

Meaning, Purpose, and Connection: Spirituality in a Learning Society

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Modern schooling has abandoned spirituality. Relegating matters of the spirit to other social spheres, modern schooling promotes allegiance to the State, basic analytical skills, individualized achievement, and exclusively rational approaches to knowledge. Driven to prepare students for state examinations, schools have become ensnared in the ‘measurement trap’, i.e., the belief that real learning is only learning that can be measured (Levinger, 1996). Yet new perspectives on learning suggest that, as wise women and men have long advised, that which escapes the trap of measurement may be the most real.

Spirituality can be a powerful teacher about learning. This essay will briefly outline some possible points of convergence between spirituality and learning, identify the ways in which such understanding of learning goes against the grain of typical schooling practices, and then discuss the implications of this intersection for the development of a learning society.

Spirituality has many definitions. For some, spirituality is a search for meaning, a desire to understand our lives in relation to Ultimate Being. It is, in the words of Catholic theologian David Steindl-Rast (1991), “an insight through which our restless search finds rest.” For others, spirituality is a quest for self-transcendence, an encounter with mystery, or a feeling of universal interconnection. Spirituality can also be seen as attention to the divine presence in each other and in all aspects of daily life. In this discussion, the many connotations of spirituality will be compressed into three words: meaning, purpose, and connection. These will serve as a framework for organizing a dialogue around emerging notions of learning.

Meaning. Learning involves a search for meaning, the active interpretation of our experience. The human brain eagerly searches for meaning-rich patterns (Caine & Caine, 1997) and builds new understanding of the world in relationship to existing understandings. We search for the value of new knowledge in relation to our core concerns and sense of identity. This is the process of knowledge construction. Yet schooling tends to work against the personal and collective construction of meaning. Traditionally, schooling has relied on extrinsic motivation—the threat of punishment or the promise of material reward—to induce the brain to store bits of personally or culturally meaningless information. Preoccupation with data acquisition crowds out deeper processing of meaning-making. In this way, schooling frustrates the fundamental human need to make sense of our experiences.

Purpose. Living systems desire to extend outward from a core identity and grow in complexity. Living systems desire not only to be, but to change—to become (Wheatley & Kellner-Rogers, 1996). As living systems, we humans learn what matters for our growth. We learn what enables us to become more of ourselves than we have been before. Because purpose is the wellspring of our motivation for action, deep learning must touch upon the learner’s sense of purpose in the world (Caine & Caine, 1997). Ultimately, the energy for learning comes from the desire to realize our dreams. On a

practical level, the energy for learning can be instrumental, stemming from the desire to do something in the world that matters to us (Shank & Cleave, 1995). We learn to ride bicycles in order to travel across the city quickly; we learn to use e-mail in order to communicate with friends. We experiment in the world until we fail, and then we attempt new ways of reaching our goals. Along the way, purpose shapes what we pay attention to and what we work toward. We resist learning which serves no purpose in our lives. Activities which serve others' purposes rather than our own will not motivate the energy and engagement needed for deep learning.

Modern schooling tends to ignore the learning needs of individuals in favor of pre-defined State purposes. Such pre-defined State goals for education (which often remain as legacies of colonial interests) leave learners no space to define and pursue their own goals. Thus, schooling often feels irrelevant and tedious to students and can sour their desire for learning.

Connection. The mystical traditions within each religion describe the nature of reality as deeply interwoven and interconnected: divine energy is manifest in the multiple forms of life. In recent years, some physicists and biologists have arrived at similar insights. Rather than treating the world as Newton and his followers have done—as a mechanical clock, a machine to be analyzed and manipulated—they describe the world as a system of system, a web of webs, a dynamic reality of endless relationships (Capra & Steindl-Rast, 1991). The common ground being established between mystics and progressive scientists reminds us that learning, too, is about human connection. In a webbed world, we need to pay much greater attention to what is happening between people, rather than focusing exclusively on what is happening within isolated individuals. We learn in relationship with other people and through our relationships with the world (Palmer, 1983).

Indeed, learning is fundamentally social and community-intensive. The Institute for Research on Learning argues that we learn what enables us to participate in a community and contribute to its welfare. We learn in communities of practice. A community of practice is a group that engages in shared activity. Such communities could include the shop of a rug-weaver, a street of shoe-makers, or an office of computer programmers. The connections within a community enable ideas and insights to flow freely among its members. We participate in the activity of the community, gain access to its shared knowledge, observe models of mastery, and build relationships which inspire further learning.

In communities, connection is the key to learning and change. If we believe that a system already contains a rich base of knowledge and the desire for growth, then we can support its growth by connecting it to more of itself (Wheatley & Kellner-Rogers, 1998). At the level of a school, for example, we might increase connection by structuring opportunities for children to work cooperatively on projects or, even better, work cooperatively with members of the community on projects which welcome them into local communities of practice. Overall, educators need to give greater value to relationship as a basis for learning and appreciate that students' capacity to build community is fundamental to the formation of a learning society.

The connection between spirituality and learning is important for the development of a learning society. A learning society will be concerned with “relationships, creative acts, a search for meaning that eclipses the economic” (Levinger, 1996). In a learning society, we realize that spiritual concerns are learning concerns. We cannot sustain a society in which our deepest human aspirations—our desires for meaning, purpose, and connection—are viewed as separate from the processes of learning. Alternatively, we cannot sustain a society in which learning is viewed as the purely consumerist accumulation of data.

Sterile, manipulative modes of education have left generations frustrated and hungry for a better way. Many of us seek greater integration and transformation in our work as educators and advocates of social change. Yet, in a pluralistic society, it is untenable to seek grounding for the spiritual development of public institutions and public life within a particular religious tradition. Instead, we can approach the re-spiriting of our work as a matter of learning. In light of the new understandings of human learning sketched out above, we now have opportunities to articulate dynamics of spiritual development in individuals, organizations, and society with dynamics of learning. This articulation of spirituality and learning can open new space for creative exchange between religious leaders, educators, and everyone concerned with alternative social development.

Religious scholar Robert Thurman (1996) notes that classical Indian civilization was deeply contemplative and developed a great spectrum of inner arts. As we consider ways to build a learning society, we might ask, what are the relationships between the inner arts of spirituality and the liberal arts of education? How can we engage in critical conversations about the quality of our religious experience and the wisdom which religious traditions offer for the renewal of educational practice? As the American educator Parker Palmer (1983) asks, “How can places where we learn to know become places where we learn to love?”

Along these lines, we might ask how religious traditions sculpt environments for learning. All religious traditions have deep pedagogical insights. Through prayer, chant, and ritual, religious practices enable participants to focus their attention, increase their self-awareness, and attune their consciousness to the interconnections among all people and all life. Ideally, religious rituals train us to realize meaning, purpose, and connection in daily experience. Rituals give people access to collective spiritual resources and provide guidance as we discern a path for ourselves through life—the ultimate path of learning we each walk (Cajete, 1994).

Of course, rituals can also become hollow habits, mere markers of compliance to behavioral prescription. When tradition becomes stale and no longer speaks to our lives, individuals and institutions must ask themselves: does participation in ritual open moments of vulnerability, of transformation? Does ritual open us to be known by that which is beyond us? Does ritual continue to bring us into intimate contact with otherness? By bringing us into contact with otherness, ritual can enable us to ‘unlearn’ normative modes of knowing and being. As the Jewish teacher Abraham Joschua

Heschel has said, “prayer is nothing if it is not subversive” (quoted in Kaiser, 1998). If ritual does not stand in some degree of tension with dominant ways of thinking and being, then it becomes time for its renewal.

People who maintain formal social institutions, whether educational or religious, often become more occupied with the perpetuation of their institutions than with reaching toward life’s greater goals. Critical spiritual inquiry—questions not of piety or orthodoxy but of meaning and purpose—can help people inside institutions examine the forces of domination in their lives in such a way that personal transformation might accompany institutional transformation.

Within the professional educational community, we need to reconsider the meaning of accountability. Currently, accountability is typically equated with the objective measurement of indicators of individual achievement, i.e., how well students are acquiring basic skills and knowledge. How might we rethink educational accountability in larger terms: as accountability for meaning, as accountability for collective learning, as accountability for participation in community life, as accountability for the cultivation of connection to, wonder about, and care for the human and physical worlds? As suggested by Beryl Levinger (1996), we need to be as serious about social cohesion, compassion, and creativity as we are about macro-level economic indicators. We need to appreciate learning as a web of transformative relationships rather than as a means of gaining control over others. Educators need to take seriously the variety of roles that human beings play throughout their life span, rather than focusing only on the student’s potential functionality within the modern economic sector.

Accordingly, opportunities are needed for innovation and experimentation—grounded in local needs and traditions—with hybrid models that intentionally bring spiritual insights to bear on educational practice and organizational forms. At this point in history, it is evident that learning is essential for contribution to community throughout our lives. Schooling which stifles meaning, purpose, and connection—in the name of rationalism and efficiency—diminishes human capacities and social growth in the long term.

Just as we attend to meaning, purpose, and connection in individual learning, we need a vocabulary for dialogue about the spiritual development of our institutions and our societies. As communities, how do we expand our collective capacities? Ongoing, cross-boundary dialogue is needed about the dimensions of our collective lives that we care to develop and the ways in which we can recognize such growth. Such dialogue can help revitalize educational discourse by advocating for the centrality of meaning, purpose, and connection in education and alleviating the hidden fear among many educators that ‘spirit talk’ will be branded as unprofessional, exclusivist, oppressive, or naively romantic.

Fundamentally, a spiritual perspective on learning must problematize both a secular worldview and a fundamentalist worldview. The secular, objectivist perspective on reality—a vision of the world as dispirited matter available for human exploitation—separates human beings from nature, from community, and, ultimately, from participation in the subtle forces of creation. At the opposite end of the continuum, fundamentalism holds tightly to a specific religious orthodoxy, offering a single lens with which to view

the world. That lens is usually defined by traditional texts and religious leaders (typically men) who claim privileged access to sacred truths. While fundamentalist perspectives can open powerful windows on the spiritual nature of the world, they are limited by their concern for self-preservation, and limited in their capacity to transform themselves in support of human liberation.

In a contentious religious and cultural environment, it is difficult to talk about spirituality without falling into partisan debate about particular traditions or touching nerves raw with memories of oppression and violence. A great challenge of our time, then, involves lifting deep issues of the spirit to the surface and the center of public conversation while protecting them from appropriation by parochial interests or dismissal by cynical modernists. We must get beyond the simple polarization of secularism/fundamentalism, of atheism/orthodoxy. Such dichotomies leave no room for those of us who aspire to spirited learning, multi-faith community life, and a common future rich with connection, meaning, and purpose. Our challenge, as suggested by Diana Eck (1993), is to create a social learning environment in which different traditions can offer unique perspectives on shared concerns without monopolizing the conversation in their own terms. To create this environment, we must acknowledge the wounds of the past and listen heartfully to our shared aspirations for the future. We must have the courage to share our deepest truths while transcending ourselves and our institutional affiliations (Levinger, 1996). Otherwise, we may find it all too convenient to fall back into familiar securities and all too easy, as Krishnamurti (1953) notes, to discourage the critical inquiry of others for fear of what changes they may ask of us.

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