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A YEARNING FOR WHOLENESS:  
SPIRITUALITY IN EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY

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Numerous popular figures currently espouse the importance of spirituality. Some prominent voices, such as Deepak Chopra, Marianne Williamson, and Eckhart Tolle, advocate a more spiritual existence, warning that the earth and humanity are engaged in a seismic change. Recently, even mainstream media outlets have taken an interest in what “spiritual types” have to say. To note just one example, Tom Shadyac’s documentary, “I Am,” was discussed by Bob Edwards on NPR in April 2011. The shift of spiritual leaders from fringe to fairly mainline attention is intriguing and perhaps represents a reevaluation of the separation constructed during modernity that relegated the religious, spiritual, and the emotive to an inferior status—that is, as being subjective and the stuff of non-intellectuals.

Andrew Harvey, an Oxford-educated academic, provides somewhat of a bridge between the popular culture and academia in spiritual matters.<sup>1</sup> A public figure, Harvey operates a spirituality center and speaks in many public venues about the need for taking the spiritual nature of humankind seriously. Harvey describes the present era as a grave, emergency situation that threatens humankind if a balance is not restored between “science” (rationality) and the spiritual. His list of causes for alarm includes global warming, corporate greed, addiction to science, technology, and rationality, and the retreat to fundamentalism in many religions. Advocating for spirituality that will lead to sacred activism, Harvey proposes not just connecting with, but embodying, the often-identified major elements of spirituality: compassion and love. Much like Tenzin Gyatso, the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama, Harvey stresses the importance of living the divine Love.

Harvey’s philosophy is raising important problems and giving a solution that has historically been a part of many world religions and of selected philosophic thought. However, because of the ways in which religion has been conceptualized, especially during modernity, Harvey’s definitions of the spiritual and the sacred seem a bit odd and inappropriate, especially for academic settings. But that is the problem that I am attempting to raise in this essay: we are out of practice in being able to talk about the sacred, or the spiritual, and that may be a reason why many individuals report a state of imbalance in their lives, institutions, and in the general culture. Therefore, after examining the effects of the separation of faith and reason during modernity, I

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew Harvey, *Hope: A Guide to Sacred Activism* (Carlsbad, CA: Hay House, 2009).

will note the possible benefits of encouraging the inclusion of spirituality in the learning experiences of individuals, giving examples from the work of recent advocates.

During modernity, with the rise of science and the attention paid to its promising practices, a fairly substantial rift developed between faith and reason (science) which brought about metaphysical, ontological, and epistemological changes: a new way of viewing what counts as knowledge developed and affected the way that reality is conceptualized. Interestingly, when early modernist John Locke wrote his treatise on education in the 1600's, he posited the main quality of an educated man as being virtuous, which he defined as having belief in God.<sup>2</sup> In the interval from then to now, talk of God, or faith, in relation to the educated person has either been eliminated or drastically diminished. Even though many of Locke's other pronouncements about education are fairly commonplace to today's educational thought, his definition of the educated man is oddly not subscribed to now. The dismissal of the value Locke placed on faith is indicative of what tended to happen with the sacred during modernity.

Physicist Arthur Zajonc, explaining how the mechanistic and materialistic notions of modern physics came to dominate Western thinking, describes the epistemological shift of modernity that occurred, noting that even philosophy and the life sciences have moved into this paradigm. Claiming that thinkers were searching for the precision that modern physical theory offered, Zajonc describes the effects in the following way:

Genetics, evolution, and cellular biology displaced natural history and whole organism biology. The mind itself, traditionally understood as expression of the spirit, gradually became part of the mechanistic universe as well. By the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the physics of the 17<sup>th</sup> century had successfully conquered the adjacent areas of science and was encroaching on that of mind. A single mechanistic paradigm and its associated materialistic metaphysics came to dominate Western thinking.<sup>3</sup>

The academy, during modernity, gradually removed arguments that included allusions to the sacred or faith from standard curriculum and placed them solely under the supervision of theology departments and divinity schools. As theologian and popular writer Karen Armstrong notes, during modernity God was redefined and the numerous abuses of the medieval church were featured,

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<sup>22</sup> John Locke, "Some Thoughts Concerning Education," in *Philosophical Documents in Education*, ed. Ronald F. Reed and Tony W. Johnson (New York: Longman, 2000), 55-56.

<sup>3</sup> Arthur Zajonc, ed. *The New Physics and Cosmology: Dialogues with the Dalai Lama*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 4-5.

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thus increasing a wider subscription to atheism and the dismissal of the religious aspects of life. The religious and sacred (identified as a part of the organized church) seemed outdated and the stuff of magic.<sup>4</sup> This attitude, fairly silenced conversation in academia, related to an important component of humanity's existence—spirituality.

English philosopher Dr. Keith Ward provides a personal story that epitomizes the marginalization to which I refer. Dr. Ward, noting that the manner in which his work was received markedly changed when his job and title went from philosopher at a London university to theologian at Oxford, states:

The way I was perceived by other people changed considerably. For some, being a Regius Professor at Oxford (technically, the senior professor in the university) was very grand. But for others, it was a definite slide down the ladder of academic respectability. For from being a free-thinking and radical philosopher, I had suddenly, somewhere on the road from London to Oxford, developed what Richard Dawkins calls a 'theological mind'. And that, he thought, was rather like developing some sort of mental illness.<sup>5</sup>

Dr. Ward's experience has been replicated numerous times in the academy.

A major reason, then, that educators and thinkers may be reluctant to overtly include spirituality in their conversations and in schooling policies rests with spirituality's ties to religion. However, the terms, religion and spirituality, are not synonymous: a person can be spiritual without being religious and religious without being spiritual. Nonetheless, there appears to be a reluctance among philosophers and educators to offer theories of spirituality. Annette L. Becker refers to this hesitation to include the spiritual in philosophical discourse as

a pause, a pause that assumes an entangled relationship between spirituality and religion, a pause that represents guardedness against 'right wing' agendas and fundamental fanaticism and a pause that is supported by the belief that individuals should learn about spirituality in their church or home rather than college.<sup>6</sup>

I add an additional reason for "the pause": spirituality resists examination in typically philosophic ways because of its nature, rendering a

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<sup>4</sup> Karen Armstrong, *The Case for God: What Religion Really Means* (London: Vintage Books, 2010).

<sup>5</sup> Keith Ward, *Why There Almost Certainly Is a God* (Oxford: Lion Hudson, 2008), 7.

<sup>6</sup> Annette L. Becker, "Ethical Considerations of Teaching Spirituality in the Academy," *Nursing Ethics* 16, no. 6 (2009): 698.

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working definition difficult or elusive. In referring to the spiritual, thinkers often reach outside of the current rational/scientific paradigm, perhaps moving from logos to mythos. Even though we may be able to identify a nascent academic discourse related to spiritual matters, definitions vary and are often unclear, and in many ways the concept is hermeneutical and still in process. For example, in this paper, I am using Arthur Zajonc's definition of spirituality: "those immaterial dimensions of life that give it meaning and purpose, and which have lived at the heart of liberal education since its inception."<sup>7</sup> However, even this definition does not quite fully encompass my intended meaning, which illustrates the difficulty of defining and employing the term.

Whatever the rationale for the pause in including the spiritual, the avoidance of the topic and the inferior designation given to spirituality has taken a toll on individuals, schools, and the wider culture. The problem relates to a matter of balance. A dominating, materialistic epistemology, resting on scientific method, rationality, and technology (the current, dominant paradigm), requires the balance of the spiritual. Cosmic shift talk in the popular culture arises from a felt need, a need for more balance, leading to connectedness that honors the spiritual, or sacred, and the ineffable qualities of the human experience. The same yearning for a more connected ontology and epistemology is evident in the work of an increasing number of current scholarly writers, from philosophers to scientists. For example, Parker Palmer noted the problem at least fifteen years ago, as is evidenced in *The Courage to Teach*.<sup>8</sup> Specifically, he alluded to the penchant of those in American culture to think in polarities that lead to imbalance and to a lack of wholeness.

More recently, Palmer and Zajonc have written about the necessity to locate an integrative, transformative pedagogy that addresses "the whole human being—mind, heart, and spirit—in ways that contribute best to our future on this fragile planet."<sup>9</sup> Zajonc's and Palmer's work expresses a yearning for a wholeness—where those things usually associated with the spiritual, such as imagination, multiple ways of knowing, and creativity, can find validation. For example, Zajonc contends that individuals are living with the wrong "knowledge map," a map that leads toward the living of divided lives and atomistic learning.<sup>10</sup> Zajonc draws the faulty knowledge map as having religion, faith, moral codes, and values on one side, with science, reason, natural knowledge and facts on the other. He notes that life and

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<sup>7</sup> Arthur Zajonc, "Spirituality in Higher Education: Overcoming the Divide," *Liberal Education* 89, no. 1 (2003): 50.

<sup>8</sup> Parker J. Palmer. *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998).

<sup>9</sup> Parker J. Palmer and Arthur Zajonc, *The Heart of Higher Education: A Call to Renewal* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010), 5.

<sup>10</sup> Arthur Zajonc, "Spirituality in Higher Education," *Liberal Education* 89, no. 1 (2003): 54.

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knowing simply do not work well when divided in that way. Using his own field as an example, he claims that scientific advances occur when scientists realize the holistic nature of the world and universe and when creativity and imagination take precedence over strict scientific method.

This dichotomous way of dividing individuals' lives and groups' values has led to a fragmented way of being and to an absurd craze in schooling policy where numerical data trumps all other considerations and truncates the definition of what it means to be educated. It isn't that there weren't warnings. Important thinkers, from a variety of fields, during the last century attempted to point out of the dangers of an overly defined view of the scientific method as the premier way to knowledge. For example, Einstein's famous early twentieth century quotes about the importance of imagination, creativity, and spirituality, often attached to office doors and bulletin boards, are for the most part, ignored in practice.

In the middle of last century, Columbia University philosopher Susanne Langer also pointed out the balance problem by warning that our civilization is over dosing on facts and data. She writes:

We have inherited the realistic outlook and its intellectual ideal, science. We have inherited a naïve faith in the substantiality and ultimacy of facts, and are convinced that human life, to have any value, must be not only casually and opportunely adapted to their exigencies . . . but must be intellectually filled with an appreciation of "things as they are." Facts are our very measure of value.<sup>11</sup>

While not eschewing science and facts, Langer does, however, emphasize that they are not the only measure of things or the only way to know:

The upshot of it all is that the so-called 'empirical spirit' has taken possession of our scholarship and speculation as well as of our common sense, so that in pure theory as well as in business and politics the last appeal is always to that peculiar hybrid of concept and percept, the "given fact." . . . Science is an intellectual scheme for handling facts, a vast and relatively stable context in which whole classes of facts may be understood. But it is not the most decisive expression of realistic thinking.<sup>12</sup>

Extending that thought to the wider community, Langer writes: "Nature, as man has always known it, he knows no more. Since he has learned to esteem

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<sup>11</sup> Susanne K. Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1942), 272.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 274-275.

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signs above symbols, to suppress his emotional reactions in favor of practical ones and make use of nature instead of holding so much of it sacred, he has altered the face, if not the heart, of reality.”<sup>13</sup>

Langer recognized the importance of the symbolic as a way of conceptualizing and knowing. She claimed that the penchant for facts denigrates the important ways that individuals express felt thought or their spiritual natures through art, music, dance, ritual, and so forth. Also writing at approximately the same time as Langer, Thomas Merton noted, “The way to find the real world is not merely to measure and observe what is outside us, but to discover our own inner ground.”<sup>14</sup> He claims that action without deep self-understanding gives nothing to others. Basically, Merton refers to the ability of humans to use their consciousness to think about their own thinking. In so doing, individuals can examine their values, beliefs, wishes, and desires. In searching for their own inner grounding, individuals often find themselves entering into the ground of all being, love.<sup>15</sup> Merton, thinking in this vein, compares the university and the monastery as both being the institutions in civilization that are “open to the sacred.” He notes, though, that in a way the two institutions are in competition to find “the hidden and sacred values” that ground existence.<sup>16</sup> Even though modern universities tend to be logos centered, Merton claims that sometimes a deeper mystical contemplation comes from universities than from monasteries. Therefore, Merton cautioned universities, in much the same manner as does Langer, not to lose the mythos or symbolic way of knowing and being.

So, here we are, in a new century, with voices both in the wider culture and in academia, increasing in volume and number suggesting that something is amiss with both our ontology and epistemology. In academia, advocates of postmodernism have been most prominent in their criticism of the foci of modernity, and their work has placed a gossamer thread of doubt upon the paradigm. For example, the enlightenment/modernity model places, as Glenn Hughes describes it, “faith in the complete self-sufficiency of human reason.”<sup>17</sup> Humans know that there is more than this. Spirituality advocates rest their argument on the need for balance; that is, without the inclusion of spirituality as a part of epistemology, scientific, rational thinking becomes mechanistic and inhibiting. Spirituality allows not only for inner work but also for transcendence, and to these two qualities I now turn.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 279.

<sup>14</sup> Thomas Merton, “Contemplation in a World of Action,” in *Thomas Merton: Spiritual Master*, ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham (New York: Paulist Press, 1992), 386.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 387.

<sup>16</sup> Thomas Merton, “Learning to Live,” in *Thomas Merton: Spiritual Master*, ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham (New York: Paulist Press, 1992), 361.

<sup>17</sup> Glenn Hughes, *Transcendence and History: The Search for Ultimacy from Ancient Societies to Postmodernity* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003), 2.

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Recognizing the role of the spiritual (creativity, the emotions, intuition, mystery) in the ways individuals reflect upon the world as they seek to locate insights seems to be quite important. Numerous academicians appear to realize that the complexity of consciousness goes beyond reason, or that quality that is used in reasoned decisions, and method; however, little mention is made in academic discourse of the role that the creative imagination, or the spiritual, plays in reasoned decisions and self-reflection. In part, the mode of reflection that one uses in perception and cognition depends upon one's self-perception. As Merton claimed, "Life consists in learning to live on one's own, spontaneous, freewheeling: to do this one must recognize what is one's own—be familiar and at home with oneself. This means basically learning who one is, and learning what one has to offer to the contemporary world, and then learning how to make that offering valid."<sup>18</sup>

Engaging in inner reflection affects the manner in which one contemplates the world in which one is embedded and learning. As Alexander W. Astin explains, the "spiritual domain has to do with human consciousness—what we experience privately in our subjective awareness," and it "involves our qualitative or affective experiences at least as much as it does our reasoning or logic." In addition, according to Astin, spirituality has to do with values and with "intuition, inspiration, the mysterious, and the mystical."<sup>19</sup> Astin further claims that, "Our thoughts and our reasoning are almost always taking place in some kind of affective . . . context."<sup>20</sup> This claim is not unlike Susanne Langer's when she insisted that all thought comes from feeling. Therefore, arguments can be made that the cognitive and the spiritual are strongly interrelated. Individuals bring their inner lives to the learning experience, and the experience is affected by who the learner is. The dichotomy between subjective self and objective knowledge is an artificial one. The inner work of spirituality contains the passion or energizing principle that moves the individual toward learning or compassion or toward the other.

Many spiritual advocates claim that the grounding of a spiritual existence is love, yet most modern philosophers have edged away from discussion of love in the pursuit of knowledge even though the derivation of the word philosophy itself includes it: love of wisdom. Norman Wirzba notes that love precedes wisdom because it opens the human heart and the mind to the whole of reality—a reality that is more than facts and data.<sup>21</sup> Although modern philosophers have tended to be suspicious of love and other subjective notions

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<sup>18</sup> Thomas Merton, "Contemplation," 358.

<sup>19</sup> Alexander W. Astin, "Why Spirituality Deserves a Central Place in the Academy," *Liberal Education* 90, no. 2 (2004): 34.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>21</sup> Norman Wirzba, "The Primacy of Love," in *Transforming Philosophy and Religion: Love's Wisdom*, ed. Norman Wirzba and Bruce Ellis (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008).

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because they are thought to hinder the objective search for truth, perhaps the opposite is more accurate. That is, objectivity prevents thinkers from seeing the world and others in their wholeness. Categorizing thought and feeling into the objective and subjective ignores the complexity of the lived experience and knowing. A relationship exists between the subjective and the objective whether or not one decides to acknowledge it. As Palmer and Zajonc state, “At bottom, knowing and loving significantly overlap each other: there are passions of the mind that are almost indistinguishable from passions of the heart in the energy they generate.”<sup>22</sup>

A spirituality grounded in love, then, inspires curiosity, wonder, reverence and passion for life, as well as compassion and empathy for others. Such spirituality enables the individual to transcend the personal, or the self, so that connections with others, the past, and the earth can be made. Individuals and learners are embedded in groups. Being able to connect with and evaluate the work of the group forms an essential part of an individual’s life; I would argue that it leads to the growth, in the Deweyan sense, of individuals and the group. The interest in the other and the patience required to “hear” the other stands a better chance of development if one embodies the love of spirituality.

Interestingly, John Dewey’s work can be read as containing a most definite spiritual quality. David Hansen’s beautiful analysis of Dewey’s educational philosophy contains the claim that, “at the core of Dewey’s thoughts on education is his belief that life constitutes a generative gift.”<sup>23</sup> Indeed, it is difficult to read Dewey’s works without noticing that he is proposing a way of educating youth that will enable them to flourish in life and in so doing, enhance the life of the community. As Dewey writes in *A Common Faith*,

The ideal ends to which we attach our faith are not shadowy and wavering. They assume concrete form in our understanding of our relations to one another and the values contained in these relations. We who now live are parts of a humanity that extends into the remote past, a humanity that has interacted with nature. The things in civilization we most prize are not of ourselves. They exist by grace of the doings and sufferings of the continuous human community in which we are a link. Ours is the responsibility of conserving, transmitting, rectifying and expanding the heritage of values we have received that those who come after us may receive it more solid and secure, more widely accessible and more generously shared than we have received it. Here are all the

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<sup>22</sup> Palmer and Zajonc, *The Heart of Higher Education*, 29.

<sup>23</sup> David T. Hansen, ed. *Ethical Visions of Education: Philosophy in Practice* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2007), 22.

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elements for a religious faith that shall not be confined to sect, class, or race. Such a faith has always been implicitly the common faith of mankind.<sup>24</sup>

Though not using the word, he is speaking of that human connectedness that is a major component of spirituality. In addition, Dewey's notion of education as growth—growth that occurs as individuals learn to use their intelligence to solve problems—and his notions of responsible freedom and compassion—ideas that lead to lives of moral depth—point to the value Dewey held for living life well and in community, which are both aspects of spirituality.

It is no accident that Dewey's work focuses on life and its activities; most educational philosophers must consider ontological questions in order to theorize about epistemological matters, including what counts as knowledge and what it means to be educated—the two go hand in hand. Many thinkers have noted the importance of formal educational experiences that examine the big life questions, particularly the question of purpose. If one accepts the notion that formal education serves the purpose of helping individuals to live life well and meaningfully, while at the same time realizing their commitment and connection to others and the earth, then it seems that the absence of the spiritual in educational thought and schooling curriculums hampers achievement of this purpose. The inclusion of and acknowledgement of the spiritual in schooling experiences, provides students spaces where they can contemplate the human condition, reflect on their possible roles in many and diverse communities and the world, and acknowledge the role of the spiritual in those considerations.

For example, Richard Pring, former head of the department of education at Oxford, writes that twentieth century language and metaphors for schooling have followed the atomistic, modernist business model which values technique and the bottom line. The science of schooling has become the technique of schooling, valuing the outcomes and products so that

the learner becomes a 'client' or 'customer', lost is the traditional apprenticeship in which the students are initiated into the community of learners. When the product is the measurable targets on which performance is audited, then little significance is attached to the struggle to make sense which characterizes the learning of what is valuable.<sup>25</sup>

Pring's analysis applies to American schools as well, where schooling practices have been truncated to the point of teaching to the tests and turning schools, students, and learning into commodities, resulting in children and youth

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<sup>24</sup> John Dewey, *A Common Faith* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1934), 87.

<sup>25</sup> Richard Pring, *Philosophy of Education: Aims, Theory, Common Sense and Research* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 20.

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seeking their value from external rewards, such as high test scores, stars, and trophies.

With his purpose for education resting on helping individuals to locate meaning for their lives and for living with others, Pring recommends using a different set of metaphors in our educational philosophies, ones that lead to

making the connections between the impersonal world . . .  
and the personal world of the young people, thereby creating  
an interpersonal world of informed and critical dialogue . . .  
[with the hope that] such efforts will be reflected in thoughts,  
beliefs and valuing which are diverse, unpredictable and  
sometimes slow to mature.<sup>26</sup>

With such a set of metaphors, educational policy makers would move toward experiences that are balanced, not only for individual students, but with respect to ways of knowing.

An educational philosophy that would have such a purpose as its grounding needs to have the balance that comes from valuing and including both the rational and the spiritual, not as a dichotomy, but as a balanced interrelationship. The purpose would find expression in a curriculum that allows students to examine diverse and perhaps conflicting notions of the spiritual, or the sacred, along with, and through, the great works of literature and art that give symbolic expression to the human condition. The way out of the current quagmire of truncated, outcomes-centered schooling policies may be to strike the balance between reason (science) and the spiritual, acknowledging the relational qualities of the two rather than their separateness. Perhaps such an inclusion would balance the mythos and logos and lead to human flourishing.

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 21.

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