

The Green Banana Donald Batchelder

Any comprehensive list of the fruits of learning should be expanded to include the green banana. No major revision of the curriculum is necessary, but amid the talk of learning and discovery, possibilities should be available to allow discovery to take place.

Although it might have happened anywhere, my encounter with the green banana started on a steep mountain road in the interior of Brazil. My ancient Jeep was straining up through spectacular countryside when the radiator began to leak, ten miles from the nearest mechanic. The overheated engine forced me to stop at the next hamlet, which consisted of a small store and a scattering of houses. People gathered around to look. Three fine streams of hot water spouted from holes in the jacket of the radiator. "That's easy to fix," a man said. He sent a boy running for some green bananas. He patted me on the shoulder, assuring me that everything would work out. "Green bananas," he smiled. Everyone agreed.

We exchanged pleasantries while I mulled over the ramifications of the green banana. Asking questions would betray my ignorance, so I remarked on the beauty of the terrain. Huge rock formations, like Sugar Loaf in Rio, rose up all around us. "Do you see that tall one right over there?" asked my benefactor, pointing to a particularly tall, slender pinnacle of dark rock. "That rock marks the center of the world."

I looked to see if he were teasing me, but his face was serious. He in turn inspected me carefully to be sure I grasped the significance of his statement. The occasion demanded some show of recognition on my part. "The center of the world?" I repeated, trying to convey interest if not complete acceptance. He nodded. "The absolute center. Everyone around here knows it."

At that moment the boy returned with my green bananas. The man sliced one in half and pressed the cut end against the radiator jacket. The banana melted into a glue against the hot metal, plugging the leaks instantly. Everyone laughed at my astonishment. They refilled my radiator and gave me extra bananas to take along. An hour later, after one more application of green banana, my radiator and I reached our destination. The local mechanic smiled. "Who taught you about the green banana?" I named the hamlet. "Did they show you the rock marking the center of the world?" he asked. I assured him they had. "My grandfather came from there," he said. "The exact center. Everyone around here has always known about it."

I took time to internalize the possible meanings of these events. A roadway led to temporary difficulty, resulting in a discovery which resolved the problem while opening up a whole new perspective of shared belief and speculation. As a product of American higher education, I had never paid the slightest attention to the green banana, except to regard it as a fruit whose time had not yet come. Suddenly on that mountain road, its time and my need had converged. But as I reflected on it further, I realized that the green banana had been there all along. Its time reached back to the very origins of the banana. The people in that hamlet had known about it for years. My own time had come in relation to it. This chance encounter showed me the special genius of those people and the special potential of the green banana. I had been wondering for some time about those episodes of clarity which educators like to call "learning moments," and I knew I had just experienced two of them at once.

The import of the rock marking the center of the world took a while to filter through. I had initially doubted their claim, knowing for a fact that the center was located somewhere in New England. After all, my grandfather had come from there. But gradually I realized they had a valid belief, a universal concept, and I agreed with them. We tend to define the center as that special place where we are known, where we know others, where things mean much to us, and where we ourselves have both identity and meaning: family, school, town, and local region. The lesson which gradually filtered through was the simple concept that every place has special meanings for the people in it; every place represents the center of the world. The number of such centers is incalculable, and no one student or traveler can experience all of them; but once a conscious breakthrough to a second center is made, a perspective is established and a lifelong journey collecting centers of the world can begin.

If some of the goals of education in modern times are to open up possibilities for discovery and expand learning and the chance for mutual acceptance and recognition in a wider world, it may be important to offer students a perspective on their own immediate center of the world by enabling them to participate sensitively as cross-cultural sojourners to the center of someone else's world. The cultures of the world are full of unexpected green bananas with special value and meaning. They have been there for ages, ripening slowly, perhaps waiting patiently for our students to come along to encounter them. There are people there who will interpret the special meanings, give them perspective, combine ideas in new ways,

and slice old concepts to answer modern questions. Personal discoveries converge in a flow of learning moments, developing a healthy tug-of-war between that original center of the world from whence the student comes and the new center being experienced. Eventually the student has a strong sense of identity in two centers, in two cultures. Both have special meanings, and both the self-awareness and cultural awareness of the student have been significantly increased.

There are many ways to go about this. No single formula is suitable for all students. One program which has been taking students to the center of the world for sixty years is provided by The Experiment in International Living. The approach is directly concerned with the roadways which lead to the interior of the host culture, the conscious recognition of the importance of being in the center of their world, and the attitudes and behaviors which demonstrate that it is a good place and we are lucky to be there.

Throughout the entire exposure in the center of that new world, the way is left open for each Experimenter to discover himself or herself and to be discovered in turn. In our quest for personal and cultural awareness, for appreciation of the patterns and meanings of other cultures, and for the values of international understanding, every student should have an opportunity to try out those steep roadways to the interior. A green banana is waiting for each of them, there at the center of the world. Every person's grandfather came from there, and everyone around there has always known about it.

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