Secular Spirituality and the Foundations of Education Classroom

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Introduction

Every institution of higher education serves in some measure as a community of imagination in which every professor is potentially a spiritual guide and every syllabus a confession of faith (Parks, p. 159).

In a somewhat radically-inspired foundations of education classroom, I seek to stimulate thinking, and questioning - a little philosophical wondering and wandering - when I toss-out the statement that "teaching is a spiritual journey – as is life itself." And herein lies a somewhat complicated question: What do I mean? As I reflect on the personal meaning that I inject into this phrase I am reminded that I always encourage students to look behind expressed words for the meaning they represent. For the purpose of this discussion, I recognize that: Words, in and by themselves, have no reality, except in terms of the context in which they are used, in terms of the intentions and the character of the one who uses them. If they are read in a one-dimensional way, without a depth perspective, they hide ideas rather than communicate them (Fromm, 13).

It becomes important to proceed with a precautionary caveat: How I interpret the concept "spirituality" may not fit the contextual understanding of others who seek to probe the depth of the meaning in the word, and who find intensely personal ways to live authentically into the meaning found.   "The same word means different things in different settings. It may even mean different things for the same person, depending on where it is used" (Cox, H., p. 213). The dialectical conversation that defines an intellectually/emotionally-diverse educational foundations classroom revolves around hermeneutical inquiry, and an open-minded search for diverse interpretations of the who, what, and why of education. And, to probe deeply into the paradoxical issues that define formal and informal educational processes is to open the door to even more expansive life-defining realities. In the words of Viktor Frankl, such an educational setting seeks to provide the "means to find meaning" (1969, p. 85). It is at this point that we understand that it is "the act of creating and uncovering meaning that enables the individual to grow into his/her own niche" (Schubert, p. 318).

I want each of my students to grow into her/his own niche; to be authentic to individual personhood. And, of course, this intellectual/emotional process of

personal growth requires continually redefined answers to the question, "who am I, and who am I becoming?" There are, therefore, differing interpretations of the meaning of "spirituality," and how to incorporate this understanding into a personal search for answers to life's persistent questions. "Meaning is not 'in' words. Meaning is in people, and whatever meaning words have are assigned or ascribed to them by people" (Postman, 1969, p. 106).

Most of my students ascribe meaning to "spirituality" based on a personal worldview; one often influenced by a gradually-learned and experienced sectarian interpretation. They assign a theistic connotation to the concept, and this helps define their selfhood. "We are born with a seed of selfhood that contains the spiritual DNA of our uniqueness" (Palmer, p. 32).   How this seed is cultivated, nourished, and brought into bloom - if it does bloom - influences an individual's personal life-choices. It's possible that the seed may not bloom, and then an individual's selfhood is psychologically diminished.   Therefore, one goal of education is to intellectually - and emotionally - stimulate the student's spiritual DNA.   I have a responsibility to those whose bloom is from religiously fertilized roots, and also to those whose spirituality "does not have a religious connotation but refers to the specifically human dimension" (Frankl,1973, p. xi).

In my foundations of education course I want to provide intellectual nourishment for the growth of a student's spirituality; whether it be rooted in the humanistically/secular or the theistically/sectarian. In either case it is a "spiritual identity we must strive for, come upon, acquire, enhance, and live by" (Heschel, p. 51).   Not all students find a personal connection to a spirituality that is defined in theistic terms. This means I also have a responsibility to recognize the concept of a secular spirituality, and to infuse this concept into those classroom dialectical encounters that uncover and explore the many paradoxes to be found in the who, what, how, and why of formal education. This does not negate the richness, meaningfulness, and vitality of a sectarian/theistic spirituality. But, it opens a door to a more rigorous, open-ended philosophical exploration of the "spiritual self-affirmation" (Tillich, p. 46) that provides a centering focus for individual student becoming. Philosophers haggle about what to call this core of our humanity, but I am no stickler for precision. Thomas Merton called it true self. Buddhists call it original nature or big self. Quakers call it the inner teacher or the inner light. Humanists call it identity and integrity. In popular parlance, people call it soul . . . (It is) an ontological identity, a core of selfhood (Palmer, 2004, p. 33, 35).

For the purpose of this discussion, I choose to identify this core of selfhood as one's personal "spirituality." I then widen the interpretation of this spiritual selfhood, and acknowledge it as being the " key to the meaning of life (which) is found deep within each of us" (Thurman, 1951, p. 93). This necessitates an intellectual wrestling with interpretations of "spirituality" that include both religious and secular understandings. And here, as we jostle with possibilities, we might find a definition of spiritually that is very similar to an 18th century New England intelligentsia's transcendental attempt to probe into life's challenging mysteries: "Transcendentalism . . . (is) the right to interpret the meaning of life, untrammeled by tradition and convention . . . (It is) spiritual in nature and remarkably varied in practical implications" (Gura, p. 14).

The Intellectual Wrestling

Questions, doubts, confusions, and uncertainties are valuable experiences because facing them can lead us to develop intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually. (Gordon, p. 42)

Spirituality is not usually a subject raised when educating future teachers for the world of educational reality. "Mainstream education appears reluctant to explore the mystical and spiritual side of life" (Nielsen, p. 7). There are many questions and confusions- and contentious discussions - about economics and education, technology and education, testing and education, educational standards, teacher qualifications, the politics of education; the list goes on. Perhaps, in the educational arena, there IS a place for an open-minded - even mildly contentious - conversation regarding spirituality as a subject in these wide-ranging efforts to "reform" the public educational system. Contemporary education (at least in the public sector) all too seldom provides opportunities for students, or teachers, to look beyond the behavioristic, instrumentalist, testable, mechanistic aspects of learning. But, education should also include a search for life's diverse meanings, for self-understanding, and for finding ways to enrich the wholeness of the self. And this means uncovering and releasing an individual's unique spirituality.

To quest for the secular/spiritual in an educational setting is an effort to seek ways to open the mind, warm the heart, and awaken the creative spirit of <u>both</u> teacher and student. Such a quest requires creativity, contemplation, and imagination; ways of personal becoming that expand beyond a follow-the-script,

teach-to-the-test educational expectation. A "spiritualized" educational atmosphere as part of a learning community encourages all members of the community to explore life with more sensibility, more personal awareness, and with more sensitivity to the adventure that IS life. Such an atmosphere allows cultural, ethnic, and religious boundary-crossings, and facilitates a meeting of minds – and hearts. It encourages, and makes possible, an inter-connectedness based on inter-relationships. Here is where the paradoxes of life become the seedbed for intellectual and emotional growth. We need a balance between the rational and the intuitive, the intellectual and the imaginative, the linear and the strategic, and the literal and metaphorical in our lives. Students are encouraged to acknowledge this and to use their educational experiences to nurture all aspects of their humanity, to reconnect to the wellsprings of their beings and to the life force that animates them (Beattie, p. 36).

The animation of this "life force," - an educational/spiritual exploration - can take place within the confines of any academic discipline, but may have a special relevance to a foundations of education classroom. The future teacher needs to explore beyond "best practices' methodologies, and expand her/his vision to encompass a larger educational landscape. The adventure involved in such an intellectual journey opens the venturous searcher to an experience of "awe" – the sense of astonishment experienced when one open-mindedly responds to the mystery as well as to the majesty of life. Awe is more than a description of a feeling: it is a direct experience . . . These moments of awe are windows into the universal balance and harmony that is the web of life . . . When we realize that everything we do - and do not do - has effects beyond our own lives, we begin to glimpse the wonder that is the web of life. These glimpses put into proportion the incidents that impact our lives, as individuals and communities (Collister, p. 41-42).

Margaret Metzger (2001) has coined a phrase that may well connect to this sense of wonder, this philosophical "aweism." She metaphorically writes of asking the big questions of life as involving a process of "calling in the cosmos" (p. 23.)   In the foundations of education classroom to which I refer, we call in the cosmos. We ask the big questions of life, about the wonder that is the web of life, because the teacher's "task is to keep alive the sacred spark of wonder and to fan the flame that already glows" (Dewey, p.34).   In relating this thought to spirituality I find cause to reflect upon words in a song from the musical, The Children of Eden (music and lyrics by Stephen Schwartz). Here one finds a poetic metaphor to help us explore the meaning of "spirituality." The spark of creation

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burning bright within me. The spark of creation won't let me rest, until I discover, or build or uncover, a thing that I call my celebration of the spark of creation. It is this this bright-burning spark within the individual - an Augustinian eternal discontent - that activates personal creativity. By way of this metaphorical spark, "we possess in ourselves the Illuminating Intellect, a spiritual sun ceaselessly radiating . . . whose light causes all our ideas to arise in us" (Maritain, p. 128).

Jacques Maritain writes from a personal theistic/religious perspective, but we may also interpret the "spiritual sun" in terms of a secular spirituality. What is essentially meaningful about man is that he is a spiritual creature . . . By 'spiritual' I do not mean 'religious' in any formal sense, but simply progress in goodness. And by goodness I mean the ability to love, and the ability to experience and to respond with deepening sensitivity to the world I which one lives. Not with an echo, but with a voice of one's own (Montagu, p. 99-100).

To express goodness and love, and speak with a voice of one's own, the speaker must seek an honest answer to the probing question, "who am I, and who am I becoming?" – and then be authentic to the answer. It may well be that personal authenticity is integral to one's spirituality – sectarian or secular. Authentic personhood - as an aspect of one's spiritual nature - is achieved only when we resist closed-minded conformity to socially imposed expectations and "widen our acquaintance with the mysteries of the self and free ourselves from parochial assumptions and traditional mental habits and taboos" (Wilder, p. 16).

We may never solve all of the mysteries of the self, but an exploration into "the unfathomable mysteries of being" (Cox, G. , p.72) is a spiritual exercise that stimulates a person's continuous becoming. A foundation of education classroom may function as a creative space in which this exercise may take place. Here is where the philosophical issues regarding education may be explored in an atmosphere of open-minded questioning that encourages diverse ways of thinking, feeling - and being. "If we teachers are to develop a humane and liberating pedagogy we must feel ourselves engaged in a dialectical relation" (Greene, p. 52).   It is the dialectically-empowered classroom that encourages a knowledge-based curriculum to interface with a spiritually-infused learning atmosphere. It is here, to reinterpret a musical term, that a powerful "fugue" - a continuing interweaving of ideas and emotions - enlivens the classroom and reenergizes a communal search for clearer understandings of the complex realities of Life.

Authenticity and the Inner Voice

The longest journey is the journey inward of him who has started upon his quest for the source of his being. (Hammarskyjold, p. 58).

    I begin a semester's quest for answers to educational - and life - questions that often have conflicting, diverse answers, by making use of a Shakespearian reference from Macbeth: "To thy own self be true." And, this admonition to seek and express personal authenticity relates to individual spirituality as an aspect of one's reality, one's wholeness. The heart of learning is revealed <u>within</u> **each of us; rooted in spirit . . . Spiritual identity arises as an expression, not from indoctrination; it arises out of our unique, particular mingling of awareness, experience, and expression . . . Education can serve as the core of a lifelong journey toward wholeness, rather than merely an accumulation of facts, figures, and skills (Glazer, p. 2-3).**

    This spirit within each person, one's spiritual DNA, is "that (which) lies within each of us, waiting to be heard . . . this inner voice" (Chickering, p. 205). It is this spirit, this inner voice, that may be defined as personal spirituality.   And, it is this spirituality that is given birth in a classroom that seeks the "inner teacher, whose guidance is more reliable than anything we can get in a doctrine, ideology, collective belief system, institution, or leader" (Palmer, p. 25).   It is this existential, authentic, ontological identity - the inner self - that is an expression of secular spirituality. This non-ecclesiastical spirituality "is one's capacity to tap one's deeper levels of insight, sensitivity, and awareness" (May, 1981, p. 161).

    Howard Thurman (my former professor at Boston University) taught and wrote from the perspective of a theistic worldview; but his understanding of the human condition allows one to think in the power of paradox, and to reframe some of his words of wisdom into a secular vocabulary. Speaking of the "inwardness" which is part of one's personal authenticity, he reminds us: As a person, each of us lives a private life; there is a world within where for us the great issues of our lives are determined. It is here that at long last the "yea" and "nay" of our living is defined, declared (Thurman, 1972, p. 19).

It is this inner-world that houses our spirituality, and provides the launching pad for those various ways in which we engage the complex realities of life. It is here that one wrestles with, and formulates, decisions regarding life's big issues. "We have an interior life . . . and without it we are shells, we are nothing" (Dove, p. 125). One cannot be authentic without listening to the inner-voice, the spiritual ingredient that is part of the recipe that creates who we are. It is this mental attentiveness that intensifies an awareness of personal possibilities; that awakens us to a more vivid consciousness of what otherwise lies dormant within. And: "Man's waking consciousness is the beginning of his spiritual response" (Meland, p. 125); an intensified search for life's sometimes hidden meanings.

And this is why I see my foundations of education classroom as a place of personal meaning-making. Every student is on a journey. I am on a journey. We are on a journey together.   We are on a quest – an expedition of togetherness. "Viewing teaching as a spiritual journey can shift the focus from the teacher as the center of pedagogy to elements of learning shared by both the teacher and students" (Michalec, p. 13). And so, I begin a semester's sixteen-week communal-journey with the stipulation that each of us is a co-learner and a co-teacher. We share the responsibility to probe into the diverse, controversial, and changing meanings of education in a democratic society. We apply these meanings to the broader issues of life. And, we connect the big questions about life to education. We deal with paradoxes, conundrums, ambiguities; and with questions that have no definitive answers.   In so doing, we share the responsibility to be authentic to who we are, to be true to the inner-self; to an innate spirituality. The more I divulge my inner sense of truth, the more my students see me as a genuine person. And the more they see the virtue of being true to self, the more willing my students are to divulge their view of truth . . .The making of meaning becomes communal rather than insular . . . When I am true to the spiritual dimensions of teaching, I grow interpersonally be responding honestly to the ethical and pedagogical dilemmas my students present (Michalec, p. 10).

It is the intertwining of teacher and student existential authenticity that makes possible a communal learning environment.

Spirituality as "Heart Work"That's what my mind says to me. I wish someone would explain it to my heart. (M'Lynn, in the the play and film, Steel Magnolias)

In the classroom under discussion, the Shakespearian thought about authentic personhood is followed by a reminder that: Reflective thinking and rational thought have vital role to play, but this leaves room for passion and emotion. The intensity of living is thus enriched by the heart as well as the mind (Kurtz, p. 9).

As a pedagogical device, the heart is used as a metaphor; it stands for love, emotion, feeling, sensitivity, passion, compassion, awe, sensibility, courage, forgiveness; all ingredients in a definition of secular spirituality. Metaphorically, the heart can be pierced or broken. It can be saddened. It can beat with passion. In the world of education, the heart as a metaphor for spirituality is significant. As we search for intellectual excellence, competitive academic success, and high test scores (head work), it is all too easy to neglect "heart work" in the classroom, and in the larger community and society. "The real spiritual task for individuals as well as cultures they live in becomes the need to establish a balance of these two forces" (Brockelman, p. 123).

Teachers need to balance head and heart, thinking and feeling, rationality and emotion, order and creative chaos, prescriptive standards and caring, the tangible and the intangible, factual knowledge and interpretive understanding, inflexible expectations and forgiveness, love of knowledge and love of student. It is this "inner equilibrium" (Frankl, 1978, p. 80) that provides a stabilizing symmetry for the human psyche. An imbalance in the direction of either head or heart disturbs our teaching, and learning, equilibrium. Our technologically obsessed culture has, it can be argued, tipped the balance toward the head – toward the measurable, the quantifiable, the empirically testable. This is often at the expense of an aspect of spirituality, the heart's yearning to feel, to care, to love, to emotionally connect with others. In our own time, when education in the institutional and sociological sense has become little more than an instrument to serve the status quo, when the emphasis on technology has smothered our inner being . . . we are in need of . . . that more intangible sense of the value of being (Abbs, p. 22).

It is this sense of being - a spiritual perspective - that allows the individual to experience a relationship to the mysterious intangibles that lie outside of the materialist world of facts¸ figures, and observed realities. Spirituality is the attitude, and practice, of suspending our imagined reality in order to stand in

wonder and awe at that which unfolds and emerges beyond our conceptual grasp (Miller. P. 7).

And, this perspective may be expressive of a religious OR a secular line of vision. Perhaps, after all, education - at its foundational base - is primarily a spiritual task. The task is to establish a balance between head and heart, between intellect and emotion, between knowledge of our place in the universe and our ability to "feel" the interconnectedness of all that is; to be spiritually alive. "By spiritual I mean the diverse ways we answer the heart's longing to be connected with the largeness of life – a longing that animates love and work, especially the work called teaching" (Palmer, 1997, p. 16).

Those who viewed the film, StarTrek: The Next Generation, will remember Data, the robot. Data recognizes that something is missing in his logical calculations. Data wants to feel. Data can write - even poetry - with technical efficiency; but the passion is not there. That which is spiritual in nature - emotion, devotion, compassion, love, meaning - are missing. Data is a robotic metaphor for our technologically sophisticated and data obsessed society. This infatuation with the quantifiable seeps relentlessly into our teacher education programs. A foundations of education classroom can provide a counterbalance to an overreliance on an academic positivism, by facilitating classroom dialectics in which the spirituality of the heart is allowed to connect with the rationalism of the head. Definitions of spirituality and authenticity imply these domains interact with other vectors of human development: integrity, identity, autonomy and interdependence, meaning and purpose. . . We believe the path . . . to strengthened authenticity and spirituality lies in sharing views, exposing our assumptions and preconceptions, and risking the vulnerability entailed (Chickering, p. 9 & 11).

With this heart-infused definition of spirituality in mind, my students are reminded in a course syllabus that dialectical conversation, critical questioning, and challenging intellectual engagements will constitute the academic atmosphere of the classroom. The reinterpretation and repositioning of knowledge will take precedence over direct knowledge transmission. Instructor and students will be partners in sometimes risky intellectual explorations – even minor emotional explosions. Knowledge, ideas, insights, understandings, and interpretations - as well as challenging questions, personal concerns, and emotions - will be shared in a climate of mutual inquiry and reciprocal trust.

The above implies the creation of an academic kulanu. This Hebrew word, borrowed from the Jewish tradition and repositioned in a secular-education context, means "all of us." It defines a special kind of connected, sharing fellowship or community. The struggle to achieve an academic kulanu requires accepting a communal responsibility to encourage and embrace the contributions, spiritually-defined personhood, ways of knowing, and lived-reality of each individual in the classroom. To engage in a spirituality-tinged search for a classroom kulanu is to experience the emotional highs and lows of an educational adventure.   It is an adventure surrounded by uncertainty; by the lack of rigidly predetermined outcomes. It is the continued possibility of meeting the unexpected, of risk taking, and the reality of new insights and changed directions.

Here is a classroom that seeks to connect head and heart, and to develop an intensified awareness of both the "self" and the "other." There is a stress on the existentialist concept of personal becoming - a transcendent quality that evokes the creative spirit which is manifested in each person's inner being. "Being is the center in which exist the possibilities that, when unfolded, reveal the essence of the person, both as a member of the species and as an individual" (Salk, p. 107).   It is this personal essence, intensified by the realities of existential existence, that may be defined as the "spirituality (which) animates our minds and bodies, giving meaning and purpose to thought, word and action" (Kazanjdian, p. 3).

Concluding Reflections

Teachers teach spirituality by the way they talk to the students and treat them; by the way they move through their classroom environment and how they care for it. (Thayer-Bacon, p. 36).

A question has been raised: What is secular spirituality? This presupposes another question: Has the question been answered?   In considering the second question, it is well to give thought to the reality that: "It is a form of stupidity to accept without reflection someone else's definition of a word, a problem, or a situation . . . Definitions are hypotheses and imbedded in each is a particular philosophical, or political, or epistemological point of view" (Postman, 1988, p. 25).   It must be admitted that this writing flows from a particular, personal philosophical perspective. It is a way of thinking that gives

credence to a belief that the word "spirituality" is like life itself; it has paradoxical interpretations. One's concept of spirituality can be based on a sectarian <u>or</u> a secular interpretation. Or, one can hold the two interpretations in a creative tension that adds a new dimension to both poles of thought. In certain circumstances, truth is found not by splitting the world into either-ors but by embracing it as both-and. In certain circumstances truth is a paradoxical joining of apparent opposites, and if we want to know that truth, we must learn to embrace those opposites as one (Palmer, 1998, p. 63).

There are, of course, various theistic interpretations of spirituality. Paradoxically, there are also secular interpretations, as have been expressed in this writing. "Humans are primarily spiritual beings whose humanness is routed in a spiritual dimension . . . spirituality taken not in its theological context but as an expression of what makes us human" (Bulka, p. 35).   In many ways, both interpretations - the theological and the secular - are embraced in my foundations classroom. Differing worldviews are encouraged to stir the simmering cauldron of intellectual inquiry. This allows a mosaic of personal authenticities to engage in both/and inquiries into the big questions of life; questions which are often woven into meaningful philosophical discussions about the who, what, and why of formal education.

Teaching IS a journey; one impacted by the unfolding spirituality of both teacher and student -- those who are partners on a quest for more nuanced understandings of self, others, and the interconnectedness of all that is. "Spirituality is an ambiguous, controversial, and elusive term. . . a term to describe the wholeness of life and the unity of all natural phenomena" (Purple, p. 47).   Spirituality is a form of energy, too often untapped, that allows the individual to liberate her/himself from the restrictive bounds of biological and environmental determinism. However defined, it is this energy that I want my students to access as they negotiate a journey of personal becoming. It is a source of personal power that must be searched for. It becomes an educational desideratum: "Dig within. There lies the wellspring of good. Ever dig and it will flow" (Montaigne).

As I reflect upon this source of power - this inner energy - I am reminded of the Chinese concept of chi. Chi is "a life force which cannot be explained in terms of physics or chemistry" (Smith, p. 200). It is a human possibility that can't be measured, or quantified – or even defined in absolute, certain terms. It is the power of personal spirituality; an inner creative spirit that - when activated -

allows one to transcend social, cultural, ethnic, political, and economic boundaries; to climb outside of the box of conditioned conformity. It is like a magical, metaphorical growth hormone that intensifies the power to BE; that awakens the qualities of the human spirit – such as openness, empathy, compassion, tolerance, and forgiveness. It stimulates the personal courage that allows the individual to open-mindedly explore unknown intellectual and emotional territories. That is why my teaching responsibility involves encouraging the expression of divergent spiritualities in a communal exploration of the who, what, how, and why of formal education – and of Life.

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