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SPIRITUALITY: AN APPROACH TO FREEDOM AND DEMOCRACY

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Since learning has often more to do with identification rather than with a simple transfer of information, I believe that teaching demands not only that one knows theoretically what the subject is about, but also that one intends to live up to what is being taught. This is especially the case in all teachings of social competence, as in the fields of human rights and peace education. In the following paper I would like to discuss this with a focus on spirituality, hence presuming that spirituality is a neglected factor in our Western culture in the field of human rights education and peace and democracy pedagogy. Furthermore I will establish a link between spirituality and freedom. I want to reflect on the idea and concept of freedom, asking whether a specific concept of freedom could be related to spirituality as its basic source.

I would like to start with an attempt to gain greater clarity about the term 'spirituality'. For my understanding and experience spirituality describes the moments of rich in awareness, fused with knowledge and confidence, when one arrives at the direct and intimate consciousness of unity and wholeness. Spirituality does not mean believing something. It is not dependent on religion as defined by churches or other institutions. Spirituality is an inward power, an unfailing energy which has its own criterion of certitude in itself. Spirituality is concerned with values that engage with reality, it strives for unity and wholeness and connects life on the outside and life on the inside. Rufus Jones (1863-1948), a Quaker, a professor of philosophy at Haverford College, Pennsylvania, who was a pioneer in the English-speaking world in the study of

mysticism, described beautifully what he had encountered as spiritual energies in daily life.¹

Far from dulling us into sentimental acceptance, spirituality offers a kind of awakening. One of the things we are likely to recognise in an awakened state is that the outside and the inside of life cannot be separated in any convenient way. When we spend time in stillness, listening to our inner deeper knowledge, pulling ourselves away from the business of daily existence, we are making room for much more than daily existence – we make room for our own spirituality. That is why withdrawing from hectic life speeding through tasks is never a luxury, never a waste of time. Listening to the deep inside knowledge is some of the best that we can give ourselves, and any time we spend accordingly reinforces a sense of life's deeper meaning.

Now it seems to be necessary to clarify the idea of wholeness. Our normal way of understanding wholeness tends to deceive us, leading us to think of wholes as made up of many parts, the way a house is made up of walls and a roof and an interior space. This way of thinking originates in the fact that our lives are dominated by things and machines. Things and machines work as an effective assemblage of parts. However, living systems are different. They are continually growing and changing and creating themselves.

How has our normal way of understanding developed into losing the idea of an inseparable wholeness? The basic problem is “fragmentation”. This is a way of thinking that creates divisions in order to avoid the incomprehensible whole. It was developed as a mechanism to attain security amidst the escalation of modern sciences, but has become the hidden source of the social, political and environmental crisis facing the world. The problem is the loss of a balance for valuing what can be separated and what cannot. When the whole of creation and humanity is at the service of producing things, we risk seeing our purpose only in human terms: What we want and how to ‘make things better’ for us with the help of ‘things’. The necessary insight that should penetrate our innermost understanding is that relations are more fundamental than things. Spirituality is an energy that expands intelligence, because it connects us, strengthens the understanding of wholeness and hence makes us aware of all creation's inseparable relations.

Being a mental status, it is not possible to measure spirituality. And since quantitative measurement has become a cornerstone of Western thinking and understanding, sensations which are obstinate to being measured have been classified as less important. Framing the world into numbers and categories is a well functioning method against fear or anxiety. At best we become better at separating, categorizing and counting. We remain “secure” in the cocoon of our own worldview. A new way of thinking, seeing freshly, integrating inner work and overcoming separations is urgently required. Challenging inputs for this new kind of perceptions are described in “Presence”,

¹ Rufus M. Jones, *Spiritual Energies in Daily Life* (New York: Macmillan, 1924).

a book written by Peter Senge et al., - for me this is a very important book on the necessity of change.

Results of many emerging studies suggest a level of interdependence between thought and reality that defies our conventional worldview. In these studies the capacity of experiencing the power of thoughts and feelings grows, proving again and again that mind and world are not separate, they are aspects of the same underlying field.²

When anxiety and fear dominate our minds and thinking, reality proves us right and we continue to sacrifice at the altar of security.

We have to acknowledge that the immeasurable if chimerical longing for security is a mental model which originates from the assumption that we, as human beings, are the crowning of evolution and God's image, while the whole creation around us is nothing more than our natural resources that exist and were given to mankind solely for us to use. The assumption of this basic separatedness has become so deep, so utterly self-evident, that we have, at least in our rational thinking, lost the capacity of experiencing us as a part of the whole. The lonely position of being separate, being more valuable produces a dark abyss of fear.

As long as we fear we will invent more and more methods of separation. It needs courage to see freshly, to overcome separations and to integrate into the process of the greater whole of creation. Spirituality can be the bridge to overcome the abyss of fear. Since spirituality, compared to rational thinking, originates in a different level of awareness, it allows the mind to re-enter memories of mankind, arising from a deeper knowledge of interdependence of all with everything. At these moments we are aware of the dynamic between conserving essential features of our existence, and also seeking to evolve and grow, thus overcoming the framing borders of the status quo. At these moments we are able to see with the eyes of the soul and to listen with an open heart, becoming aware of what is emerging, letting go and letting come.

In spiritual moments the capacity to envision that which is not is in its most transformative and revelatory ability. It is the fount of invention and innovation, the power that enables us to empathize with all of the creation, whose experiences we have never shared. This is, I presume, where imagination and creativity are born. This is where a new understanding of peace can grow. Peace, not as the opposite of violence and war but as the "beyond".

We all possess some kind or other of creative energy, which opens the door to a sensual understanding and to a listening, which is not focusing on any given objective. Had Mother Theresa been asked what she was thinking while praying to God, she may have responded: "I am listening to God". And if we wanted to learn what God was saying to her, in all likelihood she would have answered: "He is listening too". To reach such openness requires, of course, some practice. True spiritual awareness cannot be switched

²Peter Senge, Otto Scharmer, Joseph Jaworski and Betty Sue Flowers, *Presence, Human Purpose and the Field of the Future* (London, UK: Doubleday, 2005).

on like canned energy. In its innermost experience, I think that this spiritual experience of wholeness is an equivalent of freedom: the freedom of being which exists only in relation to the other. May I name this freedom peace?

Here it becomes necessary to discuss the contemporary concepts of freedom. In my understanding I feel close to the philosophical definition and ethical concept of Emmanuel Lèvinas.³

Historically our concept of freedom refers to the beginning of modern science and the revolutionary idea of freedom of thought, or “cogito”. Cogito was the main dignity of freedom, from Descartes to Husserl, from Kant to Sartre. Immanuel Kant’s philosophy defined this idea of freedom into the “project of modernism”. For Kant the sovereignty of reason and the moral law were the fields of individual freedom. The individual is defined by the law, and its freedom emerges from the correspondence between free will and reason.⁴

Theodor W. Adorno’s critical further development of the idea of freedom focuses on social conditions. Since he defines moral as dependent on social conditions, freedom is never independent of social development. Adorno challenges Kant’s abstract idea of morality and defines Kant’s concept of will as a kind of “moral narcissism”. His criticism of Kant’s idea of freedom is a criticism *for* freedom, a freedom which, as he sees it, has been never realized yet and will only be realizable after the end of capitalism.⁵

Emmanuel Lèvinas, on the other hand, questions all existing definitions of freedom, and his criticism is that they miss the main point, which is ethical responsibility. Lèvinas’ radical criticism of freedom has its origin in his definition of ethics, which demands the search of “*the other*”. Beyond the concept of freedom for the individual lies the responsibility for *the other*, a responsibility without reciprocity. This is the centre and the origin of freedom in Lèvinas’ definition: the responsibility for *the other*, which solely constitutes the subject.⁶

When I recall what I described as the level of awareness in spirituality and the possibility of opening towards the perception of the larger whole, Lèvinas’ concept of responsibility becomes obvious. Any evidence of the being depends on a reference to the other, which comes prior to becoming a subject. As a consequence, thought and speech can only follow *after* referring to the other, just as thinking and speaking are bethinking of the desire for the other. This is the true origin of freedom.

³ Emmanuel Lèvinas, *Jenseits des Seins oder anders als Sein geschieht* (Freiburg, Germany: Alber, 1998).

⁴ Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft* (Hamburg, Germany: Meiner 1952).

⁵ Theodor W. Adorno, *Probleme der Moralphilosophie* (Frankfurt/Main, Germany: Fischer 1996). Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (New York: Seabury Press, 1973).

⁶ Emmanuel Lèvinas, *Jenseits des Seins oder anders als Sein geschieht*.

Lèvinas criticizes the existing definitions of freedom as expressions of a certain way of thinking, which leads and lead us to fascism. He unmasks the totalitarian power of reason, of commands and announcements coming from the centre and vindicating truth. Lèvinas' thinking arises from the edges and finds its words beyond conscious reasoning. It insists on ethics as the only means to answer the questions about *the other*.

Returning to the initial thesis of this paper, I want to emphasize the importance of spirituality in human rights and peace pedagogy. I assume that the critical view towards churches and religion, and the growing refusal to submit to questionable sermons, may erroneously lead to a general loss of spiritual practice. Especially so in the scientific world, where spirituality has become suspicious, leaving reason far behind and opening up to another light rather than the one of enlightenment.

Nevertheless, if we search for change, considering that crisis means opportunity, I do recommend to introduce the search for spirituality into the fields of "Human Rights learning as Peace Education". My hope for our process at the IIPE 2009 "Pursuing Democracy in a Time of Crisis" is we will promote actions which will then become part of alternative futures. I believe we should emphasize democracy (besides political theories and structural analysis) as an inward-bound journey, seeing with the heart, overcoming separations and connecting to what emerges from the inner primary knowledge. We should encourage the discovery of spirituality as a thoroughly and radically different concept for becoming democratic subjects. And, as I stated at the beginning, teaching demands that we live up to what we teach.

Post scriptum: One morning, as we were working on the development of questions after the presentations, our small group formed a question which I want to cite: "Given the existence of systems of control, should authentic freedom be a concern, a subject to peace education?" It came to me a bit later to see, what a wonderful deep question we had produced. May I add the thought, that – given the existence of systems of control - it might be too late to make 'authentic freedom' a concern of peace education?

My workshop at the IIPE

When I proposed a workshop at the IIPE, I knew that this would not be about giving a lecture on my ideas or readings. Therefore I prepared a hand out with a short explanation about a special way of communication, which I wanted to suggest as a reflection upon the connection between spirituality and democracy. For the discourse I promoted the format "dialogue" as a form of creative communication which emphasizes careful listening and leaving a pause after each given statement, as to let the information arrive fully at the listener. This way of talking also asks not to focus on one's own remarks while someone is speaking, but to really open up to the speaker.

It might sound quite simple to communicate in this way, but unfortunately it is not so. On the contrary, listening without at the same time designing one's own statement is not at all the general format of discourse. It is the traditional form of communication in Quaker meetings, where the decision making process emphasizes listening to what is being said and also to an inner voice, which should not be the voice of the ego. Quaker

decision meetings always need a common assent, hopefully following a higher knowledge than human ratio. This format has lately become a highly recommended so called “dialogue” format for discussions, especially in relation to conflicts.

I prepared some questions which followed Linda Seger’s “questions to reflect” out of her last book on spirituality. Linda Seger is a Quaker whose work is an attempt to bridge the gap between the spiritual and the professional aspects of life.

For the second part of my workshop I prepared some art supplies, suggesting that after the discourse we could transform our understanding into collages. Often my own approach to gain understanding aims to transform the objective into a creative activity, like music, painting, writing, dancing. It seems to me that this leads to “active conception”, an understanding of the necessary input of emotions, sensual energy and intellect. And besides, creative handling of conflicts is fundamental to both peace education and human rights learning.

Workshop Hand Out (August 2009):

Future thinking in times of crisis - times of opportunity

We'll discuss and question connections between spirituality and democracy; - working in the format of dialogue as a form of creative communication, - also producing collages; - addressing deeper levels of learning, which create increasing awareness of the larger whole and options for actions that become part of alternative futures; - emphasizing democracy as inward bound journey, overcoming separations, connecting to what emerges from inner primary knowledge.

One basic problem is "fragmentation". This thinking creates divisions, avoiding the incomprehensible whole. As main step into modern sciences, attaining security, it has now become a source of the crisis facing the world.

Spirituality as empowerment, from the viewpoint of democracy could be called: seeing with the heart. What constitutes a true spiritual path?

Questions to consider:

Have you experienced a call or leading to your work?

Who has supported you or helped you?

Have there been adversaries? How have you overcome them?

Has it been difficult (or is it still?) to continue, to maintain?

Have you ever thought that the results of your activities were not the results that were most important spiritually?

What would you consider as the difference between competitive thinking and collaborative thinking?

What are the negatives you have had to confront in your work? What is their source?

Have you ever felt being blessed? Have you ever blessed others?

Let us create collages which visualize what we desire in our lives. In this exercise we should produce affirmations about what we really want, true representations of our real goals.

We could deepen our understanding of this reality by asking "Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?"

90 minutes is a rather short time span for what was to be introduced and developed, moreover since my workshop was scheduled for the last afternoon after a long and inspiring week, the limiting enthusiasm for punctuality shortened quite some of the available time. Nevertheless, the participants contributed from their point of view to the given introduction. The understanding of the connection between spirituality and democracy developed, even if at the beginning these two notions seemed to have nothing to do with each other.

In the second part of the workshop, when we were painting and producing collages, we tried to transform our understanding of the subject into the creative process. I attach herewith the photo of a painting one of the participants. He drew a river with lots of colored fishes swimming in the water. He wrote: "Spirituality is the river where we take what we need. Democracy and spirituality are like fishes in the river".

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