

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

By Rachael Kessler

Chapter One: Honoring Young Voices

I am teaching a class for seniors that is designed to be a rite of passage from adolescence to adulthood. Two-thirds of the way through the semester, we travel from our school to a retreat center in the mountains of Ojai, several hours away. We camp in an oak grove, creating opportunities for private reflection, for play, and for facing common challenges.

Now it's the last day of the retreat, and we are preparing for our closing ceremony. Suddenly I realize that Felicia, a beautiful but brittle 17-year-old student who is struggling with the final stages of bone cancer, will never make it down the hill on her crutches. She staunchly refuses our help. Except for hourly injections of painkillers that my colleague is giving her, she acts as if she wants to face death alone.

As her teacher, I want to respect Felicia's strength and not injure her pride. At the same time, I feel that she has reached that stage in her illness and her life where she needs to accept help. Because everyone wants to include Felicia at this ceremony, leaving her behind isn't an option.

Bewildered, I sit down on a rock and take a moment to reflect. What are we going to do? How can I help this dying young woman inspire her peers with her indomitable strength, while also learning--for the first and last time in her life--to accept support from others?

Felicia joined our class in the spring despite her frail condition. She had been diagnosed with cancer in the 10th grade, and she spent much of her junior year away from school seeking cures anywhere her devoted parents could find hope. She was so weak this year she could hardly attend classes. By spring, she was on painkillers around the clock, she could walk only with the support of crutches, and her energy was almost gone. But she was determined about one thing: She would participate in this senior rite of passage.

"She wants so much to be normal," her mother confided in me. "She is so independent--she always has been. And she wants to participate just like the others. She knows that this is her chance to separate from us as well--to become a grown-up. She needs so much to do this, I can't tell you how much it means to her."

Working closely with Felicia's parents was essential because the advanced state of her cancer involved problematic issues of medication, transportation, and potential emergency care.

When we left on the school bus for the mountain retreat center, I told my students that Felicia's parents would do their best to bring her. The exuberance of the students as they settled into the retreat was tempered by fear and grief. Felicia was a crucial part of this group that had worked toward the retreat with great anticipation after the wildly enthusiastic stories

of previous seniors. Would she have to miss this experience? And if she did come, how would they deal with it?

In our opening "council" meeting on the first afternoon of the retreat, we passed a round loaf of bread, with each of the 22 students in turn tearing off a piece and stating what nourishment they hoped to receive during the next five days and the nourishment they hoped to give. But then one of the students broke down. "I want so much to give my love to Felicia-- I know we don't have much time left, and there's so much I want to tell her. But I feel like I shouldn't talk about it--like she'll know if I get emotional that I know she's dying and we're not supposed to ever think that. I'm supposed to pretend everything's okay. But it's not okay. Sure, I keep praying that she'll make it somehow. But I have eyes. Don't you?" she looked around the room at the faces filled with tears.

Her outburst then triggered another student: "This is my senior retreat," he said. "My special time. I've been thinking about this for four years now. I've got so much going on--so many decisions to make, so many goodbyes. How am I going to take care of all this if I'm worrying about Felicia? I feel selfish saying this, even thinking this. But I know we're supposed to be honest here. If I can't be honest here, where can I be?"

"How do we treat her now?" wondered a third student. "She wants us to act like everything's cool, but it's not. What do we do with our sadness and our fear when we're with her?"

"And she won't let us help her in any way. It seems so dishonest. I mean, she needs us. And we need her--she knows things about life we need to learn from her. But can we really talk straight with her about all this? It seems so impossible."

As her best friend May sobbed with grief during this council, I felt grateful that Felicia was not here. It was an opportunity to speak with the students about life and death on a deeper level than any of us had expected.

"We are all so busy trying to take care of Felicia that we have not really tended to our own pain," I began. "This pain of watching your friend dying is yours--and it comes when you already have so much to deal with--making huge decisions, preparing to leave all that's been secure and familiar for you. And in the midst, you are carrying this enormous pain."

I felt the room relax as I named and honored their suffering.

"We have to really take care of each other these next few days," I continued, my own voice shaken by tears. "If Felicia comes, we need to remember to take care of each person here, even as we do our best to care for her."

"Felicia's here," one of my students shouted, as we sat around the campfire before the evening council. I jumped up. When I arrived at the kitchen, Felicia was waiting impatiently to join the group. Her father and mother had driven her up the dirt road usually closed to cars in this beautiful mountain retreat center.

"How wonderful that you're here!" I said, embracing her awkwardly, around her crutches. "Thank you so much, Mr. Sanchez, for bringing her. We have all been eager to share this time with Felicia."

"Don't thank me," he replied humbly. "We are most grateful to you all for making it possible for our girl to be here." Then I embraced her mother, Ruth, who had become a friend from our many dialogues about her daughter.

"Let's go join the others," I said, beckoning to Felicia. "And you're welcome to join us, too," I encouraged her parents. Felicia glared at them to let them know she was determined to do this alone.

"You'll have to be careful with those crutches, Felicia--it's a bumpy, rocky path," I warned. Her father rushed to assist her, and she pushed him away, angrily. The other students were ecstatic when Felicia arrived at the fire. Swept up in a wave of whoops and hugs, she melted into the group.

For the next four days, we explored the challenges of navigating the critical passage from childhood to adulthood. In council meetings, students shared their hopes, their fears, their gratitude, and their regrets; gradually, these students found their way to confronting honestly and tenderly some of their most difficult feelings with Felicia. Their reflections about death were perhaps the most courageous and thoughtful I have ever seen expressed by people of any age.

During free time, they explored the land and organized major campaigns of "Capture the Flag" and "Ultimate Frisbee." We challenged them to spend hours alone--listening to the wind in the trees and to their own hearts. We created enactments of the journey of letting go and embracing their strengths and their futures. Felicia participated as much as possible--resting when exhaustion overtook her, but maintaining a strong presence in our group. We planned our closing ceremony quite spontaneously. During their free time the students had found a beautiful spot down the hill from our meeting rooms, far past the sleeping grounds. In the exuberance of the moment, we teachers agreed, not thinking of how difficult it would be for Felicia to get there. Now we have to confront this problem. Suddenly I have an idea. I approach a group of boys hanging out together and lower my voice. "Would one of you guys be willing to carry Felicia down the hill if we need you?" Two young men volunteer immediately. One--Jimmy--is probably our tallest, strongest student. He also has a reputation outside this class for being a good-for-nothing cut-up. He has been a disappointment to his father, who had raised him and an older brother, who was a star athlete and academic success. But in our work in this class, Jimmy has proved himself trustworthy, even of this delicate task. Since the first day of the semester, Jimmy has seen this class as a place that was safe enough to expose his pain, his longing, his wisdom. Our group has loved and acknowledged the beauty of this struggling young man. I ask Jimmy and Will, the other volunteer, to go inside. Then I ask Felicia and her best friend, May, to join me for a moment in our meeting room.

" Felicia, you have a choice to make. The walk we're about to take is too far for you to do on crutches. Would you be comfortable letting either Jimmy or Will carry you on his shoulders? It would mean a lot to these guys and to all of us if you would accept our help." Our days together have made it easier for her to face the truth, to let go, and to let us in. But still she hesitates. She cannot decide.

" Do it, Licia!" May says, gleefully. "You can ride on Jimmy, and I'll ride on Will. We'll be side by side, riding in style. It will feel like a parade!" Felicia's eyes light up with a girlish joy I had seen only in photos from before the cancer. "Yes!" she shouts, high-fiving May, and then Will and Jimmy.

"Let's do it--it will be a blast!"

The rest of us tromp behind them down the hill as Felicia and May ride like prom queens on the shoulders of these proud young boys-becoming-men. They are carrying her for all of us--allowing her to surrender to our love and care.

In our hearts we all know that this is truly a moment of "passage" for Felicia--and for all of us. Despite our continuing hopes and prayers that this young senior will make it to graduation, we sense that a much more challenging graduation awaits her.

A month later, on her 18th birthday, Felicia died.

Fortunately, most high school classes do not wrestle so immediately with death. Nor do they have the privilege of five days in the magic of mountains. But in most secondary classrooms, adolescents everywhere are carrying the profound questions that challenged Felicia's group. What gives meaning to life? Why am I here? Can I ask for help? Does anyone really love me? The teenage years are a time when the most important questions can fester in loneliness--or with support, inspire a journey toward wisdom and connection.

When a group of students can acknowledge the truth, whether it is malevolent or benign, when they can meet where their personal stories strike universal chords, they become a community that can respond constructively to any challenge--even death. This is the soul of education.

But how do educators begin to make a place for soul in the classroom? What does it mean to nourish the spiritual development of adolescents in school? There is little in the educational literature to answer these questions. For me, both the questions and the answers have emerged from my day-to-day work with students.

As I developed this work in the 1980s, I sensed that it was meeting student needs at a very deep level; but I didn't know then what to call it. For several years, I thought it was best not to try. Like most educators, I thought it would be too dangerous to acknowledge that we were doing something in school that involved the spiritual dimension. In the mid-'80s, educators did not dare to consider or discuss the possibility that soul might have a place in schools. If

we had used the words "spiritual" or "soul," some students would have thought it was "hokey" or "flaky." Others would have felt we were intruding. Parents and colleagues might have heard the word "spirit" and assumed we were proselytizing or practicing devotional exercises that violated their personal beliefs and the First Amendment as well.

I could not explain what it was about the Mysteries classes that invited soul into the room. We were not practicing religion or even talking about religion. Though I was eager to understand, I did not seek answers from books or spiritual teachers. I was determined to learn from my students. Because I wanted to find a pure, fresh, direct connection to what nourished the human spirit, I decided to listen to the voices of the young people themselves. Teenagers, however, do not readily share what is deeply important with anyone, certainly not with most adults called "teachers." To earn their trust, I had to learn ways to work together to create an environment that was safe and full of respect and compassion so that they would speak with authenticity. The more they felt their voices honored by their peers and teacher, the more they were willing to speak.

I discovered four practices that proved crucial to inviting soul into the classroom:

- A ground rules process that empowers students to define and take ownership of the conditions for safety in their group.
- Games and symbolic expressions that offer teenagers an indirect way to express themselves and meet each other gradually in deeper, more personal ways.
- The "mysteries questions" process, underscoring that we will be talking about what is in the hearts of these particular students, not someone else's "curriculum."
- The council process, which enables students to listen and speak from the heart, telling stories about what matters most to them.

These practices were the steppingstones on my path to discovering a safe, responsible, and effective way to make a place for soul in the classroom. Each was based on the principle of honoring young voices.

Ground Rules

I could never have begun my journey without giving students a way to define the conditions they most needed to speak about their longings and concerns. " Together, we can make this class a place where it's possible to talk about what is really important to you," I say to my students once they have begun to feel comfortable with our class. (I usually wait until the second or third class, using the first classes to establish comfort and connection with activities that require little risk or self-revelation.) "Our curriculum comes from your issues, your questions, and your challenges as you go through this time of your lives. But if you're going to risk speaking about what really matters personally, what do you need--from yourself and from others--to make it safe to do that?" " Trust." Invariably, this word comes out first. " Yes, trust is essential. But what is it that would allow you to trust others, and to trust yourself? Most of us are pretty cautious when we begin to reveal what really matters to us. I

think that's healthy, don't you? I don't want to encourage you to trust for the sake of trust. Blind trust can be naive and dangerous. We always have to be discerning. What actions, what behaviors tell us we can begin to trust?"

They begin to call out words, and I stand at the board listening and writing. "Respect." "Honesty." "No put-downs." "Listening as if you really want to know." "No laughing at people." "No interruptions." "Don't make judgments." "An open mind." "Trust." "Respect for my privacy." '1' "The right to stay quiet and speak only when I'm ready." Thousands of students across the United States create this same list again and again--from 7th grade through high school.'2' The language may vary, but the sentiments are the same. Differences may deeply divide this nation, but I find widespread agreement among teenagers (and among adults) when it comes to defining what makes it possible to speak authentically. Once the students and teacher have collaboratively established ground rules, they can begin to move toward genuine communication.

Games and Symbolic Expression

Trust builds slowly. After all, I am asking students to begin to dissolve some of the boundaries between their private feelings and the public life of school. Unlike participants in a weekly youth group outside of school, students who encounter this approach as part of the school curriculum are usually required to participate in this group; and they do not escape from the others when the session is over. Whatever happens here will be remembered by the peers they face daily--in math, in history, on the playing field, on the bus home. This is no easy challenge for any of us; it is a delicate process, requiring patience and respect.

A respectful pace and nonintrusive methods honor the mistrust and cynicism teenagers feel about voicing what is really in their hearts. Playful games in the early weeks foster affection, cooperation, and connection in the group. They help students learn as much as possible about others without feeling exposed or invaded. Carefully selected activities invite students slowly, cautiously, playfully to get to know each other.

Each class period, like each semester, has its own rhythm, designed to ease students into and out of a time of sharing honestly about significant teenage issues. A class might begin with a game that brings everyone together quickly through laughter. Or it might open with symbolic expression as students work with a lump of clay or crayons and paper to create a symbol of how they are feeling "right now." A repertoire of warm-up exercises helps students relax, let go of distractions, and interact with one another in a casual way before being asked to speak before the whole group. Unlike programs that begin with "boundary breakers," I have learned that respecting the caution, pace, and privacy of each student is what allows them to tell their stories with authenticity and depth.

After the groundwork is laid, students begin to find the comfort or the courage to begin talking about their own lives. Personal storytelling brings a group to life because it ensures that students speak about what they have experienced and know. It gives speakers a sense

of authority over their own lives and begins to develop the listener's capacity for empathy. Through their stories, students reveal what in their lives awakens and feeds their souls. "Bring in an object that symbolizes something that is really important to you right now in your life," I tell a group of high school seniors in Colorado. "Does the object have to be valuable?" a student asks. "No, the object is just a symbol. It could be something you cherish, but it can also be a trivial object that symbolizes something important to you right now." The students bring their objects in paper bags, so no one will know who brought them. One or two students have forgotten, so I give them crayons and paper to draw their symbol. They all leave the room so I can lay out the objects on a beautiful cloth in the center of the room. When they come back in, no one knows who brought the ring, the book, the cupcake, the exquisitely delicate small box, the stone, the set of keys, the painting, or the locket. One at a time, the students choose an item that intrigues them. Ryan goes first, picking up the cupcake. "Do I get to eat it, too?" he asks mischievously. Giggles ripple throughout the room. "Who brought this great-looking thing?" He looks around the circle and Karen nods shyly. "What does it mean to you, Karen?" he asks. "What's the story?" "One of my friends loves this kind of cupcake," Karen explains. "Whenever I know she's down, I go to the one store in town that makes these, and I surprise her with one. I have some very good friends in my life, and those friendships are what's most important to me right now." Other students, when their objects are chosen, talk about surprising gains and disturbing losses in the lives of their families. One student feels blessed and surprised by a rose given her by her step grandparents. The next student tells a more typical tale from the divorce wars. "This is my Dad's wedding ring," says Jen, holding up a thick gold band. "I wear it now, since they divorced. He travels a lot, and I worry about him. Wearing the ring on a chain around my neck keeps him close to me. And it reminds me of how precious relationships are and how quickly they can be gone."

Petra has brought a picture of her family and laid a cross on top of it--a cross she had made herself, carved out of wood, with a lifesaver glued in the center of the cross. "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." Tension comes over me as I wonder how the other students will react to religious fervor in the classroom. But what I see in their faces is a relaxed openness, curiosity, respect. Petra, too, reads the room, and her face brightens with a beautiful smile. "Guys--it's amazing," she concludes. Because each story comes straight from the heart, these students are quickly engaged, eager to listen. Many of them are surprised to feel respect for classmates they never knew or wanted to know. Many notice more similarities than they expected. The students become calm when they discover how easy it is to enter the circle and be heard.

Working with 8th and 9th grade students in Oakland, California, Folásadé Oládélé (1998/1999) created a similar approach. "As part of encouraging a sense of spirit in the classroom," says Oládélé, "I helped students develop . . . 'sacred symbols' that exposed more of the students' personal aspirations and desires. Every student performed an oral

presentation of his or her symbol to applause and support from the entire group" (p. 65). Telling stories about the symbols they bring with them, students introduce themselves to each other through what they value most in life. Whether it is the objects they bring to represent what is most important in their lives or the clay they mold into a symbol of their feelings, symbols allow students to reveal their emotions indirectly. Through such exercises, they have the freedom to explore and express feelings that might otherwise be too private or uncomfortable to put into words this early in the semester.

With seniors, I have found we can quickly build an environment safe enough to invite students to share what is meaningful to them. For younger students, our early discussions circle around friendship and the qualities we look for in a friend. We tell stories about childhood--supporting distance before asking students to reveal the more vulnerable experiences and feelings of the present.

Although symbols are a valuable source of inspiration, nothing elicits stories more powerfully than students' own questions. To find out what is on their minds, we do something radical: We ask them.

The Mysteries Questions

Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves like locked rooms and like books that are written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.--RAINER MARIA RILKE (1962, p. 35)

At about the fourth or fifth week of the course, when the beginnings of trust emerge, we ask our students to anonymously write their personal mysteries. " Please write about what you wonder about when you cannot sleep at night," we suggest, "or when you're walking alone to the school bus, or when you're jogging on the track. What do you worry about? or feel curious about? or feel afraid or excited about? What are your questions about yourselves, about others, about life itself?"

We never ask students to speak aloud about their private mysteries. Only if this process is completely anonymous are students safe. Only then will we hear the truth. If you as the teacher are familiar with students' handwriting, you might give the original papers to a colleague to type before reading them. The promise of complete anonymity in our mysteries questions frees students to have a rare glimpse into the hearts of their peers; they are always surprised and greatly relieved by the common concerns they find there. Gary Comstock, a professor of leadership development and chaplain at Wesleyan University, also uses anonymous writing to elicit unusual depth and honesty. He gives his students a topic or a question, hands out index cards, and asks them to write anonymously what feels most important to them about the theme. Comstock (personal interview, 1999) believes that

"authority never really breaks down" in the classroom, "even if I'm the nicest person in the world. Students still need to express some things with utter safety--not just because of how I'd react but also their peers. There are things people are ready to own and others they must process first before being ready to own."

From the inner city, from small towns, and from affluent suburbs, I have collected thousands of questions from students in 7th through 12th grades. The range is broad, but more impressive are the patterns of yearning and confusion that appear again and again.

Let us listen first to a few "mysteries about myself" from high school seniors:'3' * Why am I so angry? * Why am I so alone? * Why do I feel scared and confused about becoming an adult? What does it mean to accept that this is my life and I have responsibility for it? * Why am I not pretty like my sister is? * How do I know I'm "normal"? * What is normal?

When asked to ponder their mysteries about other people and about life or the universe, seniors ask questions like these: * Why do people hate others--black, white, Hispanic? * Why do people do drugs? * Will my brother have the same temper/addictions as my father? * Will we ever have a woman or a black president? * How do people who love you hurt you? Why? * Why do people tire of life? * What is our purpose in life? * How do I know the world around me is safe, in existence, and not going to end any minute?

Younger students have already begun this search. In 9th and 10th grade, they chew on questions like these: * What do people think about me? * How does one determine sexuality? Are there symptoms? Is it a decision or a natural given--are you stuck with it or is it a choice? * Why can't I trust people who are trustworthy and not trust people who aren't? * Why am I so heartless to so many people? * Why is it so hard to get along with others at this age? Why? Why? Why? * Why have we ruined our earth? * I wonder who is God, or if there is God? If there is a God, why is there so much Bad on Earth? * Does it hurt to die?

With questions ranging from the mundane to the profound, 7th and 8th grade students also reveal the challenging dilemmas of adolescence: * Am I so annoying and so unfriendly that some people ignore, act mean, or talk behind my back--I don't want anyone to hate me. * Why do I have to make myself look nice for other people? Why can't I just act like myself and not have to impress anybody? * When do I get tall? * What is it like to be old? * Why don't I always get along with my parents? * Why do boys always like stuck-up girls? * How do you know if you love a boy or girlfriend? What is a good time to loose [sic] virginity? * What happens when you're pressured into sex? * Why don't my parents trust me? * Why are people so cold in taking care of our planet? * How come people kill other people? * Where do we go when we die?

These "mysteries questions" allow us to refine our curriculum to respond personally to each group. By doing so, student concerns become central to the curriculum, not peripheral or irrelevant.

The following week, we read aloud all the questions--completely unedited and uncensored. We read them in a ceremonial way with honor and respect. When their questions are read back in their entirety, students are stunned by the depth and wisdom of their peers. They always express relief that they are not alone. This public, respectful witnessing of their personal mysteries is a turning point for each group. " So now are you going to answer all of them?" a student will often joke. In this humorous way, they reveal their awareness that most of these questions do not call for answers, certainly not by a classroom teacher in a public school. *" If we are to open up the spiritual dimension of education, we must understand that spiritual questions do not have answers in the way math problems do,"* writes Parker Palmer (1998), one of the first contemporary writers to write about the role of spirituality in education. "Giving one another

The Answer is part of what shuts us down. When people ask these deep questions, they do not want to be saved but simply to be heard; they do not want fixes or formulas but compassion and companionship on the demanding journey called life" (p. 8). Palmer also acknowledges that *"our real questions are asked largely in our hearts because it is too risky to ask them in front of one another."*

As I have tried to understand what encourages the spiritual development of students, anonymous, heartfelt questions have been a vital tool. These questions give us as teachers immediate access to the wonder, worry, curiosity, fear, and excitement that burns inside our students.

The Council Process

On the day we read the mysteries questions aloud, we have our first council. Like the sharing circles we have had earlier in the semester, a council meeting gives each person a chance to speak without immediate reaction or dialogue. But the council shifts the atmosphere by the use of a few simple ritual elements, as follows:

If the student and parent community are comfortable with candles, we begin by lighting candles in the center with a student dedication or two for that day's council: * "I dedicate this council to honesty--and the friendships that come when we tell the truth." * "I dedicate this council to my grandpa, who is very sick right now and I'm worried about him." * "I dedicate this council to our soccer team, which just won the state championship!"

With the lights dimmed, the candles create the intimacy of a campfire. On rare occasions, I have met students for whom the lighting of a candle means the invocation of the devil or evil spirits. If I suspect that such religious beliefs are present, I ask if there are any objections to lighting a candle. If there are any, I will substitute fresh flowers or other objects of natural beauty or invite students to bring something of beauty to put in the center.

The smooth stone we pass to designate who has the right to speak protects each speaker from interruption. A timekeeper with a discreet bell ensures that each student has equal time.

Students practice the "deep listening" (Zimmerman & Coyle, 1996) that is central to the council process--listening with complete attention, unimpeded by quick judgments and reactions, hearing the speaker's feelings and intentions, as well as the words. For many students, the elements of simple ritual make our conversation feel more meaningful and safe than ordinary talk.

Throughout the semester, I offer themes that allow students to find out more about one another and about themselves, such as the following: * Trust--a time someone in your life was really there for you; and mistrust--a time when someone let you down. * A precious moment from childhood you want never to forget. * Childhood fears you may be still learning to overcome. * A decision you had to make and how you made it. * Being left out or excluding someone else.

Through storytelling about these and other themes, students quickly engage with each other at a new level.

The Map Emerges

When my students described what they had heard about this program from previous students, they often used the word "spiritual." I wanted to know what they meant by that word. Rather than seek a metaphysical definition, I decided to ask them directly. I waited until well into the semester, when a sense of community had begun to form. In my "Senior Passage" course--the program in which Felicia participated--I asked my seniors: "What does spirit mean to you?" " We've been talking about wholeness in this class--about caring for ourselves as whole people," I begin carefully. "It's pretty clear what we mean by mind and body and even what we mean by social and emotional needs. But what do we mean by spiritual?" At first they call out words like "religion," "soul," "meditation," "peace," "holy," and "God." It is an important beginning, but I am looking for a way to discover a more personal definition of their spiritual nature. " Would you be willing to each tell us a story about a time in your lives when your own spirit--whatever that means to you--was nourished?" I ask. " What do you mean 'nourished'?" they ask. " You know--encouraged, stimulated, inspired. . . . Whatever comes to mind." Their eyes take on a dreamy quality as they begin searching. Everybody has a story--a story that commands the full, riveted attention of each student in the room.

Many stories are about nature or about a sense of belonging. Others are about the joy of creativity, the strength that comes through challenge or even suffering, the awe that comes from discovering faith in God.

As I listen to these stories, my heart is moved, and my own spirit is nourished. Finally, I have been willing to ask and they are willing to speak about the spiritual dimension of their lives.

After listening for many years to their stories, questions, and wisdom, I began to see a pattern. Certain experiences--quite apart from religious belief or affiliation--had a powerful

effect in nourishing the spiritual development of young people. As the pattern became clearer, a map emerged. I found seven gateways to their souls, each gateway representing a set of key experiences embedded in their stories. Together these gateways offer both a language and a framework for developing practical teaching strategies to invite soul into the classroom. Ordinary activities--easily integrated into school life--can have an extraordinary effect in meeting needs long neglected for so many teenagers.

Each gateway begins with a yearning--a yearning that is sometimes fulfilled by merely being acknowledged, a yearning for experiences that can often be fostered in classrooms where the heart is safe and the soul is welcomed. The remaining seven chapters in this book explore these gateways: the yearning for deep connection, the longing for silence and solitude, the search for meaning and purpose, the hunger for joy and delight, the creative drive, the urge for transcendence, and the need for initiation (see Figure 1.1).

Each of these domains can be a gateway to spiritual development, a path for nourishing "the soul of students." They are not, however, a developmental sequence, not stages that each student goes through in a particular order. Some students will be engaged and satisfied through certain gateways and not through others. Often the gateways are not distinct, but overlap and interact for each student, individually.

As we explore each gateway, we will hear the stories of educators, as well as the stories and questions of young people, like Felicia, who have been my primary source in discovering the many paths leading to the soul of students.