

# EDUCATION FOR SPIRITUAL PILGRIMAGE

Agnes Kramer-Hamstra and Lois Mitchell

The educational enterprise is a critical aspect of humanity's response to the opportunities and challenges of the shifting canvas of a dynamic and complex world. Globalization, multiculturalism, pluralism – and assorted other “isms” - present students with a context at once both terrifying and inspiring. Conventional models of teaching and learning – and indeed even ways of conceptualizing the aim and intent of education - fail to equip today's students for the environments in which they will live and work and have their being. At the same time, questions of faith and spirituality – of transcendent purpose and meaning - persistently find their way into the conscious and subconscious spaces where learning and being meet.

This paper proposes that, rather than bracketing questions of faith as being inherently inappropriate or irrelevant to the educational mandate, these questions ought rather to be embraced as integral aspects of worldview formation and transformation. The student is not a discrete intellectual being, but rather an integrated person: heart, mind, soul and body.

The figure of the pilgrim offers a tantalizing response to life in a world characterized by high mobility, instantaneous social networking, seismic shifts in economic structures, and environmental change. Challenging the illusion that little reflection is needed, indeed that there is no time for reflection if one is to be on the “cutting edge,”<sup>1</sup> the pilgrim's life is a journey of deliberation through accelerated developments (such as in technologies).

In contrast to this siren call to be on the “cutting edge,” literal journeys and spiritual pilgrimage are shaped by how one responds to this question: “to what do you open when you find yourself stranded, standing on nothing?”<sup>2</sup> Every spiritual search, rather than being generic, notes Parker Palmer, “is and must be guided by a particular literature, practice and community of faith” (1993, p. 14). The Christian tradition's claim that “love calls us to the things of this world” invites a pedagogy that calls both teachers and students on a pilgrimage to explore what it means to live in communion with the world, and what this means for each discipline. The teacher and student engage in training for a journey in which “self and the world were permeated with transcendent possibility, the possibility of love” following the person of Christ who

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<sup>1</sup> There is a growing consensus that being on the “cutting edge” in the realm of education means to prepare students for the marketplace; recently, CBC's “Cross-Country Check-up” (Sunday 2 October 2011) reflected high praise for the 90% placement rate of students from community colleges into today's labour force.

<sup>2</sup> This question is the title of a painting by Erica Grimm-Vance, a Vancouver artist. [http://www.egrimmvance.com/grace\\_and\\_gravity.html](http://www.egrimmvance.com/grace_and_gravity.html)

came to dwell among us on earth, as the plot of the Biblical narrative tells it (Palmer 1993, p.14). Training for pilgrimage as a part of this plot then, includes asking critical questions, for example, about how earthlings can live in respect for this fragile, green gem of a planet, a household whose very breath depends on healthy relations between all of its inhabitants.

Pilgrims embark on both a literal journey and a lifelong spiritual experience. The literal journey is subject to work availability, which often requires people to be mobile and adaptable; our students are likely to have multiple jobs in multiple fields in multiple places. The spiritual journey has to do with a communal search for answers to larger questions. People trained to ask “Do you want fries with that” in a winning tone – are simultaneously trained to *not* ask about the physical and environmental effects of the fast food industry or the effects of global franchises on local economies. In other words, pilgrimage calls for deliberate questions that seek to enlarge a place that has become narrow. Wendell Berry’s questions provide a model as they ask: “How good is this website or automobile design or this farm or this hospital *as such?* ... What is the *quality* of this thing [that I am helping to make] as a human artifact, as an addition to the world of made and of created things? How *suitable* is it to the needs of human and natural neighbourhoods?”(1987, p. 81).

Asking such questions takes pilgrims along unfamiliar paths, destination unknown. The Celtic tradition, characterized by the sense of being called to journey without having to know where one will land, echoes through these larger pedagogical questions. Our understanding of knowledge is shifting as confidence that ‘science and reason will deliver a single, impartial, true picture of the world’ is giving way to questions about the ends or goals of knowledge. Noting how troublesome some of these “ends” of knowledge are (e.g. the “ecological consequences of technology...the grotesque potentials of genetic engineering”), Parker Palmer (1993) argues that one cannot ask to what end knowledge is directed without asking about where knowledge originates. Not only is knowledge rooted in “a place of passion within the human soul,” (p. 7) but the “nature of that passion” sets a direction that the knowledge will follow. Palmer calls for careful discernment of the passions: “we had better go back to its launching pad and deal with the passions that fuel and guide its course,” (p. 7) suggesting through his image that knowledge can be shaped into a weapon, or, it can be a healing balm, depending on what kind of passion “launches” it. He unmasks as amoral two common passions of the Western intellectual tradition; “curiosity” is a detached inquisitiveness while “control” is another word for power that desires to master “our environment, each other, ourselves” (p. 7).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The film *Wit* provides a powerful illustration of this. Emma Thompson plays a literature professor who, finding she has terminal cancer, unquestioningly gives herself over to “science,” agreeing to be the ‘research zone’ for untested treatments. However, for the first time in her life she finds that her heart and emotions are unable and unwilling to be subjected to a study in detached enquiry; they manifest her extreme loneliness. The scriptwriter makes profound use of the children’s classic *Runaway Bunny* to suggest that Thompson’s character has always been known by One who has longed for her to risk a life of living in relation to another.

The Christian tradition suggests an alternative to these passions, suggesting that knowledge gets at truth when being loved and being known are synonymous. Palmer quotes from the Biblical narrative in his claim that the end goal of love/knowledge is when “we shall be seeing face to face”(1993, p. 16). Truth, then, has less to do with detached “fact” and more to do with “troth,” with promise, faithfulness, with understanding oneself and the world as being radically dependent on the staying power of love.<sup>4</sup>

Palmer translates this for the realm of education: “Knowledge that heals and makes whole will come as we look creation in the eyes and allow it to look back, not only search nature but allowing it to search us as well.... the ‘objects’ of our knowledge will no longer be objects but beings with personal faces, related to us in a community of being, calling us into mutuality and accountability” (1993, p. 16). This is an educational pilgrimage that seeks transformation: “transformed by love we use our minds to recall and recreate the community in which we were created, to know the world in the same spirit in which we are known” (Palmer, 1993, p. 16). This love is a mystery that invites one on a spiritual journey whose “end” is to learn how to return that love wherever one finds oneself.

### Works Cited

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Agnes Kramer-Hamstra PhD teaches English while Lois Mitchell PhD teaches International Studies at St. Stephen’s University, St. Stephen, New Brunswick.

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<sup>4</sup> Instead of a mastery of “facts” the pilgrim is invited to a “playfulness and delight in the discerning of wisdom in experience, not only in good humour but also the ‘play’ that we find in a steering wheel” (Smith and Shortt, 154, quoting Brueggemann). This kind of discernment calls the pilgrim to accept and enter into “slippage that cannot be overcome or explained.” The sense that one’s life is interwoven in a larger story and life invites the pilgrim to wonder instead of giving the illusion of certainty.