Teaching As If Life Matters

C. Uhl

Introduction

It is a deeply personal challenge for each of us to ‘marry’ life totally and completely, for better or for worse, richer or poorer, in sickness and in health until death
-D. Connelly, pg. 5

Given my interest in teaching, it was perhaps inevitable that one day I would ask myself: What would it mean to teach as if life matters? This question, as soon as it arose in me, had a stilling effect. I sensed, immediately, that this was a question that had the power to transform my work as teacher. And, as it turns out, it is doing just that. Indeed, it is this question—What would it mean to teach as if life matters?—that has guided me in the writing of this book.

Teaching As If Life DOESN’T Matter

I am a survivor of a concentration camp. My eyes saw what no person should witness; gas chambers built by learned engineers, children poisoned by educated physicians, infants killed by trained nurses; women and babies shot by high school graduates. So I am suspicious of education! My request of teachers is: help your students to be Human. Your efforts must never produce learned monsters, skilled psychopaths or educated Eichmans. Reading, writing, spelling and arithmetic are only important if they serve to make students more Human. Victor Frankl, quoted in Bryson, 2004, pg 35)

We humans are social beings. So it is natural that children take on the attitudes and beliefs of their parents, relatives, teachers, and other authority figures. And then, when they grow into adulthood and have children, they raise them more or less the way they were raised.
The same thing goes for young people who study to become teachers. They, too, tend to reproduce in their own classrooms the same structures and pedagogies that they were subjected to as students. This certainly describes me. For example, during my early years of college teaching, I taught the same way that I had been taught—e.g., I lectured; I administered tests; I assigned text readings—never stopping to seriously consider whether any significant learning was taking place, much less what it might mean to “teach as if life matters.”

Then one day, while on a visit to the University of Michigan, during a question and answer session, in a packed room, a female graduate student stood and asked me to explain my philosophy of teaching. I was dumbstruck, stilled—like a deer caught in headlights. Seeing my befuddlement, she added, “You know, your ideas on how people learn and how this informs your approach to teaching?” I mumbled and stuttered but it was soon clear that I had nothing worthwhile to say. In truth, though I had been teaching for more than a decade, I had never given any thought to this woman’s question. Had I had the composure and presence of mind to pause and really think about her question, I would have discovered that, in fact, I did have a philosophy of teaching. It was grounded in five inherited beliefs:

- “Knowledge” is a collection of facts; these facts are objectively verifiable and not subject to interpretation.
- “Teaching” occurs when these facts move from teacher to student via oral transmission or through text.
- It is the “teacher” (credentialed, owing to many years of study) who is qualified to transmit these facts.
- Verifiable “learning” occurs when the student receives the “facts” from the teacher by listening and taking notes, and then studying for and passing tests.
- All this teaching and learning takes place in designed locations referred to as a “schools.”

This is the so-called “transmission model” of education. For me, the traditionally “trained” scientist, this model was the only one to which I had been exposed. I tended to view students as “empty containers” and it was my job as teacher to “transmit knowledge to them. This philosophy had simply been absorbed by default; I was teaching in exactly the manner I had been taught during my many years of schooling, never once stopping to consider if this model was effective. Only in the last decade, after many years of teaching, have I given serious consideration to this question of a teaching philosophy and specifically to how the actions and behaviors and attitudes that I bring to teaching might be informed by my own life experiences as a learner.

It was my colleague and partner Dana who pointed out that a philosophy of teaching must necessarily be built upon one’s understanding of how learning occurs. In this vein, she suggested that I conduct a kind of inventory of my own schooling and learning experiences—a “learning history”—with an eye to elucidating the conditions and circumstances that for me,
My Story

As I prepared to conduct an inventory of my schooling and learning history, I felt three emotions. First, I felt embarrassment. Why? Well, there I was, a university professor, son of a university professor—my entire life spent marinating in schools, college towns, libraries, classrooms—yet I had never given sustained attention to this question. My embarrassment was amplified when I acknowledged that I had preached the importance of critical thinking in my courses—yet I had seldom paused to think critically about the process of my own schooling. The second emotion I felt was excitement—the same excitement I feel whenever I sit down to explore something new and important. Indeed, I sensed that this inquiry had the potential of turning my understanding of teaching on end because, contrary to my academic upbringing, I would be seeking insight, not from books, but, instead, from my own lived experience. Finally, and growing out of my excitement, was the feeling of desire—a yearning to know something of myself more fully. In this vein, I suspected that one reason that I had avoided examining my learning history was that, unconsciously, I knew that such an investigation would shake me up and challenge me to overhaul my entire approach to teaching. In the past, I feared such change; now I yearned for it.

Elementary School: At St. Thomas of Villanova Elementary School, I remember spending a lot of time in lines—lining up to go out to recess, lining up to go to the bathroom, lining up to get lunch in the cafeteria, lining up in the front of the classroom to recite verses. There was a mind-numbing sameness to my days in school—sitting in bolted-down desks, hands folded, waiting for the next task; reciting my ABCs; memorizing the answers to catechism questions; practicing penmanship on specially-lined paper. Everything, it seemed, had to be done within the lines, according to the rules. I must have “learned” this lesson well, because whenever we were given a “blank” piece of paper and told to draw, I drew the same thing—a boat. Maybe the first time I drew it my teacher said something kind. I don’t know. I do know that year-after-year, I drew the same boat—a little three-deck tugboat.

Pausing now, I realize that my memories contain a strong emotional component. For example, my jaw tightens and I feel “flutters” in my stomach (Just as I did years ago!) when I remember Father Hennessey coming into the room to hand out report cards. He would call us up one-by-one. My turn: Father Hennessey opens my report, looks at me, tilts his head, and then hands it to me. No word needs to be spoken. I know I am not doing well. Reviewing my report cards now, I see that my grades were sometimes failing and, at best, mediocre; I see too that I was severely lacking in the categories of “self-control,” “obedience,” “personal hygiene,” and “responsibility.”

It was in the fourth grade that schooling finally broke my spirit. I spent many hours of that year kneeling in the corner of Sister Clara’s room. I can still conjure that corner—its
cinderblock walls, the lime-green paint, the polished linoleum floor. It was also in my fourth-grade year that my parents noted my shoulders beginning to slump—they saw the slump of resignation, though I doubt that they “read” it in this way. I had been broken. To correct my slump, each evening my Father made me stand, ramrod straight, for five minutes, with my shoulders pressed against the refrigerator door.

Ordered to kneel, told to put my shoulders back, graded as a failure, I came to believe that I was deficient. This assessment was reinforced through what Catholics call “confession.” Confession is preceded by an “examination of conscience.” At St. Thomas this consisted of a nun reading aloud an exhaustive list of sins. A typical confession for me in fifth grade went like this: I swore 8 times, I stole money from my Dad’s change bowl 3 times, I looked down a girl’s bathing suit once (only had one opportunity!), and so forth. After confessing my sins I was given a penance. I usually felt a little better after confession but soon I would be back “sinning” again.

I think deep down, right from the start, I knew that school was not a place that would nurture me and, suspecting this, I did the only thing I knew to do—I struck a low profile, made myself invisible, went numb. But this came at a price: I withdrew from life. In school this translated to living in fear that I would be called on and humiliated, further confirming my sense of inadequacy.

Life Outside the Classroom

Though much of my childhood was spent in classrooms, my most vivid memories of learning actually occurred outside the classroom. For example, on my way to school each day, I walked through a large parking lot where I learned to recognize, at a glance, the model and year and special features of all the cars made in America. At recess, I traded baseball cards with friends. These trades were based on a complex calculus involving the team, the player’s statistics (e.g., batting average, earned run average, errors, etc.), and the age and condition of the cards, themselves. Meanwhile, on weekends, in Boy Scouts, I learned skills like how pitch a tent, cook a meal over an open fire, tie knots, paddle a canoe, fix a leaky faucet, treat a snake bite, and administer artificial respiration. At the time, it never occurred to me to connect these joyful, easy, freedom-filled experiences with learning for I was trapped in the belief that learning occurs in designated places called schools.

At the end of my sixth-grade year it was apparent to my parents that Saint Thomas was not offering much in the way of an education and so they announced that they were going to send me to a public school. I was outraged and told my Dad he would be sent to hell for doing this. At that point I was so utterly defeated that I preferred to stick with a soul-numbing school, rather than risk something different.

High School: My high school years, for the most part, were also devoid of genuine
learning. By this I mean that I seldom learned new skills or gained enduring knowledge (i.e., profound new understandings), nor were my beliefs fundamentally challenged or my dispositions changed.

When I got around to studying in high school, it wasn’t because I was interested in the subject. Instead, I studied because there was a test coming up; I studied, in effect, because I was afraid of the consequences of getting a “bad” grade. So it was that my self esteem became entrained to my performance on tests—outer authority replaced inner authority.

And then something remarkable happened. In my last year of high school, two extraordinary women, Lucille Bowen and Stacy Jackson, took me under their wings. They were English teachers, nearing retirement, filled with goodwill, overflowing with curiosity, and radiating joyfulness. Their enduring gift to me was not so much the writing skills they taught, but rather the simple fact that they believed in me. Under their gaze I felt seen, accepted, valued. These two woman modeled what it means to teach as if life matters—what it means to love students to life!

**College:** I only experienced what I consider significant learning twice in college. The first time was when I spent my sophomore year in Japan and learned—mostly outside of the classroom—that there are other ways to understand religion, food, space, responsibility, courage, and even beauty, than what I had been brought up with. My second important learning period occurred during my final semester when I decided to take my education into my own hands by taking 15 credits of independent study. I spent the entire semester reading everything I could get my hands on in the realm of history, political science, psychology, peace studies, anthropology, nutrition. At the same time, I fell in love with the woman I was later to marry, I got active in political issues, wrote for the college newspaper, and joined a “street theater” group. I was bubbling with life! I woke early each day, read, wrote in my journal, experimented in the kitchen, met my lover for “deep” conversation. There was an “I-can’t-get-enough-of-this” quality to my existence. Here is the point: I know I am learning when I experience a palpable whole-body sense of desire, excitement, power, and expansion. In this state, I literally come to feel more capable, more self sufficient, more independent; I feel expanded, bigger, better, more complete—more as if my life matters!

**Graduate School:** During my graduate school years, pursuing a Ph.D. in Ecology, the natural world was one of my classrooms. There I learned about ferns and fungi, insects and trees, fish and spiders by simply wandering through fields and forests and mucking about in ponds and streams—sometimes relying on a good guidebook or a knowledgeable friend; sometimes simply trusting in my own powers of observation and discernment.

At this time, I had two important indoor “classrooms” as well. The first was the library! It was in the library that the whole world of research opened up to me. I was no longer reading dumbed-down narratives (textbooks), but the original manuscripts—the actual research papers—that comprised the substance of ecology. And more often than not, my reading was motivated by
my own questions—my own burning desire to know more. I was a man on fire, hungry, passionate, alive. Two years into my graduate year experience a moment came when I realized that I, too, could actually do ecology. I could take my own questions to the field and devise experiments and find answers. Oh, the sense of power that came with this realization!

My second indoor classroom was the seminar room. It was there that I would meet with fellow graduate students (with or without a faculty member in attendance) to have conversations about important research papers that had just been published. Here we were, “greenhorns,” reading about the very latest discoveries in a field that we were increasingly passionate about! For once, we weren’t reading and taking notes and memorizing facts in preparation for a test. We were reading for the joy and excitement of it. We read to test our wits against these “published” ecologists who had made it. We didn’t bow down before them and accept their work as perfect. Rather, we tore their papers to shreds, pointing out shortcomings in experimental design, unspecified assumptions that could invalidate their conclusions, sloppiness in their data collection, and misapplications in the use of statistics. After a time, as we began to launch our own research projects, we continued to come together—fledgling scientists—to encourage, critique, and inspire each other. In effect, we became a community of learners—learning from each other.

Lessons

While everybody’s learning history is unique in its particulars, there are common characteristics that run through most of our stories. For example, though we are taught to believe that learning occurs in schools, it turns out that a lot of learning occurs outside of schools. In this vein, Donald Finkel in his book, Teaching With Your Mouth Shut, invites readers to think back over their lives with an eye to selecting their three most significant learning experiences and then, in each case, to stop and ask: 1) Did this experience take place in a school? 2) Was a professional teacher involved? and 3) What conditions and factors were involved in bringing about the learning? Finkel observes that: “Most people’s significant learning—the learning that has really mattered to their lives—did not take place as a result of intentional teaching….. [And] if a teacher or a teacher-like figure was important to your learning, she was probably doing something different from enthusiastic telling…. Perhaps she got out of your way, gave you the opportunity to make your own mistakes, or failed to rebuke you when you expected a rebuke. But more than likely, no teacher was even present.” (Finkel, 2000, pg. 7)

Reviewing my own learning history, it is clear that formal schooling has seldom been an important locus of learning for me. As often as not, my true “classrooms” and best “teachers” have shown up in daily life. For example, I learned Portuguese by living in Brazil; I learned the rudiments of carpentry, farming, and bread baking by apprenticing myself to masters in those fields; I learned something of compassion when my heart was cracked open, about suffering when I refused to forgive. I learned sports by getting out on the field; I learned ecology by
wandering in the forest, eyes wide open and by working side-by-side with able mentors.

As Matt Hern, author of *Field Days*, points out, “In a lot of ways, learning is synonymous with living. Learning is something that happens all the time, whether we intend it or not. Learning is what people do. We learn, take in new information, gain new knowledge, pick up new skills and insights constantly” (2003; pg. 64 confirm page). Meanwhile, our education system has brainwashed us into believing that learning is something that happens exclusively in schools under a prescribed set of circumstances, and that living is what we do outside of schools. This is nonsense: Learning and living are inseparable.

### Escaping Education

I have had the good fortune to live in the Amazon Basin with people who have had no formal schooling. I think here of Getulio and Pedro and Luciana, and Maria, my friends living in the village of San Carlos, perched on the banks of the Rio Negro. None of them ever attended school, and yet the men are able to build houses, track animals, trap fish, and make canoes; and they have an encyclopedic knowledge of the plants and animals and soils of the rainforest. The women, for their part, are accomplished farmers, weavers, and healers; they know how to prepare and preserve food and care for the sick. My friends acquired their knowledge and skills and dispositions in the school of life; they learned by listening, watching, and imitating their fathers, mothers, aunts, uncles, cousins. Indeed, there is no scarcity of “teachers” when it comes to mastering life’s arts and necessities.

A while back, a cinderblock school was built in San Carlos. So, it is that nowadays the sons and daughters of Getulio, Pedro, Luciana and Maria spend their days in school. My friends confess that they are confused; they want a better life for their kids and they have been led to believe that schooling will lead to this better life. But they harbor doubts. Juan laments, “My son is learning to read but he doesn’t know how to hunt or fish; he doesn’t know the healing herbs; he doesn’t know how to build a house or fashion a dugout canoe, or make a fish trap.” Meanwhile, the children gather each night to watch the one television set in town. This is the nighttime “classroom” for it is here that they learn both about the life of glitter that exists out beyond the village and, by inference, about the seeming backwardness of their parents. As for me, when I look at the intelligence of my friends, and the enfeebled state of their kids, I want to weep.

The esteemed educator John Dewey observed “we learn what we do!” Applied to the modern classroom this means that, for all intents and purposes, learning is confined to what students *do* in the classroom. Reflecting on the question of what students do in a typical American classroom, educator, John Gatto, wrote:

*Well, they sit and listen. They memorize what someone else said is true and they take tests. What they don’t ‘do’ is make things that they need (a*
pair of pants for wearing, a chair for sitting, bread for eating), fix things that are broken (e.g., their bike, their basketball, the leaky faucet in their bathroom), care for things that are precious (a vegetable garden, the old tree in the neighborhood park, a baby), or address real world problems in their community (e.g., the pollution of the town stream).

The point is that relevancy—i.e., realness—is central to learning and there is nothing more real than the real world. Schools, on the other hand, are artificial environments, necessarily lacking in immediacy. Indeed, the work in classrooms “fails to satisfy real needs pressing on the individual; it doesn’t answer real questions experience raises in the young mind; it doesn’t contribute to solving problems encountered in actual life” (Gatto, 2001, pg. 51 confirm).

The second lesson that emerges, as I reflect on my learning history, is that I learn best when I am motivated by a deep and sustaining desire to learn. In other words, for learning to occur, I have to acknowledge my ignorance in a certain area and really want to do something about it. I am not alone in this regard. Indeed, humans have extraordinary capacities for learning, provided we are motivated by genuine desire. Think about it: As babies we looked around and saw adults walking and quite naturally we wanted—we desired—to have mobility for ourselves. This motivated us to learn to walk. Likewise, we observed adults making sounds and saw how this caused things to happen, and this created a desire within us that propelled us to learn to speak—a phenomenal achievement. The same is true for learning about numbers.

The Role of Desire in Learning

Imagine a twelve-year-old child in America who still hasn’t learned how to add and subtract. Scandalous! Talk about “a child left behind!” And yet in Framingham, Massachusetts at a place called the Sudbury Valley School this would not be a cause for alarm. Indeed, Daniel Greenberg, a teacher at Sudbury, relates how one day a dozen kids between nine and twelve-years-old approached him and asked him to teach them arithmetic. Up to that point these kids had seen no need for arithmetic—it had had no relevance in their day-to-day living—but now they wanted to learn it—for reasons important and known to them. Upon hearing their request, Greenberg discouraged them saying, “You really don’t want to do this? Your neighborhood friends, your parents, your relatives probably want you to, but you, yourselves, would much rather be playing or doing something else” (1987; pg. 15). But the students insisted and promised to work hard and do all the homework. Greenberg eventually consented, making it clear that he would meet with them for ½ hour (from 11:30-11:30 AM) on Tuesdays and Thursday. If they were as much as five minutes late, class would be cancelled; if they missed two classes, no more teaching. “It’s a deal,” they said. For the text, Greenberg chose a math primer written in 1898 that was chock full of exercises designed to teach basic math skills.

What happened? Here is Greenberg: Basic addition took two classes. They learned to add everything—long thin columns, short fat columns, long fat columns. They did dozens of
exercises. Subtraction took another two classes.... On to multiplication, and the tables.... Everyone had to memorize the tables. Each person was quizzed again and again in class. They were high, all of them. They could feel the material entering their bones. Then division—long division. Fractions. Decimals. Percentages. Square roots. They came at 11:00 sharp, stayed half an hour, and left with homework. They came back next time with all the homework done. All of them. In twenty weeks, after twenty contact hours they had covered it all. Six years’ worth. Every one of them knew the material cold (1987; pg. 16-17).

Notice that Greenberg didn’t employ sophisticated technologies or the most up-to-date teaching materials. His methods: practice and drill. And these were not exceptional students, just regular kids. Yet, they accomplished in twenty weeks what normally takes six years and they learned the math “cold.”

Greenberg’s story illustrates that the critical ingredient for genuine learning is DESIRE. Those kids at Sudbury didn’t have to be bribed or cajoled or shamed into learning ’rithmetic. They wanted it! Indeed, once desire is present, “teaching” as it is commonly understood (i.e., as teacher depositing packets of information into the empty heads of students), is rendered moot.

As I worked to distill further lessons from my learning history, I began to delve into books such as Deschooling Society by Ivan Illich, Instead of Education by John Holt, Dumbing us Down by John Taylor Gatto, Field Days by Matt Hern, To Know as We are Known by Parker Palmer, Teaching as a Subversive Activity by Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner, among others. The critiques and insights offered by these authors led to a third revelation—one that I had been avoiding facing up to for decades—namely that I had learned very little of lasting benefit through my schooling.

This is not to say that I didn’t learn anything in school. I certainly acquired skills like reading, arithmetic, and writing, but, like the kids at Sudbury School (above), most of what I learned could have been learned in a tiny fraction of the 20,000 odd-hours I spent within the confines of classrooms.

A final breakthrough occurred for me when I began to think about what was actually happening for me during the thousands of hours I spent exiled in school. At first, I was inclined to conclude that I didn’t learn anything at all, but, in truth, we are always learning something. Ideally, what we learn is beneficial to us—e.g., it makes us better informed, wiser, stronger; but it is also possible to learn things that make us weaker, stupider, and more dependent on others. Tragically, as Holt points out, this is the net effect of schooling for most young people in America:

We are very unlikely to learn anything good from experiences which do not seem to us closely connected with what is interesting and important in the rest of our lives... Even more important, we are even less likely to
learn anything good from coerced experiences, things that others have bribed, threatened, bullied, wheedled, or tricked us into doing. From such we learn mostly anger, resentment, and above all self-contempt and self-hatred for having allowed ourselves to be pushed around or used by others, for not having been smart enough or strong enough to resist and refuse (1976, pg. 12).

These are strong words and, yet, they ring true to my experience.

In the end, I was compelled to admit to myself that what I learned during all my time sitting in the classroom was, well…. SCHOOL—i.e., a way of being that, more often than not, undermined my personal agency, creativity, intelligence, and confidence. Caught in the “spell” of school, I learned that to be a successful student, the best path was to be: 1) be obedient—i.e., follow the rules; 2) quiet—i.e., sit docilely and avoid asking probing questions; and 3) dependent— i.e., to wait to be told what to do, rather than charting my own learning path. Apparently, not much has changed. When fourth graders nowadays are asked “what being good means,” 90% answer, “being quiet.” Meanwhile their teachers describe a successful classroom as one “where the teacher is able to keep the students on task”—i.e., where students are doing what the teacher tells them to do. In such contrived settings, students aren’t really behaving; rather they are being behaved by their teachers.

My schooling also conditioned me, to see the world as composed of objects, subjects, categories. The emphasis was on distinctions—ways of separating—rather than on commonalities—the interconnectedness among things. In the eyes of the “schools” I attended, I was an object to be acted upon (the “empty container”) and, as well, an object to be quantified in terms of numbers. Absorbing the lesson that life is a kind of contest rendered my classmates as “objects” for me to compete against, while encouraging me to believe that winning, success, and getting ahead were more important than kindness, compassion, or community.

My graduate training in science further engendered objectification. Indeed, it was in graduate school that I learned the power of manipulation enacted through experimentation. For example, if I wanted to learn something about a plant or animal, I could perform an experiment to see how “it” responded. After the experiment I could assess the effect of my manipulation by taking the organism apart—by, in effect, killing the “object.” Trained as a scientist, I adopted the “objectivist” approach—believing that I could know the things of the world only if I held them separate from me. The logic of “objectivism: is expounded by Palmer (1998): “When we distance ourselves from something, it becomes an object; when it becomes an object, it no longer has life; when it is lifeless, it cannot touch or transform us, so our knowledge of the thing remains pure” (INSERT PAGE NUMBER).

The very culture of the educational institution where I now work, has also contributed to my “schooling” in objectification in so far as I have been objectified by my employer. Indeed, Penn State and other “research universities” tend not to see their faculty as individuals with
hopes, feelings, and passions, but, instead, as a composite of performance indicators—e.g., grant
dollars generated, publications, tally of bibliographic citations, course ratings, sum of student
credit hours generated, etc. Now, here is the important part: Objectification kills—it deadens the
soul.

Most people, myself included, have difficulty seeing the pernicious lessons of schooling
because we are so comprehensively embedded within the educational system—we are products
of it; the system is us. Also, it is painful to acknowledge that, for most of us, our formative years
were spent in ways that may have crippled our sense of self, our confidence, our curiosity, our
compassion, our creativity, and on and on. In this vein, Derrick Jensen (Walking on Water)
makes an important distinction between “education” and “seduction.” Education (from educare)
means to lead forth or to draw out; seduction (from seduce) means to lead astray; to lead away
from one’s self. Jensen maintains that much of what passes for modern schooling is closer to
seduction than education. This rings true to me.

It isn’t until now, writing this book, that I have allowed myself to admit this. Yes, I am
“coming out.” For the first time in my life I am giving voice to something I have heretofore been
afraid to acknowledge to myself, let alone speak publicly, at least not is such unequivocal terms.
I don’t speak as a victim; there is no power in that. There is power, however, in forthrightly
examining our individual educational histories, unearthing the lessons contained therein, and
then moving forward to create something more life affirming.

Teaching As If Life Does Matter

It is my thesis that our education system (and culture at large) is grounded in a set of
beliefs that often (though not always!) tend to diminish, rather than enhance life. Think of it this
way: Life is relationship and anything that ruptures or undermines relationship is anti-life
and sadly, schools often do just that. How? First, schools tend to undermine the relationship
that a young person has with him/her self. Indeed, as a result of sitting in classrooms, year after
year, living in the realm of abstraction and obeying the commands of their teachers, the young
person gradually learns to silence his/her questions, desires, and passions. The result is that
young people, in effect, give themselves away to the agenda of the system and in the process
become alienated from their very hearts and souls. Too, the culture of schools, to the extent that
it emphasizes grading, ranking, separating, and competition at the expense of intuition,
compassion, dialogue, and cooperation creates division—rather than loving acceptance—among
students. As well, schooling distances students from life by separating them from the natural
world—e.g., students, more often than not, pass their days indoors studying representations of
life, seldom being invited to participate actively, directly, in life by the growing food, the
building of shelter, the solving of real life problems. Finally, in so far as schools do not create space for exploring the great questions of life—e.g., Why are I here? How did the Universe come to be?—they can undermine a student’s relationship to the life of the spirit. All this separating is anti-life, undermining life’s natural proclivity to create relationship.

Swimming in the Waters of Separation

I think that it is likely that future historians will refer back to this period as The Age of Separation because of the myriad ways that contemporary culture leads to the fragmentation of life. Consider:

-Birth: The mother is separated from her own wisdom—relying on experts to deliver her child.

-Toddler: The little one is placed in “day care”—separated from family and kin.

-School: The youngster is sorted by age, social class, test scores and “taught” that to “know” it is necessary to tear apart, to objectify, to observe at a distance—in short, to separate from.

-Work: The adult exchanges his/her life energy for an abstraction—money—and is often separated from the opportunity to expend effort in the creation of goodness, beauty, wholeness.

-Retirement: The “spent” adult is placed in a retirement home, separated from the rest of society.

-Death: The medical establishment transacts death, separating the aged, in their moment of death, from their personal dignity.

Indeed, we swim in the waters of separation without even knowing it. Science, with its emphasis on abstract models and numbers, creates separation through objectification; religion cultivates separation by dichotomizing the world—saved vs. fallen, good vs. evil; social institutions (e.g., justice system, welfare system, education system) engender separation by cultivating helplessness; modern technologies create separation by substituting comfort for community. And on and on…..

This begs the question: At this juncture in human history, what kind of change is most essential so that our species might not merely survive, but flourish? My short answer to this question is that these times call us toward a change in consciousness—a comprehensive change in how we understand ourselves—a shift in our worldview from “Separation Consciousness” to “Relational Consciousness”.
Table 1. Moving from Separation Consciousness to Interdependence Consciousness: The biggest challenge in education for the 21st Century.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Separation Consciousness (Old World View)</th>
<th>Relational Consciousness (New World View)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MECHANISTIC: Earth is like a big machine; things work best when central control and specialization are exercised.</td>
<td>ORGANIC: Earth is alive; animated from within; things work best when interdependence, creativity and cooperation are encouraged.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SIMPLE: Keeping things simple through standardization is best way of ensuring control.</td>
<td>COMPLEX: Life is innately complex; nurturing diversity is the best way of ensuring a healthy world.</td>
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<tr>
<td>SEPARATE: Life is a problem that can be solved abstractly at a distance. Domination is necessary.</td>
<td>RELATED: Life is, nothing more—nothing less—than relationship. The way to live well is to cultivate caring relationships with one’s self, others and the whole of creation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRODUCT: Life is about production; the end product is what is important; progress depends on order, predictability, and accountability.</td>
<td>PROCESS: Life is about relationship; interaction is what is important; progress depends on flexibility, openness and adaptability.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PHYSICAL: Only objects exist in the world; materiality is the essence of life; humans are the end-product of evolution.</td>
<td>SOULFUL: Everything has interiority; mystery is the essence of life; humans are a present-time expression of the life force of the universe.</td>
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Overcoming “separation consciousness” is a call to take steps to, in educator Parker Palmer’s words, “live divided no more.”

In essence I am suggesting that what is needed, more than school reform, is a new narrative—a new story—to guide schooling. Indeed, the allegiance to a shared narrative is arguably the most important public service of schools for the shared narrative offered by schools is what determines, to a significant degree, the kind of public that is created.

Schooling in America has always been guided by a narrative. Originally, the narrative was that of taking the “huddled masses” from other lands and molding them into loyal, industrious freedom-loving Americans. This was a narrative that gave meaning to schools, and as Postman (1995; pg. 7) points out: “… without meaning, learning has no purpose. Without a
purpose, schools are houses of detention, not attention.”

What about now? What is the guiding narrative that justifies spending all those years in school? One way to answer this question is to simply ask a collection of college students: “What is the reason for going to school? And why, specifically are you in college?” When I do this with freshman at Penn State, they don’t beat around the bush. The main reason is “to get a job.” They have absorbed the culturally transmitted story (narrative) that college is a necessary step to survival in a competitive world and so they are in college to get a diploma which they hope will make them “marketable.” As much as anything, school for most college students is a kind of business agreement: They consent to pay attention, do their assignments, and study for tests in exchange for a diploma which they hope will bring them a decent paying job.

As Postman, (1996, pg. 27-28) points out: “This story tells us that we are first and foremost economic creatures and that our sense of worth and purpose is to be found in our capacity to secure material benefits…. It’s driving idea is that the purpose of schooling is to prepare [us] for competent entry into the economic life of a community.” In light of this narrative, the response to the profoundly important question, Who are we? is simply: **We are what we do for a living**—a severely limiting characterization of what it means to be human.

Clearly, this narrative is problematic in so far as it fails to call forth our higher selves—fails to call us to public service. Too, it fails to motivate us to act on behalf of the common good and it fails to inspire us to fearlessly explore what it might mean to be fully human. Worse, it is a story that leads inexorably to the commodification of life and with this comes ever-growing objectification and deepening separation. Indeed, the absence of a powerfully inspiring and deeply meaningful narrative may explain, to a significant degree, the high dropout rates, rampant depression and the myriad addictions of American youth.

In sum, it is my contention that the most vexing problem of education in the new millennia has little to do with the size and/or structure of schools, nor with the qualifications of teachers, nor with the pedagogy adopted in schools, nor with shortages of hi-tech teaching aids (though these may be legitimate concerns in some quarters). Rather, the most vexing challenge has to do with transforming our world view from “separation” consciousness to “relational” consciousness—i.e., the challenge is to understand that life is relationship—that we are profoundly interdependent. So it is that the traditional role of public education—i.e., to transmit the existing culture—no longer serves us for it will continue to engender separation. The time has come for something much more radical—indeed, something unprecedented—namely: for education to play a catalytic role in the transformation of culture. The way forward is to “teach as if life matters” which, in my view, means that the goal of all teaching should be the cultivation of relationship with self, with other, and with Earth and Cosmos.
Teaching as if Life Matters: Why This Book?

This book is written for all those who fashion themselves as teachers or who aspire to be teachers. The writing is autobiographical in so far as each sentence has been shaped, to some degree, by my efforts to make sense of my work as a teacher.

As I wrote I had myself in mind, which is to say that I have tried to write the book I would have liked to have had in my grasp when I began my teaching career; and, as well, the kind of book that would have helped guide me away from complacency and resignation when, at mid career, I became discouraged by my failings in the classroom.

My starting point—hardly controversial—is that schools are important loci of socialization and that the socialization that occurs in schools is often in lockstep with the dominant (American) culture with its emphasis on competition, control, production, efficiency, technology, economism, and power-over social relations. It is my thesis that such cultural values are antithetical to the flourishing of life, and that the confusion that permeates educational institutions as well as the anger and anomie embodied in increasing numbers of students is not fixable with more technology, more money, or more cleverness.

What we have before us is not a head problem so much as a heart problem. The significant solutions will not come in the form of sweeping new legislation (e.g., No Child Left Behind) or new rules (school vouchers) but, rather, in the way lasting change has always come—by individuals—e.g., teachers in all their guises—one by one, and then in groups saying “No” to the ignorance and violence of old ways and walking a new path that is filled with purpose, passion and profound caring.

This book and my work as a teacher over the last decade have been nurtured by a simple question: “What would it mean to teach as life matters?” This is a question that grows out of the Holistic Education tradition (e.g., See What are Schools For? and The Holistic Curriculum by Ron Miller). My answer to this question, in a word, is “relationship.” Indeed, in so far as the central unifying characteristic of life is relationship, to teach as if life matters would mean grounding the entire curriculum in the exploration and cultivation of relationship. It would mean teaching in such a way that graduates, at whatever level, become ever-more practiced in the art and science of relationship.

As is often the case, the answer to one question, raises another. So it was that I was faced with the adjoining question: How would one go about “grounding an entire educational curriculum in the exploration and cultivation of relationship”? My answer to this question comes in eight parts, each part occupying a chapter of this book.

I would like to introduce you to these eight parts (chapters) through a visualization exercise. The first step is to go back in time to a familiar classroom from elementary school or high school or college. Specifically, go back to the door of that classroom and imagine that you are standing outside that door, not as yourself, but in the person of your teacher. It is the first day of the school year and there you are, ready to welcome your students as they enter. These
students could be pre-graders or first graders or eighth graders or twelfth graders or fifteenth graders or twentieth graders. No matter the grade, teaching as if life matters is the same in all cases.

Now, as you stand there, imagine asking yourself, over and over again, **Who/what is entering my classroom?** Note, right off, that in order to answer this question, you will have to be a good observer—i.e., you will need to be fully present to the beings entering your classroom.

So, there you are at the classroom door, fully present. Observing! Now, what is the very most obvious thing that is entering your classroom? Human bodies, right? It is almost too obvious to speak! Bodies—the carriers of our lives enter the classroom. Indeed, we are, each of us, first and last, a body and, yet, the classroom is generally not a very welcoming place for the human body. Why? Because we have been led to believe that learning is the province of the mind and that body and mind are separate. Indeed, the body is often regarded as an impediment to learning, filled as it is with needs for food and water and other creature comforts. This is unfortunate for the body, as we will see in Chapter 1, has much to teach us, if we open to this possibility.

Now, back at the door, you observe that these bodies entering your classroom have the capacity to express themselves. Indeed, the faces of the beings entering are adorned with expressions of anxiety, glee, consternation…. you name it. These bodies are carriers of emotion. And imagine that as the teacher welcoming these beings into your classroom, you know the importance of openly and honestly expressing emotions for therein dwells our life force. And so you are committed in our teaching to make it clear (Chapter 2), through word and action, that emotional expression and the cultivation of emotional intelligence is a worthy educational goal.

Again, back at your post by the door, you again ask, “Who/what enters the classroom? Observing closely, you bring your full attention to the eyes of each person—eyes that take in the world—and in those eyes you see inquisitive minds--intellects (Chapter 3). Yes, “mind” enters the classroom along with body. See yourself welcoming these minds, celebrating them, knowing that a curious mind nurtures questions and that each person’s questions will be an important catalyst for much that occurs in your classroom.

And now, the last person has arrived. Your classroom is full. You walk into the room—a room filled with life—and you pause, straining to see, really see, the essence of this life that has entered into your classroom. See yourself there in this moment of inception, striving to break out of your patterned ways of seeing, determined to see with new eyes. So it is that it dawns on you that the essence of all this life gathered before you is relationship. And that teaching as if life matters will mean helping yourself and your students to cultivate and deepen relationships in all realms.

Then, with a start, you realize the very most important relationship is the one that each of us has with ourselves (Chapter 4). We are the ones we wake up with each morning, the ones
whose thoughts and emotions and questions we live with, moment by moment; and we are the ones we bed down with, dream with, each night. The health and richness of all our other relationships rests on the quality of this primary relationship with self. See yourself standing there, looking at these beings who have gathered before you, wanting nothing more than for each of them to become, literally, their own best friend.

Time is passing and yet, you don’t rush ahead to begin your teaching? No, there is more that you must be present to if you are to teach as if life matters. As you continue to survey those gathered, you note that these people are relating to each other. This is what “life” does; it relates. And the ways that human beings relate to one another—e.g., with kindness or selfishness; with understanding or close-heartedness; with humor or cynicism; with judgment or acceptance—can create happiness or misery; peace or strife, turmoil or equanimity. As you observe with soft, non-judgmental eyes, you resist the temptation to label individuals as “gifted” or “unruly” or “shy” and you refrain from “seeing” the class, as a whole, as a “management problem.”

Looking at your classroom with “new eyes,” you see an opportunity to nurture a community grounded in mutual respect. Indeed, learning to get along with each other, no matter our apparent differences, is at the heart of teaching as if life matters (Chapter 5).

Listening now you hear noise, the sounds that humans make when they gather—the “noise” of language. Indeed, we create the world—we “word” the world—with our speech. Our words are like stones—they can be sharpened and used to inflict wounds or polished and used to engender beauty and harmony. With our words we can argue or make peace; we can speak lies or we can speak truth; we can condemn or exonerate; we can judge or accept; we can complain or extend understanding; we can divide or we can unite. Teaching as if life matters means cultivating a deep awareness of and reverence for the tremendous power of language to both harm and nurture relationship (Chapter 6).

Still you stand, in your prolonged pause, not ready to begin until you are present to the full spectrum of relationships that are essential for the flourishing of life. So it is that you gaze out the classroom window, extending your awareness to all our relations and the generative cosmos that has given birth to Earth. In so doing you recall that the bodies of those gathered in this classroom are made up of star dust and that their breath comes from the heavens and their daily bread from the soil. To exclude nature, cosmos, mystery from the classroom is to exclude the fullness of life (Chapter 7).

You are almost ready to begin—your observations almost complete. Now, calling to mind all that has come into your classroom, you are humbled by the magnificence of each life before you. And you know that if you follow your instincts, maintain presence, and teach as if life matters, your students will grow to their full potential; they will find their calling through a full-hearted embracing of life. So it is that I conclude this book (Chapter 8) exploring how teachers might act to help young people address life’s most fundamental questions of purpose and meaning and in so doing cultivate relationship with their very souls.
This is a curriculum which invites a new narrative. When we teach as if life matters, the central goal of schooling is to become a “Relationship Master.”

Conclusion

To take up the possibility of becoming a teacher, one must first take up the responsibility of being a human being. Expertise and professional training can never replace the power of possessing a world view.

-R. Inchausti, 1993; pg. 160

Teachers have a choice in how they perceive who/what enters their classrooms. They can objectify, seeing those that enter as “containers” that they must fill with information. This is the traditional view of education: “Something that some people do to others for their own good, molding and shaping them and trying to make them learn what they think they ought to know” (Holt, 1976, pg. 3). In this view, children enter the world empty and they need to be shaped, formed, controlled, disciplined to ensure their success. This paradigm is so deeply imbued in our psyches that we seldom question it.

In the old educational paradigm, teaching is an imposition both from above (the teacher standing over the student) and from outside (a curriculum imposed on the student). By contrast, when teachers are committed to teaching as if life matters, they see the unique personhood of each of those beings gathered before them. As Ferenga points out: “By viewing children as people, as individuals, it becomes harder to classify them as we do in school: “A” student, “B” student, and so on down the line. It also becomes harder to teach the subject matter without regard to their emotions and interest in learning it; people usually don’t like having their interests dictated to them by others; their time conscripted by outsiders, and their performance in areas they are forced into, being judged in public” (Ideas for Nurturing a Culture of Learning by Patrick Farenga—find page number).

Teaching as if life matters requires, first and foremost, the cultivation relationship between teacher and student. This means dismantling the life-stifling labels and roles that separate “teacher” and “student.” For this to happen, the “teacher” must relinquish her role, her identity, as “teacher” and assume her true identity as one who truly sees and cares for her students. Indeed, the relationship between teacher and learner will flourish if the learner feels that she is “seen” by her teacher and that she matters to her teacher and that her way of seeing things and her interests and her feelings are valued by her teacher. When this happens, the learner comes to trust that her teacher has her best interest at heart; and this trust then fuels student’s confidence, stripping aware the fear and anxiety that so often undermine learning.
Visualize an Acorn

Satish Kumar (2002), a master educator in his own right, invites teachers to think of a young person as an acorn. Just as an acorn has within itself the potential to become a complete oak tree, so does the young person have within herself the raw materials to become a whole human being. The forester doesn’t put the oak tree into the acorn; it is already there; his job is to nurture the acorn and in so doing to draw an oak tree forth from the acorn. Likewise, the teacher doesn’t need to “put” anything into the young person. Rather the job of the teacher is to draw out (from the Latin, *educare*), that which is already there. This means supporting, encouraging, inspiring, and providing for the young person, as the need arises. In this way a poet or a painter or an engineer or a healer grows out of the child; these potentials are not inserted into the child.

The genuine teacher in these times is one who models wholeness, integrity, compassion. Indeed, there is an immense hunger in young people for teachers who are whole—teachers who know who they are; teachers who are grounded and comfortable in their “skins;” teachers who are fully conscious of the ways that fear operates in their own lives and who, day-by-day, take steps to break free of their fears; teachers who are not caught in the trap of blame and victimization but rather who take full responsibility for their lives—for their choices; teachers who, because of their own self acceptance, are able to extend full acceptance to their students; teachers who know their own greatness and who, in turn, can see the greatness simmering just below the surface in ALL of their students; teachers who are whole, and by virtue of this, able to see the pain and dysfunction in our schools and in the lives of their students and who understand that they, as teachers, have an important role in the creation of a world of justice, and peace and sanity…. In short, teachers who have the courage and wisdom to understand themselves as helpers, healers, facilitators, guides, lovers!

Change occurs not one school district at a time nor one school at a time, but, one classroom at a time—i.e., one teacher at a time. Each classroom has its own culture and it is the teacher who creates the culture. It is in schools that our kids might come to understand virtue, possibility, self-esteem, compassion, and love to the extent that their teachers embody these qualities. Awake teachers invite their students to awareness; kind teachers create the possibility of kindness in their students. Schools change and culture changes as individuals change. While each of us exists in a web of relationships, teachers occupy a special place in so far as their influence extends, both deep and wide, to the young.

In the last analysis, teaching as if life matters is an invitation to ground education in love—the energy that creates, fuels, and heals relationships. In the end, nothing else much matters. Love is what we all yearn for. Love is what we thirst for. Love is what we discover ourselves to be, once we wake up. In the absence of love, life is a series of problems resolved through
manipulative transactions. Save love, no amount of inventiveness, wealth accumulation, or technological wizardry will address the myriad social, environmental, and political problems now confronting humankind. We don’t need more technology—don’t even need more food—for love, the open heart, is the great distributor. We don’t need more laws for love, the compassionate heart, is the great peacemaker. Love is the antidote to all that ails and addles us; it transmutes separational consciousness into relational consciousness.

Love can’t be diced and parsed; it can’t be “taught.” But the conditions that lead to the opening and softening of the human heart—e.g., a full awareness of how profoundly divided our lives have become—coupled with a capacity to fully see and receive in body, mind, and spirit those beings who enter our classrooms—can be cultivated and once the power and primacy of love is recognized it can be practiced—day-by-day—teacher and students loving each other to life. This is what it could mean to teach as if life matters. May this book serve as a candle lighting the way.

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