

## Book Review of: *The Soul of Education* written by Rachael Kessler

The consciousness of our children depends immeasurably on the way we educate them. The absence of connection to the mystery, to essence, remains the most glaring defect in education. This relationship to the whole self is intrinsic to education (at its best) and is a way to allow children to experience health and well-being. Nothing could be more important for the education of the child in this day and age. It is Rachael Kessler's eloquent exposition of how this essential educational concern has been approached by her and by others that makes *The Soul of Education*, her book, so important for anyone interested in education. Kessler shows us that an education which moves away from a compartmentalized reductionism approach and towards one that honors the whole human being necessarily includes the mystery that lies within us all.

*The Soul of Education* is a great contribution to helping teachers begin to unlock the mystery that lies within each child. By offering a tenable curriculum that is possible, promising and practical, this book provides many tried and tested ideas, as well as written accounts in the words of students, as to how educators can approach this enormous question of bringing inspiration and "soul" into the classroom. Especially enjoyable are the sections in which students themselves speak of the importance that meaning, purpose and connection have had for them in combination with creative expression and moments of joy and transcendence.

Kessler embraces a shift in the emphasis of education from the punishing of dysfunctional behaviors—which manifest from the exigencies of psychological and emotional wounding—to the satisfying of students' deep inner needs and hunger for connection. When the needs are fulfilled, the aberrant behaviors fade away. This book is an important reminder that health and well-being are our natural birthright. When nourished, humans return to the natural flow of health and "wellness."

Without self-knowledge, we live in confusion and fear—fear of the unknown, fear of mystery and fear of death.

The definition of the word "soul" in the English language changes with the philosophy, religion, organization or persons using it. In the introduction to her book, Kessler clarifies her meaning: "I use the word *soul* in this book to call for attention in schools to the inner life; to the depth dimension of human experience; to students' longings for something more than an ordinary, material, and fragmented existence" (p. x). This definition follows her clear statement of philosophy: "The body of the child will not grow if it is not fed; the mind will not flourish unless it is stimulated and guided. And the spirit will suffer if it is not nurtured. A soulful education embraces diverse ways to satisfy the spiritual hunger of today's youth. When guided to find constructive ways to express their spiritual longings, young people can find purpose in life, do better in school, strengthen ties to family and friends, and approach adult life with vitality and vision" (ibid.)

Kessler shares with us her rich work with hundreds of teenagers. She writes, "After listening for many years to their stories, questions, and wisdom, I began to see a pattern.... As the pattern became clearer, a map emerged. I found seven gateways to their souls, each gateway representing a set of key experiences embedded in their stories. Together these gateways offer both a language and a framework for developing practical teaching strategies to invite soul into the classroom" (p.15, 16).

Honoring young voices, Kessler states, is a process of creating safety. This requires great sensitivity to the needs of the teens. Kessler recognizes teens need to self-govern and so she encourages teachers to allow them to design their own safe space ("ground rules"). She knows how difficult it is for them to trust themselves and one another and so she

suggests that games and/or symbolic expression are used initially. Then, in a gracious act that truly honors students, Kessler turns the direction of the spiritual dialogue over to them.

To accomplish this, Kessler uses the Council Process, a process she has used for many years and to which she has contributed significant creative impulse. Council is a modern expression of a timeless Native American tradition and for many years Kessler has successfully found ways to make it relevant to modern students. In council, a “smooth stone is passed from speaker to speaker to designate who has the right to speak.... [As a way to honor everyone’s voice, this process] protects each speaker from interruption” (p.14).

With safety established, children are able to speak on topics that have arisen out of their own questioning. Powerful, meaningful questions arise. Here’s a very brief sampling: “Why do I feel so alone? How do people who love you, hurt you? Why? Why have we hurt the Earth? Is there a God? Where do we go when we die? How did life begin? How can I create the peace within me that will create peace in the Universe?”

Clearly Kessler cares about her students, and this caring may be the most important factor in creating the requisite safety. She enjoins teachers to reach into their own caring capacities. She reminds them that they need silence too. She talks of the risks and opportunities there are for teachers to engage in their own self-discovery. She even goes so far as to say that teachers not only have to self discover, they have to have a collegial atmosphere that allows for the sharing of their insights.

Perhaps what is most exciting is that Kessler has a wonderfully broad perspective on the factors needed to bring spirituality into the classroom. Having seen to the safety and support of her students and teachers, Kessler directs us to the core of her inquiry: “The Seven Gateways to the Soul in Education.” They are:

1. The yearning for deep connection
2. The longing for silence and solitude

3. The search for meaning and purpose
4. The hunger for joy and delight
5. The creative drive
6. The urge for transcendence
7. The need for Initiation

In the next seven chapters, Kessler, with a great deal of care, communicates to the reader exactly what she means by each of these “Seven Gateways.” Laced throughout these chapters are stories of children’s experiences told in their own words, stories that illustrate Kessler’s points while always respecting the privacy of the students. While it is tempting to delineate what Kessler means by each of these I feel that right belongs to her and to you as you read the book. The names of the Gateways themselves—connection, silence, meaning, joy, creativity, transcendence and initiation—invite us into the children’s lives, into Kessler’s insights and into our own self-discovery. It is beyond the work of a reviewer to prejudice that with her extrapolations and interpretations.

At EnCompass, a non-profit organization dedicated to conscious relationships with children in the context of family and community, I have facilitated man programs for children, adults, and for whole families together. I am also a student of spirituality and spiritual literature. Therefore, given my work and interests, I find it refreshing that Kessler relies on her own inquiries with students. *The Soul of Education* would not have the ring of authenticity that it does were it to depend on theory or scripture. Thus the value of this book reaches beyond the classroom teacher for whom it is primarily intended. Anyone who has teenagers in her or his life in any capacity, be it as a parent, youth group facilitator, or simply a neighbor will find this book inspiring and useful.

This is not to say that Kessler has written some kind of manual. Even with this book, it will be difficult for adults who have not met the nurturing of their own deep inner or spiritual needs for silence, inspiration and transcendence to guide a youth through a land they themselves have never walked.

Moreover, Kessler writes, “If, as teachers, we do not have the support or guidance (in our own lives) to uncover what lies in our own shadows, we may hurt ourselves or our students. When we uncover what we too have disowned, we become much safer, more responsible teachers. What we do not see in ourselves we may project onto our students and colleagues.... What we suppress from our own awareness may erupt in ways that are often out of our control” (p.83).

Kessler has other words of caution which should not be underestimated. Diving deep into the heart of youth, we may inadvertently unleash a Pandora’s box of pain, sorrow, loneliness, deep anguish or abuse. Without experience or training, the unskilled person would be faced immediately with his or her own shortcomings as well as potentially embarrassing or hurting the student. With the words of Lisa Lopez Levers, chair of the counseling and human development program at the University of Rochester’s School of Education, Kessler offers the teacher/reader guidance on how to handle such pain and sorrow: “The teacher’s job is to listen, be nonjudgmental, acknowledge that this is a really big problem, and have the pragmatic conversation: ‘Who do we need to talk to next?’” (p.111). In short, get help!

Kessler shows us that the thirst for transcendence or going beyond the limits of the known is present in every teenager. Transcendence offers the individual a new way of *seeing* which dawns from within. Young people are curious about but vulnerable in regard to these things: “If we do not guide young people into this domain, *they will go there without us* – and many lose their way” (p.134; author’s italics). The urge for transcendence is recognized throughout holistic education. Our approach to whole-child development, Natural Learning Rhythms, points to the wisdom that is guiding each developmental stage. EnCompass is dedicated, in all of its programs to honoring the transcendent in children, to “going there with them” as Racheal Kessler might say.

To understand the importance of transcendence for all humanity, consider the

piercing question posed to us by Carl Rogers: “How does it happen that the deeper we go into ourselves as particular and unique, seeking for our own individual identity, the more we find the whole human species?”<sup>1</sup> The importance for each child to find this meaning and purpose in her or his own life goes beyond words. Perhaps we can understand how terrible the lack of appreciation for meaning and purpose is when we recall that we often drug our children who don’t fit into the conventional definitions of how they should behave. Perhaps, instead, we should attempt to understand their motivation, and consider what it might be like if we provided opportunities for their self-discovery, of meaning and purpose in their lives.

Carl Jung also spoke at length about the need of the human child to “individuate,” a term he used in a way similar to Maslow’s use of the term “self-actualization.” In an interview, Jung pointed to social pressures which make people “stupider and more suggestible” and which work against individuation. When asked how this unfortunate gullibility could be cured, Jung responded that part of the solution lay in developing “education for fuller consciousness.”<sup>2</sup> In whole-child development, we would say, education of the whole human being is inclusive of his/her wisdom nature. Racheal Kessler’s book is a beautiful contribution to a curricular approach that addresses these fundamental issues. Kessler offers us a rich array of experiences that feed the deep inner and spiritual nature, a nature we might call “soul.”

Kessler, R. (2000). *The soul of education: Helping students find connection, compassion, and character at school*. Alexandria: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

---

<sup>1</sup> Rogers, C. R. (1983). *Freedom to learn for the 80's*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company.

<sup>2</sup> Jung, C. G. (1977). *The collected works of C. G. Jung (R.F.C. Hull, Trans)*. (Vol. 17). London, UK: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

**Josette Luvmour, PhD** has a private Personal and Family Consulting practice. She also serves in the non-profit sector at EnCompass Institute as Director of Family and Professional Development. EnCompass a center designed to support the family well-being through an array of integrated programs. She is an author, personal consultant and seminar leader specializing in human development, sustainable family relationships, adult development in a family context, supporting optimal well-being in each family member, and holistic education.

Together with her husband, Ba, Josette created and developed Natural Learning Rhythms™ - a whole-child understanding of child development that supports optimal well-being in children. Josette has worked with families, educators, therapists and schools on all facets of relationships with children using Natural Learning Rhythms™ for over twenty-five years. They each are available for public speaking engagements and conferences.