

Discourses We Live By

Narratives of Educational
and Social Endeavour

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3. Narratives of Fundamentalism, Negative Capability and the Democratic Imperative

Alan Bainbridge and Linden West

Alan Bainbridge and Linden West offer a theoretical discussion of (mainly) contemporary British society with particular reference to Stoke-on-Trent, the home of the Workers' Education Association and a city still struggling to adjust following the decline of the pottery industry. They posit the growth of fundamentalism as a search for certainties and propose that Keats' notion of negative capability (the ability to accept uncertainty) may offer an alternative lens.

The Starting Point: Fundamentalism Is Ordinary

The notion that 'we', as individuals, whole groups or cultures, possess the truth and nothing but the truth, unlike the other and otherness, seems to be a universal discursive tendency, colonizing diverse minds and hearts, across different historical times and geographical spaces. The truth and nothing but the truth of politics, religion, economics, and of myth and diverse ideologies — here lies the province of the fundamentalist; and maybe the fundamentalist lurking in every one of our psychologies and cultures. Fundamentalism, we argue, is quite ordinary.

The word fundamentalism was coined in California and its origins lie in Protestant movements in nineteenth-century America. These movements consisted of people who wanted to assert the inerrancy of the

Bible — the direct creation of the world and humanity *ex nihilo* by God as opposed to Darwinian evolution — and the authenticity of miracles and the Virgin birth. But fundamentalism and related discourses of absolute truth encompass very different phenomena (Ruthven, 2007). Following Wittgenstein, the word, heuristically, is helpful in a search for discursive similarities across different forms. Of course, not every person whom we call a fundamentalist reaches for a Kalashnikov or pipe bomb. But, broadly speaking, fundamentalism can be thought of as a retreat from engagement with others and otherness, rooted, perhaps, in feelings of disrespect, marginalization and or psychological or even cultural vulnerability. It works at the level of discourse or metanarrative, colonizing inner space: the other — whether Jew, ‘White trash’, ‘people of colour’, Muslims, working class people, etc. — is to blame for a range of ills. Fundamentalism also presents itself as beyond contestation, that there is simply no alternative available, as in the kind of market fundamentalism pervading the contemporary world. In the case of racism and Islamism, people turn to those who think like themselves and hostility develops towards the different other, or ideas and experiences that challenge their view of the world. Fundamentalism among some men, for instance, can represent a reaction to the terror of seeming feminine and unmanly — as in extreme fascistic organizations (Flemmen, 2014).

The dynamics of fundamentalism can encompass processes we might recognize in ourselves, at least at times: when stress and uncertainty seem overwhelming, when we feel out of our depth and can’t cope, and when we may grab at facts or certainties to help manage anxiety. Traits such as dogmatism, rigidity and a need for order and power, can underpin a wide psycho-political spectrum of people and groups. The need for external sources of absolute authority or truth, or for discourses of complete certainty — for the mythical texts of Communism, Islamism or Catholicism — may be a kind of defence against not knowing, as well as being a widespread human phenomenon. So is the tendency, individually and collectively, to split off parts of ourselves that we fear or don’t like, such as the capacity for violence or greed, and to project these onto others.

We can factor ‘market fundamentalism’ into our wordplay, with its dogmatism, its tendency towards absolute truths and its disparagement

of the poor as deviant and wholly responsible for their own condition. According to academic and psychoanalyst Paul Verhaeghe (2014), this way of thinking casts the unsuccessful as deficient in some way, embedding and exacerbating feelings of confusion and despair engendered by disadvantage. Turning inwards, people feel increasingly isolated and this insularity extends into institutional life. When educational and care establishments function as businesses and financial reward depends on performance, team spirit and cooperative endeavour are replaced by competition and personal enterprise. This individualism penetrates wider society making it harder to develop and sustain deep, even loving, relationships and, thus, our lives are colonized by the performative imperative.

Verhaeghe's main concern is how social change has led to what he calls a psychic crisis and altered the way we think about ourselves. He has investigated the effects of neoliberal fundamentalism for more than thirty years, concluding that the context in which we live heavily influences who we become, and that neoliberal practices have negative consequences on mental health, for example, the development of narcissistic tendencies.

He claims that 'dependence is spineless' and believes that we must make our mark, stand up for ourselves and do our own thing (Verhaeghe, 2014, p. 13). Such individualism and the disintegration of collective notions of well-being can exact a terrible price in suffering and distress. So too might the tendency to blame the poor for their condition and the negative stereotyping of whole communities. Some turn in response to the racist gang or extreme Islamist group: having a gang and mythic narrative of our own is one response to anomie and alienation (West, 2016).

We suggest that an important antidote to fundamentalist tendencies, of whatever kind, lies in what the English poet John Keats called 'negative capability'. This is the capacity to live in doubt and not knowing, as part of a process of coming to know and being open to what may be more truthful, worthwhile, even beautiful. Such capability, we argue, is grounded in the quality of our relationships, which encompass educational settings as well as families, communities and those closest to us. We explore one manifestation of negative capability in a form of liberal workers' education that emerged in

the United Kingdom at the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But we also suggest, paradoxically, that we might have need of our fundamentalisms, at times, in biographical trajectories, as a means to escape restrictive and stifling cultures of conformity. Adolescent flirtations with various forms of extreme politics is one example. However, we regard this as part of the difficult business of growing up, and as a stage in the struggle for more open, reflexive and dialogical ways of knowing.

Distress in a City

Our central argument is the outcome of historical reappraisal and in-depth, auto/biographical narrative research into racism and fundamentalism in a post-industrial city, Stoke-on-Trent, in the English Midlands, where Linden was born and raised (West, 2016). The research included in-depth narrative interviews with autodidacts, schooled in workers' education and the wider Labour movement. He revisited the history of workers' education, including his own writing (West, 1972), in the light of the city's post-industrial distress, encompassing racism on the public housing estate where he had lived. The process was stimulated by Jonathan Rose's reassessment of workers' education (Rose, 2010) and its place in the development of British social democracy, alongside the insights of the historian Lawrence Goldman (1995; 2013). Rose drew on diverse personal testimonies and forms of life writing in his re-evaluation of the Workers' Educational Association (WEA) while Goldman interrogated the historical interpretation of historians like Roger Fieldhouse and Stuart Macintyre. Linden was once modishly dismissive of forms of workers' education. But then he was a child of the 1960s, when space opened for critical thinking alongside new forms of fundamentalism, hubris and dismissiveness towards previous generations. This is a central theme of his recent book (West, 2016).

The basic contention of the chapter is that we are all prone, at times, to cling to what we conceive to be the truth and nothing but that truth, which can be illuminated through auto/biographical and historical enquiry. In the history of workers' education, for instance, in the United Kingdom, non-conformist autodidacts could sometimes be dogmatic,

rooted in religion or hard, structuralist readings of Marxism. Their questioning was paradoxical: challenging conventional wisdoms but inflexible in their response to others. They might quote texts with quasi-religious fervour in workers' classes. Their Marxism could involve an extremely mechanical version of the materialist conception of history, in which human activity was controlled by economic forces independent of human volition (Macintyre, 1980).

Workers' education in the UK was characterized by a mix of Enlightenment idealism, the aspirations of democratic socialism, as well as Marxism, and for many, a religious belief in the potential divinity in everyone. It was a social as much as an educational movement. Jonathan Rose (2010) argues that it played a key role in creating the welfare state after the Second World War. Workers' education could model, in microcosm, the good, fraternal and equal dialogical and democratic society. These adult classes represented a social and educational experiment open to the marginalized, with an equality of status between students that encouraged freedom of expression and enquiry, tolerance and respect, alongside the turbulence generated in the clash of ideas and difference. But difference and dispute did not, in general, degenerate into 'I-it' objectification, at least in any permanent way. At their best the classes were communities of imaginative, caring, committed and thoughtful students, in which all could be teachers as well as learners.

Workers' education, in the form of tutorial classes, once thrived in Stoke. The first ever university workers' tutorial class took place there in 1908 sponsored by the University of Oxford. Thirty or so worker-students met on Friday evenings for two hours, over a period of years, with their tutor, R. H. Tawney, subsequently a distinguished economic historian. The tutorial classes constituted an alliance, unusual in European popular education, between progressive elements in universities and workers' organizations. The classes were free from prescribed curricula and members were encouraged to explore issues in their working lives from the perspectives of history, politics, economics and literature. Fortnightly essays were required, and the standard of some of these was high (Goldman, 1995; West, 1972, 2017). There were no formal examinations or qualifications due to a desire to eliminate competition and vocationalism from the classroom (Rose, 2010; West, 1972).

The first students met in the pottery town of Longton that was to become part of the new city of Stoke-on-Trent. They were potters, miners, clerks, shop assistants and elementary school teachers, women as well as men (West, 1972). Many came from nonconformist backgrounds, from families that encouraged them to think for themselves. The Marxist Social Democratic Federation (SDF) made up the nucleus of the first class. The Social Democratic Federation was formed in 1883 under the leadership of Henry Hyndman, who was the son of a businessman and became a journalist and political agitator (Macintyre, 1980). The Federation was strongly opposed to the British Liberal Party of the time, and its programme was progressive, calling for a forty-eight-hour working week, the abolition of child labour, compulsory free secular education, equality for women and the nationalization of the means of production, distribution and exchange. Some members of the SDF, according to Stuart Macintyre, held an extremely 'mechanical version of the materialist conception of history' in which the whole of human experience was controlled by economic forces independent of human agency (Macintyre, 1980, p. 17). Education, politics and consciousness were mere epiphenomena of the techniques and relations of production. Such students could be rigid in their economic doctrines (*ibid.*), and this rigidity played out in the tutorial classes.

However, Tawney (1917) thought the tutorial class 'movement' and the WEA a successful 'experiment in democratic education' (Taylor & Steele, 2011, pp. 32, 30). According to him, it was founded on three core principles. First, the opposition to revolutionary violence: 'one may not do evil that good should come', in Cobbett's dictum of a century before. Second, no institution, however perfect in conception, could be made to work effectively by individuals whose morality was inadequate. Third, where a sound morality was lacking, this could be forged in a community of scholars seeking truth and the common good (Dennis & Halsey, 1988). There was an Aristotelian ideal at work, as well as Oxford idealism (Goldman, 1995): notions of the fully developed person living in communities, building and sustaining virtue in relationship — communities cultivating not self- but other-regardedness — directing themselves to higher aims than the purely egotistic or narcissistic (Dennis & Halsey, 1988). The idealists at Oxford who influenced Tawney were opposed to individualism, utilitarianism

and social atomism and drew on German philosophers, especially Kant and Hegel, and the notion that individuals are best understood and can best realize their potential in the collective. Men and women were part of webs of social and political, as well as economic relationships from which they could not be divorced for analytic or practical purposes. They were linked together by values, institutions and diverse patterns of association rather than economics alone.

Tawney himself had doubts about the tutorial classes, not least the intellectual and emotional effort required from the worker students. Tawney was also far from a naïve idealist and there were ‘limits to his moralising’, as Lawrence Goldman notes (Goldman, 1995, p. 160). He was aware that the same spirit of non-conformity that drove some of the worker students could also narrow viewpoints and bring the tendency to over-proselytize, making it difficult to engage in dialogue and be respectful to difference.

Breakdown, and Taking Tea

It is interesting that many of the worker-students admired tutors like Tawney, who remained steadfast as well as respectful even when harangued by a fundamentalist student. Leftist fundamentalists, sometimes from the Social Democratic Federation and later the Communist Party, though not exclusively so, might quote from texts like *Das Capital* with religious fervour. The other students noted how Tawney remained steadfast in the face of provocation. One recalled a particular Marxist — the SDF could dominate the early tutorial classes — challenging point after point and referring to classic Marxist texts. Tawney took it in his stride but insisted that there were other points of view. The student accused the tutor of hopping around like a bird, from twig to twig, and a sense of bad temper pervaded the room. However, Tawney insisted that everyone, including his challenger, take tea together afterwards and tell stories, read poetry and sing songs. A shared humanity and a spirit of fraternity were restored (Rose, 2010, p. 266; West, 2017). The class stayed together despite the local secretary of the SDF demanding that his members leave for fear of contamination (Goldman, 2013).

John Holford (2015) usefully reminds us that these were classes, not lectures, and ideas were explored and developed in discussion. The processes of education were democratized — students engaged in research and discovery through using original source material, like historical documents, rather than simply relying on secondary texts. The fundamental aim of the tutorial classes was to make university education available to all people in their localities, in pedagogically democratic and dialogical ways. The movement was about building social solidarities rather than the contemporary obsession with social mobility. Humanity, risk taking, and engagement with otherness, and challenges to fundamentalism, of whatever kind, constituted a cultural as well as collective challenge to the seductions of omniscience.

The Seductions of Fundamentalism

We are suggesting that a long, never-to-be-completed struggle is to be fought against fundamentalism, in ourselves as well as others. Psychoanalyst Adam Phillips (2012) has considered the relationship between the internal world and the appeal of fundamentalism. Drawing on clinical work, over many years, he discusses the problems of ‘not getting it’ in intimate or wider social life. Not ‘getting it’, feeling confused, misunderstood or inadequate can have devastating effects in early life. We don false mantles in the hope of gaining the other’s attention and regard. ‘Getting it’ — feeling understood by a powerful other — means potentially not feeling humiliated or diminished. ‘Not getting it’, however — not understanding what is going on and feeling lost and frantic, like the child who struggles to understand a mother’s depression — is a widespread human experience. What we may then long for, as mentioned above, is a gang and a mythic narrative of our own. A dream of like-mindedness is the dream in which the possibility of not getting it disappears. We can be attracted to groups of the like-minded because the issue of not getting it is resolved in the abolition of complexity. The defence against not getting it, or not knowing, evokes the seduction of certainty. Hannah Arendt (1958) observed how opinion can solidify into ideology and fundamentalism, which demand assent and certainty. There are fundamentalisms of the left as well as of the political and ideological right.

The process involves creating rigid boundaries between ‘us’ and ‘them’, and between our self of present understanding and a potential self of a different way of seeing. Fundamentalist groups offer compelling ‘truths’ of how the other is to blame — whether in the ‘moral corruption’ of the West or the ‘greedy Jew’ — and how ‘our’ group is good. The trouble is that this involves splitting into an idealized self or selves, and the projection onto the other of aspects we most dislike in ourselves. No hard work is required in this anti-education, because the fault lies elsewhere. The turn to fundamentalism, old and new, brings for its disciples the feeling of getting it, of belonging, of recognition in a grand if delusional way. We are made to feel part of something that is essential to creating a purified world. Education, however, as in the workers’ tutorial classes, gives us choice — to decide whether or not we love the world enough to wish to seek to understand and take responsibility for it, as well as to engage with the other in humane and open ways (Nixon, 2015).

Therefore, we suggest there are psychosocial patterns across fundamentalism in its many guises. Wittgenstein thought it important to play with similarities in the use of a word: a word such as ‘games’, for instance, in its various guises. Ball games, word games, Olympic Games are all different but there can be family resemblances (Ruthven, 2007). There may be resemblances between market and Islamic fundamentalism, or between the zealots in a tutorial class and (only occasionally we hope), our own behaviour. Islamic fundamentalism may, like forms of leftist ideology, exploit the power of trauma and myth in the processes of radicalization. If Islam is full of narratives of mercy and tolerance, as Christianity and socialism are, all too have a darker side (Hassan & Weiss, 2015). The dark side is revealed in the worship of violence, the degeneration of the ideals of the French Revolution into slaughter, and the grotesque narcissism of small difference that continues to haunt the progressive imagination.

Market fundamentalism might appear to be different with regards to violence. But it too employs powerful mythology, grounded in social Darwinism and the cult of success, in ways that have penetrated to the heart of modern Western societies. The market is sovereign and can provide for all human needs: consumption is crucial, as is the consumer (rather than the citizen). It works through appealing, via instruments of persuasion, to a desire for status, triumph, power, sexual

success and transcendental performance (Verhaeghe, 2014). It may also, in its manipulation of images, employ violence in video games or social media to sell products, using heroes, myths and triumphal sexual conquest to make its pitch. Thus Mirowski (2013), drawing on Hayek's free market ideas, argues that neoliberalism is profoundly anti-educational in its assumptions and practices: encouraging the prioritization of the market and consumption as the only good. Too much education of a questioning kind is antithetical to the efficient functioning of markets and the cultivation of desire, discontent and materialistic illusions on which conspicuous consumption depends.

We suggest that the importance of the open, diverse social and educational group for human flourishing mirrors the psychoanalytic stress on the cosmopolitan, democratic psyche or Biesta's normative subjectification (Biesta, 2011). Andrew Samuels (1993) has written that the cultural diversity of the population is not a disaster, but a challenge and opportunity for healthy internal life. How to remain open to others and acknowledge and learn from difference, rather than seeing it as a threat, becomes the central issue for us all. The metaphor of the psyche as a theatre helps us to comprehend this idea: internal worlds are constituted and peopled by varied 'objects' drawn from intersubjective relationships — objects that encourage or constrain and enable us to take risks with the unknown and the other.

But, as indicated, there can be a more positive and developmental dimension to our relationship with fundamentalism. An insight into this emerged in a discussion on the social unconscious at the ESREA Triennial Conference in 2017 (Salling Olesen et al., 2017). Lynn Froggett, in response to Linden's paper, described how she embraced the Socialist Workers Party, at one stage in her life, as a kind of antidote to the stifling narrowness of a provincial background. She used its discursive forms, however 'fundamentalist' these might have been, as a good object, in psychoanalytic terms, to break free from certain kinds of conformity and to play with new discourses. We might need a more sympathetic educational reading of fundamentalist tendencies, one that can be biographically developmental. The capacity for negative capability might, in such terms, be a lifelong struggle.

Negative Capability and the Unconscious

It is worth returning to Keats' emblematic consideration of the struggle to remain engaged with the verisimilitude of beauty. He refers to this in a letter (Keats, 1817/2018) to his brothers and offers a helpful metaphor, especially when combined with psychoanalytic understandings of the interplay between internal and external worlds. Keats introduces the principle of negative capability as his letter ends — it seemingly emerges from a discussion on the qualities required for 'achievement' in literature. Yet the narrative of the letter is initially less whimsical, indeed, rather prosaic, as tales are told of endless dining out while bemoaning such conviviality ('for I have been out too much lately'). Keats is critical of a painting he had recently seen that offered 'nothing to be intense on', arguing that the excellence of art is in its intensity. 'I imagine a painting, that in common-parlance, is what it is'; there being no depth of hidden meaning, no salacious seduction, for Keats, 'no women one feels mad to kiss'. The painting disappoints on all levels as it has an 'unpleasantness without momentous depth of speculation excited, in which to bury its repulsiveness'. There appears to be a disconnect between the realness of the painting and the emotion it could, should evoke, if it were good. Despite being an actual painting, existing in an actual world, there is for Keats something viscerally lacking in it, and it is this something that can make a painting 'intense'.

There is a similar story told in the same letter, not of painting, or literature, but of how to enjoy the company of others. Keats acknowledges that he has dined out too much, and maybe has become weary of company. He complains to his brothers how tiresome it is to be subjected to 'wit' and not 'humour'. The witty say things 'that make one start, without making one feel' and are overly concerned with fashion and etiquette. There is a superficiality in Keats' description of these dining partners and he would much rather be in 'low company' where humorous conversation predominated, not fashion and clever verbal games. For Keats, an enjoyable meal is one where the company is unpretentious and less likely to be persuaded by the continuing ephemerality of fashion. The illustrations provided in Keats' letter represent the interplay between an encounter with the external world, the painting or these companions, in conjunction with an internal/emotive response. It is

at this stage of the letter that Keats introduces negative capability, and at this stage of our chapter we return to psychoanalysis to make links between such negative capability, Klein's theory of mental positions and fundamentalism.

Unlike Freud, Klein (1998) assumed that the ego and its defences were active in the infant from birth, and that mature mental development equated to a resolution of internal desires with external realities. Klein proposed two mental positions that corresponded to the developing relationship between the internal self and the external other: the early paranoid-schizoid, and a latter, more mature depressive position. The very young paranoid-schizoid infant has the experience of hunger, or the desire to be cuddled, but as yet no symbolic way of communicating this to an 'other'. As a result, there is a conflict between the individual's internal experience and the reality of an 'other'-dominated external world. The infant also cannot distinguish between the self and other and inhabits a frustrating world, with feelings, without memory, which are unknown and seemingly unknowable. It is this paranoid-schizoid mode of functioning with which Keats' negative capability struggles, staying with uncertainty, doubt and myth without access to fact or reason. What is significant is that the infant does not stay stuck in paranoid-schizoid thinking, and can be enabled, with the help of an empathic other, to move towards a depressive, more integrated position where needs can be satisfied, if always provisionally, and where the world is a mix of nurture and frustration.

The achievement of the human infant is the creative act of successfully negotiating the paranoid-schizoid position, in relationship, informed by the symbols and metaphors offered by language, to be able to inhabit the psychic reality of the depressive position. From the perspective of the depressive position the infant can utilize language, alongside feelings, to think about a world previously experienced through feelings alone, and importantly to distinguish between the needs of self and other. Therefore, the shift from paranoid-schizoid to depressive thinking is a move from selfish frustration, with the creative use of language, to a position where metaphor and abstract thinking can be used to integrate the needs of the self and others. Despite Klein locating her description of the paranoid-schizoid position in very early infant experience, it is largely assumed (see Bion, 1963) that this and the depressive position are two

mental states that exist across the lifespan; and can be thought about as normative as well as pathological (Britton, 1998, cited in Harrang, 2012). The thinking characteristic of both the paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions provides insight into unconscious processes that may help us theorize the nature of fundamentalism, as against an emotional and intellectual openness in the history of workers' education.

As we have suggested, paranoid-schizoid thinking is a frustrating state, without memory, waiting for meaning to evolve, during which the infant or the adult experiences feelings that are as yet unarticulated. For the adult, negative capability — where unknowns are sensed and thought about with others in the right environment — needs time to emerge. Bion (1970, cited in Harrang, 2012) argues that this is the space in which creativity emerges, leading to the depressive position, and it is a normal part of thinking throughout the lifespan. Britton (1998, cited in Harrang, 2012) acknowledges that each of Klein's positions can also be experienced pathologically: for example, if the frustrations inherent within paranoid-schizoid thinking, or the experience of negative capability, are not resolved, then the adult will exaggerate good and bad feelings. Unconscious defences operate to protect the self, resulting in primitive 'splitting', where good feelings are introjected, and bad feelings projected outwards onto external objects. Therefore, the self is experienced as good and the other as bad, and a fundamentalist, black and white/right and wrong splitting predominates. Interestingly, Britton also recognizes a potential pathology when the more thoughtful, mature depressive position is used to defend against uncertainty, as well as the anxiety of the paranoid-schizoid position. Again, the fundamentalist can be seen to inhabit such positions and to hold on, in an extreme and exaggerated manner, to the security of established belief system(s), or to grab at new ones, without properly internalizing and digesting their complex qualities and discursive potential.

The fundamentalist is not therefore to be seen as simply 'stuck' in a primitive paranoid-schizoid position, unable to access and use negative capability; for it is equally possible that certainty in more mature depressive thinking provides sufficient motivation to defend against the potential uncertainty of negative capability. Keats' letter contains both possibilities: the depressive certainty of the witty fashionable bore, and the painting that, despite being accurate, does

not evoke deep emotion. He also references Coleridge's attempt to describe beauty 'pursued through Volumes' that ultimately 'obliterates all consideration' and it is in the lines before this that Keats introduces negative capability. It is here that Keats appreciates the creative accomplishments that can be achieved, if only artists or dinner companions could stay with uncertainty and allow thoughts to emerge in a world that is complex as well as psychically and psychosocially real, satisfying and frustrating.

Conclusion: Negative Capability

Notwithstanding, being colonized by the truth and nothing but a truth denotes the opposite of certainty or epistemological substance — it represents a fragile and uncertain subjectivity in need of externally derived authority, whether of Marxism, religion or whatever. But 'liberal' workers' education provided a cultural and educational space to engage with fundamentalisms in various guises, including racism and bigotry, and to move towards what Melanie Klein (1998) called the depressive position. This involves some acceptance of the good and not so good in every one of us, and thus greater openness to the other and otherness (see Nancy Dobrin, 1990, for instance, for one compelling account). Here was a cultural space of sufficient equality, respectfulness (including towards the bigot), dialogue and truth-seeking. At best the process generated what critical theorist Axel Honneth (2007; 2009) calls self/other recognition, including the capacity to recognize the other by being fully recognized oneself. Through life writing and auto/biographical narrative research, we bear witness to how educators like Tawney and the worker-students created a good-enough space to question and transcend discursive assumptions and engage in the eclectic symbolic world, and its otherness, in emotionally, intellectually and discursively liberating ways.

How best to conclude our discussion of negative capability? Stephen Hebron (2009, 2017) writes of how, in December 1817, Keats' letter to his brothers talked of returning from a Christmas pantomime and discussed various subjects: several thoughts dovetailed in his mind, Keats said, and he wondered about the qualities that went to form great and satisfying achievement especially in literature. Shakespeare possessed such

qualities in abundance, but less so with Coleridge, he thought. Keats concluded that negative capability was at the core of this quality: when a person can stay in uncertainties, or mysteries and doubts, without irritably reaching after fact, reason or certainty. His language, although not immediately clear, is suggestive and idiosyncratic. Obviously, the word 'negative' is not used pejoratively but to communicate a notion that a person's potential is defined by what he or she does not possess. Essential to literary achievement, Keats insists, is a certain passivity, a willingness to wait and let what is mysterious or doubtful remain just that. It might in short be best to break off from a relentless search for knowledge, and instead contemplate something beautiful and true, in the Romantic spirit; 'a fine verisimilitude'. The experience and intuitive appreciation of the beautiful, or of the potential beauty of a different idea or way of seeing, is central to poetic talent, but also to democratic educational sensibilities (Hebron, 2009; 2017).

Moreover, such an idea finds deep traction in psychoanalytic thinking about struggles for profounder forms of change. Any new idea presents itself as an emotional experience, which can be beautiful but also threatening. Pleasure and pain — of losing cognitive certainty — may co-exist (Meltzer & Harris Williams, 1988). In the workers' tutorial classes, as well as in other creative struggles in literature or in therapeutic settings, negative capability might just thrive, sufficiently, to enable a person to live in doubt, and then to experience, over time, a fundamental change in a way of seeing and feeling, despite how unsettling the process might be. The culture of learning groups matters in such a process: a spirit of fraternity, and the capacity of a teacher to live in uncertainty, matter greatly. Such cultures were at the heart of Tawney's successful experiment in democratic education and may lie at the core of all good-enough, inclusive and dialogical learning groups.

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