

SPIRITUALITY IN EDUCATION: ETHICS AT WORK

Sunnie D. Kidd

This presentation will address spiritual dimensions of education and then move on to how the ethical dimensions of education flow from these spiritual dimensions and are at work. Here, they are alive.

Teaching and learning are critical to our individual and collective survival and to the quality of our lives.¹ When we come to embody in our teaching and learning the sacred, we truly come to understand the preciousness of otherness. The fundamental theme of this presentation is otherness.

Teachers with the capacity for connectedness make connections among themselves, their subjects and their students so that students can learn themselves.² These connections are not held in their techniques but in their hearts, the place where intellect, emotion, spirit and will converge in the human self.³

The teacher within is the voice of identity and integrity. It speaks not of what ought to be but what is real for me. It speaks of who I am and who I am not, what gives life and what takes away. It is the fundamental ground upon which connectedness is found.

Identity is a moving intersection of the inner and outer forces that make me who I am, converging in the irreducible mystery of being human. Integrity is the wholeness within the pattern of my life. It requires that I discern what is integral to my selfhood, what fits and what does not-and that I choose life-giving ways of relating to that which converges within me and to others.

Technique is what teachers use until the real teacher arrives.⁴ True teachers connect students with the subject being studied and with each other. This expresses the capacity for connectedness at the heart of spirituality of education, cultivating the inner ground from which community grows.

Community emerges from that inner ground into the classroom and the larger world. Community is an outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible grace, the flowing of personal identity and integrity into the world of relationships.⁵ It is the continuity of connectedness.

The model of community we seek, says Parker J. Palmer, is one that can embrace, guide and refine the core mission of education—the mission of knowing, teaching and learning. This model of community reaches deeper, into ontology and epistemology—into assumptions about the nature of reality and how we know it—on which all education is built. The hallmark of the community of truth is in its claim that reality is a web of communal relationships and we can know reality only by being in community with it.⁶

This speaks to a transformation of images of reality that move from fragmentation and competition to community and collaboration. Community is the essential form of reality, of being itself. This image lifts up not only our visible connections to human forms of being with their opportunities for intimacy, civility and accountability—but our invisible connections to nonhuman forms as well.⁷

In the community of truth we enter into complex patterns of communication—sharing observations and interpretations, correcting and complementing each other, torn by conflict in this moment and joined by consensus in the next. This communal dynamic is governed by rules of observation and interpretation that help define us as a community by bringing focus and discipline to our discourse.⁸

Truth is an eternal conversation about things that matter, conducted with passion and discipline. The idea of a subject that calls to us is more than metaphor. In the community of truth, the knower is not the only active agent—the subject itself participates in the dialectic of knowing.⁹ It is not only we who correct each other's attempts at knowing but the subject itself corrects us, with the strength of its own identity, refusing to be reduced to our self-certain ways of naming its otherness.

Eventually we conclude that we know it. But the transcendent subject always stands ready to take us by surprise, calling us into new observations, interpretations and namings and into the mystery that can never be fully named.¹⁰ Openness to transcendence is what distinguishes the community of truth from both absolutism and relativism.

Perhaps there are clues, says Palmer, to a synthesis in the image of the community of truth, where the subject sits in the middle and knows. The classroom should be neither teacher-centered nor student-centered but subject-centered, a classroom in which the best features of teacher-centered and student-centered education are merged and transcended by putting not teacher, not student but the subject at the center of our attention.¹¹

True community in any context requires a transcendent third thing that holds both me and the other accountable to something beyond ourselves. In a subject-centered classroom, the teacher's central task is to give the great

thing an independent voice—a capacity to speak its truth quite apart from the teacher's voice in terms that students can hear and understand.¹²

Education in its wholeness, says Palmer, is about healing, empowerment, liberation and transcendence. These four spiritual dimensions are foundational Christian values. Placing these values on a quadrilateral crossing, transcendence is inner, healing is outer, empowerment is backward, liberation is forward with the person standing in the middle (see Figure 1).

SPIRITUALITY

Transcendence

Empowerment + Liberation

Healing

Figure 1

Now, there are four values that seem to be the embodiment of these spiritual dimensions in the classroom that could be a representation of any culture. These values, responsibility, respect, trust and care are very basic. Placing these values on a quadrilateral crossing, responsibility is inner, respect is outer, trust is backward, care is forward with the person standing in the middle (see Figure 2).

ETHICS

Responsibility

Trust + Care

Respect

Figure 2

Now, at this crossing of the sacred and the lived, first there is the transcendent and the human being responds to the transcendent. Respond is the root of responsibility. With the gift of life comes responsibility. On the dimensional continuum is respect. Respect is not only for the gift of life and the power of healing but for the other, for otherness. Given the power of healing, the human being has the empowerment to heal and to change. Trust along with faith provides the foundation for all.¹³ On this dimensional continuum is care. Care is the fundamental ground upon which values are found.¹⁴ Care goes full circle to the transcendent, which originally cares. In life itself, if the human being did not care about anything there would be no values.

Teachers and administrators willing to engage life where people live it, embody responsibility, respect, trust and care. This is at the crossing of the sacred and the lived. Here, teaching and learning are one.

Notes

- 1) Parker J. Palmer, *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1998), p. 3.
- 2) *Ibid.*, p. 11.
- 3) For Palmer, intellect, emotion and spirit depend on one another for wholeness. By *intellectual I* mean the way we think about teaching

and learning-the form and content of our concepts of how people know and learn, of the nature of our students and our subjects. By *emotional* I mean the way we and our students feel as we teach and learn feelings that can either enlarge or diminish the exchange between us. 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. *Ibid.*, pp. 4-5.

- 4) *Ibid.*, p. 5.
- 5) *Ibid.*, p. 90.
- 6) *Ibid.*, p. 95.
- 7) *Ibid.*, p. 99.
- 8) *Ibid.*, p. 103.
- 9) *Ibid.*, p. 105.
- 10) *Ibid.*, p. 106. With absolutism, we claim to know precisely the nature of great things, so there is no need to continue in dialogue with them-or with each other. With relativism, we claim that knowledge depends wholly on where one stands, so we cannot know anything with any certainty beyond our personal point of view. *Ibid.*, p. 109.
- 11) *Ibid.*, p. 116.
- 12) *Ibid.*, p. 117.
- 13) Personal communication, 20 December 2000, with Sister Anne Therese Allen, C.S.J.
- 14) James W. Kidd, "Universalism as Being-with: Caring itself," *The Teilhard Review*, 26, no. 1 (Spring 1991).