

SPIRITUALITY IN EDUCATION: CONNECTING MIND, BODY, AND SPIRIT

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SPIRITUALITY IN EDUCATION: A CALL FOR RENEWAL

Since November 9, 2016, I have given a lot of thought to the concept of spirituality. I was raised as a Christian and, for most of my life, have considered myself an adherent of that faith. Little has shaken my faith in that institution in the same way as have the political events in our country over the last year and a half. When my faith in the institutional church is rocky, I find myself turning, instead, to the notion of spirituality as a source of renewal and peace. To a certain extent, the complex nature of the idea of spirituality is, itself, comforting, as it is the kind of thing I can noodle over for hours, giving more immediate and concerning issues of the day a rest. Thinking about spirituality helps me to reconnect with the truth that faith is about so much more than religion. Looking at the current upheaval within and continued assault on our public education system, I feel a similar clinch in my gut as when I consider the uncertain future of the institutional church, and I have found myself again turning to an exploration of spirituality as it relates not just to religion, but to education, as well, in hopes of reconnecting with the truth that education is about so much more than schooling.

As a writing teacher and as a student of the history of the English language, I have learned that definitions are tricky things. They tend to shift and change over time. They tend to be slightly different for each person and in each situation. This seems doubly true with definitions of words like “spirituality,” which are in themselves nebulous and defy attempts to make them more concrete. Spirituality is of considered to be, in many ways, that mystical thing about us that cannot be quantified, so the act of attempting to define it feels a little bit wrong, but I have come to believe that, especially for educators and especially at this moment in time that feels primed for all kinds of crises of faith, thinking about what we, as educators, do in terms of spirituality can be fruitful and can, perhaps, give hope to those who are struggling to find meaning in our efforts. Dantley (2005) defines spirituality as “the place of our authentic selves or the genuine persons that we are” (p. 654), which seems reasonable, but at the same time, I am left wondering just who it is that I really am. Who is that authentic me? How do I tell the difference between the authentic me and the me that has been constructed by my society and my experiences?

As an educator, I spend a lot of time thinking about thinking. I focus on how to define and quantify things. Educators are often encouraged to ignore our own bodies and those of our students in our attempt to focus solely on the important thoughts we are thinking, and we certainly don’t want to think about our spirits. In avoiding that subject, though, we can miss is the deep importance of connection, connection with each other and connection within ourselves. At one point in my teaching career, I decided to take a leap of faith that my students would learn what they needed to learn from me if I focused first on building relationships with them, fostering community within my classroom, and giving them room to be and grow as complete individuals in that space. An amazing thing happened. My students not only learned, but they did so at a very high level in a very pleasant atmosphere of cooperation.

I have come to believe that, when thinking about spirituality in terms of education, the theme of connection is key. Spirituality, in that realm, is a process of connecting, of pulling together with my students and connecting with them, giving them the opportunity to connect, mind, body, and spirit, and also challenging myself to make those same connections. Spirituality is the connective tissue that holds it all together and that holds us together and allows us to hold it together in the face of what seems like impossibly entrenched oppression and despair. A mind-body-spirit connection can be seen as a form of spirituality that combats nihilism and engages in needed confrontation, a focus on action, and a celebration of the need for connection.

SPIRITUALITY IN ACTION – MIND, BODY, AND SPIRIT

Much is made in the field of education of the divide between theory and praxis. Practitioners bemoan the ways in which theorists don't understand the day to day practicalities of the classroom, and theorists complain that all of their brilliant ideas are ignored as people go on, like Energizer Bunnies, doing the same things regardless of whether or not they work. Too few make the connection that practice is steeped in theory. Whether or not we acknowledge it, what we think affects what we do. Sister Helen Prejean (2008) argues that belief can only be truly illuminated when we examine what we are doing, so closely does she see the connection between the two. Dantley (2005) suggests that the power of critical reflection is crucial if we want to truly understand the connections between what we believe, what we hope for, and what the actual outcomes of our actions are. If we do not take the time and make the effort to seriously, critically reflect on what we are doing, others' thoughts will govern what we do, rather than our own convictions. Those thoughts will undoubtedly be hegemonic, dedicated to the reification of systems that oppress and dominate. What we think, the way we use our minds and connect them to our bodies and our spirits, matters tremendously. Yet, often, our thought processes lead us to places of despair, which is probably why there is a tendency to argue that what we think doesn't matter. It reflects a divide between what we think, what we believe, and what we do, or a lack of spirituality.

McClellan (2010) argues that critical servant leaders share a "preoccupation with the future through a prophetic transforming vision" (p. 99). We cannot work or pray our way into hope without first being able to envision a new place where things can change, and that visionary process often begins with examining what we think. Hope that things may change, that, as Foucault (as quoted in Youdell, 2006) writes, "that-which-is might no longer be that-which-is" (p. 512), is intrinsically connected to the way we think. Theoharis (2009) quotes a principal who is working for social justice and equity within his school as saying,

what is right is also what is possible. It's not only what's right in the abstract; it can happen and in fact it does happen when we really believe in it, when we understand the intricacies and the details of equity and justice in schools. (p. 149)

This principal's one condition for enacting what we believe to be right is understanding the way in which our society works to liberate some while oppressing others. Understanding is the foundation of hope, which seeds both belief and action.

On the flip side, nihilism can kill hope, dismantling belief and paralyzing action.

We must have the courage to do the mental work of combating nihilism within our societies, our lives, and ourselves. West (2004) writes,

To talk about race and empire in America is to talk about how one musters the courage to think, care and fight for democracy matters in the face of a monumental eclipse of hope, an unprecedented collapse of meaning, and a flagrant disregard for the viewpoints and aspirations of others. (p. 60)

West's "courage to think, care and fight" speaks directly to a mind, spirit, body connection that stands in the face of darkness and pushes ever onward toward the light.

Having that courage to stand in the gap for ourselves and for others means having the courage to take risks. Dantley (2008) quotes Freire in writing, "to learn is to construct, to reconstruct, to observe with a view to changing—none of which can be done without being open to risk, to the adventure of the spirit" (p. 127). Learning how to think and be in new ways is risky. It requires laying down that which makes us comfortable and walking into an unknown space in the hope that something positive will result, while knowing that there are no guarantees of success. "The servant leader is willing to take risks to achieve a higher good" (McClellan, 2010, p. 97). We take risks for ourselves and also for the possibility that doing so will bring about changes that will make life better for others. We think, say, and do things that will be unpopular for the sake of doing what is right.

A call to forge connections and take risks that can allow for action in the face of debilitating nihilism is not a call to hold hands and sing "Kum Ba Yah." The process of theorizing, of thinking our way toward a better place, is "ongoing and messy" (Theoharis, 2010, p. 283). We must be willing to stand toe to toe with those who neither agree with us, respect us, nor like us and do the hard work of hashing out what we think together. This means being willing to be wrong and also being willing to be right, to hold onto our beliefs in the face of opposition, and still be able to listen with kindness and compassion to what others think and need. This is not easy, and it is rarely fun, but it is absolutely necessary to the process of forging hope and constructing a vision of the future. Royal and Davis (2010) argue that, "To be a teacher-leader is to be in a constant state of discomfort" (p. 252). This discomfort does not mean we are failing or that we are doing the wrong thing. On the contrary, it is the sign that we have hit a nerve, and just like a limb that has fallen asleep after a period of inaction, the process of waking can be painful. It is not the pain of damage. It is the pain caused by shifting things that have perhaps not shifted in quite a long time. Dantley (2002) quotes McLaren,

...when we try to make culture an undisturbed space of harmony and agreement where social relations exist within cultural forms of uninterrupted accords we subscribe to a form of social amnesia in which we forget that all knowledge is forged in histories that are played out in the field of social antagonisms. (p. 345)

The process of theorizing, of giving birth to hope, can be a painful process, but the results are critical, and there is no higher calling. We cannot stop there, however. We must come off of our theoretical mountaintop and out of our space and time of critical reflection to connect our thoughts to our actions and ourselves to others.

Action is centered in the body. It is what we do and how we interact with others and with our physical world. Moving from a space of theorizing to create visions of

hope and into a space where those visions might become reality necessitates that we work in the world for gains in social justice, democracy, and equity. There is a great difference in working toward these things and providing charity (Theoharis, 2009, p. 95). While charity might bandage a wound, it will not prevent the situation that caused the wound in the first place. McKenzie and Locke (2010) argue,

An instructional leader for social justice not only focuses directly on the “business of teaching and learning,” but ensures that teaching and learning is occurring for all students. This is done through attention to equity consciousness and high-quality teaching skills. (p. 51)

In my practice as an educator, this attention on the idea of social justice and equity results in the action of providing high-quality teaching to all students and ensuring that each and every student gets the same opportunity to succeed.

This focus on success is born from a belief that the act of learning is an identity formation process, wherein students are not just learning a subject, but are actually, physically forming who they are and who they will become in the process. Dantley (2011) writes, “...to offer a counter-hegemonic pedagogy, one has to understand that students too, like the adults who facilitate the education process, are agents and cocreators of their own subjectivities” (p. 15). Too much of the literature on educational leadership fails to mention students as anything other than line items on data sheets or as adjectival markers, such as “student achievement” (e.g. Brooks and Miles, 2010; Peters, 2010). Students are real, whole people, with their own body-mind-spirit connections and with connections between themselves and others and the curricular material being discussed. When we acknowledge these connections and the connection between identity formation and education, what we ask our students to do takes on a new and even frightening importance. We, as educators, are not only teaching our students. We are participating in their becoming, in their process of envisioning hopeful possibilities of what they might be and putting those visions into action.

We should not wait to have our visions fully in place before we act, as, through acting, we might clarify what our visions are. Our students are in this same process of clarification on a daily basis. We cannot continue to deliberate about problems, point them out and say, “Gee, isn’t that terrible.” Time marches inexorably on, and we must march with it, or it will march on without us. My husband used to have a bumper sticker that read, “There they go. I must follow after them, for I am their leader.” Our students are moving toward their futures, and we must keep pace and work together with them, focusing on action in order to make a space for all of them to grow and succeed.

In addition to focusing on action, we must also acknowledge the presence of the physical body. Educators are rarely encouraged to acknowledge our own bodily presences and those of our students. We try to go blithely through our days assuming that our minds are all that matter. This is not in the interest of social justice and equity, for some of our students will be judged harshly by our society based on physical differences, while others will be assumed to be more than they may actually be based on appearances alone. Some students will fail to connect with our curricula due to physical realities that we would ignore. What we think and what we believe are crucial, but they are not meaningful until they become actions carried out by physical beings in a world of physical help and physical harm.

These connections between mind, body, and spirit are, for me, what spirituality is, and it is when I can clearly see those connections that I feel that my spirituality is guiding my life. When, through critical reflection, I can determine that my intentions have matched my actions, that the bodily reality of my visionary hope is indeed being born out, I know that I have been successful in walking the path I set out as the route to my vision. As I mentioned above, at a certain point in my career, I decided to work on connecting with my students in a more meaningful way than I had in the past. I had always focused simply on being the best teacher I could for my students without ever thinking of allowing them to see me as an integrated person, a whole human being who could be honest and open with them in a real way. I decided that any attempt at this would have to begin with shedding some of the power that I had been given. Anything I could think of, from giving students the responsibility of beginning and ending each class session to allowing them to choose how many pieces of each assignment to submit, that would give them more control over their lives as they related to me and my practice as an educator was used to attempt to level the playing field between us and open up new possibilities for relating.

An unexpected thing happened. Students started dropping by my office just to say hello. Others came by to discuss personal problems and ask for advice on issues unrelated to class. With very little effort on my part, I started down the road to becoming more than an educator. I began to be a mentor and friend to a group of truly amazing young people. I began to be a trusted advisor who was making important connections to my students, not just as my students, but as whole, complete individuals with complex mental and physical realities. I began to see my students as integrated beings, connected within themselves, among themselves, with me, and with the larger world. These connections were the fruit of our collective spiritual journey.

NON-CRITICAL SELF-CARE: FITTING OURSELVES FOR THE JOURNEY

One other unintended consequence of that spiritual journey and newfound connectedness was exhaustion. Teaching is a tiring business, as anyone who does it can tell you, and working to establish real connections with others can also take its toll. I am unaware of any empirical studies, but I suspect that, were one to be conducted, we would find that teachers are less versed in and less proficient in self-care than are those in almost any other profession. Many of us take on the job because we see ourselves, as may be evident from what is written above, as both teacher-leaders and servant-leaders. We work daily with a focus on caring for and helping others, yet I wonder how many of us ever focus on taking care of ourselves. This is why I believe educators must engage non-critical self-care that takes as its sole mission the goal to renew and refresh us so that we can continue our journey.

Non-critical self-care must acknowledge the connections between mind, body, and spirit while allowing us the freedom and opportunity to disconnect both from the world and from our own intellectual endeavors. It must engage us in giving ourselves a break from the constant attempt to think ourselves out of the entrenched positions we inhabit in so much of our daily lives. We must find moments of mental peace, whether through meditation, prayer, or simply watching a truly pointless movie. We must find ways to enjoy that stupid romantic comedy without hearing the critical-studies commentary running in the background of our minds. We must sit on beaches and watch sunsets. We must enjoy moments of baking cakes with our children and walking with our significant others.

Non-critical self-care must give us permission to lay down our burdens, both mentally and physically. In our desperate need to deny the bodies of teachers and students we bury the physically demanding nature of our everyday jobs. We come home at night exhausted and often feeling as if we have been beaten from the inside out. In responding to a fellow teacher who was espousing the need for lunchtime, water-cooler conversations among teachers about curricular planning, another colleague pointed out that she only gets twenty minutes for lunch and that most days those twenty minutes are spent wolfing down a sandwich while standing in front of the copier. When I was beginning my doctoral program, during the first semester of our studies in educational leadership, two out of my fifteen-person cohort (that I know of) began taking blood pressure medicine, while a third ended up in the hospital due to exhaustion. We must insist on taking care of our physical selves, including simply sitting down to feed our bodies. We must put down the books, climb into bed, and rest our weary bones. We must engage in physical activity that does not involve toting piles of books to and from our cars, so that we will be physically strong enough for the battles ahead.

Non-critical self-care must engage us in actively seeking Sabbath times and spaces. Those of us entrusted with the enormous task of teaching and learning need to acknowledge that we cannot carry on with that task indefinitely. Many of us feel such great and weighty responsibility that just thinking about stepping aside for a moment can seem irresponsible. We often feel as if the weight of the world rests on our shoulders, and maybe it does. But, it does not rest on our shoulders alone. We must find places, whether they be institutions of religion, yoga classes, or at the corner pub, where we can disconnect from our jobs and reconnect with ourselves and our lives. We need to find time to rejuvenate our spirits and remind ourselves why we do what we do. This rejuvenation often comes in finding ways to honor the connections between our minds, bodies, and spirits. We must seek out the moments and the places that bring us peace and comfort. We must find healthful ways to relax and allow our minds to drift without making judgments and to allow our bodies to recuperate without feeling guilt.

In my life, these moments of peace often come when I give myself permission to stop thinking and just be. As an intellectual, those moments are not where I choose to live the majority of my life, but they are a necessary part of calming my mind, recentering my body, and rejuvenating my spirit so that I can emerge from my Sabbath space a whole, integrated, and connected person. Connecting all of the aspects of myself allows me to move out into the world to connect with others, to connect with students, and to help them connect their ideas with the ideas of others in the papers they seek help writing. I suggested in the beginning that the notion of spirituality might be able to help me reconnect with the idea of education as about more than schooling. In the end, I believe that spirituality has helped me reconnect with the idea of connection and its central role in teaching and learning.

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