Chapter 3

Present

Humanity in the Humanities

A.T. Miller

A.T. Miller grew up in a large, active, musical, creative, overeducated, and socially engaged family with many siblings and cousins, on the shores of two lakes in the Chicago region, one very large and one very small. Museums and libraries, outdoor adventures, and concerts and plays—both on stage and in the audience—were a constant part of his childhood. His father’s family has a long Quaker heritage to which A.T. maintains a commitment, serving as an adult in the leadership of the Friends Committee on National Legislation. In the online companion site for this book, one can see in A.T.’s video contribution the top of a chair on which A.T. is sitting, a chair that belonged to his forebear of Ebeneezer Miller, brought from Connecticut, where Quakers were not welcome, to Salem, New Jersey, in the eighteenth century. The famous Quaker saying “Let us see what love can do” inspired one of the songs A.T. has written and sings with his husband, Craig Kukuk, in their folk duo, Bridgewater.

With much of his time devoted to interpreting and seeking to influence the world he encounters through poetry, religious philosophy, music, public action, and social justice teaching and cultural awareness, A.T.’s life is centered in the humanities. This didn’t prevent him from being elected as a Bernie Sanders delegate to the Democratic National Convention in 2016, his first engagement in active electoral politics since the Rainbow Coalition of 1988.

A.T. has a long association with various African communities. In the video on the Scholar as Human website, one can see the prominent Tuareg necklace,
a traveler’s protection, that A.T. received on a visit to Mali in West Africa. He was there twice, first for the engagement of his niece to a Malian doctor, and then for their wedding. In Malian engagements and weddings a maternal uncle plays a significant role, and A.T. was happy to do so. As a young person, A.T. had spent eight years on the opposite side of the continent in East Africa helping to establish a secondary school that now bears his name and devoting time over a number of additional years to working with the National Music Festivals of Kenya. Some from those communities called him “mukhwasi,” meaning “in-law,” and in later life it is interesting how his niece has made that distantly more literally true. Not wishing to objectify his African friends and work, his PhD study was devoted to African American cultural studies but informed by his experience of rural Africa as well as his commitments to a view of the North American continent that connects to justice and love.

The chapter that A.T. offers here plays with presence and poetry, shaping experiences of his courses and encounters as opportunities for being-with in powerful, reflective ways. These courses include an experiential course on the Underground Railroad in upstate New York, and another such course interacting with places and people exploring 150 years of Latinx, women’s rights, and indigenous experience at Cornell and in Ithaca. In the presence of history and of each other, he argues, we come to know ourselves.

May I have your attention, please? I’d also like to give you mine. It’s something that we can do together, to be fully present to each other, as a gift, as mutual exchange, as food for thought, inspiration, and perhaps some level of relationship. We share stories and interpretations of our lives and worlds in ways that require one to be present. I actually need to go to the gallery, to attend the concert, to become part of the audience in the theaters of dance and drama, to visit the historic site, to actually read the whole book, to engage in the discussion, to share my ideas, to tell my story and to hear others, and to listen, to protest. My opinions and my analysis are informed by, shaped by, and depend on my presence. One of the pleasures of our seminar has been being with each other on Wednesdays, in the same room, and of bouncing our ideas off of one another, mixing the serious ideas with the humorous asides and the excited interruptions. Amid the rising tide of mediated messages and manipulative iconography designed to make us jump to hurried, uncritical conclusions at their bite, we still wish to get together and exchange ideas and to be witnesses to each other’s making of meaning in the stories we tell about our lives, this world, ourselves.

At Cornell I have taught a new course in Africana studies, “The Underground Railroad Seminar,” that gives the students and me an opportunity to explore regional heritage, discuss current incidents of human trafficking,
and place in physical and geographic context some of the classic narratives of individuals who freed themselves and assisted others. Each week the seminar meets in a different location on campus or in Ithaca, with two longer off-campus trips during the course. One day early in the course we hike down the Cascadilla Gorge to downtown, following Cascadilla Creek, and talk about those who followed streams, who might have had to walk in them to hide their scent from tracking dogs, who might have walked such trails with children or elders without the benefit of our paved path. While I emphasize to the students that there is no evidence that any nineteenth-century fugitive walked this particular trail, we do walk to the sites in DeWitt Park where twice Frederick Douglass stood and spoke, once to jeers and once to acclaim. A remarkable thing happens on this outing. Despite the tremendously compelling nature of Douglass’s narrative, which the students have just read, something about being on that spot matters to them. Something about that walk and talking of the people we speak of moves some to tears.

We stand outside the Clinton House, a former hotel and current office building where Peter Webb, the only enslaved person in Tompkins County to purchase his own freedom, worked. Several students speak in somewhat incredulous tones—“Do you mean this building? Here?” We visit the building where he filed his freedom papers. We visit a storefront that was once the barber shop of George Johnson, who gave fugitives and refugees the kinds of makeovers that would assist them to remain unrecognized during their journey onward to Canada or their ongoing stay in Ithaca. Several students have told me that in the following weeks they brought their roommates, and in one case mother, to stand on the same sites and hear the same stories. Often, when I share some of the details of the class, fellow faculty and staff members at Cornell ask me to take them to these sites. Perhaps you feel something of the same reading this now? I am happy to share being present in these places. It moves me as well, and in the course we try to figure out why. What is it about the combination of story and place that seems to make the story more real and the place more meaningful? Why does it mean so much to do it together?

But presence is also opportunity and connection. We visit St. James AME church, the oldest standing church building in Ithaca, on land purchased by Peter Webb for the purpose of building a permanent church. Harriet Tubman worshipped here frequently, and the church was very active in assisting people who were fleeing the violent terror of the United States. One year the class was unexpectedly fed a meal there by a warm and gracious group, and we all noted that the tradition of hospitality that had founded this congregation still grounded it. They invited us to come back any time and noted that they offered regular meals on particular days. A student unable to attend the
day the group went became part of one of those events. Another year, the elder who met us to talk about the church mentioned that he had been born in Alabama. One of the questions toward the end of the presentation focused on him, as a student asked how he had ended up in Ithaca, New York, of all places, from Alabama. When he was sixteen, his father’s involvement in a small civil rights movement gesture brought an immediate threat from the KKK, and the family left Alabama the next morning. In the elder’s presence and in his life story, we all experienced an immediate understanding that a historic path to and through this town was still active, and the testimony to that was happening in class. In the university archives, we hold the real shackles, we see Olaudah Equiano’s first edition, we view every issue of Douglass’s North Star, we talk of George Washington Fields, the Cornell student whose narrative we also read, learning how his mother freed herself and her children by dashing to Union lines at night, hiding in the bushes in the battles of the Carolinas, suddenly losing heart at having somehow to cross a river with five small children. We think of Fields sitting in the classrooms of Old Stone Row, where we sit, a nontraditional older student in the 1870s. The presence, the place, the touch, the careful conservation and collection in order to show us again the precious and real documents in this place. We are separated by time, and they are long dead, but somehow this form of presence matters, it matters deeply. It matters that we in the class do this together.

Late in the semester we take a longer trip, to the Canadian border at Buffalo and Lewiston, where Harriet crossed with so many. She lived for a time in St. Catharines, Ontario, when life in the United States became too dangerous. So many New Yorkers were uprooted in those days. By then we would have watched 12 Years a Slave, the astounding film depiction of Solomon Northup’s twelve years kidnapped away from Saratoga Springs. We have passed through Rochester, where Linda Brent (Harriet Jacobs) had her tea room with her brother. We stood on that corner and looked at that building—which is also the same building where the North Star was printed. It is cold in Rochester late in fall semester. It is cold in Buffalo and in Lewiston. Yet this was the time of year, post-harvest, when fugitives were most likely to flee and, after hundreds of miles, to face that last obstacle, the river. It is a terrifying sight. The Niagara at these points is often the fastest flowing river in North America. One year, in Lewiston, as we huddled on the banks, some folks in a small boat were struggling to tie up. I asked the students, “Would you get in that boat?” We know there are those who swam. How many could not have made this final challenge after so many miles of walking and hiding? We think of the boats in the Mediterranean Sea. We think of the walk from Guatemala. We think. We stand as witnesses in the place, in the presence of
the many thousands gone. It’s a way that I’ve gotten to know upstate New
York. Who would I have been then?

**Toward New Destinations**

Imagine worlds
Imagine suns
That germinate, that generate—
The generations

Imagine you and you again
Your many selves
Amid the one—
The congregation

Imagine earth
Its single moon of many moods
And guiding stars
Reflecting and producing light
Within the beauty of eternal night
The darker time of shining dreams
That wake us to inspire beyond the parch of day

The years,
   The seasons, days,
       The now.

Three sowers—many seeds
The rich dark earth
The prism’s many-colored warmth of light
We plant the autumn crop
A winter wheat to meet the hunger
And years of blinding snow, the cold
Will break and melt will water shoots of early spring

We’ll let the older things decay, but keep them near
To mix with what we’ve planted
In the loam that’s all the richer
As we cultivate this home

And from those worlds
And from those suns
And from those selves
These seeds
I answered the phone one day in my office to learn that I was speaking to a colonel at West Point who invited me to speak to an important alumni diversity committee there and interact with their faculty. My first thought was, “Do they know what I look like?” I am a Quaker and an activist on the board of the Friends Committee on National Legislation, the largest peace lobby in Washington DC, and a gay man. When I shared the news that evening as I was seeking some clarity about whether to go or not, my husband told me that he had always wanted to see West Point, so I guessed we were going as a couple. As I discussed the visit with various officials at the United States Military Academy, the responsibilities grew to involve a two-day itinerary of events that included guest-teaching two classes and giving a keynote speech at a formal dinner, along with several hours’ work with the diversity committee and a series of one-on-one and group faculty discussions. For the first time, the leader of the corps of cadets that academic year was a woman, and disparaging social media comment (via Yik Yak) was emerging during parade, a gross violation of discipline. The full acceptance of our LGBT cadets in the army and in the corps was just about one year old officially. There remained long-term racial and ethnic equity and representation issues in the corps and on the faculty. I was in both a very familiar and an extremely unfamiliar place. They wanted my expertise, but I also needed to offer them myself. It is one of the fundamentals of diversity practice to be all in and to share honestly and authentically.

In some ways, the uniformity of military discipline stripped several of the layers of social navigation I was used to in situations like this. There was a directness to getting to the problems that was refreshing, and a sincerity that was palpable. A week after my visit, one of the young male cadets in a class in which I guest-lectured sent me a paper he was doing on gender equity issues in the army. Ostensibly for comment, it was also clearly for affirmation. I had not been called “Sir” so many times in two days since serving as head of a rural high school in East Africa many years ago. The dinner was attended by a fair number of four-star generals, who were very cordial to my husband and me. They really are trained to kill, but they also really don’t want to have to do so. Lee and Custer trained there, losers and losses. I learned a great deal from deciding to be present to several humanities classes and the constituents of an institution that gave me pause at the invitation, and as
I left, my hosts asked if they could print the poem I wrote for them in the West Point alumni magazine.

Taylor and Bradley, Sullivan and Pershing, Petraeus and Mattis all studied there. The opposite of the humanities is dehumanization, is inhumanity, so I’ll stop. Here is the poem I shared that night.

**West Point**

Down from the mountains and out to the sea
In wide waters deep this current flows
Where stones stand strong
Becoming every grain of sand that shows
The many facets, blues and greens, yes gold, brown, red
That make the grey, the stately run
Of river and rock—
We are the river,
We are the rock—|
The river passage to and through a newer world

On higher ground we can survey
Perspectives on the seen, unseen, the parts we never knew
The backdrop scenery
Ensouled, envisioned, peopled
By the stars’ early light
That dawn of knowing who we’re with
With whom we are
The more that makes us units, all

We see the distant fields
The scenes of action of the mind
Reaction to the minds of those
Who see with other eyes that land
This earth, our homeland shared
And where forever rests

Led to and from the stone
Made stronger in the passing through and by
Where leading leads us to the many
You and I
Our many selves that make us true
And every part, yes every facet|
Every grain of sand within the flow|
A profound response to the violent struggle over apartheid was the truth and reconciliation commission designed and led by Archbishop Desmond Tutu. This was an incredibly daring and sweeping use of presence under circumstances of injustice that could never be made right, and a history of deep and lasting harm. Being able to tell the terrible stories and to speak about what was hidden and what was gotten away with in the presence of the perpetrators had remarkable effects. Personal burdens and personal transformation have a depth and importance within human understanding that is on a different plane from institutional and social justice but holistically is also a part of it as restorative justice. We can be witnesses and speak truth to power as we also diffuse power with truth. It all happens with presence, and it happened again with the desire of a committee that gives the Wallenberg Medal to engage and honor the presence of Desmond Tutu. It is another form of presence to attend the lectures and shake the hands of those who boldly write and speak. Even when we have known the message and known the words, we still desire that presence. I served on that committee, and at the reception before the prize was awarded noted that no one was actually talking beyond introductions with the archbishop, who is a lively and humorous person. So I spoke with him, and we touched on my class, and he agreed to speak to my students the next morning during a time of engaging and funny banter before the ceremony. To introduce him to my students, I wrote for him this poem:

**Praise Poem for Archbishop Desmond Tutu**

It’s a little name you wear  
A smile that’s small  
That fits your dancing soul  
With room for both of us and yet another also  
And points out where we’re going—  
Oh, take us with you, merry man.

The dream you had  
For all of us  
Came really true  
And planted seeds of other dreams
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In soil of clay and rock, both desert dry and fertile, too,
Inspiring songs from notes and bars, the prophet’s voice—
The chorus grew.

And let us pause with love for ancestors,
The grandfathers whose dreams were never known,
But were the gold they buried in the mines
and never sold.

When hope is hard
A spirit speaks,
But needs a voice of steady pitch
And principles are paths that must be walked with strength,
Though where they lead, the walker only dares to know
By moving forward in the front of fear,
A bramble only faith can clear.

The life you’ve lived for all the ones whose lives were lost
In times where color killed, was read all over.
It’s your humility that gives us pride
Your power in the stand the disempowered held.

Across the sea, in other worlds far south
Where spring is blooming, just as here the winter comes
What balance do we find in opposites?
It’s only ‘til they’re reconciled, the tipping stops,
And that which would have sunk is steadied in a calming sea.

The struggle in the life to which we’re born
Cannot be dodged, but also when the round is through
The fighter knows the count, and after ten
Must leave the vanquished on the mat,
But who can shake that bloody hand?

There are the saints who show us all
What is the victor/victim’s wound that must be seen
To then be healed
And tears can cleanse the hardened heart that did the wrong,
But only in the light of truth,
The glaring white that finds its match
In sable darkness, comfort of forgiven crimes.

The little girl . . .
That youthful dream . . .
And grandma’s hope . . .
The men . . ., the fists . . ., awetu!

How did you gather pieces all, each tragedy
And build a home, from shards, a glass
Reflecting on a world anew?

You were the one who went to school
And made your education free for all
And taught the ones we thought would never learn.

And so we build
We honor lives both lost and found
And give to those who gave, a prize.

Take wisdom from the dancing stars
The southern cross
A bishop’s prayer.
Equality has many names
And glory comes when truth is told,
No gilding words, but boldly paid
In stories where we kiss the ring, we find the gold.

Inspired, the young embrace the old
Whose youth
Will live within our hearts
And ripen in a wider world of gratitude
For what will come.

A.T. Miller, October 2008

Karl Polanyi, the Austro-Hungarian socialist social theorist of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in his major work *The Great Transformation*, sees a level of natural resistance to the market and commodification in human life and society, while Stuart Hall sees a necessary resistance in *The Empire Strikes Back*, and Augusto Boal finds the dramatic and artistic method of engagement used by Olivio Dutra in Porto Alegre to make the people authentically present as participants in public affairs.

In the days after the 2016 US presidential election, my husband began telling many of our friends that we would be in Washington for the women’s march the day after the January inauguration, and telling made it so. We rode “Harriet’s Hometown Bus” from Auburn, New York, as the only two men among a determined and joyful fifty-four passengers. Our friend Sigrid, who
could not go, called up two days before and told us she had two pussy hats for us to wear. She dropped off a third when she stopped by, for our bus captain, as it happened, who did not have time to get her own earlier. We presented ourselves in the hundreds of thousands to the seat of power, crowded, dancing, and decorated for the battle. It was and is a source of strength.

Last fall on campus an artist sought to show the measure of ethnic cleansing on our slope and in our town in *American Spolia* but failed to note that those he thought were gone had family here among us, on the lake that bears their name. He saw the faults of Washington’s orders and DeWitt’s survey and Sullivan’s campaign, our fellow white men, but not the objects of the plan, the people, those present. Yes, that founding time was wrong, but it is not over, we are not erased in reality, even if in his rendering. He was told but found his own idea more compelling than the presence of the others. And there are other others who, very present in our work and days, but lack the documents that borders crossed, are under threat. We came, we come, we stay. Upon this beautiful and enduring land the great bear scratched with lakes, the many claims of those who occupy, and those they thought were gone, and those who are here but they wish were gone, all meet and are present. We struggle with the art, and we struggle with the policies, and we struggle with ideas, and we struggle to be here with each other. Still here.

**Solidarity**

We stand above Cayuga’s waters  
Here upon Cayuga’s land  
The people here who keep the beauty from so long ago—

Can we adopt the ancestors, can we with honor  
Stand upon these heights that are not ours?  
Come down, bend near, rock low  
For sun and earth are loaned to us for these days here with you  
And how injustice lingers, listen, notice, even now as you reclaim the shore,  
With us, if we so dare to say, take us with you,  
Oh bear us up, with knee and arm and shoulder square  
We honor you, Cayuga, we.

All the deepest cracks within the earth, and  
All the falls that run the rocks  
The tumble and the splash  
The violent rush, the diving tempting fear upon the bridge
Yes, all the cooling waters that reflect the day, the falls, the fall, the trees
The burning branches, cooling evenings there
The nights, the dropping droplets flow
To one, the lake, that bears us up
The boats, the float, the know—
We ride the depths upon the fracture filled,
The will to one, the cracking full,
No further fall, the all, the water’s wide—
We wade, we drink, we live.

Alone we never sing
For it is not a song without a hearing one
In harmony the notes belong
And tune to one another, yes
Anticipate the time
Compose the power of our beauty
In d’Artagnan’s mode
The one in all, the all, the one

And when we reach divide, no conquer then,
No long division comes because
We know the waters
Yes, we know the falls become the lake,
The chasm filled, we cross,
And of the French, as kin, say we/oui

A.T. Miller, October 2012

I felt a tickle on my hand from behind as I was walking on Park Avenue in New York City, turning to find Christopher and a hug of recognition—my student of thirty years ago! I was a graduate student and administrative fellow in an undergraduate college house where Chris was a resident. I had served as a character witness in his trial and dealt with all the press and the Penn administration when he was summarily suspended. Visiting his brother in Harlem during a drug raid, he was swept up and had his photo on the front page of the New York Post with the headline “Ivy League Crack Dealer.” Every reporter I spoke with was an uphill climb of re-righting the story of the pre-written trope within their heads. He had no car, no flashy clothes. He was not trying to keep up with a fast Ivy crowd. Our college was the diversity college. His financial aid covered everything. He was a kind and considerate person. “Everyone we interview says that,” said the doubting reporters—perhaps because it was true. I spoke at rallies and conferred with William
Kunstler, the top pro bono attorney, met with his mom, later cleaned out his room. The police case fell apart on the stand. The prosecutor had only one final argument: “No law-abiding citizen would be in a place like that!” In the press, on the stand, I was the flaky hippie academic. My New Jersey uncle saw me on the evening news. The apartment house where Christopher’s brother lived condemned him just by being there. Christopher got twenty-five years. He served nineteen. I wrote and visited over those many years as he got religion. The Bible-laced letters were not my style, but the Bible was certainly not a bad focus in Green Haven. We never missed birthdays. After his release, my husband and I attended his wedding a few years back, and he got his accounting degree, and there on Park Avenue he told me of his son, another baby to become a proud black man. He recognized me walking down the street near his office. He loves me, and I love him over all these years. It is all a complex exchange between real people. There are stories we live, chance meetings, and stories we cannot stop, embedded in society.

The ACLU found my husband and me for the 2005 lawsuit in Michigan against the state’s recent ban on health benefits for domestic partners because the ACLU needed couples with legal standing who would be willing to handle public scrutiny. Craig was connected to the state through my employment benefits at the University of Michigan, all four of our Michigan-based parents were supportive, and we met through church—how could we not agree to be the plaintiffs? We felt generous as they asked us, and we gave up our privacy. We won the first trial. The benefits allowed Craig, a mental health therapist, to serve the most vulnerable with group therapy after hospitalization, most likely for a suicide attempt. They were on disability, severely depressed, and their lives had not changed on discharge. Some paid five dollars a week for life-giving support. So much of nonprofit community support work is done by those on the benefits of others. Cutting off Craig would cut off forty people. It was a story we told, the truth, against the tide of tropes that saw our benefits as selfish, as if we were the ones who sued and not the ones the ACLU approached. Young gay professionals resented.

The photographer came to our house for the article and for most of the shots wanted us to sit in separate chairs and at one point told us not to smile. The dimmed photo that ran large above the article made us look angry, like people who would sue. The state appealed, and we lost, and we lost again at the state supreme court. Through creative means, at the university, Craig became my “Other Qualified Adult” until even that was challenged.

Those present can be themselves and not summed up, not packaged, and not told, but ever telling and revealing more and more again. The humanities are a constant exchange in the search for meaning, for broader life, for
the complexities of what cannot be easily understood or summarized, for the alternative view. We are not simple, we may have standing, but we have more when we are present, the humans at the gate, open to interpretation and able to speak.

**At Home**

Let us be uncomfortable together.  
Let us depend upon surprises.

The unexpected is a place we hope to find most every day,  
And by the way we get there—  
Moving off the trodden path.  
What difference makes is wisdom,  
As knowledge brings the unfamiliar home.

The educated one is all unbounded and is never one,  
Nor truly singular as through the curiosity the we flows in  
And out to all the others who have come to know—  
Above, below, in front of us,  
We look behind the simple sign of who we are.

We raise a flag, but don’t salute before another flag is raised  
Devoted in our hours and days to signs and wonders  
Semaphore that by interpretation tells us more  
About our many selves.

Do come in,  
Don’t be our guest—  
This house is theirs,  
And yours.

A.T. Miller, October 2011