

## Special Section:

Five Articles  
on Spirituality  
and the Curriculum

## Spirituality and the Curriculum

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### Introduction

In 1897 Gauguin painted *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* It hangs in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. In typical Gauguin style, the painting depicts primitive Tahitians looking in wonder at the tropical paradise surrounding them. There is sunlight and freedom, the vibrant colors of Tahiti, a river in the woods, a blue sea and misty mountains. But on closer look, the painting is divided into three parts. *Where we come from* is visioned as a baby and three women who are closest to the mystery of creation. *Where we are* has two women talking about destiny, a man with a puzzled, aggressive look on his face, a youth reaching up to pluck a fruit from a tree, the metaphorical fruit of experience. Sister Wendy describes this as “humanity’s innocent and natural desire to live and search for more life” (<http://www.artchive.com/artchive/G/gauguin/ehere.jpg.html>). A child eats the fruit while an idol looks over the scene—the symbol of the need for spirituality in the quest for what we are. Women are curled up in a shell sharing their world with the animals. *Where are we going* is depicted by a brooding woman and an old woman near death. A white bird represents the afterlife, the unknown.

Gauguin sought to symbolize the questions that have been asked through the ages—questions that make us human—questions that really do not have definitive answers. If those questions are important, we may ask what part the curriculum and schools play in preparing students to come to terms or even address them? Should educators participate in this dialogue? Of course the reticence may stem from the confusion that each question evokes, whether these are religious or secular, and whether the spiritual responses they engender are appropriate to address in schools.

Whatever my personal opinion, I will try to clarify the questions by defining what spirituality is and then talking to each of Gauguin’s questions in turn from the perspective of a secular spirituality that is both personal and universal.

### Spirituality Defined

We use the word spiritual in much of our language. We refer to a person as having spirit, we describe a person's behavior as spiritual and uplifting, a person may be in high or low spirits, and alcohol is called a spirit I guess due to the unexplainable effects on some people, people write or speak in the spirit of truth (does everyone else speak in falsity?), people get spirited away (as in the *Blair Witch Project*), athletes give spirited performance beyond their everyday capabilities, and we take things from others in the right or wrong spirit. These nonmaterial descriptors imply some energy, some physical or psychological animating vital force within a person. In Latin spirit means breath, the spirit that g-d breathed into Adam, the inspiration and infusion of creative ideas, the life of all things, and the inner self that lies hidden yet colors our thoughts and actions. This nonmaterial dimension exists in all people, (and perhaps in animals too—I believe my pet has spirit and knows what I am thinking and feel), and it permeates the physical world and gives us a glimpse into the personal and unstated life of others. It is for others to ascertain the extent that this spiritual nature is apparent in the daily actions of people who may or may not practice compassion, understanding, and personal convictions. Some people actively strive to experience the source of their existence by actions that enhance their awakening, enlightenment, freedom and wholeness (Fontana, 2003, p. 11). Others use drugs and meditation to enhance the state of coming closer to that spiritual existence. In any case, it is as a character in *13 Conversations About One Thing* says, "Faith is the antithesis of proof" and we have faith that the spiritual exists independent of religious belief. While spirituality is a characteristic of religion, taken alone, the belief in another reality beyond ordinary existence and experience can manifest itself in everyone, and thus perhaps it can be fostered and enhanced by education.

I want to discuss the juxtaposition of the curriculum to the personal awareness of the spiritual, which some authors describe as happiness, and how to make the two closer; the science and technology that so permeates our enterprise with the development of consciousness, or awareness on the part of students in a time when the greatest amount of resources are aimed to promote the scientific secularized goals that purport to regulate and cure society's ills.

### Where Do We Come from?

#### *On One Hand...*

There has been a secularization of the goals of education leaving no room for the development of the soul, of conscience, of the concept and practice of freedom in education. The relevance of science in a world of technical control relegates the spiritual to a place of less importance. The popularity of *The DiVinci Code* (Brown, 2003), making the religious real and explainable, and the battles of the culture wars (Graff, 1992) creates a loss of the spiritual as a feeling, revelation, and immediate

experience and that favors instead the technical, scientific fact. The generated belief in progress as happiness in the world, of science, technology and market economies as progress, is a goal nourished by a government of the secular, moral and political. Morality language is not so much spiritual as it is utility and the market, self-actualization to lead to the material life, and free individual choice in the pursuit of material progress. This progress is of the individual with the state providing the infrastructure to nourish the goal of happiness as “he/she who dies with the most toys wins” as the bumper sticker saying reads.

There is an attempt to escape the past traditions and control the world and, through the control, achieve the dreams of success. Gone is the Puritan ethic of work hard and support your community and learn through education how to share that community promise with others to make a better society for all (the Mann common school promise). In the past society was a community, an association of common purpose, but today we teach and transmit the idea that we define ourselves and judge ourselves by the values and products of modernity (or postmodernity), by science, technology, politics, economic liberalism, pluralism and individualism. Spirituality today is sociability, science, being savvy to the new thing, having a rich varied social life, and it is sold to us by books and movies and the media. Possessions, things, have become spiritual representations of the individual’s happiness and contentment, except we are never content with what we have and constantly search for more, better, best, trying to outdo the other with the newest televisions and sound, cars and houses, idols of progress. We are at the same time at a place in education and politics and economics that has a fundamentalist point of view not seen for decades with the moral regulation of society and society ills being corralled by evangelicals in the name of religion and conservatism (Nord, 1995).

#### *On the Other Hand...*

The other position is the liberal optimism of human responsibility, action and social change, and justice in the world through personal and collective happiness; a spiritual connection within a social contract of one person to the other forming together for the good of all. This spiritual connection is a feeling, a revelation if you will, a romantic notion of our forefathers that through Kant’s reason people will come together and have faith in humanity and be able to understand Hegel’s reality historically knowing that society is constantly evolving. This position recognizes that we cannot be so sure that we can go this alone without connection of one person to another, with groups of people connecting to others, and sifting through all the artifacts of modernity come to believe and share society as a community, an association of common purpose. Nord (1995) questions whether the social contract, the legacy of Rousseau and Locke, is alive today in the spiritual connections described. He sees the spiritual problem as being that we are successful in economics, science and technology, but not in matters of the heart and soul. The evidence is in our morale, entertainment, politics, sex and violence, relationship failure, boredom,

unhappiness, all in our rich society (p. 380). Modern society has lost its spiritual balance in the name of liberty, individual rights, self-fulfillment, economic success and technical progress. We have lost duty, virtue, tradition, community, compassion and sacrifice, reverence for nature, and sin and guilt (p. 381).

Thus, our past is ahistorical, a postmodern claim, and if we look at the goals of education and the conditions of success for our students, perhaps where we came from is being forsaken on purpose for a redefined image of individualism. Perhaps Ayn Rand (1946) was right, and in reality it is dog-eat-dog, go it alone world. But, in the name of the spiritual, which is an awesome internal force perhaps unique to human beings, I hope that where we are now is temporal.

### What Are We?

In 2002, John Gray wrote a book called *Straw Dogs: Thoughts on Humans and Other Animals*. Intrigued by the title, I realized I did not know what a straw dog was, so I researched it, naturally, on the web. I found that there was a movie, which is not available anywhere but received rave reviews, that has in it the famous line that “behind every coward’s eyes burn straw dogs.” The original reference is to the Tao and Lao Tsu. The quote from the Tao is:

Tao does not love as humans do, it sees all things as straw dogs  
The sage does not love as humans do; he sees people as straw dogs (Tao Te Ching)  
—[www.higherpath.org/ri-human-love.htm](http://www.higherpath.org/ri-human-love.htm)

Gray (2002) describes the Chinese ritual of a literal straw dog being used as offerings to the g-ds. They are treated with reverence during the ritual, but when it is over the straw dogs are trampled and tossed aside, burned and thrown away because their purpose is no longer needed. “Heaven and earth are ruthless, and treat the myriad creatures as straw dogs” (p. 33-34). Gray suggests that the nature of existence, what we are, is delusional since all in the universe are interconnected and interdependent. The paradigm of separation perpetuates the gulf, and we invest in the illusion for individual gain, but it can be transcended by the spiritual goals of life if only we would toss our straw dogs away. Gray likens people to straw dogs, humanimals, who are part of an illusion that somehow they are different and under different laws of nature than other animals. The focus on self adds to the illusion by empowering the opposite—hatred, evil, violence—at the global level and exacerbates the chaos. There is too much bureaucracy and too many rules and regulations leading to weakness and failure of the spiritual that can release the individual from the burdens of the symbols of the past.

Gray (2002) says that liberal humanism (belief in science and the power of scientific knowledge) is like a religion, the belief in progress is a superstition, a false idea that we are free from limits that structure the life of other animals. The promise of science is that humankind can know the truth and be free. It represents the transformation of the Christian religious doctrine of salvation into a secularization

of a belief that we somehow have the power to control and to change the world (p. xiv). Political action is the surrogate for salvation, as we strive through control to live in a world of our own making. Straw dogs argue for a shift of perspective—that humans cannot save the world because it does not need saving—we never lived in a world of our own making to begin with. We are, as Schopenhauer said in a critique of humanism, one with other animals, subject to universal will, its struggles, a suffering energy that animates the world and all in it, and that a free, conscious individual is an error that conceals who we really are, creatures driven by bodily needs who are part of an illusion of individual selfhood (cited in Gray, 2002, pp. 39-44). We are products of chance and necessity, not authors of our own acts (p. 65). The postmodernists say there is no such thing as nature, only human constructions, and the world is what we make of it; nothing exists unless it appears in human consciousness. I am not suggesting a denial of conscious thought believed to be unique to humans. Instead, as Gray notes, there is one thing that distinguishes man from other animals—words and books—the source of the spiritual, a representation of our unique ability to preserve and create artificial memory, and deal with abstracts. But, we mistake this for reality, which it is not. “The search for meaning has nothing to do with life. Spiritual life is not a search for meaning but a release from it” (p. 197). Santayana (cited in Gray, 2002, p. 189) said, “Spirit is itself not human; it may spring up in any life; it may detach itself from any provincialism; as it exists in all nations and religions; so it may exist in all animals, and who knows in many undreamt-of beings; and in the midst of what worlds?”

What are the conditions of life that necessitate the need for spirituality and the need to include spirituality in the curriculum? The Tao good life holds no gap between what is and what ought to be—instead it is a life that is natural and skillfully lived according to our nature and circumstance acting objectively to situations we encounter. The freest human does not choose but lives as he/she must (Gray, 2002, p. 112). Our consciousness must be spiritual and strengthened and supported by education so it does not become a side effect of our language, a product of the media, of hunter gatherers in cities who search for goods and services, seek free trade, and make and remake their own or Donald Trump’s version of the world.

So, is there something inherent in our seeking to control through spiritual belief systems? Fontana (2003) questions what followers of the spiritual actually believe; why do they believe it; what effect does it have on thought and behavior and culture; what influence does it have on our psychological well-being; what experiences have occurred in connection with those beliefs? Belief implies a trust, a confidence in something without evidence of proof. There are deeply held beliefs, while others are superficial, some are based on data, others on anecdote, some illogical superstitions, others simple and profound worldviews about the meaning of life, some fit in with our preferences and others go against the grain. Some arise out of peer pressure to conform for fear of punishment or rejection; others are unquestioned, while some are pondered over and carefully dissected before acceptance. William James noted (cited

in Fontana (2003, p. 20) that beliefs arise from intuition, not logic, and can be in contradiction to evidence.

What then do we believe in and how do we know how these beliefs are formed? James' functionalist perspective about conscious daily activity concerned perceiving, learning, the mechanisms that produce useful behavior, and led to the use of introspection to inform people of their attitudes and beliefs, to do self-evaluation and self-regard, and to establish their worldviews. This cognitive aspect reflects affect and inner experience. Modern psychological theorists connect the idea of consciousness to self-concept, belief systems, aesthetic appreciation, emotions, feelings, life goals, meaning, personality, morals, ethics, self-fulfillment, creativity, spontaneity, free-will, peak experiences, self-actualization, spirituality and sense of the sacred (i.e., Fromm, Horney, Allport, and Rollo May's work) (Fontana, 2003, p. 28). These are some of the things schools seek to instill in the youth through education.

Spiritual intelligence then is the ability to be creative, to alter boundaries of current thought and situations, to recontextualize experience and allow the mind to contemplate alternative solutions to problems, to address the questions of right and wrong and exercise choice in solutions, to seek meaning in life and to transform oneself in positive ways to meet the unexpected (Fontana, 2003, pp. 80-81). Much like Goleman's (Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2002) construct of Emotional Intelligence, this is the source of creative imagination that myth, art, literature, music and poetry springs from. The arts arouse emotional responses, ecstatic feelings that science and technology cannot. It is through the senses that an awareness of the ability of mindfulness (Langer, 1989, 1997), the continual creation of new connections, grows and is nourished. Of course the antithesis is mindlessness, obeisance to rigid, repetitive, patterns, reactive preprogrammed behaviors that keep people in restrictive, un-lived lives beyond their control. Educators must face the choice of which to develop in education through the curriculum.

Where to begin this infusion? The young child exists in an impulsive state, full of magic and wonder and moves into a consciousness of conformism and myth of the symbolic world. As the child grows she enters a formal rational state of consciousness and this guides her worldview. The individualistic state has a worldview that is pluralistic and relative, followed by an autonomous state worldview that is holistic and integral to thought. As the child grows this progression is shaped into a conscious way in which the "manner in which we think, feel, behave, plan, and react is shaped by the particular way in which we look at the world through the prism of who we take ourselves to be" (Fontana, 2003, p. 178). Thus, the potential of consciousness, according to Jung (cited in Fontana, 2003, p. 174-175), for the child is to develop meaning and spirit and this contributes to the self, to the individual whole in harmony and balance with the qualities of psychological life. The purpose of human life, according to Jung, then is to realize and achieve identification with the source of the potential as a person learns and grows through a series of levels of consciousness on the road to the realization of who they are.

Jung (1953) recognizes that thinking and feeling are real since all languages have expressions for these terms. His famous introvert/extrovert types divided into thinking, feeling, sensation and intuition is based on the premise that consciousness directs behaviors that become part of the habitus of individuals as they interact with their environment. He goes on to talk about the growth of consciousness as the “gift of civilization” and the existence of problems are the result of man turning away from instinct (the metaphorical eating of the apple by Adam) and the beginning of doubt. Science is a symptom of the loss of consciousness and choice in the struggle for certainty and the discovery of the cause of everything that will be found in time. *The Rainmaker* will come and cause a revitalization of the crops, the endless reporting of imminent hurricane movements will somehow control them. “What can we do to stop the direction of the hurricane from coming here?” a caller asked the meteorologist on television!

The artist sees differently, never submitting to the established world view while creating a vision of other fantastic worlds of the spirit, of time before man, of the future. We protect ourselves and teach surety and lack of imagination in the name of faith against the chaos of lack of control. A conscious world that is safe and manageable under the natural law that we assume is legally binding on nature is false. Only the poet catches sight of the spirits, demons, and visions as “in a glass darkly, deep presentment” of the possible (Jung, 1933, p. 162). Why, because we have accepted a metaphysics of matter, not of the mind, and set empirical boundaries for every problem and have accepted everything as having a material cause (p. 174). Scientific education is based on statistical truths, knowledge that imparts an unrealistic yet rational picture of the world and the individual lives on the margins and plays no role. Deprived of moral decisions on how to live her own life, she is ruled, fed, educated, clothed as a social unit, amused in accordance with the will of the greatest number, ruled as a collective of like needs, and is educated by state policy that decrees what should be in the curriculum and how it should be taught and tested (Jung, 1958, p. 22).

The child possesses a potential for adaptation of conscious functioning that is independent from material surety. This spiritual potential appears to be in contradiction with the physical restriction placed on her by our reliance on control of nature and compliance with scientific laws. The paradox of Gauguin’s painting is the material verses the spiritual. People live within the frame or they look outward beyond the borders and utilize their own sense feelings to view the world and the passage of time. It is not control of nature but living as a piece of it within a broader context. It is not tradition that limits but the unconscious compliance with and unmindful followership promoted by society and its institutions, by schools and the curriculum. There is no room for doubt, there is no room for the inner life, but there seems to be rebellion underfoot—there is internationalism, supernationalism, cinema, music, human compassion, desire, passion all suppressed in ordered life yearning to be freed (Jung, 1933, p. 219). Jung (1958) stated that happiness and contentment, equitability of soul and meaningfulness of life can be experienced only by the individual. The task of the curriculum is to make the individual aware of this potential.



### Where Are We Going?

Modern genetic science has a new revelation for us. Scientists have found a g-d gene—the seat of spirituality. I read this in the newspaper—the repository of truth. Evidence is ample, Hamer (2004) says, since over 30,000 years ago our European ancestors painted pictures of sorcerers and priests on the walls of caves, and there have been innumerable acts of charity and violence in the name of the spirit. Today a fundamentalism sweeps the globe; therefore it appears that spirituality is both universal and a part of all human history. The answer, it is hard wired into us, this gene g-d, into our DNA. It is not a question of whether there is a g-d, or how these thoughts and emotions are formed and spread, but why we believe in the spiritual that science seeks an answer to. Hamer says it may be no more than a genetic program for self-deception.

As a molecular biologist, he uses a “self-transcendence” scale to provide a numerical measure of a person’s ability to reach beyond themselves and to see everything in the world as part of a great totality (p. 4). Of course the testing of this was done on twins, and the conclusion was that spirituality is heritable, while shared cultural environments (Sunday school, parenting) have little effect on its development. The gene is called VMAT2, and it produces a chemical similar to drugs that induce mystical experiences. These monoamines alter consciousness, or our sense of reality, awareness of self and the world around us, our thoughts, memories and perceptions. The linkage of objects with emotions and values makes for the sense of spirituality. Finally, why did humans develop the gene? Hammer says that it is at best an educated guess, but he posits that it provides a sense of optimism, the will to be alive and have children despite facing death. Also, we know that optimism creates conditions for better health, quicker recovery from illnesses, and the will to live long enough to have and raise children

Another reporter, Claire Mitchell (2004) said in her column in the *Miami Herald* recently that there is much benefit to spirituality, a reason much closer to our spiritual sense than the scientific reason. Mitchell says that the children of even mindful parents have stopped paying attention to the spiritual in every day life. We have lost the desire to sit and contemplate the world and our place in it that constitutes the spiritual. She talks about a time when the start of the school was one to prepare for the year with a sense, a spirit, of hope, to revitalize, renew, and to be prepared to do better than the past. Instead the focus is on the material, what to do to be a “good girl” or “good boy,” to obey and not think or feel on ones own. The coming together and declaring yourself a part of a larger community is missing; the strength of the group is missing, as education pits one against the other in an effort to standardize wants, needs and desires to the material world and neglects the formation of the spirit. Education can and should have a role in the formation of beliefs and the spiritual awakening of its charges. The curriculum can be transformed positively in this direction by a re-infusion of arts, aesthetics, and creative potential, all in the quest to foster personal awareness.

## Conclusion

In the end, what is spiritual to the individual, to me? I can only speak for myself, so here is my list, which I retain the privilege of amending as the spirit moves me. As the T. S. Elliot poem *Burnt Norton* says (<http://stuff.mit.edu/people/dpolicar/writing/poetry/poems/stillpoint.html>)

Words move, music moves  
 Only in time; but that which is only living  
 Can only die. Words, after speech, reach  
 Into the silence. Only by the form, the pattern  
 Can words or music reach  
 The stillness, as a Chinese jar still  
 Moves perpetually in its stillness.

What else? Books, sunsets, losing myself in the theater, hearing *Carmina Burana* for the first time in high school, Florence from the terrace above the city, the perfect teach, the aha of a student making a discovery, my daughter, unconditional friendship, paintings by Renoir, charity, peace, kindness, nationhood, liberty, freedom, being loved, loving . . . all of which make up who I am. None are science, none are material objects, all are the breath of the spirit, the highs of creation, nature, sounds, images—real and imaginary, the awareness of life. Not the reality, but the incorporation of the sense images I filter through me, enhanced by my experience, which, through my education, I was taught how to incorporate into the consciousness that is me and the choices I make about my life.

When in education do we have the chance to give others the opportunity to open their minds, their conscious waking lives, to what Greene (1995, 1988) calls the possibilities, and what we can now shout out loud is the spiritual awareness of life? There are moments in schools, in education, of enlightenment: there is the active coming together in a community and sharing of a sense of belonging, there is the love and respect for others, there is the tolerance and celebration, there is the reverie, there is great literature and words that put us in other's shoes and excite the imagination of who we are and what we can become. That is the spiritual of the curriculum that I can participate in and make a difference in as we help students prepare to answer for themselves Gauguin's three questions: Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?

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