

EDUCATION FOR ENGAGED CONTEMPLATION

The Ignatian Contribution

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ONE OF THE MOST ENCOURAGING MOVEMENTS within secular Western education today is the development of pedagogies for teaching spirituality.¹ Parker Palmer² and others have argued for the inclusion of contemplative practices within formal education as a corrective to the objectivist, cognitive and behaviourist agenda of education in our globalised and capitalist age. Such contemplative practices include: developing the contemplative dimension in teaching; attending to the inner life of teachers and students; teaching various forms of meditation; promoting altruistic service projects and engaged learning; and appreciating both religious and non-religious expressions of the 'sacred'. The teaching and learning of contemplative spirituality often involve engagement in actions that promote social justice, environmental sustainability and global citizenship. The stream of educational thought that calls for deliberate attention to the inner, contemplative dimension alongside the active life of social and political action can rightly be called education for engaged contemplation. I note that this stream is flowing outside the systems of explicitly religious

¹ Two good collections of essays on the spirituality in education are: *The Heart of Learning: Spirituality in Education*, edited by Steven Glazer (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher, 1999) and *Holistic Learning and Spirituality in Education: Breaking New Ground*, edited by John P. Miller (Albany, NY: State U. of New York P, 2005). In both books various well-known public intellectuals consider the question of spirituality in secular public education. Such voices include Parker J. Palmer, Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche, the Dalai Lama, bell hooks, David Orr, Diana Chapman Walsh, Huston Smith, Vincent Harding, Thomas Moore, Riane Eisler, John P. Miller and others.

² Parker Palmer, *To Know As We Are Known: A Spirituality of Education* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1983).



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education such as the Catholic one I work in, although it is certainly found in these as well.³

My own view is that there is tremendous value in these initiatives, and that the work of the practitioners and theorists who emphasize spirituality in this way is a significant contribution to education as a whole, which seeks to lead people into embracing and promoting the fullness of life in the world. Free of the doctrinal concerns and circular arguments that frequently inhibit religious educators, those working in the secular education system are often able to unleash the creative power of the spiritual life in an institution with a significant social mandate. Nevertheless, a case can be made for the need to include insights from religious traditions within this nascent movement in secular education. There are areas, most notably those of suffering and finitude, where secular pedagogies for spirituality are weak, and where the various world religious traditions have something to offer. The Catholic Christian tradition in particular could supplement and complement the work of secular spiritual educators in these areas.

My own location for practising engaged contemplation has been in five state-funded Catholic schools in Ontario, Canada, where I have

³ Thomas Groome, *Educating For Life: A Spiritual Vision for Every Teacher and Parent* (Allen, Tx: Thomas More, 1998).

served as a school chaplain. Within the Ontario Catholic education system funding is provided fully by the state while Catholic boards and educators retain control of curriculum development and teaching. As part of this arrangement, secondary schools within the province are legally required to accept all students regardless of their religious affiliation or lack thereof. This requirement poses new instructional and pastoral challenges to Catholic teachers and administrators as they seek to meet the spiritual and educational needs of a diverse student population that reflects the surrounding multi-religious and secular culture of Canada—a culture that often eclipses the Catholic worldview. Over the past twenty years I have served in three different Ontario Catholic schools: a rural high school, a suburban high school, and an inner-city high school. At present I minister in two inner city intermediate schools. Throughout these years I have led experiential retreats for staff and students, supervised engaged service projects (working with the homeless, serving meals at shelters), taken part in political protests, accompanied students on learning trips to developing countries, engaged in spiritual direction, facilitated contemplative practices (silent, guided and walking meditations), taught classes, and guided students and staff through moments of crisis and grief. Being a full-time chaplain in a publicly funded Catholic school system as constructed within Ontario has provided me with an opportunity to follow the way of contemplation-in-action at a rare intersection between religious and secular education.

In light of my experience I wish briefly to explore what Ignatian spirituality has to offer to the new field of engaged spirituality within education. I shall first describe the way of engaged contemplation and some of the weaknesses found within the secular articulation of this way. Then I shall discuss how some of the key insights of Ignatian spirituality can supplement and enhance education for engaged contemplation. My aim is to encourage a healthy discourse between secular and religious educators as we share in the common work of forming the next generation of citizens who will make their contribution to building a just and sustainable world. Within this shared horizon of purpose the way of engaged contemplation, or contemplation-in-action in Jesuit thought, provides a wise pedagogy for spiritual education.

Engaged Contemplation

Engaged contemplation essentially seeks to bring the social and political realms into the contemplative journey. As any contemplative knows, the active life includes anything from breathing to studying, to reflecting, to liturgical prayer, to manual labour. But what the socially engaged contemplative knows is that the active life also includes activity for social and political change. Hence a fully engaged and contemplative life embraces social critique, involvement in community development, work for social justice, political protest, and alternative living. Engaged contemplation then brings social and political activity for the repair of the world into the purview of the contemplative person and the contemplative community: it is essentially a way of social and political spirituality.

Moreover, there is a growing consciousness today, apparent in the work of thinkers such as Thomas Berry⁴ and David Suzuki,⁵ that social and political actions for justice must be situated within a renewed ecological awareness of the earth as our shared home. Thus, any sentient being who is without a home in the universe (urban homeless people, refugees living in camps, endangered species whose habitats are vanishing, or even the human species itself which is destroying its own habitat) deserves our compassionate attention and our active help. We must move the resources and the will of the polis towards sustainable life for all creation.

Education for engaged contemplation is about the development of an attentive and loving heart alongside social, political and ecological activism. It is about bringing the concerns and needs of our marginalised, our poor and our wounded earth into the classroom of the heart. It involves making the connection between the locations of social and political injustice and the locations of environmental destruction—for the two are linked. It involves educating people to act in ways that express compassion for the natural world and to pursue social justice within the systems that we have constructed. It includes an awareness that the bodily and physical world is connected to our spiritual consciousness and that any break in this connection leads to

⁴ Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1990).

⁵ David Suzuki, *The Sacred Balance: Rediscovering Our Place in Nature* (Vancouver: Greystone Books, 1997).

estrangement and impoverishment. Ultimately, engaged contemplation is a way of being spiritually political and politically spiritual.

The Four Insights of Engaged Contemplation⁶

The path of engaged contemplation starts from the belief that the journey through life is most complete when it embraces tradition and innovation, charity and justice, caring for the self and caring for others within just institutions.⁷ Some engaged contemplatives find strength for this journey in the traditions of world religions. Others find support in secular humanist philosophies of the spirit. But both religious and secular contemplatives bring the best from their traditions to bear upon contemporary concerns, and collaborate on actions that promote the common good. There are four basic insights or signposts for the journey that are shared by religious and secular practitioners of engaged contemplation.

The first insight is that the whole of creation is connected and that its different parts mutually affect one another. This is true in the natural world, but it is also true in human life. The active life of social and political engagement and the pondering life of contemplation are connected and, while calling for different energies, do have mutual influence. Psychology, physics, mathematics and literature all point to how integral the inner and outer dimensions of life actually are. Pursuing the active life and the contemplative life together promotes holism, peace and harmony, and each dimension benefits from its involvement with the other.

The second insight arising from engaged contemplation is that there is a continual development, transformation and expansion of energy within personal consciousness, human civilisation and the natural world. Despite the real evidence around us of social systems in decline and the extinction of numerous species there remains plenty of evidence, from a wider historical perspective, that nature and society are in a state of progressive transformation—from the starbursts when

⁶ For a more philosophical treatment of these four insights see my book *Contemplation in Liberation: A Method for Spiritual Education in the Schools* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 2001), 102–111.

⁷ While he does not deal directly with engaged contemplation, Paul Ricoeur argues for a comprehensive approach to ethics as living well with and for others in just institutions. See *Oneself as Another* (Chicago: U. of Chicago P, 1992).

the galaxies were born, billions of years ago, to the global and historical consciousness that permeates the earth today. This insight grounds engaged contemplation as a pedagogy of hope based upon its conviction that there is a 'river of grace' running through the past, the present and the future. Followers of St Ignatius would understand this insight as 'salvation history'.

The third insight is that true and lasting social and political change for the common good takes place through the accumulation of many apparently small actions. Engaged contemplatives see the importance of addressing systemic and political structures so as to bring about changes that will result in justice and sustainability at the level of local cultures and societies. They also see changes in one's own heart and one's own way of life as important to healing the divisions found in human cultures and the wounds inflicted upon the environment. The heart of the engaged contemplative beats with the hope and the affirmation that each and every personal action directed towards the common good has an impact upon the collective. Not only each action but also each attitude that is held by the person and offered through the heart has an impact. Anger and gratitude, for example, have very different effects upon the community and give rise to different modes of action for change. This insight yields an appreciation of the wisdom of long-term engagement.

Finally, the fourth insight is that unity and diversity, community and individuality, wholeness and fragmentation, exist simultaneously. A life-giving energy flows through everything that exists. This insight arises frequently during times of quiet contemplation and rest. Yet it can also arise out of the whirlwind of action by those who are attentive and living in accordance with their deepest truth. Such an insight calls for maturity in spiritual life. It calls for an ability to hold apparent contradictions together in tension, to look for 'the hidden wholeness'⁸ that lies below and between divisions. It calls for an ability to move beyond the dualism of 'either/or' to 'both/and/neither', to perceive the river of grace that flows through our personal and collective life.

⁸ Parker Palmer, *The Active Life: Wisdom for Work, Creativity, and Caring* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1990), 29.

The Contribution of St Ignatius

While there is much good in the education for engaged contemplation advocated from within secular pedagogies, it does have weaknesses. In saying this I do not mean to detract from the excellent practical and theoretical work of secular engaged contemplatives, but rather to complement and add to it.

The first major concern I have is that an unrealistic optimism runs throughout secular engaged contemplation. That is it is often pursued under an illusory horizon of utopianism predicated upon the championing of the autonomous ego. Now if the twentieth century has taught us anything, it is to mistrust ideologies or agenda for achieving utopia and to be suspicious of the inflation of the ego. I would argue that a balanced education for engaged contemplation requires that we help people learn how to deal with failure, suffering, evil and corruption in human history and to pursue the true self as opposed to a dislocated ego.

My second concern, linked to the first, is that secular engaged contemplation often fails to appreciate the limits of the human capacity for transformation and change. There is often little consciousness of the fact that we, as human beings, are limited, finite and fallible creatures. Our ability to act and our ability to reflect are not infinite. The life of an engaged contemplative can involve frustration, discouragement and even depression when political action is unsuccessful, and when he or she reflects on the continuing injustice in the world and the magnitude of the task of bringing about systemic change. Such experiences and situations are a constitutive part of the human journey and need to be addressed within engaged contemplation.

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In light of these concerns, two contributions from Ignatian spirituality would be valuable to the secular teaching of engaged contemplation. The first is Ignatius' guidelines for the discernment of spirits, and the second is his advice concerning consolation and desolation.

St Ignatius wrote that there are good and evil spirits at work in the world of human affairs. As David L. Fleming explains, the good spirits 'lead a person in a good direction towards a good goal', while evil spirits 'make use of evil directions, and even sometimes of what are at first

good directions, to accomplish the evil end'.⁹ One of the strengths of Ignatius' approach is that he appreciated how much the inner motivations of a person can affect action. His attention to the spiritual disposition of a person towards good or evil has practical application inasmuch as he believed that the fruit of an action depends upon its source in the motivation of the person who does it.

For Ignatius the signs of the 'good spirit' were strength, encouragement, inspiration, consolation, peace and resolution. Following the good spirit results in delight, joy and confidence. The signs of the 'evil spirit' were sadness, anxiety, discouragement and delusion. The evil spirit attempts to distract us from the pursuit of good by pointing out all the obstacles in our way and making us feel weak and unable to meet the challenges we face (Exx 315).¹⁰ St Ignatius was not content, however, to focus only on the inner personal disposition of the contemplative-in-action. He was quite aware that the powers and principalities of the world were also locations where the struggle between good and evil spirits took place. A person needed to learn how to discern good and evil both in the inner and the outer worlds.

Anyone who has a commitment to opposing evils such as injustice, war or environmental destruction will have experienced disappointment, discouragement and perhaps even despair. In this regard, St Ignatius' advice about consolation and desolation is also instructive.

The fruit of consolation, a powerful interior consciousness of the love of God, is peace, joy and contentment. But Ignatius is mindful that there are times when evil will use the signs of consolation to trick us into believing that we are on the right path. One criterion for the true nature of the consolation is that it should endure over time. Another is that it should lead us to perform good actions. Should these criteria be lacking, there is reason to pause and ask if the source of the consolation is the good spirit or the evil spirit.

Desolation is the opposite of consolation and comes when things appear to be going wrong. We experience failure of plans, the end of dreams, or disappointment in a relationship. Desolation is marked by sadness, weakened resolve and pessimism about our work for the good.

⁹ David L. Fleming, *Draw Me into Your Friendship: The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius: A Literal Translation and A Contemporary Reading* (St Louis, Mo: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1996), 243.

¹⁰ Fleming, *Draw Me into Your Friendship*, 249.



There are times when such feelings are a natural result of what has happened to us. But sometimes evil will trick us into feeling that we have failed. Again, there is a need to pause and reflect upon the source of the desolation.

Years ago my spiritual director at the time told me an enduring and wise Ignatian maxim: 'In times of consolation, remember desolation. In times of desolation, remember consolation.'¹¹ We all have moments of failure and often feel dejected afterwards. And we all have times of success when we feel very good about what we have accomplished. This maxim calls us to pay attention to our entire life and to remember when we are feeling good about our engagement with the world that there are also times when it has not worked out so well. Likewise, we need to remember during times of failure and disappointment that we have also had successes and have been agents for the incarnation of the good in the world. Following this maxim can help us to grow in humility, wisdom and spiritual maturity.

¹¹ See Exx 323–324.

Ignatian Insights for Educational Practice

What are the implications of incorporating these insights from St Ignatius into our pedagogies of engaged contemplation? They may help us to achieve a more nuanced and less utopian view of the integration of contemplation and action.

Teaching and learning how to discern 'good spirits' and 'evil spirits' can help contemplatives to see more clearly the impact of changes in social systems and structures upon the common good, even when the full effects are not apparent at once. Using one's imagination to envision the future of a particular line of social action, and listening from the heart to its consequences for all involved, can help us to see an action's potential for good or evil. We can learn to recognise how systems which purport to do good may in fact do evil or a lesser good. Such discernment is particularly necessary in an age when organizations seek to manufacture consent to persist in activities that are unsustainable or unjust.

The discernment of spirits also remains important for the inner world of the heart. Learning how to discern the movements of good and evil in our own hearts and our inner motivations for political action is indispensable for engaged contemplatives. Of course, the success of actions taken for the common good is important, but so too is the care of one's own soul in the midst of it all. If I wish to work for a more ecologically sustainable and just world, I must canvass my interior motivations to ensure that I am guided by love and compassion rather than by unhealthy pride, anger or resentment. Moreover, I must be prepared to live with the changes that are required of me as an individual to sustain the transformation that I advocate. I must bear witness to change and the implications of the advocated change within my own life.

The advice to pay attention to consolation during times of desolation and to desolation in times of consolation can help to establish a better balance in my practice of engaged contemplation. There is a special need to help young people, who are gifted with idealism, to accept defeat and failure as they seek to advance the causes of justice, peace and sustainability. Knowing how to embrace our limitations, our failures and our misjudgments can help us to grow in humility, detachment and enlightenment. Without this knowledge there is a danger of idealism turning to bitterness and cynicism.

Over the years I have led a number of three-day and one-day Inner City Retreats, during which students take part in engaged learning activities while working with skilled and experienced professionals as well as the clients of social services. Integrated throughout the retreat are moments of personal and group reflection and times for meditation and prayer. These experiential learning retreats help students to develop a greater understanding of the complexity of most social issues and the vested interests of those involved. They are also encouraged to develop ways of appealing to the good in others rather than the qualities they lack. Most people are willing and able to move towards the common good if they are encouraged and given practical ways of doing so. My own experience has been that teaching the discernment of spirits can best take place during the debriefing sessions when we reflect upon the social, political or ecological problems uncovered during the retreat.

Moreover, during times of prayerful reflection while on these engaged retreats we are able to do an internal inventory of our emotions about social engagement and motivations for being involved. The altruistic desire to help others is the seed of a spirituality that needs to be nurtured. I use examples from the lives of historical and contemporary models of justice (such as Romero, Gandhi or Martin Luther King) to demonstrate that all those who have sought to bring about justice and peace have faced times of failure, disappointment and setback. They have all experienced moments of desolation and have needed to be consoled. Sometimes this consolation has come through the encouraging word of others, through prayer, or from a quiet place in the soul of a person where God speaks. My examples are grounded people who can celebrate their victories and accomplishments but who do not rely too much on these things, because they have also known failure and desolation. Beyond their experiences of success or failure lies their awareness of the 'hidden ground of love', a grace that sustains them throughout their entire life.

The Value of Engaged Contemplation for Education

Creating the context for students to learn about engaged contemplation requires the support of educational institutions and their administrators, trustees and clergy because very often students' critical spiritual engagement can raise uncomfortable questions for the

education system itself. To what extent, for example, does the system socialise students to accept the culture they live in rather than transform it? To what extent does the education they are offered make room for spiritual meaning and motivations alongside the pragmatic concerns of skill development and career preparation? Of particular concern for some religious educators is the fact that the way of engaged contemplation can expose injustices within a student's faith tradition, as well as ways in which religious and secular institutions sometimes collude in maintaining unjust structures. Uncomfortable questions such as these are easier to handle if the institution's decision-makers and budget controllers are favourable towards curricula and programmes that encourage students to bring their spirituality into dialogue with the social and political questions of our time.

There is much that is excellent in the Western secular system of education. It teaches students regardless of economic, cultural, linguistic, racial and religious differences. It promotes the civic values of democracy, equality, freedom and social justice, each of which contributes to the common good of society. Students in state schools are exposed to an ethos of citizenship and global solidarity. Yet Western education, with its fixation on rational and technical knowledge, has in many ways lost its grounding in the holistic understanding of what it means to be human. At its worst, it can seem to do little more than

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prepare students to become consumers and producers within the global capitalist system, without paying attention to issues that are crucial to the common good such as justice, peace and sustainable ecology.

The nascent movement within secular education towards contemplative pedagogies offers the hope that that this loss of grounding can be mitigated and corrected. As this movement grows and expands, from theory to classroom practice, from the kindergarten to the university, from teacher training to student learning, we can hope that it will help to foster a new generation of global citizens capable of engaging the world with some degree of spiritual depth. The insights drawn from different spiritual practices from around the world are invaluable to this project. In particular, St Ignatius' ideas about living the contemplative life in the midst of action can make a substantive contribution to the way of engaged contemplation. It is vital for education today that the dialogue between religious and secular educators pursuing engaged contemplation should continue, simply because the emerging generation is in need of sound spiritual practices that will prepare them for the future.

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