

What Does Spirituality in Education Mean? Stumbling Toward Wholeness

Laura Jones, Southern Oregon University

Abstract

Definitions and aspects of spirituality, and trepidation surrounding professional discussion of it, are addressed. Spirituality constitutes the meta-message of teaching, and we can strengthen our teaching by attending to it.

Part I: What Is Spirituality in Education?

As a Health and Wellness teacher for three decades, I have become increasingly aware that our state of being (another way of saying our health) drives all our behaviors, decisions, and relationships. The underpinnings of being that we tend to call “spiritual”—our most authentic relationships to self, others, the universe, and the transcendent—influence our personal health on all levels—and, domino-like, the health of our communities, our nations, and the world, as we interact with others and with the planet.

Definitions of spirituality are many and varied, and thus muddy rather than clear the waters of discussion. Spirituality is often equated with religion or morality, both emotionally charged words representing public and private practices that may exclude those outside a particular belief system. In contrast, spirituality, as used here, is inclusive and recognizes the interrelatedness of all things.

To reach deep inside students, where true learning takes place, we teachers must teach from our most authentic selves. Students can always tell when we’re not. When classroom interactions are less than authentic, both teachers and students are to some extent merely going through the motions of formal education. This can create, as Parker Palmer, itinerant teacher of teachers and prolific author in spirituality and education, reminds us, a “great sadness” among all involved (1998, p. 8). Spirituality in education refers to no more—and no less—than a deep connection between student, teacher, and subject—a connection so honest, vital, and vibrant that it cannot help but be intensely relevant. Nourishment of this spark in the classroom allows it to flourish in the world, in the arenas of politics, medicine, engineering—wherever our students go after graduation.

Laura Jones is assistant professor Assistant Professor of Health and Physical Education at Southern Oregon University. Her teaching spans nearly three decades and several states, and her interest in spiritual aspects of education has evolved informally since childhood, and formally since entry into the teaching profession.

Part II: What Is Spirituality?

Many authors have wrestled with a definition for spirituality, and their inspired efforts lend clarity to our discussion. Remarks by authors reviewed here tend to fall into these categories: professional trepidation, what spirituality is not, and what spirituality is. What follows are some points of view, distilled. I hope that, like any good distilled product, they constitute an energizing attention-getter.

1. Professional Trepidation

Humble practitioners of relationship-based education may ask: Does spirituality even exist? If it can't be seen or measured, how can we know it is there? Ernest Boyer, longtime scholar of teaching and learning, has reminded us that even things that can't be measured can nevertheless be experienced (personal conversation). This might put spirituality in calculable company with emotions, which also can't be measured, yet cannot be refuted.

Attempts to define spirituality must often be delicate, as the field is rife with land mines. The word is emotionally charged for many people, and considerably nebulous for others. Overall, a working definition of spirituality is anything but tidy.

Mary Rose O'Reilley, a Minnesotan English teacher and author of *The Peaceable Classroom* and *Radical Presence*, became interested in the contemplative world at age seven. She would make a tent of a covered card table, crawl inside with her nightlight, and read and think (1998, p. 3). As a professional educator, she is a longtime advocate of paying attention to students and to classroom dynamics as they affect teaching and learning. O'Reilley expressed the frustration of many educators who would like to discuss spirituality. "‘Spirituality,’ these days," she lamented in *The Peaceable Classroom* (1993), "can mean anything you want it to mean, and for that reason I am tempted to discard it forever from my box of words" (p. 72). R. Joseph Hoffmann, director of the Oxford Center for Critical Studies, later agreed, noting, after having recited several distinctly different definitions, e.g., "form and structures of the life of prayer," "some kind of wholeness," and "a search for meaning and significance," essentially agreed with O'Reilley (1997, pp. 9-10). And Iris Yob, who has written for, among others, *Religion and Education* and *Educational Theory*, likewise noted that spirituality is a term that tends to be used indiscriminately, embodying different meanings within different contexts: Is it religion? A feature of religion? Independent of religion? Counter to religion? A human quality? An extra-human quality? Natural, or contrived? Subjective, or objective? Merely a psychological event? (2003, p. 112).

Most of us interested in holistic education know that to discuss with our colleagues our feelings, passion, or deep connections with our subject and our students is to risk being thought unscientific, impractical, and, as we say in southern Oregon, "out there" (as in, too far out there!). Parker Palmer, longtime observer of American education, described a common objectivist (belief in the validity of objective observation over subjective experience) suspicion of spirituality: that "any way of knowing that requires subjective involvement between the knower and the known is regarded as primitive, unreliable, and even dangerous" (1998, p. 52). Byers (1992) had alluded earlier to the same kind of skepticism, noting that as early as a century ago, words related to spirit often referred to fortune-telling and communing with the dead; at best they suggested religious devotion (p. 7).

Elizabeth Tisdell, teacher and scholar of the spiritual in adult learning and culture, perhaps spoke for many teachers who have felt a need to see which way the collegial wind is blowing before discussing the spiritual aspects of teaching and learning. Those involved with institutions of higher education, she asserted, have traditionally been taught that it is (only) the rational, scientific thought that is worthy of attention (2003, p. 25). If we agree with Tisdell, it follows that our reputations as valid scholars may be at risk if we openly explore the development of relationships between student, subject, and teacher. And because it is our reputation as scholars, rather than our ability to bring our students into relationship with our subject that is rewarded in the traditional system, many teachers find it best to remain discreet where the spirituality of teaching is concerned.

2. What “Spirituality” Is Not

Although defining spirituality may be as sticky as peanut butter, authors reviewed for this work hold a general consensus that spirituality is not religion, a public institution that facilitates access to a power greater than ourselves, nor is it ethics, the study of rightness and wrongness in human conduct. Here are several blessedly clear, albeit personal and therefore subjective, distinctions between what spirituality does and does not mean. Robert Nash (2002), professor in the College of Education and Social Services at the University of Vermont, has distinguished the terms thus: “Religion,” he advised, “is the institution; spirituality is the personal. Religion is what we do with others; spirituality is what we do within ourselves. Public vs. private faith. Religion is head; spirituality is heart” (p. 166). Beverly-Colleene Galyean, member of the World Commission on Global Concerns and Spirituality, expressed a similar idea several years earlier, upholding the concept that spirituality is not doctrine, but rather the vital energy that creates meaning in our lives (cited in Wolf, 1996, p. 25).

Paul Byers (1992), anthropologist and professor of education, may have written the most succinct contrast between religion and spirituality unearthed for this review. “Religions,” he declared, “are particular answers to the universal human questions about the creation and meaning of life. Spirituality refers to the universal personal concern for the questions” (p. 6). And Joseph Dunne, philosophy teacher at Dublin City University, has reminded us that spirituality is not a character trait. “The word is not to be used as a valorizing term,” he admonished, “because everyone, inescapably, is spiritual, in the sense that there is some overall orientation to their lives, some assumption of what most matters” (2003, p. 99).

3. What “Spirituality” Is

The various definitions of spirituality are perhaps beginning to converge so that, as Hoffmann declared, the definition “threatens to stabilize” (1997, p. 12). Following are themes that, like prairie dogs in the brush, continually raised their heads during this author’s trek through the pertinent literary terrain.

Spirituality as transcendence

Transcendence here refers to moving beyond our own psychological walls to experience more clearly the true nature of things. Nash used the Greek word *epektasis* to note this most important part of spirituality: “a straining forward toward mystery, toward a luminous darkness, toward an insatiated desire for a meaning beyond meaning” (p. 18). In a revealing and uplifting depiction of

his professional journey into the spirituality of education (2002), Nash referred to a kind of transcendent teaching, stating that it “simply” calls for the student and teacher to take an inward journey together whose ultimate destination is a deeper personal response to the mystery of existence (p.168). On the surface, this may appear a daunting task. Upon reflection, however, it constitutes an inspiring summary of what most students and teachers arguably hope to derive from the enterprise of education. Nash further identified questions he called “life’s most insistent.” Among them are What am I? Why am I? How should I act? Why should I be moral? (p. 21). Nash claimed unequivocally that satisfactory answers to these tenacious questions are a proper end goal for education; furthermore, they do not leap whole into existence upon graduation if they have not been addressed in the classroom!

Joan Halifax, anthropologist and teacher, offered these remarks several years earlier:

Spirituality is difficult for us to touch because it flows to and from the invisible, from love and the mystery of death It flows from the ground of our relationship, not only between human beings, but also between all beings, including mountains and rivers It evokes within us compassion, which allows us to see through the eyes of innumerable beings (*italics mine*) (1998, pp. 44-45).

If education is, as some have said, “learning to see with new eyes,” then surely attending to spirituality, regardless of its existential benefits, is beneficial to the learning process! Steven Glazer, past educator, administrator, and cofounder of the Naropa Institute, referred to the transcendent aspects of spirituality in his down-to-earth, practical definition of spirituality as it relates to teaching (1999). Calling it sacredness, Glazer wrote:

So, then, what is sacredness? Sacredness is the practice of wholeness and awareness. It is approaching, greeting, and meeting the world with basic respect. What is sacredness as the ground of learning? It is rooting education in the practices of openness, attentiveness to experience, and sensitivity to the world. Spirituality in education begins with questions: What is my experience? What is my effect? What are the interrelationships between myself and others? Are these being attended to? (pp. 11-12)

Spirituality as connection

Rachel Kessler is director of The Institute for Social and Emotional Learning and author of *The Soul of Education*. Kessler’s work was informed by two impulses: to prevent violence and to honor the spirituality in young people (2000, p. xiii). She was drawn to adolescents because she noticed that the larger spiritual questions—of meaning, identity, and responsibility—became more urgent at that time. If these questions are ignored or repressed, Kessler recognized, they can turn inward, becoming toxic and explosive. As she worked with students to address these mysteries and channel their energy constructively, she saw her students finding balance, integrity, and connection. In a 1998 article, “Nourishing Students in Secular Schools,” Kessler asserted that the arc of adolescence bends toward connection. Students yearn for deep connections to themselves, to others, and to nature or a higher power (p. 51-52).

Palmer (2004) has expressed an illuminating analogy for the connections that comprise our spirituality. In previous times, during blizzards, farmers on the Great Plains would tie a rope from

the back door to the barn to keep from getting lost in the driving snow. Spirituality is our rope, showing us the way home. When at home with ourselves and the world, we can be, as Palmer says, “healers in a wounded world” (p. 2). Palmer (1999) has also offered insight into teacher-student connections: When students are asked to describe their good teachers, he recounted, the methods of teaching depicted varied—but all students described their good teachers as having “some sort of connective capacity, who connect themselves to their students, their students to each other, and everyone to the subject being studied” (p. 27).

Aline Wolf, interpreter of Maria Montessori’s philosophy and co-founder of Pennsylvania’s first Montessori school in 1961, is the author of *Nurturing the Spirit in Non-sectarian Classrooms* (1996). Slightly pre-dating Kessler, Wolf wrote passionately of the need to recognize the deepest human connections. The need for product (grades, graduates) has been allowed to hijack nearly the entire school day. This educational stance is alarming when one considers the kind of citizens and leaders that “education” without reflection on the large questions of life can produce.

Spirituality as wholeness

Historian of alternative education Ron Miller, in his treatise “Holistic Education for an Emerging Culture” (1999), referred to the “many layers of wholeness and meaning” of which human beings are composed (p. 195). Looking ever deeper at these layers of meaning, we may agree with Glazer (1999), who described wholeness as “the inherent, seamless, interdependent quality of the world,” and noted that everything is already connected, in relationship, and in union (p. 10). If this is so, then our task as educators is to lead students to discern this wholeness.

This issue of relationship is inherent in the concepts of wholeness, and holistic education is nothing more, or less, than making room in the classroom for all relationships, and all layers of relationship to the subject. Carol Flake, editor of *Holistic Education: Principles, Perspectives, and Practices*, has included in holism recognition that spirituality is the formative force underlying reality. Holism acknowledges the importance of the questions, she asserts, allowing us to stand in mystery; and it affirms that the process of questioning and learning is as important as the product (1993, p. 38). O’Reilly, Palmer, and Remen have also written extensively in numerous works, on the philosophical stance of living the questions.

Spirituality as compassion

Rachel Naomi Remen is clinical professor of family and community medicine at the University of California San Francisco School of Medicine, and a well-spoken advocate for addressing human questions in education. In her essay “Educating for Mission, Meaning, and Compassion” (1999), Remen wrote eloquently of the soul-saving and world-saving attribute of compassion, clearly implying its place in classrooms as well as in personal relationships (p. 34).

An important aspect of spirituality in education is the motive, the driving force, for our teaching and learning. Parker Palmer, acknowledging the primary historical motives for learning, those of curiosity and of control, has persuasively asserted that another kind of knowledge is available, one that originates in compassion. “The goal of a knowledge arising from love” Palmer stated, “is the reunification and reconstruction of broken selves and worlds . . . (it) aims not at exploiting and manipulating creation but at reconciling the world to itself” (1993, pp. 7-8). Lest he be misunderstood as preaching sentimental mush, Palmer reminds us that

This love is not a soft and sentimental virtue, not a fuzzy feeling of romance. The love of which spiritual tradition speaks is “tough love,” the connective tissue of reality—and we flee from it because we fear its claims on our lives. Curiosity and control create a knowledge that distances us from each other and the world, allowing us to use what we know as a plaything and to play the game by our own self-serving rules. But a knowledge that springs from love will implicate us in the web of life; it will wrap the knower and the known in compassion, in a bond of awesome responsibility as well as transforming joy; it will call us to involvement, mutuality, and accountability. (p. 9).

Part III Summary

Spirituality in education refers to a transcendence and compassion in the classroom that acknowledges the interconnectedness of the students, the teacher, and the subject. Denise Tolliver (cited in Tisdell, 2003) offered a meaning that, like an organic baker’s bun, seems comprised of the purest ingredients from the shelves. Spiritual, she noted, is that which can “raise consciousness, stimulate awareness, foster creativity and imagination, connect us with grander issues of purpose and meaning, and facilitate connection with that which animates us” (p. 199). This divine process begins with our willingness to allow the subject and the learners to engage our hearts each time we begin the mind- and soul-expanding trek of adventure.

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