

Examining Loss of Soul in Education

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One does not have to walk long in the hallways of schools to see that something is very wrong. We search in our students for the passion and enthusiasm for learning that they possessed before entering school. Instead, we find idle bystanders content to remain distant from formal instruction and from their hearts. Too often they remain dazed, passive consumers window shopping the mall of education. Education becomes something to get through with a grade or a degree rather than a clearing for deep experience. A common malady of education today is the familiar emptiness found in the experiences of both teachers and students.

This paper will explore the complex issues in contemporary education surrounding the dissatisfaction teachers and students experience with teaching and learning, from each other and from their own desires. In addition, this paper will examine the concept of soul as it relates to educational practice and its effect on teachers and students. It also represents a personal journey to deepen my understanding of a crisis facing students, educators, our nation, and of the soul's essential role in educational renewal. Examining the loss of soul is just one way to understand our modernist-rationalist educational milieu and the impact this environment is having on students' and teachers' lives. Soul as a function of education is certainly not a new idea and has been described by authors for thousands of years. Yet in the decades prior to 1990s, there was an absence of much serious dialogue on the subject. Words like "soul," "spirituality," and "spirit" had been deemed inappropriate for secular education or serious discourse, but they are found to be increasingly relevant to contemporary life, including education. In recent times, there have emerged scholars who are speaking boldly on the inclusion of soul in education praxis. The profile of participants include: Parker Palmer, David Purpel, Ron Miller, John Gardner, Thomas Moore.² We will consider the implications of soul as it relates to the malady of educational systems.

Let me first provide a conceptual framework to better understand the profound importance and deep connotation of the phrase "loss of soul." Because soul has more to do with the imagination, it is impossible to precisely define the soul. Thomas Moore, in his book *Care of the Soul*, describes soul not as a thing, but a quality or a manner for experiencing the fullness of life.¹ It is linked with those dimensions of life experiences that embrace depth, passion, relatedness, heart, and personal growth. Soul is better known intuitively as

something that gives genuineness and depth of meaning to all aspects of our lives. Moore characterizes the affinity of soul as being connected to all aspects of our lives from satisfying conversation to genuine experiences that stay in the memory and touch the heart. Soul is revealed when we experience something moving or profound as when we taste certain foods or hear a moving piece of music. It is also revealed when we experience love, intimacy, and authentic community.

To approach the subject of soul in education, we must first understand that it is not a function of methodology, strategy, or problem solving. The primary notion of education today is that if something is wrong, then we need to fix it. The soul cannot be looked at as something that needs fixing; rather it is seen as something that requires continual personal attention in the small details of the ordinary aspects of life that give it depth and meaning as well as to the major decisions that change our lives. By this I mean that soul requires care and nourishment, and not a remedy for cure.

Soul is to be found at the center of the learning process. When soul is revered and attended to, education becomes exciting and stimulating, the way it used to be before we entered the epoch of our formal educational journey. It is the wellspring of what we dream education should be. Reviving soul in education focuses on a deeper meaning of learning and knowing which becomes a function not just for the intellect but all aspects of human nature, including our feelings and imaginations. Our soul is the source from which deep learning emerges. Bringing soul to the center of the education process gives learning vitality and meaning; it invites students to engage in learning experiences that emerge originally from their own paths, not someone else's.

The ecological balance we seek in and with our lives best describes the province of soul. The soul is that which holds us all together. It is the impulse from which we seek to know and how we want to be known. It seeks to know why we are here and how we fit into this world. It seeks meaning in all our relationships. It tells us who we are, not as gifted or average students, but as passionate relational beings.

In education today, soul is often ignored. Without honoring soul, learning is dull, disconnected, trivialized, and desists. When the soul is neglected, students turn into mere receptacles or automatons waiting to be filled with the teacher's knowledge. Focusing on the loss of soul in education calls for us to examine the disconnection, distortions, and dissatisfaction of teachers and students.

This paper will focus on the phrase "care of the soul," borrowed from Thomas Moore's book by the same name, in the context how educational communities foster connection, community, and the building of *I-Thou*² relationships, that is, forming relationships based on the sacredness of human life and unconditional love. More specifically, it will examine how communities value dimensions of the "soul" through deep levels of relatedness. It will compare and contrast communities that value individuality, connection, and pathos with communities that foster competition, hierarchy, objectivity, and ethos.

Examining soul or the loss of soul in contemporary and historical settings

To better help us understand the characteristics of soul with all its phases, we will examine how soul is attended to in both ancient and contemporary educational settings. This may provide us with a perspective of the relevance of soul to living a satisfied life. In examining these cultures and educational settings, it is my attempt to broadly interpret the landscapes to find applications to soul. This study is not intended to be an explicit historical essay but a means of generalizing themes found in cultural and educational settings. Let us first examine the education of ancient Israel. Abraham was the founder of Judaism at the beginning of the second millennium B.C.³ From Abraham, his son Isaac, then his son Jacob (whose name was later changed to Israel) who had 12 sons (known as the 12 tribes of Israel) was passed the belief that they had been chosen by God to have a special and permanent relationship with him. The Children of Israel had a deep belief that they were a chosen people destined to prosper for endless generations. The conviction of their being a "chosen" people required a process of transmitting their culture and beliefs to their children.

The history of Judaism and of the Jews is a long and complicated story that is also imprecise in describing how children were educated. A main concern was for Israel to maintain its national heritage and identity. At the heart of their educational agenda were the first five books of their canon authored by Moses and known as the Torah.⁴ Their education always began with the Torah where Israel's story began.

By imitation and experience, there emerged a learning process which met their needs for transmitting heritage, morality, values, and their distinctive mission. Their teaching could be found in ritual ceremonies of remembrance that occurred in a context which were developed to arouse interest, curiosity, and wonderment on the part of the children. The teaching ritual evolved around teachable moments in the form of storytelling. It always began with the child asking a question and the adult responding with a story. It was not an

ordinary story told to answer a child's curiosity, but a story built around the notion that they were a special people with particular responsibilities and values set apart for a special purpose. Joshua tells us one such story as the Children of Israel were crossing the Jordan River to occupy the "Promised Land."

Take up twelve stones from the middle of the Jordan from where the priests stood and to carry them over with you and put them down at the place where you stay tonight.⁵

The stones were to be a commemoration, a testament to be recounted later to their children.

He said to the Israelites, "in the future when your descendants ask their fathers, 'what do these stones mean?' tell them, 'Israel crossed the Jordan on dry ground.' For the Lord your God dried up the Jordan before you until you had crossed over. The Lord your God did to the Jordan just what he had done to the Red Sea when he dried it up before us so that all the peoples of the earth might know that the hand of the Lord is powerful and so that you might always fear the Lord your God."⁶

As an educational process, the Israelites capitalized on the yearning of their children to be let in on the secrets contained in the pile of rocks. Timing was an important part of the process as the adults had to await the yearning from their children to belong to the secret. The teachable moment came only when the child's yearning led him/her to ask the question, "What do these stones mean?" Like a person desiring to know a secret, the child came to the adult asking to be a part of the secret. Teaching was perhaps the shrewd management of a secret, the capacity to keep a secret, and knowing the right time to share a secret.

Responding to the question with desire and passion, the adult would characteristically answer, "Let me tell you a story." Telling them the story with passion and meaning evoked the imagination and became the way children were brought into the "house of Israel." It became the means of disclosing both religious and cultural traditions, and it also served to nourish and deepen the child's faith in their traditions. This mode of disclosure matched the significance of the knowledge to be transmitted. The narration unfolded when one that owned the story was ready to trust the secret to the child. The story was not to be quantified, universalized, and abbreviated, but would embrace the dimensions of human pain, healing, and the divine attributes found in the heart of God.

Knowing the secret now means that the child becomes part of the community that owns the story and is responsible for keeping the story alive. This method served to keep alive both cultural and religious traditions by placing them in context and forming a frame of reference. This method also served to develop a communal character of human life not

formed by doctrines of dominating power and conformity by indoctrination, but one that celebrated power for those who have been wronged and who are willing to risk casting their hearts in their community.

The Israelite community appeared to value those aspects of daily life that related to soul. Rituals of "remembering" emerged from their value of communal life which was in harmony with their need to keep alive both their cultural and religious traditions. "Remembering" described a method for forming connections of their theocentric heritage and giving context to the pain and hardship they often endured. Out of these engaging stories and genuine experiences emerged a way of knowing that led them into deep connections with their families, community, and God. Soul is nourished when a bond with family and community is not based on fear or intimidation—rather on the yearning for and sacredness of the relationship. For this community, the process considered and capitalized on those aspects of education that honored and nourished soul, i.e., feelings, passion, healing, belonging, and uniqueness.

Next, we will consider the authoritarian state of Sparta and the nature of its education around 550 B.C. Sparta was an example of a state that emphasized systematic, efficient, practical, military training. Since they believed their prosperity depended on military domination, development of the intellect and the arts were of little value. Because they existed as a military state, the Spartan Code of Lycurgus restricted a Spartan male's occupation to soldiering and prohibited their pursuing other vocations. The ruling military elite community propagated a system that was racist, reactionary authoritarian, totalitarian, and anti-intellectual⁷—a practice not at all uncommon in societies where a minority elite rules to find education emphasizing military training. A militaristic education became the means through which their national interests were secured and promoted. The Spartan totalitarian ideal was to train children to be wholly patriotic and devoted to the polis (state). So excessive was their focus on military training that Gerald Gutek described Spartan education as "transforming young men into disciplined savages."⁸ Sparta's totalitarian ideal was to make the state the focus of their devotion and affection. Education was designed to produce soldiers absolutely devoted to the will of the polis. Soldiers were not thought of as separate individuals but as property of the polis.

Using absolute power over their sons and requiring nationalistic devotion to the state was in sharp contrast to Israel whose focus was on God, the source and resource of their spiritual heritage. While both the Spartans and Israelis valued their respective communities, and their youth generally adopted their cultural practices, each community advanced somewhat opposing ideologies. Spartan ideology espoused devotion to a repressive, authoritarian, and hierarchical system, domination by use of force and

intimidation, and repression of feelings and emotions. The Israeli ideology espoused a theocracy and a devotion to one God, the empowering of each child's imagination, and inviting them to risk being part of their sacred community.

Spartan education began at birth when a baby boy was brought to the Ephors, who decided if he was physically fit for the rigors of military life. A baby who was found unacceptable was either left to die or was taken to the Helots who raised him as a worker. At the age of seven, he would enter the military school barracks where he was subjected to the rigors of physical training and patriotic indoctrination. Here he became a member of the "pack" and lived for the benefit of the squad or company and later the polis. He was taught to endure pain and hardship without protest. He was poorly dressed and often suffered from the cold. He was given little to eat and often foraged for his food. Obedience to those in authority was taught as a "requisite to a life of military courage, which was every Spartan's highest goal."⁹ Frequent beatings and other forms of corporal punishment were administered to produce obedience, courage, and the Spartan representation of a mighty warrior.

At the age of 18, he receive two more years of strenuous and intensive military training. From 20 to 30, he would actively serve in the army. Finally, he became a soldier trained to defend their state and, if called, would in patriotic devotion surrender his life.

This community saw their sons not as unique individuals, but as little warriors to be molded into the personification of fighting machines separated from their feelings and emotions. Communal life was valued but did not serve to promote relationships between people and existed exclusively for the benefit and preservation of the state. This was a community that prided itself at being able to disconnect oneself from deep feelings, emotions, and pain, and valued competition, hierarchy, objectivity, and ethos. There was no room to be found in this community for those aspects of soul that relate to the imagination, a deep connection to others and self, and pathos. One cannot resist making an association that Spartan society and education were, in many ways, similar to the twentieth-century Fascist dictatorships who were also racially motivated and consolidated their energies to build military states for the advancement of nationalistic interests.

Next, we will examine Plato's ideal "Republic" and the Academy. Plato's idealized Republic bore few similarities to the elitist and totalitarian Spartan State. Plato's Republic has been referred to as an intellectualized Sparta to be ruled by philosopher kings rather than by a militaristic system.¹⁰ While Plato favored an elitist society, it was based on the intellect rather than determinants such as race. Moreover, he envisioned a state that would foster harmonious relationships between all communities and not a coercive state where the elite would subjugate the masses.

Plato's view of reality affirmed that knowledge was based on the doctrine that truths or ideas were present within our minds. This view recognized that a person possessed a soul that existed prior to its temporarily inhabitation (imprisonment) of a mortal body. Learning emerged from the rediscovery of truth through the imagination and not from objective sensory experiences (although presumably these might also awaken imagination). This knowledge was eternally valid and never changed. "That knowledge they seek is not knowledge of something which comes into being for a moment and then perishes, but knowledge of what always is."¹¹ In his "Allegory of the Cave," Plato clearly distrusts the harsh realities of the perceived world in favor of an ideal world with its source rooted in the depths of the imagination. "The world of our sight is like the habitation in prison."¹²

Plato's theory of education was intimately related to all aspects of one's life and not limited to formal learning. In a wider more generic sense, education was equivalent to the depth and meaning of one's interaction with the environment. While nature was the teacher in a broad sense, experiences were not left up to the person to be individualized, but were to be socially controlled, and "guided."¹³ This learning environment can be seen as one that valued the integrity of the child and their need to imagine and interact. More recently, this idea was to reemerge in the writings of John Dewey and those who began the progressive educational movement in the United States.

In Plato's idealized Republic, parents were often perceived to be a corruptive influence on children—thus, they were separated from their parents and placed in state-run nurseries. All the while, parents were to retain control of their children and, to some extent, teachers also had control, "who stand partly in *loco parentis*, partly in *in loco civitatis*."¹⁴ From ages 6 to 18, the students studied gymnastics, music (broadly interpreted), writing, basic arithmetical processes, geometry, astronomy, and reading approved classics as a means of developing one's rationality. Following this course of study, students' studies became more intensive and included military training. Those few who were selected to become "philosopher kings" concentrated on dialectics and metaphysics.¹⁵ Plato was critical of the competitive nature of athletes (which the Greeks found popular), therefore, he favored a gymnastics that promoted a balance of character development, physical strength, and skill. Plato believed a competitive spirit fostered an unhealthy individualism rather than a cooperative spirit and wanted to restore the original qualities of courage, skill, strength, and spirit. From 18 to 20, they pursued a more vigorous military training, and at 20, future philosopher kings were selected for additional education.

Plato founded the "Academy" in Athens in 387 B.C. for the systematic study of philosophy and mathematics. Plato's

"Academy," also known as "The Friends," can best be described today as healthy fellowship in a common activity or members of a learned society.¹⁶ When discussing education, Plato most often had in mind a pupil-teacher relationship we commonly refer today as "Platonic love." The association was more than a social gathering; it brought learners and their leader together on a journey to discover transcendental forms of the beauty, goodness, justice, and the good.

One of the principles practiced by Plato to discover or uncover truth was a method called *dialectic*. The aim was to pursue a topic with patience and by asking and answering questions. One was never satisfied with a simple or easy answer but sought all avenues of relatedness. The Socratic methods required a teacher to ask leading questions for students to ponder the basic human concerns about the meaning of life and truth. The purpose was to aid the students in their quest by redirecting them from a world of visual forms to an idealized reality. This form of learning brought about an intensely personal relationship between teacher and student. This learning method was also used to stimulate people to define themselves through self-examination and analysis.

This community saw soul as an integral part of life. Plato's goal was to help people live in such a way that they would not violate their soul's nature. So significant was soul to education that it became the focus on ontological thought. For Plato, community, connection, and relationship were central to soul and spirit. This was seen in the importance he placed on the pupil-teacher relationship. This was a community whose highest ideals were of service rather than the pursuit of pleasure, power, or wealth.¹⁷ It was also seen in the *Dialogues* which can best be described as a conversation of the soul with itself. The emphasis was not upon an authority figure coercing students toward the truth on a topic, but on one's personal use of reason and questioning to uncover truth of one's self. Each student was seen as an integral part of a learning community.

A critical element in the dialectic was the use of the imagination. Use of both the imagination and the emotions were central to their way of thinking. The imagination became the stage in the dialogue where one was able to transcend the limitations of his/her sensory perceptions of the world. This view of education appeals to the very depths of soul. Soul was seen as something within each person that was sacred.

Next we will consider contemporary education in North America. To understand the complex issues in contemporary education, we will first examine what is happening in the economic and political arenas. It should be beyond debate that the world economy now determines, to a great extent, decisions made by our governments and our

educational systems. Whether they are sanctions placed on Iraq, the economic failure and breakup of the former USSR, or Europe emerging as mega-state, educational systems still respond to the economic and political climates in which they reside.

As an example, economist Lester Thurow, in his book *Head to Head: The Coming Economic Battle Among Japan, Europe, and America* (1993), outlines clearly the emerging economic contest. In the European community and Japan, where the United States has competed successfully for the past 50 years as the economic power, it is now jockeying into competitive/cooperative relationships. The soon-to-be-realized coalition of the new European countries into a powerful economic unit signals yet another strategic move in the international game of commerce.

International businesses competing for limited and specialized resources are having an enormous impact on educational decisions. William B. Johnston, in an article for the *Harvard Business Review* titled "Global Work Force 2000: The New World Labor Market" (1991), speaks to the growing mobility of the workforce and that the future will increasingly bring a world market for labor. Businesses already are searching the globe for workers with the needed skills. In the United States, employers are lamenting a shortage of skilled workers, while developing nations are producing a surplus of workers for their economies. Johnson predicts that there will be a mass migration of people, especially the young, educated workers who will look for employment in developing countries of the world, and he sees international competition increasing for the most highly skilled global citizens.¹⁸ Education is increasingly being seen and used as an instrument for the development of "human capital" to respond to the increasing demands of business and governments.

In Europe there is emerging a vision for restructuring education that addresses the issues of modernity, a common economic era, the rise of nationalism, and the loss of soul. At the recent 14th Congress of the German Association for Educational Research, Dietrich Benner said that "Education must not be restricted in Europe to transmitting the achievements of European civilization but must also introduce people to the world of labor and to the daily problems of living together."¹⁹ The issue of an abiding active nationalism is seen not as preventing its existence, but discovering how to help people release their latent nationalism in healthy ways. Benner's vision is for us to acknowledge our humanness, and when that forms the basis of the state, then "the external definition of Europe's boundaries become not geographical but moral."²⁰

Tremendous pressure is being felt by schools at every level to respond to the increasing demands to develop human capital to meet the demands of competitive and combative economies at the expense of responding to psychological and

pedagogical issues. Schools have responded by choosing a path that is more concerned with assessment and competition than attending to those elements that give ordinary life depth, relatedness, and value. Over the years, schools have continued to disconnect themselves from an educational praxis that honors soul. Schools today follow a path of assumptions and approaches to education that resembles the assembly line or factory. Education becomes something that is manufactured or applied much like a technician assembling a computer or a car. Or knowledge may be described as components on the assembly line that will be fitted on unsuspecting children by "robotic" technicians. These images reflect a lack of concern regarding those dimensions of living that honor soul.

Implications

What can we learn about education's malady from examining and analyzing ancient and modern educational practices? Much wisdom can be found in the traditions that encouraged an education that focused on the deep meanings of learning and knowing and that understood the importance of not only the mind, but also the heart and soul. While we have found traditions that valued an education that honored the soul, today we observe the symptoms of the loss of soul in the lives of children, in classrooms, and in society.

Both teachers and students acutely feel loss of soul. Symptoms of this loss appear in their expressions of daily living. It is evidenced in the growing disconnection between teachers and students, between learning and the learner, and within their hearts. Educators express concern at the growing reluctance of students to engage in deep learning experiences and their preference to seek solace in silence. When teachers and students are gripped by fear and fail to see meaning and purpose, soul is impoverished. Both teachers and students also suffer when learning becomes a matter of the skillful application of policies and strategies that deliver grades and degrees rather than opening spaces for deep learning to occur. Teachers focus their energies on applying the latest strategies, and students focus much of their time and energy on acquisitions: getting through school, earning a degree, seeking a good job, and buying a new car while contemplating more degrees, better positions, etc.

Symptoms of loss of soul also appear in acts of violence, obsessions, and addictions. Symptoms can be observed in the increasingly disconnected lives and in the unhealthy and distorted ways students respond to daily life. The United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund's report in the Fall of 1993, *The Progress of Nations*, stated that the U.S. homicide rate for young people ages 15 to 24 is five times that of its nearest competitor, Canada. The Children's Defense Fund's latest report in *The State of America's*

Children Yearbook, 1997, states that every day in the United States 16 children are killed by firearms, 6 commit suicide, 316 are arrested for violent crimes, 403 are arrested for drug abuse, and 3,356 drop out of high school—that's one every 8 seconds.²¹ Nearly two-thirds of the gun-related deaths of children were homicides. The number of children murdered by guns has tripled between 1984 and 1994. The outlook for young Black males is even more grim. They are five times as likely to be victims of gunfire as their White male counterparts. After homicide, the largest cause of youth gun deaths is suicide. For young Black males, the gun-related suicide rates have skyrocketed 300% between 1980 and 1992.

This past year, national and international attention has been given to a number of school shootings by male students of their peers in Oregon, Pennsylvania, Illinois, and Kentucky. In 1993, 5,751 children under 20 were victims of gunfire, and the number of juveniles arrested for murder increased by 168% between 1984 and 1993. The malady of our children appears to be reaching epidemic proportions with more than 1.6 million 12 to 17 year olds reporting that they had been the victims of violent crimes in 1994.²² The state of Georgia is responding to this epidemic of violence by adding 4,554 beds to its 37,204-bed prison system which is currently the 8th largest in the country.

These are just a few of the many symptoms that appear before us every day. They represent a movement of students away from meaningful and sacred associations toward an objectification of all relationships. They also represent a move towards narcissism which proceeds to fuel their self-separateness and the objectification of human existence. These symptoms portray a soul that is incapable of finding meaning in relationships and holding their world in balance.

What have we learned about education's malady and the contemporary approaches to bring healing? Soul is not to be understood as a way to solve educational problems. It is not so much a way of fixing our schools or as a new strategy to be applied to unsuspecting students, but is to be understood as a way of seeing each individual as sacred—having great value. It has to do with developing a keen insight or inner-view as a way to guide teachers and students to find deep meaningful connections. It is not about working with what isn't, but with what already exists. It requires a commitment to form *I-Thou* relationships rather than the application of some new reform package. It is not a question of application, but of being. It requires schools to examine policies, praxes, and their impact on fostering those connections that honor soul or how they disconnect us from those aspects of life that nourish soul. It asks us to find a balance in all aspects of our lives, for when we neglect to attend to our soul, its pain effects us all and is manifested in unhealthy ways through our lives.

Here are some questions to ponder and maybe give readers guidance in their making of everyday decisions—decisions that take into account the importance of honoring soul.

What can be learned through examining the wisdom in traditions that valued life and attended to the particulars of soul? Do schools spark the imagination or do they dull and distort the vision? Do we see schools as communities that are moving towards or away from soul? Does our teaching bring a broader vision of reality, or does it narrow and limit students' awareness of life? Are schools moving towards fostering *I-Thou* connections, or are they becoming more like prisons? Do we find community in our work, or do we encounter competition and suspicion? What are the barriers or obstacles that impede or prevent us from re-visioning an educational system whose policies and practices embrace those aspects of living that honor soul?

May we also find the courage to reexamine our own lives and attend to those aspects of soul that gives balance to life and enlivens our hearts.

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