



Cultivating Spiritual Intelligence: Honoring Heart Wisdom and First Nations Indigenous Ways of Knowing

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Abstract

The author of this paper has First Nations Indigenous Ojibwa roots and was taught to honour heart wisdom and spiritual ways of knowing throughout her lifelong learning. The spiritual dimension of people's lives, which reflects heart wisdom, is an important source of learning and is commonly awakened by ceremonies, rituals, art forms, music, drama or storytelling. When acknowledging heart wisdom, educators are honoring First Nations Indigenous ways of knowing. In sacred scripture, spiritual masters introduced narratives to reveal sacred truths that can awaken people's hearts. Vanier (*Becoming human*, House of Anansi Press, Toronto, ON, 1998) gives his perspective about heart wisdom:

To speak of the heart is not to speak of vaguely defined emotions but to speak of the very core of our being. At the core we know we can be strengthened and rendered more truthful and more alive. Our hearts can become hard like stone or tender like flesh. (p. 87).

Pearsall (*The heart's code*, Broadway Books, New York, NY, 1998) further states that "one of oldest forms of medicine has focussed on the heart as the centre of the spiritual energy that expresses our soul" (p. 29). This paper will present an argument that supports cultivating spiritual intelligence and acknowledging heart wisdom within educational systems.

Keywords First Nations · Indigenous · Heart wisdom · Spiritual intelligence

Freely articulating spiritual experiences within education would connect "head with the heart" (Myss 2001, p. 20) and empower educators to be servants of a holistic heart-centered dynamic. This dynamic can assist in cultivating spiritual intelligence. The silencing of discourses about spirituality within classes may prevent students

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from experiencing epiphanies that could awaken their spiritual essence and help them re-discover their heartfelt connection to one another. Such a re-discovery has been known to make a difference between someone “living to die and someone dying to live” (Bender 2001, p. 48). As noted by Curtis and Eldredge (1997), ignoring messages of the heart leads to a loss of passion for life, immoral acts and a deadening of spirituality.

Single words, stories, actions and art acknowledging spirituality can move students’ hearts with forces of love, hope, faith and compassion (Fox 1995). Fox suggests that: “We want to tell... the divine story, the story bigger than ourselves that we have been graced to breathe in” (p. 121). Sharing such stories could induce spiritual clarity through the experience of an epiphany, which is a sudden recognition of a person’s intimate connection with the divine (Chopra 2000; Myss 2001). Myss suggests that an epiphany can be “a sudden ending of the inner chaos and lack of direction of significance.... Through a sudden infusion of charisma, your inability to make sense of life’s challenges, coupled with the emotional weight of feeling as if you are living without purpose or direction, is transformed into the knowledge that each moment in your life is divinely ordered” (p. 27). A genuine spiritual awakening manifests itself as a desire to be a community serving others (Myss 2001) and to follow the path of one’s innate personal calling (Coelho 1998).

Simpson (2014) acknowledges that First Nations Indigenous people assume:

“Epistemology... takes place in the context of family, community and relations. It lacks overt coercion and authority, values so normalized within mainstream western pedagogy that they are rarely ever critiqued. ...the process of coming to know is learner-led and profoundly spiritual in nature. Coming to know is the pursuit of whole body intelligence practiced in the context of freedom, and when realized collectively it generates generations of loving, creative, innovative, self-determining, inter-dependent and self-regulating community minded individuals. (p. 7).

Their view of epistemology demonstrates the value of cultivating spiritual intelligence and honoring common Indigenous ways of knowing. Simpson (2014) points out that a First Nations person’s close relationship with the spiritual elements of life is at the core of their life-long learning journey. Their knowledge begins in the spiritual realm and is passed on to them from their Creator and the elders’ wisdom. “Within the context of humility and agency, decisions around learning are in essence an agreement between individuals and the spirit world” (p. 10). To obtain this knowledge, individuals need to participate in ceremony, ritual and the embodiment of Indigenous innate heart-centered teachings commonly passed on through stories (Simpson 2014). The heart is not perceived as exclusively an organ to pump blood.

Although the “human brain wants to know, the human heart wants to believe” (Arieti and Wilson 2003, p. 3). This indicates that the heart plays a major role in the learning journey, by its ability to provide innate spiritual ways of knowing and believing. Pearsall (1998) points out that “one of oldest forms of medicine has focussed on the heart as the centre of the spiritual energy that expresses our

soul “(p. 29). As suggested by Coelho (1998), “you will never be able to escape from the heart, so it’s better to listen to what it is has to say” (p. 129). Curtis and Eldredge (1997) think that living a life without heart leads to a sense of worthlessness. In addition to Coelho, Curtis and Eldredge’s insights, Kant (as cited in Arieti and Wilson 2003) reminds us, that if we mute our hearts and refuse to believe in something greater than ourselves, “we are likely to go mad” (p. 233). These outlooks indicate there is a need to ignite hearts of students to cultivate spiritual intelligence. A problem noted in the literature is a muting of discourses about spirituality and the exclusion of honoring heart wisdom within most educational systems (Doetzel 2006).

However, many twenty-first century educators have revolted against routine bureaucratic systems that promote silence about spiritual experiences, threaten to diminish human character and thus “deaden” people’s spirits (Sennett 1998). For example, some leadership bureaucratic systems within education have focused strongly on embracing a positivistic perspective that excludes spiritual ways of knowing. Such a belief system presupposes that theology and metaphysics are not perfected knowledge and positive knowledge is totally reliant on what can be verified by the empirical sciences. These bureaucratic educational values do not support cultivating spiritual intelligence or honor heart wisdom.

The ideal educators, who honor First Nations epistemology, are viewed as inspirational leaders who integrate the intelligence of mind and spirit, and lead from the heart (Hawley 1995; Secretan 1999). “Followers are currently seeking leaders who will build their spiritual muscles” (Secretan 1999, p. 8). To help build their spiritual muscles, educators need the freedom to express spirituality, which can help ignite hearts and cultivate spiritual intelligence within students. This form of teaching can be initiated by sharing rituals, ceremonies, music, stories, visuals, and drama, which awakens the spiritual part of one’s being.

Spiritual evolution is a process that involves both heart and mind. When people lose touch with their hearts, they become disconnected from their spirituality (Curtis and Eldredge 1997).

We make sure to maintain enough distance between ourselves and others and even between ourselves and our own heart, to keep hidden the practical agnosticism we are living now that our inner life had been divorced from our outer life. Having thus appeased our heart, we nonetheless are forced to give up our spiritual journey because our heart will no longer come with us. It is bound up in the little indulgences we feed it to keep it at bay. (p. 3)

Within some First Nations Indigenous belief systems, “spiritual divorce” is perceived as a consequence of people distancing themselves from sacred ways of thinking and reverent ways of acting (Morrisseau 1998). The danger is that a dualism of mind and heart keeps individuals alienated, resulting in cognitive states of heartlessness and lack of compassion for others. Ideally though, learning can become an ecstasy that cultivates heart and mind by eliciting an awakening of awe and passion within students (Doetzel 2006). This awakening can result in sparking creativity, connection with peers and an acknowledgement of the

meaningfulness of their lives. Intra-subjective ways of knowing and multi-intelligence can be addressed within education by suggesting educators and students conduct creative and altruistic acts. Denying students awe, passion and creativity is like claiming an ocean is separate from water. Alternatively, administering both a heart and mind perspective to facilitating education can ignite hearts and honour First Nations ways of knowing (Doetzel 2006).

Mind intelligence and heart wisdom should function as an interdependent dynamic within education. A reductionist approach to education has resulted in overlooking latent essences, such as a butterfly within a caterpillar or a tree within an acorn, which are metaphors for heart wisdom and higher consciousness within individuals (Doetzel 2006). Michelangelo saw an angel in stone and then carved the angel that he saw. When educators see the “best” in students, and treat them accordingly they often can help bring out the “best” in them, which can assist them to reach their full potential selves. This is comparable to moving beyond dualistic thinking and acknowledging a caterpillar can become a colourful butterfly or an acorn can grow into a beautiful tree.

Many educators are coming to a juncture in an evolutionary path where they are challenging the dualism of a disconnected mind and heart approach to their work and alternatively are taking the progressive path of including spirituality within their models of teaching (Helliwell 1999). “The spiritual dimension of our lives is an important source of... learning and is often represented through art form, music or story telling” (Tisdell 2003, p. 22). When considering spirituality within the educational process, learning facilitators extend the theoretical acknowledgement of multiple intelligences, including the heart, and multiple ways in which people gain insight. For example, latent knowledge can be awakened within people’s hearts through story telling (Vanier 1998). In Sacred Scripture, spiritual masters introduced narratives to reveal truths and awaken people’s hearts. Vanier (1998) notes:

To speak of the heart is not to speak of vaguely defined emotions but to speak of the very core of our being. At the core we know we can be strengthened and rendered more truthful and more alive. Our hearts can become hard like stone or tender like flesh. We have to create situations where our hearts can be fortified and nourished. In this way, we can become more sensitive to others, to their needs, their cries, their inner pain, their tenderness, and their gifts of love. (p. 87)

Heart knowledge enables students to cultivate spirit, bond with peers, and create community within their classes.

Beyond the domain of scholarly literature, the number of spiritual books and workshops available during the last few decades, as well as an introduction of spirituality into a wide range of different organizations, indicate that some heart and head dualisms of the past are being challenged (Helliwell 1999). Throughout North America, conference sessions and workshops devoted to spirituality are being developed within and outside educational workplaces. For example, at The University of Calgary, the Faculty of Social Work and the Faculty of Medicine have worked cooperatively with other universities to present conferences addressing the need to introduce discourses about spirituality within their programs (Doetzel 2006).

Consequently, educators who have acknowledged a “spiritual crisis” within their work attempt to “sacralize” their work by introducing a spirit of significance and meaning into their classes (Purpel 1989). “Sacralizing” suggests that they envision their work as opportunities to be reverent, respectful and service oriented. This approach to teaching cultivates spiritual intelligence and demonstrates caring about students.

Reviewing educational practices entails acknowledging spiritual components that promote a synergistic and caring approach to teaching and learning (Creighton 1999). A leading corporate executive, Max DePree, who built his company into one of the top 25 in the world, states “love and the awareness of the human spirit are more important than structure or policy” (Hoyle 2002, p. 11). He asks, “Without understanding the cares, yearnings, and struggles of the human spirit, how could anyone presume to lead a group of people across the street” (p. 11)? Educators need to get in touch with their own spirituality to enable them to reach others’ hearts and spirits (Hoyle 2002).

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, a shift with respect to the ways in which educators understand education is occurring (Begley and Leonard 1999; Creighton 1999; Hollaar 2000; Spears 1998). Many educators demonstrate a hunger for something beyond the traditional scientific paradigms and are mapping out new territories of spirituality despite tensions created by misunderstandings of the term “spirituality” (Holmes 2003; Ornish 1998). As noted by Tisdell (2003), “spirituality is not about pushing a religious agenda” (p. xi); spirituality is about honouring the sacredness and wholeness of life and moving past a dichotomization that results in oppression of people. According to Moffett (1994), even if some educators do not “accept any metaphysical meanings of spirituality” (p. 19), a rallying call for heart and mind synergy alone “warrants spiritualising education” (p. 19). This rallying call honours First Nations Indigenous ways of knowing and presupposes the importance of cultivating spiritual intelligence.

As an individual with First Nations roots, this author strongly supports Simpson’s (2014) perspective that an Indigenous person’s close relationship with the spiritual elements of life is at the core of our life-long learning journey. Our knowledge begins in the spiritual realm and is passed on to us from our Creator and elders’ wisdom. Within this paper, the author has honoured her own First Nations Indigenous roots, by presenting an argument to fellow educators, which supports cultivating spiritual intelligence and honouring heart wisdom within students. When acknowledging students’ heart wisdom, we honour the theoretical acknowledgement of spiritual ways of knowing (Doetzel 2006). The author has aimed to empower educators to be servants of a holistic heart-centered dynamic with the goal of inspiring students to become their full potential selves and make their world a better place.

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