Living and Learning: Education as the Way of Life

Buddy North
Alaska Pacific University

It is a privilege to respond to Professor Naoko Saito's work.[1] Not only have I been a proponent of her work for some time now, but also grappling with these themes orients my life. They impact the way I lead my life—presumably for the better. Moreover, I was extra excited while reading Saito's paper given that it engages with the wonderous works of Hayao Miyazaki.

Regrettably, I have not been able to watch Miyazaki's newest film. Living and working in rural Alaska (as I do) has limitations, and watching a movie, which is currently only in theatres, is one of those constraints. I am, like all others, stuck living and writing with my limitations. However, upon learning about the film being based on Genzaburo Yoshino's book, *How Do You Live?*, I was able to order it, and read it.[2] Accordingly, the following response critically examines Saito's paper and Yoshino's book, but not Miyazaki's movie. As usual, more work (and living and learning) is needed.

My response will not be critical of Saito's views, but rather I want to add to the conversation by illuminating some aspects and themes of her essay. Indeed, I believe Saito and I are "of-one-mind"—as much as that is possible—with regards to the need for beautiful and holistic knowledge over and above mere knowledge-as-information. In my response, I hope to capture how reading in a high sense can be a desirable and admirable "way of life." Indeed, that seems to be the point of Yoshino's book—that reading deeply, studying, and living a good human life all seem to be jumbled together.

How Do You Live? follows a school year of a young boy named Copper; nicknamed after Copernicus. Copper is in his second year of middle school and is the star of the book. He is well natured, well liked, and at the top of his class. Though he is small in stature, he has a strong desire to stand up for what is right and good, and by the dying wish of his father, he is guided and tutored by his uncle. Throughout the book he learns about philosophy, sociology, economics, history, religion, among other things, and he becomes fascinated with

the life of Napoleon.

Throughout the book, Copper's uncle writes to him in a journal. These reflections are meant to help Copper lead a good life, and they touch on many themes found in Saito's paper. In one of the uncle's notes to Copper, the uncle writes about, what I take to be, philosophy as a way of life and its relationship to reading and experiencing art. He writes: "And your heart, well, it opens only when you actually encounter a great work of art in person and it makes a deep impression on you."[3] This raises the question: What is a great work of art? It also makes me wonder: Can a person's life be a work of art? The uncle goes on:

> If it means anything at all to live in the world, it's that you must live your life like a true human being and feel just what you feel. This is not something that anyone can teach from the sidelines, no matter how great a person they may be. Of course, there are many great philosophers and Buddhist monks from long ago who left us words of wisdom.[4]

Here, Copper's uncle questions the nature of teaching, and indicates the difference between being taught information and the experience of feeling something. He goes on: "You will never really know these writings just by reading them, the way you would study mathematics or chemistry."[5] In other words, one must read great works, but also one must experience and grapple with the ideas within their own life—and in their own way. This in turn will shape their future reading and living. Furthermore, with philosophy and human life, there are no certainties.

The uncle's words here remind me of Emerson's. In *The American Scholar,* he writes that higher education:

> Can only highly serve us, when they aim not to drill, but to create; when they gather from far every ray of various genius to their hospitable halls, and, by the concentrated fires, set the hearts of their youth on flame.[6]

I interpret Emerson here as wanting to highlight the need for the cultivation of emotion in educational settings: "setting students' hearts on flame" is igniting curiosity and wonder; it is meant to make students feel something—over and

DOI: 10.47925/80.3.122

above giving them the mere testimony of information. This is the true job of teachers worthy of the name; it is not simply to pass on information, or to measure what is measurable. Rather, it is to provide a formative experience that helps re-shape new experiences for the better.

Saito begins and ends her essay with a critique of *Jiko-keihatsu*—a trend in Japanese culture translated as "therapeutic self-enlightenment," and can be characterized as "fast knowledge" or "knowledge-as-information." To Saito, and others, it is a form of "panicked perfectionism" where the fear of failure is placed over and above the love of wisdom.[7] Thus, there is a premium put on certainty, and less emphasis on the value of imagination and unforeseen modalities. For *Jiko-keihatsu,* the value seems to be in the outcome—not the process. I believe Saito is right to ask more from our modern educational experiences.

Virtue epistemology, and its explicit endorsement between the connection between moral and epistemic dimensions can be elucidating here. In Lani Watson's essay "'Knowledge is Power': Barriers to Intellectual Humility in the Classroom" she questions the notion of—knowledge is power—and warns against, what she calls, the pervasive answer-orientation of modern educational theory and practice.[8] More specifically, she holds that the answer-orientation of educational systems is a barrier to the cultivation of intellectual humility, and intellectual virtue more broadly. In environments that are answer-orientated, questions from students are perceived as less valuable than answers. This occurs more often, so the claim goes, when we promote that *knowledge is power*; namely, when we win games and school by knowing fast answers. Watson writes, "When students are systematically placed in the position of answerers ... they are denied such rich opportunities to expose, and become comfortable with exposing, their limitations."[9] One way to help remove this barrier to intellectual humility is to modify modern practice of educational assessment. That is, we, qua educational practitioners, can assess questions, and not simply answers. This will give students the motivation to own their epistemic limitations. They will learn, like Socrates did, that knowing and owning one's ignorance is valuable.

Copper learns a hard lesson within the book. After learning about the many battles of Napoleon, and glorifying him for his bravery, Copper freezes in

a moment of cowardice. In this scene, he does not step in and join his friends who are standing up to bullies, despite his former promise to do so. He wants to join his friends in this act of bravery but cannot. Instead, he silently watches while his friends pay the price. Seeing himself as a coward makes Copper sick. He fights with the idea of why he has acted like a coward. With help from his uncle and mother, and with his heart on flame, Copper comes to realize that he needs to experience failure. He will grow from recognizing his weakness. Ultimately, Copper writes his friends a letter apologizing, acknowledging and exposing his limitations, with the hope of moving forward.

Saito writes in her essay, "acknowledgment is a state in which one learns to expose one's vulnerability to the other."[10] Risking harm can be scary and fear inducing; it is difficult to expose one's vulnerabilities. She goes on: "In acknowledging the other and the world, one needs to learn to see what exceeds our familiar, common grasp, and what cannot be fully accommodated in the common."[11] In other words, we need to practice open-mindedness, open-heartedness, intellectual humility, and intellectual courage. Indeed, the uncommon can be scary and difficult, but necessary to live fruitfully.

As the title of my paper indicates, I hold that education is not "a" way of life, but rather education is *the way of life*. Education is constitutive of living. One might say: "You live—you learn; you don't learn—you don't live." Put another way, education happens for better or for worse. This illuminates the importance of educational thought and its critical practice: if we want to educate well, then we must think and act well. Copper comes to learn this through his education and life. Unfortunately, as Saito recognizes, education is often tied up in the "usefulness in the global economy."[12] Education is often treated like shoveling food into one's mouth and keeping it there. In this misconceived manner, one does not need to swallow the information or digest it. This seems misguided.

Nevertheless, this response to Saito's work is incomplete. I will watch the film, I will re-read the novel, I will continue to study the philosophers mentioned, and I will come back to Saito's essay. In this way, this response is an ongoing living response; it is not the final answer. This engagement demands more action. It demands more living and learning in a high sense.

DOI: 10.47925/80.3.122

REFERENCES

1 Naoko Saito, "Reading in a High Sense: Beautiful Knowledge and Uncommon Schooling," *Philosophy of Education* 82, no. 3 (same issue). https://doi.org/10.47925/80.3.104

2 Genzaburo Yoshino, *How Do You Live*, trans. Bruno Navasky (United Kingdom: Rider, 1937).

3 Yoshino, *How Do You Live?*, 47.

4 Yoshino, *How Do You Live?*, 47.

5 Yoshino, *How Do You Live?*, 48.

6 Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature and Selected Essays* (United States of America: Penguin, 2003), 91.

7 Saito, "Reading in a High Sense," 4.

8 Lani Watson, "'Knowledge is Power': Barriers to Intellectual Humility in the Classroom," in *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Humility*, ed. Mark Alfano, Michael P. Lynch and Alessandra Tanesini (New York, NY: Routledge, 2020), 439-450. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351107532-45

9 Watson, "'Knowledge is Power'," 446.

10 Saito, "Reading in a High Sense," 11.

11 Saito, "Reading in a High Sense," 12.

12 Saito, "Reading in a High Sense," 19.