

## Educating the Child's "Inner Power"

By Ron Miller

The original meaning of the word "education," according to its Latin roots, is to lead out or bring forth that which lives within the human being. To *truly* educate is to nourish the unique and unfathomable possibilities that each child introduces into the world. Many teachers and most parents know this and, as individuals, seek to encourage the distinctive potentials of the children in their care. However, just as our understanding of human development is conditioned and constrained by a culture's worldview, education is always shaped by a culture's understanding of the child's place in society, and of the human being's place in nature and the cosmos. Some cultures recognize that the emergence of a human personality is, ultimately, a profound mystery, and so they honor the deeper dimensions of the psyche, traditionally referring to them as the "soul" or "spiritual" aspects of the person. Other cultures hold fixed, instrumental, or ideological ideas about how a mature person should function in the world, and tend to ignore, or deny, the more mysterious, interior dimensions of the personality. In modern, technological culture, the human being is essentially defined as an economic unit—a producer and consumer playing a small specific part in a massive, interlocked, impersonal system of production. As Ivan Illich (1970) and other astute critics have observed, "education" in such a culture has little to do with bringing forth the person's inner life but is reified as schooling—a standardized, mechanized system for delivering and controlling learning so that individuals can be assimilated smoothly into the economic order.

A countercultural tradition that I and others have identified as *holistic* education has attempted to turn attention back to the nature of the child, particularly to the creative, vital source of unfolding personhood. Many holistic educators frankly refer to this source with the traditional terms "soul" and "spirituality," yet it is important to recognize that they do not thereby mean to endorse conventional religious dogmatism; holistic education theorists often explicitly distinguish between spirituality—an open-ended description of "ultimate" meaning as it is experienced freshly by individuals (Forbes, 2003)—and the usually closed belief systems of organized religions. The terms are used because they remind us that an entirely materialistic, utilitarian conception of the human being ignores essential elements of our inherent nature. Some holistic educators prefer the more secular language that has developed in the literature of humanistic and transpersonal psychology (e.g. "higher self" or "self-actualization"), but the point is the same: an education that neglects the deep creative source of selfhood will result in a deadening, mechanical routine of schooling that negates rather than honors childhood. Furthermore, we argue, a deadening education is not only shortsighted but destructive, because it leads inexorably toward global fragmentation and conflict rather than human fulfillment and peace.

Holistic educators are convinced that the further evolution of civilization and human consciousness requires a renewed measure of respect and reverence for the inner life of the growing person. This view is rooted in various historical critiques of modernism, as far back as Jean Jacques Rousseau's *Emile* (1762). The ideas of Pestalozzi, Froebel, Emerson and Alcott in the nineteenth century, and of Steiner, Montessori, and Krishnamurti in the early and mid-twentieth century also make this connection between personal and cultural development (R. Miller, 1997; J. Miller, 1996; Forbes, 2003). Maria Montessori made this point explicitly in passages such as this:

If salvation and help are to come, it is from the child, for the child is the constructor of man, and so of society. The child is endowed with an inner power which can guide us to a more enlightened future. Education should no longer be mostly imparting of knowledge, but must take a new path, seeking the release of human potentialities. (1989, p. 1)

To many critics with a modernist mindset, sentiments such as this appear to be merely “child-centered” in a romantic, anarchistic sense, but a holistic philosophy of education goes deeper, and explains why we are justified in maintaining such faith in the child. *The child is endowed with an inner power*, says Montessori, and this power is nothing less than the cosmic force that breathes life, love, and creativity into the world. The highest and truest purpose of education is to nourish this force, to bring forth this power. “Education” harnessed to the machinery of an impersonal, rapacious system of production, consumption and control chokes off these possibilities and is thus a tragic diminishment of what education, and the human being, might be.

Holistic education is child-honoring<sup>1</sup> education, because it respects the creative impulses at work within the unfolding child as much as, if not more than, the cultural imperatives that conventional schooling seeks to overlay onto the growing personality. Often, when dissenting educators have shown such respect, they have been accused of being “anti-intellectual” or politically subversive. The guardians of culture—those with a vested interest in maintaining social, economic and political inequality—are the first to make these claims because they prefer authoritarian models of schooling and a “transmission” model of teaching and learning; their foremost aim is to keep people in their places. But as John Dewey eloquently argued in *Democracy and Education*, if we want to educate for a truly participatory democratic society and not one that is hierarchically ruled—if we desire a dynamic, progressive culture and not one that is rigidly fixated upon the past, then the educational process must take into account the impulses that arise within the dynamically evolving life of each person. Curriculum decisions and learning environments need to meet and accommodate vital energies, not suppress them. Dewey went to great lengths to explain why such openness and flexibility are not anti-intellectual, but in fact promote a more active and engaged intelligence than that produced by forced, rote learning. Child-honoring and democracy go together, and a culture that is authoritarian toward its children will eventually become, if it is not already, authoritarian toward all but the most elite of its members. It is revealing, I think, to look at the No Child Left Behind program, with its relentless testing and rigid control of learning, in this light. I have heard NCLB referred to as “Childhood Left Behind,” which seems to me a troublingly accurate description. And if childhood is left behind, so too is our essential personhood.

Those who place their trust in the “inner power” of human nature are willing to shake up a society’s assumptions and prejudices when these hinder the discovery of new insight. Among the best examples of this attitude is the Religious Society of Friends—the Quakers—whose faith in the “Inner Light” has inspired them to be among the leaders of movements for social reform, justice and peacemaking for over three centuries. Quaker educators have expressed this faith in describing their unconventional approach to teaching.

It is important to note that our Quaker experience of education is different from education understood as the transmission of the group’s inherited wisdom. . . . Every moment bears in it the dynamic of new truth, a life-changing insight, a hitherto unexplored perspective often coming through unexpected and unlikely channels (Brown, 1982, pp. 9-10).

This radical openness to revelatory insight through “unexpected and unlikely” sources reflects a deep respect for “that of God” in all human beings, even the young. Again, this is conventional religious language, but holistic education embraces the principle without necessarily endorsing the theology. Indeed, the most influential contemporary writer on education to come out of the Quaker tradition, Parker Palmer, has expressed a profound child-honoring perspective in his work that transcends specific religious belief. “If we try to keep our children within safe boundaries,” he once declared, “we prevent them from undertaking any great experiment with Truth” (Palmer, 1978, pp. 9-10). Imagine that—education conceived as encouraging young people to experiment with Truth!

Who knows where their explorations might lead? If we believe that they are animated by life-giving impulses, whether or not we understand these energies to be of divine origin, then we share the Quakers'—and Montessori's, and all holistic educators'—faith that the “release of human potentialities” will lead to “salvation,” or at the very least, to social and cultural renewal.

Throughout history, prophets, mystics and visionaries have declared that the formative force of the cosmos is essentially *love*. Martin Luther King, Jr., explicitly expressed the compelling faith that motivated his total commitment to working for justice and peace: “I am convinced that the universe is under the control of a loving purpose, and that in the struggle for righteousness man has cosmic companionship” (1963, p. 141). Rabbi Michael Lerner writes of the spiritual dimension of humanity as that which “enables us to transcend all that we’ve been encouraged [by our culture] to do and be—and become higher embodiments of our deepest values and beliefs. This transcendence has a particular trajectory: it pulls us toward love and a sense of Unity with All Being, toward goodness and a desire to make things right as best we can understand...” (2000, p. 9). To proclaim that education should hold the child’s spiritual nature in reverence and should follow its lead is to align ourselves with a force for healing, compassion, and peace. To enable transcendence of society’s prejudices, ideologies, and violence—to educate for peace—we need to reclaim the true meaning of “education” from the soul-numbing system of schooling within which the modern world has imprisoned its children.

The educational methods developed by holistic educators are surprisingly varied. Montessori prescribed a “prepared environment” containing specific materials that children could use, independently for the most part, to learn at their own pace, in response to their particular readiness for specific sensory and intellectual stimuli. Rudolf Steiner devised the Waldorf approach based on his intuitive (his followers claim clairvoyant) understanding of the needs of the evolving soul at each level of development, so children in Waldorf schools are divided into grades according to age and spend most of their time learning through group activities carefully planned and led by the teacher (who is also supposed to have intuitive insight into children’s personalities and immediate needs). Montessori education tends to emphasize empirical learning, with a focus on real objects in the environment, and encourages early acquisition of reading and writing, while Waldorf schools cultivate imagination and artistic expression and strongly discourage literacy in children under age 7. Some holistic approaches (for example, Quaker schools, or “neo-humanist” education based on the teachings of Tantric guru P.R. Sarkar) have adopted meditation, periods of silent reflection or journaling, yoga and other centering practices (Kesson, 2002). Other holistic approaches (the Reggio Emilia system of early childhood education comes to mind) place great emphasis on artistic self-expression and engaged creativity. Krishnamurti, on the other hand, advised against methods as such and suggested that a caring, open, nonauthoritarian *relationship* between people leads to genuine learning (Forbes, 2002), a view shared by many parents and radical educators who have joined the “deschooling” or “unschooling” movement and have, in many places, established community learning centers in place of rigidly managed schools (R. Miller, 2000).

Given this variety, it is difficult to describe a prototypical holistic school, and there is surely no single holistic curriculum. At most, I would only sketch out a few general features of any learning environment I would consider to be holistic:

1. Learning is more experiential, emergent, organic, cooperative and personal than in standardized school settings. Tests, grades, ranking, honors and other trappings of competitive learning are greatly reduced or completely absent. There is more open discussion and critical questioning in the classroom. Students are more free to pursue personal interests and passions, or a creative effort is made to present an established curriculum in ways that makes it more relevant, meaningful and

exciting to students. Indeed, to the extent curriculum is pre-planned, its content is less driven by what corporate leaders and politicians determine that “every child needs to know” and more by educators with a philosophical commitment to well rounded personal development and their own personal and professional sensitivity to the learning rhythms of their students.

2. There is a genuine sense of community among students, teachers, and the parents involved in the school. People care about each other and take care of each other. There is little authority exercised solely for the sake of control or impersonal enforcement of rules, although teachers and school administrators take their responsibilities for community functioning seriously. In the terms used by feminist cultural historian Riane Eisler (2000), a school oriented to “partnership” values would exhibit a “hierarchy of actualization” (a management structure that empowers each individual to realize one’s potentials) rather than the more traditional “hierarchy of domination.”

3. There is respect for students’ interior life and for ultimate questions. At the very least, a holistic learning environment offers periods of time or physical spaces of respite from the competitive materialism, constant noise, distraction, and titillation of modern civilization. Many holistic educators use the centering practices previously mentioned to help their students find calm and centering. Moreover, students are encouraged to wonder about deeper questions, about the meaning of life; their existential concerns are taken seriously. Rachael Kessler (2000) has thoughtfully observed the effects on young people of banishing “soul” from modern education and has eloquently argued that we need to honor their quest for meaning. For adolescents in particular,

the larger questions about meaning, identity, responsibility, and purpose begin to press with an urgency and loneliness we can all remember. Ignored or suppressed, the spiritual forces inside our young turn toxic and explosive. Providing students with opportunities to channel their energy constructively and to explore their mysteries with peers and supportive elders, I saw young people find balance, integrity, meaning and connection (p. xiii).

4. A holistic learning environment has meaningful connections to the world of nature. The principles of ecology and sustainability are implicit in the structure and content of a holistic education, if not explicitly addressed; there is a deliberate cultivation of what David Orr (1992) has called “ecological literacy.” The physical design of holistic schools and classrooms brings nature indoors, or invites students into the surrounding ecosystem. In these spaces, beauty is as important a concern as functionality. We would commonly find gardens, field trips, or other opportunities for contact with nature in the curriculum.

These general principles are practiced in distinctive ways by the various approaches to holistic education. Because of the diverse origins and histories of these alternative educational subcultures, they have had little interaction or communication with each other. There is still not a coherent holistic education movement that comprises them in reality as holistic education writers like myself do in theory. Each group has its own publications, conferences, internet discussion groups, and particular concerns. Nevertheless, I believe these approaches are intrinsically related under the banner of “holistic education” because underlying them all there is a holistic view of the human being that is radically, fundamentally different from the view that is dominant in modern technological culture. Because the creative spirit of the cosmos is so marvelously complex and generative, the human being can grow authentically in numerous ways, and different educational approaches place their primary emphasis on different aspects. But I argue that what is common to holistic approaches is vastly more significant than what differentiates them. And this common element is a sense of awe and reverence for the creative spirit that animates the unfolding of a human personality. When education begins with this reverence, with this respect for the individual

personhood of every learner, it cannot be standardized. It cannot be managed in undemocratic, authoritarian ways. It does not become obsessed with measuring “outcomes” or bureaucratically mandating what every child must know and be able to do. By sloughing off these deadening constraints on imagination, creativity and authentic growth, holistic education enables the “loving purpose” of the universe to work through the child’s—and the teacher’s—feelings, thoughts and actions.

Unless we remember how to truly educate, how to draw forth and nourish the richness of the human soul, we will not achieve genuine peace on this troubled planet. The United Nations has declared this the decade for building a “culture of peace,” but let us contemplate the radical premise that a culture of peace is fundamentally at odds with the dominant modern culture of aggressive materialism, consumerism, and technological mastery of nature. Most likely the UN did not intend such a radical assault on modernity, and principally sought to promote non-violent means of resolving conflict. But when we consider what is necessary to achieve a culture of peace, we must, indeed, examine the root causes of conflict, violence, domination and oppression. In a culture of peace—in a culture that, in Riane Eisler’s terms, embraces an ethic of partnership—the relationships between a society and its children, between the human world and the natural world, between spiritual and scientific ways of understanding would have a dramatically different quality from what they are like now, in a culture of control and exploitation. And when these relationships change, what we consider to be education will also be dramatically different. We will not build a culture of peace by sticking “non-violence” into a standardized curriculum whose primary purpose is to cultivate uncritical technical expertise, or into schools whose primary mission is to maintain conformity and competitive meritocracy.

I think the task of building a culture of peace comes down to this: We must bring more love into the world. More accurately, we must learn to shed the fear, mistrust, and selfishness that drive this insanely competitive, acquisitive and violent culture so that love can come through us and connect us to each other and to life as a whole. Our de-souled civilization has diminished the meaning of love just as surely as it has demeaned education. What Dr. King perceived as the “loving purpose” of the universe is far more grand, sublime and holy than the romantic sentimentalism expressed in so much of our popular culture. We never hear of a school board or national commission proclaiming love and compassion as the most essential educational outcomes. Of course, an authentic reverence for life cannot be mandated by any authority—that is why peace cannot be achieved by tacking it on to the curriculum. Nothing less than a radical rethinking of schooling will do. Notes

1. The term “child-honoring” is used by the popular children’s songwriter Raffi Cavoukian, who in recent years has been trying to build an international movement recognizing the developmental needs of the world’s children. See *Child Honoring: How to Turn This World Around*, edited by Raffi Cavoukian and Sharna Olfman (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2006). Bibliography

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