

“Walk in beauty,” is sage advice I learned from Navajo elders. Since my youth, when ancient Native American life captivated me, I have strived to walk the beauty way. When we walk in beauty, every experience in our life feels as if it was intended to lead to *this very moment*. It took me until middle age to understand the grace of the beauty way in my present life.

The walk that led to my life today was unconventional. I thought I was meant to pursue art, and in my mid-twenties I opened an art gallery. Unexpectedly, I stumbled into a passion for education through a myriad of fast-paced events that swept me away, leading to the founding of Paradox Valley School, a charter school serving a uranium mining community. Interestingly, I founded PVS with no prior educational training. As an artist, I took a creative, self-learned approach to designing that school, which turned out to be wildly successful. It was exactly what Paradox children needed. Now I realize it wasn't just some divine accident that led me toward that mission. The intense experiences I gained in Paradox were indispensable to the work I do now.

That experience, and many more, prepared me for my present position as executive director of Rainbow Community School. At the time I accepted the directorship at Rainbow, my private plan was to slow down a bit. I simply wanted to run this quaint (as I saw it) little school and enjoy life beyond work. Instead, the Rainbow approach to education transformed me, and I am now on a mission to spread that model far wider than Asheville, NC... which brings me to the present moment and to the project I intend to make the primary focus of my doctorate program.

I believe that my project—to create a wide-spread charter school model out of Rainbow Community School's philosophy—will return *beauty* back into education. American education has forgotten how to walk in beauty. I believe that if we can return beauty into education, we can usher in a new era that will, as the UELP vision statement puts it, “restore public faith in public education.”

To explain, I refer to the ancient Greek notion of Truth, Goodness, and Beauty. This triad has endured in many traditions and forms: Mind, Body, and Spirit; Head, Hands, and Heart; or Thinking, Willing (or acting), and Feeling, respectively, are all renditions of the same triad. The theory is that

when these three forces are in balance, all of life is harmonious. Unfortunately, things are radically out of balance in American education, and since education is a reflection of society, and vice versa, I suggest that we are dangerously out of balance throughout our culture. The “head,” or thinking, has reigned supreme since the peak of the Enlightenment, and it is time for a change.

Aristotle and the ancient Greeks never intended education to be solely about thinking. After all, what good is thought without action and without heart? For years now, a teacher cannot justify bringing into the classroom something that is beauty-oriented, such as the arts or mindfulness practices, without proving that it enhances the mind, i.e. increases test scores. Beauty, in and of itself, is not considered worthy. The will, on the other hand, has been given recognition. This pairing of thinking with willing dangerously lacks beauty. Without beauty, the will lacks “Goodness.” Without beauty, thinking lacks “Truth.” Tragically, it isn’t hard to think of intelligent, willful leaders who have reaped tremendous destruction because they were heartless. A nation without beauty is doomed.

Steve McIntosh (2007) puts forth a brilliant application of Truth, Goodness, and Beauty. McIntosh observes that when these three forces become out of balance, two of them act in a dialectic fashion until there is so much tension that when the third is introduced it flips to the next level of evolution, ushering in a moment of harmony. This can be applied to the micro or the macro level.

At the micro level I have trained my teachers to evaluate students according to this triad. Here are a couple of examples: A child who is heavily oriented toward feeling and willing dreamily pursues fanciful, impulsive notions without thinking them through. The teacher must help this student apply critical thinking, to measure potential outcomes before acting. On the other hand, a student who is all thinking and feeling is likely to be melancholic and lack the ability to be productive. If the teacher can help the latter student develop will power, the student has the opportunity to become highly effective. This is merely one example of the holistic approach we take to education at Rainbow Community School. We refer to this triad as Inquiry, Integrity, and Inspiration. The word inspiration, with “spirit” as its root, represents beauty. Inquiry denotes truth, and integrity, of course, represents goodness.

At the macro-level, one can look through the lens of this dialectic theory to understand the onset of new historical periods. Thinking, especially scientific thought, was the catalyst for the Enlightenment, for example. Thinking and willing, together, are creating tension in our current society, and beauty will be the catalyst for the next era. I believe society is ripe for this transition, and educators can lead the way. I see teachers being drawn to mindfulness techniques, for instance, which are heart-centered (beauty) activities. Also, there has been an explosion of interest and research regarding contemplative practices in education in the last few years by researchers such as Dr. Richard Davidson in Madison, Wisconsin. Furthermore, the Millennial generation is having children later in life, and they are not going to put up with the broken educational system. They will demand a more holistic model that honors beauty. Early progressive educators, such as John Dewey and the founders of Rainbow, were ahead of their time, but I believe that time has come, and we educational leaders need to be strategically ready for a massive shift.

Why Columbia and the UELP program? Harvard doesn't even offer an EdD degree anymore, and I can't enroll in a program that requires leaving behind my important work at Rainbow for five years. I could apply for one of the programs here in North Carolina for much less expense and trouble, but the descriptions of those programs sound like my cohorts would be there primarily to gain a credential. I need the training UELP promises in order to gain the skills necessary to develop and run a large charter school district, since my experience has been in small schools. I need the resources of a school such as Teachers College to truly be successful, and the backing of a university with prestige would help garner attention for my project. Finally, there is perhaps no other school better aligned with my personal progressive values and goals. When I walked into Teachers College this summer and saw Dewey's quote larger than life on the wall, I wanted to drop to my knees. As I look over my curriculum vitae, I am struck by how all my experiences lead toward *this very moment* and prepare me for my purpose, which is to help reform society through education. When I am aligned with that purpose, I walk in beauty.