

Why Spirituality? Lessons that Educators Can Take from an Artist

By Julie J. Park

As a graduate student researcher on the Spirituality in Higher Education project, I get caught up in the day to day of our work: churning out the latest draft of the survey, recruiting institutions for data collection, and editing yet another IRB application. Yet when the question is posed to the project about what distinguishes spirituality from some of the other “it” topics of higher education—authenticity, meaning and purpose, active scholarship—I have to pause and wonder, what is it about “the S word” that makes it so important to tackle head on?

It was with that same question that I opened up Wassily Kandinsky’s *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* to see how someone from another field and time was defining and wrestling with spirituality. I was intrigued to find out that Kandinsky, a seminal modernist and among the first of abstract painters, was not a religious man in the traditional sense. Raised in an Orthodox Christian tradition, a key influence apparent in the religious imagery invoked in his work, he later became an ardent proponent of Theosophy, which contends that all religions contain a portion of the truth. Kandinsky did not start out as an artist, but left a career in law and economics to go to art school in his early 30s, suggesting some vocational soul searching.

Like educators, Kandinsky addressed issues of meaning and purpose, quoting Schumann: “What is the message of the competent artist? ‘To send light into the darkness of men’s hearts—such is the duty of the artist.’” He went deeper, arguing against a focus on the external and material:

To harmonize the whole is the task of art. With cold eyes and indifferent mind the spectators regard the work. Connoisseurs admire the ‘skill’ (as one admires a tight-rope walker), enjoy the ‘quality of painting’ (as one enjoys a pasty). But hungry souls go hungry away.... This condition of art is called ‘art for art’s sake.’ This neglect of inner meanings, which is the life of colours, this vain squandering of artistic power is called ‘art for art’s sake.’

Substitute “education” or “knowledge” for “art” in this commentary and one might almost have a 21st century-appropriate argument against an educational climate that focuses more on standardized test results than a commitment to learning that feeds the mind and soul. Certainly there is an excitement and purpose to inquiry for the sake of inquiry, but there is a deeper satisfaction that comes from a more holistic ownership of knowledge. When work becomes vocation, when memorizing begets learning, and application leads to social change—these are the moments that feed a hungry soul.

Still, what was it about spirituality in particular that was meaningful for Kandinsky? Besides a strong distaste for traditional organized religions of the day, Kandinsky spoke to an “internal necessity” of artists operating within the “spiritual life.” He used the triangle as a metaphor for the “life of the spirit,” representing a journey to the peak that fewer and fewer people are able to reach. He posited that artists were stationed along each portion of the triangle, and it was their job to guide people to a higher level of understanding: “Each one of them who can see beyond the limits of his segment is a prophet to those about him, and helps the advance of the obstinate whole.” Thus, the understanding between the painter, his or her art, and the viewer becomes a spiritual connection in which the art is a conduit to the artist’s inner life and intention.

When one visualizes Kandinsky’s art, the bright lines, colors, and shapes splashed across the canvas in abstraction, overt spirituality does not necessarily come to mind. It is not Madonna and Child; it is not even recognizable in the traditional, representational sense. Regarding Kandinsky’s work, painter Diego Rivera stated:

A painting by Kandinsky gives no image of earthly life - it is life itself. If one painter deserves the name ‘creator’, it is he. He organizes matter as matter was organized, otherwise the Universe would not exist. He opened a window to look inside the All. (qtd. in Overy, 1969)

With his work, Kandinsky pulls us in to walk up the triangle with him, to understand the universe as he sees and portrays it.

Parallels to education certainly exist, in which the teacher acts as a guide to help his or her students come to a higher level of self-realization. More than the “banking” technique that Paulo Freire used to describe how students are seen as vessels in which to mechanically deposit knowledge and facts, the teacher seeks to help the student not only master knowledge, but also come to recognize, understand, and appreciate his or her own potential. Certainly developing this sense of empowerment among students is dependent on the tools that the higher education offers in terms of meaning and purpose. However, using the term spirituality opens up a discussion of the inner life, the educator’s own “internal necessity” to pursue education as not only as a means to a job, but as a more satisfying and integrated life experience.

Another parallel exists in how both art and education serve as mediums for expressing the inner life. Director of the Spirituality in Higher Education project Jennifer Lindholm articulates:

Through their art, artists express something within themselves. Through their teaching, spiritually-inclined faculty do the same, sharing who they are and what they know (and don't know). In doing so, they help people (i.e. students) move to a higher level of understanding of self, others, and content.

Just as art is not only isolated to the final product on canvas, but includes the process, the motives and the impulses of the artist, the holistic educator seeks to help students understand how their personal experiences influence their interpretation of the day's lesson. By sharing their own journeys with students, faculty can help students "up the triangle" by sharing their own motivations and passions behind commitments to teaching, research, and service. One's story does not need to be divorced from the text; in fact, it can even enhance the process of understanding the text. It takes a certain amount of vulnerability to take these steps. The classroom should not appropriately turn into a therapy session for teacher or student. Rather, the goal is to create a learning environment that fosters the development of the whole student, and in turn allows faculty to bring forth something of their inner selves into the classroom.

Concepts such as "holistic," "whole student," and "passion" are not new to education and pedagogy. A focus on spirituality in education is certainly inclusive of all of them, and yet it connotes something extra. For Kandinsky's art, spirituality was found in his discussions of inner-meaning and journeying up the triangle. As educators, we too desire to avoid the outcome where "hungry souls go hungry away." Students come to the university with a hunger to learn, to test or reinvent themselves, to make new friendships, to discover their vocation, and to develop a sense of meaning and purpose. There is certainly no one correct way to meet these needs, but exploring the role that spirituality plays in their lives can hopefully bring us closer to understanding how colleges and universities can better nurture and satisfy mind, soul, and body.

Kandinsky, W. (1914). Concerning the Spiritual in Art.

Overy, P. (1969). Kandinsky: The Language of the Eye. London: Elek.

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