

Holistic Education: A Response to the Crisis of Our Time

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In the United States, many people express their political or philosophical opinions by attaching small signs on the back end of their cars, for other drivers to read while stuck in traffic. These “bumper stickers,” as we call them, often attempt to compress an entire worldview into a very brief slogan, so they are usually superficial and often quite humorous. But sometimes they capture an essential truth about the human condition in the twenty first century. There is one that I find particularly relevant. It says, “If you’re not outraged, you’re not paying attention.” In other words, the condition of the planet is so immensely disturbing, that if you are at all awake, the only natural response you can make is one of deep concern, a state of alarm about the magnitude of the crisis we face. Our survival as a species is at risk! How could we not be so shocked, so radically disturbed, that we would be galvanized to take heroic action to change our societies? It is only possible to be comfortably content with the hedonistic luxuries, endless entertainment, and technological distractions of the global economy if you remain ignorant of the devastation and suffering that threaten to consume the Earth. Yet millions of us have either been lulled into naïve ignorance by the propaganda of the mass media and popular culture, or we deliberately maintain our ignorance by upholding ideologies, such as free market capitalism, that portray modern global civilization as the best of all possible worlds.

Why should we be outraged? Because our industrial economy is poisoning the air, water and soil that are essential to life, wiping out thousands of species of living beings, and raising the planet’s temperature enough to change the climate and raise the level of the oceans. Because the plague of militarism causes the deaths and terrible suffering of many thousands of human souls every year, and threatens our survival with horrible nuclear, chemical and biological weapons. Because the global economy enriches a small number of powerful people while it exploits and impoverishes millions of human beings.

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Because science now gives humanity the truly frightening power to distort the genetic basis of life and ignorantly manipulate the complex ecology of the biosphere, and corporations are using this power to serve their greed. Because the moral and ethical principles taught to humanity by all religions and traditional cultures—principles that maintain psychological, social and ecological *balance* and hence enable a dignified, meaningful, and sustainable way of life—are being consumed by an explosion of corruption, intoxication, addiction, and selfish materialism, fueled by the media and the commercialization of every aspect of our lives. When we consider these tremendous threats to the well being of life on this planet, how can we not feel outrage, concern, alarm? It is time to pay attention!

Having acknowledged the seriousness of our problems, what can we possibly do to respond effectively? Where do we start? In my view, we need to learn how to respond *holistically*. The crisis we face is complex and multidimensional. To solve it requires a fundamental transformation of our civilization. It will not be enough to simply vote new governments into power or drive more fuel efficient cars or eat more organically grown food—although each of these actions, and hundreds more like them, are essential elements of the larger transformation. The nineteenth century American writer Henry David Thoreau observed in his classic work *Walden* that “there are a thousand hacking at the branches of evil to one who is striking at the root...” Even as we struggle with the many branches of our dangerous modern civilization, we need to identify and deal with the root, the source, of its deadly power. We need to radically question the worldview that makes its pervasive violence and exploitation seem normal and acceptable. Philosopher David Ray Griffin has argued that our task is to challenge modernity itself. The worldview of modernity sees the Earth, and all that lives upon it, as an inexhaustible supply of material resources to be managed, manipulated, packaged, sold, and consumed. Modernity sees the human being as an economic robot, continually calculating one’s self-interest and grasping for material products to satisfy an endless stream of desires.

I am a historian, so I am fully aware that corruption and suffering did not suddenly begin with the rise of the modern age. Humanity has always struggled with its biological, psychological and moral limitations. Humans have viciously exploited and

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killed each other for millennia. But never before has our ignorance been so catastrophically dangerous. The fact that we now live in an interconnected global civilization and possess tremendously destructive technological power compels us to make a deliberate choice: Either we resign ourselves to a tragic fate because “human nature” can never change, or we take the present crisis as an opportunity to make a conscious evolutionary leap to a new, expanded vision of who we are and what is possible for us. A holistic perspective chooses the second of these alternatives. It tells us that we can, and now must, advance our evolutionary process.

Modernity, like all worldviews, is self-justifying and closed. It does not encourage us to raise radical questions about itself, but conditions us to accept its primary assumptions as reflecting the truth about reality. A holistic perspective is critical because it seeks to understand all phenomena, even the worldviews that shape our civilization, in terms of larger contexts, larger dimensions of reality. To a holistic thinker, nothing is self-evident, self-justified, or self-contained, because everything is interconnected and receives meaning from the larger contexts within which it is situated. The modern worldview is not the final expression of human creativity. The global market economy is not the best of all possible worlds. Genetic modification and weapons of mass destruction are, from a larger perspective, insane applications of scientific knowledge. Holism says that we can do better. Holism says that human consciousness is still evolving and, if we open ourselves to still larger contexts of meaning, we can facilitate our own evolution.

Let me be more clear about what I mean when I talk about “larger” contexts, dimensions or perspectives. According to holistic thinkers, the universe expresses itself through a hierarchy of manifestations; reality exists on a series of levels that are gradually “larger” or more whole, complex and inclusive. (Some of the writers on holism use the term “holarchy,” because “hierarchy” implies domination and social inequality, and that is not what we mean.) An inanimate, nonliving object, such as a stone, exhibits physical reality. Empirical science can measure and analyze such objects and make quite reliable predictions about how they will behave under specified circumstances. Plants, however, exist at another level of reality in addition to their physical form. They are alive; they grow and reproduce. And their life is delicate and temporary; they can be reduced to

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nonliving matter very quickly. Animals inhabit still another level, because they are conscious enough to move themselves, and to react to various stimuli in their environment in ways that maintain their delicate lives. Human consciousness introduces still other levels of reality, beyond physical matter, biological life, or instinctive behavior. Humans are capable of symbolic and conceptual thought, moral judgment, and imagination.

Now this hierarchy gets more subtle and more interesting, because human consciousness is capable of penetrating layer upon layer of nonphysical reality. The experiences of intuition, extrasensory perception, meditative insight, and enlightenment that have been reported throughout history, from all parts of the world, suggest that there are dimensions of reality far more subtle and complex than the material world at our fingertips. We usually call this the realm of the soul or spirit. Ultimately, we are told by mystics and sages, this realm emanates from an infinite, indescribable source, which we might call God or Allah or Brahman or the Tao, but which we cannot possibly capture with human language.

According to the hierarchical (or “holarchical”) view of reality, the higher and more subtle realms of being are more whole, more meaningful, more fully real than those below them. According to this view, consciousness strives toward the higher, seeks to expand itself from the dead material realm into the immortal realm of spirit. This is the process of evolution. The entire cosmos is expanding toward greater wholeness and completion, and human consciousness is part of this vast process. Evolution is not easy or smooth; it encounters obstacles and setbacks. But as we see in the resiliency and fecundity of nature, the life force just does not give up. It is the very essence of the life force to continue striving for completion, for unification with its ultimate source. Our task as human beings is to loosen our attachment to cultural beliefs and practices that hold back our evolution, and to surrender to the urgent call of the life force, which at this moment of history is trying to save us from ourselves.

Ideas like this sound religious, don't they? Clearly, the holistic perspective is related to religious teachings from many traditions, particularly the more mystical traditions. Whenever we begin to talk seriously about the spiritual realm, and especially

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when we claim that it is more real or more meaningful than the physical world, we have left the rational discourse that is so comfortable to modernity, and we can be accused of retreating to an obsolete religious worldview. But holism is not a religion in the conventional sense. A holistic perspective is not based on doctrine, faith, rituals, prayers, priests or the other formal signs of religious belief. Rather, holism is an intellectual and moral effort to re-discover the primal mystery that gives rise to the religious impulse in humanity. It wants to know the mystical essence of spirituality, to go beyond the culturally and historically shaped outer shell of religious institutions. It wants to re-align us with the universal life force, with the infinite source that is calling us back home. Observe that the true mystics of all religious traditions are conveying very much the same teachings; in recent years, as global civilization has brought sages from diverse cultures into more frequent contact, they have discovered how little differentiates them.

Significantly, holism is as much influenced by contemporary science as it is by ancient mysticism. Ever since Einstein and the theorists of quantum physics threw the mechanistic worldview of classical physics out the door a century ago, the most creative and insightful scientists have begun to realize that serious science leads to the same place as serious spirituality: The cosmos is a vast, interconnected network of energy fields in a constant state of self-organization, renewal and evolution. It is *not*, as the worldview of modernity assumes, a random collection of physical objects blindly reacting to physical laws. Intelligence pervades the universe, and this means that everything is meaningful. Everything plays a role in a cosmic drama too vast and intricate to be understood by the limited imagination of modern rationality. Physicists like David Bohm and Fritjof Capra, biologists like Rupert Sheldrake, Francisco Varela and Humberto Maturana, chemists like Ilya Prigogine and James Lovelock, and numerous other scientists have, in recent years, been describing the universe in these terms. Last year an unusual film was popular in the U.S.—I don't know if it ever came to Turkey—called "What the Bleep Do We Know?" It provided a graphic and provocative account of this new worldview, and included fascinating interviews with leading scientists who explicitly announced that physical reality is essentially an illusion. If popular culture is beginning to recognize a more

holistic worldview, we can be hopeful that a transformation of our civilization may be on the horizon.

Here is where we can begin to talk about education. Now, history teaches us to not be naively idealistic about education; we need to understand the limitations of educational systems. Schools do not change society; schools primarily serve to maintain a society's self-image. I have never claimed that holistic education will bring about a holistic civilization; the reverse is true. When cultural transformation begins to support a more holistic worldview, then we will see holistic education practiced more widely than in isolated independent schools or the classrooms of unusually radical teachers. But the rise of a holistic education movement over the past 25 years is a positive sign that a growing number of people in many parts of the world are embracing a worldview that challenges modernity at its roots. The growing number of Waldorf and Montessori schools, the spread of homeschooling, and continuing interest in other forms of progressive and democratic education, demonstrate that parents and educators are searching for alternatives to modernist schooling. They perceive that modernist schooling, obsessed with standards and objective results and efficient management, treats their children as raw material for the corporate economy rather than as active, growing, aspiring human beings. By choosing educational alternatives, they are refusing to support modernity's reductionistic image of human nature. They are looking for more organic forms of pedagogy—that is, ways of teaching and learning that are harmonious with the natural rhythms of human development.

Modern culture is technocratic. It does not trust organic functioning but prefers to implement proven, standardized techniques and methods. So there is a temptation to identify “holistic education” as a specific method. For example, the great Italian doctor/educator Maria Montessori developed a particular approach and invented hundreds of very clever learning games and materials, and a school that adheres to the approach and fills its classrooms with her materials is recognizable as a “Montessori school.” Now, Montessori was a brilliant observer of children and possessed a mystic's sensitivity to the patterns of their unfolding development. Consequently, the schools that genuinely use her method are wonderful places for learning. Many, if not most, educators

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in the Montessori movement believe they have found the supreme answer to the problems of education—a method that addresses the needs of human growth and learning uniquely well. However, the education of the human being is not so simple. A decade after Montessori introduced her method, Rudolf Steiner provided a very different model from *his* intuitive insight and his followers believe that *this* method expresses a universal archetype of holistic education. To complicate the matter even further, consider what John Dewey and his students in progressive education and critical pedagogy have to say about the social and political contexts of learning—dimensions of education that both Montessori and Steiner addressed rather indirectly, and less than comprehensively. We must see that no single form, no single method of educating, can fully address the complexity of human existence. Our first task is to escape from the limitations of a technocratic way of thinking.

I am not saying that a Montessori or Waldorf school, or any other place with an established philosophy and method, is itself technocratic. What I am saying is that from a holistic perspective, we need to understand all perspectives, all methods—and the ways these are implemented—within their historical and cultural context. Since we live in a civilization that worships technique and standardization, it is very difficult to put ideals into practice in a truly organic way, a way that is responsive to the unpredictable rhythms of life. The fact is that both Montessori and Steiner advised educators to pay close attention to the actual experiences and spontaneous growth of live children, and they suggested their methods as appropriate responses to the children they observed in *their* societies at their moment of history. One of my colleagues once wrote an insightful paper explaining how two such deeply observant educators could have developed such different responses to child development; while the underlying patterns of human unfolding are universal, the cultural avenues for expressing these patterns are vastly different, and Montessori's Italy called for expressions that differed significantly from the postwar German society where Steiner established Waldorf education. The question before any holistic educator is "How can I respond to the children, to the community, to the society, and to the historical moment I face right here, right now?" I would expect holistic

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education in Turkey to take some forms that are different from those in the United States, or anywhere else.

Some of the most radical writings on education are those that question the need for any method, model, or preconception, and insist on absolute freedom of inquiry and thought. The Indian philosopher Krishnamurti emphasized this approach throughout his long career. He argued that a person can only respond to the world authentically and intelligently by remaining absolutely open, unbound by prejudices or preferences. Krishnamurti is one of the key holistic thinkers of the twentieth century, because he saw through the influence of not only the modernist worldview, but of worldviews as such, and taught us how to free our minds from their pervasive influence. In this way, his teaching is profoundly spiritual, because as mystics tell us, it is the false realities generated by the mind that block our access to the true source of the cosmos.

Yet there is a danger in making freedom itself into a technique! The spiritual discipline of clearing the mind of artificial obstacles is not the same thing as providing a completely unstructured educational environment where children can do whatever they want. Many educators and parents revolt against the technocratic system of modern schooling by joining what are called “free” or “democratic” schools, or by withdrawing their children from all schools and refusing to hold any expectations for their learning—an approach that is sometimes called “unschooling.” I think these ways of educating do have value. It is wonderful to see children who are happy, unpressured, and self-motivated. We can be delightfully surprised to find how passionate, serious, and focused young people can be when they are allowed to explore the world on their terms and engage in learning that is meaningful to them. But from a holistic point of view, I do not believe that maximum freedom is *always* the correct answer to any educational question. There is a profound difference between the experience of “freedom-from” and the experience of “freedom-for.” It is one thing to revolt against external constraints, and then to make a method out of that revolt. It is quite another thing—indeed it is the spiritual practice that Krishnamurti and others teach—to clear the mind so that one can be obedient to the wisdom one finds in the depths of one’s soul. Genuine freedom—freedom understood holistically—requires both aspects, working in harmony. We need to be free

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from external constraints and cultural conditioning, so that we can be free for expressing who we most essentially are.

So the question then becomes, how do we as educators help young people discover the wisdom within themselves? First we clear away the falsehoods, the seductions, and the cheap satisfactions of the modernist worldview. This step is absolutely vital, and it is what all the holistic alternatives can agree upon. Whether you observe a Montessori or Waldorf school, a Deweyan progressive school, or a Krishnamurti or yogic or other spiritually based school where self-reflection is practiced, or a family engaged in unschooling, you are seeing an effort to help young people withdraw from the corrosive and corrupting influence of our technocratic, competitive, consumerist, materialist and insanely violent civilization. But then what? Well, I will not give you the answer, for if you are the holistic educator I hope you are striving to be, *then you will need to find the answer within your own inner wisdom*. You will need to respond, with a clear mind and an open heart, to the young people in front of you, and to the community and society and ecosystem within which you and they live. You will need to find within yourself, in each moment, how much freedom and how much guidance to provide, or what needs to be studied more seriously, or how to facilitate a caring community of learners. If your goal is to help each student connect with their own inherent wisdom, you need to connect with yours, for that, and no technique or method, is the only reliable gateway to the ultimate Source of what is absolutely real and true and good.

If I understand the purpose of your organization, it is to promote the teaching of human values. Apparently, you recognize that the modernist worldview is devoid of meaningful values, indeed it is hostile to the ethical qualities that are most nourishing to the evolution of higher consciousness—compassion, generosity, humility, receptivity to the wisdom that comes from a Source far greater than society or the personal ego. You seem to be responding to the challenge expressed on the “bumper sticker” I’ve seen on a few automobiles in the U.S.; you are, in fact, paying attention to the suffering and insanity of the modern world, and you realize that it is time to respond. Today I am

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proposing that what my colleagues and I call “holistic education” is a coherent and powerful form of what you are calling “values education.”

Let us examine the entire structure of modern schooling, and discover how it destroys rather than cultivates the best possibilities of human nature. Then let us conceive of education in a new way, not as a nation’s mass training of its citizens, workers and consumers, but as a spiritual gift from one generation to the next. This sort of education cannot be confined to schools, or to religious institutions, or to the family alone. We must refashion our entire culture—we must revise our worldview—so that every interaction between a society and its young generation nourishes the soul and expands the imagination. Let us invite our young people to explore beyond the limitations of their culture so that they may discover genuine wisdom at its Source. I do not believe that anything less than this transcendent wisdom can save us from the crisis of our time.