

# Spirituality, Faith and Education

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**Keynote presentation to the 11<sup>th</sup> International Conference of the European Affective Education Network, University of Ljubljana, 26-29 June, 2011**

## **ABSTRACT**

The concept of ‘affective education’ is important for anyone who takes the education of the whole person seriously. If education is thought of as cognitive operations divorced from emotional states, moral awareness, aesthetic sensibilities and the embodiment of individual identity in the physicality of the person, there is not much to it but ideas. At worst, these ideas are ‘transmitted’ from teacher to pupil, and from pupil to examiner, without much concern for the personal, social, emotional, moral and spiritual aspects of the child. That, in turn, means scant regard for the *feelings* which are bound up in all such human experience. I take *affective education*, therefore, to be an essential part of the work of educators who refuse to accept the stunted concept of education as no more than the facilitation of cognitive development.

Fortunately, there is nowadays more general agreement than hitherto as to the importance of personal, social and health education (PSHE), and if not moral education, at least citizenship. More recently, the need to promote ‘emotional literacy’ and ‘emotional intelligence’ has come to be recognised, as in the UK framework for social and emotional aspects of learning (SEAL). There is, however, less attention paid to the idea of *spiritual* education, even though spiritual experiences may be highly emotionally charged and connected to belief systems about which the individual feels passionate. The relationship between the emotions, the spiritual and faith, and their implications for affective education, require much deeper consideration.

Against the background of the philosophy of the emotions, and the ideas of the Scottish philosopher John Macmurray, this paper focuses on two vivid and highly personal experiences to examine a certain kind of spirituality and what this might tell us about the distinctions and connections between emotion, faith and spirituality. It argues that the development of the capacity to have such experiences should be the most fundamental purpose of education.

## References:

Macmurray, J. (1962): Reason and Emotion. London: Faber & Faber.

**KEY WORDS:** spirituality; faith; spiritual development; emotional education

I have chosen to approach my topic by way of two highly personal experiences, packed with feeling and emotion. To build a lecture around such experiences is dangerous, I know, for personal anecdotes can become tedious for the audience, and self-disclosure (especially where the emotions are concerned), is always risky. But I do not think I can even begin to do justice to this topic unless I root what I say in first-hand experience.

Here is the first of those experiences:

On the 30<sup>th</sup> June, 2007, when I was in Turkey attending the 9<sup>th</sup> Biennial Conference of this Network, my step-daughter (whom I love dearly) was giving birth in the maternity unit of our local hospital in England. The previous day, my wife sent me a text telling me that her daughter was in labour and that the birth was imminent. I then heard nothing for the next 24 hours. For those 24 hours I was more anxious than I have been at any other time in my life. Other Network members could see how worried I was and sought to comfort me in my distress. I would like to think that they shared also in my relief and joy when, in the early hours of the morning, I received a text to say that I had a new grand-daughter, and that both mother and baby were fine.

That was a time of intense and very mixed emotions for me. First anxiety. Then fear and a feeling of helplessness. Then anger: why couldn't my wife text again to let me know what was happening? (I learned later, that she could not leave her daughter's side and that the use of mobile phones in the labour room is forbidden). Then a kind of terror in which I imagined the worst of possible outcomes. Then relief and joy. And finally, impatience to be home to see them all. And there was also a feeling of gratitude to Network members for their empathy and support, and (let it be said), shame and embarrassment at having unnecessarily burdened them with *my* anxieties.

I tell this anecdote, not in order to boast about my grand-daughter (although she is quite the most beautiful and talented child in the world!), but because it illustrates a number of things which are important in thinking about feelings, emotions and affective education:

First, that the feelings of any person are uniquely theirs; no-one else can have *my* feelings and no-one else can have *yours*.

Second, that emotions are always experienced *in relation to* someone or something. In this regard (the philosophers tell us<sup>1</sup>), they are different from *moods* or *states of mind*. I may have been in a pessimistic state of mind, or just feeling low on June 30<sup>th</sup>, 2007, but the specific emotions I experienced make no sense outside of the context of my relationship with my stepdaughter.

Third, although each person's emotional experience is uniquely theirs, it *does* impact on the experiences - and the feelings and emotions - of others. To realise this is essential not only to how we manage our interactions with others, but also to how we go about living a moral life.

Fourth, although unique to the individual, others can reach an approximation of one's emotional experience by close observation, receptiveness to the outer signs of inner feelings, and a little imagination, in the process we know as *empathy*. The capacity to empathise is essential for all effective interpersonal encounters, and absolutely crucial for teachers, therapists and others in the caring professions.

Fifth, being educated in the conventional sense - and I think of myself as reasonably educated - is no guarantee that one can handle one's emotions successfully - I didn't on that occasion.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Oakley, J. (1992): *Morality and the Emotions*, London: Routledge.

## II

While emotional development is often overlooked by those who make educational policy and is poorly understood by many teachers, it is encouraging that there is nowadays more general agreement about the importance of personal, social and health education - PSHE - and that the promotion of emotional 'intelligence' or emotional 'literacy' is seen as an important aim in PSHE. In England and Wales, a framework for what is called 'SEAL' - Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning - has been introduced over the last six or seven years, and that is to be welcomed<sup>2</sup>. While many people will immediately think of Howard Gardner<sup>3</sup> and Daniel Goleman<sup>4</sup> when they hear a plea for the education of the emotions, the idea is hardly new. To take just one example, here is the Scottish philosopher John Macmurray, (on whose ideas I draw heavily in this presentation), in a lecture in the 1930s. He asks:

“How can we develop an emotional life that is reasonable in itself, so that it moves us to forms of behaviour which are appropriate to reality? Or to put the same point from a different angle, how can we be trained in our emotional life to recognise the real values in the world around us? The first condition of any attempt to answer this question [he continues], is that we should really recognise that our emotional life does need educating”.<sup>5</sup>

Our emotions do, indeed, need educating, and not only so that we can “recognise the real values in the world around us”, but because they lie at the heart of everything we do. To quote Macmurray again:

“...[E]very activity must have an adequate motive, and *all our motives are emotional*. They belong to our feelings, not to our thoughts. At the most our thoughts may restrict and restrain, or direct and guide, our actions. They can determine their *form*, but *not* their substance”.<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, for our own mental health, we need to be able to recognise, analyse, acknowledge, 'own' and express our emotions in authentic yet morally acceptable ways. Denial and repression lead only to depression and illness.<sup>7</sup>

## III

So: it is good that the education of the emotions is at last beginning to be acknowledged as important in the personal and social development of children and young people. However, rather less thought has been given to *spiritual* development, even though heightened feelings and emotions are said to accompany spiritual experiences such as those associated with religious conversion or revelation.

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<sup>2</sup> For an outline of the SEAL initiative, see

<http://www.nationalstrategies.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/primary/publications/banda/seal> accessed 1/12/2010.

<sup>3</sup> Gardner, H. (1983): *Frames of Mind. The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*. London: Fontana.

<sup>4</sup> Goleman, D. (1996): *Emotional Intelligence. Why it can matter more than IQ*, London: Bloomsbury.

<sup>5</sup> Macmurray, J. (1962): *Reason and Emotion*, London: Faber & Faber, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edn., p. 34. (First published 1935).

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, p. 23, my emphases.

<sup>7</sup> For example, from the literature about deliberate self-harm, it is clear that repressed feelings may contribute to an unendurable emotional build-up. For some, the only release they are able to find is through self-harm of one sort or another, and in extreme cases, through suicide. For some findings about self-harm by students and how the staff of schools and universities respond to and support them, see Best, R (2005): 'Self Harm: a Challenge for Pastoral Care', *Pastoral Care in Education*, 23(3), 3-11; Best, R (2006): 'Deliberate Self-Harm in Adolescence: an Educational Response'. *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling*, 34(2), 161-175; Best, R (2009): 'Students who self-harm: A case-study of prevalence, awareness and response in an English university'. *Pastoral Care in Education*, 27(3), 165-203.

In the UK, state schools are required by law to teach religious education and also to promote the ‘spiritual, moral, social and cultural development’ (usually shortened to ‘SMSC’) of children.<sup>8</sup> Although in the minds of many people, the spiritual and religion are synonymous (or at least, intimately connected), to assume that they are more or less the same is simplistic. To equate spiritual education with religious education is no longer tenable. This is partly because society has become increasingly secular over the years, organized religion has been in decline or crisis, and less people participate in the life of religious institutions. But it is also a reaction to the massive increase in labour mobility between states which has resulted in more multi-cultural, ethnically diverse societies. Societies now experience influxes of people of many religions so that, paradoxically, as the state becomes more secular it has to accommodate diverse religious beliefs and practices - and the tensions between them - to an unprecedented degree.

A commitment to promoting spiritual development in a form which is acceptable to those of every religion and none is the challenge, and this requires answers to three fundamental questions:

- What is meant by ‘*the spiritual*’ or ‘*spiritual experience*’?
- What is involved in spiritual *development*?
- How can spiritual development be *promoted through education*?

No answer to the second and third is possible unless we can answer the first.

Attempts to answer the first question have most often resulted in a multitude of definitions and a near-endless inventory of ‘characteristics’ of spirituality or spiritual experience which look like a check-list against which experiences can be compared and classified<sup>9</sup>. But classifying an experience as ‘spiritual’ because it ticks enough boxes gives a poor idea of what it is like to experience spirituality ‘from the inside’ and tells us even less about how we might promote it. Moreover, it leads to a concept of the spiritual as including just about everything, and when that is true of a concept, the concept itself loses all meaning.

Another way of tackling the question is to look at and reflect upon personal experiences which *might* be called ‘spiritual’, and *feel* what they are like.

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<sup>8</sup> For an insight into SMSC in the curriculum, see Bigger, S. and Brown, E. (Eds): *Spiritual, Social, Moral and Cultural Education*, London: David Fulton. Best, R. (Ed) (2000): *Education for Spiritual, Moral, Social and Cultural Development*, London: Continuum.

<sup>9</sup> For example: “Elkins et al. (1988) identified nine non-religious components that constitute what they define as humanistic spirituality which are distinct from religious forms of spirituality: transcendence; meaning in life; mission in life; sacredness of life; ultimate satisfaction in spiritual rather than material things; commitment to altruism; idealism; awareness of the tragic; and fruits of spirituality”. Gross, Z. (2010): ‘The chicken grows as the egg decays: war and spirituality as contradictory and complementary forces’, *International Journal of Children’s Spirituality*, 15(3), p.200. In similar vein, Braun-Lewenson and Sagy report: “In a review of 73 articles, Chiu et al. (2004) concluded that the term [‘spirituality’] is a multi-dimensional concept which is comprised of several elements. They offer several themes which are incorporated in the term, including seeking meaning and purpose in life... as well as hope, search for hope and feelings about the future ....”. Braun-Lewenson, O. and Sagy, S. (2010): ‘Sense of coherence, hope and values among adolescents under missile attacks: a longitudinal study’, *International Journal of Children’s Spirituality*, 15(3), p. 247. I have critically discussed the proliferation of definitions and characteristics of ‘spirituality’ in the publications of the UK quasi-governmental bodies responsible for the curriculum (The Schools Curriculum and Assessment Authority – SCAA) and inspection of schools (the Office for Standards in Education – OFSTED) in the 1990s. See Best, R. (2005): ‘Spiritual Development and Affective Education: an English perspective’, in Karppinen, S., Katz, J. and Neill, S. (Eds): *Theory and Practice of Affective Education. Essays in honour of Arja Puurula*, Helsinki: University of Helsinki, pp. 65-84.

## IV

And so, to the second of my experiences:

My granddaughter, who is now almost four and has a 15-month old sister, spends a day a week with us. A few months ago the following event occurred:

It is 6.00pm. We are sitting at the dining-room table and have just finished our tea. Her favourite CD - 'ABBA Gold' - has been playing in the background and is just coming to an end. I tell her it is time to help me tidy away all the toys we have been playing with and which are strewn all over the floor in the next room (which we call 'the lounge'), before we take her home to her parents. This *must* be done: that's the rule. She does not want to, and continues to sit at the table. I coax her to leave the table and help me, but she stays put. "Are you tired?", I ask. "Would you like me to carry you in there like a baby?" She nods and I pick her up in my arms and head for the lounge. At this moment, a new disk begins, a traditional jazz band playing an old hymn in  $\frac{3}{4}$  time. For no reason, I begin to waltz with her lying in my arms like a baby. We glide and swirl around the lounge, to all corners of the room, and even out to the kitchen and back. Her eyes are closed and she is still. She does not stir, and she does not feel heavy in my arms. Even though the track lasts for almost seven minutes, *I do not want it to stop*. As the tune comes to an end, I swing around and around and around, gradually coming to rest as I lay her gently on the sofa. After a moment, she opens her eyes, as though she has been in a trance, and gives me the most sparkling, piercing look. Then she leaps off the sofa and, with some reluctance, picks up a single toy as a token gesture towards tidying up.

I tell this story in an attempt to communicate something of what it is like to be 'on the inside' of a certain kind of experience. There are many things to be said about it:

First: Some people<sup>10</sup> might say that this is nothing more than an *emotional* experience. I do not agree. As the philosophers tell us, emotions have three components: *cognition*; *affect*; and *desire* (or want)<sup>11</sup>. This is sometimes illustrated by the example of *fear* when we encounter a snake or a fierce animal<sup>12</sup>. We recognise it and know that it is dangerous (cognition); we experience affect (sick or sinking feeling in the stomach, breathlessness, panic etc); and we want to get away from it as fast as possible (desire). What I experience in the dance is not like that. The sensations I have are not a matter of cognition (what is it that I recognise or understand?); nor is there a desire comparable to what I feel when I see a snake or the emotions surrounding the birth of my grand-daughter, or when I feel admiration, gratitude or envy in other situations. There is, however, *affect* - pure feeling of some kind not classifiable as an emotion: this is *not* 'just an emotional experience'.

Second: Once the dance has begun, the experience is without motive, it is not goal-directed in any way (I am no longer the slightest bit interested in tidying the toys away), but is

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<sup>10</sup> Including my friend and colleague, the philosopher Roger Marples. See Marples, R. (2006): 'Against the use (of the term) "spiritual education"', *International Journal of Children's Spirituality*, 11(2), 293-306. For my reply, see Best, R. (2008): 'In defence of the concept of "spiritual education": a reply to Roger Marples', *International Journal of Children's Spirituality*, 13(4), 321-329.

<sup>11</sup> For a comprehensive analysis, see Goldie, P. (2002): *The Emotions. A Philosophical Exploration*, Oxford: Clarendon/Oxford University Press. John White takes a specifically educational perspective on this matter and emphasises *action* as integral to emotion. See White, J (2001): *The Child's Mind*, London, RoutledgeFalmer. A matter of dispute is the relationship between emotions and *rationality*, addressed (amongst others) by R. S. Peters and David Best. See Peters, R. S. (1972): 'The education of the emotions', in Dearden, R. F., Hirst, P. H. and Peters, R. S. (Eds): *Education and Reason*, London: Routledge and Kegan-Paul., and Best, D. (1988): 'Education of the Emotions', *Oxford Review of Education*, 14(2), pp. 239-249.

<sup>12</sup> For example, see Oakley, J (1992) op.cit..

something which just ‘happens’ - I am the recipient or object of an unexpected, unpredictable affect which happens *to*, and *in*, me<sup>13</sup>.

Third: The experience was possible only in relation to another person - my granddaughter - and the nature of this relationship is of a special kind. It is characterised by an unspoken but profound level of *trust*, evidenced in her willingness to lie, passively, in my arms while I dance. This is, I believe, the product of the basic trust which Erik Erikson<sup>14</sup> sees as the primary developmental task of early infancy. It develops only where there are warm, nurturing attachments between babies and their primary carers, which build what Bowlby and his followers<sup>15</sup> call a ‘secure base’ from which the world can be explored and new experiences managed. I am reminded here also of the distinction made by Martin Buber between two kinds of relationship: the ‘I-it’ or subject-object relationship in which I relate to an object in the world as separate from me, and perhaps of use *to* me as I seek to live my life, and the ‘I-Thou’ relationship which (as the Israeli philosopher, Hanan Alexander puts it)

“is achieved by letting go, at least in part, in order to receive another subject.... [It is] a subject-subject encounter [in which] we set aside interest in order to receive the other with no end in view other than the meeting itself”.<sup>16</sup>

In letting go of self, we allow the other to fill our world and (in a sense) allow ourselves to be completed by them. This seems to describe our experience in the dance, and was communicated in the look we shared at the end.

Fourth: The experience is *total*. As I have argued, although there is a great deal of feeling in the experience, it cannot be reduced to a list of emotions. It is both more pure than emotion and transcends mere emotion. Moreover, it is also a *physical or bodily experience*: the sensations of holding and being held, of hearing and moving to the music, and seeing the child in my arms, are all in the realm of the senses. While the spiritual is often distinguished from the physical and the sensory - indeed, some people seek trance-like states which are supposed to leave the experience of ‘mere’ physical existence behind - I think it needs to be thought of holistically, with the physical and the sensory as essential components of the spiritual. To quote Macmurray yet again:

“If we are to be full of life and fully alive, it is the increase in our capacity to be aware of the world through our senses which has first to be achieved”.<sup>17</sup>

Fifth, there is something *playful* about this experience.

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<sup>13</sup> For other examples of ‘unexpected’ experiences that may be construed as ‘spiritual’, see Cupitt, D. (1998): *The Revelation of Being*, London: SCM Press, p.8, and quoted in Best, R. (2005) op cit.. See also Hull, J. (1997): *On Sight and Insight. A Journey into the World of Blindness*. Oxford: One World Publications, pp.195-196. But note that their experiences are triggered by *indirect* (rather than) direct relations with others.

<sup>14</sup> Erikson, E. H. (1975): *Childhood and Society*, Harmondsworth: Penguin.

<sup>15</sup> The psychology of John Bowlby and followers (such as Mary Ainsworth) was highly influential in establishing, first, the idea of ‘maternal deprivation’, and later, the whole area of patterns of functional and dysfunctional attachments between children and their primary carers. See Bowlby, J. (1951): *Child Care and the Growth of Love*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, and the three volume *Attachment and Loss*, published between 1971 and 1980 by the Hogarth Press, and later, by Penguin Books. See also Bretherton, I. (1992): ‘The origins of attachment theory: John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth’, *Developmental Psychology*, 28, 759-775. For an account of the significance of attachment in educational settings, see Geddes, H. 2006): *Attachment in the Classroom*, London: Worth Publishing.

<sup>16</sup> Alexander, A. H. (2009): ‘Autonomy, faith and reason. McLaughlin and Callan on religious initiation’, in Haydon, G. (Ed): *Faith in Education. A tribute to Terence McLaughlin*, London: Institute of Education, University of London, p.39.

<sup>17</sup> Macmurray, J. op.cit., p.40

So: Spiritual experience - at least the kind of spiritual experience I am talking about here - is rich in affect or feeling, but is not reducible to emotion. It is holistic, involving our bodies and our senses as much as our emotions, and it occurs within personal relationships characterised by trust and the 'I-Thou' or subject-subject relationship in which the experience of two persons is not a means to an end but infinitely valued in itself. Note the centrality of the *person* in all this. Writing about Science, Art and Religion as the three generic ways in which humankind relates to the world, Macmurray (and this is the last time I will quote him), says:

“Science grows out of our rationality in relation to *material things*. Art grows out of our relation to *living beings*. Religion grows out of our relation to *persons*”.<sup>18</sup>

Sadly, religion loses this fundamental quality when it becomes stuck in the past (as in the dry teaching of dead or primitive doctrines), because it is no longer in touch with persons living out their relationships in the here and now. The same may be said of religion pre-occupied with the future - what it will be like in Heaven or Paradise, and how to get there - and of the kind of mysticism which takes leave of the physical world. Neither are more relevant to the kind of spirituality I am talking about than promoting a blind belief in the propositions of religious dogma.

Now: part of the paradox of a society which is both more secular and more religiously diverse and aware, is the UK Government's encouragement to religious or faith communities to set up their own schools with financial support from the secular state. For some people, such 'faith schools' (as they are called), might be expected to promote spirituality. Whether faith schools are better placed to do this than secular schools depends on what we *mean* by 'faith' and what actually goes on in those schools.<sup>19</sup> If by 'faith' we mean the promotion of religious beliefs - beliefs *that* some doctrine such as the Virgin Birth is true - then faith schools may do little or nothing to promote the kind of spirituality I am talking about. Being 'educated' in a faith school is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for spiritual development. However, a faith which is characterised, not by beliefs *that*, but by belief *in* the life and the soul of the community (with its living values, hopes, sentiments and mutual concerns) may be well-placed to promote spiritual development<sup>20</sup>. But again, communities do not, it seems to me, have to subscribe to a specific religion for this to be the case.

That said, the capacity to enter an I-Thou relationship with other persons *does* seem to be necessary pre-condition for building such communities. That is one reason why schools need to find ways to promote the kind of experience I describe as 'the dance'.

But there is another, more fundamental reason: This experience is the epitome of what it is to be fully human, fully alive, and wholly at-one with another. It is what it is to love and be loved. To facilitate the development of a capacity for such experiences should be a fundamental purpose of education.

Time does not permit me to examine in depth what schools must do to achieve this purpose, but, again, the example of the dance may be instructive. This kind of experience cannot be planned; the most we can do is provide the conditions in which such experiences *might* occur. That experience involved an unexpected departure from the normal routine, shared experience in a relationship of mutual trust, the engagement of whole persons (emotions, body, senses etc), and an element of spontaneous play. It has about it something of the experiential, child-centred

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<sup>18</sup> *ibid*, p.196, my emphasis.

<sup>19</sup> For the debate about faith schools, see Haydon, D. (Ed) (2008): *op.cit.*, especially the chapters by Halstead, Pring and Brighouse. See also Marples, R. (2005): 'Against faith schools: a philosophical argument for children's rights', *International Journal of Children's Spirituality*, 10(2), 133-147, and Parker-Jenkins, M., Hartas, D. and Irving, B. A. (2005): *In Good Faith. Schools, religion and public funding*, Aldershot (K): Ashgate.

<sup>20</sup> For an argument along these lines, see Alexander, A. H. (2008) *op. cit.*.

classrooms of the 'sixties and 'seventies, and the eccentricities of progressive schools such as Summerhill<sup>21</sup>. Formal classrooms in which children's lives are restricted to instruction in the concepts and facts of a traditional academic curriculum would seem positively to preclude such experiences. It is in contexts which take us out of the routines and rules of institutional life and lift us to new heights of joy and new depths of feeling, that our lives are enriched and made worth living<sup>22</sup>. The promotion of such experiences, and the opportunities to share, discuss, analyse and reflect upon them, is what I mean by spiritual education.

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<sup>21</sup> Summerhill School in Suffolk (England) is known throughout the world as a residential progressive school in which attendance at classes is optional and school policy is determined at weekly meetings of a council of teachers and students. The school was founded in 1921 by A. S. Neill. For more details visit [www.summerhillschool.co.uk](http://www.summerhillschool.co.uk)

<sup>22</sup> It is no accident that the experiences of 'outward-bound' type courses, educational visits abroad and residential field-trips are often remembered by participants as up-lifting and unusually rewarding. It is also in such contexts that the 'normal' subject-object relationship between teacher and student is likely to give way to deeper relationships characterised by greater mutual understanding and appreciation.