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# Higher Education and the Journey of Transformation

Ron Miller

## Higher Education and the Journey of Transformation

*Holistic education* is a philosophical perspective on the challenges of teaching and learning, grounded in an emerging postmodern worldview that calls into question the most fundamental assumptions of the modern industrialized world. In the last three or four decades, an increasing number of cultural critics, scientists, and sensitive observers in many fields have come forward to assert that the ecological, economic and social crises now threatening civilization are ultimately caused by the materialist and objectifying worldview of modernity.<sup>1</sup> We have, they say, created a technocracy that forcefully harnesses natural processes for short term profit or comfort, converting fecund ecosystems into polluted wastelands, and deepening our alienation from the interdependent community of life on the planet. According to a holistic worldview, we need to stop violating nature's organic patterns and self-organizing processes, because the modern system is destructive and unsustainable. Holism, also known as "green," "ecological," or "integral" thinking, proposes that human activities be better synchronized with the vital rhythms and evolutionary creativity of the living world.

This perspective recognizes that it is the essential nature of life to strive for transformation toward greater complexity and integration—toward greater wholeness.

This includes the human species. Holistic educators assert that every person intrinsically strives to participate in this journey of transformation, and requires a nourishing cultural environment to undertake this quest. Holistic education is essentially the effort to embrace the organic wholeness of our human experience and to support young human beings on their existential journeys. It is not a methodology, a definable series of steps or techniques leading to a specified outcome. Nor is it an ideology, a fixed system of assumptions and beliefs derived from some authoritative text or charismatic founder. Because it follows, rather than dictates to, the organic unfolding of life, a holistic pedagogy must remain open, responsive, flexible, and self-reflective.

A holistic approach directs us to consider what we might call vertical and horizontal dimensions of human experience. The vertical dimension, according to holistic theory, involves the multiple layers of "wholes within wholes" that comprise the world. According to all those who have explained a holistic (or "integral") worldview, such as Arthur Koestler (1973), Huston Smith (1984), Anna Lemkow (1990), Malcolm Hollick (2006), and the prolific writer Ken Wilber (1977, 1981, 1983, 1997), the cosmos manifests through a "holarchy"—a series of "holons" sequentially nested in an ever more comprehensive pattern of meaning

and interconnection. What do these strange words mean? In terms of our identity as human individuals, “sequential nesting of holons” works like this: The material components of our bodies follow the laws of physics and chemistry. They exist in nature, independently (and are therefore “whole” in their own right), but they are organized within our bodies into a larger pattern—a living organism—which comprises a more inclusive whole. Biological processes are more complex than physical and chemical reactions; creativity, options, and evolution enter the picture, and living beings exist only in ecological relationship to their surroundings and to each other.

The holarchy of human existence does not end with biology, however; contrary to the claims of hardcore behaviorists or sociobiologists, our consciousness (the realm of the mind) introduces another, still more subtle, fluid and complex layer of reality—an intellectual and moral sphere. (Holism does not support traditional mind/body dualism, which separates these “layers” into altogether different categories of reality; rather, we are trying to understand the relationships between more and less fully integrated aspects of our existence.) Consciousness has more than a personal dimension; we can identify cultural and archetypal patterns that live through us, and beyond these, according to most holistic thinkers, is a spiritual dimension, the “Absolute” or Source, the ground of being itself, the most inclusive whole. The journey of transformation is an exploration of larger and deeper dimensions of meaning, aspiring toward, and perhaps actually attaining, direct experience of the creative energies of the cosmos. Holistic education, most fundamentally, is a pedagogy that recognizes these multiple layers of our existence, including dimensions of mind and spirit that lie beyond the simply physical world. Education in modern culture has come to mean training and disciplining the intellect, largely for utilitarian purposes in a world of material resources, but if we understand ourselves in terms of holarchy, this is a partial and inadequate education of the human being. Pedagogy needs to cultivate our ecological, emotional, moral, and spiritual aspects as well.<sup>2</sup>

Considering the horizontal dimension of the human journey, we see that our consciousness evolves over time. As individuals and as cultures, we *reconstruct* our understanding of the world, as Dewey (1963, 1966) would put it, to make more sophisticated and comprehensive sense of our experience. The pioneering holistic educators Maria Montessori (1965, 1973) and Rudolf Steiner (1975, 1995) argued a century ago that this process is not the simple addition of new knowledge, but a *transformation* of one’s way of being in the world. In more recent years constructivists in psychological research and cognitive science have come to the same conclusion. A five-year-old child experiences the world through a qualitatively different consciousness from that held by a twelve-year-old, which differs as well from that of a teenager or adult. To recognize this horizontal dimension is to hold a *developmental* perspective.

As we consider higher education, we must bear in mind that while the philosophical principles of holism are meant to be universal, the educational situation of young adults is profoundly different from the learning needs addressed by most existing models of holistic education. Higher education poses different challenges, and while some individuals and a handful of experimental colleges have explored this area, there is still much work to be done. Indeed, after thinking and writing about “holistic education” for nearly thirty years, this essay is my first attempt to consider the specific implications of this philosophy for teaching young adults as well as more mature learners.

This issue became salient for me a few years ago, while teaching required liberal arts courses at Champlain College in Burlington, Vermont. Champlain is a dynamic small college with a strong sense of community; it provides extensive support to its students’ academic and social development and cultivates a caring, truly collegial atmosphere on campus. Yet, as a career-oriented institution, it embodies many aspects of conventional, transmission-style schooling: The students in my courses were required to be there, whether or not they had a personal interest in the subject (and most did not; there are no liberal arts majors at this college). I was required to grade their work, making subjective and consequential judgments while lacking any real familiarity with their learning styles, educational backgrounds, intellectual interests or personal struggles (of which there appeared to be surprisingly many). And while I enjoyed a good deal of freedom in designing the content of the courses and activities in the classroom, I worked in a culture with an explicit vocational focus, which placed boundaries on what the institution—or the students—would consider proper or acceptable. In addition, I was teaching young people who had spent their entire educational lives in public or parochial schools; few if any of them had any experience as independent learners in alternative schools or as homeschoolers. They were well groomed to work for grades; many of them took serious notes only when they knew the material would be on a test.

So I spent three years wondering how to practice my calling as a holistic educator. My attempts to build on the students’ own questions and interests, or to get them involved in class or small group discussions, were often thwarted by the repeatedly demonstrated fact that most of the students were not intrinsically interested in the courses. Many of them candidly stated that they did not like studying history or political issues. They wanted to earn their degrees in business or graphic design, computer programming or some other field, and get out into the work world. They were not sitting in my classroom because they shared my passion for the dramas of American history. So I tried to impart this passion by giving spirited lectures, and trying to show connections across time to the present (it helped to be covering African American history during the week Obama was elected). I enjoyed giving these presentations, and the students seemed to appreciate them, yet all the while I was aware that I was in transmission mode, packaging and conveying my knowledge rather than inviting them to co-create their own. There was little or no expression of the vertical dimension of holistic education; I doubt my lectures did much to cultivate emotional, moral, or ecological layers of their experience, never mind the spiritual.

Earlier in my career, I had been on the faculty of the Education program at Goddard College, where the situation was entirely different. This is a low residency program where students—most of whom are older than traditional college students—spend eight intensive days on campus each semester, devising personal study plans rather than taking prescribed courses. I was not an instructor there, but a mentor, coaching each student individually as he or she identified what to study for the semester and how to most effectively go about it. My guidance went beyond narrow academic content, as I helped students get in touch with their deepest questions and passions as well as the doubts and fears that held them back. I helped them understand the larger context of the topics they wanted to study, and because they had already had independent experience in the world, they could co-create this understanding. They brought many ideas, observations, and feelings to the table, and through dialogue we incorporated these into the study plan. During the semester, they would send their assignments to me by mail, and I would provide detailed feedback—not grades. At the end of the semester I wrote a narrative evaluation, and each student wrote a reflective self-evaluation. No tests were given, and no grades. This felt like holistic teaching.

Comparing these two teaching situations, I recognize that many factors influence the possibilities for holistic higher education. It would be simplistic to claim that Goddard is a holistic institution while Champlain is not. Given the student population and its stated educational mission, Champlain makes an uncommonly strenuous effort to prepare young adults for their careers as thoughtful, self-aware, caring people. It requires them to be in classes such as mine, in an innovative, interdisciplinary Core program, precisely because it recognizes that narrow vocational training by itself does not cultivate a whole personality or constitute a well rounded education. I was constrained in my holistic teaching there by the age and educational background of the students, and by their own need (thanks to the bleak state of employment in late capitalist society) to acquire specific marketable skills in order to achieve an independent adulthood. Developmentally, most of these students were not prepared to make the sort of informed and self-aware choices that my older students at Goddard were capable of exercising. Even so, although they were in my courses grudgingly, which limited the possibilities for student-led learning, I could still open some windows to more holistic experience. They did not meditate or dance in my classes (though I did try fiction writing one semester), but by modeling my own passionate, morally engaged, yearning-for-deeper-understanding scholarship, I think I did expose them to other possible dimensions of learning.

I wish I didn't need to grade them. I could not fight the college on this issue, because the objectification of learning is much, much larger than this institution, engrained in our technocratic culture, and it is only the rare, renegade school (such as Goddard) that can disregard this imperative entirely. I tried to incorporate self-assessment and narrative evaluations in my classes even if I could not substitute these for the dead symbols that I was required to attach to their transcripts. I could not undo twelve years of training which taught

my students that they study for grades, not understanding, just as they will work for paychecks, not self-fulfillment, when they enter the technocracy. They need those paychecks, and it was not my place to disillusion them, even if I could. I could only offer them a glimpse of other possibilities, and some day, when some of them are ready, they may explore those. The point here is that higher education exists in a cultural context, and our universities and colleges, no less than our public schools, were given their present form and functions to serve and maintain that culture. Holism is a countercultural perspective; it contests the hegemony of modernism and technocracy. We cannot practice holistic education fully unless we are prepared to do battle with this culture in deep and significant ways, and very few institutions of higher education are in a position to do that. Holistic teaching is a radical act—too radical to fully implement in the present context of higher education. Nevertheless, we can begin to incorporate some of its principles, and start down a path toward the ultimate goal of educational and cultural transformation.

Earlier I mentioned my students' personal struggles, and here is one place to start. They deal with financial worries, including the massive debt they are piling up by attending college, as well as health issues, family crises, and a wide range of conflicts and stresses in their daily lives, from sexual harassment to drunken roommates. I am convinced that many of these problems are not merely personal, but are inherent in our ruthlessly competitive, objectifying technocracy. These young people are being worn down by the very system they are struggling to join and serve.

My job was to evaluate their academic work, disinterestedly, sidestepping the obvious fact that learning the content of my courses ranked fairly low on their list of pressing priorities. As a holistic educator, though, I had at least to attempt to break out of this prescribed professional role. Standing before my students, I was pulled in two competing directions: I was aware of these struggling, aspiring human souls looking for identity and security in an impersonal and insecure society, and I wanted to be their mentor and confidante. But I was also a teacher of an academic discipline, and the designated representative in that classroom of all that it means to cultivate the mind through critical, disciplined inquiry. Besides, I loved my subject and the lessons it holds for our humanity and our role as citizens, and I value clear thinking and effective writing. I knew that I was not simply there to be a friend to these young people, but to stretch their understanding, knowledge, and intellectual skill, even if the stretching was uncomfortable to them. And, most unlike a friend or confidante, I held the authority to pass judgment on how far they could or were willing to stretch.

In a simpler time, most of these students would not have been attending college. They would not have needed, or sought, the discomfort of being challenged and stretched by academic discipline. They would have found employment, a productive and more or less secure place in adult society, without "higher" education, which was intended for a certain personality type (or cultural elite), not for everyone. Higher education, as I experienced it, was a refuge

from the world's demands, a place to step back and ponder the meaning of things and the multiple possibilities of life. Today this description sounds amusingly anachronistic, like typewriters or even quill pens. Today college is largely an agency for developing human capital for the voracious global economic machine. Most of our students are not there to cultivate sophisticated intellectual habits or a passion for disciplined inquiry; they are there to become marketable.

How do we respond to this as holistic educators? How do we address the wholeness of our students' lives— not just their marketability, but their struggles and passions, their insecurities and aspirations, their place in history, in the ecosystem, in the cosmos? One place to start, as I have argued in all my writings, is with a commitment to balance and flexibility, because human needs and existential situations vary so widely.

In higher education, it seems to me, the core issue is more specific: How do we balance the existential realities of a young adult's life with the intellectual and professional demands of a recognized academic degree and the expectations of employers? In its most fundamental sense, this tension is between individuality and enculturation, between person and society. Young adults are at a critical developmental point where they must take on vocational roles in society—a task that introduces an external responsibility which at younger ages they (and their teachers) did not specifically need to address. But a holistic educator wonders how these students can accomplish this task without doing violence to their vital individuality, their essential personhood. Must the technocracy's vocational demands trump all other aspects of our humanity? teaching children, a core issue requiring balance is determining how much freedom of movement, behavior, and inquiry to give them in relation to pedagogical structure, to adult management of their activities.<sup>3</sup>

By requiring young adults to sit in classrooms for an additional four years after completing the modern childhood ritual of schooling, I think we owe them the respect of recognizing their existential struggles, by acknowledging that the academic performance we demand could be adding another layer of pressure on their developmental journey rather than supporting it. I am not suggesting that we discard intellectual rigor; I would not be interested in teaching history if the classes consisted of nothing but disconnected topics *de jour* casually selected by students, let alone gripe sessions or group therapy. Rather, I am arguing that a holistic approach to higher education requires the same commitment to *balance* that is a primary hallmark of holistic childhood education. Academic subject matter does have an inherent integrity, which it is our responsibility to uphold, but the engagement of young adults with academic discipline, the actual point of contact where, for example, a stressed out business major facing a world of globalization and peak oil encounters historical events such as the 1896 Supreme Court decision of *Plessy v. Ferguson* or the 1925 Scopes trial and tries to discern their meaning or relevance, is a fluid, multi-layered existential moment that requires from us more than intellectual authority.

Balance, in other words, is how we accommodate the vertical dimension of existence. The individuals sitting in our classrooms have intellectual capacities, but that is not all; their intellect is only one layer of their embodied existence in the world. Students are not simply cognitive processors, as some learning theories maintain, but also bio-eco-psychological organisms, living within social/cultural, moral and spiritual contexts. We cannot equally address all these facets of human identity in the setting of a college classroom, but if we strive to teach holistically, we must somehow acknowledge that each young person struggling to grasp the intellectual content of the course embodies them all; they are part of each student's existential reality at every moment. The content of the course, and the manner in which we teach it, must attempt to respond to this complex reality.

In recent years, some theorists of college pedagogy and adult learning have begun to address this challenge by promoting "spirituality" in higher education (Tisdell, 2003; Chickering, Dalton and Stamm, 2005; Awbrey, *et. al.*, 2006; Hoppe and Speck, 2007). This is a very promising development, a serious and thoughtful effort to explore the implications of holistic thinking. These theorists recognize that students (as well as faculty!) in our crushing technocracy need an expanded perspective, a wider and more inclusive source of meaning, to make sense of our lives and the world around us. Beyond academic competence, they assert, higher education needs to nourish our higher aspirations and deeper questions about life. Students should feel safe to bring their whole selves, including their dreams and vulnerabilities, into college classrooms; they should find a welcoming space that honors their individuality and their struggles. In his seminal work *To Know as We Are Known*, Parker J. Palmer (1983) beautifully described spiritually concerned teaching as the creation of such a space:

If we can affirm the search for truth as a continually uncertain journey, we may find the courage to keep the space open rather than packing it with pretense. . . . But precisely because a learning space can be a painful place, it must have one other characteristic—*hospitality*. Hospitality means receiving each other, our struggles, our newborn ideas with openness and care. It means creating an ethos in which. . .the pain of truth's transformations can be borne (pp. 72, 73-4).

What defines this approach as "spiritual" is the conviction that there is an active force within the human being, some animating element of consciousness that seeks growth, fulfillment, wholeness. This element is utterly mysterious and ultimately ineffable. We may use religious terminology to describe it, or not. (Physicist David Bohm (1983), for example, attempted to describe the "implicate order" that underlies material reality.) We may even use the word "spiritual," or not. The point is that a holistic educator sees his or her students as evolving beings who are guided from within, from some mysterious inner core, to strive for transformation toward wholeness. Their educational journey is "continually uncertain," as Palmer puts it, because the evolution of consciousness is creative and self-organizing, and the specific outcome of any person's own wholeness is never fully completed and therefore



never fully knowable. What a profoundly different understanding this is from the technocratic imperative to control events and manage resources!

In Palmer's elegant phrase "the pain of truth's transformations" is contained the very essence of holistic pedagogy. We do not merely seek to transmit knowledge, or even wisdom. Holistic teaching aims to call forth the transformation of each of our students, along with the transformation of the culture within which they live. Authentic growth—the stretching from old ways of being and knowing to expanded and more sophisticated ones that embrace a larger portion of truth—can be painful. It requires a letting go, a death, of familiar ideas and identities. Transformation means death and rebirth. A holistic approach to higher education is one that supports our students in their transformational journey from youth to adulthood, from dependency to independence, from a self-contained identity to one that assimilates societal roles and responsibilities. This is a higher education that honors both the horizontal and vertical dimensions of human existence.

## Notes

1. For example, see Roszak, 1978; Merchant, 1980; Berman, 1981; Capra, 1982; Griffin, 1988; Mander, 1991; Jensen, 2002; Korten, 2006; Hollick, 2006; Taylor, 2008.
2. I have explained this in more depth in "Holism and Meaning: Foundations for a Coherent Holistic Theory" in *Caring for New Life* (Miller, 2000).
3. I discuss the principle of balance in *The Self-Organizing Revolution* (Miller, 2008).

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