Take Your Soul to School: Practical Applications For Holistic Classrooms

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I. Critical View of School Practices

Current Trends in Education

During this time of major educational upheaval and change, school curriculum has been dehumanized and centralized to include prescribed topics and standardized testing. As a result, teaching emphasizes the pragmatic and is mainly concerned with reportage, logic, analysis, and linearity. Adding to the stress of radical program modifications and expectations, teachers are further disconcerted and demoralized by public criticism and a call for greater accountability. They face uncertainty about their performance as they grapple with models of delivery that encourage the discounting of personal needs in favour of global competitiveness. The heart and soul has been taken out of education and there is little or no incentive to risk sharing our deep spiritual selves. In fact, we are taught to believe that our humanness and our emotions will interfere with scientific objectivity and professional judgment.

In much of the current literature on education, holistic teachers and environmentalists are critical of these current trends and practices, pointing out that schools are spiraling into political rhetoric because the sacred had been driven out. For example, Palmer Parker (1997) persuasively argues that we are taught “to live out of the top inch and a half of the human self, to live only with cognitive rationality and with the powers of the intellect, out of touch with anything that lay below that top inch and a half: body, intuition, feeling, emotion, relationship” (9). He suggests that we have been educated in a way of knowing that treats the world as an object to be dissected and manipulated in order to satisfy our drive for power and control. In his critique, he emphasizes the school’s role in promoting and institutionalizing such a limiting and distancing objective orientation and makes particular reference to the way teachers convey both a scientific epistemology and a competitive ethic to students.

Likewise, Jack Miller (1992) points out that, “we live in what has been called the age of alienation . . . we tend to live in a world that is fragmented, and our lives are filled with the experience of separateness” (43). In the shadow of these values lies “a profound sense of isolation from our human wholeness” (35). Such exploiting goals influence our approach to living as well as our learning by putting us in an adversarial and competitive relationship.
with each other that ultimately interferes with the well-being of the world.

David Abram (1996) also observes how surprisingly silent educators have been in response to the rapid deterioration of the earth’s ecosystems, the vanishing of hundreds of endangered species every month, and the consequent flattening of our human relationships. Ironically, halting the decline of the planet life-support systems may be the most critical challenge educators have ever faced. Although humans have negotiated relationships with every other living element for as long as they have existed, today we participate almost exclusively with other humans and with our human-made technologies. In no way can our relation to the earthly biosphere be considered a reciprocal and balanced one. Abram points out that the earth is central to all human experience and, as such, we must renew our acquaintance with biological ethics and our vital connectedness to the sensuous, non-human world.

My Vision of a Holistic Classroom

With such dehumanizing educational trends in mind, I developed an educational course to actively demonstrate and model practical holistic strategies that address the whole person. Key concepts of holism seem to deal with balance, interconnectedness, awareness, and respect. Holistic teaching values the task of self-construction and self-acceptance and seeks to facilitate learners as they acquire self-knowledge and self-understanding. It encourages students to choose different pathways for self-development. It is both child and culturally centred and involves the integration of body, mind, and spirit and embraces social and ecological dimensions of human experience and natural wonderment. It is my belief that children must be explicitly taught how to connect with their inner spirit, how to respect themselves and others, how to nurture self-esteem, how to become attuned to their bodies and express authentic feelings, and how to develop a one-ness with the earth and take action to protect the environment.

In this course, my intention is to encourage teachers to be more open to the full expression of self and others. If education is to be empowering and transformational, it must be about reclaiming its sacredness and its connection to the vitality of life. To do so, we need to practice our intuitive capacities to recover our sense of one-ness, otherness, and inwardness. As we practice being more fully present and mindful in each moment, I believe we can begin to celebrate and reclaim our capacity to wonder and imagine. Finally, I want to suggest that by learning to live in community and harmony with all life forms, we can appreciate and protect our vital attachment to the natural cycles of the planet.

Fundamental to each component in this course is my belief that knowledge is created by drawing not only on our perceptions and our reasoning ability, but also on our intuitions and our creative metaphorical imagery—a kind of pluristic multi-sensory knowing that extends beyond the five senses. This involves pulling prior knowledge synthesized in the subconscious to the conscious level and requires receptivity and suspension of logic and rationality. This ability to trust and tune into embodied cues must be practiced and modeled as a valued component of school curricula. By embracing such practices, Parker Palmer (1983) advocates that “we come to know the world . . . as an organic body of personal relations and responses, a living and evolving community of creativity and compassion” (14) and we “create a classroom practice that would teach us not to rearrange the world but to learn its intricate relationships” (38).

Creating a Sacred Space in the Classroom

Sheri Klein (2000) asks an interesting question. “What if the primary concerns of education offered possibilities for fulfillment, wonder, awe, joy, caring, compassion, and enchantment?” (7). Classrooms would then become sacred spaces which she defines as “places of power, where energies convene and create sites for healing” (5). Such classroom sanctuaries include aesthetically pleasing arrangements of artifacts that invite the use of imagination and enchantment, that focus on renewal, and that allow students to dream and

http://ccfi.educ.ubc.ca/publication/insights/v09n01/articles/abbey.html (2 of 17)
to be fully present in the moment. They are physical spaces that embrace sounds such as
music, water fountains, and wind chimes to invite quiet reflection and a respite from
frenetic activity and over-stimulation. These spaces also offer possibilities for
transformation and for deepening intuitive, creative and imaginative dimensions of the soul.

In sacred classrooms, Shelley Kessler (1991) observes that spirit and clarity of purpose are
at the heart of the teaching enterprise and teaching presence is authentic, open-hearted, and
fully alive. These are safe, trustworthy places where the integrity of the student is respected
as well as the needs and boundaries of the teacher. Sacred classrooms foster both
interpersonal and intrapersonal development in order to strengthen relationships and nurture
social-emotional competence. Teachers who create such spaces are warm, alive,
spontaneous, connected, and compassionate. They are open to perceiving what is happening
right now, responsive to the needs of the moment, flexible enough to change directions,
and able to let go of inadequate agendas and invent new approaches on the spot. They are
willing to feel deeply and are genuinely moved by what a student expresses. They are able
to interpret body language and hear the feelings behind the words. In order to achieve this
state of full presence, teachers might take some time for solitude before teaching and
include daily meditations into their plans in order to attend to now-ness on a regular basis.

What is the Soul?

Most of us have an innate understanding of soul even though it is impossible to define.
Intuitively, we know it has to do with genuineness and depth. Definition, however, is an
intellectual endeavour, as Thomas Moore (1998) reminds us, and the soul prefers the
imagination. It presents images that are not immediately intelligible to the reasoning mind
—fleeting impressions, desires, intuition, dreams, stories. Parker Palmer (1997) states that
the soul is “like a wild animal: tough, self-sufficient, resilient, but also exceedingly shy . . .
But if you are willing to go into the woods and sit quietly at the base of a tree, that wild
animal will, after a few hours, reveal itself to you” (9).

Lance Secretan (1997) suggests that the soul is the immortal or spiritual part of us and the
source of our deepest longings and passions. He describes it as “our essence—our
emotional and moral fiber, our warmth, and our force. It is the vial part of us that
transcends our temporary existence; it is our nobleness within . . . the essential ‘more’ that
exists in our lives” (28). While Secretan emphasizes the higher values that the soul pursues
such as grace, harmony, co-operation, and reverence for life, Moore (1999) also suggests
that the soul is deep and bottomless. He believes that the soul involves a going down as
well as a going up, “becoming more ordinary, more humble, more a part of the earth” (4). It
involves attending to small details in everyday life such as cooking, colours, spices and
places to walk in order to make them extraordinary, magical and sacred.

According to Marianne Williamson (1995), “while the soul is always present, it doesn’t
appear in our lives automatically. Soul requires our attention and reflection” (xvi). For Jack
Miller (2000), the soul is not a finite entity but rather an animated, loving energy that
‘dwell in paradox and does not approach life in a linear manner’ (27). According to
Miller, “the soul hides while our minds analyze, memorize and categorize” (29). For Moore
(1998), the soul is the source of all desires, fears and images that spontaneously arise in our
imagination. It “enters life from below, through the cracks, finding an opening into life at
the points where smooth functioning breaks down” (27) In her attempt to define the soul,
Marion Woodman (1995) believes the soul to be the bridge between body and spirit—“the
uniter of opposites” (33).

However, Tanis Helliwell (1999) distinguishes the body or vessel which she calls the
‘personality’ from the soul or spiritual being. While the personality is transitory and finite,
the soul is eternal and timeless. The personality relates to the outside world and the soul
relates to the inner world and does not judge or attach itself in any material sense. For her,
the personality’s essence is ‘doing,’ while the soul’s essence is ‘being,’ and we must strive
to bring both into balance in order to create a life worth living. In most cases, she observes,
we are so focused on doing that we leave little time for being. Helliwell believes that the soul specifically chooses a particular physical vessel and personality to accomplish the task it sets for itself in this lifetime. As such, the soul knows the purpose of our life and only by listening to the soul will we be able to hear what it is we are meant to do. As Helliwell states, “the soul knows your life’s purpose and the personality has the gifts to fulfill it” (24).

For Helliwell, a soul-infused personality is self-actualized, joyful, creative, truthfull, and self-directed. She suggests a four-step process to bring this about. First, one must create a healthy vessel for our soul. Second, one must strengthen the vessel with purposeful intention and deliberateness. This is a stage of dependence and a focus outward on doing. During the third stage, one must empty the vessel. This requires looking inward and exercising independence. At this level one must be willing to let go of old habits in order to change and transform oneself. Finally, the vessel is refilled and one becomes self-actualized and interdependent.

Gary Zukav (1989) believes that humans are evolving from five-sensory to multisensory beings whereby they can better appreciate the consciousness of the soul. When the soul is recognized and valued, it begins to infuse the life of the personality and the personality comes fully to serve the energy of its soul and achieve authentic empowerment. The very reason for our being, Zukav argues, is to align our personalities with our souls. Since the soul is not confined to time, each personality that becomes an instrument for the soul contributes to the evolution of its soul. After an incarnation, the soul returns to its immortal and timeless state of compassion, clarity and boundless love. Secretan concludes that “we are souls seeking a human experience, not humans seeking a spiritual experience” (28).

**Challenges and Barriers that Limit Soulful Teaching**

A paradox arises when we try to define the spiritual self in rational terms such as “a greater purpose beyond the self” . . . “an all encompassing energy” . . . a sense of wonder for our universe” . . . “ an awareness of being part of a bigger universe” (Johnson 1999, 45-47). It is difficult to lend credence to something that cannot be perceived or identified by traditional scientific procedures. The more we try to pin down a collective image of the spirit the more elusive it becomes. Furthermore, the spiritual or inner domain cannot be evaluated with standard measures and, as a result, is treated with suspicion or disregard in schools. In fact, “as objective rationality, based on scientific reductionism and materialism, emerged as a dominant legitimized worldview, the ‘spiritual’ realm was denigrated and relegated to a separate religious category” (Johnson, 42).

References to spirituality still make most educators uncomfortable. David Whyte (1994) argues that “to understand the soul we cannot turn to science for a description. Its meaning is best given by its context” (14). As a result, the needs of the soul have been largely ignored in schools, institutions, and workplaces primarily because “it refuses to be quantified in a way that satisfies our need to plan everything in advance” (14). We have few contemporary models and little tolerance for seeking ways to move beyond the dimensions of time and space or to free ourselves from a mechanistic worldview. The challenge becomes finding effective methods of applying soulful teaching to actual classroom practice and convincing others to do so.

Ironically, in our increasingly solitary and isolated society, it seems safer to stay objective and avoid nurturing the evolving selfhood of our students. Teachers who allow themselves to be fully present to their students are vulnerable and must be willing to take risks and allow themselves to be known to their students in full partnership. For example, they are cautioned about the criminal implications of touching and hugging students and yet, Phil Cousineau (1995) advises teachers to pay attention to the very way they touch others, reminding them that “the soul emerges through our fingertips”(165).

As I struggle to become a co-participant in community with my students and to create safe
and trusting classroom spaces that invite original inquiry and value everyone as a teacher and an authority figure, I continually confront the tensions and frustrations of letting go of my own agenda or purpose in order to make room for more student voices. This also entails being open and responsive to the needs of the moment, flexible enough to shift gears, and “to have the repertoire, creativity, and imagination to invent a new approach in the moment” (Kessler, 1991, 13). Students, for their part, must also be willing to take an active responsibility in the shaping of the curriculum.

It is easy enough to identify the elements necessary to create a sacred classroom where the soul is felt and responded to and to mount persuasive arguments that support and justify the need for holistic curricula in schools. However, it is quite another matter to actually develop such a classroom and apply principles of spirituality in everyday practice. So many aspects of our culture today offer children mixed or confusing messages about soulfulness and the classroom must become a safe place to discuss and sort out these elements. Children will be more understanding of others when they come to understand themselves, they will be more responsible if they have been responded to, and they will be more goal-oriented when their basic needs are met.

In addition, Michele Borba (1989) argues that self-esteem will only become a viable component in classrooms if it is built into elements of all subject areas. She reminds us that “too many students exist in the shadows. Their potential and capabilities will never shine because they are clouded by self-doubt or by lack of self-worth, which affects all aspects of their being” (xvii). In order to refocus attention on children’s inner needs in schools, she suggests a curriculum built on five components: security (feeling comfortable and safe), selfhood (acquiring self-knowledge and a feeling of individuality), affiliation (a feeling of belonging, acceptance, and relatedness), mission (a sense of purpose and motivation in life through realistic, attainable goals) and competence (a feeling of success, control, and accomplishment).

II. Practical Strategies to Encourage Holistic Teaching

The First Class

Before the first class, I arrive at least two hours ahead of time. I bring a great deal of material with me. I have a brightly coloured table cloth to drape over a large table and I place on it some photographs of my family, my pets, and my sacred spaces, a container of wild flowers I stop and pick on the way. I also display some treasured artifacts that tell something about me such as a rock from Ireland, a sea shell, theatre programs, travel brochures, gardening gloves, jogging shoes, letters from my children, books I have written, a bottle of my favourite wine, my good-luck touchstone, and a favourite book of poetry. I bring a tape player and play quiet music. I mount collages and poetry that I have created around the walls. I move the chairs into a circle and place a letter I have written to each student on the seats. I create a special environment that is inviting and pleasing — not at all like a typical university lecture hall. I try to use myself as a role-model in order to invite students to begin to really focus on knowing themselves mindfully. As students begin to arrive I mingle with them and sit in one of the chairs beside them. I do not immediately introduce myself as the instructor. I do my best to dismantle any power hierarchy before it forms.

Through the use of relaxation mediation and guided imagery, I invite students to be silent together as a way of connecting. Then, by passing a large stone from person to person, a ‘talking circle’ (Graveline, 1998) is created in which each person in invited to share something unique and meaningful about his/herself while others listen and affirm. As the instructor, I try to model a deep connection with myself and invite the group to come to know and trust each other and to support their wholeness with compassion. I believe that compassion cannot be taught but must be discovered and lived. During subsequent classes these communal rituals are practiced and expanded upon as each student takes a turn facilitating one session related to a metaphor or image he or she has selected. As they work
in small response groups, they help each other connect with their spiritual knowing and probe for deeper inner meanings of self. At the end of this class, I ask students to write their initial impressions of this course. Although some students feel uncomfortable at first or wary of the intent, most are positive and confirming (see table 1).

The Use of Metaphor

I explain to my students the metaphorical significance of the objects on my table display during our first class together. Against a backdrop of quiet music, I share with them a personal metaphor in which I use the symbol of a bottle of wine to deeply examine an understanding of myself as a learner. I also read a wonderful children’s picture book *Wilfred, Gordon, McKenzie Partridge* by Mem Fox (1984) to illustrate how a little boy come to understand the complex concept of a memory through the use of symbolic objects. I then invite students to begin to consciously tap into their own metaphorical skills by collecting meaningful artifacts. I remind them that metaphorical thinking improves with practices and depends on the combination of deliberate and purposeful sensory awareness, memories of past experiences, and a keen desire to seek deeper self-awareness. The first course assignment is to write a personal metaphor. I ask students to bring a first draft to the second class. These are shared in triad groups that are formed the second week. These three students tend to form strong trusting bonds by working closely together throughout the course. They listen and support each other’s work, provide confirmation and guidance for the tentative journey inward, and eventually celebrate in each other’s new insights and personal growth.

Metaphorical thinking begins with experiences rather than words, challenges conformity and taps into ‘right brain’ energies essential for holistic learning and personal meaning-making. Janet Burroway (1992) contends that symbols are unavoidable in life. Words are “unwieldy and unyielding, and we leap over them with intuition, body language, tone, and symbol” (283). Humans function symbolically all the time, according to Burroway, because “we rarely know exactly what we mean, and if we do we are not willing to express it, and if we are willing we are not able, and if we are able we are not heard, and if we are heard we are not understood” (283). Objects and artifacts tend to store our memories and emotions. The object then becomes a symbol of the event that triggered the emotion, impression, or sensory experience by substituting, comparing or interacting to construct new images. Objects become metaphors when we attach positive or negative emotions to them.

According the Lakoff and Johnston (1999), metaphors are universal and are based on embodied images created through our sensory-motor system. They are extraordinarily powerful tools to explore the unknown in terms of the known, to invoke multiple perspectives, to peel back layers of meaning and to disrupt established categories—making the abstract more accessible and the imaginative more possible. Thomas Moore (1998) believes that “when the imagination is allowed to move to deep places, the sacred is revealed” (286). By legitimizing sign systems and modes of representation other than printed text, Pugh, Hicks and Davis (1997) suggest that we open new doors for students to explore, build, and demonstrate their knowledge. Both metaphorical and intuitive perceptions are illusive and non-rational. They alert us to patterns rather than parts, and to the imagined as well as the literal.

Intuitive Thinking

During the next class, I introduce my students to their intuitive powers by inviting them to complete Philip Goldberg’s “Who Is Intuitive?” Inventory (1983, 110-113). The results are discussed in triad groups and students are encouraged to open themselves up to perceptual possibilities beyond the five senses for the duration of the course. Intuitive insights are often more apparent after this discussion and I remind students to look for intuitive messages during mediation and visualization exercises. Some students focus on their dreams and tap into this intuitive realm by keeping dream journals. We then compare our personal orientations along two intersecting grids—intuitive/sensory and feeling/thinking.
invite students to consider how these scales could be applied to children in their classrooms and how this personal knowledge would influence their curriculum.

Although intuition is hard to ‘prove,’ we observe its impact on our lives every day. However, it will flourish only where it is valued and understood. As Renee Welfeld (1997) points out, we often become disconnected from our bodies and our intuitive wisdom because we have been taught to believe that the mind is superior to the body or have been convinced to be critical of our body. According to Welfeld, we lose “a deep sense of harmony and balance that arises when you know yourself to be—body, mind, and soul—at one with the Universe” (7). Although intuition always offers useful wisdom it takes time to ‘hear’ it properly. As Shakti Gawain (1995) suggests, learning to trust your intuition is an art form and takes time to perfect. If you are willing to act on what you believe to be true, you will learn very quickly. If you hold back, it might never happen.

The word holistic has often been ascribed to intuition, inferring that intuition gives knowledge of wholes as opposed to just parts and that wholes are greater than the sum of their parts. The parts and their sum can be discerned through rational analysis, but the greater can only be conceived through intuition. It is experiential rather than conceptual, a realization and a feeling, an intimate identification with a wholeness. Intuition is a flash that comes instantaneously and in that instant might be contained an extraordinary amount of information. It is not linear or sequential but instead, seems to suppress time. It has no clear boundaries. Intuition is an illusive image that Virginia Jagla (1994) describes as “a grasp at knowledge that connects the subconscious and the conscious mind. It pulls prior knowledge synthesized in the subconscious to the conscious level at an opportune moment for immediate insight” (36-7). Mona Schulz (1998) points out that intuition hits are sudden, immediate and unexpected, often not the result of any deliberate thought process. They bring with them a feeling of confidence and certainty and inspire us to become creative and open to imaginative alternatives. She identifies several general characteristics of intuitive messages: a sense of certainty, a sudden creative gestalt, nonanalytical, emotional, and empathetic (30).

Tanis Helliwell (1999) takes the meaning of intuition into the spiritual realm and declares it to be a tool of the soul that speaks to us through our bodies. Although intuitive information comes to us all the time, we learn to ignore it and devalue it. By development our intuitive awareness, we can align ourselves to the soul. Once activated, intuition will not easily be shut off. For Helliwell, intuition is a gift of the sixth chakra or third eye which require receptivity and suspension of logic and rationality. The soul dangles intuition like a worm to tempt the personality. She believes that the human brain is a part of the larger hologram of the universe and the two continually interpenetrate and reflect each other. According to Helliwell, intuition is “a lens that can glimpse the soul’s purpose and a way that the higher Self can communicate with the lower self to give it practical answers to problems we face” (284-5).

Gary Zukav (1989) goes one step further by asserting that intuitions are messages from the soul that are intended to assist the soul on its evolutionary journey. These are indicators of “a loving guidance that is continually assisting and supporting” (81). To receive intuitive messages clearly, Zukav points out that we must become aware of our feelings, honour and trust the guidance received, and keep an open orientation toward life and the universe. Schulz believes we also get our intuitive messages “through the holes in the soul—through our physical problems…or disease of the body” (33).

**Learning to be Mindful Through Breathing**

To begin practicing mindful awareness, I encourage my students to attune themselves to their own breathing. In order to be fully mindful, we must try to see what lives in a moment before putting anything into it. According to Andrew Weil (1997), a focus on breathing is an ancient spiritual tonic that disengages us from our outer thought processes, enlivens us and restores harmony to the whole nervous system. However, as Beryl Birch
(1995) explains, most of us become shut off from our solar plexus, our main energy storehouse, our emotional life force, our prana (in Sanskrit) and because of this physical disconnection, we breath backwards. Instead of sucking in our belly and breathing only from the upper chest, I teach my students to relax and expand their belly when they inhale deeply and tighten their abdominal and intercostal (between ribs) muscles back and up, press rib cage down and back toward the spine to push up their diaphragm when they exhale. In this way, stale air is expelled and the oxidation of tissues is improved (Goldberg, 1983). Relaxing after each exhalation will allow the lungs to begin to pull air back in all by themselves.

Firstly, in simple Breath Observation, I instruct students to place their tongue in Yoga position, gently against the roof of the mouth and touch their thumbs and forefingers to keep energy circulating in the body. We breath naturally and simply focus on the point where our breath changes from an inhalation to an exhalation. Next, Exhalation Reversal I ask students to begin their breath cycle with the exhalation instead of the inhalation. This puts us in touch with the diaphragm and reawakens our inward attentiveness. Another way to attune ourselves to our breath in through Nostril Breathing. Begin by breathing in through the nostrils counting 1—4, hold the breath counting 5—7, and release the breath through the mouth counting 8. With each inhalation, notice which nostril is dominant or taking in most of the air. This is an involuntary process that changes from side to side periodically. In a variation of nostril breathing, I ask students to press on nostril closed with their thumb and breath deeply and slowly through the other nostril. After holding that breath for a few seconds, switch nostrils and release the breath through the other nostril. Next, I introduce Stimulating Breathing which involves rapid in-out breathing through the nose (in contrast to panting through the mouth). The increased muscular effort of the neck and diaphragm is noticeable as well as the pumping of the chest (bellows breathing). This is a good for stimulating wakefulness as well. Once these variations have been demonstrated, students take turns leading the group in an exercise of their choosing in order to encourage the practice of mindfulness at the beginning of each class.

According to Thich Nhat Hanh (1975), “mindfulness is the miracle by which we master and restore ourselves” (21). For him, “there is only one important time and that is now” (116). “Our breath,” he says, “is such a fragile piece of thread. . . it is the bridge from our body to our mind. . . which makes possible one-ness of body and mind” (37). Mindfulness begins with feeling at home in your body, feeling real and alive to yourself, feeling the space that you occupy, feeling subtle movements of energy within yourself, the taste of food, the weather on your face. Each of these moments become moments of wonder and awe—true causes of celebration.

Renee Welfeld (1997) reminds us that mind and body are closely interconnected and that our body is “the keeper and transmitter of our feelings and emotions . . . experienced as a movement of energy within the body” (2-3). For her, each part of the breathing process has a symbolic meaning. Each time you inhale, you reestablish the cycle that initiated life outside the womb. In one sense, you begin life anew each time you breathe in. With the space that follows inhalation, the promise of a new beginning can be deeply felt. Exhalation represents the emptying out that must precede becoming full again. It is a moment of surrender and trust that the next breath will be made available to you again. The moment after an exhalation is a time to pause, reflect, and feel a profound sense of well-being—a time to be at the centre of your immediate universe. This often requires practice and mindfulness. Several techniques are offered that involve letting go, opening up, and allowing some prana into tight, closed-down areas of the body.

**Learning to be Mindful Through Meditation**

Mediation and visualization are also effective ways to activate mindfulness, to become open an attuned beyond the five senses, and to listen to the soul. Meditation is a natural tool for relaxing the conscious mind without clouding awareness (Weller, 1997). The body, mind, and senses are brought into balance (Carrico, 1997). In this deep stage of relaxation the
heart rate and consumption of oxygen decrease. Deborah Rozman (1994) explains that meditation opened her heart and mind to what inner peace and wisdom really could be.

‘Meditation with a specific focus’ is the easiest to start with. It is suggested that students focus on their breathing (Nhat Hanh, 1975), one of the body chakra centres, an action such as walking, a candle or other physical object, a mantra (a repeated sound, phrase or chant such as ‘om’, ‘ring-rong’) or a creative image. To introduce this experience I ask students to walk around the room and focus on the movement of their feet. Typically, we are more aware of placing each foot on the ground rather than lifting each foot up. By shifting our focus to the ‘letting go’ process, we are able to remind ourselves that we cannot move forward unless we let go of something else. I ask students to pick a place where they often walk and practice this walking meditation whenever they walk there.

Students are also asked to set time aside to mediate at the same time every day, in the same place. They are reminded to assume a straight sitting posture with the chest open and the neck free. Rest hands on knees with thumb and fore-finger lightly touching. Start with two or three minutes and work up to ten or twenty. Allow the mind a little time to unwind and don’t go into the mediation with any expectations or pre-conceived thoughts. There will be many obstacles of distraction at first. The technique will become personalized and improve with practice. Often meditations will lead to creative insights or inner wisdom.

**Guided Imagery & Visualization**

Guided imagery is a tool to unlock creativity, promote relaxation, and to use your natural creative imagination in a more conscious way. According to Maureen Murdock (1987), these exercises “help [us] tune out the distractions and demands of everyday life and to focus on being” (19). I begin with her simple Relaxation Exercise (20) in which I read from a prepared text. Participants close their eyes and let their minds envision as I read. In this exercise each part of the body is tightened and relaxed in succession. Another of Murdock’s exercises The Waterfall of White Light (22) calls forth an image of a white beam of light entering the top of your head. Its healing energy flows through the whole body. Other guided images include undersea adventures, spaceships, balloons, wheels, plants, fire, earth cycles, inner body explorations, mirror reflections, desert islands, waves on an ocean, and inner sanctuaries. Drawings of their images can be included in their journals. Near the end of the course, after attentiveness and mindfulness have been practiced, I introduce The Inner Shaman exercise (Feinstein & Krippner 1988, 41). After an inward journey, participants pass through an arch and image their inner guide who conveys some important information to them. Participants are also directed to ask their guide a question after which they leave the image when an indicated signal is heard. During the course, students are encouraged to lead the guided imagery sessions as well.

Creative visualization is a technique of using your imagination to create what you want in your life (Gawain, 1995). It involves understanding and aligning yourself with the natural principles that govern the workings of the universe and learning to use these principles in the most conscious and creative way. Holding a thought in your mind creates an energy force that attracts and creates that form on the material plane. Whatever you put out into the universe will be reflected back to you. We always attract into our lives what we think about the most. The visualization process involves four steps: set your goal, create a clear idea or picture, focus on it often, give it positive energy. Affirmations are an important element in the process - a strong positive statement that something is already so. It is a way of making firm what you are imaging.

After relaxing in a deep, quiet, meditative state of mind, I ask my students to image themselves in the environment that they would like, doing what they want successfully and harmoniously, receiving appreciation and appropriate compensation. I invite them to add any other details that are important to them. They must feel within themselves that this is possible, experience it as if it has already happened. Imagine it exactly the way it should be. Repeat this short exercise often, perhaps twice a day. If the desire and intention to make
a change are clear, chances are good that some type of shift will take place.

Creativity and Imagination

Julie Cameron (1992) describes creativity as a spiritual experience. As both an artist and a teacher, she believes that by acting creatively the universe is able to advance. Once we remove the blocks, the flow moves in. Opening your creativity, she contends, changes us from something bobbing on an vast electrical sea to a more cooperative part of the ecosystem (1).

In order to encourage students to explore their innate creativity, I introduce them to Cameron’s creative practices. First, I invite them to write three pages of stream-of-consciousness notes every day that we call ‘morning pages.’ These morning pages are a kind of meditation that leads to a connection with a source of wisdom within. The second practice is what Cameron calls the *Artist's Date*. This is a two hour block of time set aside each week to nurture creative consciousness of the inner artist. This inner artist needs to be taken out, pampered and listened to, according to Cameron. As she suggests, “spending time in solitude with your artist child is essential to self-nurturing” (19). We must be self-nourishing and alert enough to consciously replenish our creative resources as we draw on them. This involves the active pursuit of images gleamed through deliberate attentiveness. Throughout the holistic course, I suggest that students keep journals to record meditation experiences, dreams, images, and introspections as well as impressions and questions provoked in class. These are not handed in or marked by me. They are for personal reference only.

Although art occupies the margins in schools, imagination is closely connected to the soul and must be affirmed. As John Dewey saw it, imagination is the gateway through which meanings derived from past experiences find their way into the present. Maxine Greene (1995) talks about imagination as a “search for openings without which our lives narrow and our pathways become cul-de-sacs” (17). For her, imagination is the felt possibility of looking beyond our incompleteness for something more, enabling us to make new connections among parts of our experience. In fact, Greene concludes that “it may well be the imaginative capacity that allows us also to experience empathy with different point of view, even with interests apparently at odds with ours . . . where we can come face to face with others” (31).

Arts-based Inquiry

Art and image-making is often an engaging way for people to realize wholeness and bring to consciousness what they know at deeper levels (Carbonetti, 1998). Image making connects our inner selves to something universal, transporting us back and forth between past and present, self and other, personal and archetypal. Image work helps to make contact with imagination, the deepest voice of the soul and to extinguish usual modes of analytical thinking. After all, the earliest beginnings of our experiences are nonverbal images.

In a way, drawing is a type of meditation. It is embodied energy made visible. Painting, drawing, poetry, and journal writing are all ways of making it available for contemplation. To encourage the intuitive artist within to emerge, I ask students to make a series of ten scribble drawings with eyes closed, using both hands, standing and sitting, turning the paper in any direction, and using different materials such as pencils, water-colours, markers, pastels, and acrylics. After each drawing students free associate and try to discern images emerging from the scribbles that may represent interior dialogue with the soul. In some cases, very noticeable patterns are clearly present in all ten drawings. I also emphasize that it is all right not to know what an image might mean in a cognitive sense. It may take time to unfold its meaning or merely be a fragmentary gestalt that will grow with time. I encourage students to trust their inner knowing and let the image do the guiding and instructing.
As art therapist Pat Allen (1995) points out, “the image process is a journey [and] to come to an absolute conclusion about an image is to rob it of its power as a guide (61). Instead, she suggests following it patiently “like a trail of bread crumbs as far as you can” (74). Allen cautions that the primary obstacle to drawing is losing focus on the subject and shifting consciousness to judging the results. However, she also believes that it is important to honour the resistance and get to know your inner critic. The critic holds valuable information and can mature and change into a compassionate helper if you are open and accepting to this process.

According to Allen, images reveal that we are holographic beings, living multiple lives. However, as she points out, “we often get stuck in one view of self and lose the richness of our multiplicity” (10). She believes that images often come to inform us of embodied messages that are not consciously apparent and they have an “integrated effect on the mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual totality of a human being” (xvii). In addition, Allen argues that “all that is unexpressed is saved and recorded in the body, like a careful scrapbook. . . and the contents of our mind, when left unexamined, exert a strong influence over our behaviour. These unexamined contents can be a source of our resistance to living fully and joyously” (59).

Our soul’s deepest wish is for us to see this resistance, according to Allen. She also reminds us that “the image is the messenger of your soul and never comes to harm you” (60). In fact, Allen argues that “the soul narrates your deepest truth through image and metaphor” (82). To know our soul, she contends, “is to become free of the power exerted by the contents of the mind to limit us” (60). In support of this position, Thomas Moore (1998) adds that, “we care for the soul by honouring its expressions, by giving it time and opportunity to reveal itself, and by living in a way that fosters the depth, interiority and quality in which it flourishes” (248). “The first step in caring for the soul,” he suggests(1997), is to “get out of its way and let our full genius emerge (5).

**Collage Work**

Images and pictures in books or magazines can also inspire and trigger memories and feelings, according to Margot Sunderland (1993). The process of image synthesis in collage work involves the skill of suspending judgement and of being open to serendipity, as Lynn Butler-Kisber (2002) points out. At some point, the intellect releases the intuitive. As she suggests, visual images are inherently more ambiguous and multifarious than text, allowing us to move to an intuitive, associative state where images find us and speak to us on a holistic, emotional level.

I demonstrate how this intuitive process works using a series of my own poetry and collages to reveal how emerging images drew out issues, albeit surprising, that are worthwhile for me to explore further. I explained to students that upon completing the first collage I noticed the pair of red hands in a prominent position on the page. To me, the hands seemed swollen and covered in blood. Free association led me to thoughts about mothers who care for others at the expense of self. I titled the work *Red Hands* and wrote a poem about maternal sacrifice. In the second collage of the series, I deliberately looked for magazine images of hands and covered the page with these. As I reflected on this collage, I immediately noticed that all the hands were severed at the wrist and disembodied. This led to another poem entitled *Cutting Off Our Hands* that addresses war and the loss of control as hands that originally worked in the earth were encouraged to operate machines and weapons. In the final work of this trilogy, I used photographs of my mother’s hands and explored themes of loss, aging, and grief.

Often such emotional experiences cannot be reduced to words. Words, in fact, can distort the meaning of experiences and result in an over-generalized or insufficient understanding. Words often lose their power to represent subtle variations of meaning. Translating feelings into images rather than words can be less threatening and help make an inner impression more visible and tangible. Because most of our waking thoughts appear in images, image
making is also a familiar process.

Like intuitive and metaphorical thinking, image-making must be practiced in order to tap into the endless stream of messages that are available to us every day. This process begins by being fully present and aware in the moment. I encourage students to notice what pleases them in order to become acquainted with their own personal aesthetic energy. It is a matter of noticing the essence of things, seeing infinitude in the ordinary—colors, shape, textures, and details both centrally and peripherally.

As a way of drawing forth their inner images and critics, I have students bring magazines and scissors to class. I ask them to rip out images that appeal to them without trying to consider any reasons or patterns for their selections. After these images are collected, they form collages by gluing these images onto large posters. Photocopies of family photographs can also be used. I suggest that students display their collages at home and study them closely before the next class to determine any inner wisdom that might emerge from the image patterns. During the following class students work in their triad groups, listening to initial interpretations and adding new insights from other members’ perspectives. We are nourished by viewing images made by others that resonate within us as well. We alternate between the role of witness and receiver. Often our initial metaphors emerge again in these collages.

As an extension of this collage work, I introduce to my students to the concept of a ‘Smile Book.’ On the cover they paste magazine pictures of people with great smiles. I then ask them to bring in photos of themselves to include in this book. We focus on our own smiles and write descriptions of these. On the next few pages they write about things that make them smile or cut our newspaper stories that bring on a smile. We watch each other over the course of the next few classes and write descriptive notes about how smiles from others make us feel. Sometimes we draw secret names at the beginning of the class and make sure we smile at that person at least once during the day. I conclude this exercise by reading a section from Thich Nhat Hanh’s book on ‘Mindfulness’ (1975) in which he suggests maintaining a half smile to affirm that you are in complete mindfulness and that nourishes this mindfulness (43).

Mandalas

Another visual exercise I introduce is The Mandala. I explain that mandalas are archetypal circle motifs that have been produced in every known culture. They appear in our dreams and in the early art work of young children. For this reason, many psychologists including Susanne Fincher (1991) conclude that mandala symbolize a safe refuge of inner reconciliation and wholeness. Perhaps, the circle in encoded in our bodies through our connectedness with the motion of atoms, planets, and orbits or the shape of the sun, the moon, and the eye. It is the basic pattern of dances, cardinal direction, and zodiac wheels.

I begin with a guided visualization in which students image a circle in the middle of their forehead. As they breath, the circle begins to grow until it encompasses the room and then the universe. After about a minute of silence to contemplate this image, students are given circular pieces of paper and asked to draw their mandala as they stay with the feeling of being one with the universe. Using a set of guideline questions (Dahlke, 1992), students analyze the construction of their own mandala and what it might reveal at the intuitive level. I ask them to identify repetitive patterns and numbers, where they began, the colours used, the degree of symmetry, abstraction and preplanning, and tolerance for ‘mistakes.’

Next I show students a series of slides showing a variety of mandalas created by artists, native people, and children. Some are created with paint while others are created with objects and natural material such as leaves, feathers, and stones. Using insights developed from our discussion of these slides, I ask each student to create another mandala based on more deliberate planning and bring it to the next class. I facilitate another visualization exercise in which I invite them to imagine walking around inside their mandala and to
write about this experience. Once again, I use my own images and written descriptions as an example of freeing the intuitive self.

The Power of Sound, Chanting, and Drumming

One of the course experiences that I enjoy the most is the drumming/percussion session. Based on the work of Jonathan Goldman (2002), I point out to students that everything in the world is in a state of vibration including the human body. Every part of the body has a healthy resonant frequency and when it vibrates out of frequency a dis-ease is created. By listening to music that is high in harmonic content, we can charge the cortex of the brain, reduce respiration and heart rate, alter blood pressure, and lower brainwave activity. “We are truly a celestial orchestra filled with sound,” according to Goldman, and sitting in silence enables us to begin to know the inner symphony that is ourselves” (81). By using musical instruments such as drums and chimes, technical tools such as tuning forks and even our own voice (including laughter), we can bring about significant changes in our energy fields (chakra centres). The sacred chants and mantras from ancient Hindu and Tibetan cultures are believed to serve this purpose.

To introduce this concept, I ask students to sit with straight backs, imagining an invisible thread running straight up from their navel, up through their heart, between their eyes and out the top of their head. Taking in a deep breath, I instruct them to sigh loudly as they exhale. Often, I am aware that students are self-conscious and reluctant to create these primal sounds at first. It is sometimes easier to use the long and short vowel sounds or to sing C – E – G – C on the harmonic scale. When I ask them to notice what part of their bodies resonate with a high pitched or low pitched sound, they readily discover that high notes vibrate in the head and low notes vibrate in the chest or gut. Then, using the drums, I introduce the concept of resonance and entrainment. By placing the palm of the hand on the surface of the drum as we vocalize sounds, it is apparent that the sound in one vibrating body reaches out and sets another body in motion. In fact, a more powerful rhythmic vibration of one object such as a drum can change the less powerful rhythmic vibration of another object and cause them to synchronize their rhythms.

When the whole class plays a drum beat together, this experience of entrainment is very therapeutic and almost hypnotic. A group synergy is created that unifies and transcends the individuals involved. As Robert Friedman (2000) suggests, “the drum fulfills the human need to be heard, to find simplicity, and to make connections with the heart, mind, and soul of others” (21). The reasons to drum are multifold, as Tom Klower (1997) points out. Drumming creates a primitive creative force, transporting us out of the mind and into the body. It connects the psyche and the spirit, penetrating the deepest layers of consciousness and centring our attention. It reduces stress, stimulates neural pathways, endocrine and immune systems, causes the pituitary gland to secrete hormones, and enhances immunity. It is also an easy instrument to play and impossible to make a mistake. Any sound works.

By leading students through a series of short exercises initially, a spontaneous improvisation session always emerges. We begin by imitating our heart beat, emphasizing the first or last sound in each pair. We then speed this beat up to double time or quarter time and then slow it again. We experiment making different sounds in the centre or rim of the drum. We drum out the syllables in our names or drum familiar nursery rhymes. We then create nonsense phrases or ‘scat’ to imitate such as dum diddle dum dum. We play follow the leader or bring each drum into the circle one at a time and then fade them out the same way. CD recordings of drumming music can also be used to vary the effect. However we proceed, I notice that everyone smiles and enjoys the experience.

COURSE EVALUATION

Curriculum Implications

In order to implement a holistic curriculum in schools, it is my belief that we must start
with the teachers. Only by experiencing the power of embodied knowing first-hand can teachers be persuaded to balance doing and being and to value elements of subjectivity and humanism that might conflict with the status quo of institutional learning. Only by connecting to their own inner spirit and self-worth can we hope to counteract competition, power, and control in classrooms with such non-tangible ways of knowing beyond the five senses as intuition, creativity, and wonder. As holistic role models, teachers can effectively influence their students to live mindfully in the moment, to appreciate their connectedness both inwardly and outwardly, and to maintain harmonious and healthy relationships with self and others. Teachers must become advocates for nurturing the heart and soul of our students as well as their minds.

This shift in traditional thinking is an immense challenge that extends far beyond the boundaries of the classroom but it can begin with small steps. Including holistic learning into pre-service and in-service teachers’ courses can have a positive impact, as my course evaluations attest to, and would provide a good foundation for future teachers (see table 3). Adapting selected topics from this course to pilot in classrooms would also provide valuable data to support program changes as well. Offering workshops for parents would help to engage the community and raise the level of awareness about the impact of experiences that touch the whole person. In many cases, parents need to be convinced that subject content and high scores on tests will not necessarily ensure fulfilling, purposeful lives for their children as long as self-worth and authentic personhood are ignored in schools. I invite other educators to take up this challenge, add to these course experiences and become attuned to embodied, soulful learning in their own lives. Let’s make classrooms spirit-filled sanctuaries where the worthiness of personhood thrives and is celebrated.

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Activity Books for Children Focusing on Self-Identity and Self-Esteem


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