Final Paper

The Role of Spirituality in Creating Change in Community

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We are facing a tremendous crisis; a crisis which the politicians can never solve

because they are programmed to think in a particular way - nor can the scientists

understand… nor the world of money. The turning point, the perceptive decision,

the challenge, is not in politics, in religion… it is in our consciousness (Krishnamurti,

1983 as cited by Kumar, 2013, p. 3)

We need broad-based social movements that address the totality of society. I think

you got to live standing up rather than on your knees, you know. I think you have to

believe in something other than yourself. I think that you have to believe that the

world can be a better place and you need to fight for it. I think you have to believe

that you can't do it alone. You have to do it collectively, and I think you have to

believe that justice is going dead in us all the time and we have to find ways to revive

that. And we have to do it in ways that are compassionate, engage the notion of

social responsibility, take seriously what it means to be intellectually alive and to

always spark the imagination... (Giroux, 2014).

In an interview with Truthout media, Henry Giroux identifies the basics of what can be seen as

an ongoing and accelerating war between the rich and everyone else, an event that has resulted in a

mass inability 'to translate private troubles into larger structural public considerations.' "We have no

way of understanding that link anymore," Giroux (2014) says, "because what we've done is we've

defined freedom in a way that suggests it's the freedom to do anything you want and screw everybody

else."

Addressing the problems Giroux has identified has been an ongoing and growing interest of

mine. I have lived experience feeling excluded and forgotten by society, and as a 'problem' for the

economy, not as someone who has anything to contribute. Yet, with support I have overcome those challenges and I believe I have contributed quite a bit; economically and socially within a variety of communities.

I believe everyone does have something to contribute, not just to the 'economy' but to society in general. I believe many people who have been painted as 'problems' for society can be very productive in the economy and society with support. I believe everyone needs support at different times in their life, so people should not be judged a 'problem' just because they have some challenges in life. I believe everyone has something to offer and is of value to society.

The advent of Covid-19 has exacerbated a variety of historical issues related to racialization and other ways of dividing or labelling people in society. This is very apparent in the economic realm as well. As a student of the folk school movement theories of Nicolai Grundtvig, the founders of the Antigonish movement here in Nova Scotia and the Highlander Folk School in the Appalachia region of the United States, I also believe when people work together and have 'faith' in something larger than themselves, they can accomplish amazing things.

This work also connects for me with the work of Paulo Freire (of whom Giroux is also a fan) and Freire's work developing theories related to critical pedagogy as a means to understand and change the practice of education (Freire, 1970/1993). Freire's approach also involved starting with 'where people are' (Cobden, 1988). This was a core part of Freire's ideas around 'conscientization.' Freire (1970/1993) asserted that education can never be neutral. Either it is an instrument for liberating people or it is used to dominate and disempower them. He found that people were more motivated to learn how to read and write if the experience gave them insight into the power networks to which they are subjected. A key concept in Freire's *conscientization* is about the ways in which individuals and communities develop a critical understanding of their social reality through reflection and action.

Giroux (2010) also talks about how Freire's work is more important than ever because current educational systems are "privileging job readiness above any other educational values [including] self-reflection… [and] critical agency" (p. 716).   Giroux adds Freire's work is about a political and moral practice that provides the knowledge, skills and social relations that enable students to be critical citizens while expanding and deepening their participation in the promise of a substantive democracy" (p. 716).

Looking at some of the foundational theorists related to adult education, many of them would seem to agree that the purpose of education should be broader than just preparing people to be good workers. Eduard Lindeman (1926), as cited by Bean (2000) said the purpose of adult education is to "create meaning out of life experience" (p.67). Lindeman also believed that the "meaning gained through adult education was not complete until it was expressed through social action" (Bean, p. 67).

Myles Horton (founder of the Highlander Folk School) and Freire (Horton & Freire, 1990, p. 177) also said "a good, radical education is about loving people first… next is respect for people's abilities to learn and to act and to shape their own lives…". At the heart of the folk school movement originally imagined by Grundtvig was always this idea of the importance of addressing practical economic issues as well as ones of the 'spirit,' or what it meant to be a human being and to be aware of one's place and role within the world (Manniche et al, 1978).

To explore these ideas further, and how they might relate to the problems Giroux identified, I moved on to explore the newer field of social movement learning (SML). SML theorist Holford (1995, p. 95) says "the theory of social movements, if cast in terms of sociology of knowledge, provides the basis for a radically new understanding of the relationship between adult education and the generation of knowledge." Another SML theorist, Hall (2008) uses a poem by Marge Piercey called The Low Road to illustrate the nature of a social movement:

What is a Social Movement?

It goes on one at a time

It starts when you care

To act, it starts

When you do it again after

They said no

It starts when you say we

And know what

You mean, and each

Day you mean more

A more technical definition of a social movement (Snow et al, 2004, p. 11) is:

Social movements can be thought of as (italics original) collectivities acting with

some degree of organization, and continuity outside of of institutional or

organizational channels for the purpose of challenging or defending extant authority,

whether it is institutionally or culturally based, in the group, organization, society,

culture or world order of which they are a part.

Hall (2006) also says "deepening our understanding of learning within social movements is a

contribution, however modest, to the achievement of the larger historic project of a world we want" (p.

231). Citing Eyerman and Jamieson (1991), Hall notes: "There is something fundamental missing from

the sociology of social movements… North Amercian social movement theory… focuses on what

movements do and how they do it, [but] not what [the] members [of various movements] think" (p. 45).

This sense of being part of something bigger than oneself comes up again when looking at the

work of theorist Wilf Bean. He admits that 'at best' spirituality is a vague term encompassing a

landscape of meaning … but there remains within us a need for meaning, for understanding how our

lives fit into the larger world" (2000, p. 72). This sense of ourselves as being part of something bigger

seems to correspond and connect both adult education theory, radical adult education theory and even

the ideas of faith and spirituality throughout the work of practitioners Myles Horton (Highlander Folk School), and priests Father Jimmy Tompkins and Moses Coady (Antigonish Movement). All of these titans in the adult education world, including Grundtvig, looked for 'meaning' outside themselves. For them, it was their Christian faith that helped inspire and sustain them, but there are examples in many other faiths and cultures of this work and similar ideas as well.

Another example Bean (2000) puts forth is that of Sarvodaya Shramadana in Sri Lanka. Bean himself says the connection between spirituality and transformative education can come in many forms. In the same work where he writes about the Antigonish Movement in Nova Scotia, he also talks about the Bhuddist Sarvodaya Shramadana movement. Bean describes it as emphasizing:

> the inter-connectedness of reality…[calling] for awakening on four levels: the personal, the village, the nation and the world… Achievements are not just measured in changes in social systems or economic production, but also in human transformation… with an underlying assumption [that must include] the unfolding of the villagers' potential for wisdom and compassion (2000, p. 70).

The question then is how can we include 'meaning' and spiritual practices more in educational practices generally, and in social movement learning.

Bean (2000, p. 72) suggests one way to look at things would be to use a more 'contemporary' spirituality based on the following principles recognizing:

> humans are not the apex of creation, but one species within a complex, interdependent web of life… that the increasing global exploitation of both humans and nature is unjust… [that] each person is… not an object to be used for the benefit of others… [that] an individual's life is both shaped by and in turn shapes the web of relationships of which it is a part …spirituality… is a practice of justice [and] combined action and reflection...is relevant both for the groups with whom adult educators work and for adult educators… themselves.

Bean adds "these spiritual principles do not stand separately" (2000, p. 75).

Each is a strand in a larger, inter-connected vision of a more sustainable, equitable

world in which both people and resources are honored as sacred and where

everyone is more fulfilled through an increased awareness of their connection and

contribution to the greater good of the entire Earth community. This is a vision in

which spirituality, adult education and development are inseparable, and one that

challenges adult educators... to understand their work as central to the project for

human betterment (2000, p. 75).

The work of Kesa Munroe-Anderson (2018) in her dissertation, Set Our Spirits Free: Exploring

the Role of Spirituality as an Anti-oppressive Agent in the Formal Education of African Nova Scotian

Learning, also contributes significantly to the idea of the value of incorporating spirituality into the

education system. Her work explores how afri-centric spirituality could help marginalized learners be

more resilient in the face of challenges related to the current euro-centric system, and help community

members to use their 'spiritual' knowledge to confront and change issues of power, systemic inequities,

alienation and social oppression in the current system.

Another area of educational theory that seems it could help inform the question of how to

integrate meaning and spirituality more is holistic education. Holistic education, as theorist Ron Miller

says (2000), is based on:

each person [finding] identity, meaning and purpose in life through connections to

the natural world and to spiritual values such as compassion and peach. It aims to

call forth from people an intrinsic reverence for life and a passionate love of

learning. This is done, not through an academic 'curriculum' that condenses the

world into instructional packages, through direct engagement with the

environment... [and by nurturing] a sense of wonder.

Going back to theorists Jiddu Krishnamurti and James Macdonald, there is a strong recognition that the highest function of education is "to provide opportunities for teachers and their students to understand and transform their consciousness and thereby society" (Kumar, 2013, p.3). Macdonald says "[C]hange in human… consciousness is necessary and [a] precondition of later political change…" (1995, as cited by Kumar, 2013, p. 3). Another area of new ideas related to holistic education is meditative inquiry. Theorist Ashwani Kumar says: Meditative inquiry is an approach to focus on learning "about oneself and one's relationships with people, nature and ideas… [and] 'awareness' is [the] central dimension" of such inquiry (2013, p. 3).

The world of questions related to meaning and 'spirituality' are not just of the academic world though either. Writer Emily Esfehani did a TED Talk in 2017 where she talked about how happiness comes and goes, but having meaning in one's life is about serving something beyond yourself and developing the best within you. She said this gives people something to hold onto when times are tough, and helps build resilience. The four 'Pillars of Meaning' she talked about included: belonging, purpose, transcendence and storytelling.

Given our current situation with Covid-19, and the nature of many challenges youth especially are going to be facing, economically and socially, I believe using materials and practices that incorporate holistic education could go a long way to mitigating the damage done by Covid-19. I also believe though there is a unique (although tragic) opportunity for us to build back better long term

To do this though, we not only need to educate youth and others to help them adjust to the practical challenges of this time, we also need to educate the 'whole' person to encourage them to use this time to advocate for greater systemic change as well. We need to look at all aspects of our education systems and ask the question: Beyond the technical skills needed to do something, what are we doing to support skill development related to critical reflection and meditative inquiry, and what are we doing to support 'spiritual explorations' related to building a sense of purpose and meaning in one's

life? This is critical not just to encourage people to participate more in social movements that fit their values, and advance socio-economic justice, but also to address serious challenges related to mental health and resilience. The challenges will not stop with Covid-19, and the creation and distribution of a vaccine. We still have many other existential crises to deal with including climate change, and the potential advent of other 'super-spreader' viruses.

So, given the personal interest I have in the problem of how to create more inclusive economies, and more inclusive democracies, I find myself reflecting on these various 'new-to-me' areas of educational theory and feeling very excited. I see many potential ways to incorporate these ideas into my practice as a community educator, and have already done so just recently in teaching entrepreneurship to a group of NEET (Not in Education or Employment or Training) youth in my own rural community.

This is a group of youth for whom learning does not come easy; at least it has not in the traditional school system. Many of them have mental health challenges. I had delivered workshops for a similar group of youth last year (just before Covid hit). I talked about entrepreneurship, social enterprise and co-operatives. The workshop went well. I remember my emphasis last year though was more on the technical skills related to these topics; how to be an entrepreneur, how to create a social enterprise, how to create a co-operative.

This year, my emphasis was different. Again, I touched on the basics related to how to be an entrepreneur, start a social enterprise or develop a co-op, but more of my focus was on finding meaning and purpose in one's life as a path to greater resilience in times of difficulty. I talked about my own story and journey as someone dealing with mental health challenges, and how I had overcome those challenges. I also shared videos of Esfehani and Stacey Abrams (former candidate for Governor of Georgia). Both resonated deeply with the youth.

I hope this different approach to 'entrepreneurship education' will help these youth to reflect deeply on what they want to do with their lives, how they can contribute to their communities and to show them they all have value. They are all important, and with 'meaning' in their lives, they can all overcome whatever challenges life will throw at them.

I believe this is a small example of how we could take existing programs and adapt them for a larger purpose whether this is with NEET youth, racialized youth or other groups who are marginalized in some way. I also believe even programs for people who are not marginalized, but even privileged in some way, could be adapted to ensure consideration beyond their own needs and interests. I believe incorporating a more comprehensive, holistic and even 'spiritual' approach to education could fundamentally alter our 'collective consciousness' to encourage us to do more for others, and create a better, more inclusive world.

> Movements have narratives. They tell stories, because they are not just about rearranging economics and politics. They also rearrange meaning. And they're not just about redistributing the goods. They're about figuring out what is good. (Ganz, 2009).

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