

Fostering Connection, Compassion, and Character at School

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In adolescence, powerful energies awaken and profound questions loom large. Drugs, sex, violence - even suicide - may mark a search for meaning gone horribly awry. But this educator has discovered that, when teachers honor and nurture their students' spiritual unfolding, the children don't crave danger to feel fully alive.

It is our first "senior honoring ceremony," designed to celebrate each graduating senior - not just the few who have shown outstanding achievement in academics or athletics. A small cross section of the community is gathered in the softly lit room. In the center of the circle is a large vase filled with a variety of long-stemmed flowers. The first circle of chairs holds twenty-five students and the teachers who will address them. In the chairs behind are parents and other faculty.

After a welcoming address by the head of school, a teacher goes to the center, selects a flower from the vase, and stands before a surprised and curious student.

The teacher begins, "I have watched you grow this last year and become strong like the sturdy stalk of this giant Iris. When you came into my class, I could tell that you were used to being one of the clowns. Yet when it came time to share our stories, you took the first risk. You inspired all of us with the courage of your vulnerability. I want to honor you for the warmth you brought to each one of us, and the initiative and courage you've shown. I respect you as a leader and value you as a friend."

The young man beams. His father behind him looks stunned. This is his younger son, the cut-up, the disappointment after the academic achiever who went before him. The one whose actions have brought the father too many times to the disciplinary dean's office. Now, after listening to one of the most respected teachers in the school describe the outstanding gifts of character his boy has demonstrated in his final year of high school, the father's face begins to soften. Tears glisten. He places his hands on the broad shoulders of his son. One squeeze tells this boy that his father has heard, is willing to see him in a new light.

In the father's eyes looms perhaps the largest question of all: *What went right?* And the answer, though elusive, is quite simple: At the heart of every adolescent experience is an exquisite opening to spirit. An awakening of energy when larger questions of meaning and purpose, of ultimate beginnings and endings, begin to press with both an urgency and a loneliness much too powerful to be dismissed as "hormones." *What went right* is that this year this young man found experiences that nourished his spiritual development. This independent school created a place for his soul, and he flourished.

Your school can do it too.

For fifteen years, I have worked with teams of educators around the country in both private and public school settings to create curriculum, methodology, and teacher development that can feed the awakening spirit of young people as part of school life. I call this approach "The Passages Program" - a set of principles and practices for working with adolescents that integrates heart, spirit, and community with strong academics. This curriculum of the heart is a response to the "mysteries" of teenagers; their usually unspoken questions and concerns are at its center.

I first discovered this approach at the Crossroads School for Arts and Sciences (California), where I worked for seven years as the first chair of the school's department of human development, building the team that created the "Mysteries Program." In the 1990s, I began to take the gifts of "Mysteries" into schools around the country - adapting, refining, and expanding the curriculum to include what I learned from colleagues in the new and growing field of social and emotional learning. In those first years, I could not explain how our classes invited soul into the room. We were not - and are not - practicing religion or even talking about religion. Yet the students reported that there was something "spiritual" about our classes. We had to figure out what they meant.

CLASSROOMS THAT WELCOME SOUL

Most high-school students grapple with the profound questions of loss, love, and letting go. Of meaning, purpose, and service. Of self-reliance and community, and of choice and surrender. How they respond to these questions - whether with love, denial, or even violence - can be profoundly influenced by the community of the classroom. When students work together to create an authentic community, they learn that they can meet any challenge with grace, with love, and with power - even wrenching conflict, prejudice, or death. Creating authentic community is the first step in the soul of education.

When soul is present in education, attention shifts. We listen with great care not only to what is spoken but also to the messages between the words - tones, gestures, the flicker of feeling across the face. We concentrate on what has heart and meaning. The yearning, wonder, wisdom, fear, and confusion of students become central to the curriculum.

Questions become as important as answers.

When soul enters the classroom, masks drop away. Students dare to share the joy and talents they have feared would provoke jealousy in even their best friends. They risk exposing the pain or shame that might be judged as weakness. Seeing deeply into the perspective of others, accepting what has felt unworthy in themselves, students discover compassion and begin to learn about forgiveness.

HOW CAN CLASSROOM TEACHERS INVITE SOUL?

To achieve the safety and openness required for meaningful exploration of spiritual development, students and teachers work together carefully for weeks and months. We create ground rules - conditions that students name as essential for speaking about what matters most to them. Games help students fully focus, relax, and become a team through laughter and cooperation. Symbols that students create or bring into class allow teenagers to speak indirectly about feelings and thoughts that are awkward to address head on. And we work with a highly structured form of discourse called Council (see Jack Zimmerman and Virginia Coyle's *The Way of Council*, Bramble Books).

With everyone sitting in a circle where all can see and be seen, the council process allows each person to speak without interruption or immediate response. Students learn to listen deeply and discover what it feels like to be truly heard. Silence becomes a comfortable ally as we pause to digest one story and wait for the another to form, when teachers call for moments of reflection or when the room fills with feeling at the end of a class.

Since "we teach who we are," teachers who invite heart and soul into the classroom also find it essential to nurture their own spiritual development.¹ This may mean personal practices to cultivate awareness, serenity, and compassion, as well as collaborative efforts with other teachers to give and receive support for the challenges and joys of entering this terrain with their students. When this climate of honor and respect is co-created with our students, stories emerge about what matters most to young people. I have listened to these stories for years now and a pattern has emerged.

GATEWAYS TO THE SOUL OF STUDENTS

Based on students' stories and questions, I have mapped spiritual development in adolescents who may or may not have a religious tradition or other beliefs about the nature of spirituality. This mapping comprises seven interrelated yearnings, needs, or hungers. Meeting these spiritual yearnings supports, strengthens, and fosters the development of a young person's spirit.

1. The search for meaning and purpose concerns the exploration of existential questions that burst forth in adolescence. "Why am I here? Does my life have a purpose? How do I find out what it is? What does my future hold? Is there life after death? Is there a God?" I've read these questions time and again when students write anonymously about their personal "mysteries" - their wonder, worries, curiosity, fear, and excitement.

This domain of meaning and purpose not only is crucial to motivation and learning for students but also is paradoxically simple and uncomfortable for teachers to deal with. Teachers who predicate their authority on the ability to "know," or to have the "right answer," are profoundly uncomfortable with questions that appear to have no answers. In most schools "purpose" is primarily taught through goal-setting and decision-making - often with strictly rational techniques. But when the spiritual dimension is omitted, or if the inner life of adolescents is not cultivated as part of the search for goals or careers, they will most likely base their decisions on external pressures - from peers, parents, teachers. One student writes:

"So many of my friends are so clueless. They don't know what they want to do; they know what they're supposed to do. They don't know how they feel - they know how they're supposed to feel. And here I find myself in a group of people going through all my same stuff, and although I don't have the answers to all the questions, I find myself

feeling like everything is perfect and right.... I have this 'community' that gives me a home base and a sense of security."

Educators can provide experiences that honor the big questions. They can also allow students to give their gifts to the world through school and community service, through creative expression, or academic or athletic achievement. In the way we teach, we can help students see and create patterns that connect learning to their personal lives. A student helps explain:

"When I go over to the local elementary school to tutor two Spanish-speaking children, they are so excited to see me. I guess they don't get too much attention from a teacher and a classroom that is strictly English speaking.... When I am with them, I feel special. I am an average student at my school, I don't hold any elected positions, I am not on any varsity team. I do not stand out in any way, and that is okay with me. It is okay with me because for three hours each week, Maria and Miguel make me feel like I am the most important person in the world."

2. The longing for silence and solitude can lead to identity formation and goal-setting, to learning readiness and inner peace. For adolescents, this domain is often ambivalent - fraught with both fear and urgent need. As a respite from the tyranny of busyness and noise that afflicts even our young children, silence may be a realm of reflection, calm, or fertile chaos - an avenue of stillness and rest for some, prayer or contemplation for others. Another student writes:

"I like to take time to go within myself sometimes. And when I do that, I try to take an emptiness inside there. I think that everyone struggles to find their own way with their spirit and it's in the struggle that our spirit comes forth."

3. The urge for transcendence describes the desire of young people to go beyond their perceived limits. "How far can I be stretched, how much adversity can I stand?" writes one student. "Is there a greater force at work? Can humans tap into that force, and bring it into their daily lives?" writes another. Transcendence includes not only the mystical realm, but also secular experiences of the extraordinary in the arts, athletics, academics, or human relations. By naming this human need that spans all cultures, educators can help students constructively channel this urge and challenge themselves in ways that reach for this peak experience.

4. The hunger for joy and delight can be satisfied through experiences of great simplicity, such as play, celebration, or gratitude. "I want to move many and take joy in every person, every little thing." writes one student. Another asks: "Do all people have the same capacity to feel joy and sorrow?" Educators can also help students express the exaltation they feel when encountering beauty, power, grace, brilliance, love, or the sheer joy of being alive.

5. The creative drive is perhaps the most familiar domain for nourishing the spirit of students in secular schools. In opportunities for acts of creation, people often encounter their participation in a process infused with depth, meaning, and mystery. Writes one student, "There is something that happens to me in pottery class - I lose myself in the feeling of wet clay rolling smoothly under my hands as the wheel spins. I have it last period, so no matter how difficult the day was, pottery makes every day a good day. It's almost magical - to feel so good, so serene."

6. The call for initiation refers to a hunger the ancients met through rites of passage for their young. As educators, we can create programs that guide adolescents to become conscious about the irrevocable transition from childhood to adulthood, give them tools for making transitions and separations, challenge them to discover the capacities for their next step and create ceremonies with parents and other faculty that acknowledge and welcome them into the community of adults.

7. The common thread is deep connection. As my students tell stories about each of these domains, I hear a common thread: the experience of deep connection. This seventh domain describes a quality of relationship that is profoundly caring, resonant with meaning, and involves feelings of belonging, and of being truly seen or known.

Through deep connection to the self, students encounter a strength and a richness within that is the basis for developing the autonomy central to the adolescent journey, to discovering purpose and unlocking creativity. Teachers can nourish this form of deep connection by giving students time for solitary reflection. Classroom exercises that encourage reflection and expression through writing or art can also allow a student access to the inner self while in the midst of other people. Totally engrossed in such creative activities, students are encouraged to discover and express their own feelings, values, and beliefs.

Connecting deeply to another person or to a meaningful group, students discover the balm of belonging that soothes the profound alienation that fractures the identity of our youth and prevents them from contributing to our communities.

To feel a sense of belonging at school, students must be part of an authentic community in the classroom - a community in which students feel seen and heard for who they really are. Many teachers create this opportunity through "morning meetings," weekly councils or sharing circles offered in a context of ground rules that make it safe to be vulnerable. The teacher must continue to support the autonomy and uniqueness of the individual while fostering a sense of belonging and union with the group. The more that young people are encouraged to strengthen their own boundaries and develop their own identity, the more capable they are of bonding to a group in a healthy, enduring way.

Some students connect deeply to nature: "When I get depressed," revealed Keisha to her "family group" members in a school in Manhattan, "I go to this park near my house where there is an absolutely enormous tree. I go and sit down with it because it feels so strong to me."

"It was my science teacher who awakened my spirit," said a teacher about his high school days in Massachusetts. "He conveyed a sense of awe about the natural world that would change me forever."

And some students discover solace in their relationship to God or to a religious practice, as well as a place to explore urgent questions. Writes one, "I try to practice being present - that's what Buddhism has given to me that I really cherish. It's really the most important thing to me now." Another writes, "I became a Christian a few years back. It's been the most wonderful thing in my life. I can't tell you what it feels like to know that I'm loved like that. Always loved and guided. By Jesus. And it's brought our family much closer."

When students know there is a time in school life where they may give voice to the great comfort and joy they find in their relationship to God or to nature, this freedom of expression itself nourishes their spirits. The First Amendment actually protects students' freedom of expression of religious beliefs. But in the fear and confusion about violating the law, most educators have actually suppressed student freedom and the rich exchange that comes when such an important part of their lives is being acknowledged and respected.

Students who feel deeply connected don't need danger to feel fully alive. They don't need guns to feel powerful. They don't want to hurt others or themselves. Out of connection grows compassion and passion - passion for people, for students' goals and dreams, for life itself.

In a pluralistic society, educators can provide a forum that honors the ways individual students nourish their spirits. We can offer activities that allow them to experience deep connection. In the search itself, in loving the questions, in the deep yearning they let themselves feel, young people will discover what is sacred in life, what is sacred in their own lives, and what allows them to bring their most sacred gifts to nourish the world.

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1. Please see my chapter "Soul of Students, Soul of Teachers: Welcoming the Inner Life to School" in Lantieri, L. (ed.) (2001). *Schools with Spirit: Nurturing the Inner Lives of Children and Teachers*. Boston: Beacon Press.

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