

Education and the Soul

In the last few years we have witnessed an increasing interest in matters of spirituality. Some argue that we are in a spiritual renaissance:

There is a spiritual renaissance sweeping the world. . . . It is a revolution in the way we think. (Williamson 1994, p.3)

People, of course, can take issue with this claim but one piece of evidence that supports Williamson's claim is that interest around the concept of soul. Through the work of Thomas Moore (1992, 1994) and others, the word "soul" has found its way into various domains including business (Secretan 1996) and politics (Wallis 1994). I think this interest can be explained because people feel that something is "missing" in their lives. People who have achieved a degree of material affluence often end up asking the question: "Is that all?"

Many people detect an emptiness in society and in their own lives. In attempting to find the source of this emptiness Moore and others have asserted that part of the problem comes from a lack of soul. Without soul, our society seems to lack a basic vitality or energy. Except for the energy in consuming and producing, the way many people feel is summed up by a cover of *Newsweek* (March 6, 1995) that showed a man's tired face with the title: "Exhausted." People on the streets, subways, in the shopping malls often look exhausted, disgruntled, or angry. As a result, people seek fulfillment, or escape, in alcohol, drugs, work, and a variety of other addictions.

The pace of life itself is soulless. We all seem in a mad rush to acquire and consume, with little time for simple pleasures. We are not satisfied with just feeling fresh air on our cheeks or watching children at play. Children too feel the pressure. David Elkind

(1981) has written about the *Hurried Child*. Children can find their lives programmed with not only school but other activities that their parents feel are essential to their development. Children are driven from one event to another as they become part of their parents' hectic schedule. Elkind describes some of the other characteristics of the hurried child:

Hurried children are forced to take on the physical, psychological and social trappings of adulthood before they are prepared to deal with them. We dress our children in miniature adult costumes (often with designer labels), we expose them to gratuitous sex and violence, and we expect them to cope with an increasingly bewildering social environment—divorce, single parenthood, homosexuality. Through all of these pressures the child senses that it is important for him or her to cope without admitting the confusion and pain that accompany such changes. (p. xii)

Education has become part of this scenario. We are told constantly that the purpose of schooling is to prepare our children to compete in a global economy. There is rarely any mention of a broader vision of education that includes a focus on the whole person. The emphasis is primarily economic. "Education" in many cases has become a series of tests and hurdles rather than focusing on learning. Alfie Kohn (1993) has found that the more we emphasize tests and rewards the less children learn. As a result, schooling can become a grim pastime where children feel a variety of academic and social pressures. The results of all this are summarized by Robert Sardello (1992):

Education instead has become an institution whose purpose in the modern world is not to make culture, not to serve the living cosmos, but to harness humankind to the dead forces of materialism. Education as we know it, from preschool through graduate school, damages the soul. (p. 50)

We can reclaim our souls. Instead of denying and oppressing the soul we can learn to let the soul manifest itself in the world. Instead of confining the soul, we can learn to celebrate soul. By reclaiming soul, we find that the classroom, or any educational encounter, takes on a new vitality and purpose. Students and teachers no longer go through the motions, but instead feel alive and nourished in what they do.

This book is about how we can bring soul into our classrooms and schools. It is also about how we as teachers and administrators

can nurture our own souls. A basic assumption of this book is that the more we are able to nourish our own souls the more our teaching or work will be reenergized and revitalized. Bringing soul into education is not to deny the need to teach skills to our students so that they can be productive citizens. Soulful education is also education with high expectations. However, soulful learning seeks to restore a balance between our outer and inner lives.

GLOBAL CONTEXT

I think it is important to link the need for soulful education with other changes that are taking place on the planet. As noted earlier Williamson has called this a “spiritual renaissance”; I prefer the term “global awakening.” People in different countries and in different domains are awakening to a sense of the sacred and to the interconnectedness of life.

The ecology movement and concern for the environment has played a major role in this process. Recent global conferences on the environment demonstrate the desire of people to prevent the further degradation of the planet and the biosphere. The environmental movement has shown us how everything is so deeply interconnected. We can no longer live under the delusion that we can separate the economy from the environment. For centuries humans felt that they could do almost anything and no problems would result. Now we know that any changes we introduce into our lives will have some effect and that we must try to take these changes into account if we want to protect the soil, the air, and the water that support all life. Ecology as well as the traditions of indigenous people has drawn the metaphor of the web to portray this interconnectedness. If we can see ourselves as part of the web of life there is less chance that we will tear this web apart.

This awakening to the interdependence has also encouraged us not only to look at our actions but our thoughts and inner life as well. Many see the source of ecological problems arising from an inner poverty. Al Gore (1992) has written:

The more deeply I search for the roots of the global environmental crisis, the more I am convinced that it is an outer manifestation of an inner crisis that is, for lack of a better word, spiritual. . . . I have come to believe in the value of a kind of inner ecology that relies on the same principles of balance and holism that characterize a healthy environment. (pp. 12, 367)

Gore and others have made the connection then between soul and the problems that confront our world. Simply put, if our beings are filled with greed, aversion and anger, then the world around us will reflect that inner state. Of course, there is an interaction between our inner and outer worlds but lack of attention to the inner world tends to exacerbate the problems we face. The following words of the Buddhist tradition I think are appropriate here:

The thought manifests as the word,
The word manifests as the deed,
The deed develops into habit,
And the habit hardens into character.
So watch the thought
And its ways with care,
And let it spring from love
Born out of respect for all beings. (source unknown)

By being more attentive to our inner life, or soul life, we can perhaps help in the process of healing ourselves and the planet.

The environmental ethic of seeing interconnections can be seen also in medicine. Physicians are moving away from seeing the body as a machine and instead are seeing the relationship between mind and body. For example, Redford Williams, an M.D., has made the connection between people's emotional state and heart disease. He has found that particularly damaging to the heart is hostility and anger. People who carry hostility are more prone to heart attacks. In contrast, people who have trusting hearts have a much greater chance to be healthy:

The trusting heart believes in the basic goodness of humankind, that most people will be fair and kind in relationship with others. Having such beliefs, that trusting heart is slow to anger. Not seeking out evil in others, not expecting the worst of them, the trusting heart expects mainly good from others and, more often than not, finds it. As a result, the trusting heart spends little time feeling resentful, irritable, and angry.

From this it follows that the trusting heart treats others well, with consideration and kindness; the trusting heart almost never wishes or visits harm upon others. Just as our research has shown that the hostile heart is at risk of premature death and disease, it also can reassure that the trusting heart appears protected against these outcomes. (Williams 1989, p. 71)

We can link Williams' research with the Buddhist quote above, which focuses on cultivating compassionate thoughts and also the

proverb “As a man thinketh so he is.” Our inner state, then, is important to both our own personal well being as well as the health of the planet.

As mentioned earlier, this process of awakening is found in business in the work of Dalla Costa (1995), Covey (1990), Hawley (1993), Secretan (1996), and Senge (1990). Covey, for example, makes the connection between the inner and outer when he cites David O. McKay who said: “The greatest battles of life are fought in the silent chambers of the soul” (cited in Covey 1990, p. 294). Covey adds:

If you win the battles there, if you settle the issues that inwardly conflict, you feel a sense of peace, a sense of knowing what you’re about. And you’ll find that the public victories—where you tend to think cooperatively, to promote the welfare and good of other people, and to be genuinely happy for other people’s successes—will follow naturally. (p. 294)

Peter Senge (1990) has also written about the changes that are occurring and he believes one of the most important is where people are moving away from fragmenting, or compartmentalizing, problems to where we place our problems in larger contexts so we can see the relationships among the problems we face. This process is called “systems thinking” and is part of a process Senge calls for in developing “learning organizations.” He writes about this process in his book *The Fifth Discipline*. At the end of the book he also acknowledges the broader spiritual changes that are occurring when he refers to Rusty Schweikart, the astronaut, and his perceptions of viewing the planet from space. Senge writes:

At the conclusion of the leadership workshop, someone asked spontaneously, “Rusty, tell us what it was like up there?” He paused for a long time. When he finally spoke, he said only one thing. “It was like seeing a baby about to be born.”

Something new is happening. And it has to do with *it all*—the whole. (p. 371)

There are certain political leaders who are also infusing spirituality in their approach to politics. These leaders include Vaclav Havel, president of the Czech Republic, the Dalai Lama, the spiritual and political leader of the Tibetan people, Nelson Mandela, President of South Africa, and Aung San Suu Kyi, who has become the spiritual and political voice of the Burmese people. Aung San

Suu Kyi (1997) when asked about the most important qualities of Burmese culture she wishes to preserve, states: "The Buddhist values of loving-kindness and compassion. A respect for education" (p. 81) Aung San Suu Kyi does not separate spirituality from political life. She says: "I think some people find it embarrassing and impractical to think of the spiritual and political life as one. I do not see them as separate. In democracies there is always a drive to separate the spiritual from the secular, but it is not actually required to separate them" (p. 26). Aung San Suu Kyi meditates every day as part of her spiritual practice. She feels it is important in developing awareness and spiritual strength.

The Dalai Lama (1994) does not see himself a political leader but as simply a monk:

I am a Buddhist monk, so I try to practice accordingly. When people think this practice is something unique and special and call me a leader of world peace, I feel almost ashamed! . . . It's just that my practice is the peaceful path of kindness, love, compassion, and not harming others. This has become part of me. It is not something for which I have specially volunteered. I am simply a follower of the Buddha. (p. 98)

I believe that Aung San Suu Kyi, the Dalai Lama, Havel, and Mandela are creating a new vision of political leadership that is part of the broader pattern of awakening.

The restoration of soul is part of this pattern of global awakening. People are attempting to infuse soul into every part of our lives in order to revitalize and give deeper meaning and purpose to what we do every day. It is part of a process where we engage the sacred in everyday life. Like Aung San Suu Kyi, more and more people find the barrier between the secular and spiritual to be superficial. Senge (1990, p. 5) and others have discussed how more people are seeing their work as something sacred.

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This book, then, is an attempt to help teachers be part of this broader pattern by bringing soul and the sacred into education. I believe that we can do this in a manner that does not threaten anyone's religious beliefs or traditions but in fact can enhance them. I can speak from personal experience since I teach graduate courses in spirituality in education and holistic education and have

had people from every conceivable religious tradition in my classes. I have found that by approaching the spiritual issues and practices in an open and nondogmatic way that we can begin to nourish each other's souls. I discuss this work in chapter 8.

In the next chapter I discuss the nature of the soul in detail. Here I will just give a basic definition that will provide a foundation for the rest of this chapter. *Soul is a deep and vital energy that gives meaning and direction to our lives.*

Why should we infuse our approaches to education with soul?

1. As noted above, the separation between the spiritual and secular is false. To deny spirit is to deny an essential element of our being and thus diminish ourselves and our approach to education. By bringing soul more explicitly into the educational process we can have an education for the *whole person* rather than a fragmented self.
2. By bringing soul into education we can make our classrooms more *vital* and energizing places. Too often the classroom can be a dull and lifeless place. By restoring soul we can bring a basic vitality into the classroom. The last half of this book suggests different ways we might do this.
3. Soulful education can help bring a *balance* to our education between such factors as inner and outer, the rational and intuitive, the qualitative and the quantitative. Our educational systems have tended to emphasize behavior, rational thinking, and the quantitative. It can be argued that our educational system has become out of balance with its overemphasis on technology and accountability. By bringing soul into our classrooms we can develop a harmonious balance between the inner and the outer. Again some ways of restoring balance are discussed in the second part of the book.
4. By acknowledging soul we can face the "*big*" questions of life. These are the questions that most people confront during their lives but are rarely addressed in educational settings. These questions include, what is the nature of reality and truth? What is the purpose of life? Who am I and what is the nature of the human being? These questions can begin when as a child we look up into the cosmos and wonder about the nature of the universe. They continue into adolescence when we can begin to probe more deeply into the purposes of life. These are questions that we come back to throughout our lives, and education

should facilitate this process by examining how science, poetry, religion, and other areas have explored and addressed these questions. A soulful approach to education does not ignore this process and, in fact, allows education to become deeply relevant to the lives of children and adolescents.

In summary a soulful approach to education can help bring vitality and a deeper sense of purpose and meaning to classrooms.

THE BOOK'S FRAMEWORK

This book is divided into two parts. The first part, which includes the first three chapters, explores the nature of the soul. Various conceptions of the soul are examined including my own. The third chapter explores this conception in some detail and in particular discusses how love and work are important to the soul's development.

The second part of the book deals with how we can bring soul into our schools. Chapter 4 discusses a curriculum for the inner life. Specifically, techniques such as meditation, visualization, dreamwork, and autobiography are explored. The chapter is based on the principle stated by Matthew Fox (1994) that we need a massive infusion with regard to our impoverished inner lives.

Chapter 5 explores how the arts can nurture soul. Visual art, music, drama, and creative writing are explored in different contexts. Earth education and how it can support soul are discussed in chapter 6. Some basic principles of earth education are discussed and then several schools and programs are cited as examples of how these approaches can work in practice.

Chapter 7 examines how the school itself has a soul. The work of Secretan (1996) is explored and specifically his conception of the sanctuary, which is an institutional setting that nourishes soul. Ways to enhance the soul of the school are explored. The chapter concludes with several examples of soulful schools.

Perhaps the most important element in soulful learning is the teacher's soul. The teacher's soul must be nourished if the student's soul is to develop. There is nothing that our students desire from us more than our attention, our authentic presence. Only with training and discipline can we reliably offer this to them. In chapter 8 I discuss various ways that we can support this process.

Two qualities that the soulful teacher can usually bring to the classroom are presence and caring. Presence arises from mindful-

ness where the teacher is capable of listening deeply. In my own work at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education/University of Toronto, I encourage teachers to bring mindfulness, or moment-to-moment awareness, to the classroom and their interactions with students. Below is a statement by one teacher who is able to bring this awareness to the classrooms.

As a teacher, I have become more aware of my students and their feelings in the class. Instead of rushing through the day's events I take the time to enjoy our day's experiences and opportune moments. The students have commented that I seem happier. I do tend to laugh more and I think it is because I am more aware, alert and "present," instead of thinking about what I still need to do. (Miller 1995, p. 22)

Closely related to presence is caring. The caring teacher relates the subject to the needs and interests of the students. Nel Noddings (1984) who has written extensively about caring suggests that when this happens the student "may respond by free, vigorous, and happy immersion in his own projects" (p. 181). When the teacher demonstrates caring, community can develop in the classroom. Marcia Umland, an elementary school teacher, talks about how this can happen:

When I wanted to spend all that time with those little people in class, I found that the intimacy I had shared with my peers in college in the sixties was carried over into my classroom. I cared about the students and couldn't stand to sit in the teachers' lounge where they were gossiping about their students. . . .

I get exhausted, but not burned out. Sometimes I'm dropping my dream for a day or two, but most days I'm on, and stunned by the kids. Lately I've realized that in setting up in a classroom at last I've given myself permission to form a society I'd like to live in. (Macrorie 1984, pp. 155–61)

In the last chapter I discuss what I consider the basic principles of a soulful approach to education. Finally, I try to deal with the difficult question of how we can have soulful education in our public schools in a nonthreatening way.

I believe that the time has come for soulful learning. We have had enough of machinelike approaches to education that deaden the human spirit. The present trends of outcomes-based education and accountability can drain the vitality from our classrooms. The

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pressure for quantifying all learning without concern for quality represses the student's soul. Instead, we can learn to bring onto the Earth an education of deep joy where the soul once again learns to sing. Soulful learning nurtures the inner life of the student and connects it to the outer life and the environment. It acknowledges and gives priority to the human spirit rather than simply producing individuals who can "compete in the global economy." Restoring the soul to education is not a new vision. It is a vision articulated by the Greeks and various indigenous people for centuries. It is found in Taoism and the in the teachings of Christ and the Buddha. Why should we aspire to less than our ancestors? Education has lost its way; we need to look to the soul to help recover and remember what Emerson called "our original relationship to the universe."