Crises and Suffering as Sources of Learning

Current learning theories tend to focus on the intentional learning of curriculum contents. They never make thematic other human experiences. Yet in everyday life, we (a) experience disorder, pain, and afflictions to our bodies; (b) feel emotions, including the strong ones denoted by the nouns desire, hate, fear, anger, rage, affection, love, and enthusiasm; and (c) are subject to external forces and agents. All of these experiences denote various forms of – and collectively are referred to as – passions. The passions are an important, if not the most important form of human experience and perhaps the constitute experiences that are most foundational for the way we are. Their considerations, as form and content of experience, take us beyond the limits of what learning theories currently in vogue can explain in terms of human knowing and understanding. We understand pain precisely because we have been subject to pain prior to all thoughts about pain, prior to any conceptual development of any kind, including the concepts of pain. Someone who has never experienced pain may be able to hear the word when the sound /peɪn/ is produced; the person may even be able to construct sentences using the word ‘pain’. But they would not be able to experience compassion, suffer together with another person and participate in her suffering. This is so because they would not know how suffering feels. But, without culture, I do not know how to talk about how I feel. This is so because ‘I cannot identify the behavior of the other as choleric without adopting at first an exterior point of view over my own affects, that is, from this other himself. Only under this condition can I understand this carnal manifestation of another as choleric’ (Franck 1981: 157). This also means that the conscious self-presentation of experiences – a self-presentation in consciousness – that I have in flesh and blood are interlaced with the forms of descriptions, collective representations, that I have available. We see this at work at the end of the preceding chapter, where I write about how the singularity of the event on the butte vanishes and becomes nothing other than a collectively possible experience, which, for this very reason, no longer is mine. My pain, however, is my pain, and nobody else can feel it. All they can share is the talk about pain.
The passions, including experiences through the senses, are given to me, come to me through the unpredictable forces of the environment upon me. I do not have to intend exploring something through touch if I can anticipate what it is to touch the substance; I do not have to taste a whiskey, olive oil, or other food if I can anticipate that I will not like it. Learning means confronting and subjecting oneself to the unknown. In Part I of this book, I exhibit methods for exploring the senses, which constitute one aspect of the passions. In this chapter, I am more concerned with other forms of passions that we often do not think about until we actually experience them – such as the experience of suffering some illness or the experience of a life crisis. In these cases, I do not really know what suffering or experiencing a crisis feels like unless I have felt it myself. This is so because I know and practically understand suffering and crisis, as all other passions, only through experiencing them. Otherwise I only have symbolic knowledge and, literally, ‘do not know what I am talking about’. For there is no other way of incarnate knowing what it is to suffer than through suffering, no other way to know addiction than through living an addiction, and there is no other way to know how joy grabs hold of the incarnate body as a whole than through the intense sense of joy.

The passions may therefore teach us something; and they do so in ways that the theories we know today, built on intentionality and representation, cannot explain. This is so because ‘[f]rom the perspective of intentionality, non-intentional experiences or real contents of experiences – whereby experiencing and experiences, sensation, and the sensed become one – are nothing other than formless and functionless materials that contribute nothing to the constitution of an object’ (Waldenfels 1999: 40). From such intentionalist perspectives, therefore, suffering and experiencing crises are nothing but qualities that cannot be ascribed as properties to some entity or process. In this chapter, I exemplify the first-person approach by means of two analyses, one focusing on suffering and the other one on crisis.

**Pathos, Empathy, and Sympathy**

Throughout my life, I have been a very active person, someone who took things into his own hands. I had never been ‘afflicted’ by something that I would have experienced as such. Most people who have come to know me also would say that I am a ‘strong-willed’ person, very much in control over himself, and task-oriented. As a world-class athlete, I have carnally experienced what the popular diction ‘no pain no gain’ denotes. Pain, therefore, has not been an experience that made me stop in view of some ultimate result. As an athlete, I repeatedly moved across the threshold of pain, winning some championship, but subsequently being unable to walk because of exhaustion. Training was often hard, and there were instances in which the idea of giving up emerged into consciousness – but I have never allowed such an idea to take hold. Outsiders, such as television viewers and sports journalists often use the expression ‘s/he is suffering (right now)’, but I have not experienced such instances of suffering themselves. They only have symbolic knowledge of such instances, perhaps arrived at through the metaphorization from other experiences. Despite all of these experiences, some of which have driven me