

2016

The Shifting Wholeness of our Beings: Intersections of Faith in Education: An Introduction

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Recommended Citation

Bright, Anita L. (2016) "The Shifting Wholeness of our Beings: Intersections of Faith in Education: An Introduction," *The Journal of Faith, Education, and Community*: Vol. 1: Iss. 2, Article 1.
Available at: <http://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/jfec/vol1/iss2/1>

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The Shifting Wholeness of our Beings: Intersections of Faith in Education

An Introduction

There is something in the depths of our being that hungers for wholeness and finality.

Thomas Merton, 2005

Although some may claim to bring an entirely objective and unfiltered framework to their work as educators, I believe that most of us realize we come laden with baggage, unable to fully divest ourselves of our beliefs, experiences, and histories. Though we may, at times, wish to (or even pretend to) leave parts of ourselves outside the door of our professional practice as educators, most of us know this isn't really possible, and in truth, is perhaps not even desirable. I believe that we come with the *wholeness* of our beings, whether we intend to or not, and that this serves as one of the most animating and enlivening features of our work. Further, I posit that this wholeness, while ever-present, has a malleable and *shifting* quality, much as gases expand or contract to fill the spaces within their containers. So, too, do our beliefs—our wholeness-es—shift to fit our current contexts.

However, for many of us in the field of education, particularly for those of us who work in public-school settings, the role of faith and membership in faith communities remains an uncomfortable, awkward, or even taboo element of our identities, one which might be masked, hidden, or downplayed. Audre Lorde (1984) speaks to this idea, explaining, "I find I am constantly being encouraged to pluck out some one aspect of myself and present this as the meaningful whole, eclipsing or denying the other parts of

self” (p. 120). In some instances, this reluctance to speak to the ways membership in faith communities and spiritual belief systems plays into our professional practices as educators may serve to create a denial or silencing of key elements of individual identities, reifying marginalizing conditions (hooks, 1997). Stretching this idea further, Parker Palmer (2015) explains in a speech, “Wholeness does not mean perfection: It means embracing brokenness as an integral part of life.”

As such, the voices in this special issue speak to different aspects of this idea, illuminating how the shifting wholeness of our beings can intersect with our work as educators. Drawing from perspectives informed by Catholicism, the Baptist faith, Buddhism, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, and non-belief, the authors of the works herein incorporate a range of methodological and epistemological approaches, working to provide windows of insight into the shifting wholeness each author has created and lived. As Desmond Tutu (2014) explained, “A life of wholeness does not depend on what we experience. It depends on how we experience our lives” (p. 76). Each author speaks to this *how* rather than *what* in unique and provocative ways.

Providing a thoughtful framework for the range of perspectives and experiences in this issue, Kimberly Ilosvey gives voice to the urgent need to focus on the nuanced layers of understanding and connection that can emerge through interfaith dialogues, and the ways these purposeful conversations and interactions can enrich not only our experiences together, but our access to understanding one another in new and more humanizing and kind ways. In her piece, *Religion in Schools? Exploring Influences of Religious Experiences in the Classroom*, Ilosvey invokes a multiplicity of perspectives

from a range of faith traditions, including insights from Gandhi, Pope John Paul II, His Holiness the Dalai Lama, the Reverend Beauchamp, Grandmother Agnes Baker Pilgrim, Imam Najieb, and Rabbi Cahana. Highlighting the urgency in using interfaith dialogue to better know about the lives of one another, Ilosvey invites us consider the ways in which our educational systems provide involuntary contact with members of belief systems different from our own.

Speaking to his own shifting wholeness, Brandon Fox builds upon the work set forth by Ilosvey, and employs “multiple reflections” as a way to illuminate his path of knowing and understanding. Framed in snapshot-like vignettes, rich with temporal detail, Fox’s work, *Negotiating the Baptist Influence in East Texas: Examining “multiple reflections” to Disrupt the Local Sociopolitical Stage*, roots the reader in the familial, communal, and geographic specifics that defined borders and boundaries along each plane. Building from this, he articulates acts of transgression that served (and serve) to not only define these borders and boundaries, but to also help shift and redefine them.

Similarly rooted in place, time, and relationships, G. Sue Kasun’s work also speaks to the ever-changing nuances of understanding and belief through an exploration of an often off-limits topic: suicide. In her work, *Breaking the Taboo: What my Mother’s Recent Suicide Might Teach us in Critical Social Justice and Faith Work, and Perhaps Beyond*, Kasun invokes Buddhist practices, and invites the reader to “sit with” her. Speaking to where she is as she is writing, both literally and metaphorically, Kasun gives voice to the moment-upon-moments of multi-layered transition, woven and braided with emotions from all parts of the spectrum, including those rarely

acknowledged. Her sense of shifting wholeness is evident, and invites the reader to consider their own, as well.

Articulating a different kind of shifting wholeness, James Gambrell, in his article, *Breaking Stone Tablets, Rejecting Binaries: A Culturally Affirming Approach to Embracing Differentiated Aspects of Identity*, recounts autobiographical incidents from his work within The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. Recognizing the dawning of his realization of complicity in perpetuating marginalizing ideas and ideals, he describes his navigation of different aspects of identity, including working as an educator *within* the faith community, while simultaneously studying as a social-justice-oriented doctoral student. Gambrell problematizes the concept of binary thinking, and draws from biblical examples to illuminate his observations and insights on this topic. Layering the identities of being both a Christian *and* an ally to the marginalized, Gambrell illustrates his sense of shifting wholeness with clarity and passion.

Finally, in my own contribution to this series, in my work *Amazing Grace, How Sweet the Sound: A Journey in Four Verses*, I speak to my own shifting wholeness as I moved from deeply faithful and content Catholic through a period of unrest and sorrow, into my current set of beliefs that do not include a deity or higher power. Tracing the path through four distinct eras of faith within my life experiences, I speak to the ways in which my heart—my spirit—sang, wavered, and grieved, leaving me in today's state that contains each of these experiences, strengthened by the process and the journey.

Taken as a whole, these pieces—these voices—Ilosvey, Fox, Kasun, Gambrell, and my own (Bright), speak to the urgency Parker Palmer (1999) describes in the quest for wholeness:

But if I am to let my life speak things I want to hear, things I would gladly tell others, I must also let it speak things I do not want to hear and would never tell anyone else! My life is not only about my strengths and virtues; it is also about my liabilities and my limits, my trespasses and my shadow. An inevitable though often ignored dimension of the quest for 'wholeness' is that we must embrace what we dislike or find shameful about ourselves as well as what we are confident and proud of (p.6).

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