

## **Abstract**

Much of our time as professionals involves a focus on rational thought: completing administrative tasks, setting course outcomes, planning lessons, marking assignments and evaluating tasks. As Thomas Moore reminds us in his paper *Educating the Soul*, “today’s emphasis on mind has resulted in a neglect of the soul” (as cited in Miller, Karsten, Denton, Orr, & Colalillo Kates, 2005, p. 9). In this article, Kara Arviko sets out to explore what it means to discover and nourish the soul, and to identify how that discovery impacts her interactions with and understanding of her students. She concludes it is a journey worth taking.

## **“Walking by Ourselves with our Toes”: An Exploration of Soul**

**By: Kara Arviko**

When I selected Holistic Education as my second course in the M.Ed. program, I hoped that reading the texts and discussing issues in community with other honest “seeker” students would lead me on a path to fine-tuning my in-class practices. I thought that this course would be a blueprint of pedagogy and curriculum, and I hoped that I would be handed a tidy little package of techniques to deepen my classroom expertise. While I had an idea that the readings and discussions would possibly enhance my teaching style, I had a limited awareness that they would also challenge my personal habits and connections with all that is alive around me, in particular, my students or fellow learners. And challenge me - they did.

My first hope of discovering a blueprint for what a holistic classroom should look like was dashed in the first class when the professor responded to my query with, “There is no answer to that. It’s up to you.” His response shocked me at the time, but set the tone for the remainder of the course. The end is not important; it is the journey that counts. No quick fix in this pursuit. Figure it out for yourself -- words I often use with my own students. That was the beginning of my exploration of the notion that education must reach beyond the mind to the soul because, according to Thomas Moore in his paper *Educating the Soul*, “today’s emphasis on mind has resulted in a neglect of the soul” (as cited in Miller, Karsten, Denton, Orr, & Colalillo Kates, 2005, p. 9). As I thought about Moore’s quote, it became apparent that as an educator, my goal

to be a life-long learner, while admirable, must venture beyond simply gaining knowledge and degrees in association with an institution. This endeavour must also involve becoming increasingly aware of and nurtured by my relationship with God and those I connect with: family, students, colleagues, neighbors, animals, and society. Often, it begins with simply living in a respectful and appreciative way.

While contemplating the notion of the importance of the journey rather than the end result, I came across this dialogue penned by George MacDonald, one of Scotland's foremost authors:

“What is my next duty? What is the thing that lies nearest me?”

“That belongs to *your* everyday history. No one can answer that question but you. Your next duty is just to determine what your next duty is. Is there nothing you neglect? Is there nothing you know you ought not to do? You would know your duty if you thought in earnest about it, and were not ambitious for great things.”

“Ah, then,” responded she, “I suppose it is something very commonplace, which will make life more dreary than ever. That cannot help me.”

“It will, if it be as dreary as reading the newspapers to an old deaf aunt. It will soon lead you to something more. Your duty will begin to comfort you at once, but will at length open the unknown fountain of life in your heart.” (as cited in Tileston, 1928, p. 68)

From a holistic perspective, by living in the moment, sacredly connected to mundane duties and loving actions, we discover the peace in soul while at the same time enlarging our creative capacities. The real beauty in this is that creativity and compassion do not flow from ambition, but from grace: since we are loved, accepted and valued, we can do no less than extend this same kindness to all those individuals our paths or duties lead us to.

Miller (2008), also suggests that the more we realize how fundamentally connected we are with God and with all that is His cosmos, the more we will feel a compassion and

responsibility for others. Undoubtedly, this is where my affection and concern for my students emanates from-- my sense of connection to God, and therefore to others. This explains the disparity I have felt when, ignoring soul, I have tried to ram through a rhetorical development and organization lesson even though I know that students have been in school since 8:00 a.m., have had no lunch because of back to back classes, and have shown too much respect for my "elevated position" as their teacher to leave the room. On days when I have been nurtured through early morning meditation, silence, prayer, or a walk with our beloved dog, I have found myself more in tune with students' discomfort and needs. I have felt the freedom to take extended breaks, have informal conversations, and catch up with their concerns without feeling like my script as a teacher was being rewritten as a lesser part, if, indeed, being a student is truly a "lesser" part. I think not. We are all learners together; we question together; we also inspire each other. Ultimately, my connections with my students give me a greater sense of the sacred.

Clifford Mayes, in his book "Seven Curricular Landscapes" (2003), summarizes beautifully how soul speaks to soul as he posits this explanation:

...the teacher's most important role is to speak to her students out of her solidarity with God. This does not mean using explicitly religious language, but it does mean speaking with a spiritual authenticity that comes out of her "ultimate concern." Such speech, in turn, awakens students to their status as individual beings in relationship with the Eternal Individual. (as cited in *ENCOUNTER*, 2005, p. 63)

No preaching allowed; simply live from a place of authenticity. Authenticity cannot be forced; it must come from within, and as it moves outwards, it awakens those that encounter it. As these connections are made, new learning emerges from the shared experience. Thus, becoming

attuned to the songs of my students' souls is a new trick this old dog is learning to explore and enjoy, although somewhat haltingly.

Prior to completing some of the holistic course readings, I would have hesitated writing of my relationship with God, and I initially wondered how educators in a secular society would find enough common ground to even agree on a definition for soul, let alone tolerate reference to God. My fear of offending, because it was just that, was quickly dispelled when I discovered the philosophy behind holistic education: the perennial philosophy, a belief that is rooted in many of the ancient wisdom writings and is universally echoed today in numerous spiritual traditions. Aldous Huxley's definition of the perennial philosophy went right to my soul, affirming who I am. The perennial philosophy, according to Huxley (1970), is

...the metaphysics that recognizes a divine Reality substantial to the world of things and lives and minds; the psychology that finds in the soul something similar to, or even identical with, divine Reality; the ethic that places man's final end in the knowledge of the immanent and transcendent Ground of all being – the thing is immemorial and universal. (as cited in Miller, 2008, p.16)

Call it God, the divine Reality, the immanent and transcendent Ground of all being –there is greatness beyond each of us that my soul has always been aware of, and this awareness has not only grounded me, but often filled me with wonder and curiosity. Reading through Miller's chapter on perennial philosophy opened new dimensions to understanding this reality, and reminded me of the importance of cultivating intuition, compassion and contemplative practice in order to quiet my mind's demand for rational answers. There must be a balance of soul to counteract the drain of reason, and seeking this balance has become my focus. The mental acuity

I require for numerous hours of lesson preparation, teaching, marking and student conferencing is reinforced through my times spent meditating, reflecting, and enjoying nature, be it during a walk or a retreat to the lake. While I cannot claim to have a complete understanding of soul, I am on a journey that I know will continue.

From this place of soulful explorations, I have felt as if I am looking at my students through a different lens. Shortly after our first holistic education class, I discovered a holistic journal, *Encounter*. After reading a sample article that was posted online, I ordered all the back editions from 2001 to 2007 and anticipated their arrival. From the day they arrived, I have been slowly reading through these journals, moved by many of the stories of heart that were written by despairing students who were awakened to and developed their inner self because one person listened and cared, or by educators who, like myself, were feeling frustrated with the education system as it is. While searching for articles related to second language classrooms, I discovered a short, but poignant letter to the editor that caused me to reflect on how language is conveyed and received. It is from this letter that I derived the title of my paper. I quote it in full here:

Dear Editor,

I am happy to see your journal's interest in children's poetry, and I would like to provide an anecdote. As first-time parents of a two and a half year old boy named Christian, we have been greatly amused by our son's efforts to invent new words to convey his meaning when he hasn't learned the conventional English words. Often a kind of poetry results. For example, on a warm spring day, Christian advised us that he wanted to "walk by myself with my toes"-- that is, go barefoot instead of wearing his customary sneakers. My wife and I loved the expression because it seemed to capture

both his need for independence and a kind of Native American spirit. Since then, we don't go barefoot in our household. *We walk by ourselves with our toes.* [italics added]

John T. Kolaga

Buffalo, New York (ENCOUNTER, 2005, p. 59)

Most parents would be moved by the poetic nature of that little boy's sentiment. I imagined him sitting on the floor, cradling his feet in his hands, perhaps pushing the sneakers back as his parent encouraged him to put them on. "No!" he says emphatically as he hugs his bare feet. "I walk by myself with my toes!" What simple delight I felt as I read that expression. Almost simultaneous with that delight-filled awareness, however, I realized how often I have reacted quite to the contrary with my students when they write a poetic phrase to fill the blank that a conventional English word should complete. Often my response is to ask them to explore their mental vocabulary bank in an effort to remember that all-important and precise word they somehow missed. While I am usually very tactful in this probing, I have often missed the beauty in the words that come from a student's inner essence. Why is it cute when a two year old comes up with such a phrase, but not that entertaining when fledgling adult English learners do the same thing? Their superfluous phrases often have the lilt of an Asian songbird, so why is that beauty unacceptable? Contemplating that question led me to consider how the expectations vary in each situation, and how novel an unrehearsed expression is when it comes from a child's mouth. Why have I inwardly chided my second language students while outwardly encouraging them to be more articulate? Why are their expressions any less an occasion to celebrate than an expression from a two year old? Both are novel; both are an attempt to communicate meaning; both are music from that person's soul. Their souls often speak, but I cannot hear the soul in the writing because my mind is focused on analysis. Thomas Moore reflected on this reality when

he stated that “we glimpse soul through insight rather than through direct analysis” (as cited in Miller et al, 2005, p.11). That is my job: to use my mind to analyze and expound. It is also my calling to nurture my own soul, to nurture my connections with my fellow pilgrims, and to find joy in the moments we are blessed to share.

Have I been challenged throughout this course’s evolution? Unequivocally. Do I know and understand the full nature of soul and how it can be expressed in a classroom? Absolutely not. For soul is ever changing, dynamic in each encounter with another part of this unity we call life. Am I excited and encouraged to continue the inward and outward journey? Without question – particularly now that I know I have joined a band of like-minded, but diverse travelers on this journey of teaching to the soul. Hopefully, as we travel, we will all find joy in the freedom of “walking by ourselves with our toes.”

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