

Reflecting on Spirituality in Education

Published in Encounter Vol. 19, No. 2, Summer, 2006

Early in my career, I attempted to define the place of spirituality in holistic education:

A basic premise of holistic education is the belief that our lives have a meaning and purpose greater than the mechanistic laws described by science, and greater than the ‘consensus consciousness’ of any one culture. This transcendent purpose is a creative, self-guiding energy which we ought not attempt to suppress. No ideology, no social order devised by wealth- or power-seeking factions should be allowed to corrupt the delicate, miraculous unfolding of this creative energy. . . . Ultimately, a spiritual worldview is a *reverence for life*, an attitude of wonder and awe in the face of the transcendent Source of our being (1990, p. 154).

Sixteen years later, having watched a holistic education movement and literature take shape, with the publication of numerous books and articles concerned with spirituality in education, I am revisiting this definition to consider whether I still believe it to be sound and sensible. And, turning fifty years old this month, it seems a good time to reflect on my own experience of spirituality and what I now think it means.

Actually, I do not think I would change the definition I gave in 1990. More than ever, I am convinced that the primary issue at stake here is the choice between recognizing “a creative, self-guiding energy” and holding to some self-interested, self-assured ideology or culturally conditioned belief system. Although I have not yet had any profound enlightenment experience of my own, I suspect that the Zen masters and other sages have it right when they tell us that the Source, the Ultimate, transcends all beliefs. Human beings get into the most trouble when we mistake our concepts, our mind-

Paths of Learning

This article by Ron Miller is available at www.pathsoflearning.net

generated images of reality, for the “transcendent purpose” of the cosmos. Spirituality is the attitude, and the practice, of suspending our imagined reality in order to stand in wonder and awe at that which unfolds and emerges beyond our conceptual grasp.

It is easy to contrast this attitude with the smug epistemology of materialism. Modern culture is conditioned by a worldview that denies the possibility of transcendent realities. Living organisms are compared to machines, and the mind is viewed as a sophisticated computer. To consider this an inadequate, one-dimensional worldview is not to condemn the entire scientific method, which has yielded vitally important understanding and knowledge of the world, but to challenge the overreaching claims of scientism, which leads to a narrowly reductionist, mechanistic image of reality. Since holism is, most fundamentally, an effort to overcome the limitations of reductionism, it poses a radical critique of an overly materialistic science, and holistic thinkers of the last century, from Rudolf Steiner to Fritjof Capra, have eloquently done so. Clearly a “spiritual” perspective offers something different from a materialist one.

I have wrestled more with a more subtle distinction—that between spirituality, as I have defined it, and religious belief and ritual. The holistic literature frequently points out that its emphasis on spirituality does not necessarily imply an endorsement of any specific religious tradition or practice; hence, holistic education does not threaten the important principle of separating church and state. But historically, at least in the West, religious traditions have been the primary means for discovering and expressing spiritual experience. The imagery, language, and practices of religion are so deeply engrained in our culture that it is radical, and difficult, to express spiritual realities without them. In its suspicion of religious institutions, the secular culture does not easily grasp a non-religious spirituality. Hence, efforts to establish state-supported Waldorf schools in California have met fierce resistance from humanists who are convinced that religion is being introduced into public education. Similarly, in one of the early issues of this journal, I engaged in a debate with a progressive educator who remained highly suspicious of my talk about spirituality; he was sure that I meant to bring angels, demons and similar otherworldly beings into educational theory. If not, he demanded, why use the term “spirituality” at all?

Paths of Learning

This article by Ron Miller is available at www.pathsoflearning.net

In my definition above, there is no reference to God or any identifiable sorts of beings (such as angels) or realms (such as heaven, hell, or the etheric plane). There is no reference to ritual, dogma, sacred scripture, holidays, or special places for worship. In fact, there is no reference to worship or prayer. There is no attempt to found a sect, or to identify leaders or priests—indeed, rather than seeking to distinguish one group of human beings as being especially spiritual or having exclusive access to truth, the passage calls for an attitude of reverence toward *life*, which includes all of humanity as well as nonhuman organisms inhabiting the earth. Is this still “spirituality”?

I think so. In my own searching, I have come across several teachers who insist that the path to wholeness, to a glimpse of the ultimate meaning and purpose of the universe, is a wordless, nameless, doctrine-less *presence*. Among the teachers who have most inspired me are Krishnamurti (e.g. 1975), Eckhart Tolle (1999), and Toni Packer (2002). Each of them warns of the limitations of conceptual and ritualistic systems; because the transcendent Source is infinitely creative and eternally new, our mental and cultural forms cannot fully embrace it, can instead serve to limit our experience of it. For these teachers, spiritual practice is the cultivation of a compassionate, receptive awareness that remains fluid and open to the world, without trying to fix our experiences in a conceptual mold. As soon as a religious ideology, even under the name “holism,” takes shape, we too easily lose the essence of spirituality and may promote a diminished version, a preconceived package rather than a flowing openness to the restless wholeness of the cosmos.

Many of the influential writers in holistic education suggest this as well. Parker Palmer’s (1993) description of compassionate knowing, and Rachael Kessler’s (2000) notion of the “teaching presence,” have, for me, always embodied the essence of a spiritual approach to education. The classical figures in modern holistic education, Maria Montessori and Rudolf Steiner, similarly insisted that the primary task of an educator is to become fully conscious and present to the miraculously unfolding lives of the young people before them. It is the cultivation of a receptive, compassionate awareness, an attitude of wonder, awe and reverence for life, that defines a holistic educator. The form that one’s teaching practice then takes is not, or should not be, fully predictable, because

Paths of Learning

This article by Ron Miller is available at www.pathsoflearning.net

a pedagogy that flows from receptive awareness will respond to the totality of the situation at hand. The teaching moment involves each child's personality and aspirations, and his or her mood at a given time, as well as the social climate of the classroom, school and community, as well as the current realities of the world at large. Holistic pedagogy should flow freely and spontaneously, not be bound by the expectations of any ideology.

Why then, I have always wondered, do the classical holistic approaches—Montessori and Waldorf education—take such established forms? Why are they recognizable methods that have remained virtually intact since early in the twentieth century? Their practitioners argue that these approaches address universal, archetypal elements of human development. Since every child goes through developmental “sensitive periods” (in Montessori's terminology) or exhibits universal “soul forces” (according to Steiner) at more or less consistent ages, then pedagogy can and should be designed accordingly. Well, there is much truth in these descriptions; there are inherent developmental patterns that conventional schooling largely ignores, which is why modern educational systems are so alienating, so destructive of genuine learning. There is no question that many young people experience Montessori and Waldorf classrooms as nourishing, often inspiring places for growth and learning.

Still, I have spent much of my career, from my own Montessori training in 1980-82 to my sons' experiences in a Waldorf school in recent years, wrestling with questions about structure, control, and freedom. I have always wondered about a few crucial questions: Are developmental patterns so universal, so consistent across culture, class, history and personality that they trump the “receptive awareness” or attitude of open-ended wonder that holistic education essentially represents? Is each individual child's progression through identifiable periods of life so regular and predictable that one set of pedagogical practices can fully meet every child exactly where he or she is alive at a given moment? I doubt it. I have been too much impressed by the freedom of learners in progressive education, democratic schools, and unschooling to be completely satisfied with the authoritative role granted to adults in the classical holistic models. Young people who have been allowed genuine educational freedom do not flounder, as orthodox Montessori and Waldorf educators imply—much more often, they sparkle. By the time

Paths of Learning

This article by Ron Miller is available at www.pathsoflearning.net

they are teens, most of them turn out to be vibrant, confident, curious, engaged, self-directing and unusually focused and mature—even without having teachers carefully orchestrate every nuance of their learning experiences at every minor step of developmental emergence.

I think we can accept that young people's physical, intellectual, and emotional growth unfolds according to fairly regular stages, without being compelled to provide a highly structured, highly directive pedagogy. Here is where my understanding of spirituality, and my concern about its confusion with religious ideology, is relevant. If we *trust* that there is some spiritual dimension, some creative energy at work in the cosmos whose limitless imagination is far greater than anything we or our culture can devise, then we can trust young people to unfold themselves from within, with more or less support from us, as long as we don't clutter their paths. When some spiritual vision, like any other ideology, becomes hardened into a belief system, we feel the need to guide, direct, mold, shape and control children's learning accordingly.

Sometimes this guidance is nourishing, if it expresses genuine care and love. But I would argue that it is the care and love that nourish human development, not the pedagogical ideology. In another of the early issues of this journal, I brought two Waldorf and two Montessori educators together for a dialogue, and one of them, Diana Cohn, made an observation that has resonated with me ever since: "The methods are very different," she observed, "but the bottom line is that you have these very interested adults working with the children, and they feel that. *They feel enlivened by the fact that there are these caring adults in their lives*" (Cohn, et. al., 1990). The spiritual teachers and holistic educators who emphasize the importance of compassionate presence would fully understand and support this statement.

It so happens that the classical holistic models, Montessori and Waldorf, attract caring adults who passionately hold a reverence for life. But I want to suggest that an overly controlling pedagogy, like an overly protective and intrusive parent, even if motivated by love and having the child's best interests at heart, may ultimately make it more difficult for a child to discover his or her own destiny. "The secret of Education lies in respecting the pupil," wrote Emerson in his brilliant essay on education (1965). "It is

Paths of Learning

This article by Ron Miller is available at www.pathsoflearning.net

not for you to choose what he shall know, what he shall do. It is chosen and foreordained, and he only holds the key to his own secret.” Holistic educators all agree that the child’s destiny should not be foreordained by the Secretary of Education, or the CEO of IBM, or whatever elite bureaucrat happens to dictate public educational policy. But should it be foreordained by Montessori’s observations of children in Rome in 1907, or Steiner’s elaborate (and rather strange) cosmological system? If we truly believe, like Emerson in “Self-Reliance” (1965), that “the relations of the soul to the divine spirit are so pure, that it is profane to seek to interpose helps,” then why on earth would we construct fixed pedagogical theories and systems?

I have always viewed holistic education—or holism more broadly—as an effort toward synthesis and integration. Ken Wilber’s sophisticated writing on “integral” philosophy emphasizes that deeply meaningful knowledge about the cosmos must be far more comprehensive than any limited, partial vision. While the visions of Montessori, Steiner, and other pioneers of holistic education provide grand vistas compared to the reductionism of modern culture, they too are limited in their own ways, compared to the vast possibilities of the cosmic imagination (Miller, 2000). As the holistic education movement matures and evolves, I expect to see less emphasis on particular teaching methods, less reverence for individual visionaries, and a greater effort to cultivate among all educators the kind of pedagogical presence that invites direct experiences of spirituality.

References

Cohn, Diana; Gans, Ruth; Miller, Bob; Selman, Ruth; and Miller, Ron (1990). “Parallel Paths: A Conversation Among Montessori and Waldorf Educators” *Holistic Education Review* 3:4.

Emerson, Ralph Waldo (1965). “Education” and “Self-Reliance.” *Selected Writings*. Edited by William H. Gilman. New York: New American Library.

Paths of Learning

This article by Ron Miller is available at www.pathsoflearning.net

Kessler, Rachael (2000) *The Soul of Education: Helping Students Find Connection, Compassion and Character at School*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

Krishnamurti, J. (1975). *The First and Last Freedom*. San Francisco: Harper.

Miller, Ron (1990). *What Are Schools For? Holistic Education in American Culture*. Brandon, VT: Holistic Education Press.

Miller, Ron (2000). "Partial Vision in Alternative Education," in *Caring for New Life: Essays on Holistic Education*. Brandon, VT: Foundation for Educational Renewal.

Packer, Toni (2002). *The Wonder of Presence and the Way of Meditative Inquiry*. Boston: Shambhala.

Palmer, Parker (1993). *To Know as We Are Known: Education as a Spiritual Journey*. San Francisco: Harper.

Tolle, Eckhart (1999). *The Power of Now: A Guide to Spiritual Enlightenment*. Novato, CA: New World Library.