

The Purpose of Education

Within minutes of entering the building on my first day of grad school I had an exchange with a professor that set the stage for everything to follow. Waiting in line to enter the auditorium for orientation, Ray McDermott approached me, looked straight in my eye, and with an uncanny sense of honor, respect, and reverence took both my hands in his and said, "Welcome, social change agent!"

Oh my, I thought. So *that's* what I signed up for? We're social change agents!

The first entire day of math curriculum and instruction class was spent in discussion and debate around one simple question: "Why teach math?" No books. No computers. Just minds, thinking, sharing, discussing, dissecting, analyzing, reflecting, wondering, getting to know ourselves, each other, and the massive task we were embarking on.

I remember that great quote by Steve Jobs: "I would give up all the technology in the world for just one day with Socrates." Yep.

And so it would be for a full year.

Now, nearly 25 years later after countless hours of teaching in classrooms of various schools, universities, leading workshops, conferences, authoring curricula and articles, etc., it has become crystal clear what all venues that educate youth need to focus on.

Public education in particular, and its constituents (parents, politicians, industry, kids...), have lost sight of the forest for the trees. What passes for "education" has strayed so far from having real value for society that it threatens the well being of society itself. If democracy is to survive, if the ecosystems of our planet are to survive, if civilization is to survive, it will require a cultural epiphany on what we take to be the purpose of education.

Such an epiphany will not come easily. Today's culture finds itself in a consciousness crisis. To a great extent, the small minded calculus of materialism, selfishness, myopic awareness, fear, and tribal xenophobia rule the roost. Self reflection, inner work, efforts to raise consciousness and depth and clarity of perception, to serve society in an authentic sense, carry little value.

The result? A dangerously polarized world unable to understand or empathize with the perspective of others, a wholesale disconnect from the natural world and the interdependence between personal/social/economic well being and healthy ecosystems, and a devaluation of the pursuit of truth, be it empirical scientific or matters of the heart and human relationships. This state of consciousness is not adequate for society to effectively navigate the complexities of exponential growth in a finite world. This is not just an issue of meeting material needs (energy, resources, sustainability), but the need to find a new ability to be with the differences of others. Escaping elsewhere is no longer a viable means to cope with differences. There are, increasingly, fewer places to escape to, physically or otherwise. And the allure for many

to simply eliminate unwanted social groups/nations grows dangerously strong, threatening the entire planet. Survival depends on our ability to take a quantum evolutionary leap, to un-circle the wagons, get to know each other, to get along.

There are many factors bearing on these issues, but it could not be more clear that *the single most influential culprit* (and ultimate solution) in this state of affairs is *how society views the purpose of education*. Today's education practice is created from that view, addressing a tragically narrow band in the spectrum of capacity and awareness: utility, information, and performance of skills in the effort to create workers. What passes for education today is a job training mill at best. A democratic system needs far more to function effectively. Human beings need much more to become self aware, creative, contributing, fulfilled, to be happy. In turn, such people are the currency of a world that is "successful" and functional in any analysis, economically, socially, and spiritually.

Simply, we need a consciousness revolution in education. Schooling must include and *emphasize* the cultivation of higher states of consciousness. I am not alone here. Maria Montessori: "Education should no longer be mostly imparting of knowledge, but must take a new path, seeking the release of human potentialities." Montessori had an education goal that has gotten lost in the current "education" mill, that of creating a just, peaceful and sustainable world through how we educate our children. Much of this includes the cultivation of spirituality. "We must help the child to act for himself, will for himself, think for himself; this is the art of those who aspire to serve the spirit" according to Montessori. Without a doubt our consciousness crisis is in fact a spiritual crisis.

How do we proceed? Teaching to the "spirit" involves immersing children from kindergarten on in practices of self reflection, contemplation, metacognition, ethical inquiry, exploring principles of interdependence, systems thinking and perception, and more. An aspiration and priority for a broader epistemology must be firmly established in the education culture and society at large, one that honors, supports and validates intuitive creativity, visioning, play, meditation, reflective discussion (ongoing), service, critical thinking, and the aspiration to truth. Within this vision lies the hope of creating a more enlightened society, and the fulfillment of the true purpose of education.

"The child is endowed with unknown powers, which can guide us to a radiant future. If what we really want is a new world, then education must take as its aim the development of these hidden possibilities." --Maria Montessori

Integral Vision Learning (IVL) embraces this vision and aspires to promote its implementation through every means possible. IVL takes its cues from the likes of Jerome Bruner, Rudolph Steiner, Debbie Meir, Maria Montessori, Elliot Eisner, and many more. Through enlightened charter schools, independent schools, un-schooling, home school groups, teacher development, curricular models, town meetings, blogs, film, music, theater, media and much more, we can all contribute to helping to create a more enlightened society through education. There has never been a time when we needed this more.