

Coryphaeus

pronounced kor e fee es
(Leader of a school of thought or of a chorus.)

May, 2007

Lately, I've heard much talk of spirituality: concern over perceived loss of it, concern over perceived excess of it. One voice worries over a possible evolution in the way the spiritual domain manifests itself at Rainbow; the other voice wishes for change because it has perceived shadows of shallowness over the outward trappings of the spiritual in many places, perhaps even at RMCS. What appears to lie beneath all this buzz is a deeper need than anyone has thus far articulated. From beneath the worries of both voices comes a cry for reality. In a world characterized by the artificial, we all hunger for the authentic. Surely this is a basis for community.

Then what *is* spiritual reality in the school context? I invite you, both spiritual seekers and spiritual doubters, to join me as I reflect on this crucial question at the heart of our identity as a community of learning.

The Journey is Everything

Part II

The Path of a Learning Community

by John Shackelton

I am well aware that one view of the spiritual emphasizes personal spiritual evolution: experiencing the One, becoming a master, attaining enlightenment, or perhaps a little humbler personal goal. This is not the spirituality we are gathered here to focus on. We are not an ashram, a church, nor a monastery; we are an educational community called into being to serve children. The spirituality we may be occupied with in our personal journeys is, of course, related to what we bring to our work, but it cannot define the essence of our spiritual work as teachers. That requires something else.

When we consider what is spiritual about teaching, we are looking at something both practical and relational. This is something we bring to work, the energetics of our presence to our children. And it is not for us. It is for them. So I am speaking of a spirituality attuned to service, to a practical giving of ourselves.

When we enter class in the manner of authentic Presence, we bring a gift—the offering of a resonance not often found in school rooms, an energy of connection among persons, not just between students and their academic objectives. The spiritual is an expression of the holistic, the interconnectedness that is the essence of reality. To ignore this web of interconnections, to attempt to exalt one part of the web over others, or over the organic interplay of the whole, is distinctly *unspiritual*. This is why authentic holistic education cannot be separated from the spiritual. To ignore the spiritual, the vast web of interconnections, is to reduce holistic education to an amalgam of techniques and render it lifeless. *To enter authentically into the connections that are present in a learning classroom* is to bring life to those we teach and to the learning process itself. I believe there is little in the world (or above it) that could be more spiritual than that.

Introductory comments from John Shackelton for the first annual Rainbow Mountain teacher retreat at the Southern Dharma Center in August of 2005

The Social-Sacred

Within the methodologies of conventional education, interpersonal dynamics are attended to largely in the service of classroom management. The teacher does not want to have students arguing, raising their voices, or becoming otherwise emotional because it disturbs the class and hinders the group's academic progress. Methods for responding to such occurrences primarily serve the restoration of classroom order. RMCS views this issue differently.

From preschool on, we teach our children in the five domains – the whole child, or better, the child as a whole person. If two children are upset with each other, we do not just put both (or either) in "time out" until they are calm enough to return to classroom processes; that is only a classroom management response. Instead, while one teacher attends to the class, another teacher will take the two upset children aside *together* and facilitate their speaking to each other, expressing their feelings, using their words, each in turn listening. This, of course, is not just about restoring classroom order but about children learning to navigate human relationships and restoring their personal equilibrium.

This is the emotional domain – stating their feelings, speaking their truth. This is also the moral domain – responding in the context of connectedness, of participation in community. *And* it is the spiritual domain – through listening even when feelings run high, learning to respect the other as a person who also has feelings and is important (part of the basis of the Namaste).

During class time, I have often seen a teacher out on the deck or in the peace garden with two or three children doing the sort of thing I just described. This happens most frequently in the primary grades, and this crucial processing may take anywhere from five to fifteen minutes or more; also, to be authentic and effective, it must happen immediately on the heels of the upsetting incident.

Now imagine a primary-grade classroom with sixteen or eighteen children and one teacher. If a disruption occurs, there are ways the teacher can restore order, yes, and can fairly quickly move the "program" forward, yes. But she could not do what I described above. She would be limited in her ability to respond, limited to the functional restoration of order and perhaps talk with the "offenders" later during recess, but she could not address the emotional, moral, spiritual being of the upset children in the immediate context, and it is in that immediate context that authentic whole-person learning occurs. Mere talk at a later time is often perceived by children as little more than a lecture.

I take it that the difference between a corrective lecture and a conversation that restores connection and appreciation is a *spiritual* matter. The former is empty of spiritual life; the latter can bring a quickening of peace and respectful connection that surely lies at the center of what the spiritual is all about.

Another place where we see the spiritual as social-sacred is in our RMCS approach to grouping. Traditionally, grouping is another form of classroom management but oriented around academic ability instead of behavior. Educators often manage class academic progress through ability groups.

In our RMCS holistic approach, levels are only one form of grouping and only one of several purposes for grouping. For example, when children are working on collaborative projects, we will often group them by diverse intelligences. This is not an ability grouping in the standard sense of children with *similar* abilities working together. Instead, we would put, say, three children of very *different* intelligences (of the multiple intelligence framework) in a group to collaborate. We do this conscious of the meta-learning possible in this mix. The children will learn about their topic, yes, but they will also likely learn to appreciate difference (diversity) as each child not only brings his unique contribution but also sees the contribution of the others' distinct gifts.

The Spiritual Outside of School

The velocity and stimulation of the information age and the lack of contemplative space in the day often keep us on the surface, absorbing information from our senses and racing right along with our chattering minds. For children, there can be a rush to go from school to after-school activities like sports and music, to homework, to a bit of TV or computer . . . or to some reading, and then it's off to sleep. In the lives of children and adults, there is often little time and encouragement to be still and feel the deeper currents within and without. Our lives are shallower as a result.

Tobin Hart, *The Secret Spiritual Life of Children*, p. 40

Another form of grouping we use in the primary grades is multi-age groups that have nothing to do with ability levels or academic progress levels. One example is the week of MI centers in grades 1-3 each month.

Picture five multiple-intelligence centers in the second grade and a group of students from 1st, 2nd, and 3rd grade. Each center has an activity and a 3x5 directions card. Children are paired, and a 2nd-grade boy “draws” a 1st-grade girl as a partner and looks disgusted. Ignoring her, he chooses a station called “Sink or Float?” (it’s a water unit) and begins dropping objects into the water. The lead teacher is busy with two other tables in another part of the room, but the assistant sees the situation at “Sink or Float?” and approaches the table. Noting that the boy did not read the directions, she says to him, “I see (the girl’s name) is unsure what to do. Could you help by reading the directions to her?” The boy, still unhappy at being paired with a girl (and a younger one at that) frowns but picks up the 3x5 card and reads the directions aloud.

Then, both he and his partner follow the directions and record the results on their papers. The assistant withdraws to observe less obtrusively and watch another table as well. The pair moves to a second MI center. The boy reads the directions aloud. Each child in turn carries out the procedure—running a moistened finger around the rims of different sized and shaped glasses of water and comparing the sounds. By the time the pair moves to the third center, they are walking side by side and, in the third station, they consciously collaborate. They talk to each other, share ideas, draw conclusions together.

It is easy to see the above description mainly as effective learning practices, and it is that, of course. But more tellingly it addresses and actually makes *central* the learning in the emotional, moral, and spiritual domains.

In the above examples, learning seems potentially deeper than merely seeing and naming other kids’ strengths (as in a traditional human-values class) because, in the multiple intelligence-based collaborative project, the students must work closely together for days, and they can come to “know” each other much more authentically than is possible in an academic exercise about “We all have our special gifts.” This learning writes itself in their bodies and informs their spiritual being.

Obviously, effectively facilitating the personal dynamics of children working on projects of this kind in a classroom of sixteen or seventeen students is not possible with only one teacher. So, our historic teacher/student ratio is much more than good pedagogical practice.

It is a *spiritual commitment*.

Recent Reflections

In our February professional development faculty meeting, we discussed what teachers mean by the term *spiritual*. Several words came up repeatedly: connection, awareness, reverence, and authentic. There was a shared sense that connection was primary—an honoring of the multiplicity of human connections as well as our connection to the Earth. When awareness of such connections is nurtured, we are less likely to fall into judgments of one another. When awareness of connection to the Earth is nurtured, we are less likely to force the planet to serve our narrow purposes.

Reverence is the essence of the Namaste, and it holds a non-analytical way of knowing that allows us to truly see others. We spoke of the deeply spiritual experience of being reverently, and therefore authentically, present to another. Being present to our students is perhaps the *most spiritual* thing we can do for them, the best encounter with the spiritual domain we can offer them.

There was some discussion of religious backgrounds and diverse celebrations we have, but it became apparent that our honoring of diverse traditions, though highly valuable and definitely worthwhile, is not the essence of the spiritual vitality of RMCS. Instead, our authentic gift of the spiritual happens in the classroom, in seeing our kids, in caring for their growth as individuals, in connecting with each one’s current journey.

This depth of the spiritual domain is not limited to centering, deep breathing, and candlelit mudras, although those things can be helpful. The authentically spiritual happens more tellingly in the daily schedule of classes, including academic work.

To teach is to create a space in which the community of truth is practiced . . .

I understand truth as the passionate and disciplined process of inquiry and dialogue itself, as the dynamic conversation of a community that keeps testing old conclusions and coming into new ones.

Parker Palmer in *The Courage to Teach*, pp 90 & 104

A Whole Circle

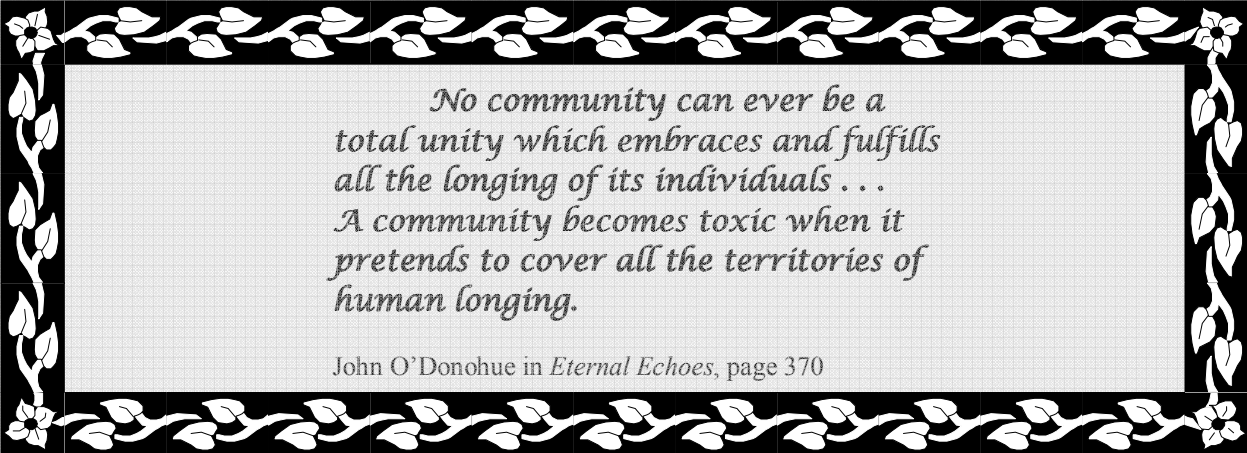
In my reflections at the Southern Dharma Center, I said we are not an ashram or other formal religious/spiritual community and that we are a school. However, as a school with a focus on the spiritual domain, there are other connections in our small section of the vast web of reality that require attention as we work to serve our children. If the spiritual truly is about connections and about awareness, then authentically serving our children means we must look at how home and school connect.

Let's take a mundane example of how easily the connection can be overlooked if we fail to exercise awareness. What happens when parents bring their children to school late, arriving after morning centering or in the middle of it? Does this teach our children that centering is important and that both the school and the teachers are to be respected? Are such "lessons" outside the spiritual domain?

I am aware (children talk at school about home just as they do at home about school) that some children spend a great deal of time in front of screens of various descriptions and others always have the latest popular toys—including violent ones. Are habits of these kinds without spiritual consequences, or is there a fairly obvious connection between the child and the toy's effect on the child? Perhaps there is an important difference between engagement and entertainment, and perhaps this is also part of the spiritual domain.

So when we speak of holistic education and the spiritual, it seems we must include the whole learning experience of the child, not just what happens at school. One of the advantages of a private-school education like ours is that organic connections between school and home *can* be formed, and surely doing so is a crucial part of the spiritual growth of our children.

But there are yet wider dimensions to engaging the spiritual. Neither home nor school nor their combined efforts can be the whole vehicle.



*No community can ever be a
total unity which embraces and fulfills
all the longing of its individuals . . .
A community becomes toxic when it
pretends to cover all the territories of
human longing.*

John O'Donohue in *Eternal Echoes*, page 370

A Response to a Question

Rainbow Mountain is committed to "the passionate and disciplined process of inquiry" (see insert, page 3) and to a deeply spiritual learning process in the ways I have outlined in this article. However, it is important to honor the truth that this spiritual learning process is not confined to the classroom and the home—or to the children.

In the first community circle this year the topic was, *What do we mean at RMCS when we speak of the spiritual domain?* Several very insightful suggestions were made, and then one parent asked the question, "Are we a temple that teaches spelling, or are we a school that includes the spiritual?" One parent responded by saying that was a very good question, and another said she had never looked at it that way before. *It is a good question; and to look at old persuasions from new perspectives is also good.* (Have another look at the insert on page 3.) Ancient wisdom taught the evolutionary process of testing old conclusions and coming into new ones long before modern science rediscovered this universal principle of learning and natural history.

Returning to the point with which I began this article, RMCS is not a spiritual community in the formal way of an ashram, church, or temple; we are a community of learning. One evidence of this is that we do allow room for challenges to old ways we have long followed and especially of old forms we have long identified with our spirituality. We allow for the testing of and dialogue about old conclusions. Furthermore, we are not threatened as a community when voices challenge us to move toward new conclusions. These aspects of our life as a school are also a part of our spirituality, as spiritual as what we do in the classroom. The reality of our spiritual life as a school resides in the classroom, in the homes, in the connection between classroom and home, and—perhaps most critically—in our capacity for dynamic and respectful conversation in which we are open to one another, to new ideas, new possibilities, and to the evolution of appearances that has always characterized growth on planet Earth.

Truth, spiritual or scientific, is always unfolding, and always assists those who enter its processes but never needs any of us to protect its integrity.