

A Difficult Dinner Party — Being Loved and Safe

How Spirituality in Education Can Open Inclusive Practices ...

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Abstract

Four guest joined a dinner party conversation to discuss youth. Each guest was interested in and had some formal affiliation with spiritual practices, whether through the lens of the Indigenous, Mormon, Buddhist, Christian or “spiritual” beliefs in their orientation. The performance is a form of critical pedagogy, as the event was one in which the four presenters were actively considering dissenting and disaffected voices, querying the regulatory processes of many empirical and analytical approaches in advancing our understanding of the educational and social phenomena of youth. The performance setting of a dinner party was aspirational. An expanded view of spirituality and love provided common ground.

Key words: religion, spirituality, critical pedagogy, ethnmethodology

Introduction

This paper was presented using a performative form of representation at the a Conference in Darwin in 2013 and is to be read as one would read a play – the public performance of the four characters became a form of qualitative inquiry in which the four world narratives addressed the lived experiences of youth

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they had worked with, within universities, churches, communities and schools. This style of performance is perhaps viewed as a form of “reflexive ethnomethodology” as we as a group, at a dinner party, set out to document the defining and confining practices for a young people or youth, through the eyes of the people sitting at the table. The performance gave voice to the narratives of the young people through these elders’ perceptions, and the “guests” at the dinner deliberated on how we could consider the nature of the belonging and alienation young people experience. Each guest was interested in and had some formal affiliation with spiritual practices, whether through the lens of the Indigenous, Mormon, Buddhist, Christian or “spiritual” beliefs in their orientation. The performance is a form of critical pedagogy, as the event was one in which the four presenters were actively considering dissenting and disaffected voices, querying the regulatory processes of many empirical and analytical approaches in advancing our understanding of the educational and social phenomena of youth. The performance setting of a dinner party was aspirational. The four researchers wanted to share the dialogue that follows as four stories that can be read as a script or as orthodox theoretical positionings.

Dramatis Personae

Sarah – the Buddhist; a university academic

Flavia – the Artist and a Lutheran; and a visual arts teacher

Alan – an indigenous man who also identifies as a Mormon

Thomas – a university academic

Sarah – The Buddhist Story

Sarah: Hello. I am exploring strategies that might help promote the wellbeing of young people. The Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) frames wellbeing around young people feeling loved and safe, and being provided with material basics, health, and happiness, which includes a positive outlook and self-esteem. So I hold to the belief that young people value participation in education and opportunities to grow and develop their sense of self. This includes developing values and morals, being involved in community, having freedom, independence and having a voice that is heard. Young people also require leisure and fun. *The Report Card: The Wellbeing of Young Australians* found that the most consistent theme considered by the youth participants was being loved and valued.

In the ARACY work, young participants stated they considered wellbeing should be based on interconnections and loving relationships. From my own Buddhist perspective, observing the dynamics of interdependence and developing loving kindness and compassion is how spirituality is framed, ethical living is

pursued and, with that, happiness and wellbeing are cultivated. Our young people need this opportunity for cultivation.

Love and interconnection are embedded in the ARACY domains but are yet to hold overt and easily seen status. Spiritual education was included in the Adelaide Declaration and has retained a place in the Melbourne Declaration of Goals for Australian Schooling, yet this remains primarily the preserve of religious schools. A mounting body of research into youth wellbeing has noted spiritual or religious affiliations were significant as indicators of wellbeing and resilience (Osser, Scarlett and Bucher 2006; Roehlkepartain, Benson, Scales, Kimball and King 2008). Smith, Webber, and DeFrain (2013) argue that spiritual wellbeing and resilience were shown to be interrelated and ecologically bound, as the ARACY study suggests. They also found that when spiritual wellbeing was present, and it was largely from a Christian cohort's perspective, the attractiveness of risk-taking behaviour was weakened.

It is interesting, however, that the uptake of religions among Australia's young people is scant. While exploring young people's spirituality, Mason, Singleton, and Webber (2007), found that almost half of Australian young people between the ages of 13 and 24 do not belong to or identify with any religion or denomination. The majority of "Generation Y", while agreeing that morals are relative, note there are no definitive right or wrong ways of doing things, and yet they indicated that they placed a high value on close relationships with friends and family, and on having an exciting and enjoyable life. Our youth also want a peaceful, cooperative, just and secure world, but religious or spiritual concerns were generally not considered important. Most young people said they had purpose in their lives, although some felt that their lives did not fit into any wider cosmological scheme and they did not really belong anywhere or "were hurting deep inside". The activities that they rated as most important for enjoying peace and happiness were listening to music, work or study. Most rated meditation as very unimportant. They do not look to organisations (including religious communities) for spiritual support, but made meaning in their lives via friendship networks, music activities and electronic media/the internet.

I do not think we can expect young people to become religious, nor can we blame them for not knowing what spirituality is, or its potentials. My sense is that most young people have not had exposure to the concept of spirituality, but if it is decoupled from religion, it is worthy of understanding more fully because of the potential impacts on wellbeing.

What is interesting to me, too, is that these young people are defining their wellbeing solely in terms of consumption and external relationships. Their inner lives are seldom nurtured in our schools. "Inner technologies", such as quiet reflection and kindness towards oneself and others, are for the most part lacking in our young people.

Too often “spirituality” connotes an “amorphous” or “nebulous” domain, or a realm that is prescriptively and even proscriptively religious in focus. As a Buddhist, I am too often caught in a default position of equating religion with spirituality, which is not helpful. Sure, Buddhism is a “religion” in that it has rituals, prayers and devotional practices, but Buddhism is not concerned with a creator being, and it promotes individual effort and responsibility rather than subscribing to a set of beliefs. There is a teaching in which the Kalama Sutta exhorts that we and our youth should “make the knowledge (y)our own”. In this way, many Buddhists would see the Dharma, as the epistemology is called, as a pedagogy for personal development. Spirituality is demystified and proactive: it is the cultivation of wisdom and compassion that Buddhism espouses and that our young people need.

Buddhism, however, is already influencing contemporary education, with borrowings of Buddhist teachings appearing in positive psychology, social and emotional learning, and mindfulness practices in particular. Mindfulness points the way to what a secular spiritual education might be, and there is a growing body of work that suggests secular spiritual education makes a contribution to resilience and wellbeing in adults. This was the case with my own work (Smith 2010, 2013) with children. Yet, as a mindfulness practitioner I draw on the tradition of the practice; I also know that mindfulness does not operate in an ethical vacuum. It is a mind/body and cognitive/affective exercise that develops awareness of thoughts and feelings and provides the space to consider and determine activity. Mindful contemplation for all people, and our youth especially, facilitates the apprehension of interconnections and being part of a dynamic process of change, and with that loses the sense of ego-bound self-importance and separate individuality.

Interconnection is present in all of the wellbeing strategies mentioned above, but the ethics of kindness, love and compassion, though implied, is yet to receive overt and strategic attention. This can be taught and will effect change; for example, Fox (2006) found in his study that compassion is an antidote to cruelty. With loving kindness come other values such as empathy, tolerance, patience that impact on wellbeing and happiness.

So, it is clear young people need to have hope, as do we all. Buddhist teachings can facilitate this and sustain life through cooperation, consideration, service and kindness. Developing a sense of innate goodness and to extend this to a kindly understanding of others can be taught, and indeed should be taught.

Love, too, often has a spurious, overly sexualised, and commoditised status in our society, but:

A commitment to spiritual life necessarily means we embrace the eternal principle that love is all, everything, our true destiny. Despite overwhelming pressure

to conform to the culture of lovelessness, we still seek to know love. That seeking is itself a manifestation of divine spirit. (bell hooks, 2000, p. 78)

Wisely, we can call on hooks as she does not opt for a soft-serve notion of love, but for one that is empowering, bold, empathetic, and has an active concern for other beings, which is totally relevant to young people. She sees love as “the primary way we end domination and oppression” (p. 76). In our struggles for social justice and equity, love is often overlooked.

Holistic education has been around for a long time and it has been argued in other contexts that the curriculum should focus primarily on “relationships” and connections so that the student can become aware of the interdependence of life (Miller 2007). I guess I am saying it is wise to be kind, and an act of kindness to be wise, and to consider the flow-on effect of thoughts and words and deeds.

Buddhism is growing in momentum in Australia, and the Nest project suggests best practice is a whole of community and long-term project. As Palmer has called to us for three decades now, spirituality is always present in education, in our quest for connectedness and is waiting to be brought forth.

It is in our sameness: same biology, psychology, emotionality, temporality and same world.

There is a deepening awareness of spirituality that many researchers and writers have now identified as being a potential vehicle for change in public education: a change that values connection and is based on loving kindness. With hope and optimism, I think Palmer is right when he says that we are entering a new era when spirituality and education need not be seen as “enemies” but as partners in a conversation about the future of public schooling (Palmer 1998). It seems wise and is inextricably kind.

Allen — The Indigenous Story

Allen: In my community and as an indigenous man, spirituality is an integral part of Cook Islands society and a motivational factor for indigenous Cook Islands Maori youth. An example of this is found in the proverb cited in the Cook Islands Ministry of Education (2004) curriculum framework:

Takai koe te papa enua (You step on to solid land)

Akamou te pitoenua (Affix the umbilical chord)

Au I toou rangi (And carve out your world)

This proverb highlights the significance of cultural values and practices and how these play an important part in culturally responsive practice. The proverb reflects the idea of a young person being anchored in an environment where they live (Te Ava 2011). It also explains how while the child is growing in the mother’s womb,

he or she is fed from their environment by way of the *pitoenua* (placenta). Outside the womb, the young child is nourished, influenced and developed by learning his or her cultural values and identity. The *pitoenua* represents the centre of balance through which the physical, mental and emotional, social and particularly spiritual dimensions of wellbeing are interconnected. To be interconnected the young child remembers his or her past, such as understanding his or her cultural heritage, which goes back to his or her *enua* (land). This encourages the young child to stay anchored, along with the strength of the relationships he or she develops. If young people want to survive in contemporary society, it is important that they understand their cultural values and how this helps them overcome challenges and difficulties in life.

It is therefore integral to culturally responsive pedagogy, for Cook Islanders and I am sure many other indigenous cultures, to include games such as *putoto taura* (tug-o-war) and *utiuti rima* (pulling interlocking fingers), which also include cultural rites such as the *peu taito* (legends and chants), the *akataoanga ariki* (title investitures), the *ura tamataora* (Cook Islands traditional dance), the *pe'e* (chants), the *pe'e tuketuke* (different kinds of chants) and the *akairo* (signs) (Te Ava 2001). With a sense of fun and community, the social, cultural, emotional, and spiritual components that keep Cook Islands cultural practices alive are taught and shared.

From an indigenous Canadian perspective, Sackney and Walker (2006) identified the centrality of values of respect and honour, similar to those encapsulated in the Cook Islands value of *peu puapinga* (cultural significance). Ama (2003) believed that Cook Islands' *peu puapinga* are essential for the development of a healthy society and an enriching environment that prepares a challenging pathway for Cook Islands youth to achieve goals and objectives in schooling. These values are all reflected in the thoughts of the *pa metua* (elders) as important to schooling and wider social practices.

A Framing of "Self" Connection, or Wearing a Cloak of Invisibility in a Design School

Flavia: Once, I took a class of tertiary students to see Ben Quilty's highly profiled commissioned exhibition entitled "After Afghanistan". It is a gritty portrayal of weary military personnel, facing the artist as requested — in a most vulnerable way — nude.

I teach Professional Communication, and my task is to facilitate academic papers by third-year School of Design students. The gallery we visited also featured an entire floor of background information to this war, and art about war. The purpose of the excursion was to help students discover the many ways this exhibition was researched by the curator. I allowed just 15 minutes to consider

and document the resources before we were to visit the paintings. Within several brief minutes, groups of students were gathering at the exit, clucking inanely or distractedly texting on their phones.

Intrigued, I asked why they were so disengaged. I was told that it did not involve them and they “just weren’t interested”. Like me, no one in the group had had any personal experience with war – no lost father, no maimed or severely troubled brother or sister. But, unlike me, these students had no desire to become aware of the journey of others. No interest in weaving their place into “community”. No curiosity about Australians their own age who had taken an alternate route involving discomfort and loss. No community sentiment or expanded forbearance. No sense of respect or tolerance for something outside their social contact. The students ostensibly chose to exclude themselves.

The exclusion was not forced upon them. It was a prerogative they casually sanctioned. This position seems to counter Joanna Macy’s (Brussat 1996) dictum: “Our lives extend beyond our skins, in radical interdependence with the rest of the world” (p.472). Somehow, even against an academic directive, the students apparently found it completely plausible to be independent of the rest of the world.

My students had donned their protecting vestments. Known to under-25s, Harry Potter’s familiar Cloak of Invisibility is a sought after and desired item. It is a magical artefact used to render the wearer invisible. Ultimately, the wearer is rendered invisible even to Death, its original owner. Thus, even Death can be assuaged. In the students’ case, to not be seen also seemed to shield the wearer from seeing what is there. Yet, indifference does not bode well for a group of design students, whose intended profession demands enthused contemporary connection to create inspired fashion, striking interior design or dynamic creative styling. Spirituality in culture in community and creativity are closely linked: “The culture that trivializes and spurns [creatives] would also, paradoxically, look to them for hope of transformation” (Norris 1993, p. 59). Successful design requires research from a deep place interrogating a combination of the physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual elements of existence as perceived within one’s own self-hood.

Wilber and Wilber (2000) nominated four basic human necessities that need to be met – physical, intellectual, emotional and spiritual. Three of these needs are well recognized by the norm. The fourth one listed, spiritual need, is less widely acknowledged to exist. When it is allowed as a consideration, there is confusion between religion and spirituality. By replacing “traditional religion” as the dominant vehicle for spirituality today with the understanding and general endorsement of spirituality as, mostly, either “indigenous” or “Buddhist/Dharmaistic”, obstructions are meant to diminish. However, barriers to perceiving one’s own “self-hood” and that of another dogmatically persist. It is possible that someone

neither genetically privileged as in the former nor subscribing to the spiritual parameters of the latter, could see themselves as marginalized today.

I have experienced cultural and spiritual invisibility since immigrating to Australia. As a Canadian, I have been included under the label of “Invader”. I would like to declare now that neither I nor my ancestors entered this country enacting violent domination. I came only to find work. Yet, I am unable to return to Canada to be free from labels. As I am not indigenous there, I would be labelled a “Settler” (The Galloping Beaver 2012). This is not much of an improvement, so belonging still eludes me. It appears that I have no deserved home. Even my spirituality is considered exploitive.

Thought by some to be oppressive, repressive and suppressive, spiritually I call myself a Christian. There is no need to expand on the disfavor – not completely without reason – Christianity holds in the wider world view at present. At times, instead of declaration, I would prefer a Cloak of Invisibility.

In the absence of this Cloak, with or without the assistance of religion or faith of any description, it seems that people attempt to answer life’s ultimate questions in various ways – “Where am I? Why am I here? Who am I?” (Walsh 2003). As such, there is a search for a home for the spiritual self; spirituality enfolded by community and belonging needs to be acknowledged as a creative consideration.

In *Art and the Question of Meaning*, Hans Kung emphasizes that the artist should not leave unanswered the great questions of ground and meaning; “to know whence we come, whither we are going, who we are” (p. 39). The artist who knows this makes possible a new relationship with the past, the present and the future. Theologian John Cobb (Norris 1999) describes artists as vessels or conduits of the divine, and Oscar Wilde sees creatives as the only people who can inspire hope in a sometimes hopeless world.

Being hopeful suggests being creative. Being “creative” suggests a “spiritual” process, and being “spiritual”, a “creative” process. While the now slippery concepts of creativity and spirituality may not be interchangeable, as they are often located together, a similar search for meaning is suggested. As Hegel writes: “The task and aim of art is to bring home to our sense, our feeling, and our inspiration everything which has a place in the human spirit” (p 46). Perhaps “the ground of being” is the ground needing recovery by weaving the appropriate cloak.

Fabricating the Cloak of Spiritual Visibility

The material of the desired cloak is found in the threads of the everyday. As a way of ascertaining interest in spirituality among my seemingly community-challenged, detached students, I developed a class survey for willing participants. I required partakers to write two words: (1) one word describing what they know about “the divine”, and (2) one word describing something they would like to

find out about “the divine”. These words were then shared with the person sitting beside them and then shared with the group, if they wished to do so. The reactions to these questions are encouraging. Although the young participants felt that interpretation of “the divine” is completely open, most are interested in finding out more about this “element”. This information seems to indicate that spiritual need appears alive and well and requiring attention.

The LGBTIQ Sexuality Story

Thomas: The particular landscape around youth sexuality has radically altered over the past few decades, and the literature focused on sexuality-related diversity has routinely centered on interrogation into how the wider educational communities of practice still reify institutional heterogendered practices. We all know “heterogendered” means believing there is only one way of being affirmed. In Australia as recently as 18 June 2013, when Labor Senator Penny Wong voted for the same sex marriage bill it was noted that she simply substituted words such as “interracial” or “different age” for “same-sex” in the debate to see if that changed people’s view of this. So research in the inclusive educational field still indicates gay and lesbian identities as problematic, particularly when considering the worlds of educational practitioners (McKenna & Vicars 2013). The assumption is that the heteronormative worldview is the only “correct” or real view, and lesbian and gay youth are therefore a problematic presence. In schools, churches and temples they are a “problem” needing to be changed, rather than becoming a legitimate challenge to epistemic or theological inquiry and indeed nurturance (Riddle 1994). It was Riddle who in 1974 was appointed to the American Psychological Association (APA) Task Force for the Status of Lesbian and Gay Male Psychologists, to direct the revised APA mandate in 1975 that declared gay men’s sexuality is not a mental disorder. So Riddle uses the notion of “nurturance” here to remind us that society requires differences in people and that these need to be greeted with genuine appreciation and an imperative for advocacy for those who might be labelled different.

I ask where are the places of genuine affection and delight in the belonging of lesbian and gay youth in our churches, temples, synagogues and educational institutions?

They are not openly neglected but are deliberately “blocked” from view. An assumption that the heteronormative worldview is the only “correct” or real view to be considered can be read into anti-homophobic discourse that interpolates religion and schooling. So we get to be seen, or rather not seen, as a partial sexuality. In the past, lesbian and gay sexuality and gender expression was considered “curable”, but again, as recently as 21 June 2013, USA Exodus International, a 37-year-old Christian ministry focused on “faith” and homosexuality, closed its

doors. The day after, its president apologized for causing “undue suffering and judgment” with its programs aimed at “curing” gay people through prayer and therapy.

The immediate past president of Exodus International, Alan Chambers, stated: “Exodus was an institution in the conservative Christian world, but they have ceased to be a living, breathing organism.” He went on to say: “For quite some time we have been imprisoned in a worldview that’s neither honoring toward our fellow human beings, nor biblical.” Chambers, who left his gay life as a teenager, said in a disingenuous announcement on the group’s website that he wanted to apologize “to the gay community for years of undue suffering and judgment at the hands of the organization and the church as a whole” (Stanglin 2013). In his own words, the gay and lesbian youth they cured “were asked to cease being living breathing organisms”.

Any alienation or practices that make people, irrespective of their sexuality, dispensable generates an impossible psychic distance from one’s self and ultimate detachment (McKenna 2009, p. 107). This, added to the still prevalent pejorative name-calling and physical harassment is rewarded with the fallacious promise that “It gets better” (Savage 2013) – a media program for “liberation” that genuinely sets out to bring a more optimistic take on the LGBTQ notion of visibility. But the matter of how the space for LGBTQ emancipation and belonging is created still needs to be addressed as we ask what was and is still wrong that needs to be changed? How can the “It Gets Better” campaign be used to valuably critique what it was that happened, as it also disrupts the unexamined heteronormative privilege?

What about a critical contestation of what is wrong in churches and the religious world that needs to get “better”? What can religious leaders do to redress the unspoken and normatively constructed LGBTQ spiritual and pedagogical problem that they have actually created themselves? Ultimately, this article asks, does it in truth “get better”?

In 2013, I still hold to the notion that the rhetoric that politicizes the American, Australian and British religious systems, while in an “emerging” sense has the intention of being democratic and inclusive, still homogenises the diversity of gay and lesbian young people. They are made invisible, while still being positioned in a tokenistic way, and their and my marginality is inhabited alongside people with learning challenges, other able-bodied people and people who are culturally or linguistically diverse. Lesbian and gay youth serve to meet the heterogendered privileged groups’ need for “the inclusive agenda”. I noted in 2009 that there is a need to “emphasise inclusivity, [which] now requires that greater attention be given to the voices which have traditionally been excluded or made invisible” (McKenna 2009, p. 5). That was in 2009, and we still need to move beyond the categorization of a collective marginality. Perhaps it is the very nature of the mat-

ter of sexuality that is the great taboo that works against inclusion of Gay and Lesbian people?

The Victorian Equal Opportunity Commission (2103) brings our diversity to the fore in the campaign “We are not all the same. But we are equal.” How do you critically reflect on how it is positioning rituals of conformity, sexuality and gender practices (McKenna 2009) in our religious and spiritual institutions when working alongside youth? How do we as leaders and “elders” of young people with a unique range of embodied narratives let them tell us what can emerge when they are given occasion for personal and professional reflection to happen? Youth’s resistance, submission and resignation are pervasive when looked at as heteronormative capital within the institutions of the churches as they are currently constructed. They simply cannot easily belong because of the rigidity of the churches and religious institutions.

For young people in the field of education, I am cognizant and mindful about revisiting once again the interpretive locations of the silencing which privileges so-called normalcy. In her seminal text, *The Epistemology of the Closet*, Sedgwick (1990) wrote of the power of the silence — how it is not just one silence, but several “that accrue particularity by fits and starts, in relation to the discourse that surrounds and differentially constitutes it” (p 3). We need a spirituality and a religious sense of belonging that approaches the re/presentation of the lived experience of young people through what I call transformative praxis, as outlined by McKenna (2012), where there are:

- places that are co-created for learning about and alongside lesbian and gay youth;
- opportunities for collaborative inquiry and connectivity through purposeful engagement to build respectful and collective knowing around their spiritual quest;
- critical interrogation of assumptions and beliefs that mistreat personal narratives and the notion of a one-size-fits-all lesbian and gay youth identity;
- occasions to use the knowledge already created in relation to psycho-social wellness, to build an affirming nurturing identity;
- locales for reviewing of the tensions and anomalies generating opportunities for integration around the identities of lesbian and gay youth into churches and other hegemonic agencies;
- opportunities for collaborative discussions of social justice, equity, respect, and mutuality for the unique needs of this group;

- more accounts of the reflexive knowing and the self-hoods and life-worlds of all those involved in and engaging with these young people; and
- unconditional opportunities to co-create ways in which these women and men can belong to a respectful community.

When discussions with the LGBTQ youth occur, we need to draw upon deconstructive, critical and potentially transformative involvements and responses, to potentially raise questions about their reclamation of power and identity in collaborative relationships with churches, synagogues and temple. I seek to use perspectival dispositions constructed outside dominant discourses to further explore “what if” and “what could” become constituted in the right world for these young women and men.

Conclusion

The four voices or characters who performed at our dinner party called for you as the reader to rediscover and reinvent research. As the critical theorist and self-styled ethnographer McLaren reminds us, this group of performers have placed emancipation at the core of the work that based the stand of “hope” at the centre of the performative practice when considering the needs of youth. The hope that we can see in the performative sharing of ideas is that these characters will be seen as a vehicle leading to social and cultural transformation. But, before we could examine the possibility of transformative practices for youth, we set out to establish to what extent there is need for transformation – that is, how much our youth perceive themselves as disaffected or dissenting, or to what extent they become compliant with the prevailing hegemony when considering spirituality, identity, sexuality and indigeneity.

This performance was not an occasion to test hypotheses as such, but rather an occasion to gather the stories of the four participants’ encounters with young people. The body of meaning that is generated in the performance and the “scripts” and narratives is the self-reflective discovery and description of phenomena, naming and ordering of the phenomena of “youth” and how they can be considered through the lens of spirituality, identity, sexuality and indigeneity.

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