

## Why Teach? – Part II

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A few issues ago we wrote an editorial entitled *Why Teach?*<sup>1</sup> There we suggested that teacher education could facilitate teacher candidates' transformation. We explained that a transformative approach entailed:

. . . an education that challenges students to consider their central or ultimate values by posing critical questions about what they value and how they ought to live. It does so in a way that: 1) fuses thinking and feeling; 2) posits the presence of, and faith in an inner self; and 3) points that self on a path to discovering truths that can guide this process of creating a life. (5)

We knew that such a framework might meet with some resistance. Academics tend to be wary of proposals that call for attention to emotion, talk of faith and an inner self, and point to a search for “inner truths”. Such discourse tends to raise the fearful specter of unduly intermingling emotional, spiritual, and intellectual realms.

For many academics, even in this post-modern, post-structural academic world, talk of emotion, faith, and inner truths tends to violate prevailing intellectual norms. Those norms maintain that in our professional lives faith, reason, and emotion, as well as professional role and personal soul should be neatly compartmentalized and separated. An intellectual's life is ruled by, and the process of education operates through, reason. We don't agree with such a clean demarcation and yet we also recognize that blending emotion, reason, and faith has had disastrous consequences. Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, in three separate and recently published books<sup>2</sup>, have outlined the tendency toward and the costs of religious fanaticism. Religious movements

have been a source and cause of enormous human suffering, and as a democracy we are wise to separate political and religious tenets. Furthermore within the teaching profession it seems reasonable to respond with suspicion and concern to many of the varieties of so-called spiritually-infused, educational discourses. Proselytizing and the preparation of public school teachers should not mix. But such concerns shouldn't lead us to disregard our teacher candidates' and our own larger searches for meaning, especially when this search for meaning traverses what traditionally has been deemed as the spiritual realm<sup>3</sup>

In our previous editorial we offered the contours of a transformative approach – building off the humanities work of Mark Edmundson and Martha Nussbaum<sup>4</sup>. There we delineated a view of transformative teacher education, relying in large part on Edmundson's elaboration of transformation. We maintained that a transformative education offers alternative narratives that challenge students' received views and enlarges or redirects students' circle of meaning. It does so in a manner that engages feeling and intellect; does not presuppose a particular answer; is frequently most powerful when it comes at a time when one is not sure of one's way; and relies on an inner eye, an inner self. What we did not do in that editorial was outline some of the spiritual, or what we will call, the contemplative<sup>5</sup> features of such a transformative teacher education agenda. We will do that here. But first let us lay some of the ground work.

### *Transformation and Reflection*

Transformative teacher education, if it is to be a defensible educational goal, must be an educational, not an indoctrinatory, process.<sup>6</sup> Our teacher education candidates and

their future students live affectively and, for some, spiritually suffused lives. These features inform, motivate, and guide their teaching. We shouldn't ignore that fact. It does not seem advisable to treat the affective and spiritual realms as "out of bounds." Minimally teacher educators need to be prepared to discuss matters of faith, reason, and belief with teacher candidates; what Ron Anderson calls their world views.<sup>7</sup> We are not suggesting that such discussions be religiously grounded, but rather that teacher educators help teacher candidates explore the significant meanings in their lives and provide a classroom space where such meaningful discussions can occur. With our two part response to "*Why Teach?*" we hope that readers will find some variation within the transformative approach that will seem worthy of further exploration. Our earlier variation relies on humanistic texts and classroom discourse, this one is grounded in a more contemplative path. We think a combination of these two orientations is most powerful but understand that others may prefer a strictly humanist strand. Both transformative variations, however, require a rethinking of the current status quo in teacher education.

One additional side note is in order before we delineate features of the contemplative transformative strand. Our proposal for transformative teacher education is not a peculiarity. In higher education it sits squarely in the liberal arts tradition. In teacher education the transformative agenda is an extension of the call for a reflective approach to preparing teachers. The liberal arts tradition (Edmundson and Nussbaum) has long supported the critical examination of personal beliefs and values. Early proponents of the reflective approach in teacher education (Zeichner & Liston, and Liston

& Zeichner<sup>8</sup>) also supported this examination of personal and professional beliefs and educational conditions.

But what appears to have happened over time is that both the “liberal arts” classroom and the push for “reflection” in teacher education have become less exploratory, and almost indoctrinatory. In some teacher education programs, reflection appears to have turned into an instructional tool used unduly to impose upon students a set of programmatically approved beliefs. Recently this has occurred in teacher education programs when reflection is promoted alongside a social justice agenda. In short it appears that reflection is acceptable if it produces teacher candidates who are committed to social justice. And such questionable programmatic uses of “reflection” could just as easily occur alongside a more conservatively fueled “core knowledge” preparatory program. In either instance the critical examination of personal and social beliefs appears to be curtailed so as to fit a particular educational agenda. Taking a few steps back, there appears to be a tension in our desire for an education that articulates and affirms beliefs on the one hand, and one that explores and challenges them on the other. We hold that a good teacher education program will encourage and address that tension – enabling teacher candidates to articulate and examine, as well as challenge and expand their educational beliefs. As one alternative, a transformative approach to teacher education appears to do that.

But where does that leave us? We think it leaves us with some rather interesting and promising terrain to travel. Many newly initiated and seasoned teachers understand that teaching, especially public school teaching, severely taxes the teacher’s head and the heart, demands inner personal resources that sometimes don’t seem adequately

developed, and requires a determination which relies on faith, forgiveness, and possibly even love. Teaching is taxing work and frequently the external demands outweigh the personal resources. How do we prepare future and existing teachers for the vicissitudes and travails of the profession – can we? We think teacher educators can help future and practicing teachers deal with (but not solve) some of these very real obstacles. Many critics argue that teacher education’s emphasis on conceptual tools, or theory, accounts for why new teachers struggle with the realities of teaching. They press for more attention in teacher education to practical tools. We agree that more attention to the practical is necessary, but it is also insufficient. A transformative approach suggests that teacher education must also attend to and nurture the candidate’s inner landscape. In what follows we outline some of the contemplative features of this transformative approach. We begin with the personal challenges entailed in teaching and move from there to consider: the head and heart in teaching; the journey and the inner self; and the role of faith and forgiveness in transformative teaching. We conclude by questioning the cultural assumption that contemplative paths lead to quietistic responses to the world.

### *Challenges to Self*

What do beginning teachers do when they discover that the progressive, reform oriented approach they’ve been taught isn’t the salvific response to public school woes; when they realize that the hunger in their students’ stomachs won’t be sated in the weeks and months ahead; when they see the light in their students’ eyes grow dimmer and dimmer with each instructional lesson and standardized test; and when they do not know how to leave the hurts and harms of school life behind when they return home in the evening? What do veteran teachers do when they understand that the sixth district wide-

restructuring effort in their eleven years of teaching appears to be another band-aid response; when two-thirds of the students they said hello to in September were not with them in June at the end of the school year; and when what had been a vocation worthy of devoting extra hours, now feels like a job with few inner and external rewards? These are the sorts of challenges that don't have readily discernible educational or practical solutions and ones that drain the emotional and intellectual reserves of the beginning and experienced teacher. These are the kinds of challenges that beginning and experienced teachers face and that teacher certification and professional development programs tend to ignore.<sup>9</sup> These are the sorts of challenges that force teachers to look elsewhere for support and guidance. A contemplative framework has something to offer. Initially it acknowledges that the problems underscored above are real, can not be readily or easily resolved, and require of the teacher a significant degree of self-awareness and understanding.

But we live in a “can-do,” pragmatic educational culture where instructional challenges are viewed as temporary detours on a road to academic solutions, and where emotional reactions to difficult challenges are viewed as momentary responses to move beyond. According to this “can-do” framing, infusing educational challenges with emotional reactions simply compounds the problem. In contrast to the “can-do” approach, a contemplatively oriented, transformative approach accepts that some educational obstacles are not easily addressed by instructional, curricular, or policy remedies. There are some classroom challenges that will not go away in a year and a day (or more), and that require of the teacher self-understanding, as well as an inner resolve to weather what may feel like a demanding set of challenges and an interminable storm.

Our emotional reactions, when viewed with discernment and self-reflection, can lead to greater self-understanding and more sustaining and humane interactions in the classroom.

Most capable teachers understand that their own emotional reactions to a challenging student, a class, or one of the daily occurring school events affect their future responses and interactions. When we act without attending to those emotional reactions, we run the risk of inadequately attending to the students or the situation at hand. Among other things, emotions are sign-posts along our everyday educational travels. Without some form of reflection and contemplative work, we risk imposing our own, rather than attending to our students' needs. A quality of attentiveness to both our selves and our students is central here.

A contemplative transformative approach countenances the need to listen, to attend to the many and myriad emotions that surface in a teaching life; to view the teaching life as a journey, an inner journey that posits an inner self; and to (re)learn the language of faith and forgiveness.

### *The Head and the Heart in Teaching*

Teaching is intellectually and emotionally engaging and challenging work. We work on and through our thoughts and emotions to engage students and to invite their thinking. Thinking and feeling are integral to the teaching act and interwoven throughout our learning lives. In learning we encounter frustration, pleasure, discomfort, satisfaction, and fulfillment. In teaching we experience empathy, disappointment, delight, and degrees of anxiety. We rarely address this admixture of thinking and feeling in the academic segments our teacher education programs. We are remiss, in part, because we have yet to raise this admixture to the level of professional discourse and in

part because it seems out of bounds. More and more we find beginning and veteran teachers, especially those working with students of need, who have become drained by the effort. After a year or eight they have great difficulty moving forward. Whether we're dealing with the everyday admixture of thinking and feeling in teaching or the point at which frustration overwhelms teaching or learning, the contemplative approach countenances an enhanced awareness. The contemplative approach suggests "self-reflective consciousness" about our educational desires and about what we're trying to accomplish as teachers and learners. Thomas Keating outlines features of this contemplative and transformative process in his *The Human Condition*<sup>10</sup> and the Center for Courage and Renewal (<http://www.couragerenewal.org/>) supports this endeavor for teachers, educational leaders and others in the various service professions (lawyers, clergy and medical doctors). This contemplative orientation to transformation suggests that through greater awareness of our assumed personal and professional needs we can discern a bit more clearly our students' and our own (as teachers) educational paths.

The Center for Courage and Renewal, as one contemplative approach, has created a professional development retreat process that provides teachers with the space and setting in which to listen to the emotional scripts that get played out in their daily teaching lives and to discern their proper response. Through creating circles of trust, which provide settings of deep individual reflection, contemplation, and community sharing, facilitators and participants respond to evocative texts (poems and other "third things") and are able to delve more deeply into the emotional and intellectual terrain of their professional and personal lives.<sup>11</sup> It is a process that posits two key elemental assumptions: the professional and personal path is a journey of contemplative self



discovery; and within each person is a “true self” that can enable individuals to discover, guide, and ground that discernment.

Our emotional reactions to the engagements and strife of our teaching days are potential windows onto an inner life that enable us to see ourselves, our students and our teaching a bit more clearly: at least that’s the goal of this contemplatively guided transformative approach. As Thomas Keating explains:

As we become more aware of the dynamics of our unconscious, we can receive people and events as they are, rather than filtered through what we would like them to be, expect them to be, or demand them to be. This requires letting go of the attachments and aversions, “shoulds,” and demands on others and on life that reflect the mentality of a child rather than that of a grownup. The latter, under normal conditions, is responsible for his or her choices. (37)

Acknowledging the significant role of emotions in our teaching necessitates that we develop the tools to attend to, understand, and explore those reactions to our educational lives. Contemplation, a quiet meditative attention to our selves and the world around us, offers a powerful way of listening to our emotions and the world. Once this meditative attention is initiated, most contemplatives talk about the resulting exploration of our inner self, our inner lives, and the journey that ensues.

*The Journey and the Inner Self*

In an essay entitled “Education and Spirituality,” Dwayne Huebner reformulates key educational concepts within a spiritual framework. While recognizing that for many the goal of education is “learning,” he offers a conception of a “journey” as an alternative construct. He writes:

Life is a journey of constantly encountering the moreness and constantly letting aspects of us die that the new may be born within us. It is not necessarily a comfortable journey, and moments of rest and peace are often more infrequent than we might want.

“Learning” is a trivial way of speaking of the journey of the self. The language of growth and development is a rather mundane way of talking about the mystery of participating in the transcendent. . . We do not need “learning theory” or “developmental theory” to explain human change. We need them to explain our fixations and neuroses, our limits, whether imposed by self or others. The question that educators need to ask is not how people learn and develop, but what gets in the way of the great journey – the journey of the self or soul. Education is a way of attending to and caring for that journey. (405)

For Huebner, as for many of those writing in the contemplative tradition, the journey metaphor is rich and multifaceted. For those articulating a more contemplative approach to education this journey, or as Thomas Merton calls it – the exploration of our “inner experience” - is oriented toward addressing those difficult life and professional conundrums as well as attending more clearly to our everyday personal and professional lives. The contemplative approach, like the humanist variation on transformative teacher education: a) doesn’t presume a particular valued educational “end-product” and, b) posits faith in and reliance upon an inner self for guidance as to the next step along this journey.

Recall, earlier in this editorial, the first year teacher who struggled with the diminishing light in his/her students’ eyes as bureaucratic demands for accountability

overtook student learning needs or the veteran teachers who have a difficult time recalling the vocational fire and desire that brought them to teaching. Both “newbie” and veteran teachers find themselves in situations of internal conflict, pulled in two seemingly paradoxical directions. For the new teacher there is a struggle over whether and how to address institutional demands for accountability and concerns over student learning needs. For the veteran teacher there is an internal conflict between a vocational life that used to be rich, intense, and full of purpose and one that now, by comparison, seems thin and lacking in purpose and integrity. The contemplative journey is motivated, in part, by an attempt to discern how to deal with these tensions.

Parker Palmer attempts to capture aspects of this paradox-fueled transformative journey when he writes<sup>12</sup>:

Our first need is not to release the tension, but to live the contradictions, fully and painfully aware of the poles between which our lives are stretched. As we do so, we will be plunged into paradox, at the center of which we will find transcendence and new life. Our lives will be changed. (20)

He goes on to comment:

We have not been well prepared to understand our lives in terms of paradox. Instead, we have been taught to see and think in dualisms: individual vs. group, self vs. others, contemplative vs. active, success vs. failure. But the deeper truths of our lives seem to need paradox for full expression. Both poles are true, and we live most creatively when we live between them in tension.

Perhaps even more can be said. Perhaps in the synthesis of those apparent opposites we get closer to truth. Perhaps in living beyond those dualisms we discover a truth which lies beyond mind's reach. (65-66)

Sitting amidst these lived professional tensions and paradoxes, trying to discern our own path, is a central part of this journey, this exploration of the inner experience. The answer to these paradoxes and tensions can not be prescribed.

Another strand of this contemplative journey is the daily struggle to see others and the world more clearly – without the noise and entanglements of the egoistic self getting in the way. Iris Murdoch, in her *The Sovereignty of Good*, has a powerful way of talking about this. She writes:

By opening our eyes we do not necessarily see what confronts us. We are anxiety-ridden animals. Our minds are continually active, fabricating an anxious, usually self-preoccupied, often falsifying *veil* which partially conceals the world. Our states of consciousness differ in quality, our fantasies and reveries are not trivial and unimportant, they are profoundly connected with our energies and our ability to choose and act. And if quality of consciousness matters, then anything which alters consciousness in the direction of unselfishness, objectivity and realism is to be connected with virtue. (84)

For Murdoch it is the quality and exercise of contemplative detachment that enables us to see beyond and partly through this veil.

This exercise of detachment is difficult and valuable whether the thing contemplated is a human being or the root of a tree or the vibration of a colour or a sound. Unsentimental contemplation of nature exhibits the same quality of

detachment: selfish concerns vanish, nothing exists except the things which are seen. (65)

This inner, contemplative journey enables us to see ourselves and the world a bit more clearly. The goal is for us, as teachers, to see our students, our classes, our colleagues and our institutional contexts with great clarity and understanding. The inner journey relies on a belief that an inner self, an inner wisdom, can be accessed. With that clarity and understanding the hope is that further discernment and practical insight can inform our everyday classroom decisions as well as our broader educational lives.

### *Faith and Forgiveness in Transformative Teaching*

So far we have suggested that a contemplative path enables teacher educators and teachers to discern better the classroom and professional conundrums they face. And for the teacher who follows this path, faith in him or her self is central. It may seem paradoxical to suggest that as teaching taxes and the situation becomes bleak – faith in oneself is needed. But it is. Faith, as well as forgiveness, is required.

For some people having faith in one's self and the world suggests a "promise" that all will work out for the better: positive outcomes will be forthcoming; pain and heartache will be averted. However that's a rather elementary notion of faith. Faith in one's inner self does not promise rosy educational outcomes but it does presume inner resources to face the inevitable headache and heartache. Each teacher has, as Parker Palmer describes it, an inner teacher. The contemplative path, as outlined by Thomas Keating, Iris Murdoch and the Center for Courage and Renewal, attempts to access the resources of that inner teacher, that inner self. But without faith that those inner resources exist within our selves – there is not much that can be done.

Accompanying this sense of faith is an attitude of forgiveness. For even when we as teachers muster the resources of the inner self to face teaching's onslaughts, we will falter and fail. This failure is sometimes our own fault, sometimes the responsibility of others and frequently difficult to discern. In order to move on and through the daily struggles of teaching we must learn how to forgive ourselves and others. To accept the frailty that is integral to our humanity requires forgiveness.

*Transformation, Contemplation and Teacher Education*

To acknowledge that there are features of teaching that can not be solved by our various instructional, curricular, or policy remedies, does not mean we lack an ability to address those features. Neither teacher certification nor professional development programs can provide the answers or armor required to sustain teachers: for some quagmires teachers need to turn to themselves for inner resources. Some of the problems facing teachers require a more contemplative orientation. This turn inward is not a resolutely solitary move. The contemplative path engages teachers in sustained contemplation but does not presume that the solutions entail individual adjustments to an unchanging educational or policy reality. A renunciation of the world or a passive and quietistic response is a caricature of the contemplative approach. It may be that one outcome of a contemplative approach is an organized, collaborative, even collective response to the harmful conditions of schooling. One needs only to look at Thich Naht Hanh, Thomas Merton, Simone Weil or Mahatma Ghandi to see contemplative lives that grappled with the every day world.

To live fully and with integrity as teachers in this challenging and changing world we may need to seek out additional avenues. The field of teacher education has lost

touch with its liberal arts, transformative, roots. When reflection and transformation are implemented, all too often they are used in doctrinaire ways. Our teacher education candidates are rarely encouraged to engage or examine their own world views in an open and inquiring manner. Theory and technique are underscored, while affect and aesthetics are left inadequately touched. Introspection on the conundrums and paradoxes of teaching –is overlooked. Attending to students as humans in search of meaning seems forgotten. The contemplative and humanist strands are two approaches within a transformative framework that attend to these and other important issues. We believe these are avenues worthy of further exploration.

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<sup>1</sup> Jennie Whitcomb, Hilda Borko, Dan Liston, “Why Teach?”, *Journal of Teacher Education* 59:1, 3-9.

<sup>2</sup> See Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (New York, Houghton Mifflin, 2008); Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror and the Future of Reason* (New York, Norton, W. W. & Company, 2005) and Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great* (New York, Warner, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> Here spirituality refers to a recognition and search for “moreness” in our lives. Sometimes this has transcendent and sometimes immanent manifestations. See Dwayne Huebner *The Lure of the Transcendent* (Mahwah, NJ, Lawrence Erlbaum, 1999) and Michael Lerner *Spirit Matters* (Charlottesville VA, Hampton Roads Publishing, 2000). For some individuals this search for “moreness” entails a “God”, while for others a sense of mystery, wonder or the “good” take the place of a “god” (for the latter view, see Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (New York, Schocken, 1971).

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<sup>4</sup> Mark Edmundson, *Why Read?* (New York, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2004) and Martha Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1998).

<sup>5</sup> Contemplative stances are sometimes viewed as a strictly eastern phenomena but numerous western examples exist. Thomas Merton, Thomas Keating and Iris Murdoch are three western writers who delineate features of a western contemplative orientation. Like the spiritual realm the contemplative orientation's assumption of a deity varies widely. Many, but certainly not all western contemplative, approaches embrace a conception of "God". For some that refers to a notion of mystery or what Rudolf Otto calls the "numinous" in our lives: Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1958). Others, like Iris Murdoch, recognize the importance of a spiritual realm but replace notions of "god" with other central concepts such as "the good".

<sup>6</sup> George Counts' construal of imposition and the distinction between imposition and indoctrination is useful here.

<sup>7</sup> Ronald A Anderson, *Religion and Teaching*, (New York, Routledge, 2007)

<sup>8</sup> See Kenneth Zeichner and Daniel Liston, *Reflective Teaching: An Introduction*, (Mahwah, NJ, Lawrence Erlbaum, 1996) and Daniel Liston and Kenneth Zeichner, *Teacher Education and the Social Conditions of Schooling*, (New York, Routledge, 1991).

<sup>9</sup> Notable exceptions to this rule are the 'Center for Courage and Renewal' and the work accomplished at North Carolina Center for the Advancement of Teaching – see *A Place For Teacher Renewal Challenging the Intellect, Creating Educational Reform*, Anthony G. Rud Jr. and Walter P. Oldendorf (eds.) (Charolette, NC: Information Age Publishing, 2008). For a general account of the contemplative strand in professional development see Katie Byrnes and Hilda Borko "Mapping Transformative Professional Development Programs and Research" unpublished paper.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Keating, *The Human Condition: Contemplation and Transformation* (New York: Paulist Press, 1999).

<sup>11</sup> See Parker Palmer, *The Courage to Teach* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1998) and *A Hidden Wholeness* (John Wiley and Sons, 2004).

<sup>12</sup> Parker Palmer, *The Promise of Paradox: A celebration of contradictions in the Christian life* (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 1980).