

August 2018

A Message from the EREA Executive Director

Dear Friends and Colleagues,

The warmest of greetings at the beginning of another busy term.

I was recently asked to give a talk at a conference centred around doing schools differently. I was asked to identify some ways in which our spiritual traditions can motivate the work of education, particularly the education of the disenfranchised. What follows are some extracts from my talk.

This morning I will speak about spirituality, education and the disadvantaged. In doing this, I acknowledge those who have formed me in these areas, many of who are nameless people whom I have encountered in my travels throughout the developing world. I have learned more from these people than I ever did in any formal university studies.

These people have taught me that excellence in schooling has little to do with enrolment numbers or the standard of buildings. They have taught me that inclusion of those who are marginalised is vital for the development of all societies. They have taught me that a school's capacity to make a difference is not simply dependent on its physical resources but rather, on the resolve within the community to build happiness and resilience in students and embrace solidarity with the excluded ones.


Your conference is so important.

You are here because of your deep belief in the young and their right to live full, engaged and creative lives.

You are here because you believe that our current models of education are not serving many of the most vulnerable of our young people.

You are here because you believe in the worth and dignity of all young people and the right of all to become co-creators of the world they live in.



A background image showing the silhouettes of several people standing in a field, looking towards a bright sunset or sunrise. The sky is a mix of orange, red, and purple. The people are in the foreground, their forms dark against the bright light.

Someone wise once said: 'Teaching people skills - without giving them a vision for a better future, a vision based on common values - is only training.' Your conference is not about training.

In preparing for this morning, I have made the assumption that there are several people present who come to education from a faith-based background. I also assume that there are many people who don't.

I am not going to argue that education inspired by a religious, spiritual or faith conviction is essential in animating education of the disadvantaged. This is simply not true.

I will propose that the best education that we can offer is that which liberates the young and gives them skills to negotiate for their right to the fullness of life and participation in society.

This is particularly important for those young people whose potential for fullness of life is stifled by the experience of purposelessness, disconnection and loneliness.

This morning I will speak primarily from my own Christian tradition. However, I will propose that all spiritual traditions, lived authentically, can guide and motivate an education which promotes fullness of life, liberation and empowerment. I will suggest that at their best, they do this very well.

I say 'at their best' because often the richness of spiritual traditions is obscured by moralising, intellectualising and defending themselves. The central teachings of the founders of these traditions can be clouded by the accumulation of rigid practices, ideologies and dogma.

Each of our great traditions of spirituality is a call to the mind of the One God; different roads converging upon the same point. Within their varying contexts, they all offer insights into how we can address the great questions of human existence. The same voice in different languages.

Bede Griffiths, the late Benedictine monk who lived in India, described it this way: 'The fingers on my hand represent each of the world's major religious faiths. At the top of my fingers they are all very different and separate from one another. This is the level of theology, beliefs and customs. But as you move more deeply into each tradition, to the level of encounter with God, you converge on a common centre, a common source. This is represented by my palm where my fingers meet.'

This common source proposes that every human being has a divine essence and our core task here on earth is to realise our divine nature and form connections with the rest of humanity who are also infused with this God presence.

The common source speaks to meaning and the ultimate purpose of life. It guides us in what constitutes a good and well lived life. It explores how relationships are best engaged with. It proposes that if we live in awareness of our true nature, we strive to be compassionate and loving because this is the essence of the Divinity we share.

Our humanity comes to fullness through connection and relationship with others. Certainly, this longing for the experience of connection is not just for those who are religious or spiritually inclined. However, at their best, our spiritual traditions speak to this quest with clarity and urgency.

As well as advocating for an education that liberates young people, my sense is that many of you believe, as I do, that education itself needs liberation.

Our education systems are at risk of suffering the same fate as our religions. Being bound up by results, easily codified evidence of success, triumphalism and shallow indicators of success. This makes education easy fodder for those who wish to use it as a political tool and feed off the fear of the majority. Many of you know this, that is why you are here.

In the Indian scripture, the Bhagavad Gita, Lord Krishna proposes that the true essence of education is the acquiring of what He calls 'virtuous knowledge': the capacity to perceive unity in diversity and reverence the universal God present in all.

In a world where borders are closing, more than ever, education must aim to free people from insular thinking, narrowness and intolerance.

To quote the Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore, education is most powerful when: 'The mind is without fear and the head is held high; Where knowledge is free; Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls; Where words come out of the depth of truth.'

I think that our greatest dread as human beings is that we go through life as observers and not participants. Tagore expressed this fear when he lamented that: 'I have spent my days stringing and unstringing my instrument while the song I came to sing remains unsung.' We know that many of the young people we may work with are at risk of dying with their song still inside them.

Our spiritual traditions speak of God's offer of life and salvation. 'Saved from what?' one of my students once asked. The scriptures teach that we can be saved from meaninglessness and purposelessness. This is 'Good News' for our young, many of whom are at risk of perishing due to lack of meaning and purpose in their lives.

You know Carl Jung was so right when he said that:

'One looks back with appreciation to the brilliant teachers, but with special gratitude to those who touched our humanity.'

What does it matter that we teach young people to read, write and do arithmetic, when they don't seem to learn vital lessons on life's sacredness, meaning and purpose, as well as a sense of the beauty and dignity of their own worth and personhood?

We live in a society devoid of conversation about the infinite and ultimate meaning of our lives. Could it be that we can teach our young so much about so many things, but fail to prepare them for a full, creative and engaged life?

Our young will only ever be half educated unless they acquire a sense of human dignity and worth, the capacity to question and make meaning, the ability to give and receive love, the capacity to contribute and live reflectively and compassionately, consistent with our inner moral compass.

Ours can be a culture where things can be valued over people, where having can be valued above giving and success can sometimes be limited to how much we accumulate.

Education must skill our young in critiquing their culture and its version of what constitutes the good, the well lived, the important and the meaningful life. It should identify and celebrate the ennobling elements within our culture but offer alternatives to those definitions of reality that oppress and enslave the human spirit.

‘The highest education is that which does not merely give us information but makes our life in harmony with all existence,’ said Rabindranath Tagore from the Hindu tradition.

One of the tasks of education is to reveal the joy of the infinite!

We want our students to be happy and experience inner peace. We must teach them, however, that happiness cannot be travelled to, owned, earned, worn or consumed.

Our spiritual traditions propose that lasting happiness is closer to contentment, peace of mind and freedom from anxiety, than it is to the always fleeting experience of physical pleasure. Lasting happiness arises from living in accord with the purpose of existence; claiming the freedom to react, choose and engage with the world on our own terms.

Inner peace is a product not of what you accomplish, but of how you are. Inner peace is a skill in how to be. The seeker of peace strives to live intentionally, selectively, naturally, knowledgeably, and harmoniously amid losses, defeats and gradual decline.

Our spiritual traditions encourage happiness and peace through the cultivation of an inner life which generates autonomy from the demands and promises of our dominant culture. It encourages a life of equanimity, harmony; independent of the approval or good opinion of others.

Our spiritual traditions remind us that the freedom we may enjoy through the good fortune of our birth, is not a license to do whatever we want. Rather, it is freedom to do what we must do for the making of a fairer and more just society. Similarly, a truly liberating education not only frees ‘from’, but also frees ‘to and for’. It teaches that freedom and service are inextricably linked and with privilege comes social responsibility.

Jesus preached not a religion, nor an institution, not even himself but the Kingdom of God, a concept that is essentially about the righting of humanity; a new world order based on relationships of justice, inclusion, love and peace.

In Jesus’ teachings, love is at the centre of all being - love that is forgiving, unconditional, and not self-serving. Similarly, the Buddha taught that when our true nature is realised, the divine states of loving-kindness, compassion and empathetic joy emerge.

At the core of Jesus' vision was inclusion of the excluded. He stood against systemic injustice and hypocrisy; he touched the 'untouchables'; the 'unclean', those with disabilities, the leprosy affected, the tax collectors, the widows - the list of those included goes on. Through Jesus, all experienced an inclusion that led them to new life.

Similarly, the Prophet Mohammad said: 'One who strives to help the widow or the poor is one who struggles in the cause of Allah.' And: 'If you love the poor and bring them near to you, God will bring you near to him.'

The vision of Jesus promotes inclusion, service and compassionate engagement with the world as indispensable to the way his followers worship God. The great Hindu yogi Sri Ramakrishna echoed this truth by saying: 'Service to humankind kind is service to God.'

This vision of these traditions challenges and animates educators to give priority to inclusion of those who are marginalised for one reason or other.

At the Global Congress on Education in 2015, Pope Francis proposed that education generally has become selective and elitist. 'This is shameful', he said. Instead of bridging the gap between people, it widens it. It creates a barrier between poor and rich. 'No one should be denied', he challenged. He suggested that if necessary, we must leave the places where we are as educators and go to the outskirts, to the poor.

Bishop Samuel Ruiz Garcia, retired Bishop of Chiapas, the poorest Diocese in Mexico, once famously said: 'The only question we will have to answer at the end of time is how we have treated the marginalised.'

The vision of Jesus cannot be separated from a commitment to stand with those who are marginalised and excluded. Bishop Pedro Casadalinga from Brazil put it most strongly: 'Without the poor there is no salvation, without the poor there is no Church, without the poor there is no Gospel.'

For Christians, our authenticity is determined by who we include! The Koran offers a similar benchmark for authenticity by stating: 'He is not a true believer who eats his fill while others go hungry.'

In my short time with you this morning, I have proposed that education inspired by our spiritual traditions gives priority to an exploration of how life can be lived fully and freely. I have proposed that the search for fullness of life in connection with others who share our common humanity, is a common goal of all spiritual traditions.

I have argued that at the centre of the Christian and other traditions, is an undeniable mandate to strive for inclusion and the support of the marginalised and disenfranchised of the world.

I hope that something in my contribution has been helpful and my best wishes to you as you pursue the vital themes of doing schooling differently.

My best wishes to you all for the remainder of term three.

Wayne



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