



## Nourishing Soul in Adolescents

### Integrating Heart, Spirit, and Community in Youth Work

-[Rachael Kessler](#)

*This article describes the process of "welcoming soul into the classroom" through a unique program called "Passages." Like other comprehensive social and emotional learning programs, Passages deals with a broad range of issues: friendship, communication skills, stress management, diversity, study skills, problem solving, health, and personal and social responsibility. Unlike most programs, it also addresses spiritual development.<sup>1</sup>*

How do educators make a place for soul in the classroom? What does a classroom look like in which soul is vital to the enterprise of education? What are the experiences that nourish the spiritual development of adolescents in secular schools? And why should schools even consider addressing this terrain?

The Passages program is a curriculum for 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.<sup>2</sup> It has been widely used both in schools and in after-school youth programs for over a decade and a half.

## **Why address spiritual development in schools?**

For many years it was considered dangerous for educators to address the question of spiritual development in schools. But after decades of headlines about "a generation at risk" we dare to do so: the void of spiritual guidance for teenagers is a contributing factor in the self-destructive and violent behavior plaguing our nation. For many young people, drugs, sex, gang violence, and even suicide may reflect a search for connection, mystery, and meaning as well as an escape from the pain of not having a genuine source of spiritual fulfillment.

Only in recent years--in response to persistent violence in our inner cities and schoolyard massacres in small towns and suburbs--are educators and social scientists beginning to acknowledge the enormity of this spiritual void. Professor James Garborino, an expert on youth violence in Cornell University, speaks about "soul death" and the importance of kindling the "divine spark" in what he calls "lost boys." The day after the Columbine massacre, he asserted:

*A very important part of all of this [is] the spiritual emptiness that so many kids feel . . . and when they feel it, when things go bad in their lives, there's nothing to fall back on and also there's no limits to their behavior.*<sup>3</sup>

The exquisite opening to spirit at the heart of the adolescent experience also inspired the Passages program. It is during the teenage years that the larger questions of meaning and purpose, about ultimate beginnings and endings begin to press with urgency and loneliness.

In those first years, I could not explain how our classes invited soul into the room. We were not practicing religion or even talking about religion. Yet the students recognized that there was something "spiritual" about our classes. What could "spiritual" or "soul" mean outside of a religious context?

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## **Classrooms that Welcome Soul**

Most high school students grapple with profound themes: loss, love, and letting go; meaning, purpose, service; self-reliance and community; choice and surrender. When students work together to become an authentic community, they can meet any challenge with grace, with love and power--even wrenching conflict, prejudice, profound gratitude, or death. This is the soul of education.

When soul is present in education, our attention shifts. We listen with great care not only to what is spoken but also to the messages between the words--tones, gestures, and the flicker of feeling across the face. We concentrate on what has heart and meaning. Students' yearning, wonder, wisdom, fear, and confusion 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, even in their best friends. They risk exposing the pain or shame that might be judged as weakness. Through the process of seeing the perspective of others and accepting their own "unworthiness." Students discover compassion and learn about forgiveness.

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To achieve the safety and openness required for meaningful exploration of spiritual development, I work carefully with my students for weeks and months. We create ground rules--conditions that students name as essential for speaking about what matters most to them.<sup>4</sup> Together we make a list, which looks remarkably similar from class to class, and from year to year:

- No interruptions
- No "putdowns" or "bagging"
- No judging

- Respect
- Honesty
- The right to be silent
- Honoring the privacy of what is spoken

I remind my students that only when each of us honors these groundrules or agreements can our classroom become a safe place.

In addition, games help students focus, relax, and become a team through laughter and cooperation. Symbols allow students 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 [Zimmerman and Coyle, 1997].

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 another to form, when teachers call for moments of reflection or when the room fills with feeling at the end of a class.

How does this process get integrated into the actual classroom? Consider the following examples:

*--An eighth grade English teacher organizes the entire curriculum around the theme of relationship and love, selecting literature that relates to these themes. In addition to reading, analytical discussion, and writing, her students keep personal journals to express their own feelings about these themes. Once a week, they sit in Council, relating stories and feelings from their own lives that have been stirred by the required readings.*

*--In the "Senior Passage" course, which is implemented both as an in-school and after-school program, Councils address themes such as the following: (1) What does it feel like to know you will soon be leaving so much behind? To be making decisions about your next step? (2) To the extent that you know something about your life purpose, what do you know? If you don't know, how does that feel? (3) How can we understand intimacy? How do we set goals and boundaries to create what will really nourish us?*

Curriculum and technique in the classroom are not enough, however. Since we "teach how we are," teachers who invite

heart and soul into the classroom also find it essential to nurture their own spiritual development. This may mean personal practices to cultivate awareness, serenity, and compassion, as well as collaborative efforts with other teachers around the challenges and joys of entering this terrain with their students.

### Experiences that Nourish Spiritual Development

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 true nature of spirituality. Just as the child's body grows when the hunger for fuel and air is fed, and the child's emotional life grows when the hunger for love and guidance is met, meeting these spiritual yearnings supports, strengthens and fosters the development of the spirit of young person. This mapping comprises seven interrelated yearnings, needs or hungers:

- The search for meaning and purpose
- The longing for silence and solitude
- The urge for transcendence
- The hunger for joy and delight
- The creative drive
- The call for initiation
- Deep connection to self and others

**The search for meaning and purpose.** This domain explores the 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? Is there a meaning to life? Why should I live? What is life for? What does my future hold? What is my destiny? 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.

Purpose is primarily taught in the curriculum through goal setting and decision making--often with strictly rational techniques. But if this spiritual dimension is omitted or if the inner life of the adolescent 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 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.*

This domain of meaning and purpose is crucial to motivation and learning for students, but it is paradoxically simple and uncomfortable for teachers to deal with. Because our profession predicates most authority on our ability to "know," or to have the "right answer," many teachers are profoundly uncomfortable with questions that appear to have no answers.

Yet, as educators, we can provide experiences that honor these questions. We can encourage 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.<sup>5</sup>

**The longing for silence and solitude.** This domain 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.*

**The urge for transcendence.** This domain 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.

**The hunger for joy and delight.** This domain 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.

**The creative drive.** This is perhaps the most familiar domain for nourishing the spirit of students in secular schools. The act of creation is a process that is often infused with depth, meaning, and mystery.

*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.*

**The call for initiation.** This realm refers to a hunger the ancients met by 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 welcome them into the community of adults (Kessler 1999; Mahdi et al. 1986, 1997).

**Deep connection to self or others.** As my students told stories about each of the previous domains, I heard a common thread: the experience of deep connection. Ron Miller, the historian of holistic education, observes that:

*Spirituality is nourished, not through formal rituals that students practice in school, but by the quality of relationship that is developed between person and world. We can, and must cultivate an attitude of caring, respect, and contemplation to replace the narrow modernist view that the world is a resource to be exploited.*<sup>6</sup>

Whether students are describing deep connection to themselves, to others, to nature or to a higher power, this

seventh domain describes a quality of relationship that is profoundly caring and resonant with meaning. It involves feelings of belonging, and of being truly seen or known.

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 grow compassion and passion--passion for people, for students' goals and dreams, for life itself.

### **Nurturing the Whole Student**

Defining the "moral meaning" of democracy, John Dewey wrote that "the supreme task of all political institutions . . . shall be the contribution they make to the all-round growth of every member of society" [Dewey, 1957]. If we are educating for wholeness, for citizenship, and for leadership in a democracy, spiritual development belongs in schools. But because we have concerns about separation of church and state, because we often confuse spiritual development with religion, and because we fear reprisal from "the other side" in a decade of "culture wars," educators have been reluctant to develop a methodology and curriculum to directly address this aspect of human growth.

In a pluralistic society, educators can give students a glimpse of the rich array of experiences that feed the soul. We can provide a forum that honors the ways individual students nourish their spirits. We can offer activities that allow them to experience deep connection.

Perhaps most important, as teachers, we can honor the quest of each student to find what gives their life meaning and integrity, and what allows them to feel connected to what is most precious for them. 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 gift to nourish the world.

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*Rachael Kessler is the director of the Institute for Social and Emotional Learning, where she consults on curriculum, staff training, and organizational development for schools, communities, and individual educators. Her focus has been integrating heart, spirit, and community into the classroom and empowering educators to create constructive rites of*



*passage for adolescents.*

*Called by Daniel Goleman in The New York Times a "leader in a new movement for emotional literacy," Kessler is also the coauthor of Promoting Social and Emotional Learning: Guidelines for Educators (ASCD, 1997), the author of numerous articles, and producer of the video "Honoring Young Voices: A Vision for Education." Her current book, The Soul of Education: Helping Students Find Connection, Compassion and Character at School, will be ASCD's first prime membership for the year 2000, going to over 100,000 educators.*

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## Endnotes

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1. Rachael Kessler's new book, entitled The Soul of

Education: Helping Students Find Connection, Compassion and Character at School, is featured in this issue's "Bookshelf". ([back](#))

2. The Passages Program has three roots: (1) the Mysteries Program at Crossroads School for Arts and Science in Santa Monica, California, where core methods for high school seniors were expanded into a curriculum for grades 7-12 (1985-1991); (2) teacher-training programs that I have offered over the last decade through the Institute for Social and Emotional Learning; and (3) collaboration through CASEL with colleagues from a broad range of approaches to social and emotional learning. ([back](#))
3. "Kids Who Kill." (1999, April 21). Online NewsHour. Available at [www.pbs.org/newshour](http://www.pbs.org/newshour) . ([back](#))
4. See "Promoting Social and Emotional Learning: Guidelines for Educators," by Elias et al. ASCD, 1997. ([back](#))
5. See writers on recent brain research such as Sywester, or Caine and Caine; also see Parker Palmer, The Courage to Teach. ([back](#))
6. Miller, R. The renewal of education and culture: A multifaceted task, Great Ideas in Education, 1995-96, Winter, 7, 5. ([back](#))

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