Importantly, from the heights of this reflectiveness, Diamond (2008) immediately begins the next paragraph: ‘This isn’t to say I don’t prepare. I may be a blank slate, but I also leave nothing to chance’ (13).

Julie Diamond’s sense of ‘tolerating readiness’ is one that I find particularly true to my sense of responsive teaching, and I also find it speaks to Cora Diamond’s sense that moral theorizing can deflect attention away from the anxieties of not-knowing how to make one’s way given the great range and variety that composes the moral life. Tolerating readiness means appreciating the role of improvisation in life and in classrooms, and tolerating readiness is inseparable from the type of self that we are. Julie Diamond’s admonition that she cannot be her summer self captures something I often feel at the end of the summer. After two months of devoting myself wholly to my research and the rhythms of my family life – work that is utterly essential to being the teacher I am – I must change gears, entering a space where I am no longer in control in quite the ways I am when I am engaged, for example, with my research. One empties oneself so that one can be receptive to what students bring to class, but one also aspires to leave nothing to chance.

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As I write this, America is undergoing massive protests against police violence. As I write this, I am also finalizing syllabi for the fall. As I write this, I know we are scheduled to elect a new President on November 3rd. As I write this, I am unsure if I will actually be in a classroom with my students, and I am unsure if we will be present to each other under facemasks and other protective gear because of the wide spread of Covid-19 in the United States. As I write this, I wonder about what long-term effects my children – and all children – will experience because of months of unanticipated distance learning. A responsive teacher tries to live all of this not-knowing, tolerating readiness. While some teachers will teach the exact same course they’ve always taught in the fall – the notes and PowerPoint slides unchanged from a world before Covid-19 and a growing recognition that Black Lives Matter – responsive teachers appreciate the fact that they are being called to not-know what good teaching will look and feel like in the fall. Their students will be transformed by this summer of pandemic and protests, and the teacher knows that they will be transformed as well. To leave nothing to chance, as Julie Diamond understands it, means sinking into this moment in time with one’s whole self so that one can be a whole self when one makes the attempt to learn about and from students, creating possibilities for hopefulness and learning in a world on the brink of despair and filled with anger. Responsive teachers gather a repertoire of readings and learning experiences that they can draw on in the fall as they learn more about their students and the ever-changing world students experience in
the classroom and outside of it. Making oneself ready for this type of improvising means both emptying oneself of reliance on things that worked in a different world, while retaining the spirit of responsiveness that allowed one to meet the demands of that world with the transforming vision that unlocked the potential that each child brings into the classroom.

More – much more – could be said about how one prepares to be a blank slate, but I want to turn to one more moment in Welcome to the Aquarium that I find particularly moving. Near the end of the book Diamond discusses the end of the school year and mentions something that I only then realized I unknowingly repressed as a teacher. Diamond discusses how the children in her class start playing a game where everyone wears paper casts, and the making and playing with casts consume a great deal of attention in the classroom. She goes on to note:

> While growth is undeniable and physical for the children, as they try on outgrown summer clothes, the breaks that occur for teachers as classes move on don’t quite heal. These losses remain losses and leave some sadness, a professional hazard that’s rarely discussed. The degree of sadness felt by teachers may have to do with their own experience of losses and separations, their adult knowledge of mortality, their feelings about growth and change. (Diamond 2008, 196).

Just as a teacher begins the year by emptying themselves out in order to be receptive, after building a classroom community for an academic year, they are once again empty, but in a different way. Before reading this passage, as I mention above, I repressed my sense of sadness that comes at the end of the year, but now it is something I am living into more intentionally. As a teacher, and as one inspired by Dewey, I tend to focus more on the undeniable growth than on the breaks that don’t quite heal. But I am convinced that we don’t live as a whole teacher unless we also recognize the ways that real loss happens each year.

What is remarkable about this passage – and Julie Diamond’s thinking more generally – is how an ordinary classroom activity – children creating play casts to heal pretend broken bones – leads to the realization that being a teacher, the sadness teachers feel at the end of the school year, speaks to our sense of mortality. I think this is what Cora Diamond helps us think about when she discusses concepts like difficulties of reality. It is a difficulty of reality that children grow up, and that we teachers are left behind. To some, nothing could be more obvious and unremarkable. But to Diamond – Cora and Julie – working to live this type of difficulty of reality teaches us something fundamental about what it means to be human. As Cora Diamond notes, living into difficulties of reality, ‘shoulders us from a familiar sense of moral life’ (Diamond 2003, 15). We are awakened out of habitual modes of thinking and reconnect with aspects of life that prove transformative. Here is Julie Diamond reflecting
on one such moment, seeing a student she taught in kindergarten now as a teenager.

How could this boy, almost a man, be the person I’d taught? Where was the other boy? And who are we after all, what’s the intrinsic self that makes us one person? Is there a core that’s not mutable, that stays the same, whatever the role of chance and circumstance? And how do we—teachers and parents—let go of the person we thought we knew? (Diamond 2008, 197)

Again, nothing is more unremarkable than seeing a student we once taught in a different stage of life. We know it happens all the time. But if we allow ourselves to be truly receptive to living more fully awake to life’s possibilities, then we might also come up short when a student we knew from their first year of college sends us a picture of their newborn baby. Where was that student who barely had the confidence to speak in front of a small group of students, now proudly holding a child of their own? Who am I to be a part of this story? Did I have a sense, in the way I responded to the cares and questions of that student, that one day they would be a parent, and that one day we will both die? If a teacher is not awake to these questions, should they be? More, if philosophers of education see the moral life of classrooms as circumscribed by questions that are more obviously freighted with moral meaning, what do we lose by not feeling our way into an understanding of the work that Cora and Julie Diamond do and the ways they allow us to see the expansiveness of the moral life?

Julie Diamond plumbs the depths of a teacher’s identity and sense of self in relation to children and schooling in ways that disclose a moral world that is hidden in plain view. Though she does not explicitly use moral language to describe her work, the attention she pays to her students and her life as a teacher are deeply philosophical and also can be seen as contributing to a teacher’s capacity for moral thinking, especially when our understanding of the moral life is educated by Cora Diamond’s work. Practicing teachers, pressured to focus on areas of their classroom that are more easily identified as morally significant, or aspects of their professional identity that are more easily identified as ethically significant can miss out on the adventure of teaching. By calling us back to the everyday – the start of a school year, the rituals of preparing a classroom and then closing it down at the end of the year, seeing students years after they’ve been in our class – new worlds of moral experience come into view. Awakening to this vision has the potential to transform who we are and how we teach.

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Coming alive to something hidden in plain view is also a way of thinking about the ways that literature can educate, especially the work of an author like Leo Tolstoy. Cora Diamond often draws on the work of Tolstoy, and at the beginning of his War and Peace Natasha – a main
character – is a thirteen-year-old girl, and by the end of the novel she is almost thirty and a mother of four. Tolstoy’s vision encompasses all of this and more. Something Natasha does at thirteen calls to mind the toddler and the child she was, even as it also allows us to see the woman she will grow into. John Dewey discusses, in many of his educational works, the importance of teachers being able to see beyond the end of the school year – the test passed, the subject matter learned and forgotten – and exercise what he calls the ‘long look ahead’ (Dewey 1938, 50). Cora Diamond values literature’s ability to help readers learn how to see a person’s past and future in a manner as if we are really alive and fully awake in the present. Julie Diamond reminds teachers that being responsive means risking the sorrow that comes when we invest ourselves in a group of children we know will grow up. I believe all of these insights lie at the moral heart of being a teacher, though you may not know this when reading philosophy of education. When reading philosophy of education, we can get the impression that all we need is to find the right arguments or policies to put teaching on the right course, where Cora and Julie Diamond emphasize the moral significance of noticing, of being awake.

I am inclined to believe that Cora and Julie Diamond are much closer to the type of teaching our students deserve and the moral heart of teaching than arguments about teaching, as important as those can be. To close where I began this article, I think a main reason that particular moment from the Passion play stuck with me was because I think I may’ve known – but not understood – that life rarely calls us to be heroes but life is often only as valuable as we remain awake and responsive to it. I thought it was odd that Jesus – at a pivotal point in his story – doesn’t ask for anything more than that his followers stay awake. Now I think otherwise. I think there is an important lesson here for teachers, one that I’ve tried to develop with reference to the work of Cora and Julie Diamond. Our students need us to be wide-awake to their full possibility. This means living the difficult reality that they – like us – will grow and that we will both one day die. We have our short time together in the classroom, and we are called to make the most of this time by caring enough to want to enter into their interests, while working to connect them to ours. The work is deeply human and always important. When I think about what I hope for my children, it is – of course – that they find something that they are passionate about in each class they take, but – as important – I hope their teachers appreciate what makes each of them precious (Gaita 2000) and realize that this preciousness isn’t disclosed in obvious things like their talents, but in the things they find funny and the things that drive them angry with a sense of injustice. Cora and Julie Diamond teach us to value that preciousness and to learn what it means to be responsive to it so that it might grow, take root and flower. It
may not be heroic work, it most certainly isn’t something that can be packaged and sold, but I am hard pressed to imagine anything more worthy of a teacher’s devotion.

Notes

1. The abstract offers a roadmap of the article. As I mention in the abstract, I jump right into this essay with a personal story.
2. Readers may wish to draw parallels between my understanding of staying awake to Maxine Greene’s (1977) thinking on ‘wide awakeness.’ I do not draw on this connection here, but readers interested in developing it may also gain from consulting Rodgers’s (2020) recent book on presence in teaching.
3. As I will discuss in more detail below, this is an interesting point of connection between Cora Diamond and John Dewey. For a discussion on Dewey’s thinking on fixed possibilities, see Frank (2020).
5. Though I cannot develop this connection with the attention it deserves, one might work to connect Diamond’s thinking and Jonathan Lear’s (2011) thinking on irony. Lear responds generously to Diamond’s work, and I begin to trace some connections between Lear, Diamond and education elsewhere (Frank 2019c).
6. There is a rich and very interesting literature on this topic, one I won’t go into here. Most of the literature is on the relationship between Dewey and Cavell, because Cavell is explicit in distancing himself from (his understanding of) Dewey. Some examples of literature that demonstrates the ways that Dewey is more complex and closer to Cavell – and, by extension, Diamond – than Cavell lets on, see Laverty (2017), Colapietro (2004), Jackson (1992), and Rodgers (2009). I don’t need to settle anything in the debates that exist in this literature to make the point I am trying to make in this paper, namely that there are aspects of Dewey’s thinking that are close enough to aspects of Diamond’s thinking to make plausible my suggestion that even though Julie Diamond is largely influenced by the philosophy of Dewey, this doesn’t mean that I cannot draw lessons from her teaching practice that help us understand important aspects of Cora Diamond’s philosophy.
7. One might also investigate Dewey’s (1925, 233) comments on Charles Dickens to draw connections between Dewey’s thinking on the moral value of literature and Diamond’s thinking on the ways that Dickens helps us expand our understanding of the moral.
8. In a very confusing move, Diamond’s publisher has recently started selling this book under the title Kindergarten: A Teacher, Her Students, and a Year of Learning. They are the exact same book. But to make matters even more unclear, Diamond (2015) also published a wonderful edited book with the title Teaching Kindergarten.
9. Though I only briefly touch on Cora and Julie Diamond’s connections to Leo Tolstoy, I borrow this phrase from an outstanding study of Tolstoy’s work, Gary Saul Morson’s (1987) Hidden in Plain View.

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