

Meditation and Service
in Public Education

MAIS 701: Integrated Studies Project
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Submitted To: Emma Pivato
Date: February 23rd, 2005

Abstract

Public education systems in North America leave out almost any form of inner or outer spiritual practice from their curriculums. In terms of inner practice, we do not teach any form of meditation or self-observation. In terms of outer practice, we do not encourage service or compassion. These practices are the heart and soul of what it means to be a human being. This paper gives several examples of schools that base their programs on a spiritual and yet “non-religious” perspective. These schools include Waldorf, SelfDesign, The Environmental Middle School, The Ojiya School, The Healer’s Art course, the Sevagram Ashram School, and The Passages Program. These schools generally encourage some form of self-observation, either through formal meditation practice or by journaling, being in nature, or just spending some time alone and in silence. These schools also focus on helping students to cultivate compassion through community service projects such as helping senior citizens in the community, planting trees, raising animals, cooking meals for the community, or developing their own nature conservation projects.

According to the widely respected education writer Parker Palmer (1999), “Education is banal because we have driven the sacred out of it” (p. 19). The real joy of living is in the spiritual quest. By leaving out the quest for self-knowledge and spiritual knowledge from education, we have created an education which is dry and boring to most students. Also, by leaving out community service activities, we miss the opportunity to help students cultivate love, caring and compassion for all beings.

There are many good reasons why these topics have been excluded from our public schools, including the fear that schools might be used for the purpose of religious indoctrination. However, it may be possible to reincorporate these spiritual practices in a non-religious way. There are many examples of schools that are doing this, all around the world.

This essay will start by looking at why the topic of spirituality has been avoided in modern public education systems. This will be followed by several examples of schools that are successfully incorporating some kind of spiritual practice or philosophy in their program. This essay will conclude with practical suggestions about how we might go about transforming education so that self-knowledge and service become more of a priority.

Why are the topics of self-knowledge, meditation, or service generally absent in the public school environment? Perhaps it is partially because in our daily lives we do not usually like to talk about religion or the spiritual, except with great caution and politeness. As Lois Sweet (1997), author of God in the Classroom: The Controversial Issue of Religion in Canada’s Schools explains, “It’s considered too divisive, too

explosive, too sensitive, even too embarrassing in an age of overwhelming secularism. Religious belief has been conveniently relegated to a social category stamped ‘private’” (p. 4). Therefore, anything in this category is avoided within the context of public institutions, including public schools.

When we think of religion or spirituality, we often think of the institutions or groups which specialize in this aspect of life. We think of churches, or of New Age culture. However, Sweet reminds us that it is “a gross oversimplification to maintain that that’s what constitutes religion or the spiritual quest. It’s also far too convenient. It means we can blithely ignore the challenge that the spiritual dimension raises” (p. 5). The spiritual dimension of life is too vast to be contained within the confines of doctrine or institutional religion. That which is religious is contained within the human heart and lives independently of all labels.

This mystical view of the religious is something that is still relatively rare. People still fear that including the “spiritual” in education might mean including institutional religion and therefore indoctrination. This is very understandable. It was only about a century ago, in the late 1800s, that Egerton Ryerson, Superintendent of Education for Ontario, wrote: “A man who rejects the Divine authority of the Holy Scriptures is, I think, disqualified from teaching” (as cited in Sweet, p. 19). In Canada at that time, “secular education was not only inconceivable to [the founders of Canadian schools], it was an oxymoron. To them, education and religion were part and parcel of the same thing—an essential good, a necessary whole” (as cited in Sweet, p.20). Considering this history, it is not surprising that people would be afraid of taking any action that seems to promote going back to the 1800s. We have come a long way. Part of the fear may also

stem from the fact that there is still a large minority of the population in North America who would like to see prayers and Bible study in our public classrooms.

The word “spiritual”, in this essay, however, refers to a broad, inclusive and mystical view of the religious. At the level of institutional religion, there is division and conflict. At the level of the mystical, there is a unity of all paths. The mystics of every religion—Sufis, yogis, Christian mystics, and Buddhist adepts—all describe similar internal experiences and similar aims. They all describe the same gradual process of awakening and becoming one with the Divine.

There are still very few people who have this mystical perspective of spirituality. Therefore, perhaps it is still too early to suggest that the “spiritual” be incorporated into the public education system. And yet perhaps there are ways that the spiritual can be introduced without the need for talking about the mystical at all.

Lois Sweet suggests that we introduce the spiritual by offering comparative religions courses in all public schools. She suggests that “religious literacy” could fill a spiritual void and also promote cross-cultural understanding. She argues that this might be particularly useful in Canada, and that it might provide “an opportunity for all of us not just to learn about the beliefs and values of those who are different from ourselves, but to be challenged to question, and to grapple with, what we ourselves believe about the nature of human existence” (p. 10).

Comparative religions scholar Huston Smith (1999) suggests that there is one main reason why we have generally let go of the spiritual aspect of life in modern times. He reminds us that throughout all history, in all places, and from all prophets, there has existed the idea of the Great Chain of Being. This idea says that there are different levels

of existence: the physical, the mental, and the spiritual. In the modern world, it has been replaced with a one-dimensional view, where everything is physical. Huston Smith argues that the origin of the one-dimensional view is not science, but *scientism*.

Scientism adds two opinions to the practice of science. First, that science is the best method for learning the truth. And second, that things at the material level are the most important. Neither of these judgements are necessary to the effective practice of science (p. 221).

Perhaps there is little attention placed on spiritual practice or service in education because we do not consider these to be the core purposes of education. What *is* the main purpose of education? The way we answer this question guides everything we do in education. Conventional wisdom says that the aim of education is to prepare children for the workforce and for society. Ken Osborne (1999), in Education: a Guide to the Canadian Schools Debate, asks: “Should schools serve the needs of students or the needs of society, and who decides just what these needs are?... Most ministries of education seem to think they are one and the same” (p. 15). What are “the needs of society”? When we think about the needs of society, for many of us the first thing that comes to mind is economic need. Osborne goes on to describe how education reformers “are driven by what they see as the needs of society, and particularly of the need to guarantee Canada’s continuing economic prosperity in an age of increasing global competition” (p. 18). In general, we seem to act on the belief that ensuring material prosperity is our primary “need”. Our education system reflects this belief.

Many people may disagree with the idea that increasing material prosperity is the ultimate purpose of education. They may instead jump to the bigger life questions. What

is the purpose of human life? Who are we, and what are we here to do? Perhaps these questions are a better place to start. Huston Smith would agree:

Spirituality in education must begin with knowing who we are. ...for our culture as a whole, nothing major is going to happen until we figure out who we are.... There is no consistent view of human nature in the West today. (p. 218)

In terms of our ideas about human nature, we are a culture in conflict. We believe in evolution, which says that humans are something great that have evolved from something lesser. At the same time, many of us believe in a Higher Power, and believe that humans are something lesser than the Origin, and that we may eventually find our way back to that Source. Until we understand human nature, perhaps we may not be making good decisions in terms of our priorities in education.

Some philosophers avoid these metaphysical questions and keep their arguments simple. They suggest that experiencing happiness is the purpose of human life, and therefore cultivating happiness should be a part of education. The Dalai Lama (1999), for example, reminds us that:

our inner peace is something really priceless, really precious. You cannot go and ask a doctor for a compassion pill. Nor can you buy happiness at a supermarket with a big check. No: Everything that is really precious is right here, in our hearts.... I think it's up to us, through education, to explain and teach this potential—inner peace.” (p. 90)

Alexander Neill (1992), the founder of England's famous alternative school called Summerhill, would probably agree with the Dalai Lama:

The necessity of a child's happiness should be the first tenet of all educational systems. A school should be judged by the faces of its pupils, not by its academic successes. (p. 117)

One might respond by suggesting that by studying academic subjects, a student increases their chances of having more success in life, and therefore more happiness in the long-term. However, by focusing only on external subjects, and not on the internal ones, we may also be doing long-term harm to ourselves. Having outward, material success might not necessarily lead to happiness. We generally expect that external problems will have external solutions. However, perhaps the opposite is true.

Philosopher Amritanandamayi (2005) writes: “As long as we neglect our inside world, the outside problems—wars, crimes, conflicts—will not cease.” It is not difficult to realize the connection between “inner” and “outer.” The Dalai Lama explains:

If one has lost the inner ability to sustain peace of mind, happiness or joyfulness, then regardless of the external circumstances, you will find these people seeking some sort of refuge outside of themselves, in drugs or alcohol, things like that.” (p. 90)

A University of Michigan study of 17,000 American students, conducted in 1993 and focusing on drug use, found that when grade 12 students were asked what substances they have used in the last *30 days*, 15.5% reported having used marijuana, 3.7% reported use of “stimulants”, 1.3% reported using Cocaine and 51% reported drinking alcohol. (as cited in Rubin, 1994, p. 246). Focusing on happiness and the inner life of the mind may be a good way to change this. If we make short-term and long-term happiness our goals, in education, then perhaps this would be a first step to actually learning and teaching ways to cultivate this inward happiness.

Thinking of happiness as the purpose of education seems to take us in a more student-centred direction. Rudolf Steiner (1920), the founder of the Waldorf system of

education, wrote that we “should not ask, ‘What does a person need to know and be able to do for the existing social order?’ but rather, ‘What gifts does a person possess and how may these be developed in him?’” (as cited in Hegener, 1992, p.198). Later in this essay we will take a look at some schools that offer a more student-centred and individual-centred approach to education.

Some education philosophers, including Steiner, strongly criticise the idea that schools should just prepare students to be of economic value to society. The Indian philosopher Krishnamurti was another educator who opposed this view. He wanted his students to break free of society, to learn from Nature, and to study their own minds.

Speaking directly to students at his school, he says:

Real education means that a human mind, your mind, not only is capable of being excellent in mathematics, geography and history, but also can never, under any circumstances, be drawn into the stream of society. Because that stream which we call living, is very corrupt, is immoral, is violent, is greedy. That stream is our culture. (1974, p. 17)

Krishnamurti is not suggesting that we not participate in society, but that we have a mind that is pure and not attached in any way to the world. He asks the students:

Are you going to conform, fit in, accept all the old values? You know what these values are—money, position, prestige, power. That is all man wants and society wants you to fit into that pattern of values. But if you now begin to think, to observe, to learn, not from books, but learn for yourself by watching, listening to everything that is happening around you, you will grow up to be a different human being—one who cares, who has affection, who loves people. Perhaps if you live that way, you might find a truly religious life.” (1974, p. 15)

When Krishnamurti speaks of “religion” he is not talking about institutional religion. Krishnamurti is a mystic, and he is interested only in direct experience of truth.

He says to the students at his school that:

it is imperative to help the student to be scientific, to think very clearly, precisely, to be sharp, as well as to help him uncover the depths of his mind, to go beyond words, his various labels as the Hindu, Muslim, Christian. Is it possible to educate the student to go beyond all labels and find out, experience that something which is not measured by the mind, which no books contain...?” (p. 27)

It seems that for Krishnamurti, the purpose of education is to help students in their spiritual awakening. He wants them to go far beyond the content of their textbooks, and to begin their internal spiritual quest. He asks the students, bluntly, “what is going to happen to you all? Will you live a life with a fire burning in you or will you become for the rest of your life a businessman or a housewife?” (p. 47). He is not interested in preparing students for society, but instead he is trying to plant the seeds for a better society to emerge.

Alternative Models of Education

There are many examples of schools that have based their programs on a spiritual perspective of life. In one way or another, most of them help students to cultivate compassion through service, and some of them also encourage some form of meditation. This section will take a look at seven such programs: SelfDesign, Waldorf, The Environmental Middle School, The Ojiya School, The Healer’s Art course, the Sevagram Ashram School, and The Passages Program.

SelfDesign

In 2002, a new kind of online independent school was founded in B.C., called the SelfDesign Learning Community. As of the 2004 school year, this community consists of about 500 students (age 5-18), over 500 parents, 30 teachers (called “learning consultants”), and a few administrative staff. For the past year, I have been a part of this community as a teacher’s assistant and mentor.

For the most part, this community only meets through the internet, in a website called The Village. The Village consists of a virtual community centre, a park, a library, a coffee shop, a learning centre, and other kinds of gathering places. Within these virtual buildings are conferences where conversations are taking place, on topics such as music, art, books, games, cooking, crafts, cultural studies, photography, relationships, science, technology, politics, math, media, movies, nature, parenting, health, history, philosophy, travel and dance. There are book clubs, poem sharing groups, story-telling circles, kids-only areas, parents-only areas, discussion intensives hosted by members of the community, and also a place to chat in private or in groups, in real-time. In the “real world”, the students, families, and teachers live all over the province of British Columbia. Many of the families were homeschooling before joining the Community.

In the SelfDesign Community, each learner (student) is assigned a learning consultant (teacher). Each September the learner and the learning consultant meet, in person, in order to get to know each other and to draw up a unique curriculum for the learner. The philosophy of the school is that since each person has unique potentials and a unique set of topics about which they are enthusiastic, each learner is encouraged to design their own personal curriculum. The consultant presents the learner with a diagram

showing four different areas of learning: Body, Heart, Mind, and Spirit. This diagram is in the shape of a circle, and it looks something like a Native American Medicine Wheel. These four areas are broken down into many specific subjects, including Personal Planning, Observing and Reflecting, Health, Physical Activity, Communication, Journaling, Social Studies, Second Language, Math, Finances, Ecology, Science, Creativity, Philosophy, Spirituality and Ethics. The learner may consider these areas of learning as they write out their own curriculum. However, they are not limited to these subjects, and they are not required to cover all of these subjects.

The main requirement in this program is that each week the learner (often with the help of a parent, in the case of younger students) submits a journal entry to their learning consultant. Each week the learning consultant replies to the journal entry, and initiates conversation. The interaction between the student and teacher revolves around the reflections of the student concerning their academics, their goals, their relationships, and their own personal development. The conversations are often more intimate than the conversations normally found in a school environment. Many learners and their families have reported that the process of weekly journaling has been very helpful to them. From my own experience with this journaling dialogue, I have been amazed with the quality of the reflections and sharing that has taken place. The students do not just give a description of their week, but they also share how they feel about it, what it meant to them, and what life lessons they are learning.

In the case of younger children, both the parent and the learning consultant help them with their goals and their studies. The teenagers in this program are generally more independent of their parents, and work more closely and directly with their learning

consultants. The learners in this program live essentially as homeschoolers, except that they are committed to keeping a journal and to having an ongoing dialogue with their learning consultant. Some learners spend most of their time doing dance, or music, or art. Others read. Some take academics by correspondence. Some of the teens are taking full-time university studies at a local college.

Brent Cameron, the founder of SelfDesign, also founded a small elementary school in Vancouver called Wondertree, which has now been running for over 20 years. In 1993 he also helped to found a high school version of Wondertree, with about 35 students, called Virtual High. Virtual High did not receive any government funding, and closed after four years. An introduction to Virtual High, written by learners and learning consultants (Wondertree, 1995), begins by describing the school in this way:

Conceptually and philosophically, it is aligned with many new insights into the human condition from science, developmental psychology, perennial philosophy and spiritual traditions, and [with] emerging global movements in fostering sustainable communities. (p. i)

I attended Virtual High during my grade eleven and grade twelve years. For me, these two years were pivotal. There was no set curriculum at Virtual High, and yet there were all kinds of extraordinary courses available for the students. I began to learn about communication, memory, meditation, environmental issues, and diet, amongst other things. I made close friends with a small group of very special people, and all of us worked together, studied together, cleaned together, ran the school together, and generally explored all kinds of exciting ideas together. The Virtual High environment supported each learner to develop his or her talents, to grow, and to care about making a positive difference in the world.

Wondertree, Virtual High, and SelfDesign have all been based on “spiritual” ideals, in several different ways. To begin with, all the learners in these schools are treated with a high level of respect and care. One of the main principles of these schools is that “learning is optimized in communities based in mutual respect” (Wondertree, 1995, p. 20). The school year begins with the “teachers” listening to the students, and asking questions like: What are the needs of the student? What does the student like to do? What is the student most excited about in life? What are his or her special talents? Teachers ask, and listen, and come from the heart. Genuine caring is there.

Another result of beginning the year with listening and conversation is that the student can really reconnect with his or her own feelings, goals and inspiration. The psychological and spiritual benefit of connecting with one’s own inner enthusiasm and motivation cannot be overestimated. Krishnamurti explains it in this way: “If you feel strongly, if you feel vitally, vigorously, you will live in a state of deep silence. Your mind will be very clear, simple, strong” (p. 48).

The more explicitly “spiritual” aspects of these schools are expressed in more subtle ways. At both Virtual High and SelfDesign, courses that include a study of Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) have been offered. The main benefit of these courses is perhaps that students begin to examine their own minds, their own thinking patterns, and the therefore the source of their own success and failure, joy and sorrow. To engage in a steady witnessing of one’s own thought processes is to engage in a kind of meditation, the psychological and spiritual benefits of which are described later in this essay. At SelfDesign, all the teens are encouraged to take the online SelfDesign Course. This course, the only formal course offered through the school, is not based on assignments,

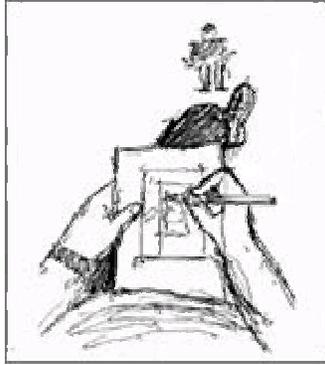
long readings or tests. Instead, it consists of a series of tasks, and then online discussions about these tasks. The tasks include exercises like setting life goals, spending some time alone in nature, noticing certain language and communication patterns in others and in oneself, and spending time with respected mentors.

At SelfDesign and at Virtual High, self-reflection has been encouraged in several ways. At Virtual High, students were encouraged to keep a journal, and also to have weekly one-on-one meetings with their learning consultant to talk about whatever was on their mind. In SelfDesign, keeping a weekly journal, as described earlier, has become the core of the program. Keeping a diary is a way to witness one's own thoughts, and it is also a way to reflect about the merit of one's past actions.

SelfDesign and Virtual High have provided many other opportunities for exploring philosophy and spirituality. At Virtual High they took the form of classes, and in SelfDesign they usually take the form of discussions—except during the week-long Fall and Spring teen retreats, when they also take the form of classes. These have included classes on meditation, epistemology, yoga, tai chi, and western philosophy. At the SelfDesign Spring 2004 teen retreat I taught the program's first meditation class to a group of about fifteen students. The class took place at midnight, on a full moon, at a Christian retreat centre near Okanagan Lake. I began the class by giving a few simple meditation instructions. For the next hour, all of teens and I remained in silence. We did walking meditation, concentrating on each step and especially on the sensation of the foot pressing against the ground. We all walked very slowly down the dirt road, under the stars, making our way to the chapel. In the chapel we lit a candle and did thirty minutes of sitting meditation, focusing only on the breath. The atmosphere of concentration that

was created around these fifteen teenagers was extraordinary. After walking back to where we began the class, students had the opportunity to share any observations or thoughts that they felt comfortable sharing. All of the students (except one) were very receptive and very moved by the experience. Many of them reported that it was their favourite class or activity of the retreat. The event has been followed by online discussions about meditation with several of the students.

One of my favourite meditation activities offered at Virtual High and also through the SelfDesign Course is the Headlessness meditation. It was developed by Douglas Harding, author of several books including On Having No Head. His approach to meditation is completely non-religious. His own personal transformation took place one day as he was walking down a road and suddenly realized, deeply and permanently, that his perspective is always a first-person perspective. He realized that he could not see his own head, and that he was essentially an empty hole or space walking around in the world. This realization may seem rather strange or obvious, and yet how many of us are consistently awake and alert to this fact? We operate with our minds continuously full of concepts, instead of with the truthful, present-moment, continuous awareness of the space at the top of our body, which is the space that “the world” happens in. The first exercise recommended by Harding is to draw yourself (and the person across from you) from present evidence only. Ideally, the result will look something like this:



Normally, most people do not draw something like the above picture, the first time. Most people draw a picture that includes their own head. Drawing a picture of oneself with no head reminds us that if we drop all of our concepts, our present moment experience of “self” is actually just a space—a silent, peaceful witness.

Waldorf

The Waldorf education system, founded by Rudolf Steiner, has grown significantly in the last few decades. The first Waldorf school was started in 1919, in Switzerland. There are now over 800 Waldorf schools in 40 countries, with 150 of these being in North America (Barnes, 2005). Each Waldorf school is independent, and yet all of them share a common philosophy. Ideally, a Waldorf school is run by the teachers and operates independently of state sponsorship.

Steiner’s philosophy of education is explicitly spiritual. Early in his life, Steiner was connected to the Theosophical Society, which was inspired by and connected to a variety of Eastern spiritual teachings. Ultimately he founded his own philosophy called Anthroposophy. According to Steiner’s philosophy, a human being is “a threefold being of spirit, soul, and body whose capacities unfold in three developmental stages on the

path to adulthood: early childhood, middle childhood, and adolescence” (Barnes, intro, web). In Steiner’s system, education is “regarded as that which develops spiritual knowledge of the world and allows the pupil to become a vital part of spirituality. The medium for this is inner experience” (Oelkers, 2001, p. 188). Since an individual’s spiritual growth is connected with their spiritual knowledge, he saw spiritual education as being important to the spiritual evolution of the world. Steiner said that “the only way out of... social chaos is to bring spirituality into the souls of men through education, so that out of the spirit itself men may find the way to progress and the further evolution of civilization” (as cited in McDermott, 1984, p. 314).

In the Waldorf system, the “surroundings, the curriculum, the teacher’s presence are all viewed in the context of how they can nurture the inner life of the child” (Miller, 2000, p. 119). In terms of surroundings, a Waldorf school is sometimes thought of as a kind of oasis in society, where there is a friendly, positive, caring environment. In terms of curriculum, Waldorf schools incorporate a high level of art, music, dance, stories and myths in the curriculum, and the type of activity depends on the age or developmental stage of the student. In the Waldorf system, there are no marks or grading. Children work according to their own personal potential, without pressure. At the same time, Steiner’s philosophy was that children benefit from a structured curriculum. He believed that young people eventually achieve true personal autonomy only through careful discipline during childhood (Oelkers, 2001).

In the Waldorf system, the teacher’s role is critical. The teacher is a role model for the students, teaching morality by example. The cultivation of a positive, long-term relationship between the students and the teacher is important in the Waldorf system, and

therefore students remain with the same teacher throughout their elementary school years.

According to Steiner, the way a child is treated by their teachers and parents plants the seeds, in a very direct way, of what they will experience in their later life—including physical and mental illnesses:

knowing that what affects the young child will continue through the whole of life as happiness or unhappiness, sickness or health ... at first this knowledge may seem a burden on your souls, but it will also spur you on to develop forces and capacities and above all an attitude of mind as a teacher strong enough to sow 'seeds of the soul' in the young child which will only blossom later in life, perhaps even in old age.' (as cited in McDermott, p. 324)

The Environmental Middle School

The Environmental Middle School is located in Portland, Oregon, and has about 135 students and 7 teachers. It is based partly on the philosophy of Thomas Moore, the bestselling author of several books including Care of the Soul. All activities in the school revolve around a spirit of caring and compassion for other people and all forms of life.

Each day begins with a morning meeting which includes group singing, storytelling and sometimes slide shows. Academic work usually revolves around term-long ecological studies and projects. Students also frequently undertake community service projects. These have included planting trees in the local watersheds, building raised garden beds for seniors in the community, making and distributing birdhouses for seniors, and feeding the hungry at a local homeless shelter. This ethic of service extends to the school community as well, and once a month a group of students prepares a special meal for the whole school. (Miller, 2000)

A similar, project-based program exists in Jefferson County, Colorado. It is called The Walkabout program, and is offered through the Mountain Open High School.

The program was founded in the late 1990s by Maurice Gibbons. In this program, the teens have the option of doing an intensive study on some topic, participating in community volunteer work, or going on a wilderness adventure. At the end of their project or journey they are asked to report what they have learned to their community (Miller, 2000).

The main difference between the Environmental school and the Mountain Open school is that the latter school offers some form of independent “rites of passage” experience, in the form of a wilderness experience or major independent project. This kind of experience may be important. Anthropologist Joan Halifax (1999) suggests that “while a teacher can give us information, a teacher cannot give us wisdom” (p. 177). She says that in the ideal school, we would be “allowing students to learn through their own experiences... by creating specific educational settings where learners can really ‘take a plunge’” (p. 179). She suggests that teenagers need rites of passage experiences. One example of such an experience is the traditional Native American “vision quest”. A vision quest generally includes spending several days alone in nature, staying in one spot and going without food and sometimes without water or even clothing. To survive such an experience involves overcoming significant internal obstacles, and it is often a profound and transformative experience.

The Ojiya School

How can an elementary school support the “spiritual” development of young children? What kinds of activities are appropriate ways for children to cultivate

happiness, peace, and stillness? The Ojiya School may provide some answers to these questions.

The Ojiya School is located in Japan, and the person who initiated the unique approach of the school is Giichiro Yamanouchi, president of the Japanese Holistic Education Society. In all the schools where he has worked as a principal, he has made efforts to encourage activities that are truly interesting to the students. Yamanouchi suggests that “unless we connect the curriculum to producing something, the children’s interest and imagination will not be activated and they cannot learn” (as cited in Miller, 2000, p. 100).

At Ojiya, the students, teachers, and parents worked together to plan and then plant a beautiful 300-tree forest of native trees on the school grounds. Yamanouchi believes the forests can be very psychologically and spiritually beneficial. To one group of students, he said:

Some people believe that the forest is sacred, and when you go into it you can be your true self. Forests are natural meditation rooms where we can be alone and listen quietly to the forest. This helps our souls to grow strong. There is good, clean air, in the forest also, which is good for our bodies. If we are troubled in body and or in our minds, we can go into the forest to meditate and to breathe deeply and we can become renewed and vigorous. (as cited in Miller, 2000, p. 99)

Yamanouchi does not promote textbook learning for young children. He believes that education should focus on supporting positive inner qualities like kindness and independent thinking. He writes:

The most important responsibility of teachers is to help children grow to be a human being; having much knowledge is not important. To think for oneself, to learn independently, to treat others kindly and fairly, to work with friends, to

encourage others, to say what one thinks, and to act as one thinks: these are the things which are important. (as cited in Miller, 2000, p. 100)

One way that the Ojiya school supports the development of kindness and compassion is by taking care of animals and plants. At Ojiya, they have all kinds of animals, including goats, chickens, rabbits, turtles, and carp. The children develop a love for the animals, even to the point of even being happy to do all the necessary cleaning and dirty work associated with raising and keeping animals. The students also raise buckwheat, harvest it, make noodles from it, cook the noodles and then eat them! From his experience of visiting the school, educator John Miller (2000) writes that it is “a place that nourishes the students’ souls by the connections that are made to all forms of life. Students relate deeply to the plants, animals, and trees that are part of the fabric of the school” (p. 101). In addition to these outdoor activities, students study science in a way that is directly relevant to their activities, and they also do writing activities about their projects. Because of this, students at Ojiya truly care about what they learn.

The Healer’s Art

Medical doctor Rachel Remen has developed a course called The Healer’s Art, which she offers through the U.C. San Francisco School of Medicine. Remen (1999) says that her motivation is as follows: “Healing... may require the formation of a subculture of credible people who value that which has been devalued by the dominant culture.... It is possible for a single course... to become such a subculture” (p. 38).

There are two unique things that this course has in common with the SelfDesign Community mentioned earlier. First of all, the learning happens through dialogue.

Second, students keep a regular journal.

In order to “change the mental set from the beginning” (p. 39), the classes take place in a large living room, in the evening. The class consists of fifty to sixty students and ten to twenty doctors. Remen facilitates the class, but does not lecture. The first class actually does not begin with dialogue, but with a very pregnant and tense fifteen minutes of silence together. Following the silence, the students have discussions on a variety of specific topics, in small groups. The first class ends with a small-group exercise where one person in the circle says their name, and for one minute everyone else in the circle, in silence, sends wishes for strength, values the person, or prays for them. The next person in the circle then says their name, and so on. Remen describes the purpose of this last exercise: “As we do this exercise, the group moves into what might be termed a right relationship with each other for the first time, a supportive collegiality based on affirming the wholeness of every person in the group” (p. 41). Within the competitive atmosphere of the medical school, this kind of relating is more the exception than the norm. Over time, as students and doctors get a chance to tell stories and get to know each other, they “move from an experience of isolation and judgement to an experience of compassion” (p. 43).

Remen (1999) also encourages her students to write in a journal every evening, asking themselves questions like “What surprised me today? What moved me?” (p. 44).

Although writing in a journal usually involves thinking about the past, Remen suggests

that the ultimate effect of keeping a journal is that people become more aware and more present to their immediate surroundings and experience:

At first, people often do not see what's going on around them. After a while they see only several hours after they have lived through an experience. But in the privacy of their living room or their bedroom, in the company of a little journal, over time they begin to see again: to reconnect to their lives and to themselves. (p. 45)

Being absolutely present to our immediate surroundings, as well as to the “environment” of our train-of-thought, is powerful spiritual and transformative practice. According to Remen and other educators, the technique of journaling is one way to develop this state of mind.

The Sevagram Ashram School

The Sevagram Ashram School, founded by Mahatma Gandhi and modelled after a school started by Rabindranath Tagore, opened in 1936 and continued running until the early 1990s. This school, although it was located in a radically different cultural context than we find in modern day North America, may still offer an interesting perspective on what a holistic and spiritually-oriented education might look like. For decades this school served as the model for all elementary and secondary schools in rural India, and was called the Basic Education system (Patchen, 2002).

At Sevagram, students learned a variety of crafts and skills, including farming, weaving, cooking, building/engineering, art and music. Students also learned any mathematics, history, or basic literacy associated with these skills, especially in the

evenings. Older students also made the necessary agricultural tools and equipment for the ashram, and learned how to build homes.

Sevagram students, just like the Ojiya students mentioned earlier, would also plant, fertilize, harvest and cook their own food. They also did the same with their clothing: fertilizing cotton plants with manure from the ashram cows, harvesting the cotton balls, spinning the cotton into thread, weaving thread into fabric, and then sewing their own clothes!

These students were engaged in activities that might more accurately be called “work” (or “hard manual labour”), not “schooling”. Some of the crafts that they made were sold, in order to fund the school, since local villagers were already paying significant taxes and were in no position to fund the school. Depending on how one looks at the activities at the ashram school, one could call it “child labour”, “practical training”, or simply “life”. Perhaps it would not be fair to call it child labour, since overall the children and teachers all seemed to be enjoying their daily activities. One student remembers:

You can't imagine what wonderful days we've spent here in the gardens. At harvest time, it was a huge green paradise. Then gathering time was a big festival. Everyone participated—from the first graders to the principal. We would all go out together and spend a whole day cutting and picking and singing. (Patchen, 2002)

From a young age, these students were in an environment where they were working and serving other members in the ashram, as well as going out into the wider community to help others when it was necessary, as Gandhi often did. Speaking from my own experience, at Virtual High I generally felt most enthusiastic about a project when it

seemed like it could be of direct service to the community and world around me. Most of all, I was interested in community development and environmental issues. Also, students at Wondertree and Virtual High initiated and worked on various software development projects (at school) that ultimately helped pay their school tuition and fund the school. Perhaps it would be useful to ask ourselves: If a child enjoys their work, is there anything wrong with children working hard in order to fund their own schooling?

At Sevagram, the spiritual and moral side of life was not neglected. The day began with morning prayers (followed by 45 minutes of cleaning the campus), and ended with evening prayers. Gandhi believed that training of the spirit could not be done through books. He felt that it had to be done through practice, just like any other skill (Prasad, 2001). Gandhi also taught by example—he maintained a steady daily meditation practice and spent one day a week in silence. In the case of spiritual practice, teaching by example is especially important. Huston Smith (1999) says:

Abraham Joshua Heschel of Apt put it this way: ‘If you want to learn how to pray you can’t learn it from books. Hang out with a praying person.’ Because you have to attune to that person. I think Mother Theresa attuned to her spouse. Ram Dass attuned to Nimkaroli Baba. (p. 227)

All Sevagram students, whether Muslim, Hindu, or Christian, also received training in basic, universal moral and ethical ideals—including and especially non-violence. At the ashram, the relationship between the teacher and student was said to be one of mutual love and respect.

The Sevagram Ashram school was closed in the 1990s, when a new government school was built in the same village. The Sevagram school never gave examinations, grades, or certificates. Therefore, students could not easily go on to university. Once a

new government school was built, families stopped sending their children to Sevagram because they wanted their children, ideally, to get a university education and go on to get high-paying jobs. Perhaps the ideal school system would be one that combined the best of both models—a school offering academic subjects without neglecting the practice of simple living, service to others and a morning spiritual practice. Linda Lantieri (2001), author of Schools with Spirit, sums up this idea beautifully when she writes that schools should:

place the highest value on self-knowledge, healthy interpersonal relationships, and building community.... These goals are not incompatible with the pursuit of academic excellence—indeed, they foster it—but without care, respect, and kindness, what purpose does intellectual competence serve?” (p. 9)

The Passages Program

Rachael Kessler (2001), the founder of The Passages Program, describes the program as being “a set of principles and practices for working with adolescents that integrates heart, spirit and community with a strong academic component” (p. 109). Kessler tours around North America sharing her ideas and practices with schools. Her root question is “How can we nourish the soul at school without violating the separation of church and state or the deeply held convictions of families or teachers?” (p. 109).

Kessler believes that remaining alert and in the present moment is a powerful spiritual practice. Most of her work and suggestions are for the primary purpose of helping teenagers, and teachers, to remain fully present. Kessler writes:

I believe it is my responsibility as a teacher to help students come into the here and now so that we can all learn together. Games wake them up; quiet reflection invites them to look inside and release distracting thoughts and feelings. Pairing or group sharing exercises allow students to express what may be preoccupying

them and so to let it go. When we have created a safe enough classroom for students to “speak from the heart,” such authentic expression is riveting, calling both speaker and listener into the present moment. (p. 125)

Kessler also suggests that hiking, playing a musical instrument, painting, meditation, writing poetry, or journaling are all effective ways “to clear the mind of distractions”. She says that “discovering this quality of being is a spiritual experience.” (p. 126).

Kessler suggests that there are several deep needs that we all have, which are not usually met in the high school setting. These include the search for meaning, and the need for solitude, transcendence, initiation, joy, and deep connection. Over several years, Kessler has developed several exercises that help to address these needs. To begin with, she recommends that all classes include a “council process”, or “talking circle”, where students can all sit in a circle together and take turns speaking without interruption. In terms of actual tasks for students to do, she has many suggestions. To address questions of meaning, she asks students to write about the question: “What do I know about my purpose or mission in life?” (p. 112). To address the need for solitude, she gives students the task of spending ten minutes a day alone in silence, at a set time, either sitting, walking, or doing something creative like drawing. She also gives the similar task of spending one hour in silence, alone, sitting or walking, with no aim. Other writing assignments that she gives include describing one’s peak experiences in life, writing a personal history of joy and gratitude, and writing to a respected elder or mentor. Kessler finds that if a teacher presents these kinds of exercises with an open heart and a willingness to care and be vulnerable, that the exercises not only help to “nourish the

soul”, but they also spark a great deal of discussion, motivation, and general interest in her students.

Meditation

We have looked at how some schools cultivate an atmosphere that is conducive to peacefulness and contemplation. This section will look at what a few other philosophers and educators have to say about the possibility of integrating meditation in education.

It might be useful at this stage to offer a definition of meditation. Medical doctor and meditation researcher Herbert Benson (2001) calls meditation “the relaxation response”. Benson’s experiments revealed that meditation produces several unique responses in the human body. First of all, there is a “marked decrease in the body’s oxygen consumption” (p. 65). This is similar to what happens during sleep, except that during sleep oxygen consumption drops by about eight percent over several hours, compared to a drop of up to twenty percent within three minutes in meditation. Another response to meditation is that according to EEG readings of meditators, there is an increase in intensity of alpha brain-waves (Benson, 2001). Some long-term meditators may also show an increased intensity of theta and delta brain-wave activity during meditation (Wilber, 1999). Anything that has this kind of effect on the human body is what I refer to by “meditation”. According to Benson, there are four main conditions that help to elicit the “relaxation response”: a quiet environment, an object to concentrate upon (such as a word, mantra, image, sensation, or one’s own flow of thoughts), a comfortable position, and most importantly a passive, non-attached attitude (p. 85).

Although these conditions are perhaps desirable, they are not completely necessary. The passive, relaxed observation of one's own thoughts can be practiced in any circumstance, even in relationship with other people:

...first become aware, become aware of the beauty of the land, become aware of the trees, the colors, the shades, the depth of light... then gradually move in, find out, be aware of yourself, be aware how you react in your relationships with your friends—all that brings intelligence. (Krishnamurti, 1974, p. 35)

The key aspect in meditation is the passive, non-attached attitude while observing an object. Yoga teacher Amritanandamayi makes this comparison: “We have to learn to let the thoughts in our minds pass by just like the sights during a bus travel. They are not our destination.” (2005). Here is another metaphor, one which Krishnamurti used with the children at his school:

To learn about meditation, you have to see how your mind is working. You have to watch, as you watch a lizard going by, walking across the wall... In the same way, watch your thinking. Do not correct it. Do not suppress it... Watch thought, the way it runs, one thought after another. So you begin to learn, to observe.” (p. 22)

Why should we care about meditation, or about teaching meditation? To begin with, as Benson describes, it helps us to relax—anxiety is reduced. Also, it can help us to understand ourselves better—our emotions, our thoughts and our attachments.

Krishnamurti says to a group of children:

If you go out by yourself sometimes... then you will get to know yourself, what you think, what you feel, what is virtue, what you want to be. Find out. And you cannot find out about yourself if you are always talking, going about with your friends, with a half a dozen people. Sit under a tree quietly by yourself.... By being with yourself... you begin to understand the workings of your own mind and that is as important as going to class.” (p. 43)

A final reason to meditate is that some meditators report that the ultimate effect of meditation (usually after many years of daily practice) is that one ceases to identify with the body and mind, and instead one identifies with God/the universe/pure consciousness. As Krishnamurti explains it, “you find out that the outside is the inside, then you find out that the observer is the observed” (p. 36). This ultimate experience is reported to be more satisfying, liberating, and “real” than any other. Also, unlike similar experiences produced by taking certain drugs like LSD, it is reported to eventually become a “permanent” experience. One lives as an ordinary human being, and at the same time is in a state of perfect peace. Being free from any limited identification, label, attachment or conditioning, conflict is no longer possible. Krishnamurti explains this here:

Now I am conditioned as a Muslim and you are conditioned as a Hindu, right? ...where there is separation, there must be conflict.... therefore, in order to live peacefully in this world, let us be free of conditioning, cease to be Muslim or Hindu. (p. 34)

Some suggest that young children are already in a state of present-moment alertness that resembles meditation, and that it is not useful to teach children meditation. There is no general agreement between different meditation teachers concerning how old children need to be before they can truly benefit from a meditation practice. However, there are many meditation teachers, philosophers and educators who are recommending meditation for teenagers.

Gina Leveté is one educator who has traveled widely, promoting meditation in education. Leveté, in a 1995 study about the feelings fourteen and fifteen year olds, received many familiar responses like: “I do lots of things but inside I feel alone,” “I hate

doing nothing” and “I always have the radio on for background noise” (as cited in Miller, 2000). For young people who feel this way, meditation could be one way to relax and become more aware of their feelings, and to notice the thought patterns and actions which are causing these feelings. Leveté, in another 1995 study, taught meditation to a group of young teenagers, and found that the experimental group did better academically than the control group (as cited in Miller, 2000).

Teaching meditation in schools does not need to mean teaching a “religious” subject in schools. There are many different kinds of non-religious meditation that could be taught, including following the breath, body awareness, walking meditation focusing on the feet, meditating on a particular sound, word, or positive quality, or wishing a positive quality for others. Simply observing the mind, without intervention, is another powerful non-religious meditation that can be used, where the stream of thought is the object of attention. However, Leveté, from her experience, suggests that this “is a more advanced technique which requires a longer period of instruction and would only be suitable for older students” (as cited in Miller, 2000, p. 54). Any of these meditation techniques could be taught as a subject itself, or in combination with other subjects. Some have suggested that meditation could be used for relaxation before tests, drama classes, or sports (Miller, 2000).

Service and Compassion

Today’s education system puts very little emphasis on service work. It could be argued that to develop care and compassion for others, through service, is the most important kind of education that one could receive. Amritanandamayi suggests: “The

main purpose of education should be to impart a culture of the heart” (2005). There is perhaps nothing more important in life:

If you have devoted your life to meaningful activities—have been motivated by a sense of caring—then I think that when the last moment of your life comes, you will have no regrets. (Dalai Lama, 1999, p. 89)

Service activities help us to think about others, and open our hearts, instead of focusing exclusively on our own individual problems. Service can help us to direct our thoughts in a positive direction—towards helping others, and towards feeling good about ourselves.

Service work can take many forms. It can involve going out into the community to help the poor, which can open our hearts and open our eyes. Krishnamurti here writes about the poverty in the rural village around his school:

If I were a teacher here.... I would help you to look... at the peasants, the villagers. Look at them, do not criticize, just look at their squalor, their poverty, not the way you look at them at present, with utter indifference.... I will make you look, which is to make you sensitive, and you cannot be sensitive if you are careless, indifferent to everything that is happening around you.” (p. 30)

Service work can also simply take place within the classroom, at any grade level. Nancy Carlsson-Paige started a “game” in her kindergarten classroom called “the peace watch”. They started by taping a big piece of paper at the front of the class, where students could go and start to make a list of all the good deeds that they witnessed over the course of the day. The list grew, and the amount of helping and good deeds taking place in the classroom increased. More and more, the children were doing things like comforting a sad friend, lending a hat, giving a block to friend from their own pile of

blocks, and giving more hugs. Carlsson-Paige (2001) writes that each child “could experience himself or herself as a ‘good person’, someone who helps others. For some of the children, this was a new way to see themselves” (p. 34). Although it is our nature to care about others, Carlsson-Paige says that children need help to “discover the powerful energy unleashed by positive connection to others. This energy diminishes the appeal of the pseudo-satisfaction they might get when they use their power over others by teasing or hurting them” (p. 34).

It may be possible to have fruitful conversations and discussions, in the context of education, which spark a desire to help others. These discussions do not need to be in any way religious or esoteric. The Dalai Lama (1999), in promoting “secular ethics” in education, suggests that “the emphasis really should be placed on the immediate benefits—not only for the society but also for the individual himself or herself” (p. 94). Secular ethics courses might involve students discussing, contemplating and writing about positive qualities. Another way to focus on these inner qualities is to study the lives of individuals who embody compassion and service, or who have expressed the opposite qualities of hatred or anger, in order to look at the results (Dalai Lama, 1999).

The best way to teach compassion and service, of course, is by example. In the case of the public school system, this may require a major transformation at many levels. For students to feel truly respected at school may, their needs will need to be respected to a much higher degree than at present. The more choices they have, the more they will feel in control of their own lives and fate. The ideal elementary school might look more like a community homeschooling club. The ideal high school might look more like a

mini-university, where students are not forced into a set curriculum, and where they might also be able to design their own independent study courses and reading courses.

It is not difficult to argue that the current public education system, by its very structure, creates an atmosphere which is not conducive to the development of caring and compassion. Education critic Crawford Kilian (1995) writes:

Imagine that you work for a big company. Your workspace is less than one square metre, and your chair is hard. Normally you can't even leave it without your supervisor's permission. You have no privacy. Although you can't even talk to your fellow-workers without permission, the noise level is high. Your workplace is aggressively ugly. Corridors, like working areas, are drab and bare....

You have to work for several different supervisors, all of whom consider their own assignments the most urgent.... The assignments often seem meaningless to you, and don't always make sense to the supervisors either....

While you must put up with countless petty rules, you're not always safe at work. Supervisors seems unable to stop sexual harassment, theft, drug abuse, racist and sexist insults, and outright physical assault—all committed by company employees on company property. Some employees carry weapons because they consider themselves in danger whenever they're in the workplace.

No, you wouldn't want to work for this company. (p. 119)

Kilian suggests that the high school environment (roughly described above) inherently leads one into a “convict-like, anti-intellectual, us-against-them teen anti-culture among many students” (p. 119). Kilian does not blame the students for this situation, because he sees the positive intentions behind their negativity: “They fight the system just to preserve a shred of self-respect” (p. 119).

Krishnamurti would probably agree. He put it this way: “external outward imposition of discipline make the mind stupid, it make you conform, it makes you imitate. But if you discipline yourself by watching, listening, being considerate... out of that... comes order” (1974, p. 39).

John Taylor Gatto (1999), one of the most outspoken critics of public education and supporters of homeschooling, suggests that meaningful learning only takes place when a student cares deeply about something. He uses Christ and his disciples as an example:

What did Christ's model of educational discipline look like? Well, attendance wasn't mandatory.... He issued an invitation... 'Follow me', and some did, and some didn't.... the first characteristic of this model is a *calling*. Those who pursued Christ's discipline did so out of desire. It was their own choice. They were called to it by an inner voice, a voice we never give students enough time alone to possibly hear.... The second characteristic of Christ's discipline was *commitment*. Following Jesus was not easy. You had to drop everything else... You had to love what you were doing. Only love could induce you to walk across deserts, sleep in the wilderness...." (p. 157)

If we can create elementary schools and high schools where students care about what they are doing, the atmosphere will probably be more conducive to discussing and practicing service and compassion.

Conclusion

Our present public education systems in North America leave out almost any form of inner or outer spiritual practice from their curriculums. In terms of inner practice, we do not teach any form of meditation or self-observation. In terms of outer practice, we do not encourage service or compassion. These practices are the heart and soul of what it means to be a human being. If we include them in our education systems, everyone will benefit.

These practices seem to have been ignored for several reasons. We still associate them with institutional religion, instead of seeing them as potentially independent and

secular. Also, we tend to value academic knowledge and material prosperity more than spiritual progress.

As we have seen in the descriptions of several alternative programs, there are many possible secular doorways into meditation and compassion. One theme that emerges in the literature about education and spirituality is that many teachers say that nature can be an excellent doorway into spirituality and meditation. Many students grow to love being in nature, spending time there in silence and solitude.

Another theme that emerges is that if students are engaged in a project where they are producing something—such as at Ojiya (a forest), Sevagram (food and crafts), Waldorf (art) and Virtual High (computer software)—they become very passionate and engaged. As Krishnamurti and others pointed out, this leads to good concentration, mental clarity.

A final theme that appears is that most schools based on a spiritual philosophy have some unique way of encouraging self-observation. Sometimes, as in the case of Krishnamurti's school, or SelfDesign, it takes place as formal meditation instructions. At some schools, such as Ojiya and The Passages Program, it takes the form of spending some time alone in any quiet place. In the case of The Healer's Art, and also at SelfDesign, self-observation and reflection take place through journaling. And in all of these cases, it seems to be an activity that students enjoy.

By implementing these kinds of activities, we can start to turn education inside out. Instead of focusing almost exclusively on academics, we can use our own hearts and minds as a subject and a starting place for education. And, most importantly, as a

primary method for building “a culture of the heart”, we can encourage selfless service towards all beings:

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. (Buddhist saying, as cited in Miller, 2000, p. 6)

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Criticism for Meditation in Schools. The video highlights criticism for bringing mindfulness to schools: David Forbes, a professor in the School Counseling program at CUNY argues these programs target schools with students of color and the practice also encourages kids to be passive and "adjust to situations that many of us think people should adjust to." Bruce Gill, who runs the meditation program at Eastern High School in Washington, DC, and is Executive Director of Minds Incorporated, suggests mindfulness can give students important tools to navigate a fraught system. They've accumulated significant data showing the positive effects of incorporating mindfulness into education.