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Interview with Canadian teacher and author Dr. Sean Steel

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Abstract

Rozhovor Dr. Zuzany Svobodové s kanadským učitelem a publicistou Dr. Seanem Steelem.

Dr. Sean Steel, who or what was at the beginning of your love of wisdom?

I think that my own interest in these things originates with my earliest childhood experiences. I was raised in the Canadian countryside of southern Ontario. I had a loving home, and spent much of my youth on the family farm. I was very lucky to have been born and raised in such an environment because it acclimatized me to solitude. I think it is from inside of that quiet atmosphere that I developed my sense that the world is not just a thing or an object, but that it can be encountered as a kind of presence all around me and even within me. This sensitivity allowed me to feel how I am a part of the world and it is a part of me; we are enfolded; I think this quietness along with the deep, subtle, elusive memories of feelings, experiences, and insights just out of range of grasp, from my earliest youth, taught me at a young age the truth of what Buber speaks about when he writes of "I-Thou" relational knowing. I think that recognizing myself *in relation* with the world of nature, and having what Wordsworth calls "intimations of immortality" made me feel a thirst for transcendence, and it planted the seeds of contemplation in me that have been stirring from time to time all through my life. I think this is what set me on my slow, unsteady, and stumbling course along these paths.

But I've also had some good teachers. Let me focus on one in particular. I think the first time I ever experienced the meaning of *theoria* or the "contemplative gaze" (although I didn't know that's what it was at the time) was with my grade 2 and 3 teacher, Mrs. Aileen Haviland. She was a remarkable person. I was called an "overly sensitive boy" by my other teachers up to that point. I was always crying, always in trouble with my nose against the wall in the corner, or out in the hallway at school for some rule infraction or inappropriate behaviour. Needless to say, I didn't like school at all! But in grade 2, all that changed because "old Mrs. Haviland" (as we children used to call her) became my teacher. That's when I was first aware that I had been SEEN by a teacher. Mrs. Haviland's *loving gaze* healed me. She took away all my insecurities about school in one fell swoop. When I was in her class, I could feel and see with my own eyes that she saw ME: how she looked at ME, and how she heard ME when I spoke in class.

She accepted me and cared for my being. I think that was one of the most remarkable moments of transformation for me in my whole life. I've never felt forgiveness or absolvement like that or been able to forgive like that myself; nor have I felt a love that releases me from all my faults and errors and failings and uncertainties as much as I felt it when, at the first parent-teacher interview, Mrs. Haviland spoke softly about the concerns of my previous teachers about my over-sensitivity and learning struggles. She brushed them all

aside like so much dust or cobwebs with a simple sentence, saying to my mother, "Mrs. Steel, I can't see anything wrong with Sean at all. He's just fine in my class." Being seen, having one's goodness affirmed by someone who has truly seen you, being taught that one's being is good and worthy of praise and celebration – I don't know why this experience was so powerful for me. I did, after all, come from a loving home where affection was never withheld. So surely I'd been seen by my parents and family. But being seen like this *by a teacher* was, I think, where I experienced first-hand the transformational, immortalizing power (as Aristotle refers to it) of *theoria*. And *theoria*, as the *loving, contemplative gaze*, is also the prime activity of the philosopher.

You talk about environments that nurture deep relationships as a basic condition for philosophy or "the love of wisdom" – places in nature or at home where we can experience quietness, solitude, and acceptance from others. Also, during your lecture in Prague in October 2018[1] you said: "As a child, I learned to be comfortable with silence". Now you live as a teacher, but also as a father, and your days are spent among young people in the city. Do you think that these young people have some similar opportunities today to experience this relationship? Does not the change in our way of life (for instance, today we live more in cities, not surrounded by nature) adversely affect young people? Also, perhaps nowadays family and the home are not for many young people the places where they could feel such peace, quiet, or calmness. In this situation, do you think that teachers should now play a bigger role in recreating schools as places of "*schole*"? Should we be preparing such paths among our students for "transformation" and for the "immortalizing power of *theoria*", rather than simply describing the world-as-object with data and facts?

I worry about this too. With my own children, I worry that they haven't developed any sensitivities or openness for these nuanced, spiritual experiences, and in conversations with them, it is hard for me to tell if they have any feelings of spiritual connection or yearning for transcendence. As parents, my wife and I have been careful each summer to take our children camping in Canada's "great outdoors." I think that this practice and tradition has helped them a little to find a kind of peaceful, quiet place within themselves from time to time. I hope it forms a good, abiding memory for them that can become the bedrock for more developed self-inquiry and relational connections as they mature. But certainly there must be many other ways in which they experience what Pieper refers to as "contemplation" or *theoria*. In his view, *theoria* is simply a kind of loving appreciation of what *is*. Anytime my children feel gratitude in their lives, Pieper would probably say that they are engaged in a kind of *theoretic* activity.

Same goes for my students to whom I stand *in loco parentis*. I worry about them in some ways because, as Plato tells us, education is care for the soul, and not simply for the body and its needs. One thing I have noticed over the years is that, although there are *some* young students who do not really connect with talk about spiritual yearning or adventures towards self-knowledge, and who claim to have no spiritual questions whatsoever, this phenomenon is far more common among student-teachers, or teachers-in-training. I think that as we get older, these sorts of inquiries are either knocked out of us; they atrophy from lack of attention, or else we become smug and confident in our own "answers" and solutions to life's

[1] Online, WWW: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FIT45CVIPxs&feature=youtu.be>.

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problems. Adolescents, thankfully, remain (on the whole, I think) more open than adult students to these sorts of questions about "Who am I?" and deeper meanings in things. I think kids are more naive in a way, and so maybe this naivete makes them more attracted and open to searching, and therefore more excited about the prospect of wonder which, as we know from Plato, is the beginning of philosophy.

One of the biggest challenges today – and I'm certainly not the only person who says this; in fact, I think most parents and teachers are beginning to agree – is the ubiquitous, all-pervasive power of technology and smart phones all around us. This has been horrible on kids and adults alike. Screens are ruining our ability to concentrate, to give attention, and to be unstimulated for any length of time. Many people have written about this problem. Neil Postman began to speak about it before the internet was a dominant distraction, and when television was what he considered to be or most common way to "amuse ourselves to death." But nowadays, Nicholas Carr and Sherry Turkle come to mind as good, engaging authors on the subject.

The final part of your question is very difficult. What role should WE play as teachers, whether we are teachers in the primary, secondary, or post-secondary level? This is tough because I think that teachers, by and large, haven't had much exposure to thinking about the meaning and importance of contemplation, *theoria*, or the role of the contemplative life in teaching. Moreover, those of us who have inclinations towards asking about these things certainly aren't supported in our investigations and desires to learn more about this part of our work lives. And so the problem becomes, "How could teachers lead students in the pursuit of wisdom if they themselves are not wisdom-seekers, or have no sense of what that might mean?"

So what about faculties of education? Can they prepare student teachers without such experiences for becoming themselves "lovers of wisdom"? Do you think that philosophy is important for teachers and educators?

This is definitely a conundrum! My sense is that any faculty of education would be hard-pressed to bring student-teachers towards wisdom-seeking practices in any systematic or institutional way. First, to put wisdom-seeking into practice on a grand scale would require a complete re-think of what is education, and I am sceptical that most scholars or academics would be willing to surrender their sense of what education is for to those intent upon philosophizing. And even if "philosophy" were given a more prominent place in teacher education, what I have been suggesting about the nature of philosophy isn't the way in which philosophy is ordinarily conceived among academics.

Second, I am highly sceptical of any "program of work", any prescribed or mandated "curriculum" that espouses to offer instructors a widespread, teachable method for doing philosophy. I've written a bit about P4C programming in relation to this problem, but I don't mean to pick on them, or to single them out for special abuse. I think that philosophy isn't to be found in *this* or *that* method, or in a particular arrangement or canon of books; nor is it simply a matter of exploring a staple set of ideas, questions, or problems. One can easily imagine how all of these components could be incorporated into post-secondary studies – even masterfully executed by some standard of assessment! – and yet there might very well be no true philosophizing at the core of any student participation in such a program of work, just

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as there might be no true philosophizing at the core of the teacher's or the instructor's efforts. Indeed, teachers are ordinarily forced to conform to certain modes of teaching, structures, methods, or approaches without entering into their spirit.

Forcing students to philosophize makes no sense; Plato tells us, after all, that "no forced study abides in a soul." And we know this from experience as teachers. Students can (and do) take up any number of academic exercises or activities simply in an instrumental way, in order to satisfy a graduation requirement, or to sustain their GPA. Indeed, it is quite easy to pass or even to excel in a university course without being deeply affected, unsettled, or transformed by it.

Philosophy, however, is a spiritual practice. Plato calls it the "art of dying". Aristotle calls it "immortalization". Augustine might likewise be willing to call it *amor Dei*, inasmuch as the true love of wisdom is nothing other than the love of God, who is Wisdom, after all. That's something quite different than is possible to include in a course syllabus, right? I guess I'm suggesting that philosophy-*propre* is a kind spirit of inquiry that must inhabit us; it's a persuasion of character that erupts from within; or perhaps it sprouts like a seed from a subtle, heartfelt desire that is by some set of circumstances gifted to us, having been imbued in our nature as human beings who "desire to know." Only then, if we are lucky, might it be harnessed through great, constant efforts and care in such a way as to increase or heighten the tension or *tasis* we feel towards the ground of our own being. That being the case, it is also clear that we cannot properly conceive of teaching "philosophy" or "philosophizing" to student-teachers by simply running them through a curriculum and then testing them for certain knowledge, skills, and attitudes (KSAs) or for the demonstration of "competencies," as we might do in relation to other lesser goods in education.

How do we go about teaching in a way that invites others to philosophize? I've wondered a lot about this problem over the years as a teacher in "Philosophy of Education" courses. My thinking about this conundrum has culminated in a book through Peter Lang Publishing. It is a kind of record of my experiences trying to "do" philosophy with my students, but it is also designed to help other teachers and instructors explore what it means to philosophize, to become initiated into philosophy as *the love of wisdom* and teaching as a *way of life*, and then to lead their students (particularly in B.Ed. programs) on this self-same path. I wrote this book as a kind of ancient *protreptikos* or a *paraggelma* for readers; that is, it is meant as both an exhortation towards philosophy and as a "user manual" for how to begin philosophizing.

My hope in writing this text is that, once students become aware of what philosophy really means and why it is important for them, and moreover, how philosophy "as a way of life" intersects with teaching "as a way of life," and how this revisioning of our work as teachers can be transformational for both us and our students – once they discover these things they will perhaps find enough incentive within themselves to start upon the slow and uncertain path of philosophizing or "loving wisdom".

I harbour no illusions that my book on teaching "philosophy of education" will reach all the students and teachers who read it in the way that I hope. Nor do I suppose that philosophy, as the love of wisdom, is a spirit that might be promoted by fiat, by broad mandate in institutions or in a school system. I have long been of the opinion that, where the

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spirit of philosophy takes hold, it is not so much in the institutions and edifices that we build but, like in the discussion of "the heavenly city" at the end of Book IX of Plato's *Republic*, or as Augustine's *City of God*, it does not and cannot exist anywhere on earth, but is "laid up in heaven as a pattern for the man who wants to see and found a city within himself on the basis of what he sees." And like Plato has Socrates point out, if such a city resides in the hearts of individuals who yearn after a vision of such things, "It doesn't make any difference whether it is or will be somewhere," since "he would mind the things of this city alone, and of no other." Philosophizing in the classroom, in my view, will therefore always be a spontaneous, miraculous, and uncertain affair, popping up from time to time unexpectedly and joyfully in diverse and disparate classrooms, among surprising people, and in all kinds of situations.

You once said: "Comedy was half of Greek education". Why is comedy so important for teaching and learning? Could we improve our "sense" of comedy?

Yes, I think we could improve our sense of comedy today. I think many of us have forgotten how to laugh, and we take things (*especially* ourselves) far too seriously. I think it's in Plato's *Laws* where he has the Athenian Stranger say something about how nothing human is serious, that comedy is about human things, and that only tragedy, by contrast, concerns serious things, but also that tragedy is therefore about divine things. In his *Letters*, Plato also mentions how nothing he has ever written is serious. *What a mystery for the rest of us*, eh? Whatever could he mean? Plato is a comedian? His writing is comic?

In education, classically-understood, we are called upon by the Delphic Oracle to *know ourselves*. But coming into self-knowledge certainly must entail knowing the extent to which we are not at all serious creatures, as Plato tells us, and therefore that we shouldn't take ourselves so seriously all the time. I don't know if you have Czech translations of Disney/Pixar movies in Europe, but there is one that my kids and I really liked when they were little called *Toy Story*. In that movie, there is a toy character called Buzz Lightyear who has no understanding of himself, or who he truly is.

Of course, he knows what it says on his box about who he is; he knows what he is *supposed* to be in the official narrative assigned to him, who is supposed to be his mortal enemy, and what is his mission. All these aspects of his identity he takes up as the entire truth about his being with the utmost seriousness, and his excessive seriousness (which is really an indication of ignorance about his own nature) drives most of the humour in the film. But at a certain point, Buzz befriends a cowboy doll called Woody. Woody knows the truth about his nature, and he finds his friend Buzz exasperating. Frustrated at his companion, and with all of his patience spent, he shouts at Buzz, saying, "YOU… ARE… A… TOY! You are a child's plaything!"

This exclamation strikes me as vocalizing a very Platonic insight; indeed, it is much akin to the image of the divine puppet in the *Laws*. Flowing from this image in the dialogue, the whole purpose of a human life is to learn to respond to the divine tug, the sacred pull, or the tensions upon the string that connects us (as puppets) to our divine Puppeteer. We are playthings of the god, after all, and although we may suppose our lives and life choices ought to be dictated by other, stronger pulls in the opposite direction (symbolized in Plato's imagery by lead weights tied to the feet, much like in Homer's *Iliad* when Hera is punished by Zeus for disobedience), we must not be distracted by these other enticements. Instead, we must put

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all of these "human" trifles and concerns aside in order to hone our attention to the god's pull. If we learn to be more responsive in this way, we will not simply hang down like dead meat puppets from a string, but we will dance divinely for our playful Puppeteer.

In ancient Greece, comedy was a kind of spiritual practice for the whole *demos* – not simply for elites, and not just citizen males, but for *all* the people in attendance, whether they be men, women, children, citizens, slaves, metics, or foreigners. *All* people were welcome to participate as audience members without distinction. Comedies were theatrical performances consecrated to the twice-born god, Dionysos. Dionysos is the god who dies and is reborn; mythically, he is rent apart, first descending into death, and then refigured or transformed into new life. Comedies are a dramatic enactment of Dionysos' passion. They are a participatory "art of dying" that includes the rest of us, and therefore just like philosophy in this regard. In comedy, we take every "sacred cow" imaginable, any cherished idea, person, or thing – even the twice-born god himself! – and we tear it down; we rend it apart, just like the god was torn to pieces prior to being transfigured.

But this rending is joyful and exuberant! Moreover, we open ourselves to the comic spirit in order that, dying to all the myriad and multitudinous things that preoccupy and distract us – those mythical lead weights dragging us down and away from the god's pull – might be dismissed, and so that we might gain a clarity of sight (*theoria*) wherein the epiphany of the great god might loom before us. Comedy, in this way, is a balm and a soothing elixir for our souls, just like wine as the sacrament of *symposia* was said in the *Laws* to soften the hard souls of the older men and to render them once again like little children. Being softened like metal in fire, hard souls full of seriousness are made light-hearted, playful, and willing to dance in the eyes of the god.

Here, in the realm of the comic and the Dionysian, we are granted a widely-available and pleasant means of unravelling the delusion of the ego. As the author of the *Cloud of Unknowing* tells us, the ego is the "last obstacle between you and your God". And God alone, we are told by Pythagoras, is wise, being the font of all wisdom. How then to be freed from this ego, which looms so prominently and *seriously* over everything, preventing us from seeing what truly *is*? Think about how much we are plagued by our egos and our psycho-mental states each day – all those thoughts and feelings and fleeting events in consciousness that prevent us from recognizing our intimate connection, relation, and identity with all things. And now consider how delightful it is when, from time to time, we manage to forget ourselves, or rather, when our false ego-self falls away in moments and experiences of love or contemplative absorption!

How rare it is for us to enter into this state of consciousness and gratitude! And next, think for a minute how hard it is for us to die to ourselves, to allow our ego-selves to be rent apart or dissolved in everyday life. I myself am a fumbling practitioner of meditation. I have practiced in both Western and Eastern traditions of meditation. My attraction to meditation is primarily because it is a manifestation of "the art of dying", and therefore a vehicle for self-knowledge. It is, as John Main says, a means of "leaving the ego behind". And yet, I confess, that when I sit down to meditate, I am ordinarily flummoxed and overwhelmed by all of my thoughts, worries, ideas, ambitions, failures, successes, anger, self-doubt, and desires. So even though I understand its value and importance in my life, I can also find meditation very

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frustrating. Intellectually, of course, I am aware that meditation is not about achieving anything.

However, *habitually*, and on a deeper level than what my mind knows, my inward tendency is to take the onslaught of my psycho-mental states seriously, treating each fluctuation as though it were real, and therefore as something to be encountered and dealt with, or struggled against. This, after all, is the way that I have managed to be "successful" in other things in my life. However, the moment that I exert my will to struggle against these states or to "achieve" something, and then to "assess" myself in relation to my "achievements" (or lack thereof), I instantly treat them as though they have an inherent existence which they do not. And so I have reified ghosts and illusions of reality into objects, just as though they were real things, adversaries, or enemies to be battled and struggled against by the force of my will, when in fact they have no true reality. My ego and my inward wrestling is a farce and a sad comedy. The turmoil of activity looms like a kind of "Plato's cave" before my eyes. The drama of inward struggle thus becomes a prison of my own device.

How to escape? How to break through our own self-delusions? Comedy holds out hope to us as an alternative, widely-available, and democratic "art of dying". Through learning to laugh at ourselves, at our psycho-mentality, and therefore at all those things that we take so seriously, we begin, like Nietzsche tells us in his own comic way, to recognize how we are indeed "human, all too human". And so, as in the Bruce Springsteen song "Living Proof," we are made joyful and able to see past and through all these transitory states of consciousness that lay claim to seriousness and real existence. Almost as a prayer to Dionysos, one can easily imagine Springsteen singing:

> You shot through my anger and rage
> To show me my prison was just an open cage
> There were no keys no guards
> Oh, just one frightened man and some old shadows for bars.

Here, Springsteen the poet captures a joyful moment of self-realization. In his Dionysian rock and roll, he offers his listeners a personal, sensitive illustration of the soul's transformation. Here, we find the death of the false ego-self-illusion, as well as the simultaneous, laughter-filled rebirth into a new life of the spirit. Springsteen masterfully evokes images of his own spiritual experiences of release from ego delusions in such a way as to recapitulate these transports within the souls of his own sensitive listeners. In this way, if the heart of rock and roll can be said to be Dionysian, then the manner of its operation upon our souls is certainly *more comic* than tragic. This is a point that Springsteen himself makes poignantly clear in another of his masterpiece songs, "Better Days", where he writes:

> Now a life of leisure and pirate's treasure
> Don't make much for tragedy
> But it's a sad man my friend who's livin' in his own skin
> And can't stand the company
> Every fool's got a reason for feelin' sorry for himself
> And turning his heart to stone
> Tonight this fool's halfway to heaven and just a mile outta hell
> And I feel like I'm comin' home.

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Simply put, coming to terms with ego is not a matter involving tragedy. Tragedy concerns what is serious; however, only *divine things* are serious. The things of the ego cry out to us that they are so very serious, but they are indeed not serious. Like our own inner-Buzz Lightyears, when we see our egos in the broader context of the drama as spectators of ourselves, they must be sources for amusement and humour to all of us interested in coming truly to know ourselves.

Could you write about your attitude to philosophical texts and schools? Which philosophical text(s) do you like the most? Is some text, author, school, or movement most important to you?

My first attraction to "philosophic texts" was as a boy when I saw that my grandfather had a hardbound copy of Plato's selected dialogues in his library at the top of the stairs in his house on the farm. I tried reading Plato on my own when I was in high school; I borrowed that book from my grandfather, but I didn't really understand it at all. Then I had an art teacher in high school, Mr. Woodcock. He sensed my penchant for searching, I think, and so he handed me a pile of Carlos Castaneda's pseudo-anthropological books on the condition that I "read them, then pass them along". Well, whatever it was that those books offered me, I was hooked! I craved transformation, and a way of life that would incline me toward a more enlightened way of seeing.

Castaneda's character Don Juan offered me all of those things with his stories, his feats of strength, agility, his mysterious sagely manners, his gnomic speeches, and of course, all of the daily practices the book offered to searchers for whom coming into an awareness of death "as one's constant companion" held allure. I must have read *The Journey to Ixtlan* a hundred times, trying to soak up all of its secrets and teachings! I probably underlined and dog-eared all the pages in that book, and I used to carry it with me in my jacket to and from school, practicing seeing whenever I could during my school days (say, in the hallway between classes, or on the long bus rides to and from school), and then also out in the woods and fields behind our house. By about grade 12 or 13, Castaneda lost his sheen for me, however, because another well-intending teacher passed me an essay from a magazine that debunked his writing as fraudulent. However, the fraud of his work never served to dissuade me from my taste for seeking or *zetesis*. In fact, looking back just now upon your prompting, I think maybe I developed my initial sense of philosophy as a "way of life" that I could practice in schools from him.

While I was a boy, I continued to read as broadly as I could in the great books – especially in Eastern religion and Western philosophy; but it was hard for me to know what I was looking at. It wasn't until I left home and went away to university in Hamilton, Ontario that I really began to see what philosophy might be, and that was only possible for me because I had such good fortune in stumbling upon a wonderful teacher. I became part of a small cohort of undergraduate and graduate students who practically worshipped him. Each of us knew just how lucky we were to have found this wonderful man and this wonderful space for *schole*, or contemplative leisure. I did my best to enroll in every class that he taught, and I even took some of his courses twice, just auditing them the second time around.

Each day in his classes was a delight. I remember being so full of anticipation to learn about myself and to have surprising inner truths provoked and revealed by the greatest writers from his lectures. I scrawled down madly everything he said that I could remember as a young man. Everyday, he would kick open a new door in my mind, which would lead me into new ideas and questions, and towards sights of things I'd never imagined existed. It was a wonderful time of learning for me and I still have such gratitude towards him.

But *besides* introducing us to "the great books", perhaps the best thing he did for all of us was to teach us *how to read* a philosophically-rich text. Learning *how to read* made the great thinkers and lovers of wisdom like Plato and Nietzsche accessible to me for the first time. My teacher modelled for me how to read; he taught all of us how to listen to a text, and how to interact with a text for the purposes of seeking after self-knowledge. It was in his classes that my love and appreciation of Plato was forever cemented; it was in his classes where I began first to read Nietzsche and to feel a great affinity with his struggles and problems; it was in his classes where I first encountered so many of the great authors and thinkers, philosophers and poets who have helped me to think more clearly about education, and then to think about how teaching can be a transformational way of life. I have a great debt to this man, and what he taught me about the value of philosophizing in school.

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