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Teaching with Heart and Soul

Reflections on Spirituality in Teacher Education

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I. The Story of Mr. Porter

Public education is a political battlefield on which both teachers and children are at risk, especially children who live on the margins of our society. As I try to understand how teachers can protect their own integrity amid these dangers—so they can help protect the integrity of children, and of education itself—I return time and again to the memoirs of a man who grew up in Harlem during the 1920's and 30's.

He writes about the hardships of being a child in that time and place, about the poverty and despair that surrounded his young life, about the price that he and his community paid for the racism of American society. But he also writes about sources of light that illumined his future in the midst of what he calls “dark times”. Several public school teachers are at the top of his list, most notably...

...the never-to-be-forgotten Mr. Porter, my black math teacher, who soon gave up any attempt to teach me math. I had been born, apparently, with some kind of deformity that resulted in a total inability to count. From arithmetic to geometry, I never passed a single test. Porter took his failure very well and compensated for it by helping me run the school magazine. He assigned me a story about Harlem for this magazine, a story that he insisted demanded serious research. Porter took me downtown to the main branch of the public library at Forty-second Street and waited for me while I began my research. He was very proud of the story I eventually turned in. But I was so terrified that afternoon that I vomited all over his shoes in the subway.

The teachers I am talking about accepted my limits. I could begin to accept them without shame. I could trust them when they suggested the possibilities open to me...

I was an exceedingly shy, withdrawn, and uneasy student. Yet my teachers somehow made me believe that I could learn. And when I could scarcely see for myself any future at all, my teachers told me that the future was mine.¹

Those lines (not least, the feisty assertion that “Porter took his failure very well...”), speak deeply to me about the theme of this issue: teaching in ways “that enhance the human condition and advance social justice.” Those lines fill me with gratitude for all the Mr. Porter-like teachers who serve in American classrooms today.

And they make me wonder how we can educate even more teachers of the sort Mr. Porter was.

I feel certain that Mr. Porter knew mathematics well. I feel certain that Mr. Porter taught many students how to do math. But Mr. Porter's self-definition as a teacher was not confined to his job description. He never stopped asking the most important question a teacher can ask: who is this child, and how can I nurture his or her gifts?

We owe Mr. Porter a great debt of gratitude for these qualities of his heart and soul. For the student he guided toward writing was none other than the young James Baldwin, who went on to become one of the greatest writers of any time and any place.

II. Spirituality in Education

As James Baldwin tells it, the story of Mr. Porter contains no spiritual language. But it is, I believe, a story about spirituality in public education. "Spirituality" is an elusive word with a variety of definitions—some compelling, some witty, some downright dangerous. The definition I have found most helpful is simply this: spirituality is the eternal human yearning to be connected with something larger than our own egos.

That definition does not solve the complex problems associated with the spiritual impulse: people can and do get connected with things that are death-dealing rather than life-giving, as witness the Third Reich. But it performs a key function of any good definition by giving us a place from which to launch an exploration. And—if my own experience as a teacher is any measure—it also gives us some insight into Mr. Porter's spiritual life.

Mr. Porter, like most of us who teach, must have felt pressure to conform to the expectations that came from his training, his role, his employer, his community, or from the policies governing schooling in his place and time. Falling into line with such external standards and expectations always tempts the human ego, with its incessant need to look good in the eyes of others. How easy it would have been for Mr. Porter to do no more than teach math, avoiding the risks involved in truly teaching a child.

A spiritual crisis arises when we find ourselves in the grip of something larger than society's expectations or the ego's needs—something like Mr. Porter's instinct that behind young James Baldwin's mathematical ineptitude was a gift of another kind. The challenge of such a crisis is always clear, though finding a way through never is: do we follow the soul's calling, or do we bend to the forces of deformation around us and within us?

Challenges of this sort are well-known to many teachers these days as they seem some way to negotiate between the demands of high-stakes testing and the deeper needs of their students. So we have much to learn from Mr. Porter, whose spirituality connected him to that largeness called the life of a child—a connection that may well have pitted him, heart and soul, against ego-seducing educational and social conventions of all sorts.

I know that "heart and soul" rhetoric is regarded as passé, or worse, by some critics in our post-modernist world. This is not the place for a rebuttal of post-modernist thought—for which we can all be grateful—but I do want to make two points about the language I am using and where it comes from.

First, the core human reality that "heart and soul" language points to has been given many names by diverse traditions. Hasidic Jews call it the spark of the divine in

every being. Christians may call it spirit, though some (e.g., the Quakers) call it the inner teacher, and Thomas Merton (a Trappist monk) called it true self. Secular humanists call it identity and integrity. Depth psychologists call it the outcome of individuation. And there are common idioms for it in everyday speech, as when we say of someone we know and care about, “He just isn’t himself these days”, or, “She seems to have found herself.”

What one names this core of the human being is of no real consequence to me, since no one can claim to know its true name. But *that* one names it is, I believe, crucial. For “it” is the ontological reality of being human that keeps us from regarding ourselves, our colleagues or our students as raw material to be molded into whatever form serves the reigning economic or political regime.

Second, even though I spent most of the sixties in Berkeley, I did not learn about the powers of heart and soul sitting in a hot tub in northern California. I have learned about them over the years by drawing as close as someone like me can to the experience of oppressed people. I mean people who, by definition, have had every external form of power stripped from them: they have no money, no status, no access to influence, no heavily armed nation-state.

How have such “powerless” people managed to foment deep-reaching social change in so many parts of the globe—from Eastern Europe to Latin America, from South Africa to the black liberation movement in our own country? By drawing upon and deploying the only power that cannot be taken from us: the power of the human soul, the human spirit, the human heart. Far from being socially and politically regressive, “heart and soul” language, rightly understood, is one of the most radical rhetorics we have.

Despite our cultural bias that all power resides in the outward, visible world, history offers ample evidence that the inward and invisible powers of the human spirit can have at least equal impact on our individual and collective lives. That simple fact is one that our educational institutions ignore at their—and our—peril.

III. Can We Educate the Soul?

Are we doing enough to educate more teachers like Mr. Porter? Not if all we offer teachers-in-training is disciplinary content and pedagogical technique. Of course, these are important matters that must be taken seriously, sometimes much more seriously than they are. But the key to Mr. Porter’s teacherly gift was not his technical mastery—it was his mastery of his own inner life. Mr. Porter refused to be bound by subject matter and methods, and he never lost sight of the fact that his true vocation was to teach not mathematics but a child.

If we want to help teachers-in-training understand their vocation in depth, we must uproot our tacit belief that “Teachers like Mr. Porter are not made, but born.” Consciously or unconsciously, we are wedded to the notion that, while higher education can stock people’s minds with facts and theories, and train them in skillful means, it cannot help them grow larger hearts and souls.

But I beg to differ, first on the grounds of liberal education itself—the kind of education that raises up liberated people. Liberal education has one taproot in a character named Socrates, who gave us the timeless counsel that “the unexamined life is not worth living.” And in the dialogical spirit with which Socrates taught, we can take his counsel

one step further: “If you choose to live an unexamined life, for God’s sake do not take a job that allows you to impose it on other people!”

A teacher has the power to compel students to spend many hours living in the light, or the shadow, of the teacher’s inner life. Are we doing enough to help teachers-in-training understand their inner terrain in ways that will minimize the shadow and maximize the light? Too often, I believe, the answer is no, and here is an ironic way to make my point.

When I give guest lectures at schools of education, and tell students the story of Mr. Porter, the professor sometimes advises me that I need to explain who this “James Baldwin” is. Most of the students in the room, he or she tells me, are unacquainted with James Baldwin’s writing—and many of them are trying to figure out, even as I speak, how James might be related to Alec and Billy Baldwin of recent (and fading) cinematic fame.

Raised to be a mannerly guest, I have always acceded in public to the professor’s counsel. But in private, I feel compelled to say something like this: “If your students have not been exposed to texts that teach them the difference between James Baldwin and Alec and Billy—if they know nothing of *Go Tell It on the Mountain* or *The Fire Next Time*—your program is failing them. I don’t mean merely that it is failing to help them get some names straight. It is failing to introduce them to the kind of literature that might put them in fuller possession of their own hearts.”

At this point, I sometimes encounter the next level of resistance to the education of heart and soul: a diagnosis of our students’ needs and interests that precludes such an approach. Soul-matters, some faculty claim, are the concerns of mid-life or old age, not youth. Young people are simply not engaged with these depths of human experience. Concerned about getting a job and making a living, they want the information and skills required to secure a credential and employment—no less, and no more. To drive the point home, faculty sometimes tell me sad stories about their efforts to go deeper in class, only to meet with determined resistance from their students, to say nothing of colleagues.

There is an explanation for all this, but it is not, I believe, that our students are heedless of soulful matters. In fact, today’s undergraduates are closer to the things of the soul than were students in my generation. Traditional students today (to say nothing of their non-traditional peers), are much more likely than we were to have had profoundly soul-challenging experiences by their late teens or early twenties: divorce, the suicide or murder of an acquaintance or friend, substance abuse as a way of dealing with chaos and despair, grim prospects for future employment, etc.

So why do they resist addressing spiritual issues in the classroom? First, our students are told from an early age that school is not the place to bring their questions of meaning: take them home, to your religious community or to your therapist, but do not bring them to school. So students learn, as a matter of survival, to keep their hearts hidden when in the groves of academe. It is no wonder that they become distrustful, even frightened, when some teacher suddenly changes the rules and asks them to wear their hearts on their sleeves.

Second, many of us who do the asking have so little experience at educating the soul, so few models for doing so, and such scant institutional support, that our initial efforts are clumsy and flawed—so our students understandably resist them. And with our reputations, even our jobs on the line, in institutions that do not encourage risk-taking, the

failures that invariably accompany innovation often snap us back to default mode: here at least we know the ropes and are less suspect among our colleagues.

There is at least one more barrier to moving toward educating the soul. Its name is “the separation of church and state”, and we make a huge mistake if we do not take it seriously: just ask Galileo. So I want to speak clearly and personally on this issue.

I am a Quaker whose spiritual forebears were persecuted, imprisoned and occasionally executed for their beliefs by the established church in England. And when Quakers fled to America in search of religious liberty, they met with similar treatment at the hands of the Puritans. On Boston Common stands a statue of Mary Dyer, a middle-aged Quaker mother of six who was hanged in 1660 before a crowd of self-satisfied churchgoers and civic leaders bent on protecting their “Godly ways” against her seditious belief in “the inner light”.

So I have no romantic notions about the “good old days” before the Constitution and its First Amendment. I am no fan of state-sanctioned religion, or of any form of religious arrogance that says “our truth is the only truth.” As I seek ways to evoke heart and soul in preparing teachers for the public schools, I want neither to violate the wall of separation between church and state, nor to encourage those who would violate the convictions of others.

But I am equally passionate about not violating the deepest needs of the human soul, which education does with some regularity. I have seen the price we pay for a system of education so fearful of soulful things that it fails to address the real issues of our lives, dispensing data at the expense of meaning, facts at the expense of wisdom. The price is a schooling that alienates and dulls us, that graduates people who have had no mentoring in the questions that both vex and enliven the human spirit, people who are spiritually empty at best and spiritually toxic at worst.

I vigorously reject the imposition of any form of religion in public education, including so-called “school prayer.” But I vigorously advocate any way we can find to explore the spiritual dimensions of teaching, learning and living: the ancient and abiding quest for connectedness with something larger than our egos—with our own souls, with one another, with the worlds of nature and history and literature, with the obligations, opportunities, and mysteries of being alive on the face of the earth.

IV. Spirituality in a Secular Society

For thirty years, I have sought ways to put these ideas into practice. And for the past decade, I have worked with many others to develop a national program that does just that for public school teachers and administrators. “Courage to Teach” (CTT) programs are now found in some thirty cities around the country, under the guidance of Rick and Marcy Jackson, co-directors of the Center for Teacher Formation, working in collaboration with a national network of CTT facilitators and the Fetzer Institute.²

The typical CTT group consists of twenty-five K-12 educators, from a variety of schools in a region, who take a two-year journey through eight weekend retreats, under the guidance of a trained facilitator. The purpose of these groups can be stated simply: to provide public school educators with a space where it is safe for their souls to show up and make a claim on the work they do.

As the Courage to Teach program has made inroads into public education, it has started migrating across professional lines. I note this fact, in passing, because those of us who care about such things should be encouraged by the fact that “rejoining soul and role” is being recognized as a profound need in a growing number of professions.

In 2001, for example, the Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education (ACGME)—which accredits the eight thousand residency programs in this country where physicians receive their last three years of formal training—established an annual “Courage to Teach” award for ten programs across the country that take “the heart of medicine” seriously.³

Over the next decade, the ACGME will bring the directors of these programs together in a series of summer retreats, similar to those we offer public school teachers, in an effort to build a network of change agents who can help medicine reclaim its integrity. Why would a major accrediting agency make such a commitment?

- Because the clinical evidence is increasingly clear that physicians who cannot connect with the “heart and soul” of the patient are less likely to be healers than those who can.
- Because a physician who has no access to his or her own inner life cannot possibly get access to the patient’s inner life.
- Because physicians who lose touch with their own identity and integrity cannot speak truth to power amid institutional dynamics that threaten to undermine their Hippocratic oath.
- Because many thoughtful physician-leaders fear that their profession is “losing its soul.”

If the link between soul and role is so critical in medicine, surely the same is true in education, where the relation of teacher and student must be deeply human for real learning to occur. But how do we enter a secular profession, such as medicine or public education, and raise spiritual topics in a way that respects the vast diversity of people’s deeply-held traditions and beliefs? In the Courage to Teach program for K-12 educators, we have answered that question by framing our two-year journey with the metaphors of the seasons.

Time and again, these metaphors have proven their capacity to welcome diverse voices in respectful discourse about difficult things. Hosted by the seasonal metaphors, we are encouraged to speak about issues we often evade—and to do so in the language most meaningful to whoever is speaking—without anyone giving or taking offense.

I can illustrate how this works by naming some of the inner life issues that arise, metaphorically, as we reflect on the seasons. Fall is when nature plants her seeds. So when a CTT group gathers in this season, we inquire into “the seed of true self”. What seed was planted when I arrived on earth, with my selfhood intact, and how can I recall and reclaim more of my birthright potentials?

In practical terms, this question takes us toward autobiographical reflection, sharing childhood stories that reveal something of who we were before our deformations

set in. Through such story-telling, over a period of time, I have seen “burned out” teachers recall the passion that led them into teaching, reclaim it inwardly, and determine that they will not let anyone—or any system—rob them of their passion, lest they lose their souls.

And yet, the seeds of possibility planted with such hopefulness in the fall must eventually endure winter, a season when the potentials planted at our birth appear to be dead and gone. As we look out upon the winter landscape of our lives, it seems clear that whatever was planted is now frozen over, winter-killed, buried deep in the snow. Far too many teachers, physicians, and other professionals find the winter metaphor an all-too-apt description of the inner landscape of their lives.

But as we come to understand winter in the natural world, we learn that what we see out there is not death so much as dormancy. Some things have died, of course, but much that is alive goes underground in winter to await a season of renewal and rebirth. So winter gives us a chance to name, metaphorically, whatever may feel dead in us, to wonder whether it might be not dead but dormant—and to ask what we can do to help it, and ourselves, to “winter through” until spring.

As adults, we like to think of ourselves as fulfilled, not partially dormant. When we drop that pretense and acknowledge how much remains unfulfilled in us, good things can happen, and not for us alone. Teachers tell us that when they start seeing what is dormant in themselves, they become better able to see what is dormant in their students—and they become better teachers in the process. Ask people to talk about their great teachers, and they almost always touch on this theme: “My teacher saw something in me that I did not see in myself.” This is, of course, the gift Mr. Porter gave to the young James Baldwin.

Spring is the season of surprise. Now we realize that, despite our winter doubts, darkness yields to light, and death makes way for new life. So one metaphor for this season is “the flowering of paradox”. As winter’s darkness and death give rise to their apparent opposites, spring invites us to contemplate the many both-and’s we must hold to live life fully and well: the deeper our faith, the more doubt we must endure; the deeper our hope, the more prone we are to despair; the deeper our love, the more grief we are likely to know.

Spring reminds us that, as creatures of the natural world, we know how to embrace paradox as instinctively as we know how to breathe both in and out. Our challenge is to stop using our minds to divide everything into forced choices, into either-ors. We might meditate, for example, on the consequences of deciding one day, “I’m really more of a breathing-in kind of person than breathing-out”, and then acting on that decision!

As we understand spring’s paradoxes, we gain insight for professional as well as personal growth—because teachers must embrace many paradoxes in order to do their work well. How, for example, does a good teacher hold together the apparent opposites of freedom and discipline, knowing that children, and learning, require both? As E. F. Schumacher pointed out, no one can write a formula for doing this, but good teachers do it daily as if it were no trick at all.⁴

Finally, summer is the season of abundance and harvest. Having traced the seed of true self from birth, through dormancy, into flowering, we can look at the abundance that

has grown up within us and start to ask ourselves, “Whom is this meant to feed?” “Where am I called to use my gifts in the world?” In the summer of our lives, we go beyond learning *who* we are to understanding more about *whose* we are.

The idealists among us often ask the “whose” question prematurely. We want to serve the world’s needs—but because those needs are infinite, we burn out straining to meet more of them than is humanly possible. The fact that someone has a real need does not necessarily mean that I am called to meet it: I cannot give what I do not have. So I need to know with real clarity what gift or resource has grown within me that is now ready to be harvested and shared. If it is my gift to give, native to my own inner soil, I can give it without depleting myself: that gift will grow again, in due season.

Over the past decade, in Courage to Teach groups across the country with teachers who hold widely divergent convictions, the metaphors of the seasons have proven their power to host hospitable but probing dialogues about critical questions of meaning. How is that possible in the midst of such diversity?

The answer, I think, is simple. Beneath our deep differences in belief and/or disbelief, we share something much deeper: creaturely lives embedded in the natural world and cycles of human experience that echo the cycles of nature. Seasonal metaphors evoke our shared condition, taking us onto common ground where we can explore meaningful matters and experience our connectedness.

V. A Pedagogy of the Soul

Framing inner life issues in ways hospitable to diversity is clearly critical if we want to help people in the public world rejoin “soul and role.” Equally critical is the task of devising a pedagogy that works at the level of the soul—a pedagogy that honors the integrity of every soul while still challenging us to address issues we would rather ignore.

What we have learned about such a pedagogy in the Courage to Teach program during the past decade of work is the subject of a book I am now in the process of writing.⁵ Here, in a few pages, I can only start to distill a few things we have learned—and note only in passing how profoundly a pedagogy of the soul challenges conventional academic approaches.

Central to the pedagogy of CTT groups is “creating a space that welcomes the soul”. So everything we do in these groups is premised on certain assumptions about the soul’s nature and needs, about what will make the soul feel welcome. These assumptions are rooted in yet another metaphor from nature: the soul is like a wild animal.

Just like a wild animal, the soul is tough, resilient, savvy, resourceful and self-sufficient: it knows how to survive in hard places. Many of us learn about these qualities in the darkest moments of our lives when the faculties we normally depend upon utterly fail us—the intellect is useless, the emotions dead, the will impotent, and the ego shattered. But sometimes, way back in the thickets of our inner lives, we sense the presence of something that knows how to stay alive and helps us to keep going. That something, I suggest, is the tough and tenacious soul.

And yet the soul, despite its toughness, is also essentially shy—just like a wild animal. It will flee from the noisy crowd and seek safety in the deep underbrush. If we want to see a wild animal, we know that the last thing we should do is go crashing through the woods yelling for it to come out! But if we will walk into the woods quietly

and sit at the base of a tree, breathing with the earth and fading into our surroundings, the wild creature we seek may eventually show up.

Courage to Teach groups depend on a set of pedagogical principles and practices that flow from this understanding of the soul—which is why we invest heavily in training people to facilitate these groups. Western culture has little understanding of what is required to make safe space for the soul: group life in our society usually feels more like people crashing through the woods together rather than sitting quietly at the base of a tree! So the facilitator of a CTT group is charged with teaching and protecting certain counter-cultural principles and practices, a few of which I want to describe here.

First, CTT groups are voluntary. Not only do people join them of their own free will, but everything that happens within them is by invitation rather than “command”. If, for example, a participant chooses not to take part in a small group exercise, or wants to answer a different question than the one posed for that exercise, he or she is free to do so, with the group’s support. Not only does the soul respond poorly to coercion, but the soul knows best what that person needs or is ready for. So CTT groups are not and will never be “share or die” events!

Second, through the whole of our time together in a CTT group (eight retreats of three days each over two years), we enforce a simple ground rule regarding how we are to speak to each other: “No fixing, no saving, no advising, no setting straight.” It is impossible to exaggerate how demanding this rule seems to most people. When we announce it at the outset of the CTT journey, someone in the group will often exclaim, “Then what in heaven’s name are we going to do with each other for the next two years? You’ve just deprived us of the only things we know how to do!”

But following this rule consistently is key to this form of community. The last thing the soul wants is to be fixed or saved, and any effort to do so will send it running back into the woods. The soul wants simply to be witnessed, attended to, heard. And in a CTT group, it does not matter whether or not you hear my soul speak: what matters is that you help to create a trustworthy space where I can hear my own inner teacher more and more clearly.

Third, we learn to respond to each other in a CTT group by asking honest, open questions whose sole intent is to help “hear each other into speech”, deeper and deeper speech. If you doubt that this is a demanding art, just keep track of the number of honest, open questions you are asked—or ask of others—in the week ahead. In our culture (not least in our academic sub-culture), most questions are advice or proclamation in disguise: “Have you thought about seeing a therapist?” is *not* an honest, open question!

An honest question is one that I can ask you without being able to think to myself, “I know the right answer to this question, and I sure hope you give it to me.” An open question is one that gives you a full and free range of responses, rather than one that tries to nudge you in the direction I have in mind. Most of us find it very hard to give up our long-time tendency of trying to set other people straight. But as we do so, many of us find our relationships at work and at home transformed in remarkable ways.

Fourth, the pedagogy of the CTT program makes constant use of “third things”—poems, teaching stories, music or works of art—that represent a voice other than that of the facilitator or a member of the group. These third things are selected because they embody, or carry, the issue we want to focus on—and they allow the shy soul to speak

about that issue without being scared off by the headlong, and headstrong, “running at topics” so characteristic of academic discourse.

In the fall season, for example, when the focus is on “the seed of true self”, we do not approach the topic with assignments likely to drive the shy soul back into the woods: “Make a list of ten words that define who you are.” The intellect will do that assignment, but the soul will not. Instead, we put forward a third thing that carries the issue for us. Here, for example, are the first few lines of May Sarton’s poem, “Now I Become Myself”:

Now I become myself. It’s taken
Time, many years and places;
I have been dissolved and shaken,
Worn other people’s faces,
Run madly, as if Time were there,
Terribly old, crying a warning,
“Hurry, you will be dead before—”
(What? Before you reach the morning?
Or the end of the poem is clear?
Or love safe in the walled city?)⁶

As the facilitator asks honest, open question to guide an exploration of this poem in a CTT group—an exploration designed to evoke personal meanings, not literary criticism—people never need to speak directly to the “Who am I?” question. They can speak indirectly instead about the map of the journey toward selfhood that the poem lays out.

But as we speak, we understand that whatever we say about the poem we are really saying about ourselves. We are reflecting on our own histories of wearing disguises for various reasons; on our own moments of being “dissolved and shaken” as a prelude to self-discovery; on our own fears about dying before we know who we are; and on the frenzy such fear creates. None of these topics is easy, and some we would prefer to avoid. But addressing them via a poem keeps us focused on them while giving the shy soul the cover it needs.

As the climate in the group becomes more trustworthy—as people discover, for example, that no one is going to “set them straight” on something they say about the poem—it becomes easier for participants to talk more directly, and vulnerably, about themselves. And as that happens, they are given a chance to hear the voice of their own inner teacher at deeper and deeper levels.

There is much more to be said about a “pedagogy of the soul”, including the personal qualities and professional skills required of a facilitator—or teacher—who is capable of safeguarding a space where the soul feels welcome to show up. In the Courage to Teach program, it takes at least a year, sometimes two, to help people learn to do this work consistently well, and some discover that doing it is not their gift.

There is also much more to be said about the challenges that a pedagogy of the soul represents to conventional higher education, which tends to be more mandatory than invitational; more devoted to proclamation than to honest, open questioning; more

engaged in charging directly at topics than approaching them indirectly. The culture of higher education too often creates spaces that send the soul into hiding.

But academic culture is, I believe, in a slow process of transformation, animated by a core of faculty and administrators who understand why we must, and how we can, join a pedagogy of intellect with a pedagogy of heart and soul. These change agents know that it is not enough to train would-be teachers in the facts, theories and methods that lead to credentials and jobs, if we fail to help them examine the dynamics of their own inner lives that will inevitably form—or deform—the work they do in the world.

VI. A Concluding Scientific Postscript

The Courage to Teach program has been evaluated from many angles. And all of these evaluations (whether via narratives, or focus groups, or statistical surveys), point in the same direction: if you educate teachers' hearts and souls, they deepen their relations with students, restore community with colleagues, embrace new leadership roles on behalf of authentic educational reform, and renew their sense of vocation instead of dropping out.⁷

But rather than rely on our own internal evaluations, I want to rest my case by referring to some recent research that has nothing—and everything—to do with the Courage to Teach program:

Two researchers contend that they have found the “missing ingredient” without which schools stand little chance of improving: a strong bond of trust among members of the school community.

In *Trust in Schools: A Core Resource for Improvement*, University of Chicago professors Anthony S. Bryk and Barbara Schneider express their support for improving the quality of instruction, measuring student performance, and reshaping education governance. But they argue that without trusting relationships among teachers, principals, parents, and students, such efforts are likely doomed to fail.

“We have identified a missing ingredient in the reform recipes: the nature of social practice among adults in school communities and how this is mobilized for sustained school improvement,” the authors write in the book, published in August by the New York City-based Russell Sage Foundation.

“We view the need to develop relational trust as an essential complement both to governance efforts that focus on bringing new incentives to bear on improving practice and to instructional reforms that seek to deepen the technical capacities of school professionals.”⁸

What is most important about Bryk's and Schneider's carefully-crafted longitudinal study, which spans much of the 1990's in the Chicago public schools, is the correlation it establishes between “relational trust” and student learning outcomes:

Bryk and Schneider contend that schools with a high degree of “relational trust”... are far more likely to make the kinds of changes that help raise student achievement than those where relations are poor. Improvements in such areas as classroom instruction, curriculum, teacher preparation, and professional development have little chance of succeeding without improvements in a school's social climate.

...[They] found that schools with strong levels of trust at the outset of reforms had a 1 in 2 chance of making significant improvements in math and reading, while those with weak relationships had a 1 in 7 chance of making gains. And of the latter, the only schools that made any gains were those that strengthened trust over the course of several years; schools whose poor relationships did not improve had no chance of making academic improvements.⁹

I confess that I regard this kind of research as “Well, duh!” science. I mean no disrespect to the researchers; indeed, I am grateful to them for a careful and valuable study which I hope will encourage more of the same. I mean instead to comment on our persistent cultural habit of ignoring the “secrets” that are hidden in plain sight. Who among us does not know that you can throw scads of slick instructional technique, up-to-date curricula, and even money at a school, and nothing good will happen if the people in the building distrust each other? Who does not know that?

But in our culture we are always obsessed with external variables, with the objective “solutions” we can throw at problems to “solve” them—such as high technology, or high-stakes testing—all the while ignoring, even trying to discredit, the powers of the human heart that can only be grown from within. Why? Because we know exactly how to measure those objective, external variables, but are largely ignorant about how to explore the more subtle world of the soul.

We are like the fellow in the old vaudeville joke who spent too much time at the bar one night, and was found crawling around under a street light by a passer-by. “What’s going on?”, the passer-by asks. “I lost my watch”, the fellow says. “Well”, says the passer-by, “I’ll help you look for it.” After ten minutes, the passer-by says, “Look, it’s clear your watch is not here. Are you sure this is where you dropped it?” “Oh no”, says the watchless man, “I dropped it down the street.” “Then why in heaven’s name are you looking for it *here*?” “Because the light is better.”

We know we have lost something important in professional training and practice. But we keep looking for it in all the wrong places because the bright light of science has been almost exclusively focused on “objective realities” like technique, curricula and cash, rather than on soulful factors such as relational trust. (In fact, we are so obsessed with externals that we will even adopt “objective” measures that weaken relational trust, as high-stakes testing is now doing in too many places.)

What does it take to build relational trust? It takes people who are explorers of their own inner lives. It takes people who know something about how to get beyond their own egos; how to withdraw the shadow-projections that constantly involve us in making “enemies” out of others; how to forgive and seek forgiveness; how to rejoin soul and role.

It takes people like Mr. Porter who have access to their own hearts—as well as to knowledge and skills—because they live examined lives.

Anything we can do to educate more teachers like Mr. Porter will not only deepen and enrich teachers' lives. It will give their students a much better chance of receiving the kind of education they deserve.

Endnotes

1. James Baldwin, *The Price Of The Ticket: Collected Non-Fiction 1948-1985*. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985), p. 662.
2. For further information on the Center for Teacher Formation and the Courage to Teach program, visit www.teacherformation.org. For further information on the Fetzer Institute, visit www.fetzer.org.
3. For further information, visit www.acgme.org.
4. E.F. Schumacher, *Small Is Beautiful: Economics as If People Mattered* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), pp. 97–98.
5. *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey toward an Undivided Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, scheduled for fall, 2004).
6. May Sarton, “Now I Become Myself,” in *Collected Poems, 1930–1973* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., Inc., 1974), p. 156.
7. Some of these evaluations can be found at the website of the Center for Teacher Formation (www.teacherformation.org).
8. Catherine Gewertz, “‘Trusting’ School Community Linked to Student Gains”. *Education Week*, October 16, 2002.
9. David T. Gordon, “Fuel for Reform: The Importance of Trust in Changing Schools” (www.smallschoolsworkshop.org/ffreform080802dtgordon.html).

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