

The Soul of Education: Helping Students Find Connection, Compassion, and Character at School

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Conclusion: From Fear to Dialogue: From Standoff to Collaboration

Defining the "moral meaning" of democracy, John Dewey (1957) 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" (p. 186). If we are educating for wholeness, for citizenship, and for leadership in a democracy, spiritual development belongs in schools.

Just imagine if every student in the United States were provided a safe place to sit with a small group of their peers and reflect on their lives . . . to share the questions that trouble or confuse or mystify them . . . to find support for their pain or joy . . . to discover the solace that comes in silence . . . to be challenged to respect those who appear to be fundamentally different from them.

Making such experiences available to every student could be an effective strategy for preventing violence and other social pathologies. Such experiences not only nourish students' spiritual development, they also help them transcend prejudice, increase academic motivation, improve focus and cooperation, foster creativity, and keep more kids in school. In other words, caring about the inner lives of our students makes educational sense at every level.

This book is an invitation to remember what we already know: The connection among souls is ultimately what education is about. There is no single right way to do it, no blueprint. But there are paths to the souls of students that are open to every teacher, in every classroom, in every school. All we need is the courage to walk these paths with our students.

Traveling through the seven gateways to the soul of students-- through connection, silence, meaning, joy, creativity, transcendence, and initiation--we found many opportunities for honoring the yearnings of young people. In their poignant stories and profound questions, in their desperate acts of violence and self-destruction, our students express their longing for something more--for something deeper than ordinary, fragmented existence.

If this book does nothing more, I hope it reveals the existence of this yearning in our youth and the dramatic rise in wisdom when students can share their quest with one another. Although some families have provided guidance and regular opportunities for their children to address their spiritual hunger, many young people have no safe place to share their inner life. Their parents have been lost or caught up in their own journey. Even if they have been part of the great wave of spiritual renewal in the 1990s, many parents have not yet discovered a way to translate appropriately for their children what is so rich and sustaining for them. And even when students have been blessed with a rich inner life at home, they often feel compelled to leave this resource outside school doors.

Many adults have judged this generation of adolescents as shallow, selfish, and vacuous. The wisdom, wonder, and search of young people today often goes unseen or misunderstood beneath all the defenses they have erected to protect their fragility and to

express their despair. Whether or not educators and parents are drawn to my suggestions for working with the soul in schools, those who recognize this hunger in the voices of students may discover their own ways to respond to these needs.

I am also eager for teachers to discover new strategies to welcome the inner life and build meaningful connections in the classroom. Some of the examples in this book, such as encouraging students to keep journals, are so simple, so unarguable that educators can incorporate them with ease. But other strategies, and indeed the entire enterprise of welcoming soul into the school, may provoke controversy, fear, and confusion.

Controversy and confusion can divide us--pitting us against one another and preventing us from taking action. For some educators and parents, the teaching strategies suggested here will be considered a violation of private religious beliefs or even a violation of the law--no matter how careful I have been to respect those concerns. Traditionalists may feel that some methods are "New Age" or "relativistic." Secular humanists may be offended at providing the option for prayer or speaking up about a student's faith or religious passion in a classroom. Progressive or holistic educators may feel that the suggestions in these chapters are too limiting and that it is time to provide students with concrete tools and practices for cultivating spiritual growth. Each of these voices represents friends and respected colleagues from whom I have learned a great deal.

Despite their differences, each side has grave concerns about the current state of our youth and is urgently searching for ways to foster connection, meaning, and integrity in our students. I have sought to create this book as a bridge between those who share common goals but have found few forums in which to dialogue together. My goal has been to provide a framework that allows educators to honor, evoke, and nourish the souls of students in ways that do not violate deeply held convictions about the worldview or religion dear to them and their families.

After spending two years in a dialogue group composed of traditionalist Christians and progressive and mainstream educators, I cannot deny the deeply entrenched and fundamental differences of belief that make it seem impossible at times to work together. But when we agree that students must have a place for their yearning to be heard, that our schools can no longer afford to shortchange or shut out the inner life of students, I believe we can transform this controversy into a lively dialogue committed to creating strategies suitable for each community. To be willing to take on this challenge, we must also face our fear.

Acknowledging the Risks

Fear can be a useful guide--it announces dangers that we should heed. But fear can also paralyze us. For decades, educators have allowed fear to keep the spiritual dimension out of our schools. If we can acknowledge this fear and listen carefully to its guidance, perhaps we can also examine our paralysis, respectfully engage our differences, and strive to find some new areas of common ground.

There are indeed great risks in encouraging schools to tend the heart and feed the soul of young people:

* We risk the overzealous teacher, who gets so carried away with wanting to nurture spiritual development that he foists his own personal beliefs on impressionable children. * We risk the half-hearted teacher who tries to implement "cutting-edge strategies" in a mechanical way that breeds even more cynicism and alienation in our youth. * We risk parents who feel "dissed" and dismissed by educators who plow ahead with new techniques they naively adopt as "neutral" or "nonreligious" without realizing they reflect and potentially proselytize a worldview directly opposed to what is being taught at home. * We risk parents who will sue teachers and administrators before they even take the time to find out whether new strategies are really a violation of their beliefs or whether they just fit some preconceived "red flags" not really disrespectful in this situation. * We risk encountering students who are so cynical or afraid of being thought vulnerable at school that they will disrupt or destroy an accepting environment in the classroom so no one dares speak from the heart. * We risk unleashing a torrent of dammed-up emotions in students for whom the least invitation to authenticity provides an opening for genuine trauma or attention-seeking melodrama. The following are some guidelines for teachers on how to deal with our fears about ourselves, our students, and their parents when we consider nurturing spiritual development in public schools.

Teachers: Risk and Opportunity

For teachers to address the spiritual development of students, they must simultaneously cultivate their own. "Deep speaks to deep," says Parker Palmer (1998, p. 31). In training and coaching teachers for 15 years, I have seen that beyond methods and theory, a more elusive quality profoundly affects the learning that is possible--the teacher's own integrity, self-awareness, and capacity to be open.

"In teaching . . . there is a secret hidden in plain sight," writes Palmer (1995). "Good teaching can never be reduced to technique--good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher. The quality of the work that is done . . . depends at least as much (and often more) on the inner qualities of the person doing it as it does on his or her technical skill" (p. 2, emphasis in original). Although this truth holds for any kind of teaching, the messages our students receive from our modeling are even more potent when we invite not only mind and body, but also heart, spirit, and community into our classrooms.

Throughout this book, we saw negative examples of what can happen when the lesson plan is more important than the caring and responsiveness of the teacher. We can have the best available curriculum and train teachers in technique and theory, but if we do not provide opportunities for teachers to develop their own emotional intelligence, their own spiritual depth, our students may still be unsafe and our programs hollow. "We teach who we are." "Walk your talk." Or, as Emerson put it, "What you are speaks so loudly that I can't hear what you say you are."

We as educators can cultivate this elusive quality--what I call "the teaching presence"

(Kessler, 1998)--not only in private but in school. Through mentoring programs and carefully designed staff development workshops, teachers can build a safe community among colleagues where they can explore their own feelings and experiences. They can practice and refine the fundamental principles that inform teaching in all of the gateways to soul in education, such as eliciting creativity and joy in students. They can hold their own faculty "council" meetings, write reflectively in their own journals, and "pair" with a colleague to share insights and feelings. In these ways, educators can explore questions and topics like these:

* What gives you a sense of worth or meaning in your life? * Tell a story about a time when your spirit, whatever that means to you, was nourished. * Share a precious moment from your own childhood--one that you want never to forget. * Tell us a story of a teacher or other adult who, by positive or negative example, inspired you to be the kind of teacher you are today.

These questions not only sensitize teachers to their students but also build an ongoing faculty community that supports and renews the inner life of teachers. In addition, creating regular opportunities for silent reflection for teachers can refresh and connect teachers at another level. By practicing silence and reflection ourselves, we learn how to be calm and firm when we introduce this practice to our students.

Whether or not teachers choose to explore their own depths, entering the arena of soul with our students can drop us into a cauldron of our own emotional and spiritual growth. In supervising secondary teachers, in particular, I have watched how issues or wounds not yet examined by a teacher will show up in neon in the mirror of adolescent search and struggle. If we are unwilling to honestly address these personal issues, we can go numb or be rocked off our moorings.

In Chapter 5, I introduced the idea of both teachers and students exploring qualities or impulses that popular culture or our own families have encouraged us to disown. In my workshops with educators, teachers have been grateful for the opportunity to have safe and private ways to look at what they envy or cannot tolerate in others, what they dare not see in themselves. We examine together:

* Our discomfort with sadness that makes it hard to be open when students express grief. * Our confusion about power that may keep us from protecting our students through respectful discipline. * Our fear of vulnerability that may distance us from students. * Our awareness of the dangerous border between caring and attraction when discovering the beauty in each student.

When teachers receive such support from colleagues, we can be more open with students and also discern when our own concerns are meant for adult ears only. In Chapter 3, we acknowledged the danger of using our students as our own support group if we are not conscious about our responsibility as elders or if we are so isolated that we have no other place to speak from the heart.

Another dangerous impulse for a teacher committed to working with heart and soul in the classroom is becoming inflated with the fantasy of being a "spiritual guide," or "healer." Our gift as teachers is to help students find their own answers, not to claim to know all the answers ourselves. Our power comes in asking what will empower our students and in cultivating our humility and humanity, not our own charisma or indispensability. If we can do this, we will naturally align with the First Amendment's protection of the freedom of our students to pursue their religious liberty while restraining us as public officials from "establishing" or imposing our own worldviews and practices.

The suggestions in this book are only a beginning for teachers and administrators who want to welcome soul into education with safety and integrity. When teachers are nourished and honored by the administrators and parent community that holds them accountable, they are more likely to provide these gifts to their students. Teachers need not only caring and respect but also the time and other resources for training and coaching. Parents: From Fear to Dialogue

As a teacher, I was surprised how easy it was to fall into an "us versus them" mentality with parents. As educators, we have often separated ourselves from parents out of fear that they would criticize us for not being good enough for their "darlings." Then, as a parent, when my own children entered high school, I was surprised at how easily I felt intimidated by teachers who could judge me for not being a good enough parent or who held so much power over the future of my child. Here are some guidelines for working with parents:

* Communicating with parents early and continuously is vital to making a safe place for soul into schools. When we inform parents of new practices, listen and respond to their concerns in refining our curriculum and teaching strategies, we are far more likely to provide the respectful climate that allows this work to flourish. * We can invite parents early in the semester to come for an introductory evening program. Here, parents can listen to an overview and discussion of goals; they can also experience some playful warm-ups and a "council" meeting on a theme that is relevant to them as parents, such as "What is working for you with your teens, and what is most challenging at this stage?" Parents love this opportunity to share with other parents. The methods used with their children become clarified and demystified. And if we find objections among parents to certain practices, we can resolve conflicts together and make decisions that reflect our community. * We can create opportunities later in the year to bridge the gap and strengthen the bonds between students and parents--such as the evening Senior/Parent councils described in Chapter 8 (which, by the way, work in a modified form for other grade levels of secondary schools, as well). We must work with parents because families are the first and most important sources for students' joy, creativity, purpose, and all the other gateways to soul in education. Parents' wisdom and modeling continue to shape these young people throughout their lives. Even when we take students through an initiation process that helps them separate from their parents and become adults, it is clear that students are most successful in becoming adults when there has been a strong foundation from which to launch.

Parent evenings not only help parents support the growth of their own children, but they also help strengthen the adult community essential for soulful approaches to survive in schools.

My colleagues and I have watched parents become our allies after parent/student councils or during the Senior Honoring Ceremony. Doug Eaton (interview, 1999) told me with tears in his eyes: I was so stunned. This dad who had refused to let his daughter attend our overnight trip because he was suspicious of the program made a special trip to see me on his way to work the morning after the parent/student council. He wanted to express his gratitude, and he offered to support me and the program in any way he could.

Working together, teachers and parents become, if only for an evening or a semester, a team of elders collaborating to raise the next generation.

Saboteurs and Kids At Risk

Teachers raise two primary concerns about students when they consider ways to bring heart and soul into the classroom. They fear the students who will go too far and those who will not go far enough. The first type of student is likely to overwhelm the teacher or other students with too much emotion, too many problems. The second refuses to engage, or sabotages the engagement of others with their cynicism and disrespect.

In Chapter 6, we looked carefully at the Pandora's Box question, addressing the students who become "too emotional" in our classes or use our forums to reveal current or threatened violence. These can be the "early warning signs" we are now urgently seeking after the tragedies in Springfield, Padukah, and Littleton. The key here is that teachers trust those colleagues trained to handle psychological problems and make referrals quickly. This, too, is a matter for staff development and for building a strong sense of community among the faculty. Sometimes, we don't really believe our student's threats or eruptions. But such assessments are best made by trained professionals. What about the students who undermine the value or the feelings of being safe to "speak from the heart" in school? In my experience, they often fall into two camps. One is the verbal, often very intellectual, student who makes an articulate case for why social, emotional, or spiritual development doesn't belong in school; this student often feels offended and is unwilling to participate. The second is the student who says nothing directly to criticize the program but acts out in ways that sabotage the climate of acceptance and safety the group needs. Let's look at strategies for working constructively with these students.

Throughout this book, we have looked at ways to respect the timing and privacy of students. Both the saboteur and the cynic can sometimes be defused by permission to be silent or just to observe. I learned something more from Jack, a well-known cut-up, when he expressed--in devastating detail--his skepticism about our 10th grade human development class:

" I think this kind of class could get sappy and fake. We could all just pretend to be talking about real feelings, and it would all be a joke. Or we could get real and then go too far. I mean, this is school, you know, it's not therapy; and we could start getting real personal with people's problems and I think that would be a real mistake."

I listened carefully to Jack and felt myself get more and more defensive. His posture said, "I know how to throw you off guard, lady, just like I do everywhere I go." I recognized one of

those "negative leaders"--the rebel who influences other students to use jokes and side talk and even philosophical debate to disempower teachers. But then, in an instant, I considered another possibility. He was bright and thoughtful--and though I disagreed with him, I appreciated the way he spoke honestly about his skepticism.

Then I spoke in a way I never had: "Jack, I really appreciate your honesty. And I think you're right. All those things could happen here if we're not careful. You have an unusual wisdom to be able to see these dangers, and I wonder if you would be willing to take some leadership here in helping our class make sure those things don't happen. And when you see them happening, please let us know."

Jack looked stunned. He was silent for a moment, and I watched his body language change. He sat up tall in his chair, and he said, "I could do that. As a matter of fact, I'd be glad to do that--to help in that way."

And he did. In that moment of being acknowledged and respected, Jack decided to become a leader in our class. He was an ally, almost a partner, for me that year in making the class a success. And the next spring, Jack decided to run for student body president. Our school had always elected juniors for that position to reign during their senior year. That year, after watching a brilliant and unique campaign, the students elected Jack--a sophomore.

The lesson I learned with Jack has infused all my work since then--with teachers and students alike. When I can genuinely consider and acknowledge my critic as a guide--when I can see in their attack, skepticism, or disappointment a needed correction or warning--a critic can indeed become my ally. And the lesson is never lost on the rest of the group. I learned another lesson after years of confusion and mistakes. For some students who are particularly raw from a recent or ongoing trauma, it can be unbearable to be around students who are sharing openly. Yet it is hard to keep silent when others are speaking. Others can't bear to have their feelings activated at school by a teacher's themes or another student's stories. The more vulnerable students often feel that it is too risky to share their enormous pain in school.

I learned to find ways to ask students like this an important question: "Is it uncomfortable for you right now to be in class while your peers are expressing strong feelings or asking deep questions in class?" This conversation can be facilitated in private, with a school counselor present:

Ted lost his father when he was in 8th grade. According to my colleagues, he had never really expressed his grief. He grew close to his grandfather; then at the beginning of 10th grade, his grandfather died. Ted was in turmoil, but he had strong beliefs about not exposing his grief to others outside his family.

Another student in the class had lost her father the year before. Keisha's way of healing was to talk about her grief whenever she could. She saw our class as a wonderful opportunity to express her feelings and share insights with others about death and grieving. Ted despised Keisha. I could feel him seething every time she talked. Soon he began to act out in ways that made it harder and harder for our class to hold a meaningful conversation. It took me months

to realize that despite his tough and joking exterior, Ted was in too much pain to be in this particular class. After a conference with his mother and the counselor, we found another way for Ted to fulfill this requirement. Our class never really came together. I felt deep remorse for not acting sooner. In conferences with the student and sometimes, parents, we can discover if these students need permission to leave during these segments of class and perhaps need a referral for counseling to address their deeper issues. We may also discover that we are dealing with a student who just needs firm, consistent, and caring boundaries that don't allow his or her behavior or opinions to interfere with the class. In working with all students--even potential saboteurs--we will be most effective when we have discovered our own capacity for caring discipline. When we carry ourselves in a way that conveys respect rather than dominance and that requires respect rather than submission, we learn to set boundaries that protect the whole class. Such boundaries allow the class to go on despite disruptions from one or two other students. Then, after class, we can ensure that the disruptive students receive the care and attention they need.

Words and Deeds of Teachers and Other "Elders" " I have not been trained as a counselor," protest many teachers. "Why should I encourage students to share feelings in my class?" Or "I can't consider spiritual development in my classroom--the parents would sue me." Parents are equally wary: "There are very few teachers I would trust with this spiritual stuff--whether it's a fundamentalist zealot or some naive New Ager, I don't want teachers passing their beliefs off on my kid." I have worked with many colleagues and school leaders who have chosen to confront these dangers with ingenuity and courage. Pooling our creativity, being willing to make mistakes and stay open-minded to those who appear to challenge our credibility, we move from fear and paralysis to finding safe and appropriate ways to invite the inner life into schools. When we listen to others and speak with respect, we can collaborate to create curriculums and methodology that will help our students, teachers, and parents honor the soul of education. The methods described in this book are finding their way into our educational culture in a variety of exciting ways. Teachers from many disciplines and grade levels integrate the methods of "Passages" with their own creative responsiveness to their communities:

- * A high school English teacher in an inner-city high school in Washington, D.C., provides art materials for students to symbolically express their feelings, goals, and strengths. As they discuss the assigned literature, they shift periodically into telling stories from their own lives that relate to the struggles of the characters in their books.
- * A health educator in Colorado provides a "transitions" course for 9th grade students, weaving social and emotional skills and opportunities for expression together with study skills and health issues. With the student's permission, the health teacher shares the student's "mysteries questions" with the academic faculty, who are awed and amazed by both the "hidden" wisdom and pain in students they see every day. After a year of resisting the idea of initiating a comprehensive program to address heart, soul, and community, this faculty begins to voice enthusiasm and curiosity about next steps.
- * An 8th grade English teacher organizes the entire curriculum around the theme of relationship and love, selecting literature that relates to these themes (Trustees of Boston University, 1993). 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. At the end of the year, she designs activities for an 8th grade field trip that will provide a simple but meaningful "rite of passage" from middle school to high school.
- * A 2nd grade teacher in New York integrates a sharing circle weekly into her contained classroom, using games, art, and movement to awaken the realm of imagination and soul and help the children make the transition from academic learning to the more vulnerable territory of personal expression.
- * A teacher in a prison school on an island off Manhattan introduces the "council" concept to a population that is not only

deeply troubled but constantly changing; students come and go weekly, so that consistency is not an option for building safety in the group. "I could not believe the impact!" this teacher reports. "The use of simple ritual made it safe enough for these kids to speak from the heart in a way I've worked for all my career. I felt the shift inside me at our retreat when we teachers spoke to each other in council in a way I never dreamed possible among colleagues. It gave me hope then, and I have even more hope now that I see how my boys respond." In addition to teachers, many counselors, parents, and community leaders with whom I have worked are using these same methods to bring soul into other group experiences: * A Spanish teacher in the Bronx takes the curriculum he has learned while teaching the "Senior Passage Course" and translates it into a rites of passage program for the church youth group he leads in his Hispanic community. No one has ever seen the church so full and alive as when parents are invited to church for a ceremony honoring the teenagers when they return from their retreat. * A counselor of "high-risk" middle school students in one of the most violent communities in the Denver area discovers that "honoring young voices" produces a shift in her work that deeply satisfies this 20-year veteran of the public schools. She finds herself nourishing the souls as well as the psyches of these young people: "I watch my students from diverse backgrounds share such deep human experiences through Council. These are students who would never have connected with one another otherwise. The depth of self-discovery, understanding, and expression in the emotionally safe environment I could facilitate after Passages training is profound." * A mother of three brings the tools and principles of Passages into a church youth group she co-facilitates. Wrestling with whether it is appropriate to do this work with her own child present, she decides to ask her daughter how she feels. Her daughter replies: "Go for it, Mom, it sounds great! And if I have something too private to share in front of you, I can always talk privately to the other leader." * Twenty-five members of Congress sit in the basement of the Capitol Building, learning to be co-leaders for the first bipartisan retreat for the U.S. Congress. They have completed a ground rules process, and I lead them now in practicing a simplified version of the council process. A month from now, they will guide scores of members through this same process in small groups. "We have never talked like this to one another," says a Congressman from Illinois. "I forgot who is a Democrat and who's Republican. I feel hopeful that we might actually begin to bring civility into this House if other members can experience at the retreat the compassion and respect we've just felt in this room today." These and many other professionals and parents are seeking ways to encourage the development of heart, spirit, and community. They are learning practices that can invite adults and students alike to engage in the powerful dialogues and meaningful experiences for which we all yearn. There is a beginning of a spiritual renaissance in our modern culture. It cannot come too soon for the next generation. In a pluralistic society, educators can respect the separation of church and state and still give students a glimpse of the rich array of experiences that feed the soul. We can provide a forum that recognizes and celebrates the ways individual students nourish their spirits. We can offer activities that allow them to feel deeply connected--to themselves, to their family and community, and to the larger world. Perhaps most important, as teachers, we can honor our students' search for what they believe gives meaning and integrity to their lives, and how they can connect 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 can discover what is essential in their own lives and in life itself, and what allows them to bring their own gifts to the world.