Learning to Surrender:
Accessing the Meaning in Education

By Estella Gutierrez-Zamano

It has been a mere two weeks since I completed my final dissertation defense, and during this small window of time, I have reflected on my graduate school experience in relation to the larger objectives of graduate education. On a basic level, graduate school prepares individuals for specialized vocational pursuits, greater workplace autonomy, and enhanced financial compensation. I think most graduate educators would add to this list, an enhanced commitment to professionalism, an interest in advancing human welfare, and the drive to move entire sectors of employment forward. In my first graduate school experience in a master's program, I honed in on two of these objectives, namely to master statistical methodologies and move further along my employer's salary schedule. At the time I had very narrow, pragmatic interests and thought of nothing else except learning how to perform analyses and interpret stacks of numerical data. Unfortunately, this was my frame of mind when I started my doctoral studies, but my mindset changed. The change was profound and made my experiences as a doctoral student quite different from what I experienced as a master's student. In fact, my doctoral journey has been a time of meaning making and intense introspection perhaps, in part, because my previous educational experiences were so benign and utilitarian. This time around, I have had an opportunity to examine formally the role of meaning making and spirituality within higher education. As it turns out, my interests coincided with those of my advisor, who also had an interest in systematically exploring students' personal and spiritual growth during the college years. As a consequence of this collaboration, I was charged with the task of surveying the existing literature on spirituality and education. That was more than two years ago.

One of my early reading assignments was Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist*, a story of a young shepherd who leaves a safe, but pedantic existence, to satiate his curiosities about the world and fulfill his deep yearning for a meaningful, committed life. I enjoyed the book, but I concealed the cover illustration and read it in snatches of time alone. I shamefacedly have to admit that I did not start my review of the literature on spirituality and education

without a bit of anxiety and apprehension. I worried that "spirituality" was a taboo topic in educational research and wondered whether it was wise to be associated with the topic since I was trying to define my personal research agenda and carve out a niche for myself in the field of higher education. I did not want people to interpret my interest in spirituality as motivated by fanaticism or as a veiled attempt to insert faith and ritual into the academic environment. It worried me to think that I might be perceived as someone bent on undermining the right to maintain a belief system separate and distinct from one's academic life. These concerns weighed heavily on my mind.

When asked by peers and colleagues about my research, I developed an array of half-truths to distance myself from spiritual pursuits. "I'm reviewing work on affective development." "Oh, I'm looking at how college students make sense of their undergraduate experience." "I'm studying motivation. (pause) Motivation and affective development...yeah, that keeps me busy these days." I did not mention "spirituality" unless others brought it up in conversation. I also developed an array of defenses for peers and colleagues who openly questioned the import of research on spirituality and education. At times, I let the conversation die of its own accord or simply waited for the other person to change the subject. In other instances, I cited work by established authors, as if to ascribe some of their clout and credibility to my own ideas and interests.

When I started doing library research for the bibliography on spirituality and education, I was not sure of what I would find. I expected some of the work to come from theologians ruminating on the demise of faith, character, and commitment in modern times. I, who was so apprehensive about being viewed as some kind of fanatic, expected to find the same kind of fanaticism in the pages of existing articles and commentaries. It was an irony that escaped me until much later. Indeed, I found writings that lamented the state of the human condition and forecasted nihilistic visions of humanity. I also found another cluster of writings whose principal aim was to proselytize and prompt some kind of spiritual conversion in the reader. These pieces were numerous and began to merge into one long narrative. I came across books devoid of a personal tone that surveyed the history of world religion or attempted to connect socio-historical events with religious upheaval. In these analytical epics, I could hear the writers' attempts to distance themselves from other spiritual literature by adopting a secular veneer.

In surveying the fruits of my library work, I knew I lacked substantive writings on the intersection between spirituality and education. Then, on a fluke, I searched the library's catalogue by inputting the key words, "meaning" and "education." This search opened the floodgates to the various writings that were to become the basis for a bibliography on spirituality and education. Before me were numerous personal testimonials written by educators who sought to transform educational environments into places more conducive to personal reflection, well being, and a sense of community. A few empirical studies on the faith and spiritual development of college students peppered these testimonials, but, for the most part, the articles and books that I encountered were a clarion cry. They were a

call to others to heed the importance of meaning and spirituality in educational pursuits. They were admonitions to transform education from a consumer-based experience to one premised on meaning and commitment. I am not embellishing the content of these writings when I say that they read like confessionals imploring the larger community of educators to create change, and the alternating despair and promise in these confessionals resonated with me. I felt a connection to the message being conveyed about the import of personal meaning and authenticity, and thus began a personal journey of introspection that was to ground the remainder of my days as an academic apprentice.

The personal tone of many of the articles and thought pieces made it difficult to find threads of commonality. The experiences of the individual writers were so idiosyncratic that I initially struggled to look beyond the specifics of the writers' experiences and find some form of shared meaning. Fortunately, time and distance from the readings helped me to clarify three recurring themes:

- First, I learned that people often begin their spiritual journey by developing a personal definition of spirituality. The authors that I included in the bibliography tended to have very personalized definitions of spirituality. On the one hand, this isolated each author, placing him or her on a spiritual island of sorts, but it also made clear that spirituality often does begin as a lonely, individual travail. However, there was some convergence in the ideas that were shared. For instance, most writers spoke about spirituality in the context of having a life purpose and connection to other living things. I think it is safe to attribute the absence of a common definition across these works to the fact that exploration of the connection between spirituality and education is in its earliest stages. Researchers have yet to come together to build a body of work that explores spirituality and education in a systematic and concerted fashion.

- Secondly, my review of the extant literature revealed a growing desire among educators to incorporate spirituality into education through missive, curricular, and pedagogical means. Many authors shared how they personally have incorporated spirituality into their teaching practices, course content, interactions with students, and overall philosophy of education. Some authors offered practical ways to include spirituality in the classroom, while others emphasized a paradigmatic shift in what it means to be a teacher and learner.

- The third and final theme was an observation -that many authors felt compelled to defend their interest in spirituality and education. Thus, while many of the writers included in the bibliography had made an initial foray into the field of spirituality and education, they also seemed to anticipate the skepticism and open attack that comes from being a minority voice. Like Sidney's spirited defense of poetry in the 1500's, many of the writers articulated a defense of spirituality and education to circumvent nay sayers eager to dismiss the viability of these intersecting interests.

By developing a bibliography on spirituality and education, I learned about how others define spirituality, intend to foster spiritual development in educational spaces, and ultimately defend the place of spirituality in education from those who would extinguish it before it has a conceptual beginning.

My personal definition of spirituality is similar to many of the definitions that I encountered while writing the bibliography, but it also is unique to me in the sense that I use it as a filter for how to live and interact in the world. I behave in ways that I feel are consonant with how I define spirituality, but someone with a near-identical definition might perceive my behavior differently and make very different choices. For me, spirituality means being a giving person to others and myself. It means reigning in the worst aspects of myself like my vanity and pride to focus my energies on the needs of others. At times, this idea translates into the simplest thing -keeping tissue handy to offer a stranger with a cold. In other instances, it means carving out the time to talk to younger family members about the things that make them sad and disenchanted. Since my understanding of spirituality serves as my lens to the world, it also means future behaviors and perceptions that I have yet to synthesize and experience.

In one of the important reflective pieces within my bibliography called "A Vision of Education as Transformation," Parker Palmer criticizes the fact that objective experience has preempted subjective ways of knowing. He warns of the fundamental danger in trusting only objective epistemologies, the effect of which is to distance ourselves from others and what we actually experience. In essence, valuing a strictly objective paradigm means that we distrust anything and everything that is not rational or empirically knowable. I agree with Palmer that we distrust one another. Taken further, I believe that we distrust our selves, our thoughts, and our feelings, and, as a consequence, we live and die by theorems. Understanding Palmer's (2000) vision meant turning my critical abilities inward to confront the ways that I have distanced myself from others. Over the years, the certainty of objective knowledge has provided me with a false sense of security and control; in an effort to maintain these feelings, I often have insulated myself from people and interactions that threatened this certitude. On further reflection, I also think that the impulse to acquire things comes from the same desire for certainty and a sense of security. The palpability of objects, like the tangible aspects of objective knowledge, is something we experience with certainty so we desire to have more.

It has been revelatory to discover that materialism comes in many forms, some more veiled than others. Since high school, I have spent my fair share of time on a soapbox attacking vapid consumerism and the mindless accumulation of more pink and purple Gap t-shirts. However, only recently have I been totally honest with myself about my own tendency to accumulate ideas and showcase them like shiny, new adornments. So, I have spent just as much needless time acquiring, but I have acquired ideas and theories, rather than things. The truth is that I have horded knowledge and distrusted others, almost as a matter of course. I have been a card-carrying member of the academic orthodoxy known

as objectivism and like the pathetic shadow of a being called Gollum in the Lord of the Rings who relentlessly seeks the corruptible omniscience of the ring - a weak, slippery half-human figure with an unintelligible rasp- I have sought the power of heaps of credible, objective knowledge.

The turning point for me came when I started to conduct my dissertation research and really opened myself to learning about the topic of altruism. For the first time since grade school, I approached my education as a complete ingénue. I conceded to knowing little to nothing. I did not steel myself for the onslaught of information I was about to explore. I simply let myself be overwhelmed by the volumes of rich and contrary information on the subject. I really listened to my altruistic informants. I gave as much weight to their feelings as to their thoughts. I basically surrendered and let them lead me toward deeper understanding. Analyzing the countless conversations and personal artifacts from my research required all of my resources -objective and subjective. It was an undertaking that was part empirical and part spiritual. My goal was not mastery of the subject matter, as it had been so often in past academic undertakings. I just freed myself to learn about the topic at hand and generate more questions. And, I rekindled something; I fell in love with the process of learning again. Every conversation with my informants intensified my learning and complicated my understanding of their accounts of everyday altruism, but I did not wait for mastery or some definitive outcome. I just wanted to know more about human altruism in everyday contexts. The end result has been that I have a newfound curiosity about ideas, other people, and the world. I want to use my current curiosities to develop new questions, and I want to delve into learning as a process so long as I am free to end up in a generative state, rather than one where knowledge is possessed and codified into an enervated version of itself.

Some of what I learned from doing my dissertation research has special implications for inquiry and praxis relevant to spirituality and education. If education is not about mastery of complex constructs and ordering students along strict hierarchies of native intelligence and ability, then what is its purpose? What ideas and principles should guide it? I surrendered to the dissertation experience with a sense of wonder and complete engagement, and in doing so I learned that the acquisition of knowledge is not reprehensible in and of itself. It certainly makes the person acquiring the knowledge more proficient and edified in the company of learned others. However, I would argue that operating from this kind of paradigm -where one views knowledge as something to be acquired- serves to distance the knower from others because his or her natural predilection is to horde such knowledge and wield it in the presence of those who know less. In this respect, the learner who amasses knowledge for its own sake is no different from someone who acquires meaningless objects for the sake of having them. As such, mastery and acquisition should not be the objectives of a viable education; the real power in education lies in connecting with others and in approaching learning as an ongoing process of growth. From this perspective, the best teachers are those who encourage students to generate more

questions than with which they began. An authentic education involves being free to share what we know and conceding to what we do not know. It means according equal value to ideas in theory and practice. It means acknowledging progress but maintaining a sense of humility relative to what we know about the self, others, and the entities that constitute our environment.

This past weekend, I spent several hours in a video game arcade with fifty or so preadolescents. I have heard all of the debates about the mind-numbing violence in video games, and with all of these arguments racing through my mind, I was not optimistic about the experience. My younger sister showed me a few of her favorite games and then invited me to play alongside her. Ever the skeptic, I insisted on playing one game and needing only a few quarters. I thought I would have a complete cognitive breakdown after an hour in the arcade, but the experience displaced most of my preconceptions. Yes, the majority of the games were violent and involved harming or maiming a stronger, hungrier predator. However, young people tended to congregate around games premised on ordinary musical and athletic pursuits.

Immense variety characterized a third of the games in the arcade. For instance, there was a machine that tested the gamer's ability to follow an intricate pattern of dance steps. Another popular machine tested the player's ability to recreate a piece of music from memory either on a string or percussion instrument. Then, there were several popular "virtual" games that called for shooting basketballs into a hoop, skiing down difficult mountain slopes, and navigating a raft through a tempestuous river. I also played a game that involved landing on a small stretch of land by manipulating the "virtual" cords of a parachute. It was surprising to me how challenging and interesting some of the games were because I had forsworn this arcade and arcades in general before ever venturing into one. I claimed to have special knowledge of all of the vices to be found in an arcade without ever having set foot into a gaming facility. In short, before that visit, I thought I knew all I needed to know about arcades and the insolent youth that frequented them.

While all of this was flooding my mind, I heard two young men talking about their increased competence at playing one of the games. One of the young men excitedly shared, "Wow! By the end of this year, you'll be the number one player on the board. Your initials will be on the top right there. You'll know all the codes and know exactly which doors to enter. You'll know everything." To this, his friend responded, "I hope I get better, but I hope I never know everything because I really like playing this game." I believe the expression is "from the mouths of babes," and there you have it, profound words from an unexpected source. The boy was hinting at his enjoyment of the process. He liked learning about the nuances of the game and hoped never to exhaust his feelings of curiosity and uncertainty. As educators and participants within educational institutions, we, too, should hope to never lose this sense of wonder, trust in ourselves, and trust in others, and above all else, we should encourage this same perspective in students and subsequent generations of educators.

The boy in the arcade reminded me of Paolo Coelho's naÏve, but well-meaning, protagonist in *The Alchemist*. The imaginative power of Coelho's spiritual allegory comes from his traveling shepherd's complete uncertainty and trust. Coelho uses metaphor to praise the merits of an epistemology in which the journey to understand never ceases. Indeed, in Coelho's tale, the complications of life, meaning, and purpose constitute a vibrant, ever-challenging alchemy for the human mind and spirit. It is an alchemy we should seek to foster in education and in any context that involves connection and vulnerability in the company of others, including the home and workplace. Schools should be spaces where students stretch their abilities and make mistakes...countless mistakes. We wonder why it is that students are so afraid to learn what is foreign and unfamiliar to them. I think it has much to do with our undue emphasis on mastery, certainty, and objective knowledge. Remember the stigma of being undeclared during the college years? It still exists. *You mean you don't already know what you want to do with your entire life?* It should be no surprise then that in our rush to know -and more importantly, know with certainty- we have developed a reluctance to explore and really confront the deepest aspects of our meaning and purpose. Granted, it is important to be trained for employment and financial self-sufficiency, but it is also important to live a life of import. It is critical to live a life that trusts subjectivity, feeling, and intuition and that takes comfort in process and uncertainty. This is where the dissertation process led me...toward a life steeped in precarious knowing, doing, and being. It is a life focused on self-awareness and the welfare of others. It is a life that I am proud to call entirely my own, but it is a life dispossessed because I want not mastery or things; I simply want to live and learn...and share the fruits of both with others. To the journey, I say, and to yours.

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