

SPIRITUALITY AND EDUCATION

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The key words I will consider herein are: purpose, meaning, place, connectedness, and soul. Soul I equate with the moral and emotional essence of human beings, such that a depth of soul, and existential state, is achieved when this essence reaches a more refined level, as based on some inner qualitative standard of natural potential. No religion required here – just Dewey’s “liberation of the life force”, which he saw as central to true educational “experience”.

In this sense of soul, then, education and spirituality are at least co-extensive, if not quite synonymous. Of course Plato thought that the moral essence had to be realized, or else education itself did not exist.

So what about thought? For Plato, human morals and thought were conjoined, but, as a contemporary species, we seem very proud, but nonetheless very exhausted, by being perpetually “cognitive”. In fact, the “wise ape” seems to have considerable difficulty in rationalizing its modern life with its ancient soul. Purposes, meanings, places, connections, become displaced, and this affects the quality of the ape’s life. Its wisdom, then, loses out to mere knowledge and information.

In fact, the Romantics considered that our moral and emotional essence, defining our natural or normal state of being, could easily become displaced or distorted by cold reasoning, or by an obsession with narrow rationality of inferring from fact or logic, what Heidegger calls “calculative thinking”. Heidegger sees this as a form of thought which we use to self-consciously plan, organize, and control, a type of thought which enables us and teaches us to rush blindly headlong, without a balancing from another type of thought, one he calls “meditative”. This type of thought is concerned with “the meaning which reigns in everything that is”. Meditative thought is, therefore, existentially rooted, at least in part, in our connectedness to nature and the natural landscape. This rootedness, when directly experienced, allows us in turn to escape into a more soulful or spiritual existence.

Heidegger, like Rousseau, also sees modern technology as a calculative incubus, that is, an evil spirit that overpowers our lives as living beings. As a result, Livingston says, we come to live in our heads, in our ideologies, and in our relationships with technology, instead of in the broader being which spawned us and which should therefore give us true nurture.

This is Wordsworth’s concern as well. His poetry describes a transcendental meditative state of union or connectedness with nature, resulting in a deeper sense of meaning, a sense that transcends the modern industrial world, and in the process it

gives us a sense of our place, as well as an awareness of our purpose – as participants, in a great natural society of interconnected beings. These interconnections define the living world, the biosphere, the society of life. This is also consistent with Aboriginal spirituality and its central role in Aboriginal philosophy of education.

There is a type of associated psychological state which produces this sense of meaning and purpose that is so characteristic of the Romantic Imagination and its essential spirituality. As Wordsworth describes it, he is “Well pleased to recognize/In nature and the language of sense/The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse, the guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul/Of all my moral being.”

This also describes the psychological/moral/emotional effects of Montessori’s “concentration”, in which the child, seen as a “spiritual embryo”, is allowed to become more deeply nourished by the nutrients of the “second womb”, that is, the immediate natural environment. When awakening from such concentration, Montessori says, the child is more contented, more social, more loving – more in a harmonious union with the surrounding environment.

Actually, the whole Progressive movement in Education was based on these types of natural standards that were to be discovered within, but yet nourished from without, in the interactive union of organism and environment. For Rousseau, this environment was also social, as it indeed was for the Progressives as well, because, as a social species, our normal, natural environment is both physical and social. Darwin, growing up in an environment largely created by these Romantics, managed to beautifully demonstrate all of this in scientific terms. No longer external observers of the natural world, humans after Darwin recognized themselves to be participants in the great and mysterious natural universe that spawned them.

Since Darwin’s time, the essential messages of naturalism and the life sciences, so consistent with Romanticism, have been incrementally usurped by the incubus created by the physical sciences and technology, and this domination, supported by government and economics and academia, has only served to suppress classical educational philosophy, and in the process it has also created an entirely different set of concepts of child, curriculum, and educational purpose, but concepts considerably less amenable to the notions of soul and spirituality.

Narrow calculation, and an obsession with information and biomedical machine-model cures for perceived problems in areas such as literacy, have only turned classical notions of education on their heads. They have made the child into a problem instead of a solution – into a mechanical being, not a spiritual one – the narrow rationality of how-to-do-it, coupled with the hovering concept of the child as a social defective, have supplanted a set of organismic solutions to educational problems which should be derived from soul and spirituality. As Kane says, “students learning in limited environments relative to the exploration and unfolding of being may find school both very informative and meaningless.” In the process of this change, we have lost our place. Education is seen as a chronic problem, not as the source of solutions to the problems which besiege it.

To conclude, Immanuel Kant took faith in the inherent limitations which science experienced in explaining the ultimate mystery of Being, limitations which in turn arose from the limitations of the human mind. That is, Kant understood our sense of place, and those limitations of the mind that nonetheless serve to connect us to something bigger than ourselves. Education cannot guide us without this type of humility and spiritual awareness, and yet, human power structures, as they do today, only tend to supercede and suppress both Education and its intrinsic spiritual core. It is now past time for adults to “unlearn” such biases, but who will be the teacher? As teacher educators, let us now take us this vital challenge.

Bibliography

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