Education as Heartwork
How Teaching from the Heart can Transform the Learning Experience

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Precis:

Education today is not only hard work; it is heartwork as well. Authentic teaching, learning and leadership lie in the heart of genuine relationships and a caring environment. Heartwork is founded by developing in teachers and students, an awareness of self and others that allows us to transcend the everyday and nurtures personal understanding, meaning and significance.

Jenn was a former student who came to visit many years after her high school graduation. These are those small treasured moments that remind us of the joy of our work and why we became teachers. Jenn was a fine student and she actually enjoyed being in my class. I often ask students who visit, what they remembered most about my class. Surprisingly one of the things she remembered most was my guitar playing and singing. She said with a smile that it, “took a lot of guts to sing in front of the class considering your voice.” Unfortunately she did not rank my dynamite lesson on the fall of communism as among her most memorable moments. Jenn had just graduated from university and she wanted to thank me for helping her along the way. I asked her what I did that she was so thankful for and she replied, “Chamomile tea”. She went on to say, “One day I came to school with a throat so sore that I could not talk. I was feeling miserable and should have been home. Well, we were all working on an assignment when part way through the class you quietly left the room and returned with a hot cup of Chamomile tea and you set it on my desk and didn’t say a word. I will always remember that small act of caring.” Jenn went on to become a teacher.
What is Heart?

I believe the qualities of Heart center around the actions, words, attitudes, and thoughts that sustains others. It is an ‘openness and acceptance’ that allows others in without prejudice or preconception. Even when confronted by negative energy or situations, to have heart is to have the presence of mind not to fall into a well of anger or blame. To exercise heart in this way one has to be mindful of what is in the best interest of all and to avoid a singular pointed mindset. Heart understands that, as an individual, I am not perfect and I will make mistakes. In that light, heart tries to help, teach and learn in ways that are kind and life affirming.

The Need for Heart

When I begin to reflect on the need for heart in schools I often think of the many challenges that teachers face in education today. There are issues of accountability, lack of resources, overcrowded classrooms, fear of liability, discipline, loss of professional respect, students who come to school hungry or hurting and teacher burnout. Can heart really help us navigate such troubled waters? Maybe. The heart within a school will not miraculously fund a program or change government policy overnight. What heart can do is help put these issues and challenges into perspective. Heart can help us look at these external limitations and forces in healthy and productive ways. Sometimes what happens when it seems like the whole world is against us is that we focus too much on the problem and how it affects us. We begin to lose sight of our real work and what is
truly important. I have found in teachers who could weather such storms a deep understanding of their own values and principles. They have a strong desire to maintain positive and caring relationships. It is this mindfulness that has helped them, 'light their way through the darkness'.

Perhaps there is no greater reason for developing caring relationships in schools than to foster a vibrant learning community. Heart is at the core of such an endeavour. Barth (2001) describes a community of learners as a “collection of youngsters and grown-ups working together to provide and sustain their own and one another’s learning. A community of learners is a school whose defining, underlying culture is one of learning. “The condition for membership in the community is that one can learn, continues to learn and supports the learning of others” (pp. 13). Dufour and Eaker (1998) elaborate on this concept with their idea of a Professional Learning Community which consists of educators who create an environment that fosters mutual cooperation, emotional support, and personal growth as they work together to achieve together what they cannot accomplish alone. There is an inherent understanding that teachers must embrace their own continuous learning as fundamental to instilling learning in others. “You cannot lead where you are not willing to go” (Barth, 2001, p. 28).

Relationships are at the heart of a learning community. It is through these relationships that teaching and learning occurs. However, these relationships are not limited just between individuals. Both Palmer (1998) and Freire (1998) discussed the relationship one can have with ‘Knowing’. Freire (1998) defined
Knowing as meaningful, thought provoking and reflective learning. It is the construction and critical examination of knowledge. Knowing takes the form of an education that challenges our perceptions of the world and helps us to see things from many perspectives. It was this kind of learning that Freire (1998) hoped would liberate us from narrow attitudes and prejudices. It is the difference between rote memorization for the sole purpose of pleasing a teacher or doing well on an exam versus genuine understanding that invites dialogue, criticism and new learning. Freire (1998) viewed learning as an exchange of thoughts and ideas, which helped in building positive relationships between student and teacher. Learning in this way changes a person. It promotes growth. It is transformation at work.

To Palmer (1998) learning was not an object but a subject. It has life and it has the potential to transform those who come in contact with it. Such knowing would not be possible if learning was regarded as a static and limited object. Palmer (1998) used the notion of “The Grace of Great Things”

By great things, I mean the subjects around which the circle of seekers has always gathered – not the disciplines that study these subjects, not the texts that talk about them, not the theories that explain them, but the things themselves. (p 107)

The subject is at the center, not the teacher or the student. It is the subject that invites questions and investigation and a sense of wonder. The subject ‘creates space’ for learning as we try to relate to it, understand it, and make sense of it. Palmer (1998) adds that,
the subject centered classroom honours one of our most vital needs as teachers; to invigorate those connections between our subjects, our students, and our souls that help make us whole again and again.” (p120)

A subject-centered classroom allows students and teachers to engage in the process of teaching and learning. When Mrs. A teaches biology – it comes to life. Her passion for the subject brings wonder and excitement to her students. Her passion starts to rub off on the students as they learn more and begin to relate and connect with the subject matter. They become a community of learners where everyone learns from each other. Learning is active and creative in nature. It is the passive classroom that courts apathy.

Heartwork is more than just teaching the curriculum. When we use heart we turn learning from being product oriented to being a process and the subjects we engage in do not become commodities to own but a way to understand reality and ourselves.

**The Inner Nature of Heart**

The concept of heart in educational literature focuses on moving education beyond the comfortable and measurable objective realm that nurtures the mind and into the emotional and affective sphere that nurtures the spirit. This is the inner nature of heart. According to Bosetti (1995):

Teaching is heartwork. It is about giving, caring and nurturing students so that they will develop spiritually, emotionally, and intellectually. It is about ensuring that the learner has the necessary skills, attitudes, knowledge, and courage to engage in creation and
transformation of his or her world. Teaching is about empowerment and transformation. (p.45)

This empowerment and transformation comes from an acknowledgement that students bring to the learning environment their own sets of values, perceptions and experiences. Students are not empty vessels to be filled and teachers are not the conduits of knowledge. Taoism recognizes this inner nature of students and of staff. Respect of one’s own inner nature and that of others is a means of achieving happiness (Hoff, 1982). It is an acceptance of the inner nature of individuals and working with them from where they are and not trying to force them into something we want or expect them to be. From the perspective of multiple intelligences it would be approaching the education of students according to their inherent strengths (Gardner, 1999)

**Courage of Heart**

Another aspect of heart can be found through Parker Palmer’s writings. He sees the courage of heart and therefore the courage to teach. His major premise is that it takes heart and courage to be true to yourself and your inner nature. He submits that teaching could not be reduced to mere technique and methodology devoid of one’s own gifts and personality. It takes courage to allow your inner passion to blossom and come forward. We will often see the safety of technique and methodology in the master teacher – student teacher relationship where the student teacher tries to emulate the methods and motions of his mentor. It often does not work as effectively because it can be void of the values, thoughts and
intentions of the author. It is not the technique that matters but the heart behind the actions that matters most.

Good teachers possess a capacity for connectedness. They are able to weave a complex web of connections among themselves, their subjects, and their students so that the students can learn to weave a world for themselves. The methods used by these weavers vary widely; lectures, Socratic dialogue, laboratory experiments, collaborative problem solving, and creative chaos. The connections made by good teachers are held not in their methods but in their hearts – meaning heart in its ancient sense, as the place where intellect and emotion and spirit and will converge in the human self.

As good teachers weave the fabric that joins them with students and subjects, the heart is the loom on which the threads are tied, the tension is held, the shuttle flies, and the fabric is stretched tight. Small wonder, then, that teaching tugs at the heart, opens the heart, even breaks the heart – and the more one loves teaching, the more heartbreaking it can be. The courage to teach is the courage to keep one’s heart open in those very moments when the heart is asked to hold more than it is able so that teacher and student and subject can be woven into a fabric of community that learning, and living require. (Palmer, 1998, p. 11)

**Heart as Caring**

Palmer’s prosaic words help us to understand what is meant by the common phrase, ‘we teach children, not subjects’. In an educational system fractured by the demands of accountability and the bottom line we need to hold tight to the foundation that children come first. Tetsuo Aoki (1992) echoes this understanding by illuminating heart as caring. This caring is found in the ‘presence of beingness’ of teaching. The presence of beingness of a teacher is not found in the mere act of teaching but more so in one’s hopes, thoughts and dreams that imbue one’s work with students. “That teaching so understood is attuned to the place where care dwells, a place of ingathering and belonging,
where the in-dwelling of teachers and students is made possible by the presence of care that each has for the other. (p. 21)

Teaching is the place where care dwells. Aoki (1998) elaborates further with the notion of pedagogy and pedagogical watchfulness and thoughtfulness.

“Pedagogy means, in the original Greek sense, leading children. Teaching is truly pedagogic if the leading grows out of this care. Teaching, then, is a tactful leading that knows and follows the pedagogic good in a caring situation. (p. 21)

A caring situation has, as a quality, pedagogical watchfulness, which is mindful watching overflowing from the good of a situation that a good teacher sees. In a sense, good teachers are more than what they do, they are the teaching. It is an embodiment of teaching or a presence of mind that connects us with our students in a caring manner. Thoughtfulness is a reflective quality where one’s thought and spirit are embodied in the oneness of a lived moment. We think about our students and our work from the perspective of goodness and concern and it becomes a part of us to the point that we begin to miss it when it is gone. (Aoki, 1998)

Watchfulness and thoughtfulness are qualities of the heartwork we do in schools. It is not a method or technique to be learned and executed, but a way of being and knowing that helps us connect with our own spirituality and that of others.
The Heart of Leadership

With an understanding of the heart of teaching and learning we can now delved into the heart of leadership. The heart in leadership encompasses all the attitudes, thoughts and feelings that enable the members of a learning community to grow and prosper in their own unique ways. It is a means of support and a way of understanding that focuses on empathy and self-awareness. The heart of leadership encourages personal exploration, risk and humility. Heart tries to find solutions to problems from within. Heart is at the core of what gives a person a sense of wholeness in being. Heart is what gives meaning to what we do in schools. Heart is what connects us in a life-sustaining web of caring relationships.

The heart of leadership is an outlook, a way of life and living that inoculates us from the vicissitudes of everyday. It helps us understand our sense of identity or the diverse forces that make up our lives, and it helps us with integrity, which lies in relating to those forces to bring us wholeness and life rather than fragmentation and death. It is self-awareness. To be true leaders we must first be true to ourselves. (Palmer, 1998)

Kouzes and Posner (1999) view leadership as keeping hope alive through encouraging the heart.

Encouraging the heart is ultimately about keeping hope alive. Leaders keep hope alive when they set high standards and genuinely express optimism about an individual’s capacity to achieve
them. They keep hope alive when they give feedback and publicly recognize a job well done. They keep hope alive when they give their constituents the internal support that all human beings need to feel that they and their work are important and have meaning. They keep hope alive when they train and coach people to exceed their current capabilities. Most important, leaders keep hope alive when they set an example. There is nothing more encouraging than to see our leaders practice what they preach. (p. xx)

Why heart in leadership? It is not so much a matter of style than one of purpose. Leadership is done in the service of others. Greenleaf (1991) identifies a servant leader as servant first. It is not a matter of ego but one of contribution, to help in the betterment of community and society. Not for material gain as a primary motivation – but as a willingness to serve and to sacrifice. There is much room for damage if people are in these positions for the wrong reasons and potential for great success if the motivation is true and honourable. It is ‘people work’.

An administrator works for teachers and students - not the other way around. As a result – the staff, students and parents perceptions of educational leadership may need to change. The days of the traditional principal as the lone heroic leader are gone. We all have roles to play and there will be aspects of education that are the sole responsibility of the principal – but effective leadership requires a collaborative environment. Linda Lambert (1998) referred to this as building leadership capacity. Leadership does not only come from the administration but also from teachers, and even students and parents. In an atmosphere of trust and caring – the potential to build leadership capacity is enormous.
Heartwork and Spirit When it was Needed Most

In no time in my career did I witness the true strength, caring and wisdom of heart than during a tragedy that struck on the Lost Coast hiking trip in California in late March of 1999. Two of our students lost their lives trying to save a parent chaperone, who also died as she was swept out to sea. Another student and teacher nearly lost their lives in a brave rescue attempt. The principal called me the night it occurred and it was my responsibility to let staff know before they would hear it on the news. I spent most of the next day on the phone. It was still spring break. The information I gave was sketchy to start with but it was important to pass on any news as soon as it arrived. The news was met in one of two ways; a need to know more, especially about everyone’s safety and well-being - or silence. I tried my best to deal with both situations. I often met silence with silence. It seemed appropriate to exist in the moment and just let it be.

A veil of sadness had enveloped the school. I wondered how we were ever going to move forward from this loss. A crisis center was set up at the school and soon students, staff, parents and concerned citizens dropped by to give and receive support. Flowers, food and cards of sympathy began to pour in. Our first line of duty was to put in place crisis support for the students returning from the trip and for others here who were impacted by this loss. The second was to somehow try and find a way to carry on despite the tragedy. The strain on the office and especially the principal was enormous. So many unanswered
questions – so much hurt and uncertainty and many were at a loss to understand why something like this could ever happen.

Meetings with staff helped prepare us for the return of the students from spring break and the inevitable questions and concerns that would arise. We would do the best we could. We were to engage students if they wanted to talk, listen to them if we did not have answers and be there for them if it was needed.

Not long after the students returned the funerals were being announced. There were three and they occurred very close to one another. Many staff volunteered to cover the classes of teachers who wanted to be in attendance. The teachers also accommodated their students who wanted to be present. We celebrated the lives of those who died. It was both happy and sad.

At school the students wanted to hold their own memorial service. With the guidance of our principal and myself these students helped bring closure to this unfortunate chapter in our lives. They remembered their friends and the parent, Mrs. C in a way that would have certainly have brought a smile to their faces. We were reminded of the fragility and the preciousness of life.

The Governor General honoured as heroes the two survivors of the rescue attempt.
Many years have now passed since that unfortunate day and what I remember most is the way the school came together as a genuine community in support and concern for one another. It was these caring and compassionate relationships that allowed us to endure and to move on.

From this experience I have started to comprehend more deeply some of the qualities of the heart of leadership and education. These qualities can help us in our work and daily interactions with our fellow colleagues, students and parents. This is by no means meant to be a complete or comprehensive list. These are qualities I have reflected upon, contemplated about and discussed with my colleagues with whom I have had many thoughtful discussions in this regard.

**Silence:** A reflective quality that allows us to stop – even if it is just for a moment – to live, to acknowledge and feel connected to the present. Often our busy lives have us reflecting on what we have just done in the past or thinking about what to do in the future. There is an aspect of ‘self-awareness’ that puts us in touch with our own feelings and how these feelings may impact others around us. Silence allows us to listen to our inner voice and not to act rashly or out of emotion. (Kessler, 2000) (Hoff, 1982) (Palmer, 1998)

**Listening:** Listening requires a very quiet mind. If you really want to listen, your mind is naturally quiet because you are deeply listening to everything. If you can listen this way with ease, with a certain felicity, you will find an astonishing transformation taking place in your heart, in your mind. (Krishnamurti, 1989) Listening helps us seek to understand, and then be understood. (Covey, 1989)

**Encouragement:** Helping individuals find their own strengths. Especially important when individuals feel defeated. Not advice giving per se but an ability to help people find strength, courage and joy from within. It is a deep self-acceptance and capacity for forgiveness. (Kornfield, 1993)

**Patience:** Not giving up too soon on students or with staff. Patience will not allow us to marginalize problems and especially students. It enables the natural progression of process and provides time for reflection – calm. True patience is not gaining or grasping, it does not seek any accomplishment. (Kornfield, 1993)
**Compassion:** No-one is perfect. We need to understand that we all have room for growth and this needs to be nurtured. Compassion is a means to develop understanding and a willingness to reach out and open one’s heart. An open heart is vulnerable. Accepting vulnerability allows us to drop our masks, meet heart to heart, and be present for one another. We experience a sense of unity and delight in voluntary, human exchanges that mold the spirit of community. It is love. (Bolman and Deal, 1995)

**Acceptance:** People are who they are. In Taoism the concept is Pu – or the uncarved block. This does not mean we have finality. They will always be room for growth and we need to encourage growth, but we accept people where they are and help them mature and evolve. (Hoff, 1982) Point out an individual’s strengths as opposed to the weaknesses. It is better to work in the light than the darkness. (Walters, 1993)

**Relationship or Connection:** The heart of teaching and leadership. “A deep quality of relationship that is profoundly caring and resonant with meaning, and involves feelings of belonging, or of being truly seen and known.” (Kessler, 2000, p. 17) Such connections can be with themselves, others, the grace of great things or even a higher power.

**Service:** “In leadership it is not the position but the function that is important. It is the work, not the rank that sustains progress. The position of leader is not, in the deepest sense, any more important than that of the humblest follower. In leadership, a garland of humility is more prized than any crown. – it is a sign of strength.” (Walters, 1993, pp. 46) When one is humble, one always puts others first. (Sergiovani, 1992)

**Joy:** The ultimate goal is to find joy in life, in living, and in others.

**Exercising the Heart of Leadership**

Kenneth Wilber (1996) had an interesting notion of what it would be like if we could educate using the body, mind, soul and spirit - what he referred to as a full spectrum education. This would encompass the objective and the subjective, the rational and the spiritual, the internal and the external, and the individual and the community. He cautioned against what he referred to as ‘flatland’ or a narrow, limited view of the world. When we exercise the heart of leadership, we are bringing to the learning community an element of caring and spirit that is
sometimes missing in our work with students. It is not because we do not care or feel it is unimportant. It comes as a result of the many demands we face as educators. We can get so busy trying to ‘do’ the work that we forget with whom and why we do it. The lesson becomes the focus and not the students. By exercising heart, by examining our spirit – we can overcome flatland in favour of an integrated approach to learning. Even Howard Gardner (1999), the master of multiple intelligences feels that we should not limit our teaching to a student’s unique strength(s) but to stretch that student so he/she can begin to develop other skills and abilities.

**Fostering Spirit and Heartwork in Schools**

How do we develop the capacity for heartwork in our schools? The answer may not be as difficult as it may seem. The means are found in us and in those we work with everyday. However, like love – spirit and heart are sometimes difficult to express. It takes courage to open up our hearts and spirit to others. There is an ease and comfort in the rational and the logical. Straight forward – objective – uncomplicated; we can go through life like following the recipe in cookbook. But we lose the very essence of life in return. Heart and spirit are in us all and the real challenge is to help us see our inner selves and those of others. For some they are already there, for others it will take time and patience, but it is worth the time for they will find - in the journey – a life affirming energy that will sustain and bring them happiness. Here are some suggestions for fostering spirit and heartwork in schools:
• **See the inspiration around you.** Schools are very inspiring places. There are staff and students and parents who do wonderful and extraordinary things everyday. Slow down and take a moment to enjoy others for who they are and the work that they do. Be inspired.

• **Celebrate.** We can encourage heartwork by celebrating it. Sometimes it can be as simple as a word of thanks, a show of support or just being there. Recognition means that we are ‘paying attention' to others and what they do. Read Posner and Kouzes’ book, “Encouraging the Heart.”

• **Lead by Example.** Encourage heart and spirit in others by encouraging it in yourself. It will guide your work and interaction with others. It will generate ‘sparks.’

• **Servant Leadership.** Remember it is not about you but what you can do to support and help others. Your actions will speak louder than your words. Be humble.

• **Sometimes we help best by not helping.** It is easy for an administrator to solve all the problems sent his/her way. However, sometimes we can help more by guiding individuals to find their own solutions. Such solutions have more meaning and authenticity because they come from within. It is about trust and empowerment.

• **Rules are not written in stone.** Rules are important in that they set guidelines and expectations. However, don’t enforce a rule just because it is there. Like a willow tree we can be strong and still be flexible. Do what is in the best interest of the student – not the rule.

• **Seek first to understand – then be understood.** Listen and learn. Here is where you will find that patience is a virtue. Don’t assume you understand – take the time to talk, listen and learn - before you act.

• **Encourage collaboration.** Remember we are all in this together. We can best help ourselves by helping each other.

• **Develop leadership capacity.** There is enormous potential for progress and accomplishment when we create a culture that celebrates and encourages the leadership of others.

The heart of leadership taps into the power of individual dignity and respect. It helps create a responsive and caring culture, which allows all members of a
learning community to thrive and prosper. The ancient wisdom of the Tao te Ching instructs:

I have just three things to teach:
Simplicity, patience, compassion.
These three things are your greatest treasures.
Simple in actions and in thoughts,
you return to the source of being.
Patient with both friends and enemies,
you accord with the way things are.
Compassion toward yourself,
you reconcile all beings in the world.

This the wise man residing in the Tao sets an example for all beings.
Because he doesn’t display himself,
people see his light.

Because he has nothing to prove,
people can trust his words.
Because he doesn’t know who he is,
people recognize themselves in him.
Because he has no goal in mind,
everything he does succeeds.

Sources:


Covey, S C (1990). The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People – Restoring the Character Ethic. New York: Simon and Schuster


