

## Continuing the Conversation: Recovering the Sacred in Education

### Abstract

This paper explores learning and education and the role that spirituality plays in the transformative educational paradigm of author Stephen Sterling. It includes the current state of affairs of spirituality and education through the eyes of several leaders and pioneers in the area of sustainable education. In the section on learning, the consequences of transmissive education are discussed, as well as how holistic learning and awareness of the sacred address some of these societal concerns. And in the next section, education as a pathway to healing and wholeness is explored, focusing on how the body is a resource, as well as the importance of the inner life in learning. This paper acknowledges that the discourse on spirituality and education is controversial, but is necessary and possible in the years to come.

*Education becomes spiritual whenever a lesson- irrespective of the subject being taught- moves beyond a mundane level to grapple with issues surrounding the fundamental meaning and purpose of life.*  
~ Andrew Wright

### Learning

Before school this morning, my son and I were snuggled in bed and he said, “I don’t want to go to school. I hate learning.” This is from a child who holds bees in his hand, knows how to weld, knits scarves and is a third-grader reading at the fifth or even sixth grade level. My son does not hate to learn. He hates to learn in transmissive ways, where he is considered empty and needs to be filled with knowledge. He loves to learn in the backyard, where he sets traps and waits for squirrels to come and eat his sardine (or leftover pizza) bait. In spaces where he is allowed to express his creativity, he shines. The Western educational paradigm avoids creativity because it is rooted in a mechanistic, industrial paradigm. When we leave creativity out of learning, we are standing on shaky ground.

The word *learn* has its foundations in the definition ‘to follow or to find the track’ and is also related to the Old English word, *laest*, which means ‘sole of the foot.’ (Online Etymology Dictionary) What are we following and what track are we on when it comes to learning? Sterling suggests that we are on an educational track “based on the 19th century factory model.” (Sterling, 2001, p.44) Are we still traveling on a track we laid down a century or more ago, for reasons that are no longer appropriate or applicable? Is filling students with facts and information in a primarily objective manner going to prepare our children to face the ecological, social and spiritual challenges of their day? How can we invite transformation, rather than fear it, and root ourselves in the organic, creative process of learning? Stephen Glazer, author of *The Heart of Learning: Spirituality in Education* believes that, “American education has become grounded in disconnection, in particular, the separation between the material and the spiritual.” (Glazer, 1999, p.9) If this is the ground we stand on, and I believe we do, it is up to us to reclaim the spiritual or the sacred, in education.

Stephen Sterling, author of *Sustainable Education: Re-visioning Learning and Change*, writes in his opening statement, “The key to creating a more peaceful and sustainable world is learning.” (Sterling, 2001, p.12) If we are to learn something new, whether that is a new skill or uncovering a hidden quality within us, we must be willing to open to something we do not know.

The process of moving from the known into the unknown, like the caterpillar to butterfly, is a sacred process of transformation. It is a creative, moving, intimate process. It seems strange that we would avoid this process when we educate children, as it seems so natural to the life of a child. But when you think about it, we are a culture that generally runs from intimacy. I think we avoid transformation because we are top heavy. We rely too much on our heads and not enough on the rest of the resources we have within us. The rational mind sorts and organizes; it does not to sense. And since we are in an educational and societal paradigm that overvalues the intellect, we are not encouraged to make mistakes and take risks. Susan Aposhyan, author of *Body-Mind Psychotherapy* says, "We have come to regard the brain as the master of the body and the sole holder of intelligence...First and foremost, we must remember that: *The brain is part of the body...*It is dependent on the body for feedback, because the brain has *no sensory nerve endings*. It cannot feel; it's data is secondary...*the brain is the last to know.*" (Aposhyan, 2004, p.26-27) The rational mind alone wants order. It does not want the mess of creativity. The heart holds the hand, so to speak, of the mind and says, "It is going to be okay. It is messy, but that is the stuff of transformation. We will make it through." The heart is what leads us into unknown landscapes and gives us the strength to take risks. When the rational mind learns to be in service to the heart, rather than the dictator, we are brilliant. We need both, as Andrew Wright says in his book *Spirituality and Education*, "Raw emotion, it seems clear, must be subject to some level of critical scrutiny. Spiritual education ought to seek to produce a generation of discontented philosophers capable of thinking as well as feeling ... a balanced combination of the two stands a better chance of producing appropriate levels of spiritual sensitivity and literacy." (Wright, 2000, p. 76) Reclaiming the sacred requires us to live with balance, where we consider not only our inner experience, but the various contexts that we find ourselves in. And when we respond to the world wholly, head and heart, we root ourselves in the mysterious and intangible Source that makes each one of us whole, and unifies us, even through our differences, as one.

Rupert Sheldrake, author and biochemist, tells us in the book *The Way Ahead: A Visionary Perspective for the New Millennium* "the only way to move back to a greater sense of cohesion and community is through...a rediscovery of the sacred." (Shapiro, E. & D., 1992, p. 195) As I sat writing this paper, my three year old neighbor sat next to me playing with magnetic toys, when all of a sudden a breeze came through the room. He immediately put down his toys and looked at me. "I feel the wind, Jenny. I can hear it too." This child's attention to the wind showed his respect for it. His actions embodied his immediate connection to the sacred in the here and now. Glazer refers to the sacred in education as "the practice of openness, attentiveness to experience and sensitivity to the world." (Glazer, 1999, p. 11-12) If we can redefine the sacred as respect for, and attentiveness to, the here and now, we might be able to create space needed for all of us to explore what is sacred about the here and now. Spirituality, understood as sacredness, is then available to us all. It has to do with recognizing with wonder and awe, the complexity and creativity of life. With the darkness that surrounds us, suffering that we cannot deny, we are invited into a multi-dimensional way of learning; one that includes every part of us. It might sound ideal, but it is necessary, and it is possible.

Learning that is rooted in the sacred is what is called for now. And we build relationship with the sacred through individual and collective experience. When we look into the mirror of our culture and we can see how it reflects the emptiness within us. Sterling suggests that "The larger-still social system affects and shapes the educational system more than the other way around..." (Sterling, 2001) Throughout his writing, Sterling alludes to the idea that it is not

simply the educational system that needs to transform, we do. We *are* society. We *are* the educational system. One by one we come together and create webs, consisting of fear, faith or both. And Sterling says: “The concept of sustainable education appears to be calling for deep change at a time when educators and learners are already overwhelmed with too much change.” When many of us consider the magnitude of the current social and ecological issues that we face, we get overwhelmed and lose faith. Sterling gives us hope in his transformative educational paradigm saying that is of “a different order...where the smallest gain can be of deep significance.” (Sterling, 2001, p. 33) In the darkness of its current state, education holds the potential to be the great light keeper; the pathway back to ourselves.

## **Education**

Sterling focuses on *how* we educate because he says that the key role of education is as an agent of change (Sterling, 2001, p.35) Sterling breaks the way we educate down into two processes, transmissive and transformative education. (Sterling, 2001, p.35) He associates transmissive education with being instructive and imposed, and asserts that this is the primary form by which we educate today. With this approach, we try to ‘get the message across’, where the teacher is more of an “expert” leading students in a hierarchical way. (Sterling, 2001, p. 35) I experience this in the classrooms of my first and third grade children, even with teachers who long to be more creative. When speaking with teachers on a heart level, many have revealed feeling constrained by the quantitative, rigid measurement tools we have to measure progress. I see children mostly sitting at desks, writing and reading, with the teacher standing at the front of the room speaking. When children are moving down a hallway, they are asked to hold their own hands in front of them and put an imaginary bubble in their mouth to stay quiet. We are asking this of five and six years old. I have often wondered after dropping my children off, why is a building with children from five to ten years old so quiet, most of the time?

Sterling tells us that one of the critical roles of education is “to recognize and help people work with very real concerns and emotions” about where our world is today. (Sterling, 2001) We are educating our children right out of their bodies and hearts. Creativity is born from wholeness and we are meant to learn as whole beings. We were given body, heart and soul, in addition to our intellects. We now have undergraduate students panicking about whether or not they will have a job and make money, when “most have an inner sense that they are meant to do something special with their lives.” (Jablonsky, 2001, p.20) A study reported by the *National Institute of Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism* shows that eighty-percent of twelfth graders in the United States have used alcohol in some way. (Johnston, L. D., O'Malley, P. M., & Bachman, J. G., 1998) Eighty percent. When we keep children, and then young adults up in their heads, we live in what Ken Wilbur, author and father of *Integral Theory*, calls the “flatlands” (Glazer, 1999, p.9). We live one-dimensionally, operating primarily out of the intellectual part of ourselves. When we disconnect from our wholeness, a big part of who we are lurks in the shadow. And when we do not have a space to engage those darker parts of ourselves, we learn how to mask or sedate in us what society cannot accept. The darkness will not go away on its own. Because education is a primary agent for change, why not engage it as a pathway to wholeness and an avenue for healing; a place to explore a deeper sense of who we are. Glazer’s vision for spirituality in education sums this up: “Education can serve as the core of a lifelong journey towards wholeness, rather than merely an accumulation of facts, figures or skills.” (Glazer, 1999, p.3)

“Paradigm change is itself a transformative learning process.” (Sterling, 2001, p.11) To move from transmissive to transformative education, we must move towards a learning process that as Sterling says, is constructive and participative in nature. (Sterling, 2001, p.38) Education, in this form, would be capacity building and process oriented. This paradigm is holistic in nature, allowing for all parts of a human being to show up. Nearly three years ago, I taught a class called *Let it Shine* in the public school system, where we used creative expression to build relationship with self and the outside world. In a second grade class, we explored our relationship to different emotional landscapes through movement and art process. When children entered the landscape of grief, they began verbally sharing stories of loss. “I remember when my goldfish died.” “I was there when my grandmother died.” “My cat Oscar died last week.” Slowly, tears began to fall from their eyes, and in a few minutes, more than half of the class was sobbing. I knew that I had to get them back to math class in five minutes, where they would be sitting at their desk with pencils in hand. I was panicked, wondering how in the world I was going to transition these children, whose hearts were wide open, down the hallway quietly to math class. Needless to say, it did not happen. As the teacher scurried them back to their desks, I felt like a failure. The next day, when I met with the principal he said to me directly, “This system does not have the capacity to hold the emotions of these children.” I wanted to argue with him, but he was right. Kathleen Manning, associate professor in higher education at the University of Vermont, speaks of this denial of emotions in our educational systems in terms of what she calls *upperworld* and *underworld* emotions. She says that we overvalue the *upperworld* emotions, such as happiness and joy, and actively avoid the *underworld* expressions, such as grief and rage. She says, “Any expression, particularly public, of these very real human feelings is viewed as weakness. Underworld emotions, though normal and complementary to expression of the positive, upperworld feelings are discouraged or even banished from modern organizations.” (Manning, 2001, p.29) The emotional landscape of our children is being left out of the learning process. With all that these children must “learn”, we just simply do not have the time for their inner lives. Because we are not tending to the inner life in education, we have quite a mess on our hands with our young people. Each month I receive emails and phone calls from young people all over the country, asking for spiritual guidance. A thirteen year old girl shared, “Jenny, I just had sex with my boyfriend and I don’t know what to do now. I feel guilty.” An undergraduate student in southern California emailed, “I am lethargic. I don’t feel like being around anyone and I am scared.” They are not prepared to be with what is alive within them. Parker Palmer says, “Attention to the inner life is not romanticism. It involves the real world, and it is what is desperately needed in so many sectors of American education.” (Glazer, 1999, p. 16) I respond to these young people by directing them to their breath and feet first. The breath is sacred, and so are our feet, because they have the power to bring us back to the here and now. In education, we have drawn a line between spirituality or sacredness, and the public education process. Andrew Wright, in his book *Spirituality and Education*, says “spiritual education will inevitably be a controversial issue in schools. This...however, does not detract from the importance of the subject: it is precisely because spirituality is so problematic that there is an urgent need to develop a pupil’s spiritual knowledge, understanding and insight. (Wright, 2000, p. 7) If we commit to and root ourselves in the sacred, we have the capacity to continue, and deepen into, this controversial conversation on education and spirituality. The way we learn and educate can be pathways to healing and wholeness.

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