

Missing in action: The spiritual dimension

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We are currently standing where humanity has never stood before. Having attained ‘evolutionary consciousness’ – the consciousness that as humans we are able to choose our future – it is now for us to take responsibility for the design of our future. Bela Banathy and Patrick Jenlink suggested that ‘the most salient implication – and greatest challenge our species ever faced – is that *we have to enter into the evolutionary design space and with purposeful creative surge give birth to the life of the Fourth Generation of H[omo]S[apiens]S[apiens]*’. It has become ‘*our task, our responsibility, our burden and privilege to choose and create our...future*’.¹

It appears that we are not particularly well prepared for this great task – consciousness often arrives before the capacity to actually do it. As a result, there is a great deal being contested in education today: traditional views of knowledge versus progressivist approaches; modern learning environments versus single-cell classrooms. Even the role of the teacher is being contested – are teachers a sage on the stage, guide on the side or, perhaps, a peer at the rear? The purpose of education is being contested. Is education to meet the needs of business, serve the economy, progress the human race, or . . . ? It is time ‘to turn to one another without reserve and in truth and openness, accepting and honouring each other’, and to enter into a dialogue as a means of collective communication about our future as a species and the future of education?² Banathy and Jenlink argued that in the process of designing our future we must define and take account of all the key dimensions of the human experience, including the spiritual dimension.³

It is in this spirit of openness to all ideas, including ones that are problematic for us, that I raise the spectre of views of knowledge and ways of knowing that are largely missing in action from among the ideas that are currently being so hotly contested in education. These pertain to knowledge that is less certain, less concrete and less visible than the traditional knowledge that is spelt out in curriculums and taught in institutions every day around the world. Though often overlooked, from my perspective, this knowledge is also very real, rich, powerful and undeniably essential to a successful and meaningful life. It belongs to the realm of the ‘spiritual’. The main point I wish to make in this chapter is that if the dialogue about education and knowledge remains firmly temporal and does not include the possibility of a spiritual (non-temporal) dimension of the world in which what is seen as legitimate and desirable knowledge is very different in essence from, but exists in integral relationship with, knowledge in the visible, temporal realm, then we are at risk of designing a future of education that does not represent or take account of the full or whole reality of the world. Such a future will not and cannot fulfil the task of education, which according to Gert Biesta, ‘consists in arousing the desire in another human being for wanting to exist in and with the world in a grown-up way, that is, as subject’.⁴

Being ‘subject’ is not about having a unique identity, or the unfettered freedom to do as I want. Biesta’s subject references Philippe Meirieu’s idea of one coming to the self-knowledge that one can live in the world without having to occupy the centre of it. It is about each individual coming to the knowledge of his or her unique contribution, where ‘I encounter freedom as the very thing that only I can do . . . and no-one can do in my place.’⁵ Biesta argued that opening up the space ‘where the student might appear as subject’ and discover this knowledge is the work of teachers and teaching. ‘When teaching has an interest in and orientation towards the subject-ness of another human being, it operates in an altogether different way.’ This world is characterised by ‘an orientation towards the unforeseen . . . , that is, to what is not present, to what can be the object of hope and thus requires faith, but can never be a matter of knowledge or certainty’.⁶ This is the ‘spiritual’ realm, where teachers do not ‘input’ but rather make ‘teacherly gestures’ that open up the possibility for our students to appear as subject. In this realm, teachers are active in the world of education, but do not occupy the centre of it. And the hoped-for outcome is what Biesta calls the ‘grown-up subject-ness’ of the student.

A 'spiritual' encounter

To this day I remember the encounter vividly. He said to me, 'We are [name of family]. We do to others before they do to us. We are violent and we are criminals. We end up in prison. That's who we are. We are [name of family] and there is nothing else for me.' He said this at the beginning of his year eight year – this student who presented such a hard, immutable exterior, redolent of violence. In that moment, I was incredibly grateful that I had recently spent some time at his home with his grandfather – past president of a gang, who died shortly afterwards – and his grandmother; and I had seen something else. What the student said to me was factually and visibly the truth. But it wasn't the whole truth. In that moment I was able to say, 'I have been to your house and spent time with your whānau. I have seen love and care and strong, unconditional relationships.' In fact, in that house I had seen the impact of poverty, of drug and alcohol abuse. But I had also had a 'moment' – I had experienced the warmth of human connection and seen the humanity of a man approaching the end of his life, sharing memories that still brought him joy and funny stories that still made him laugh and made me laugh. I had seen a grandmother who loved her mokopuna and loved reading; we talked about our favourite authors and discovered we had several in common. Patricia Cornwell was one such author.

Others at school had begged me not to do this home visit because it wasn't safe, and I had approached in the wintery dark with trepidation. But during that encounter in my office at school with that student, I was unbelievably grateful that I had visited and experienced that moment, which had enabled me to see beyond the obvious and the visible to their humanity and to the possibility of a future that could be different. At the end of that year, this student received our award for outstanding leadership. What a privilege it was to present it!

Grown-up subject-ness and teacherly gestures

If what I outlined above is to be the task of education, and I agree that it must be, then we really must embrace the reality of the spiritual realm. By this I mean not only in terms of students gaining consciousness and understanding of this dimension and how it pertains to their lives but also in terms of teachers recognising that there are ways for students to develop knowledge of the world (which includes themselves and others) that are different from the mechanistic processes of learning that dominate education today. The work of teachers in arousing the desire of students to live as subject *is* 'spiritual' work, and must stand strongly and proudly alongside the scientific, evidence-based, constructivist, sense-making approaches to developing knowledge that are so pervasive today. Science is important. Teachers do need to maximise the effectiveness of their inputs to ensure students bridge the gap between what they know and what they don't know. However, if these are the only approaches to knowledge that we focus on, education will never meet the needs of every student, and teachers will burn themselves out trying. Education also needs to dwell in the land of the uncertain, of miracles.

It is here that I will return to the true story I began with and begin to weave my experiences and understandings of the spiritual dimension and spiritual ways of knowing with the story of the year eight student hereafter known as Charlie. In this section I briefly explore the 'teacherly gestures' that may have opened up a space for Charlie to see the possibility of his grown-up subject-ness.⁷ The term 'teacherly gesture' is helpful. We often speak of a gesture in relation to giving a gift. We give a gift as a gesture that can only ever partially represent the depth of our gratitude or the importance of the relationship to us. In relation to the grown-up subject-ness of our students, we carry out teacherly gestures, but we know that though we must make these gestures, they are, after all, *only* gestures, and we are not actually 'commanding' the student's grown-up subject-ness to show up, or 'commanding' that the student will recognise it when it does. We are making gestures that acknowledge the possibility. Whether it actually happens is outside of our control, outside of our *wanting* to control. However, we make the gestures *just in case*, in spite of the fact that we have no power or ability to *make* it happen. When we act using power, we are treating the student as 'object', as something to be done to, and we shut down the possibility of the student's subject-ness showing up. Hence, teacherly gestures are acts of faith and hope – done with no assumptions or expectation that they will produce particular outcomes. They are nevertheless done, and always done with hope that they will lead to the self-showing of the student's grown-up subject-ness.

What were my teacherly gestures in Charlie's story? In the first instance, I invested myself into the relationship with this very difficult student beyond what would normally be expected. I also offered unconditional positive regard in spite of the possibility that my investment might not result in any dividends.⁸ My several visits with his whānau are examples of this. Noddings suggested that moral individuals nurture an ethic of care which communicates to people that they are important, worthwhile and esteemed individuals.⁹ The care is unconditional because it is given regardless of how the recipient responds or has behaved or is likely to

behave in the future. Sitting down to talk with this student with openness and curiosity (and without judgement) in this particular circumstance (and many other times), in spite of actions he had taken, was a teacherly gesture of my unconditional care and regard for him.

Secondly, in spite of (often) being treated as object by this student, I had to get in touch with and bring to the surface my own grown-up subject-ness. My gesture in refusing to be objectified and belittled by his behaviour, by his pain and hurt, enabled me to act in the situation out of my own grown-up subject-ness; to forgive him, and in doing so to open up a space where his own grown-up subject-ness became a possibility. When I am not subject, I cannot open up a space for others to be subject. Thus, the nurturing of my own grown-up subject-ness and the refusal to be object is a teacherly gesture that I must continually make.

The third teacherly gesture was in not allowing the student's view of himself and his family, and of his past, present and future, to stand unchallenged in spite of the visible truth of it. Biesta argued that 'when we approach a child or student as subject *precisely* when this flies in the face of all available evidence . . . it is precisely this gesture – a teacherly gesture – that opens up a possibility for the child or student to appear as subject'.¹⁰ Refusing to accept the inevitability of Charlie's future in spite of all available evidence to the contrary, and approaching him as subject – as one who is free to encounter the very thing that only he can do and nobody else can do in his place – was a teacherly gesture that opened up the possibility of his encounter with his grown-up subject-ness and of a future that could be different.

A fourth, but inextricably related gesture, I call 'speaking prophetically'. As well as refusing to accept his view of the future, in the conversation with Charlie I was able to describe to him, and for him, a future that could be different. I wasn't speaking to his rational mind, because his rational mind had already rejected the possibility of a future that was different – rationally he knew what his future would be ('We are [name of family]. We are criminals . . .'). My teacherly gesture was to speak, from the place of my grown-up subject-ness, to the possibility of his grown-up subject-ness, of a future that could be different, and, as I did so, there was a sense of calling that possible future into being. In the space that had developed between us, Charlie began to receive knowledge-as-revelation of his grown-up subject-ness, of the possibility that he could become a good man and a good leader of people. As a result, increasingly over that year, he began to act differently – as though his future could be different. Biesta commented that what is important here is not whether a future as subject is *likely* to be true, but rather what might happen if we assume it *is* true and *act* on the assumption that it is true, because only when we do, do we open up that future as a possible future and 'only then may we find out whether it is true'.¹¹

Conclusion

Education must embrace all the realities of our world, all knowledge, all ways of knowing, no matter how uncertain and uncomfortable it makes us. I agree with Parker Palmer that if we want to grow as teachers and fulfil our educational task, we must do something alien to our education culture: 'We must talk to each other about our inner lives – risky stuff in a profession that fears the personal and seeks safety in the technical, the distant, the abstract'; and, equally, we must also create opportunities for our students to explore their inner lives.¹² We must embrace the spiritual dimension of the world as an integral, essential aspect of what it means to be a teacher and a student. If we don't, we will, in spite of all our efforts, fall short of the educational task of arousing, through our teacherly gestures and the development of the (uncertain) knowledge that gestures make possible, the desire in our students for wanting to exist in and with the world in a grown-up way, as subject, as one who is free to do what nobody else can do in one's place, and as one who is able to live in the world without needing to occupy the centre of it.

Epilogue

Just the other day, at an unexpected time and in an unexpected place (Burger King at Turangi, where I'd stopped on a drive from Wellington to Auckland), I encountered a man who spoke of effective and life-changing work he and others are doing with young people in the town where I had once lived. Charlie's family, who, in their own words, are criminals and destined for prison, who do to others before others do to them, are beginning to encounter new ways of being and the possibility of a different future is emerging in reality. Another, who is not trained, has taken on the role of teacher and is carrying out teacherly gestures to create spaces for these young people to encounter the call to their grown-up subject-ness through their Māoritanga and metaphors of birds, and they are responding to that call. The miracle is still in play.

Lesley Murreihy

Dr Lesley Murreihy spent 17 years working as teacher and then principal in a small, semi-rural, low socio-economic school in highly challenging circumstances with 85% Maori students situated in the middle of the North Island; before leaving to take up a position as the foundation principal of a high decile (high socio-economic), multi-cultural school in Wellington. Lesley has also completed a doctorate in Education at the University of Waikato. In her work, Lesley aspires to combine vision and pragmatism - working best at the interface where practice and educational theory meet. Recently, Lesley has started writing critical responses to the educational happenings of today. Some of these writings can be found at **Future of Education**. Lesley and her husband, John, have eight children who have been very successful in tertiary education, but who have never actually attended school.

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