



Heart of the Matter

A publication by Renee Owen
Executive Director
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BEAUTY

Brings Balance to Education

“Walk in beauty,” is sage advice I learned from Native elders. Since my youth, when I was fascinated with Native wisdom, I have strived to walk the beauty way, but it took me until middle age to understand my path. The secret? Being engaged in a purpose – a higher calling.

John Dewey led me toward my calling when he said *“I believe education is the fundamental method of social progress and reform.”* Every day, when I hear the children laugh, I am completely in the present moment, and I feel alive because I know I am contributing to a greater purpose – my beauty way.

I am blessed to work at a remarkable contemplative school in Asheville, North Carolina. Our greater calling at Rainbow Community School is to return beauty back into education. American education has forgotten how to walk in beauty. By

infusing beauty into education I believe we can usher in a new era that will restore faith in American education and bring hope to humanity.

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, 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 practices to build empathy, 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 created tremendous destruction because they were heartless. A nation without beauty is doomed.

Balancing Truth, Goodness, and Beauty

Steve McIntosh, in *Integral Consciousness and the Future of Evolution* 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.

Balancing the Triad at the Student Level

At the micro level, our veteran teachers have learned to evaluate the needs of students through the lens of this triad. A few 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.

Finally, if a student is all thinking and willing, he is likely to be a successful student in the traditional sense of the word, but might lack

creativity or have a hard time empathizing with others. In this case, the teacher would help the student to understand emotions and would provide creative inspiration.

Balance in Society

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, bringing us out of the Dark Ages.

Since then Science and objective/reductionist thinking has reached its



pinnacle, to the point of obscuring broader, subtler, non-materialistic ways of being.

Thinking and willing, together, are creating tension in our current society. The quintessential “modern” human is one who is highly productive – constantly in action – and those actions are informed by rational, scientific, material thinking. The rise of the information age, where we have access to more “thinking” than we can possibly comprehend or act upon is creating a yearning for relief — a searching for another way. As the tension of this thinking/acting modality intensifies, beauty will be the catalyst for the next era. Beauty is the “relief” that will break the cycle.

I believe society is ripe for this transition, and educators can lead the way. I see teachers, even in traditional settings, being drawn to heart-centered mindfulness techniques, for instance, and there has recently been an explosion of research regarding contemplative practices in education. In our world where so much focus is on outward action, more people are looking *inward* for balance. Educational innovators and researchers are discovering that when a learner is in balance – when they are feeling harmonious— they learn better. Not only can they think more clearly and efficiently, but critical thinking and creative problem-solving skills develop when students can “think” with not only their mind, but also their body and spirit. The outdated school system that over-emphasizes repetitive thinking simply isn’t working for the new generation, and it isn’t meeting the societal needs of the Information Age.

Inquiry, Integrity, Inspiration

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. Yet another pedagogical model I am working with is Academics, Action, and Aesthetics. No matter the terms, it’s all the same triad.

Otto Scharmer, in his book, *Theory U*, explains how something changes when we have an open mind, an open heart, and an open will. Especially when humans are working together in a group, when everyone shifts into having an open mind, an open heart, and an open will at the same time, synchronicity begins to flow. A sense of harmony pervades the room, focused thinking comes naturally, trust amongst the group makes working together effortless, and innovative solutions to difficult problems appear.

Centering is a Time for Beauty

That is why every classroom at Rainbow Community School centers at the beginning of every day. By the end of centering, you can feel the sense of harmony in the room. All the frenzied activity of hustling to school melts away, and the class shifts into a shared, focused, grounded space. There is a reason we do Math right after centering – the ability to sustain abstract thought is at its highest. By taking the time to center, we make the rest of the day more peaceful and efficient. The popular term nowadays is “mindfulness.” Mindful students are focused on the present moment.



The Heart of Rainbow

Connection to self: We grow through inner discovery.

Connection to community: We learn through relationships.

Connection to the natural world: We serve through stewardship.

Connection to the spiritual: We honor all that is sacred

How balanced is your life?

Do you take “beauty breaks?” Is your day primarily thinking and acting? Are you blessed with the ability to appreciate beauty and use it to make your life meaningful and glorious?

When does your greatest inspiration typically come?

For most people, it is when their brain and their bodies are at rest – such as in the shower, or while zoning out behind the wheel of a car. People especially report having break-through ideas upon waking after a restful sleep. A truly inspirational education is one where children learn to develop their heart, or as Rainbow’s triad calls it, their inspiration. Smart students think. *Brilliant* students are inspired. As an educator who believes in the power of beauty to restore our society and education to a place of balance, I see hope in the changes that are cropping up everywhere. I see hope where people gather together in beauty.

The Future of Education

Early progressive educators, such as John Dewey and the founders of Rainbow were ahead of their time, but I believe that time has come. The innovative Millennial generation is having children later in life, and they are not going to put up with an obsolete educational system. They will desire a more holistic model that honors beauty, so educational leaders need to be prepared for a massive shift as parents demand a balanced approach to education. As more and more parents and educators resist the over-doing of modern “over-thinking” and are attracted to the benefits of *free*-thinking and beauty in education, we will begin to experience our greatest potential – both as individuals and as a society. We will learn how to work together to solve our most perplexing problems, and we will learn to love one another. One day, we will walk in beauty.

Resources

- McIntosh, S. (2007). *Integral consciousness and the future of evolution: How the integral worldview is transforming politics, culture, and spirituality*. St. Paul, MN: Paragon House Publishers.
- Steinmetz, K. (2015). Help! My Parents are Millennials: How this generation is changing the way we raise kids. *Time Magazine*. October 26, 2015.
- Scharmer, C.O. (2007). *Theory U: Leading from the future as it emerges*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.



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