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Welcoming Soul to Our Schools

RACHAEL KESSLER

LIVING DEEPLY

IT IS OUR FIRST OF SEVERAL “senior honoring ceremonies,” designed to celebrate each graduating senior—not just the few who have shown outstanding achievement in academics or athletics. A vase filled with a variety of long-stemmed flowers sits in the center of a softly lit room. The first circle of chairs holds twenty-five students and the teachers who will address them. In the chairs behind them are parents and other faculty. After a welcome by the school principal, teachers go one at a time to the center of the circle, select a unique

flower from the vase, and stand before a surprised and curious student. One teacher begins: “I have watched you grow this last year and become strong like the sturdy stalk of this giant iris. When you came into my class, I could tell that you were used to being one of the clowns. Yet, when it came time to share our stories, you took the first risk. You inspired all of us with the courage of your vulnerability. I want to honor you for the warmth you brought to each of us and the initiative and courage you’ve shown. I respect you as a leader and value you as a friend.”

The young man beams. His father, behind him, looks stunned. This is his younger son—the cutup, the disappointment after the academic achiever who went before him, the one who has brought his father too many times to the disciplinary dean’s office. After listening to one of the most respected teachers in the school describe the outstanding gifts of character this boy has demonstrated in his final year of high school, the father’s face is soft, tears glistening. He places his hands on his son’s broad shoulders. One squeeze tells the boy that his father has heard, that he sees him in a new light. In the father’s eyes looms a key question: What went right? The answer: At the heart of every adolescent experience is an exquisite opening to spirit—an awakening of energy when larger questions of meaning and purpose, of ultimate beginnings and endings, begin to press with both an urgency and a loneliness much too powerful to be dismissed as “hormones.” What went right is that this young man found experiences that nourished his spiritual development. This secular school created a place for his soul, and he flourished. This curriculum of the heart is a response to the *mysteries* of our young: Their usually unspoken questions and concerns are at its center.

Since 1985, I have worked with teams of educators throughout the United States in both private and public schools to create curricula, methodology, and teacher development that can feed the awakening spirit of young people as part of school life. Now called PassageWorks, this approach is a systematic set of principles and practices for working with children and adolescents that integrates heart, spirit, and community with strong academics. In 1998, a leading journal in public education, *Educational Leadership*, broke a taboo in mainstream education by discussing the spiritual dimension of education. An unprecedented response to this issue prompted the editors to select my book, *The Soul of Education*, as a membership book in 2000. It was sent to more than 110,000 educators and was endorsed across the spectrum of political and educational beliefs.

PassageWorks has been a pioneer in recognizing and responding to two vital needs now demonstrated in a growing body of research as essential to students’ resilience and future success: (1) supporting students during critical transition years and (2) personalizing schools—creating small learning communities within each school

that protect all children from falling through the cracks. Originally developed for adolescents, the PassageWorks curriculum now starts in kindergarten and addresses each subsequent transition in the cycle of schooling. Beyond social and emotional learning, this model includes a depth dimension students have long referred to as “spiritual.” In the 1980s, I couldn’t explain this; after all, we were not practicing or even discussing religion. But after many years of seeing the impact of the model on students in diverse settings—public and private, urban, rural and small town—I came to understand what students have felt since the beginning of the program.

CREATING AUTHENTIC COMMUNITY

When soul is present in education, attention shifts. We concentrate on what has heart and meaning. Students’ yearnings, fears, confusion, wonder, and wisdom are central to the curriculum. Questions become as important as answers. When soul enters the classroom, masks drop away. Students dare to share the joy and talents they once feared would provoke jealousy in even their best friends. They risk exposing the pain or shame that might be judged as weakness. And when given an opportunity to see deeply into the perspective of others and to accept what they have felt was unworthy in themselves, young people discover compassion and forgiveness.

Creating authentic community is the first step in the soul of education. To achieve the safety and openness required for meaningful exploration of the inner life, students and teachers work together carefully for months. We establish agreements, conditions that students identify as essential for speaking about what matters most to them—such as respect and the right to pass when invited to speak. Reflective practices and riveting play give students tools for letting go of distractions and becoming relaxed and alert. They become a team through laughter and cooperation. Symbols that students create or bring into class allow them to speak about feelings that are awkward to address directly. Using dyads, triads, highly structured sharing circles, and then the practice of Council, students progressively strengthen the muscles of deep listening and authentic spontaneous speaking. Council allows each person to speak without interruption in a circle where all can see and be seen. Students discover what it feels like

to be truly heard. When students work together to create an authentic community, they learn that they can meet any challenge—even wrenching conflict, prejudice, and death—with grace, power, and love.

Once respect has been established in the classroom, we give students the opportunity to write anonymously the questions they think about when they daydream or cannot sleep. These questions and the stories shared in Council are tools for encouraging students to discover what is in their hearts. For years, I listened to these questions and stories, and eventually I began to see a pattern to what nourishes the inner life of children and youth.

GATEWAYS TO A STUDENT'S SOUL

What I discovered are “Seven Gateways” that map a set of yearnings the students describe or demonstrate, whether or not they have a religious tradition or other beliefs about the nature of spirituality. This theoretical framework for understanding the domains of experience that nurture soul does not come from any religious or philosophical tradition. It describes a variety of experiences that touch students at different times and in different ways. As we seek to foster spiritual formation in our students while respecting the separation of church and state, these gateways provide clues to the opportunities we can create.

The search for meaning and purpose involves opportunities for service and for the exploration of existential questions students raise. Even kindergartners pose questions such as “I wonder if the universe never stops . . . if my fish at home are playing hide and seek . . . if numbers never end.” By the end of elementary school,

students’ questions reflect different concerns: Why do I always play alone at recess? Will we ever cooperate and live together in peace? Why do people kill animals just for money or just for fun? Is there such a thing as destiny? Questions middle school students commonly ask include these:

- *How do you know if you love a boy (or a girl)? When is a good time to lose virginity?*
- *Am I so unlikeable that some people ignore me, act mean, or talk behind my back? I don't want anyone to hate me.*
- *Why do I have to make myself look nice for other people? Why can't I just act like myself and not have to impress anybody?*
- *Why are people so cold in taking care of our planet?*
- *What is life? What is our mission in life? What made us and why are we here?*

In high school, students wonder:

- *Why do I feel scared and confused about becoming an adult? What does it mean to accept that this is my life and I have responsibility for it?*
- *Do I have a greater purpose than to labor for my survival and social acceptance?*
- *What is beauty?*
- *What makes people evil?*
- *Why is it so hard to show love?*
- *Will the planet survive for my children and their children?*
- *Who is God? Is there a God?*

“Even kindergartners pose questions such as ‘I wonder if the universe never stops.’”



And adolescent immigrants, going through a uniquely difficult rite of passage, share concerns such as these:

- *Why did my parents decide that I have to come here, far away from them and my friends and everything I loved and was used to?*
- *Will I be able to finish high school?*
- *Will I be able to return to my country?*
- *Will my children have a better life than me?*

Simply seeing the universality of their peers' concerns helps students validate their own questions and nourishes their souls. The PassageWorks curriculum encourages students to find their own answers—known as “returning the question”—while educators are guided to provide experiences that honor students' questions. When students feel genuinely listened to, they begin to sense their significance as human beings.

Although this search inspires students' motivation and learning, it is uncomfortable for some teachers to hold. Teachers who predicate their authority on having the “right answer” are not comfortable with questions that appear to have no answers. But when they honor students' existential questions, teachers often feel transformed by the work. “I am changing . . . I am now making that final leap from ‘teacher’ to ‘person,’” reports one middle school teacher. A high school teacher reflects: “How do I allow myself and others to voice life's big questions when I have no answers? How do I learn to sit quietly with myself and listen? This has a relevance to me as a parent, a wife, a friend, a daughter, and a human being as well as a teacher.”

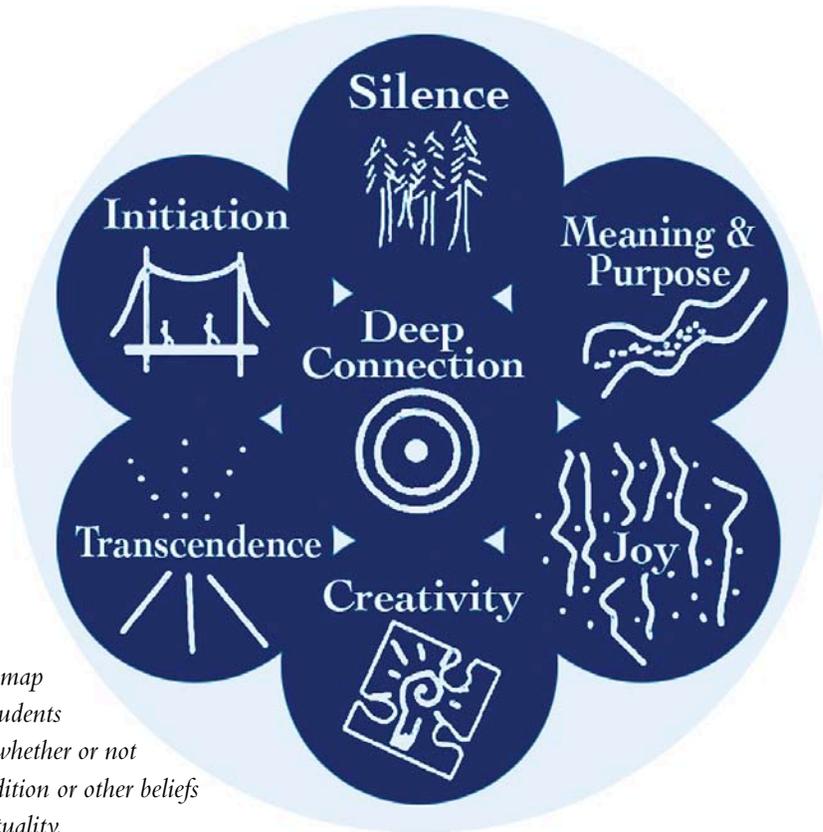
The hunger for joy within young people goes against a culture of complaint, criticism, and suffering common in schools today. Many teens are more embarrassed to share success than failure, more afraid to reveal joy than tribulation. Yet I found joy in virtually every experience of deep connection students described and whenever they talked about what is most important to them. I began to see the many ways to foster joy and delight inside the classroom:

- *Sharing joyful life experiences; reminding students that we are here to share our highs as well as our lows*
- *Creating celebrations and moments for expressing gratitude*
- *Inviting humor*
- *Teaching through play*
- *Creating lessons that awaken the senses and engage the body*
- *Fostering moments of heartfelt connection within the group*
- *Encouraging the personal exhilaration that comes when someone takes a risk or breaks through perceived limitations*

We can also invite students to experience the exultation that comes with appreciating or creating art and music, encountering the majesty of nature, feeling or witnessing the power and grace of the human body in athletics and dance, and experiencing or observing the brilliance of the human mind. Inviting joy into the classroom supports the growth of positive emotions that mitigate the forces of cynicism and despair and promote resilience throughout life. ↻



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The “Seven Gateways” map a set of yearnings that students describe or demonstrate, whether or not they have a religious tradition or other beliefs about the nature of spirituality.

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The creative drive is perhaps the most familiar domain for nourishing students’ soul life in secular schools. In the act of creating, people often encounter depth, meaning, and mystery. Writes one student, “There is something that happens to me in pottery class—I lose myself in the feeling of wet clay rolling smoothly under my hands as the wheel spins. I have pottery last period, so no matter how difficult the day was, pottery makes every day a good day. It’s almost magical.” When students are given opportunities for creative expression, they describe a healing transformation of their pain and challenges. Whether developing a new idea, work of art, scientific discovery, or an entirely new lens on life, students find awe and mystery when they create.

The urge for transcendence describes young people’s desire to go beyond their perceived limits. “How far can I be stretched? How much adversity can I stand?” writes one student. “Is there a greater force at work? Can

humans tap into that force and bring it into their daily lives?” asks another. By naming this human need that spans all cultures, educators can help students constructively channel this powerful urge by challenging them in ways that reach for this peak experience. Transcendence includes secular experiences of the extraordinary in the arts, athletics, academics, and human relations. For some, it involves the mystical realm. Opportunities for transcendence can also be found in wilderness experiences and, when appropriate, in states induced by such tools as relaxation exercises and contemplation. Consciously addressing and transforming prejudices and stereotypes and exploring the gifts of suffering—such as courage, faith, compassion, forgiveness, truth telling, and love—also support transcendent breakthroughs. If we don’t guide young people into this domain, they often go there without us—and many will lose their way, as they do when they turn to drugs and suicide.

The call for initiation refers to a need that traditional cultures met through rites of passage for their young, such as the vision quest, the Mexican *Quinceañera*, and the Jewish *Bar* or *Bat Mitzvah*. Today's young share many challenging passages: (1) the transitions into and out of elementary school, middle school, and high school, (2) the major transformation of biological puberty, and (3) the passage from high school and into adulthood. PassageWorks' school-based programs guide students to become conscious of their irrevocable transitions. These programs include a semester or yearlong course to integrating methods and coming-of-age themes in an academic class or a school-sponsored retreat. Through a rite-of-passage program at school, students can both reflect on their own identity and create an authentic community with other students across cliques and lines of class and gender. By also engaging parents, community members, and other educators, such programs create a network of support that strengthens our youth and the community.

Honoring silence, stillness, and solitude supports inner peace, identity formation, learning readiness, and goal setting. Students are often ambivalent about silence, both fearing and urgently needing it. As a respite from the tyranny of busyness and noise that afflicts even young children, structured periods of silence can bring the calm and detached perspective students need to take stock of their lives. Stillness lets them discover feelings and thoughts that might be buried under the commotion of daily activity. And silence grants them permission to day-dream, to flex and strengthen an imagination weakened by modern life. Teachers offer "solo time" in a variety of ways—for example, at the beginning of a day or class, at the end of an activity, or at the end of the day.

Deep connection describes a quality of relationship that is profoundly caring and resonant with meaning, that involves feelings of belonging, of being truly seen and known. Through *deep connection to the self*, students encounter the strength and richness within that is the basis for developing identity and autonomy. When a student feels cared for by a teacher or an advisor, and when teachers and students create authentic community in the classroom, they encounter a sense of belonging and union with a group—a *deep connection to others*. The more that young people are encouraged to strengthen their own boundaries and identity, the more capable they are of healthy bonding

to a group. Many students connect deeply to their lineage or to nature, and some discover solace in their connection to God or to a religious practice. "I try to practice being present. That's what Buddhism has given to me that I really cherish," a student explains. Another says, "I became a Christian a few years back. I can't tell you what it feels like to know that I'm loved like that . . . by Jesus."

Although teachers must be careful not to share their religious beliefs because the power and public nature of their role creates the risk of proselytizing, the First Amendment actually protects students' freedom to express religious beliefs. In our confusion about violating the law, we often suppress students' freedom and the rich exchange that comes when such an important part of their lives is acknowledged. When students know there is a time in school life when they may give voice to the great comfort and joy they find in their relationship to themselves, the people they love, their lineage, God, or nature, this freedom of expression itself nourishes their spirits. Students who feel deeply connected want to be in school. They don't need danger to feel fully alive; they don't want to hurt others or themselves.

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Through careful, methodical cultivation of deep connection, soul-centered curricula fosters the transformation of consciousness needed for a sustainable world. The spontaneous burst of respect and openness for "the other"—even those whom a student thought they could never stand—is an essential catalyst in the heart and mind that makes peace and justice a possibility. With emotional balance and a rich inner life, our children may grow to need less "stuff." Social responsibility emerges, not as a burden or obligation but as a sense of connection and empowerment. Young people discover the compassion that makes humans want to alleviate the suffering of others. They experience choice and change as possible—in themselves, the community, and society at large. 🌍

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