

Holy Sparks of Dialogic Civility: A Drama in Three Acts

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Abstract: This article, based on a keynote address honoring Ronald C. Arnett, weaves the experiences of the author, one of Arnett's first students, with the intellectual contributions Arnett has made to comprehending and responding to the challenges of current affairs. Arnett's substantial impact as an author is portrayed as a source of the same inspirational "holy sparks" that he eloquently identified in the works of Hannah Arendt and Emmanuel Levinas. Distinctions are drawn between a dark form of fantasy, serving as the basis for denying and obscuring prevalent social risks, and opportunities for tenacious hope, through which the creative imagination is allowed to flourish in problem solving discourse. Current exemplars verifying the viability of such imaginative discourse are also provided.

Keywords: dialogue; risk; fantasy; imagination

For context, bear in mind I was one of Ronald C. Arnett's first students after he earned his PhD. Consequently, our relationship has touched six decades, starting in 1978. In those early years, A. J. Muste, clergyman and life-long passivist, was a repeated topic of class conversation. Muste silently held a candle in nightly solo protest to the Vietnam War outside the White House. When asked if he honestly felt his individual effort would change US policy, Muste offered these inspiring words, "I don't do it to change the country. I do it so the country won't change me" (Erickson 2017, para. 4).

I see the flicker of Muste's candle as a spark of hope—a refrain that no amount of darkness can hide a spark of light. The relevance of Muste's stance was apparent then and is apparent now in the substantial body of work published by Ron Arnett. In his work, Ron has manifested sparks of hope for the quiet, and a boldly advanced dialogic civility in a world that, without such advocacy for seeking common ground, is inclined to silence virtue.

When I was one of Ron's undergraduate students, the Speech Communication program resided in the Performing Arts Center at St. Cloud State University in Minnesota, USA. The building, modern for its time, also housed the music and theatre programs. Walking to and from class, one was often serenaded by the sounds spilling out of music practice rooms and performance halls. Theatre

actors taking breaks during dress rehearsals slipped in and out of character in the hallways. Thus, I think it is fitting to divide my presentation celebrating Ron's work into a prologue, three acts, and an epilogue:

Prologue: The Nature of Holy Sparks

Act I: Sparks of Love in a World of Individualism

Act II: Sparks of Imagination in the Darkness of Fantasy

Act III: Sparks of Tenacious Hope in Times of Peril

Epilogue

Prologue: The Nature of Holy Sparks

In his prolific career, Ron tirelessly challenged the perils of reckless modernity, where consideration of the future and the needs of those living at the margins of society are unapologetically ignored. In the context of Hannah Arendt's work, Arnett (2013) eloquently describes leaders whose sensibility is lost in modernity with the following analogy: "such persons of self-professed confidence are like those who run full speed ahead in the dark while asking others to follow, somehow failing to ask whether running at top velocity is prudent or even safe" (4). Ron turns to Arendt for an answer to such heedlessness: "Arendt countered modernity's optimism, undue confidence, and artificial light spread by the myth of the inevitability of progress with metaphors of genuine darkness and genuine light, permitting us to witness 'holy sparks' of genuine hope in places where many of us would know only fear and uncertainty" (3). Alongside a twenty-four-hour news cycle where the most extreme voices are amplified, Ron offers holy sparks as the kindling for dialogic civility, through which selfless compassion for one's brothers and sisters remains as it has always been—the best way forward.

Act I: Sparks of Love in a World of Individualism

As a teacher, Ron countered the obsession with self, inspired by reckless modernity, with an emphasis on dialogue, love, and compassion. As a sophomore, for example, my final paper focused on an application of Erich Fromm's work in an applied setting. As Ron collected our final papers in class, he sensed I was dissatisfied with my paper in its current form and casually asked me what I thought of my paper. I said I could have done better, but I ran out of time. His response was to give me two more days in the final examination period to further develop my thoughts. Ron constantly inspired us to drink deeply from the original works of great minds, like Fromm. And I accepted the invitation.

The added time he offered afforded me an opportunity to further examine the applications of Fromm's (2000) *The Art of Loving* in the life of a college sophomore at the edge of the 1980s. Fromm introduced me to the full range of love, from romantic love and its unrealistic expectations to love of parents,

brothers (and sisters), ourselves, and God. This is knowledge that influenced my classmates and me, not for a quarter or semester but for a lifetime. When I went to Ron's office to pick up my graded paper, he said simply, "I enjoyed reading this. The extra time was worth it." Ron lives what he taught.

Fromm made clear to me that love of our brothers and sisters is much more than an altruistic ideal. Brotherly and sisterly love reflects the fact that we are all one. Only in the love of those who do not serve a worldly purpose does the art of loving unfold. Such love is a spark of hope—a holy spark—inspiring civility and dialogue in a world obsessed with defeating and dominating others.

This conceptualization of brotherly love is consistently expressed in Ron's masterful analysis of Emmanuel Levinas's work. As Levinas repeatedly asserted, "I am my brother's keeper." Ron argues unwaveringly that this realization is the foundation for civility and dialogue. As he explains, "Without openness to the Other, hospitality fails to greet the unexpected—accidental dialogues cannot be forced, only appreciated. Such a dialogue is akin to a communicative spirit of 'holy sparks'" (Arnett 2017, 6). These are the sparks that give us hope for the future.

Before moving on to Act II, there is one additional matter I am compelled to mention. After completing Ron's class and my study of Fromm's work, I met and started dating a music major at St. Cloud State. That relationship has continued through today. My wife, Deanna Sellnow, and I have now been married for more than four decades. I sincerely believe I am a better husband and partner because of the deep thinking and inspired learning from Ron's classes. Deanna and I both remain close friends and colleagues of Ron and consider ourselves better people for having known him.

Act II: Sparks of Imagination in the Darkness of Fantasy

The holy sparks Ron sees consistently in the works of Arendt and Levinas are essential for responding to the dark times we see in our country and our world today. Reflecting on Immanuel Kant's work, Ron sees fantasy as the dark side of imagination. Simply stated, a world without civility relies on fantasy to perpetuate self-serving myths. Conversely, imagination is the source of solutions. Rather than mindlessly charging into the darkness, imagination empowers us to ponder what is ahead with both mindful caution and inspired optimism.

An initial step in engaging the imagination is the realization that the world's population is not conveniently divided into two populations: those with whom one agrees and the opposition, or bluntly stated, those who are reasonable and those who are wrong. More accurately, the world is as John Dewey ([1938] 2012) saw it: composed of not one, not two, but many publics. Imagination is essential to finding the common ground among many publics—a sacred place Ron tirelessly pursued. Civil discourse is the means through which common ground is imagined and enacted.

Regrettably, much social discourse is now and has often been imperiled by fantasies of absolute division to a point where groups identify themselves as much or more by antithesis (Cheney 1983)—what and whom they oppose—as by whom

they support or what they advocate. Such polarized thinking often inspires hatred and fear where neither is warranted. As such, groups create a structure of reality where fierce opposition is the only reasonable alternative. Keepers of such fantasies run full speed into a darkness of their own making, trapped in a self-imposed reality befitting Fyodor Dostoevsky's lament: "The best way to keep a prisoner from escaping is to make sure he never knows he's in prison" (Goodreads n.d.).

As Ron and colleagues Sarah M. DeLuliis and Matthew Corr (2017) establish in their book, *Corporate Communication Crisis Leadership: Advocacy and Ethics*, fantasies, though expedient, result in poor decision making. They offer the Deepwater Horizon catastrophe as an exemplar in failed planning and management. British Petroleum's unprecedented drilling went on, buoyed by a crisis response plan that real-world experience would expose as a complete fantasy. The company charged into the darkness motivated by profit and void of essential precautions.

Risk denial like that exercised by British Petroleum contributes in large part to an increasing frequency and intensity of crises (Biggs et al. 2011). My current research identifies three persistent types of risk denial based on fantasy: outright denial, "natural evolution" as fatalism, and issue re-orientation. I describe each of these forms of denial briefly.

Outright denial is perhaps the most egregious form of fantasy. In this case, assertions are made, and evidence is fabricated to refute what is commonly known or accepted as true. For instance, claims that the COVID-19 pandemic was a hoax are an outright denial of a known risk. Alex Jones, for years, drew listeners to his online programming by claiming that the horrific Sandy Hook school shooting was a hoax perpetrated by crisis actors and promoted through fake news. The absurdity of his remarks drew a large following until he was removed from social media and found guilty of defamation (Williamson 2022).

Others deny risk through fatalistic claims that the danger is a natural part of evolution. Such claims are common in response to efforts intended to address climate change. Climate change deniers insist the world has naturally warmed and cooled in the past and that plants and animals naturally evolve in response. While it is true that the climate has varied in millennia past, such skepticism fails to acknowledge the drastic changes and extinction of many plants and animals Earth has experienced as a result (Rainforest Alliance 2021).

Issue reorientation focuses on the simplistic assumptions that there are only two sides to an issue, that compromise is defeat, and that anyone not with me on this issue is against me. Supporting information for such divisive thinking is, unfortunately, plentiful on social media platforms taking the form of misinformation and disinformation (Sellnow, Parrish, and Semenas 2019).

Reviewing the frequency and form of fantasy in crisis denial can be depressing. Yet, as Ron so eloquently argued, there is reason for tenacious hope. I'll discuss these opportunities next in Act III.

Act III: Sparks of Tenacious Hope in Times of Peril

By its nature, risk is fraught with uncertainty (Sellnow and Sellnow 2023). If we knew with certainty when and how all dangers would manifest, they would remain crises, but the element of risk would be gone. If uncertainty is central to risk, how then can we recognize with confidence the sparks of tenacious hope? The answer is found in the pursuit of what Henri J. M. Nouwen (1994) described as being articulate in our uncertainty. This concept may seem contradictory. How can one be articulate in a world of uncertainty? The answer is found in the sparks of light that give vision in the darkness of our times.

America L. Edwards, Rebecca Freihaut, Timothy L. Sellnow, Deanna D. Sellnow, and Morgan C. Getchell (2023) characterize the pursuit of such sparks of light in times of darkness as engaged learning. They see civil dialogue, so often espoused by Ron, as the means for constant learning while engaged in risk and crisis management. A practitioner of risk and crisis communication will never have all the answers, but engaged learning creates an atmosphere of transparency, suspended judgment, compassion for others, and a sincere desire to mitigate suffering.

When enacting engaged learning, we are part of something bigger than ourselves. We are seeking the sparks of light that inform us through affective, behavioral, and cognitive learning (Edwards et al. 2023). Affective learning acknowledges the relevance of personal fears and losses pertaining to the emotions of those at risk. Behavioral learning emphasizes the capacity of those in danger to take protective action. Cognitive learning challenges all communicators to translate their technical information into practical comprehensible knowledge for those at risk.

Many examples of successful engaged learning in response to risk and crisis exist. For example, Rebecca Freihaut (2023) spent two years assessing the efforts of a community in Mayfield, Kentucky, to recover from a tornado that decimated the small town. She observed a level of unity and emergent leadership previously unknown to the community. Rather than further dividing the community, the recovery process sparked new forms of unity in the shared visualization of their community revitalized.

Agencies such as the World Health Organization (2005) are engaged in the discovery of best practices for communicating via social media during crises. They seek recommendations that will assist in the accurate reporting of risk information. Although this objective is formidable, given the prevalence of misinformation and disinformation, there is reason for optimism. For example, Pauline Gidget Estella (2023) observed an interest and willingness of journalists to develop meta competencies better preparing them to perform their role in an increasingly digital society. In other words, there is interest in and dedication to engaged learning in global journalism.

Lucy Jones, a renowned seismologist in Los Angeles, California, successfully bridged political party lines to establish better building standards and enforcement of these standards for earthquake readiness (Alden 2014). The result,

put poignantly, is that people who may have died in a Los Angeles earthquake are now much more likely to live. Lucy Jones provides the kind of holy spark Ron seeks to cultivate.

These are only a few examples of how a pursuit of holy sparks through engaged learning, civil dialogue, and the recognition that we are our sisters' and brothers' keepers can give us an articulacy in our dark times of uncertainty.

Epilogue

We are long from seeing a final act from Ron. He remains a vibrant communicator and servant to a world in need. He is a cherished friend and colleague to many. We can, however, reflect momentarily on Ron's vast accomplishments. He has always created holy sparks of light in a world darkened by conflict, greed, and hypocrisy.

From *Dwell in Peace* (1986) to *Communication and Tenacious Hope* (2022), Ron Arnett has articulated a way forward, sharing his own insight and introducing many of us to the works of other giants of humane scholarship. Through his tireless efforts, he has energized generations to seek common ground, listen with compassion and tolerance, and improve the world around them at every corner possible. In doing so, I genuinely believe, thanks to the influence of Ron Arnett's work, that there are those who would have died in the violence or emotional turmoil of conflict arising from the darkness of this world but have instead lived, and perhaps even thrived, in peace. And that is the definition of a career well-spent and a well-lived life.

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