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## Presidential Address: Theory, Research, Practice, Caring, and Spirituality: Zen and the Art of Educational Administration

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## ***Theory, Research, Practice, Caring, and Spirituality: Zen and the Art of Educational Administration***

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### ***Abstract***

*Educational theory should be the foundation for most practice and research, but this is not a one-way relationship. Good inductive research may help to develop theory instead of coming from it. The relationship of theory to research can be different in qualitative research than in quantitative research. Practice can and should also inform and be informed by theory and research. Theory, research, and practice are very important to the field of education, as is the nexus of these constructs. The author of this paper considers the nexus of theory, research, and practice and delves deeper into these constructs to suggest a foundational nature of caring and spirituality.*

In my search for a topic to present at the presidential address, I reviewed previous presidential addresses and was quite impressed and humbled by the work my predecessors have given us. Much like the doctoral student, I have struggled to focus on a doable topic and still come up with one that will add to the discussion of scholars. Additionally, as we tell our students, the topic needs to be one for which you have a passion. The MWERA conference themes for this year (Theory and Practice: Two Sides of the Same Coin) and last year (Research and Practice: Building Bridges) are a good starting point. While the research—theory—praxis connection is crucial, I took 2 years away from academe to reconnect with practice and for me personally the old adage that “people don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care” is worth further exploration.

Robert Pirsig (1974) wrote his book, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* as a reflection on his life in an effort to make an inquiry into values. He did not offer a factual account of Zen Buddhist practice or apply it to the repair of small engines, nor will this work cover Zen or apply it to education. Pirsig (1974) compares a motorcycle to a system because it is designed with a structure to achieve certain performance objectives. He suggests that a study of “motorcycle maintenance is really a miniature study of the art of rationality itself” (p. 84). Pirsig notes that each part of the motorcycle is conceived to be a part of the whole: “This structure of concepts is formally called a hierarchy and since ancient times has been a basic structure for all Western knowledge. Kingdoms, empires, churches, armies have all been structured into hierarchies” (p. 87). This notion fits squarely in what some traditionalists in education would affirm and there are those who want to stop there and avoid emotion and all that ‘touchy feely stuff.’

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The author would like to thank Joseph Watras for his time and comments, which strengthened this paper.

Some traditional administrators and researchers would say that rationality is all we need to consider, but to further consider the alternative I will return to *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* and the analogy to education. Pirsig (1974) described human advancement and believed we are moving forward and in a positive (or upward) direction. When comparing ancient times to modern times Pirsig claimed, “From that agony of bare existence to modern life can be soberly described only as upward progress and the sole agent for this progress is quite clearly reason itself” (p.112). Yet Pirsig’s discussion went beyond traditional rationality and brought in “a new spiritual rationality—in which the ugliness and the loneliness and the spiritual blankness of dualistic technological reason would become illogical” (p. 323).

Pirsig (1974) struggled with the inadequacy of what he referred to as the ‘church of reason’ (the university) and in a Chautauqua he explored,

a way by which reason may be *expanded* to include elements that have previously been unassimilable and thus have been considered irrational. I think it is the overwhelming presence of these irrational elements crying for assimilation that creates the present bad quality, the chaotic, disconnected spirit of the twentieth century. (p. 230)

He further explored: “the basic fault that underlies the problem of stuckness is traditional rationality’s insistence upon ‘objectivity,’ a doctrine that there is a divided reality of subject and object. For true science to take place these must be rigidly separate” (1974, p. 253). He wrote all this before qualitative research became widely recognized and people like Michelle Fine started to explore “the hyphen at which Self-Other join in the politics of everyday life, that is, the hyphen that both separates and merges personal identities with our inventions of Others” (1994, p. 70). Yet Pirsig (1974) acknowledged, “to build a factory, or fix a motorcycle, or set a nation right without getting stuck, then classi-

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cal structured dualistic subject-object knowledge, although necessary, isn't enough. You have to have some feeling for the quality of the work" (p. 255).

Quality was very important to Pirsig (1974). He devotes much discussion to 'Quality' which "couldn't be independently related with either the subject or the object but could be found only in *the relationship of the two with each other*" (p. 215). Quality for him is different from Classic Knowledge or Romantic Knowledge. Quality is a 'preintellectual awareness' which defies definition. He notes that, "When traditional rationality divides the world into subjects and objects it shuts out Quality, and when you're really stuck it's Quality, not any subjects or objects that tells you where you ought to go" (1974, p. 253). Pirsig's 'Quality' has at least some things in common with my use of spirituality because even though he argued that 'Quality' can not be defined, he felt it was known. Spirit has a similar characteristic. For some, "Leading with spirit is not something easily learned by reading a book or attending leadership workshops. We even question whether or not it can be acquired. We do know however, that we can recognize leaders with spirit" (Creighton, 1999, p. 146).

Pirsig (1974) used working on a motorcycle, which was his passion, to offer a personal exploration of his life and as a way of integrating his well-being into work. Likewise, the education of students is my passion and this article is an attempt to offer a personal exploration of educational leadership and a way of integrating some of the essential constructs that so often are in separate worlds. The integration of theory, research, and practice is very important to the field of education. Educational theory should be the foundation for most practice and research, but this is not a unilateral relationship. Good inductive research may help to develop theory instead of coming from it. Therefore, the relationship of theory to research can be different in qualitative research than in quantitative research. Practice can and should inform and be informed by theory and research.

The 2004 Mid-Western Educational Research Association's conference theme—Theory and Practice: Two Sides of the Same Coin—is similar to the 2003 conference theme—Research and Practice: Building Bridges. In a sense theory, research, and practice are the faith, hope, and love of education. Theory is similar to faith because it supports research and practice and when strong it can move mountains; but when it is weak it seems irrelevant. Research is similar to hope in that when done correctly it gives direction to actions and practice. Good research improves the world and truly does provide hope for a better future. Practice can be viewed as love because most forms of effective education are based in some sort of a caring ethic (Hoyle, 2002; Noddings, 1993). Like all metaphors this one is not complete and is limited. For example, practice also includes technical knowledge of content and pedagogy. Therefore, rather than expand on the faith, hope and love metaphor, I propose a theoretical model to explore these constructs.

These critical constructs in the best of worlds intersect and are tightly interconnected (see Figure 1). Caring and Spirituality, to me, are more than adding a couple of circles to the Venn diagram because those two concepts should be all encompassing, not only the entire three circles, but the whole page and beyond. Some people in today's world have separated themselves from what they do and in the process end up not caring about their jobs. Pirsig (1974) asks "if in that strange separation of what man (sic) is from what man does we may have some clues as to what the hell has gone wrong in this twentieth century" (p. 25). One of our doctoral students wrote in her qualifying paper that "to truly care, I must feel that what I care about is an extension of myself" (V. Browning, personal communication, 2002). Some educators have become 'burnt out' and find it easier not to care about their jobs or the students. Others draw strength from each interaction, even after years in the field. When I reconnected with the field, I knew that I was truly blessed and felt that the students and community in which I was principal, helped me to grow immeasurably.

Every now and then someone would try to compliment me and say how good it was that I went to a high school from a university setting as if being a university professor was so far above a practitioner. My reaction was usually to thank that person, but point out that I was the one benefiting from the experience. I try to recognize how society and organizations have influenced my perspective. Link (1992) notes "An aboriginal Australian woman said: 'If you have come to help me you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together'" (p. 250). So it is with theory, research, and practice; the three are bound up with each other and all are supported by caring and spirituality.

Talking about caring or love makes some people uncomfortable. Perhaps this is because of their abstract nature, which falls outside what some have defined as scientific or research. Others (Marshall, Patterson, Rogers, & Steele, 1996) have moved beyond such simplistic notions that would hold us back and have studied administrators that integrated caring into their work. They "describe how school administrators operating from an ethic of care conduct their daily practice and how that practice differs from administrators operating solely from traditional leadership models" (p. 271).

Or perhaps another possible cause of the discomfort could be because some have distorted what this construct of caring or love should be about in education. Hoyle (2002) argues that,

"If you can't love, you can't lead." This is not some statement of a hopeless romantic. There is nothing romantic about my argument claiming that without love in organizations, violence, intolerable stress, and poor quality will continue.... The type of love I espouse for this book is unselfish, loyal, and benevolent concern for the good of another. (p. xii)

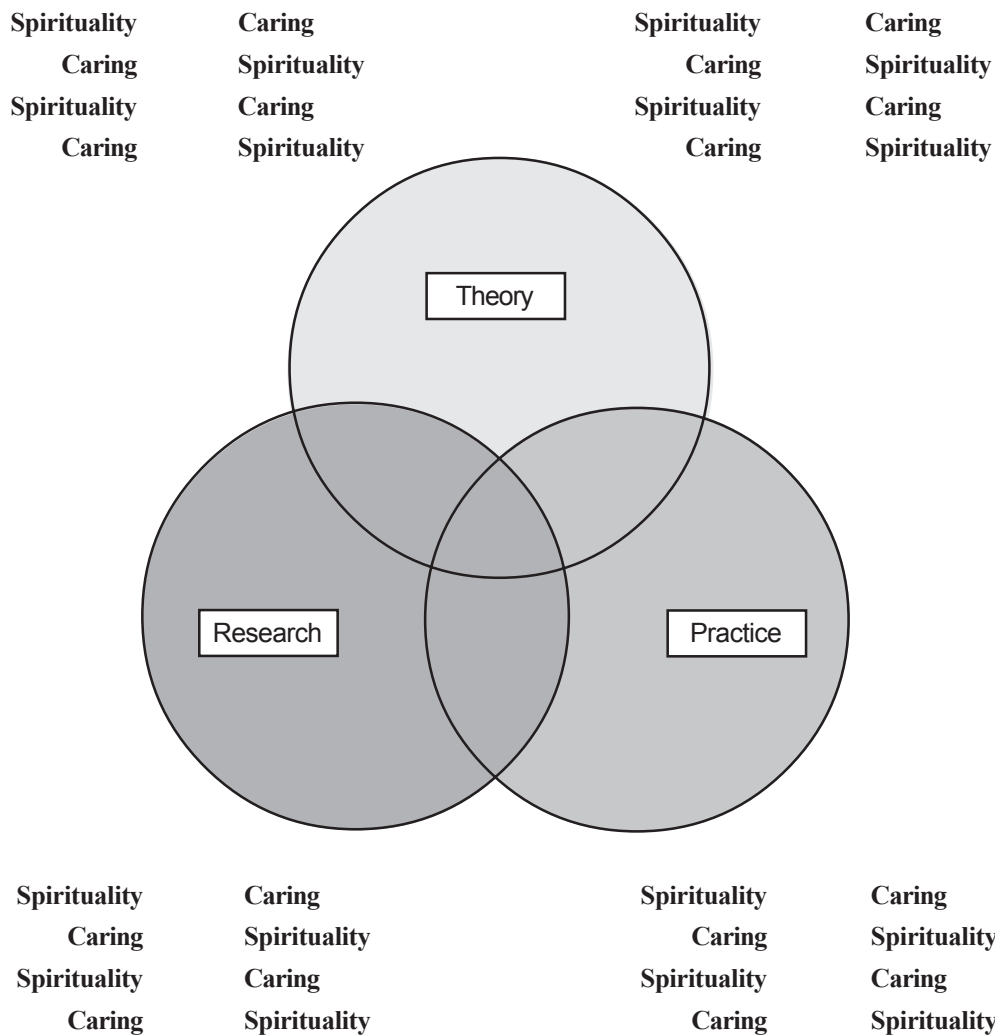


Figure 1: Critical constructs and their intersection.

This concern for the good of another is truly caring about the other person and making the other person’s well-being your concern. This is far from the sexual love of a predator. That is a perversion within education that should do more than make us uncomfortable; it should move us to action that results in the removal of these individuals from our field, but it should not cause us to remove caring from our vocabulary or the field. To use the existence of a few sick individuals (that need to be locked up rather than being put in charge of children) as a reason to make professionals uncaring robots would be another tragedy.

Caring is an administrative and leadership issue—as Hoyle (2002) states, “When the system fails the workers, the workers fail the system and find no joy or love in their endeavors” (p. 102). What I believe Hoyle was emphasizing was that administrators need to care about all employees and make sure that employees know that there are people, in the system, who care about them. That does not exclude the possibility that sometimes there is a need for tough love. For example, if an employee is hurting students, that employee may need to be fired. Being a caring and loving per-

son, does not mean that administrators are not going to do the tough part of their jobs. In fact, if you are a caring and loving person then you are going to do the tough things that need to be done—such as dealing with the individuals that need to be dealt with to stop them from hurting themselves or others.

Caring and love are uncomfortable enough, but to really stretch this work I decided to go contrary to the old wisdom that warns to stay away from topics like politics or religion. Although a distinction can and should be made between religion and spirituality, they are closely related. I use spirituality here because it is a broader term than religion. Personally my religion is how I connect to spirituality, but that compatibility and reconciliation is my own. While I have placed spirituality as an underlying foundation to the model in Figure 1, it should be recognized that one aspect of this is what Noddings (2003) indicates in her discussion of the “compatibility of philosophy, feminism, and faith... the task of reconciliation is largely a personal one” (p. 213). It must be acknowledged that in the academy where many feel “confined by the rationalistic structures of higher

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education” (Tisdell, 2000/2002, p. 80) there are atheists some of whom “find spirituality irrelevant to their lives” (Tisdell, 2000/2002, p. 83). Yet as one participant in that study put it, “there are also atheists among the group, yet we somehow seem to delve into spirit. It might be striving to be human...I don’t know” (Tisdell, 2000/2002, p. 81). Even if there are members of the community of scholars that have personal frameworks which deny the relevance of the human spirit, there are enough members that hold it in many different ways to be of such vital importance that to exclude it from a model such as this would be a disservice to the community of scholars.

Noddings’ spirituality differs from my personal reconciliation in that she moved away from her traditional religious background, feeling that, “a whole body of doctrine that flies in the face of both logic and empirical evidence is too much for many of us, but a lively intellect also remains challenged by the existence and grandeur of the universe” (p. 219). She goes on to write “When the spirit soars, it is lifted by something outside itself, but this something need not be a describable god nor need it be a single thing. Many things may trigger this soaring of spirit” (p. 220). For me it is a great leap of faith to believe that the lifting or soaring that many feel is not only outside of the individual, but outside the empirical reality of this world. Once that initial great leap of faith is made, the specific doctrines, that for some fly in the face of logic and empirical evidence, are not difficult for me personally to accept.

More important than my own beliefs is the point that I am trying to convey as I try to present a model that includes spirituality. This spirituality is broader than the Judeo-Christian view I happen to hold because it includes the full range of those that may not even believe in a God or gods, but allows for the plausibility of some form of spirituality that goes beyond the immediate strict empirical view that all reality can be sensed or measured. In fact, I would agree with Asma (2004) who makes the point that spirituality is more complex than the question of whether or not God exists. In a discussion about the recent PBS miniseries called *The Question of God*, Asma states, “melodramatic dichotomies presented here are defused when one introduces religions outside Judeo-Christian tradition” (p. B16). Stressing the limited inclusion of other perspectives Asma continues noting that “Buddhism gets mentioned twice in the conversation segment” (p. B16). If this model is to be constructive in helping the worlds of practice and universities to include any form of spirituality, we must allow for all forms to be accepted. Janesick (2004) provides advice and exercises for novice qualitative researchers,

to sharpen one’s awareness of the role of the researcher.... Nearly everything written by the Chinese master painters was aimed not just at the technique of painting but also at the painter’s spiritual resources in order to express the spirit, or *chi*, the breath of Tao. The chi is looked upon as an underlying harmony. (p. 103)

Although the personal spirituality Noddings (2003) describes is not the same as mine, she makes the point that I am trying to emphasize here which is that “spirituality—if it is treasured—must be nurtured. To find out what nurtures it is one of life’s great tasks, one terribly neglected in today’s schools” (p. 221). Neither Noddings nor I support teaching religion or that there is one right way to understand the world: “Religious claims to knowledge are all suspect and with Buber, I fear they lead us away from connection and into the uneasy or even violent separation so characteristic of battles over dogma” (Noddings, 2003, p. 224). However, nurturing spirituality does not require that religion be either established or prohibited.

The overlap of caring and spirituality is more salient here than the overlap with religion. One of the many ways the overlap can be expressed is through the work of the scientist-priest Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. He describes the continuing human evolution as ‘progress toward’ that overlap in the following passage,

The slow progress of energies must reach a peak ‘from which life will never slip back’. To overcome every obstacle, to unite our beings without loss of individual personality, there is a single force which nothing can replace and nothing destroy, a force which urges us forward and draws us upwards: this is the force of love. (Chardin, 1968, p. 15)

Palmer (1993) takes a different approach to integrating spirituality into the larger picture. He notes that educators often feel disconnected and,

beneath the broken surface of our lives there remains—in the words of Thomas Merton—“a hidden wholeness.” The hope of every wisdom tradition is to recall us to that wholeness in the midst of our torn world... That, I think, is why the spirituality of education is now being explored in so many “unlikely” places. Perhaps the ancient communal act called teaching and learning can be renewed by drawing upon spiritual wisdom. (p. x).

Wisdom is not the same as knowledge or even massive attainment of knowledge or education. Palmer (1993) cautions that “spiritual traditions have been used to obstruct inquiry rather than encourage it... Authentic spirituality wants to open us to truth—whatever truth may be... [it] encourages us to welcome diversity and conflict, to tolerate ambiguity, and to embrace paradox” (p. xi). This approach is not often easy, but is the best type of leadership and a necessary if not sufficient basis for theory or research which can inform and be informed by practice. Bolman and Deal (1995) view spirituality as crucial and assert, “Leading with soul returns us to ancient spiritual basics—reclaiming the enduring human capacity that gives our lives passion and purpose” (p. 6). Merriam and Muhamad (2000/2002) in a study of older adult learners in Malaysia and the influence of cultural values of that country found that one of three major themes was “Learning is spiritually and philosophi-

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cally driven whether Moslem, Christian, Hindu, or Buddhist, the participants in this study spoke of learning in philosophical and spiritual terms” (p. 51).

Creighton warns us that “We have so thoroughly technicalized and intellectualized the job of organizational leader that there is no place for the real passions and pains that men and women in these jobs feel” (1999, p. 146). Creighton also makes the point that the connection between spirituality and caring is foundational to practice, “Leaders with spirituality demonstrate a true ‘caring’ for all in the organization, so the approach to problem solving is synergistic, not adversarial” (1999, p. 147). That approach to problem solving, which is so crucial to leadership, reinforces the connection of theory, research, and practice.

Spirituality and caring are also foundational to research and theory. Collins (1991) stated, “the ethic of caring suggests that personal expressiveness, emotions, and empathy are central to the knowledge validation process” (p. 215). This relationship is explicit for some such as the critical theorists (Tisdell, 2000/2002), but it is important for all researchers. Ethics and institutional review boards remind us of that in some ways. The relationships of spirituality and caring to theory, research, and practice are crucial for the larger questions such as what is important and where do we spend our energy. Noddings (1994) suggest among other things that researchers can and should have an ethic of caring and that there is increased contact “between researchers and teachers, so that collaborative inquiry may be maintained and so that relationships may develop through which all participants are supported in their quest for better ethical selves” (p. 181).

Much of the literature dealing with spirit has focused on the connection with practice. That connection is important, but again we should not stop there. Reconnecting with practice as MWERA has been doing is important. I believe this model adds to that effort by making explicit parts of that process that are sometimes left out because caring and spirituality can be difficult to deal with in public settings. As a public school principal, I never spoke of religion and yet one employee wrote a note to me as I left the principalship to return to the university,

I am writing a note of thanks for your contribution to ... Schools. You have demonstrated kindness to all. I am sure that there were times that you questioned your value to us. I personally would like to say that you were truly valuable. You were chosen for such a time as this. Many times people are unable to face change, challenge and above all adversity. But, I am learning in the scheme of life we are all seeded with purpose. You came during a time ... where it was necessary to see someone that had the ability to demonstrate respect, kindness and yet discipline. When I would behold you, I saw you in my heart of hearts. I saw beyond the natural mind. What I saw was a man that genuinely cared. You

took strides to demonstrate to our kids that they were worthy of respect. Many times I wanted to embrace you. It was the compassion of the Lord that allowed me to see your heart. The embrace I desired to give you was to let you know that I understood and cared. It was the compassion of the Lord that appreciated you fulfilling His will in your life. It was the embrace that goes beyond human comprehension. Some how we connected by the spirit.... His purpose is yet being fulfilled even when you don't even realize it. He has made you a humble man.

This person came from a similar Judeo-Christian tradition religious background although not the same denomination as I am. We did not talk about religion, but still she paid me what I took as the highest compliment I could receive by letting me know that she saw my spirituality in practice. Many practitioners have a deep spirituality that runs through everything they do and gives life to their practice. The memory of an educator that cared is strong for most of us and is part of why many of us chose education as a career.

I would again emphasize that including caring and spirituality does not establish religion, but does recognize that for many human beings the spirit can and is a part of the search for truth. Having spirituality may not assure quality, but there does seem to be a relationship. For some, such as myself, with a large number of faults, spirituality may be one reason people do not seem to notice the faults so much. Creighton (1999) as noted earlier recognized spirituality in quality practitioners. Parker Palmer and Nel Noddings have also made the point that this aspect is becoming more prevalent.

Acknowledging that for many there can be a spiritual aspect of the search for truth does not diminish the importance of research and theory to practice. Bob Slavin, our keynote speaker at this conference, said in his luncheon address—*Evidence-Based Reform in Education*, that it is important that education like other fields comes to an “acceptance by practitioners of evidence as the basis for practice.” I agree even if the emphasis I would put on randomized trials might not be as great as some, these types of quantitative studies are an important part of the whole portfolio that we need. While discussions of caring and spirituality are only a part of what can be considered when we explore the lives of those in the field of education, they can be qualitatively examined and can be important. Both quantitative evidence as well as qualitative evidence must be part of the whole portfolio that we use to improve education.

The intersection of theory, research, and practice is made more viable when the dimensions of caring and spirituality are underlying what we do in education. Whether we are doing research, connecting to theory, or involved in practice, when we are trying to make the world a better place we enhance all three, and if we truly care about any one of those three we cannot ignore their intersection.

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