

**Book Review**

# Embodied Wisdom: Meditations on Memoir and Education

Alison Pryer

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North American education has long been defined by the pursuit of knowledge, the practice of reason and objectivity, the cultivation of virtuous character, and the establishment of an autonomous, independent subjectivity. While such emphasis has not been without merit, educators are increasingly recognizing how the cultivation of our full dimensionality as human beings has been devalued. Attention to body, emotion, soul, and spirit has been given short shrift in instrumental schooling practices, as has an embrace of our inherent interdependence with others and the environment. This insight stands at the heart of Alison Pryer's *Embodied Wisdom: Meditations on Memoir and Education*. Suffusing her text is an integral longing to bring into affirming light those rich but to-date institutionally disavowed, silenced, neglected, projected, or repressively managed qualities of abundant humanness and relation.

Pryer attributes the largely demystified, disembodied character of current North American educational and social life to our mainstream Western traditions. She observes how these traditions have promulgated a dualistic mindset in which one concept, identity, or value is privileged over another. For example, reason has classically been esteemed over emotion, light over dark, and self over other. The "lesser" of the pair then has been systematically ignored, oppressed, disciplined, or exiled. This mindset has saturated Western culture so thoroughly that large bodies of experience and relation have become lost to us: the intuitive, the mysterious, the passionate, the enchanting, the chaotic, the creaturely, and so on. Pryer emphasizes how the devaluing of these qualities has resulted in our diminished integral access to a sustaining, sensuous wisdom, a deeply empowering resource that helps us learn and realize our potential in the world, alone and with others. Her longing for the personal and social reclamation of sensuous wisdom reminds me of the writing of David Abram (1996), who similarly attends to Western society's slow forgetting of "the spell of the sensuous." Abram more fully ascribes this forgetting to the achievements of Western literacy, documenting how the vowels given to the Greek alphabet have, over time, rendered mute a previously active, interpretative, and sacred relationship with nature (p. 252). The term "psyche," once intimately bound with the sensuous world, over time became an abstract and rational phenomenon "now enclosed within the physical body like a prison" (p. 253). For Abram, this new modern dualistic self is alienated from the "unseen depth between things" (p. 258). Pryer asserts that our challenge as educators is to bring the vast mysteries of experience and life out from their pathologically veiled shadows and invite engagements with a sensual "nondualistic pedagogy" (p. 7). In so doing, she asserts, education participates in a deeply ethical practice (p. 6).

As Pryer details in chapter 2, her mode is memoir. Memoir invites opportunities for her to engage bodily memories and “capture the eros of everyday life” (p. 11). It encompasses an interminable, courageous journey for self-insight that enables writers to enlarge understandings of their life choices, the socio-political and linguistic contexts of those choices, and complex dynamics of teaching and learning. She cautions that memories and stories of one’s life history do not admit entire truths, and sometimes memoir plays imaginatively with events. Yet, the stylistic qualities of imaginative writing (mood, tone, evocativeness) uniquely facilitate involvement and inspiration from readers. Readers more readily immerse themselves within such texts, bringing their own understandings, meanings, and experiences to their engagements. Reading this kind of writing, moreover, invokes not only cognitive but also emotional and bodily responses.

As memoir, *Embodied Wisdom* reads less as an argument developed over several chapters than it does as an attempt to reach into and animate personal and pedagogical complexities. Each chapter generates insights into a different subject, and each subject is explored with stories and interpretations of Pryer’s past and present. In certain respects, reading Pryer’s text reminds me of when one engages a new friend’s photo album in his or her company, coming to hear fragments of life stories and interpretations of those stories. But Pryer’s stories are not interpreted in an off-hand or matter-of-fact manner. Her memoir is thoughtfully signed. She refuses to settle for easy generalizations, shows investments in wading into and dwelling with contradictions, and embeds her text in desires to address social injustice. She also reveals deep yearnings for a spacious and inclusive inner and outer peace and healing. In the 10 chapters that comprise this text, we come to know a bit about her English and Irish heritage, her formative years in Scotland, and her immigration to Canada. We are also given a window into her years spent working in Japan, the death of her mother, the challenges of graduate school, and traumas of childhood abuse. She details her experiences mentoring student teachers, and her early encounters with the North American obsession with hockey. A textured layering characterizes her writing. Each autobiographical narration becomes intertwined with insights concerning historical, social, and pedagogical issues. And, out of this intertwining of personal and social exploration, emerges an understanding that carries pedagogical weight.

Let me provide more of a sense of the workings of Pryer’s textured memoir. She begins chapter 5, for example, with the remembrance of being a student in a graduate class. Rather than productively addressing colonial brutalities, she notes that she and her fellow students spent more time inadvertently vying for the position of who was most socially oppressed. This remembrance beckons subsequent reflection on her identity as the bearer of three passports. She looks into her heritage and finds complex realities of perpetration and victimization. She identifies suffering, brutality, and indifference, all variously revealed and hidden within stories told, not told, and partially told. We are told of the hard life of her maternal grandmother, an orphan, who moved from Ireland to England and lost her brothers to World War I. Pryer also narrates the struggles in her grandfather’s side of the family. She reveals popular prejudiced perceptions of the Irish from the 1800s to the 1970s, and details her family’s communicatively erased history of the Irish Famine of 1846 to 1847, now more accurately known as the “Great Starvation” or “Irish Holocaust.” All this and we then enter into her deliberations about what family means, from which we are carried into Pryer’s conclusion that the “quest for the origin of the self, the longed-for immaculate, singular “I,” is futile” (p. 67). For me, this insight lingers beyond the text, initiating consideration of its multiple implications for curriculum and pedagogy.

In another chapter, Pryer takes on teacher education programs. She observes how these programs by and large train pre-service teachers in lesson and unit planning and in the mastery of subject content, but they tend often to neglect the complicated and chaotic worlds these soon-to-be teachers and also their practicum students inhabit. When pre-service teachers enter their field placements, while they may plan successfully, they invariably run up against all that for which it is impossible to plan. As Pryer describes, they may struggle with the exhausting demands of their new profession, with illnesses that may unexpectedly arise, or with experiences of falling in love or losing relationships. Lives are complex. They are faced with the difficulties of addressing all that befalls them and their students, difficulties that cannot be fully dealt with strictly through reason or planning or “management” but require them to work directly with their many emotions, their intuitions, and their senses. Pre-service teachers, furthermore, must also come to terms with how things have changed since they were young. As Pryer notes, no longer can children as easily lose themselves in piles of autumn leaves, because needles may be hiding therein. No longer can a teacher readily comfort a child with warm hugs, for fear of false accusations and reprisals. There are ways today’s world has become harsher, and during their long practicum, pre-service teachers often undergo stages of grieving that attend loss of certain possibilities, hopes, and dreams. These stages include denial, anger, and withdrawal, among others. Pryer thus urges teacher education programs to take these experiences of chaos, complexities, and mourning into account, and help new teachers in their abilities to draw wisely upon not just content-area knowledge resources, but also the valuable non-quantifiable resources of their bodies and environment.

Pryer continues to speak about pronounced absences in teacher education programs in a chapter that addresses the traumas of childhood physical and sexual abuse. She states the unacceptable facts: one in five children is sexually abused, what she observes described elsewhere as acts of “soul murder.” Despite the haunting commonness of abuse, there are limited spaces and resources available in education programs for student teachers to question the normative discourses that enable violation and violence. Lack of access to knowledge contributes to pre-service teachers being trained to be bystanders. In her discussion of trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), Pryer takes up the work of trauma scholar Judith Herman (1981, 1992), who discusses the dynamics and long-term effects of childhood abuse. Herman points out how trauma belongs to experiences of utter helplessness and how it shatters individual senses of significance, coherence, and trust. It tears apart belief systems and possibilities for sustaining human relationships. Pryer subsequently discusses how abusers observe rituals of control, and how individual and institutional rituals can maintain and perpetuate structures of power, violence, and inequality. In the face of such realities, teacher education programs need to provide students with opportunities to critically examine how educational institutions are “implicated in furthering the trauma of students who have experienced sexual abuse and violence” (p. 102). Pryer suggests that this entails transforming pedagogy to become a collectively struggled-for “poetics of peace” that gives voice to and compassionately hears the deep wounds of diminishment, cruelty, silence, and secrets.

Within Pryer’s tapestry of personal stories, social critiques, and pedagogical considerations are refreshing notches of wisdom drawn from different spiritual traditions. These work to further disrupt our mainstream taken-for-granted ways of being and to awaken us to more nourishing possibilities of perceiving and acting in today’s *dis-eased* world. For instance, Pryer observes that within Celtic tradition to “speak the true name of a person, creature or thing is to know the power of its spirit” (p. 60). It is compelling to contemplate this intimate link between

identification and energy. In her discussion about the tears some of her student teachers shed during their field placements, she references the ancient Greek interpretation of the word “humiliation.” She details how it means “of the soil” and how weeping in this context should not be regarded by them with shame or as a lack of professionalism, but rather might be more positively embraced as an embodied experience of being brought to earth (p. 29). In Pryer’s reading, humiliation is transformational, and for her students, it enabled productive release from their institutionally learned, disembodied idealizations of what is considered to count in our industrialized, highly capitalist society.

Perhaps my favorite chapters are the ones in which Pryer draws upon ancient Asian and Celtic wisdom. In chapter 6, for example, she draws on these in order to contemplate the potent healing side of ritual. Here she remembers being in Japan following the death of her mother and beginning a daily regimen of walking and resting among the trees in a nearby forest. She observes that “ritual is our primary form of communication,” not our mother but rather our grandmother’s tongue (p. 73). Our everyday is replete with small rituals, whether noticed or not, and “when we ritualize, we engage in ludic labor and purposeful play, investing all of life with meaning” (p. 71). Ritual meaningfully reminds the self that it exists in community and it supports co-creation of new forms of engagement. It is a practice that imbues the world with a sense of the sacred. Pryer writes that “the knowledge—that the earth is alive and that all is in balance and relationship—is central to any understanding of the sacred” (p. 78).

What I appreciate so much in Asian wisdom traditions is their shared insight that ritual is a humble, ego-diminishing practice of surrender, of reverentially “yielding” to alterity. The repeated gymnastics of letting go of egoistic attachment and of receptivity to that which cannot be mastered, controlled, or objectively grasped over time fosters creative and compassionate openness to newness, and to a gently abiding, inclusive, and nourishing relationship. As theologian Karen Armstrong (2005) writes, for Confucius, for example, “absolute transcendence of selfishness could only be achieved through the alchemy of ritual and music, which, like all great art, transfigures human beings at a level that is deeper than the cerebral. Yet it was not enough simply to attend the rituals; it was essential to understand the spirit behind them, which inculcated an attitude of ‘yielding’ (rang) to others in order to overcome pride, resentment, and envy” (p. 87). Yielding is necessarily an embodied activity, with the body in some ways working to counter habits of thought which, as Buddhist philosophy particularly stresses, all-too-frequently are set upon the self’s narration of story lines that aim to consolidate the ego and keep the self mired in a limiting dualistic worldview.

The theme of yielding emerges again in chapter 9 on taking an introductory class about the Japanese Zen art of flower arranging. She describes the expressions of humility and reverence required of her; the ritualized bowing to the teacher, to the flowers, and to fellow students in the class. Flower arranging proved more difficult than she had anticipated as she had to learn to attend to intricate subtleties of space, movement, emotion, and design. She was continually impressed by the community of care and respect demonstrated not only through bowing rituals but also through the care-full procedures of cleaning up, through attention to the minutiae of the process of the art, and through the collegial support shown. This contrasted significantly with the increasingly globalized Western focus on production, goals, competition, and criticism/judgment. She observes how, over time, she learned to attend more fully, to notice things she had not noticed before, even simple things such as the felt texture of her vase, or the underside of a leaf. Because increasingly precise copying is so central to Zen and Daoist practices (i.e., one seeks to imitate and thus come to oneness with the ways of nature), she also

learned to give more attention to how plants and flowers inhabit and interact in their natural environment, and describes the joy she felt as she became more able to see and partake in the world's sensual bounty and beauty. Flower arranging opened her to the pedagogical import of mindfulness. Mindfulness is such a powerful pedagogical practice as it emphasizes dimensions of human experience and community, as it entails divesting oneself of one's attachments to ego-centric narratives. It enables transitions from hardness and coldness to soft-heartedness and expansive warmth. It cultivates a generously tender approach to life. Pryer concludes her book by encouraging educators to become more attuned to life's mysteries and come together to create spaces for more contemplative educational approaches that invite integrated engagement with heart, mind, and body, and with subjectivity, society, and nature. I very much share this viewpoint with her. In today's world we cannot afford to be complacent, and simply accept ways of living that have proven destructive to our collective, earthly well-being. We are challenged instead to live what James Hollis (2009) calls a "considered life," a practice of being-in-the-world focused on becoming more self, socially, and environmentally aware, and participating in generative transformation. Contemplative practices encompassing mindful, embodied engagement are gaining increasing prominence in North America. They are being introduced in schools, colleges, and universities, supported by a growing body of research. Texts in many different fields and of many different genres are being created that illustrate the richness of contemplative practices. Pryer's is one such text, focusing on the educational promise of embodied wisdom. Many more such texts are needed.

### References

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