



the Heart of the Matter

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In the first publication of Heart of the Matter, I touched on some of the reasons why our society yearns for change – not just political change, but deep cultural transformation. Although we often feel unempowered as individuals to make a difference, transformative education provides hope that we can raise a generation of children who have a vision and the skills for sustainable, peaceful living.

This *Heart of the Matter* provides insight into how our curriculum supports our mission. The article on page 4 describes our school-wide service learning/science theme for this semester. Service learning is one of the important methods used at Rainbow Mountain to attain our social goals and learning goals. In addition, there is a short editorial, or sorts, on the pleasures and pains of having high ideals. Thanks for reading!

What is Curriculum?

The mission of Rainbow Mountain Children School is for students "...a holistic, moral understanding of our connection to all people and to the earth." It's a wonderful vision that most of us can relate to. It's a concept we can grasp. The purpose of this Heart of the Matter is to help parents and fellow educators understand *how* we do it.

There are three layers of any educational program.

1. The stated curriculum
2. The unstated, or "hidden" curriculum
3. The people--the students, parents, teachers, and administration

The stated curriculum is, literally, what is being taught: the topics, content, and standards. The stated curriculum can be written down, recorded, and described. The faculty has been working hard at defining RMCS's stated academic curriculum through "curriculum mapping" which is taking place during five faculty training days this year. For example, last month, we rolled up our sleeves and wrote a draft of the entire "scope and sequence" for our social studies and our science curriculum – a huge undertaking. Scope is the breadth of the material we expect to cover by eighth grade, and sequence is the order, or grade levels, we expect each topic to be taught.

The first step of the process was to define all the topics we feel our eighth graders should have covered and the

skills they should have by the time they leave RMCS. After that we drew a huge grid displaying at which grade levels each topic is being taught. The process was enlightening.

In particular, working on the history curriculum was a wonderful learning experience for me. It gave me a deeper understanding of what "alternative education" is all about. For example, I kept thinking that teaching about the development of democracy needed to include the Revolutionary War, but the faculty steadfastly refused to teach about the Revolutionary War, or any other war, until at least the fourth grade. Ruth (second grade assistant teacher) was the most outspoken, "These kids need to be steeped in the natural world...not learning about war!" This was a powerful reminder for me that alternative education is much more than teaching the same topics and the same standards as the public schools --just with a different style or a more creative, loving approach. True alternative education has an *alternative* curriculum. Most kids grow up associating the birth of democracy with war – no wonder many people think it is necessary to "fight for freedom!" It reminded me of that old Sweet Honey and the Rock protest tune I always found so inspiring, "We Ain't Goin' to Teach War No More." It was so empowering for me to realize we *can* do it differently at Rainbow Mountain! It's so liberating to NOT be subjected to state testing!!

While mapping the science curriculum, I was impressed with the scientific knowledge our faculty possesses and with how much science is being taught at RMCS – far more and much richer than the previous school I worked at, for example. However, we discovered that four

teachers were teaching the rock cycle, and no one was teaching simple machines. Through the curriculum mapping process, we were able to correct that oversight. (Third grade will be responsible for teaching the science of simple machines next year.) We also decided to teach a broader health curriculum, especially at the Omega level.

The real beauty of curriculum mapping is that it's a living, changing curriculum. No teacher is stuck teaching the same exact topics year after year until they are stale. Our curriculum map is skeletal enough that everyone has time to invent new units, do student-led projects, or take off in whatever direction student interest may be leading. Once the basic curriculum maps are written, it's simple to revisit them each year and look at what we want to change or what might be missing. By eighth grade, each student will have a record of the curriculum he/she learned at Rainbow Mountain.

I am very proud of the stated curriculum at RMCS. However, students learn more at school than what their permanent record could ever reveal. **The unstated, or hidden curriculum**, speaks louder than words. The simplest definition of "hidden curriculum" is "everything that happens that *isn't* recorded." Think of it as reading between the lines. There are several ways to get a feel for the hidden curriculum of a school. Watch the way teachers talk to students and how students treat one another. What is the "vibe" when you walk on campus? Is competition or collaboration encouraged? Are people optimistic or pessimistic; authentic or pretentious; mindful or distracted? Ask yourself, "What is valued at this school and how is that portrayed?" The hidden curriculum is the culture of the school.

In the case of Rainbow, if we want our children to grow up understanding how to create a peaceful, sustainable culture, then steeping them in such a culture at school is highly desirable.

In the first Heart of the Matter, I alluded to some of the problems our American culture has created and noted how education has the opportunity to transform our culture. Although we could write a long list of the ills in American culture, I believe almost ALL of our problems come down to ONE issue: the difference between the sacred and the profane.

Sacred is hard to describe in words, but we know it when we feel it. *Profane* can be simply defined as everything that isn't sacred (Meade, 2007). In primitive cultures, just about everything is sacred – every sound, every meal, walking, sleeping, the sun, the dirt, trading, and every living plant and critter.

I have an inkling of what the sacred lives primitive cultures is like. I was blessed, in the time between college and career, to live feral in Hawaii, and I wasn't alone. A small

group of people, including some small families, had created their own primitive culture in the tropical forest, eleven miles from the nearest road, electric pole, or permanent structure. Each person's possessions fit under a tarp (matches, a good knife, and a sarong were all that I really needed to carry), and we were engulfed by nature. To be honest, most of us weren't there out of lofty ideals, but out of a desire to be free. Some were "escaped" professionals and others might have been escaped convicts for all I know, but we were all equal in the bush. We all suffered when it rained too much. We all rejoiced when the stew was hearty and sang when the spirit moved us. We all knew that one swift accident while chopping wood or searching for a taro patch could kill or injure any one of us and that no one might find us for days. We all depended on something indescribable, something larger than ourselves, to sustain us. Those of us who eventually returned to the material world did so with a new understanding of what the core of life is all about.

It is reflections like this that help people understand why wilderness experiences, such as Outward Bound, are becoming a critical rite of passage into adulthood for youth. It also helps us understand why primitive people – people who haven't lived with all the trappings of the developed world – live a sacred life.

When you live your life as if it is sacred, you feel your connection to other people, to the Earth... to everything. Without a sense of sanctity, a meal is just something that tastes good, a business deal is just a way to make a buck (at someone else's expense), and an education is a childhood job. On the other hand, when *all* of life is experienced as sacred, a meal is nourishment for the body and the soul, a business deal honors all parties, and an education honors the sacred act of learning. Quite simply, when everything is sacred, nothing is profane.

If our culture lived as if everything were sacred, would we be worried about destroying ourselves? If our culture were more like a primitive culture, in that we experience the innate sacredness of life, how would it then be possible to continue in a way that strives so toward destruction?

We want our students to develop habits of mindfulness – to be mindful that they share their lives with a living, breathing universe that they can fully experience every day. To impart this understanding, there is no set ritual and certainly no doctrine or dogma. Each teacher, through varied techniques and behaviors--centering practices, singing blessings, and mindful behavior--helps our students think of learning as a sacred practice. It's a part of the curriculum that is unwritten, but it is vital to the core.

This brings up the final aspect of the educational program: **the people**. To our faculty, the call to teach is a sacred calling and one we take very seriously. Teachers see themselves more as life-long *learners* than as teachers. Dr. Joseph Chilton Pearce (2004) calls this the *model imperative*:

in order to teach something you have to demonstrate it.

The best example is in art. Think back to some of your childhood art classes. The teacher gave directions for an assignment that didn't make a lot of sense. But then he held up an example from a previous student. "Ooohhh. Now we understand what this assignment is!" Rainbow teachers are not "Do as I say, and not as I do" people. If they want children to understand how to live sustainably and with sanctity, then they feel they are charged with the awesome, overwhelming job of being a model. In this way, the children inspire us to be "the change we wish to see in the world," to quote Gandhi.

But the teachers, though very effective, are only a

small part of the school. The children far outnumber the teachers, and they have exponentially more energy! Teachers have as much to learn from the children as the children do from the teachers. Parents, however, make up the largest of our numbers. Every parent is a teacher and a learner—learning how to be a parent, learning how to be a passionate and compassionate part of a community, and learning how to live life to the fullest. *Collectively, we all create the curriculum.*

References:

Mendizha, M., & Pearce, J. C. (2004). *Magical parent, magical child: the art of joyful parenting*. Berkeley, Calif: North Atlantic Books.

Meade, M. (2007). *Initiation and the soul the sacred and the profane*. Seattle: Mosaic.

On Being Idealistic...

In the previous article, I mentioned how the Rainbow Mountain faculty members feel a responsibility to model for our children the behavior and values our culture needs to embrace in order to truly evolve. As a group, we believe in a contemplative life, in sustainable living, and in peace. However, declaring such high ideals is risky. It can open us up to criticism and judgment.

To explain, think about your own experiences. Most of us have had friends or relatives who converted to a particular religion or some other credo, such as environmentalism. (If we were smart, we had to give them credit for bravery, whether or not we agreed with their new-found religion and/or ideals.) When people convert to evangelical Christianity, for instance, they open themselves to comments such as, "Well, *that* wasn't very Christian!," every time they make a mistake (or every time someone else feels the need to voice an opinion). Before conversion, nobody expected perfection; afterwards, converts run the risk of being called the dirtiest word of all: a hypocrite.

No doubt it would be easier to maintain lower, apathetic standards than to risk any real or perceived failure to attain higher ideals. Consider Thomas Jefferson, for example. The genius who crafted the *Declaration of Independence* was a slave owner. More than a few young people, after learning about this juicy tidbit and other hypocrisies, discredited Jefferson's philosophy and writings altogether, without considering the culture Jefferson lived in. The actor who plays Thomas Jefferson on the NPR syndicated program *The Thomas Jefferson Hour*, was once asked about Jefferson's own failure to live by the ideals he penned and proclaimed. His response? *It's far better to have high ideals and hope, than to wallow in mediocrity for fear of failure.*

My own experience is that it is impossible to live up to my ideals in contemporary culture. The sad truth is that our culture would have to be completely re-wired for my ideal lifestyle to be possible. The nature of our capitalistic economy requires that I exchange money, consume goods, drive a car, communicate via fast-paced technology, and create pollution infinitely more than I think is right or necessary. I think our lives are ridiculously complicated, but every attempt to simplify my own life seems like the proverbial "drop in the bucket" compared to what is necessary.

The beauty in working with children is that hope is abundant in the daily life of teachers (and that includes parents, who are the original teachers). Every time I walk instead of drive, stay at home and cook instead of eating out, or make a gift instead of buying one, and every time I am kind to someone I'm setting an example for my students and my children. Kids aren't as critical as adults, and they are far more forgiving. They don't expect perfection—only love.

I have to remember, in my idealistic zeal, that we don't have to change the behavior of every adult (even Jefferson didn't try to do that!); we only need to influence the lives of the children around us. Because children imitate our behavior, we can hope that, instead of trying to make small changes on the fringes of a destructive society, they will be able to create and live in a culture that makes sense. Imagine the possibilities!

Even when we make mistakes, modeling the values that can help our children change the world seems like a worthy goal—no matter how ridiculously lofty. There is always hope in children.

Rainbow's Flowing With H2knOwing!

The following is an article written by Omega teacher, William Harwood. In December the faculty decided to do a school-wide drought awareness/water project in the spring in which classes will collaborate with one another. William's article is a wonderful introduction to the theme, and it provides brief summaries of the special activities each class is doing.

You will receive news from your child's classroom as to the water work they are doing. The project will culminate with two big events: The April 21st Water Day -- our Earth Day celebration, where students will share their water work (much like a science fair); and the May 6 Water Challenge -- an all-day science project where middle school students will be immersed (pun intended) in hands-on water work at Blue Ridge Assembly. They will also be raising money for Run for Africa to dig clean wells in Africa. Enjoy.

It is seventy percent of our bodies by mass. It is seventy percent of our planet by surface. It is the theme this spring at Rainbow Mountain. It is water – the good, wet, clean stuff we all have to have yet all too often take for granted. Well, no more. Not at our school. This essential element, (and, yes, we are aware it is actually a molecule), now courses through our curricula as surely as it runs through our rivers, flows through our faucets and slips through our cells. And not a moment too soon. As of February 12, 2008, almost all of North Carolina lay under an ‘extreme’ or even an ‘exceptional’ drought. For the few sections of the state outside these two designations, mostly along the coast, the drought is merely ‘severe.’ Clearly, the time has come to rethink this resource – to consider new and better ways of going with the flow. We at Rainbow Mountain intend to help lead this change, both on our own campus as well as in the community at large.

Since the prerequisite to effective conservation is enhanced education, the ‘H2knOwing’ – the learning of all things water – is already flowing throughout our school. Kindergarteners have brought their awesome imaginations to bear on Egypt where they have pictured the annual flooding of the Nile and how its waters bring life to the desert. The first graders have teamed up with the middle school students to recreate the world ocean inside the historic building. From the sunlit waters of the coral reefs to the hydrothermal vents of the deep, dark trenches, the exhibit features hands-on seawater science experiments as well as a ‘talking tube worm tour’ to discuss ocean life at various depths.

Second grade has dipped its toes into the water theme as well. Starting with a discussion of what they already know, they have branched out via the multiple intelligences into a series of investigations. These explorations have included making music with water, creating beautiful watercolor artworks of rivers and other bodies of water, performing fun science experiments on buoyancy and visiting the water treatment plant. In addition, the second graders will go even deeper, diving into a study of local pond water.

With the aid of microscopes, the students will see for themselves that even a tiny drop of the substance can harbor a myriad of mysterious creatures.

The third graders will work with fourth and fifth to research where our water comes from and where it goes. These students will then teach the rest of the school what they’ve learned and propose ways to reduce our own use. To assist in this effort, the sixth through eighth grade students will each perform a science project on the theme of water. These projects will range from graphs of our school’s water usage and strategies to conserve to testing for dissolved oxygen in various lakes, streams and rivers in the surrounding ecosystems. The results of the students’ efforts will then be presented at a special Earth Day festival with water as its theme. This festival will include games, information and art-making, all designed to highlight the water issue in a manner that is both engaging and effective.

Finally, in May, students from fifth through eighth grade will join with their parents in the very first Earthvoyage inter-generational water challenge at Blue Ridge Assembly in Black Mountain. The innovative program will feature activities and games on a gym-sized map and highlight water issues around the world. Not only will this program constitute an excellent way for rising sixth graders to get to know their future classmates come fall, but the event also serves as a fundraiser for Run for Africa, a local non-profit which funds clean drinking water systems for African orphanages. The students themselves have raised, to date, some one thousand dollars for this and other non-profits.

Like the air we breathe, the water we drink is truly a sacred substance that unites us all. Essential to life as we know it, water is a gift to be cherished and respected. Plus, when the light hits it just right, water is what rainbows are made of.