

*This is the grass that grows wherever the  
land is and the water is,  
This the common air that bathes the  
globe.*

*Walt Whitman*

## *Earth Day, Holism, Curriculum, and the Moral Domain*

*By John Shackelton*

*(The first of two articles on the ecology of education)*

**Back in 1977**, when RMCS was just beginning, a leading-edge concept was *holism* or *holistic education*. It was a way of thinking about curriculum and teaching methods that applied to schools the key insights of something called *systems theory*. The founders of RMCS felt that the “linear” thinking that propelled most modern processes—from science, business, and politics to medicine, commerce, and education—was faulty and misleading. Holism maintained that life could only be understood when it was studied as a vast, open, and constantly evolving system composed of interacting and mutually supportive smaller systems. Holism also maintained that this vast system—the web of life on planet Earth—is greater than our human species, that we are only one of many systems in the planetary web and probably not the most effective contributor to its health and survival. We belong inside that web, not ruling over it.

Those early RMCS thinkers also realized that this view of reality held ramifications for the philosophy and science of education. In 1978, they identified the essential domains of human experience to be the physical, mental (cognitive), emotional, moral, and spiritual. Furthermore, they embraced the notion that these five domains were natural clues about how, within the economy of the web of life, we should connect with each other and to the numerous Earth systems with which we share the planet.

It became increasingly clear that to educate in only one domain would be foolish and fraught with negative consequences, so RMCS adopted holistic education as its standard and sought ways to facilitate it in terms of overall curriculum design and practical classroom methods. The pioneers of this school well understood the interconnectedness of learning and life, of a child’s school experiences and later ways of relating (or not) to the surrounding world. They created the curriculum, in part, with an eye toward nurturing children for healthy connections to the web of life. They designed a new kind of schooling which, if widely adopted, held the potential to contribute to a better future for the Earth and all who live on it.

## The Holistically Moral

In more traditional, “linear” thinking, the term *moral* is usually defined by reference to a set of rules from above, whether “above” is God, religious authority, or other forms of authority such as school or government. The word *moral* has generally referred to “received” values, ie, standards *existing by themselves* and imposed because they’re “right” or because they “work” in some limited way or even just because a group of people are committed to them. In such a world, the moral tenets that prevail are the ones held by those with the most power (as the story below will illustrate). Furthermore, this kind of code of ethics is often employed as a set of rules by which to measure and judge others, which engenders separation instead of cooperation.

In holism as RMCS has historically perceived it, the moral domain is the relational implications of the web of living tissue that connects us with the rest of life. This approach to the “moral” does not see ethical issues as having an existence of their own apart from the living systems of the Earth. That which is moral is not handed down by authority but springs up from the reality of our interconnectedness.

Sensitivity to the web of life tends to instill reverence for that which is greater than the individual. It tends also to help relieve us of inflated notions of our own rights *vis a vis* the rest of the world and helps put human relationships on grounds of truth telling and mutual respect. These values remain core to RMCS today.

## A Missing Connection

In 1998, then curriculum director (and one of the founders of RMCS) John Johnson, illustrated the educational dilemma with a story of modern research. In 1993, the Carnegie Institute conducted a landmark national study with college students to evaluate their earlier education as preparation for college and the future. Generally, these students held a very pessimistic attitude about the future of our country. They cited over-population, racism, global warming, nuclear proliferation, the increasing gap between rich and poor, destructive ecological habits, and the increase in homelessness as issues of grave concern.

This sounds very “moral,” doesn’t it?

However, when asked how they rated their own futures, the students surprised the researchers by expressing great confidence. They thought that they, contrary to most others, would enjoy a very good life. When asked why, they generally replied, “Because I’m smart, I get good grades, and consequently I’ll get a good, high-paying job.”

The researchers were shocked by the moral and spiritual deficit this finding brought to light.

“One might ask how a person could have a ‘good life’ while surrounded by a culture in despair,” John Johnson wrote. Part of the answer, of course, is that those students were not educated holistically; they were not accustomed to think in terms of connection but isolation.

They failed to see the web of life because they had *learned* to think only of their own life.

From a holistic standpoint, this attitude seems immoral not because it violates a received-from-authority code that makes a rule out of charity, but because it flaunts its own importance in the face of its real connection to other humans, to the very people it does NOT want to be associated with. This is the kind of thinking that allows major corporations to cut down rain forests at the rate of four football fields per minute (or whatever the current rate is) because it creates a good living for a small number of individuals (for a while), and nevermind the consequences to future generations.

## Curriculum Connects to Life

The RMCS founders were wise enough to see that preschool, kindergarten, and elementary school were not only times for academic preparation and growth but also helped form in children attitudes, values, and perceptual connections that would probably last a lifetime and contribute tellingly to how they would think and *live* as adults.

From preschool on, our kids learn that they are responsible not just to their own interests and needs, but also to their fellow students, their teachers, and the greater community. For us, the moral domain is all about honoring connections, so our kids are taught to care for each other (Use your words; let’s mediate), respect differences (multiple intelligences; collaborative projects; cultural celebrations), discover interconnections in their academics (experiential learning; individual projects and essential learning skills; ), and stand up when their person or values are challenged (Speak your truth).

Since we live on the Earth, shouldn’t we expect that the education of children would have a lot to do with our relationship to the planet? How is Earth Day commonly observed in schools? A recycling lesson? A commitment to somewhat cleaner water and to rejecting styrofoam? On the one hand, we want to continue those practices that support cleaning up the environment, but that alone is like a WalMart birthday card with a smiley face and a hurried signature—it can trivialize what is at stake. It can let us avoid seeing the sanctity of the natural world, of which we are only one part.

Our world needs a deeper involvement in the real significance of Earth Day in terms of our collective consciousness, in terms of becoming more discerning about how education affects the planet’s future. Our schools have taught our children to think in a way that can solve a host of technical problems but cannot solve the problems that carry humanity-scale consequences. To truly address ecological problems that threaten our survival will require more than fixes in commerce and politics; it will require rethinking how we educate our young.

The founders of RMCS were pioneers in that rethinking, and we continue to follow their wisdom and add to it as we learn. Holistic education with its Earthrooted understanding of the moral domain may be our best hope for a sane ecology on the planet we call home.