



Heart of the Matter

A publication by Renee Owen
Executive Director
April, 2014



All for One! One for ALL!

Think back to when your inner voice first *knew* that you were going to send your child to Rainbow. While I am sure you did your due diligence – researching many schools, making sure the academic program was rigorous, making sure the teachers were highly qualified, and the campus safe – ultimately, what was it that attracted you? Often families say that it simply felt “right.” They felt a connection. This Heart of the Matter is about that sense of connection. The spirit of Rainbow.

There are many identifiable things about Rainbow’s curriculum that make it an alternative school. One of those aspects is the different cultures and religions we explore. When young children learn not only tolerance, but a true appreciation of other cultures, they grow up to be global citizens.

However, the story is more complex. Rainbow’s curriculum isn’t just “alternative.” It isn’t just a different, more effective style of teaching and learning, or a different, kinder philosophy about child development. It’s much more. Rainbow students grow up with a fundamentally different concept of the world, because the underlying spirit of the content at Rainbow is completely different than the traditional world view or the common core curriculum.

Let’s go back in history: Ever since the Enlightenment, and especially since the Industrial Revolution, the dominating world view has been one of parts. Science has been king (which was an

important evolutionary step) and Science systematically broke the universe down into parts. Traditional medicine, for example, had carefully studied every part of the body and how it functions. Therefore, when one went to the doctor, if it was determined that the stomach, for example, was malfunctioning, a remedy would be given that was only for the stomach, rather than holistically considering either the source of the issue or the interconnection with the whole body. This “parts approach” transferred to a world view where the environment was viewed much like a machine of parts. Each tree was its own part, likewise, each country its own part, and so on. And so it became that humans also saw themselves as separate from one another. Profiting from another human’s demise, for instance, was viewed as scientifically natural and systematically efficient, leading to massive greed and destruction.

Thank god, science is on the verge of proving what the mystics were saying all along -- that the

interrelation of all things is so all-encompassing that the “flapping of the wings of a butterfly in South America is felt in the Northern Hemisphere.” Our bodies are made up of the exact same compounds as earth. The earth is a part of us, and not at all separate. The scary part of this realization is that, as Ken Wilber puts it, “If the Earth is indeed our body and blood, then in destroying it we are committing a slow and gruesome suicide.” It’s so scary, that some would rather stay in denial.

The good news is that the change in consciousness to one of holism is spreading rapidly and more and more people understand the connectedness of all things. When we abandon the old paradigm of linear thinking, we see that although the change in consciousness seems slow, we are on the cusp of a massive tipping point – a dawning in consciousness. Will it be in time to save ourselves? Personally, I think so. As my friend Beth, a traditional Christian and woman of great faith, once said to me when her life was on the brink of destruction, “I have noticed that God is an eleventh hour man.” If you, as an individual, are doing what you can to make the positive shift happen, then you have every right to be optimistic and believe that Life will prevail. Sending your child to Rainbow is a huge step in the right direction!

This brings us back to our topic, which is how the underlying assumptions about the world are different at Rainbow. There are four pillars of Rainbow’s philosophy:

- Connection to Self**
- Connection to Community**
- Connection to the Natural World**
- Connection to the Spiritual.**

Going one step further, all four of these pillars are also connected – there is no ultimate separation between self, others, nature, and the sacred. There is a spirit that weaves all of life together. Without that spirit, each of us would be merely a corpse. We can examine all the elements and scientific processes of a tree, but ultimately, the etheric Life that flows through it is sacred – something that can’t fully be explained, but without it, the tree would fall over rather than stand erect. Spirit also weaves connection between us. Students in third grade greet one another with *namaste* each morning, meaning, “The spirit in me recognizes and respects the spirit in you.”

Unfortunately, in public school, it is dangerous territory for a teacher to even suggest that “spirit” is a part of

anything, much less everything. Part of the reason for this is that different religions have different names for spirit. Because naming spirit creates conflict, the government finds it fairer to delete the concept of spirit from the conversation all together – a devastating example of the lowest common denominator trap of the public sector. It is perhaps the biggest reason why Rainbow Community School has to be a private school. We will not deny spirit.

Even at Rainbow, there is sometimes a tension about how to name spirit. Ultimately, the divine is impossible to name. Disagreeing about whether it should be called the Goddess, God, the Universe, Allah, the Great Spirit, the Force, Yahweh, Brahma, Zoroaster, and so on only perpetuates fractured partialness. However, I don’t find that reason to abandon it all together! I recognize that it can be a distraction when we are participating in a holy ritual, for example, and someone uses a word that doesn’t quite jive with one’s particular personal belief system, but I believe we have evolved to be able to rise above that level and participate in the greater meaning of the ceremony, rather than focusing on the trappings of it or on being personally offended. Namaste.

Interestingly, Rainbow was founded by an order of Sufism that honors all spiritual traditions, or more accurately, all mystical traditions. Each religion has a mystical aspect (such as the Kabbalah of Judaism, Gnostics of Christianity, the Sufis of Islam, Shamanism of the Earth traditions, and many more.) At the mystical, or esoteric level, they all look very similar: a recognition of the invisible world, meditation and/or trance-like states as a method of becoming one with the source or the “I am,” a reverence for life, and so on. Mystics understand that if all is one – or if there is a oneness connecting everything, *then each of us is one with God*. Therefore, each of us *is* God. To the mystics, God is never a separate, to-be-feared entity. Throughout history, these esoteric traditions were secret – only to be passed onto “initiates,” probably because they would have been so misunderstood by the masses, as to be exterminated for blasphemy. * However, today there is a great movement to share mystical knowledge. To name but a few examples: Great Hopi leaders are divulging long held secret ceremonies, the Dalai Lama is widely sharing aspects of

*Note: The most famous historical example is Jesus, the great mystic who was executed for boldly announcing to crowds of people things like, “I am one with God.” Still today, greatly misunderstood.

Tibetan Buddhism that was only for monks, even the DaVinci Code is pop culture evidence of long-held esoteric secrets being revealed and accepted. This is happening all over the globe-- perhaps it is because we have evolved so much that we are ready to embrace one another without fear.

In November Rainbow was blessed with a very special visit from one of our founders, Nura Laird (formerly Ashrita Laird.) During her visit, Nura recalled she and the first teachers would have fellowship every morning before the children arrived and recite, with movement, the following blessing:

Toward the One
The perfection of love, harmony and beauty
The only Being
United with all the illuminated souls
Who form the embodiment of the master
The spirit of guidance.

And the verse they sang to the children each day:

May the blessings of God rest upon you
May God's peace abide with you
May God's presence illuminate your heart
Now and forever more

Sometimes people are reluctant to use the word God at Rainbow, but clearly our founders weren't. We have to remember that our children are born into this world without any preconceptions around the word God, as long as we don't pass our baggage on to them. Even children in atheist families at Rainbow don't seem to have a problem with the word and/or they have their own broad interpretation of it (unless it is being used in a fundamental manner, ie expressed as being an absolute, or only, truth.) I intentionally used the word "god" twice in the the first two pages, so you, the reader, can see how that word feels to you.

I have had many Christian families (and there are a great number at Rainbow) ask why we celebrate from so many traditions at Rainbow, but seldom from the Christ story. I am hoping this is something we can get beyond. I end up apologizing for the fact that many people identify Christianity solely with fundamentalism (defined here as lack of tolerance or even hatred for other beliefs), evangelism (a drive to "convert" others), and/or a doctrine of guilt—and it is apparently too difficult for people to move beyond these impressions and negative experiences with Christianity, despite the many progressive, radical, and esoteric forms of

Learning is a Metaphysical Activity

Insert: From the Director's Blog, February 28, 2014

I recently attended a lecture by Buckminster Fuller. Of course, Bucky passed on many years ago, so it was an actor giving the lecture, but it was very real. Enlightening and enlivening. We traveled through notions of time and space, which amounted to infinite cycles and angles. We engaged in a scientific theory that innovation, combined with compassion, can build a world where everyone has their needs met, making war obsolete.

As an educator, the most powerful "ah ha" concept of the whole evening was actually a validation: *Learning is a metaphysical activity.* You may ask what makes learning a metaphysical activity? Bucky would retort, "Can you see it?"

Why do I call this a "validation?" Because I work at a school that was founded by sufis, by mystics. Rainbow was founded with the belief that there is much more to life than what we can see and prove in the material realm. Learning is far more than a fact that can be quantifiably recorded with testing data. Material data can barely scrape the surface of what goes on internally. When I say we can't actually see learning, understand that we can see *artifacts* of learning -- student work on walls, presentations, and of course test score data, but the actual act of learning is invisible. Thus, metaphysical. There is something magical about learning.

At Rainbow, learning has always been recognized as a sacred activity. It stirs our soul because we can't actually see it -- yet we can feel it, we can enhance it, and best of all -- we can share it. It provides fellowship and brings together our whole community. Learning provides passion and purpose in our lives. Many wise people have claimed that the whole purpose of life is to learn.

If life is infinite, then learning if infinite. The very concept of Pi could be seen as simple proof that infinity exists -- it has no end, which is precisely why it is round and goes on forever. If we try to concretely quantify Pi - - if we cut off Pi at 3.14-- it is no longer truly round or infinite. If learning really is infinite, neither a school, nor a teacher, nor a politician, should ever box it up, or limit it: The act of quantifying learning can certainly be useful and necessary, but it quickly runs into diminishing returns. Bucky's legacy motto is: "Do more with less." So rather than spending more time and more precious resources on testing, let's DO MORE.

Christianity, past and present. People who fear Christianity sometimes seem offended if Christ is referenced even a fraction as much as other religions – perhaps out of a fear it will usurp our rich tapestry of traditions. Considering the fact that people espousing themselves as Christians dominated so much of the planet for many decades now, I completely empathize with their fear, but I still think we are capable of rising above it. Children who have no “baggage” about Christ, see it as no different than learning about Hinduism, Judaism, Paganism, or one of the many other traditions we explore.

A delightful example of this occurred several years ago when a kindergarten child who attended Ash Wednesday services in the morning, returned to school in the afternoon with the ash mark on her forehead, which made the other students very curious. Rainbow has a rich culture of having students share their traditions and beliefs, so this was the perfect opportunity for this child to tell her classmates what Ash Wednesday meant in her Christian tradition. As Doreen (the teacher) put it, “All the children wanted to be Christian after that!”...just as children want to be Hindu after celebrating Diwali, and so on. I have found that most children love being immersed in the magic of the spirit, no matter what form it comes in, as long as it is without hang-ups.

At Rainbow, magic is still a part of childhood. Magic teaches children that even things that seem impossible may be possible, and it certainly influences the level of creativity and imagination our graduates are well known for. So while students at Rainbow learn the scientific reasons for the changing of autumn into winter, for example, they will also delight in the story of Jack Frost. These two very different concepts seem mutually exclusive to an adult’s logical/rational way of thinking, but children raised with both have no problem with their coexistence. Interestingly, Science is the strongest subject at Rainbow, other than Reading. If you are analyzing our SAT10 test scores, the school-wide average percentile ranking, compared nationally, is 84%! Magical thinking certainly hasn’t hindered Rainbow students from understanding the scientific method or facts.

I once had a prospective parent who couldn’t quite wrap his head around how we teach academics. He probed, “If the school has seven domains, then the mental domain only makes up 1/7th of each day, and that concerns me.” Logical, linear thinking, rather than

holistic, integral thinking breaks things apart and has trouble understanding how multiple things co-exist at the same time. I tried to explain how students can be engaged in an activity that immerses them in several domains at one time – and how our holistic approach actually *increases* intellectual rigor (because true intelligence is about making connections), but it was too much of a paradigm shift for this individual to make. Just as the old paradigm fractured the world into pieces, it also separated academic subjects into completely separate categories. History, Science, Writing were taught separately, rather than as integrated thematic units, such as we structure the content at Rainbow. At the professional level, this separation of disciplines has created conflict – biologists disagreeing with physicists and so on. Yet, some of the most important and innovative discoveries were a result of interdisciplinary work.

Rainbow students have to reach across domains and across disciplines to solve problems. They have to look far beyond the obvious – often far beyond the material world to envision imaginative, sophisticated, whole-systems solutions that a typical thinker would never dream of. All the while, they have developed a deep sense of self and a connection to all of life that gives them the confidence to go forth and to have a voice. They know how to tap into their inner wisdom. Part of the reason they develop such confidence is because they see their classmates as collaborators and supporters, rather than competitors. That synergy creates fabulous ideas and group projects, and also contributes to the wonderful sense of joy we have on campus. As head of school, I am fortunate: when a child comes to my office because of a problem they were having, I can go right to the heart of the matter, and talk with them about their connection with their classmates and their heart, rather than rules and punishments, which would only make them feel more separate.

Again, think back to when you first knew that you were going to send your child to Rainbow. How did you know your child would thrive here? Even if you weren’t fully conscious of it, you hopefully sensed the spirit of oneness that is welcomed at Rainbow. 

Resources:

- Wilber, Ken. *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality: The Spirit of Evolution*. Boston: Shambhala, 1995.
- Bourgeault, Cynthia. *The Meaning of Mary Magdalene: Discovering the Woman at the Heart of Christianity*. Boston: Shambhala. 2000
- Rinpoche, Sogyal. *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*, San Francisco: Harper Publishing, 2002