

## LEARNING NOT TO SPEAK IN TONGUES: THOUGHTS ON *THE LIBRARIAN OF BASRA*

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We explore the nature of knowledge and education and how Islamic traditions have shaped understanding of these matters. We contrast this with contemporary images of "Taliban-like" schools full of rote repetition and harsh, authoritarian literalism. Some of the history of Islamic scholarship venerates a much more generous relationship to knowing. We link these explorations to a recently published children's picture book, a true story about a librarian in Basra, Iraq, during the recent American invasion. Even if it is a "true story," we consider what its truth is and whether educators, might or should or could stand by this truth.

Key words: Islamic philosophy, curriculum knowledge, knowledge formation, politics and education, multiculturalism

Nous explorons ici la nature du savoir et de l'éducation et comment la tradition islamique a modelé leur compréhension. Nous comparons les images contemporaines des écoles "style Taliban" qui sont faites de "par coeur" et de littéralité dure et autoritaire avec certaines écoles dans l'histoire de l'Islam qui affichent une plus grande générosité face au savoir. Nous établissons un lien entre ces notions et un livre illustré pour enfants récemment publié, une histoire vécue d'un libraire de Basra, en Iraq, pendant la récente invasion américaine. Même si cette histoire est une "histoire vraie", nous considérons sa valeur et nous pensons que les éducateurs pourraient accepter cette vérité ou même qu'ils devraient l'accepter.

Mots clés: philosophie de l'Islam, la connaissance du curriculum, la formation du savoir, l'éducation et les politiques, le multiculturalisme

*"In the Koran, the first thing God said to Muhammad was 'Read.'"*

Alia Muhammad Baker, from the *New York Times*, July 27, 2003

## I

The passage cited above forms the frontispiece to a wonderful new children's picture book written and illustrated by Jeanette Winter (2005) entitled *The Librarian of Basra: A True Story from Iraq*. At the early outset of the American invasion of Iraq, the librarian in question, Alia Muhammad Baker, took it upon herself to protect the 30,000 books in the library in Basra, Iraq, where she had worked for 14 years. The library had been "a meeting place for all who love books" (p. 2), but now, the only talk was not of books but of impending war: "Alia worries that the fires of war will destroy the books, which are more precious to her than mountains of gold . . . books in every language, new books, ancient books, even a biography of Muhammad that is seven hundred years old" (p. 3). After being refused official permission to act, she began secretly putting books into her car and taking them, first to a nearby restaurant belonging to her friend Anis, and then, eventually, after the library was burned to the ground, to her home and the homes of her friends.

At first blush, it is difficult to avoid parallels thoughts of Hypatia (c. 350-415 CE) and her failed attempt to protect the Library of Alexandria from ruin (see Smith, 2006b). The ruin of the Alexandrian library is often cited as one of the initiating gestures of what later became known as the "Dark Ages" (Humphreys, 2004). Jeanette Winter's seemingly simple tale thus involves profound questions and images regarding the nature of knowledge and its safe-keeping. It evokes thoughts of the ravages of war not only regarding the materiality and flesh of our lives, but also regarding the fragility of knowledge itself and how often it has been both the ideological motive and innocent victim of embattlement and war.

What educators have with this simple children's book is an image of taking care of knowledge in difficult and dark times, our time, this time, under the current shadow of war consciousness (Jardine, 2006; see also Jardine, 2004, 2005, 2006a; Smith, 2003, 2006, 2006a, in press; Gray, 2001, 2003).

## II

[I]t occurred to me to look into my copy of St. Augustine's *Confessions* . . . where I first fixed my eyes it was written: "And men go about to wonder at the heights of the mountains, and the mighty waves of the sea, and the wide sweep of rivers, and the circuit of the ocean, and the revolution of the stars, but themselves they consider not."

Petrarch (1304-1347), from *The Ascent of Mount Ventoux*, a Letter to Dionisio da Borgo San Sepolcro, Malaucene, April 26. (Halsall, 2006) <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/petrarch-ventoux.html>

"The Dark Ages," a term first coined by Francesco Petrarca (L. Petrarch, 1304-1374) around 1330 CE, describes the period between roughly 476-1000 CE. During this period, intellectual pursuit and the great wisdoms of ancient Greece and Rome were lost, sometimes deliberately and systematically, to Christian-European consciousness.

Petrarch revived, after a lapse of 1,000 years, recognition that a poet and intellectual was an important member of society. Petrarch had perhaps his most enduring influence by his re-initiation of humanistic studies. Traveling widely as an ambassador and celebrity, he collected manuscripts that led to the recovery of knowledge from writers of Rome and Greece. (<http://www.humanistictexts.org/petrarch.htm>)

Petrarch wrote of feeling "*surrounded by darkness and dense gloom*" (cited in Mommsen, 1942, p. 233, emphasis in original). His great efforts initiated a revival of knowledge from under the severities of literalism, Church oppression, and simple neglect. And it was not just knowledge that dimmed.

The seventh century [in particular] is justifiably regarded as a "dark age." In all parts of the Mediterranean, economic decline accompanied political instability. Levels of culture and standards of literacy fell as people ceased to learn, build, paint, and write in the traditional fashion. (Herrin, 1987, p. 133)

As these passages suggest, however, "Dark Ages" is clearly geographically located and a (debatably) appropriate description of a dark time. We must ask of the passage cited above regarding Petrarch's accomplishments: From whom did he collect such manuscripts and precisely upon whom had such a Dark Age fallen? There are tales of

both Islamic and Christian warriors who, when passing the Islamic libraries of Northern Africa and Southern Spain, declared, in various yet similar ways, that if the library contained knowledge that was identical with “The Book” (the Qu’ran/The Bible), then its contents were redundant, and if it contained knowledge that was different, its contents were heretical. In either case, burning down a library made perfect sense once knowledge was constricted in such a fashion. This is a terrible kinship that two seemingly “different” traditions share. As a colleague of ours, Matthew Zachariah, once noted, the fundamentalists across different traditions have more in common with each other than they do with moderates in their own tradition (see Naqvi & Jardine, in press).

As an aside, we cannot help but indicate how, in North America, educational scholarship itself is in a state of embattled darkness. In spring of 2002, for example, leaders of the Bush Department of Education issued orders to delete material from the thirty-year-old Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) database that doesn’t support the general philosophy of NCLB [No Child Left Behind]. Every assistant secretary of education was directed to form a group of departmental employees with a least one person who “understands the policy and priorities of the administration” to scrub the ERIC website. Such action runs counter to the original intent of the website established in 1993 to construct a permanent record of educational research for students, teachers, citizens, educational researchers, and other scholars. Concurrently, the deletion of such information raises the stakes of right wing knowledge politics to a new level, because individuals will only have access to public data that supports particular ideological agendas (Kincheloe, 2006, p. 41).

The parallels between the destruction of the Basra Library and the purging of educational research in America post-9/11 should give educators pause. Given such actions, the darkness of the current age needs careful thought and consideration.

### III

Admittedly this loving and protecting of knowledge of the Librarian of Basra during recent troubles in Iraq, and what this has to say to scholars and teachers in education about their work – all of this doesn’t exactly fit

with the popular, televised image of Islamic education that is afoot in these post 9/11 times. We do not get much in the way of the great pleasures and freedoms, the deep obligations and responsibilities, or a sense of intellectual ancestry that comes from the veneration and pursuit of knowledge. Current images are much more centred around Taliban-like schools full of obedient, rote repetition and, as is often the (not wholly or always groundless) accusation, mind-numbing indoctrination that sometimes goes as far as not only discouraging questioning and thoughtfulness and meditation, but in fact disparaging such things and demonizing them. We are inundated with images of repressive authoritarianism, violence, intolerance, and hatred, wherein knowledge itself has become endangered on *both sides* of the “for us or against us” ledger. After all, so-called traditional Western schools like Foundations for the Future in Calgary provide teachers with unalterable scripts and children with no voice of dissent or disruption or difference. In such schools, the flourishing of difference is a problem to be fixed.

The Librarian of Basra thus begins to appear as little more than a quaint and unruly exception to the rule.

Once this image- and media- and prejudice-driven situation is added to what David G. Smith (2003) has described as the systematic “enfraidening” and “veiled innuendos” (p. 489) [a lovely and terrifying choice of terms (see Jardine, Clifford, & Friesen, in press; Naqvi & Jardine, in press)] that are rife in American foreign policy, we might even go as far as to lament that “knowledge becomes, as John McMurtry [1998] describes it, ‘an absurd expression’ (p. 192)” (Smith, 2003, p. 489). Once we hear that, in 2003, 48 per cent of Americans believed that Saddam Hussein was “personally involved” in the 9/11 attacks (Feldman, 2003) and that not until March of 2006 did a very slim majority of Americans believe that weapons of mass destruction were indeed *not* found in Iraq (Teixeira, 2006), knowledge and absurdity and deliberate enfraidening start to grotesquely intertwine. And, as Smith (2003) goes on to say, in such an endarkened milieu, the very task of education itself becomes jeopardized: “When the lines between knowledge and mis-representation become completely blurred in the public mind, then education as a practice of civic responsibility becomes very difficult” (p. 489).

All this, of course, is nothing especially new nor, as Smith suggests, are these issues especially Islamic in their manifestation. It makes some terrible sense that, in times of threat, imaginativeness and exploration and intellectual pursuits give way, in a great paranoid rush, to the tried and true, to efforts of fixed and ensuring and surveillance and the like. As Ivan Illich (1992) has suggested, war makes cultures more alike in these matters (we've seen how both sides have marshaled their most paranoid and unforgiving and unresponsive faces in the current conflicts in the Middle East) whereas in times of peace, differences and multiplicity and intellectual vigorousness and imagination are able to flourish.

This is another reason that this tale of the Librarian of Basra is so telling. We have this children's picture book (with part of its proceeds, incidentally, being donated to a fund, administered by the American Library Association, to help rebuild Basra's Central Library), with Alia and her friends loading up her car to protect the library's books – to protect the flourishing of knowledge – in a time of great impending darkness. One might even think of this true story allegorically, as full of images of taking knowledge to heart, taking knowledge to hearth and home, making a place for it where it can be nurtured and protected and allowed to flourish: A place where it can be “left in peace” (Illich, 1992, p. 16) and wherein we can find comfort (common fortitude or strength) in its cultivation.

#### IV

Another form of darkness can come over the face of knowledge that is not born of embattlement but, in a sense, out of the opposite. When a culture is “left in peace” and becomes familiar and dominant, it can often lose from explicit memory and articulation the character and ancestry and bloodlines of that familiarity. What we do becomes simply obvious, and when our “doings” are interrupted, we don't necessarily feel enticed to self-knowledge. As an immigrant to Canada, I (R. N.) can attest to meeting looks of bewilderment or aggravation at such moments. We both wonder, then, about President George W. Bush's (and his father's) admonishment, in the face of international questioning, how “the American way of life is not up for negotiation” (Rasmussen, 2003), and

how it has come to mean that, in many quarters, it is not up for examination and thinking *at all*. As a dominant force in the world, we have witnessed how often attempting to think about the events of 9/11 is taken to be nothing more than unthinkable acts of failed patriotism.

This makes the practice of teaching rather bewildering. Teachers who strive to cultivate knowledge in themselves and in their students are surrounded, it seems, by deep and silent violation of this project.

How can any teacher teach in the name of democratic pedagogy, when the new politics is imbricated in exactly the opposite direction? If unilateralism and monological decision making mark the character of political leadership, what becomes, for teachers and students, of the relationship between thought and action, of my belief as a teacher that indeed, what I and others may plan for tomorrow may bear an expectation of being brought into effect? If bullying, both domestically and internationally, is legitimized publicly (albeit euphemistically), how can I, as a teacher, council my students against what has become one of the greatest scourges in the contemporary schoolyard? If lying, duplicity and deliberate misrepresentation are acceptable strategies by which to operate in the name of Truth, what is the basis upon which any human relations may be trusted? If the academic fields of child development and child psychology can be legitimately co-opted for commercial control of the minds of the young, what becomes of intellectual liberty at even the earliest stages of new life, to say nothing of the problem of children learning early that exploiting others for personal gain is 'the way to go'? (Smith, 2003, pp. 488-489)

Another equally disturbing and pernicious manifestation of this dimming of knowledge is not simply the outcome of deliberate suppression or deceit. Hans-Georg Gadamer (1989) hints at this phenomenon (it is meant to refer to a dimming of knowledge that is not simply the out-come of deliberate deceit) when describing the work of the artist. Belonging to a tradition in no way necessitates *understanding* that tradition and the conditions, nature, history, and limits of that belonging.

The artist . . . stands in the same tradition as the public that he is addressing and which he gathers around him. In this sense it is true that as an individual, a thinking consciousness, he does not need to know explicitly what he is doing and what his work says. (p. 133)

Likewise, under conditions of (pre)dominance, taken-for-granted images, understandings, ideas, and practices become simply obvious and such obviousness need not give an account of itself to those who stand in the same tradition *or* to those emigrating into that dominant tradition. To those within a tradition, “it goes without saying” and “it is beyond question” are signs of such belonging. In such instances, what appears to someone not fully at-home in this dominant culture is a hard, not especially knowledgeable, surface of “givenness” that no longer seems tethered to any roots, ancestries, or bloodlines, and no longer brooks any question of how such matters *came to be given*.

The above passage from Gadamer's *Truth and Method* regarding the artist and his or her works speaks also to a more difficult truth, especially when we consider the burgeoning multicultural face of Canadian culture. Belonging to a culture and its forms of language and forms of life (Wittgenstein, 1968) by no means entails that one needs to *understand* these matters or be able to articulate their nature and origins. Belonging and understanding that belonging are not identical. But here is the rub. If one enters Canada as part of a minority, one is being constantly called upon to understand and articulate one's culture of origin while at the same time facing a profound inarticulateness from the predominant culture into which one has emigrated. In other words, a predominant culture is rarely required to give an account of itself while, at the same time, requiring an account of those who are otherwise. Only when the condition of belonging is somehow *interrupted*, only when the everyday familiarity of belonging becomes strange and estranged, are we called upon to think about that belonging and its character.

## V

*“Mum look what I got for you from school.” said my (R. N.) 7-year-old daughter, as she entered the house excitedly. She shoved an oval object into my hand as she spoke. I probably looked a little lost and she added, impatiently: “Mum it’s an Easter Egg.”*

*As she moved around the house excitedly humming an unfamiliar tune, I stared at this object on my kitchen counter that now had a name. Under the fading twilight the bright blue and pink on the egg shone, staring back at me. At*



*that instance I am not quite sure what happened but whatever it was prompted me to explore the premises of this tension that I was experiencing as an immigrant parent.*

*This was by no means the first or final instance of such strangeness arriving in my daughter's life, arriving as it did with a sense of assured familiarity and normality. On another occasion, when I went to pick up my younger daughter from preschool around the same time as the arrival of Maria's egg, her teacher arrived at the door wearing rabbit ears.*

*Like so many others, I immigrated to Canada with my husband almost 10 years ago. We have two children both born in Canada. As Muslims living in Canada we are constantly negotiating questions of identity. Who are we in the midst of all this diversity and more than that who are our children and what they will become in what Judith Butler (2004) has called "precarious times." "Precarious" – "the position of being held through the favor of another" (Online Etymology Dictionary [OED]). (see Naqvi & Prasow, 2007).*

*As an immigrant attempting to enter into the life of a dominant culture other than my own, my family and I face an interesting reality. With bunny ears, and pinks and blues and yellows, (just like the reds and greens and trees and lights around December), such matters are so familiar to those who belong to such familialness that articulation is not simply unnecessary. Asking for an articulation is precisely a sign of "not belonging." In fact, such asking is often greeted with "Who do you think you are?" and sometimes even "Why don't you go back home?" These are good questions even though they weren't meant to be. "It's Easter" or "This is what we do" or "You know? Red and green? Christmas?" are fully adequate answers from within the condition of belonging, and an immigrant voice from outside of that sphere sounds almost inevitably "out of place." Who **do** we think "we" are? Where precisely **is** "home"?*

*It is clear, also, that our family traditions that stretch out across India, Iran, Afghanistan, and Saudi Arabia, and the complex stories about our family lineage and our Muslim heritage are themselves intimately familiar to us. There is little doubt that if this teacher with the bunny ears, or the one who sent home the Easter egg, moved to our countries of origin, they, too, as people other-wise to such places, would run into precisely the same incredulousness, the same silent, strange, and estranging, taken for granted practices. We thus share an ephemeral kinship.*

*I didn't ask her about the rabbit ears. She may have welcomed such a*

*question with open arms. She may have had much to say about such matters, much knowledge to impart, many questions to ask. This is the most difficult of places to inhabit: shall I move outwards towards asking and engaging and risk the bewildered stares? Or should I just forgo for now? Pile up knowledge and its pursuit away from sites of possible embattlement? Should I, this time, pull back into reserve and silence?*

*Feelings of separation and loss and estrangement are inevitable. And some of this sense of separation occurs, of course, between generations – between parents who visit here from Pakistan and ourselves, between us and our children, and so on. Here is the duplicity that comes from being an immigrant. By the very nature of its population makeup, immigrants to Canada have to embody many cultures from the moment they settle within its borders. A person like myself of Asian descent is already multicultural of necessity when he or she arrives in Canada. This is precarious because one's own culture remains the culture of one's origin, even though, with me and my husband and our two children, our own culture is Canada.*

*White Anglo-Saxon culture in North America seems premised on a strange and silent distance from its own ancestral roots. It seems that the strangest and most estranged thing in Canada isn't, for example, Islam or Pakistan, but those silent yet predominant things that "go without saying."*

## VI

My (D. J.) mother, whose cultural background is, through her father, French-Canadian (Terriault) back to about 1640 in Quebec, and Norwegian (Hendrickson) through her mother, always called herself English because she spoke English. Her father's family (under, I suspect, lost track of religious and cultural pressures), Anglicized their name to "Terrio" around 1850 (only the boys names were thus changed because the girls would, if they married, lose the French name). It was further Anglicized by my grandfather, Gardner, to "Terrie" when the family moved from Joggins, Nova Scotia, to Toronto, in about 1925, where "Terrio" made folks think they might be Italian.

My brother's first name is Terry. No one in my family ever spoke of these erasures of memory. That is, these erasures, for the most part, *succeeded*.

## VII

In his article "' . . . the farthest West is but the farthest East': The Long Way of Oriental/Occidental Engagement," David G. Smith (2006b) demonstrates how the entrenchment of East and West into separate and separably definable traditions is an illusion, and a dangerous one at that. In times of embattlement, such entrenchment into "us and them" – wherein our interrelatedness seems to be "revocable and provisional" (Gray, 2001, pp. 35-36), might make a terrible sort of sense. However, as Gadamer (1989) suggests, "only in the multifariousness of voices" (p. 284) does any tradition exist. It is precisely this situation of "mutuality" (Smith, 2006b; see also Clarke, 1997 for an exploration of how Asian traditions entered into European imagination regarding the Enlightenment) within which both East and West are what they have become only because of the other. It is not simply that without those who are otherwise, we might never have occasion to think about our own familiar belonging. Rather, that very familiar belonging has become what it is because of its often long-lost mutuality with those who seem simply "other."

"The Dark Ages" is but one timely example of such mutuality. What was, for Petrarch, a great Dark Age was, for Islam, an age of intellectual flourishing.

By the 10th century, Cordoba had 700 mosques, 60,000 palaces, and 70 libraries, the largest of which had 600,000 books, while as many as 60,000 treatises, poems, polemics and compilations were published each year in al-Andalus. The library of Cairo had more than 100,000 books, while the library of Tripoli is said to have had as many as three million books, before it was burnt during the Crusades. The number of important and original Arabic works on science that have survived is much larger than the combined total of Greek and Latin works on science. ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islamic\\_Golden\\_Age](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islamic_Golden_Age))

Petrarch's recovery of ancient texts of Rome and Greece was abetted by a flourishing Islamic intellectual tradition. As with the Librarian of Basra, a whole array of scholars took good care of "the books" in a time when Europe fell into darkness and embattlement.

It is impossible to give a full account of such matters in the present context. We refer readers, as a starting point, to the wonderful Website Islamic Philosophy Online: Philosophia Islamica (<http://www.>

muslimphilosophy.com/), as well as the on-line Catholic Encyclopedia (<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/index.html>) (and countless other sources of information). Here we will simply thread out one small line of thought that helps us understand this librarian and her work. To preface this thread we need, first, to recall that the works of Aristotle that underwrote much of later Middle Ages European philosophy and theology were an inheritance indirectly from knowledge protected by and commented upon by Islamic scholars.

Aristotle was understood to be a philosopher who belonged more to the Arab than the Christian world. Running against the grain of tradition and at the risk of condemnation, Abelard, Albertus Magnus, and Thomas Aquinas drew upon Aristotle's thoughts. Indeed, Aristotle's writings on metaphysics and logic were studied in Baghdad well before they were translated into Latin in Muslim Spain; then, from Toledo, they arrived in Paris by the end of the twelfth century. (Dussel, 2000, p. 466)

Parenthetically, here, Hans-Georg Gadamer (2007) muses upon the fact that "it is certainly no accident that in the passage of Aristotle through Arabic culture one finds many traces of that culture echoing through our language" (p. 421). He specifically notes how Arabic numerals arrived in Europe and how their arrival made possible an algebra that is simply impossible with Roman numerals. The world of mathematics thus shifted under Arabic influence. Gadamer notes as well, regarding the translation of Aristotle from the original Greek, that "Not every language is as logical as Latin. In Latin, things get weaker, paler. The whole fate of Western civilization is foreshadowed here" (p. 421). These tantalizingly brief comments made when Gadamer was 96 years old open a path for thinking about the threads of influence and inheritance that come from our *shared* Islamic past.

Al-Farabi (c. 870-950), known as "the Second Master" following Aristotle, was one of the first to incorporate Aristotle's idea of emanation into his work. Simply put, this idea means that the world can be understood as an emanation, a pouring forth, a "gift," one might say, of God. As such, the world holds in its multifariousness and complexities signs of God's hand; moreover, the human spirit is ensouled; therefore humanity, at its best, shows signs of God's character. Therefore (and

especially of interest to educators) the task of coming to know about the world is itself a venerable task and one to which it is worthy of dedicating one's life (see Netton, 1998). Pursuing knowledge of the world is not antagonistic to faith but in fact a way to deepen it. (This is clearly a by-no-means non-contentious position within the history of Islam or Christianity – we point, here, not only to the fear and paranoia of fundamentalism regarding knowledge, but also to the dangerous hubris that can come with the pursuit of knowledge, a danger understood and shared by many religious traditions.) In light of the veneration of knowledge that is also commonplace in most religious traditions, the Librarian of Basra is not demonstrating infidelity by protecting the books but rather fidelity. In this light, too (and equally contentiously), the living disciplines that have been entrusted to teachers and students in schools, and how we might take care of those disciplines even in times when knowledge is embattled, become fascinating gifts to ponder.

One of the greatest figures in this line of Islamic ancients is Ibn Sina (L. Avicenna [980-1037]) who was born near Bukhara in Central Asia. Here we have another generation of the wisdom of ancient Greek philosophy.

[Avicenna] maintains that God, the principle of all existence, is pure intellect, from whom other existing things such as minds, bodies and other objects all emanate, and therefore to whom they are all necessarily related. That necessity, once it is fully understood, is rational and allows existents to be inferred from each other and, ultimately, from God. (Kemal, 2007)

Avicenna elucidates the possibility of inference from God and his Word to God and his works – the *ens creata*, that which God created – and this inference of God in his works once again ennoble the pursuit of knowledge of the created world as part and parcel of a knowledge and veneration of God. Unlike many Islamic and Christian fundamentalists, who cleave solely to “The Book” and who thus set up a state of embattlement between worldly knowledge and faith, the whole of the world, in Avicenna's work, is such a sacred text. Avicenna's work on science, logic, and mathematics, as well as his careful commentaries on Aristotle, proved to be a major influence on Duns Scotus (1265-1308),

thus portending a whole bloodline of Christian scholarship.

Finally, for now, we have The Great Commentator, Abul-Waleed Muhammad Ibn Rushd (L. Averroes [1128-1198]) who was born in Cordova, Spain. Averroes' commentaries on Aristotle were a central influence on the Angelic Doctor, Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274); therefore, his work helped theologically found contemporary Roman Catholicism (Zahoor, 1997). One need simply glance at the grand breath of St. Thomas' *Summa Theologica* and the cascades of detailed scholarship that follow upon it to understand how Islamic scholars kept this profound knowledge safe. From Aristotle, up through Averroes, to St. Thomas, in fact, educators, directly or indirectly, inherit the very idea of "disciplines of knowledge," "subject areas," (see Thomas's [1986] "division of the sciences" which is itself of Aristotelian origin) one might say, and the rationale for their order and character. In the very mundanety of Alberta's Program of Studies and its orderly laying out of disciplines lurk old and silent familiars. Differently put, the Alberta Program of Studies is, for good and ill, in part an Aristotelian and Islamic inheritance. Even when we heard in Calgary how the Board of Education has recently been organized around the "ends" of education, this teleological discourse is, in ways that are left completely in darkness, Aristotelian in origin and Islamic in its articulation.

We have threaded our way through these authors, not to even begin to pretend to be authoritative in such matters, but to simply demonstrate how much stumbling-around-in-the-darkness we ourselves are experiencing in walking these terrains for the first time and finding ourselves so profoundly bereft. It is, frankly, humiliating in that lovely way that is the way of scholarship. Moreover, this skirting through history shows a great bias that points the knowledge protected by Islamic scholars in relation to very specific and limited Christian and Enlightenment-European traditions that were to come. One can see, for example, in the Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (1058-1111) a move away from the logic and rhetoric and intellectualism of Aristotelianism and its emphasis on the structure and formalities of knowledge, toward poetry, imagination, creativity, and reflection. Al-Ghazali was interested in "actively considering how knowledge is *made*, rather than viewing it passively" (Moosa, 2005, p. 38). Moosa goes on to contend that "Ibn

Rushd's [Averroes']" extremely negative and mocking "observations [regarding al-Ghazali] . . . blissfully skirted . . . the essence of all knowledge: invention." (p. 38). Mossa notes (p. 38), however, that this character of al-Ghazali's work links him up, for example, to Giambattista Vico's (1668-1744) later work on imagination and *sapientia poetica* (poetic wisdom [see Vico, 1984, Book Two]) as a source for how knowledge is actually *created*, and, from this thread, through to Hans-Georg Gadamer's drawing on Vico's work on images and memory in his formulation of philosophical hermeneutics (see Jardine, 2006c). Even here, we can hear echoes of the sub-divides of arts and sciences in contemporary schooling, and those long and heated arguments about "core curriculum" and what it means. We can hear echoes here, too, of our images of children as active and inventive beings who must "make" something of their world to "know" about it (a gloss on the shallows of the educational practice of contemporary constructivism).

We can hear, too, even in this emphasis by al-Ghazali on the creation of knowledge, echoes of Aristotelian emanation. In the image of God, and by analogy, the creativity of human knowledge reflects God's creative will. In our frail and finite ways, of course, we, unlike God, cannot create *ex nihilo*. Our inventiveness needs something to be inventive *with* – an inventory of material to think and create with (invention and inventory are two etymological offshoots of the Latin term *invenio*). However, even here, an analogy, a likeness, a kinship, persists.

What was, for Christendom and Europe, a Dark Age proves to be a different story in certain threads of Islamic intellectual ancestry. In a wonderfully parallel way to that simple children's picture book by Jeannette Winter, these threads show how knowledge was protected in a "Dark Age." Similarly, *The Librarian of Basra* proves to be something more than simply *A True Story from Iraq*. It is, in its own way, a reminder of something nearly lost to memory and certainly endangered in contemporary over-simplified and frightened disparagements of Islam and the full breadth of its ways.

It is a reminder, too, of something far more simple and immediate. Aristotelian and Neo-Platonic theories of emanation seem so distant from the everyday world of school and schooled knowledge. But this

hint, from al-Ghazali and from his confrontations with Averroes, is an ancient playing out of the contemporary educational conversations and confrontations between knowledge as structured and methodological, and knowledge as a poetic and creative act.

*We find some of these long and tangled threads regarding creativity and knowledge right in the midst of some work that Maria did at the local Mosque school (she would have been in around Grade One at the time in her "regular" school). She was given a worksheet to color in and learn about, and this work became the basis of long and ongoing conversations between children and teachers and parents. The sheet portrays the Qu'ran at the top of the page, and, in Arabic script on the right side, and English on the left, the opened pages say:*

*"And recite the Qu'ran clearly, beautifully."*

*Below this are pictured three other books, one about animals, another about birds, and a third about flowers. Underwriting this is what is called a "Do'a [prayer] before studying." It is first written in Arabic script, then transliterated into English:*

*Allaahumma infanii bimaa alamtanii wa'alimnii maa yanfa' unii.*

*Then, there is an English translation in which echoes of Averroes and Avicenna can still be heard: "O Allah. make me useful to the society with the knowledge that You have granted me and grant me the knowledge that is useful to me."*

*As I look back over the picture, the Qu'ran is pictured sitting up, open on a stand and the bottom of the support seems to open wide, almost sheltering or housing the books pictured below it. Birds, animals, flowers. A grade one child's simple work, with the Qu'ran pictured somehow "emanating," an embrace descending outwards into worldly knowledge and a prayer regarding knowledge and being of service and use to the world with the gift of such knowledge. When D. J. came over to my house late last year, we had talked about the Qu'ran up on top of my (R. N.'s) refrigerator, open on a stand, placed up high, above the frays of daily life and the fridge-magnets that pinned Maria's worksheet up for all to see.*

## VIII

[I carry] a general skepticism toward all ideas which are used as sources of legitimacy by the winners of the world. I should like to believe that the task . . . is to make greater demands on those who mouth the certitudes of their times and are closer to the powerful and rich, than to the faiths and ideas of the powerless



and marginalized. That way lies freedom, compassion and justice. (Nandy, 1987, p. 123)

During the invasion of Iraq in 2003, reports came out of Baghdad of the American Army setting up guard outside of the head offices of various oil company buildings to protect what were euphemistically called "American interests." At the same time, reports spread that the American administration had refused to believe the warnings that Iraq's cultural wealth would need protection if the city were to fall.

From April 10 to 12, 2003, during the mayhem that followed the collapse of Saddam Hussein's regime, looters entered the Iraq National Museum in Baghdad. They stole and destroyed artifacts and caused damage to the museum. . . . Seizing upon tiny bits of available information, Western archaeologists created their own narrative of events and aggressively promoted it through the world media. (Joffe, 2004, Introduction section, ¶ 1)

Although it is true that American troops were dispatched to protect oil company buildings in Baghdad, and it is equally true that they were not dispatched to protect the National Museum, it seems that the main thing "lost from the Baghdad museum: truth" (Aaronovitch, 2003).

It was initially reported that over 170,000 items were stolen or destroyed and the ancient depth of despair sounds eerily familiar.

The looting of the Iraq Museum (Baghdad) is the most severe single blow to cultural heritage in modern history, comparable to the sack of Constantinople, the burning of the library at Alexandria, the Vandal and Mogul invasions, and the ravages of the conquistadors. (*The American Schools of Oriental Research*, April 16, 2003, cited in Joffe, 2004, Introduction section, Opening quotation)

Talbot (2003) claims that the items stolen were so specific and targeted that the looters could not have been simply people "off the street" but had to be well-informed and selective agents who had planned ahead-of-time a strategic heist. "Nothing was accidental about it. Rather, it was the result of a long planned project to plunder the artistic and historical treasures that are held in the museum" (Talbot, 2003, p. 1). Talbot goes on to talk about how the British press had suggested that "the ACCP [the American Council for Cultural Policy]

may have influenced US government policy on Iraqi cultural artifacts" (p. 3). He further states, "The ACCP was formed in 2001 by a group of wealthy art collectors to lobby against the Cultural Property Implementation Act, which attempts to regulate the art market and stop the flow of stolen goods into the US" (pp. 3 - 4).

Later reports attempted to quell these claims. Far fewer items seemed to be missing. Vaults were discovered where items had been stored precisely because of the knowledge of impending threats to security (shades of Alia's car-trunk). Talk came of "inside jobs" (Joffe, 2004, Narrative Undermined section, ¶ 1) – "the work of newly deposed Baathist officials, who had been selling off[f] our patrimony as they saw their days were numbered. As the regime fell, these Baathists went back for one last swindle" (Joffe, 2004, Narrative Undermined section, ¶ 1, citing Makiya, 2003). In the midst of this swirl of suggestion and accusation, David Aaronovitch (2003) proposed that what might be at work here is a simple (albeit perhaps understandable) political presumption: "these days – you cannot say anything too bad about the Yanks and not be believed" (p. 4).

We will leave this foray for now with a troubling reflection. The work of teachers and scholars involves thinking and seeking out the truth of things and this statement seems profoundly and irretrievably naïve in these post-modern times of slippery signification and political and media manipulation. David Smith (2006) suggests that educators' work, now, is occurring in "a season of great untruth" in which "the truth of things" is simply a manipulable item in the sway of public opinion. Smith (in press) speaks about the influence of Leo Strauss on contemporary neo-conservatism, and how neo-conservatives took from Plato the idea of "the noble lie," where "the untrue becomes true if it helps you manage [the ignorant masses] better" (Jardine 2006b, p. x) (of course and always "for their own good" [Miller, 1990]). These moves of neo-conservatism do not end up suggesting that there is simply no truth whatsoever.

But Strauss is not a nihilist if we mean by the term a denial that there is *any* truth, a belief that everything is interpretation. He does not deny that there is an independent reality. On the contrary, he thinks that independent reality consists in nature and its "order of rank" – the high and the low, the superior and the

inferior. Like Nietzsche, he believes that the history of western civilisation has led to the triumph of the inferior, the rabble – something they both lamented profoundly. (Postel & Drury, 2003, np)

The trace lines are deep and wide. Paul Wolfowitz and other members of and advisors to the Bush administration are all students of Strauss's work, and Strauss's ideas are a central guiding concern in the Department of Political Science at the University of Calgary – Stephen Harper's *Alma Mater* (Smith, in press).

A season of great untruth? Should we suspect that our beliefs in and hopefulness about Alia Muhammed Baker's efforts are simply attractive and convincing shadows on the cave wall? Have we been duped? Have we been manipulated into something laughably ridiculous – that very sort of laughability that underwrites the anti-intellectualism of the current American administration? Have we been fed a book about a librarian in Basra that simply charms and spellbinds those who might venerate knowledge into believing a convincing, noble lie?

Even if it is a "true story from Iraq," what its truth is and whether we, as educators, might or should or could stand by such a truth – all of this is part of what this simple children's book now asks of us.

## IX

Many stupid and violent things have been done in the name of Allah, and in this regard, Islam shares a terrible kinship with its two Abrahamic forebearers. Admitting this kinship can provide a certain relief.

That is why it was especially disingenuous of Benedict XVI not to admit to the violence and stupidities perpetrated in the name of the Roman Catholic Church in what turned out to be an incendiary speech given on Tuesday, September 12, 2006. The media-version of this speech – "Faith, Reason and the University: Memories and Reflections" (Benedict XVI, 2006) – focused on how the Holy Father had emphasized that, as he put it, "for Muslim teaching, God is absolutely transcendent. His will is not bound up with any of our categories, even that of rationality. . . . God is not even bound by his own word" (§ 4). Benedict cites an edition of dialogues edited by Theodore Khoury of Munster, in which, "perhaps in 1391 in the winter barracks near Ankara" (§ 2) the Byzantine Emperor Manuel II Paleologus was arguing over the topic of

“holy war” with “an educated Persian” (§ 2). If God is wholly transcendent to the world and to human categories, then there is nothing in human affairs that would prevent, curb, or discourage violence being perpetrated in the name of the faith. We are not called upon to be generous or reasonable because of some analogy to God. Manuel II argued, “not to act in accordance with reason is contrary to God’s nature” (§ 4) but it seems that his Persian interlocutor disagreed. As Manuel continues in this line of argument, the cited text that caused Benedict XVI so much grief emerges. Manuel II says to his guest: “Show me just what Mohammed brought that was new, and there you will find things only evil and inhuman, such as his command to spread by the sword the faith he preached” (§ 3).

We will leave, for now, the almost-overwhelming urge to speak about how Christianity’s skills with the sword are themselves quite practiced, let alone the violence of a faith that created and perpetuated residential schools, again, for the good of godless Indians. For now, we are fascinated by precisely who it is that Pope Benedict XVI chose to cite in the history of Islamic thought – not al-Ghazali, not al-Farabi or Ibn Sina or Ibn Rushd, but Ibn Hazm.

Ibn Hazm (994-1064 CE), more fully Abu Muhammad 'Ali ibn Ahmad ibn Sa'id ibn Hazm, was born in Cordova in Southern Spain. He grew up in a time of difficult and violent ethnic and clan rivalries and war. His work thus betrays a sense of retrenchment and embattlement. Unlike al-Ghazali, al-Farabi, Ibn Sina, or Ibn Rushd (who, of course, Pope Benedict XVI, as a scholar and intellectual, knows full well), in Ibn Hazm’s work, the kinship between God and his creation has been severed. God is wholly Transcendent. Therefore, all we have to go on is the literal words of the Qu’ran.

[Ibn Hazm] argues that people are bound to obey only the law of God, in its *zahir* or literal sense, without restrictions, additions, or modifications. He takes the position that language itself provides all that is necessary for the understanding of its content and that, therefore, God, who revealed the Qu’ran in clear (*mubin*) Arabic, has used the language to say precisely what he means. From this position, it follows that Ibn Hazm strongly criticizes the use of reasoning by analogy (*qiyas*). Ibn Hazm does not deny recourse to reason, since the Qu’ran itself invites reflection, but this reflection must be limited. Reason is not a faculty

for independent research, much less for discovery. By submitting humans exclusively to the word of God, Ibn Hazm's literalism frees them from any choice of their own. (Arnaldez, 2006)

Roger Arnaldez (2006) suggests that Ibn Hazm's work constitutes one of the "most original and important monuments of Muslim thought" (np). Pope Benedict XVI comments indirectly on this originality. It has to do, according to Benedict XVI, with the erasure of Hellenic/Greek thought from threads of Islamic thought, erasure, therefore, of any signs of Aristotelian or Neo-Platonic emanation and therefore of any sense of an analogical intimacy between God and his creation. Thus evacuated from the world, the only recourse to knowledge is literal – the letter of the Book. Reasoning and thoughtfulness thus give way, in the contemporary imagination, to Taliban-like rote repetition of the letter, and incitements to violence against those who do not follow that letter – common incitements in all forms of fundamentalism. (Here is one more source, too, of the anti-intellectualism that sometimes infects, of all things, education itself).

Despite the clumsiness with which Benedict XVI fumbled these matters, the work of Ibn Hazm is not without importance. Those Moslem and Christian warriors who burned libraries that contained anything but "The Book" have Ibn Hazm as an ancestor. We will leave it to the Holy Father to consider whence such an idea in Christianity occurs (his speech does begin to open up some avenues in this regard).

Later in this speech, Pope Benedict XVI (2006) goes on to discuss the issue of the de-Hellenization of Christianity in a way that further betrays precisely how odd and selective was his choice of Ibn Hazm alone to cite under the blanket of "Muslim teaching."

[I]t is often said nowadays that the synthesis with Hellenism achieved in the early Church was a preliminary enculturation which ought not to be binding on other cultures. The latter are said to have the right to return to the simple message of the New Testament prior to that enculturation, in order to enculturate it anew in their own particular *milieux*. This thesis is not only false; it is coarse and lacking in precision. The New Testament was written in Greek and bears the imprint of the Greek spirit. The fundamental decisions made about the

relationship between faith and the use of human reason are part of the faith itself; they are developments consonant with the nature of faith itself. (§ 14)

Although our thoughts return to the Librarian of Basra, the Holy Father's final incitements are important.

[L]istening to the great experiences and insights of the religious traditions of humanity, and those of the Christian faith in particular, is a source of knowledge, and to ignore it would be an unacceptable restriction of our listening and responding. (§ 16)

Indeed. Would that he had been more careful in laying out a kinship of "listening and responding" between Islam and Christianity. This statement would not only include meditations, for example, on Averroes and Avicenna wherein there is an affinity regarding the use of human reason between these two faiths, but would also include some consideration and admission of how Christian faith itself has historically been quite amenable to spreading the faith through violence (and quite amenable to forms of education that are quite Talibanic in their closed-mindedness and literalist/fundamentalist paranoias). Then, perhaps, his sentimentalized journey through the universities of Germany of his youth might have been, as the title of his journey declares, truly "Apostolic" and Ecumenical, and not quite so incendiary.

#### CONCLUSION

We end these mediations on the *Librarian of Basra* with a fascinating incident whose meaning goes far beyond its intent. Early in 2007, Rahat Naqvi, Helen Coburn, Sally Goddard, and Laureen Mayer (2007) submitted an article to the Alberta Teachers' Association Magazine entitled "What do I do when 80 percent of my students don't speak English?" This brief research report spoke of work done on dual language books being used in a local Calgary elementary school.

The paper passed into the adjudication and editorial process and nothing more was heard of it until the printed magazine arrived in R. N.'s campus mail. Along with R. N.'s discovery of Jeanette Winter's lovely book, this is the moment at which this article of ours began. Unbeknown to its authors, the paper had been re-titled. Although the

sub-title remained as the authors had written it, the main title now was "Speaking in Tongues." Along with this, there was a photograph of seven girls, each one dressed in what appear to be ethnic costumes.

Clearly, on the face of it, this new title probably seemed simply more catchy than the authors' original title. It has since caught the eye of many readers who have contacted the authors about their work. It serves, however and also, as opportunity to think – about Al-Ghazali, for example, and his intimate connection with Sufism which references a phenomenon similar to "speaking in tongues." However, this precise phrase is peculiarly Christian in its origins and contemporary face. Those who chose it for a title are simply living within a familiarity that goes beyond what they may have intended by such a choice of phrase.

Many Christians believe that speaking in tongues is the fulfillment of the Latter Rain promised in Joel 2:28-29 and that it is the final manifestation of the Holy Spirit before the Second Coming of Christ. It is also commonly taught that you are not saved unless you have demonstrated the gift of speaking in tongues. (<http://www.speaking-in-tongues.net/>)

As we have suggested, this editorial change is more meaningful than it was meant to be. It opened gaping holes in what we thought we knew, and disturbed our sense of familiarity and belonging. It is a perhaps-unintended gift.

However, we will leave this meditation for another time.

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