

## VALUES IN HOLISTIC EDUCATION

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The holistic education movement does not have a single source, a predominant proponent, or a major form or expression. Consequently, it is difficult to define 'holistic education'. However, there are a number of values and perceptions that most schools claiming to be holistic would embrace, and today I would like to mention some of these values and look especially at what gave rise to their popularity. I feel that what gave rise to their popularity is particularly important because it is a combination of new perceptions and values which seems to be something like an international grass roots movement - a movement which rejects many of the authorities as well as the values and perceptions of the immediate past. 'Whose Values?' for holistic education, is a particularly relevant question.

Today I will put forward the view of many holistic educators: that holistic education reflects and responds more fully than conventional education to a new and increasingly accepted view of what it means to be human as well as to much popular social criticism. For schools to ignore what seems to be a change in humanity's view of itself is to risk having schools that try to prepare students for something they don't believe in; it is to risk having an educational system that is felt to be meaningless by the very population it wants to serve. For schools to have values and views of human nature different to those of its population is like asking a committed pacifist to attend a military academy. We see just this kind of dissonance frequently expressed in many of our schools whose populations come largely from some minority groups. These groups feel the conventional education their children are offered does not reflect their values and it ignores their views of who they feel they are. The large number of students presently disaffected with school must challenge us as educators to reflect whether these students feel a similar dissonance with the values and perspectives our schools promote.

While some advocates claim that views central to holistic education are not new but are, in fact, timeless and found in the sense of wholeness in humanity's religious impetus; others claim inspiration from Rousseau, Emerson, Pestalozzi, Froebel, and more recently Krishnamurti, Steiner, Montessori, Jung, Maslow, Rogers, Paul Goodman, John Holt, Ivan Illich, Paulo Freire. Still others feel that the views central to holistic education are the result of a cultural 'paradigm shift' that began in the 1960's. What is clear is that the values and the vision of humanity in the holistic education movement and which it promotes are increasingly popular. There are now at least seven thousand five hundred holistic schools<sup>1</sup> with more seeming to start every week. Unfortunately, the insights of this

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<sup>1</sup> A survey of alternative schools found almost 7500 schools but this writer knows of schools that are not in that list and there are without doubt many others. Jerry Mintz (ed.), *The Handbook of Alternative Education* (New York: Macmillan, 1994).

vision are often clouded by misty-eyed New Ageism, and a great deal that is valuable is dismissed because of this association.

I will concentrate today on developments in the 1960's and 1970's that forced some of the ideas of holistic education onto centre stage because it was these developments that made the ideas so popular. The ecological crisis, the prospect of nuclear annihilation, chemical and radiation pollution, the breakdown of the family, the disappearance of traditional communities, and the disregard for traditional values and their institutions (i.e. the church), caused many people to question the direction of the modern western world and many of its central values. The consumer society was criticised in a way that seemed to be absent in the first sixty years of this century.<sup>2</sup> Even if some societies seem able to continue their consumption from a local perspective, the earth's resources were beginning to be seen as finite; and a small proportion of the world's population consuming a disproportionate percentage of the earth's resources was seen as unsustainable and destructive - and ultimately it became a moral issue.

Mechanistic utilitarian rationality (as scientific thinking was called by its critics) was acknowledged for its contribution to the creation of clever gadgets but blamed for uncontrolled economic and technical growth that seemed to swamp other human capacities. Because scientific thinking on its own lacked the non-rational (as opposed to irrational) or 'supra-rational' capacities of mind such as wisdom, intuition, appreciation for beauty and insight, it was most commonly used to create brilliant weaponry or unnecessary consumer goods. The 'supra-rational' capacities were seen as increasingly important in view of what unrestrained mechanical thought was producing. 'Small is Beautiful' by Schumacher<sup>3</sup> and the works of Wendell Berry seemed to fly in the face of convention, yet made perfect sense to hundreds of thousands.

The professional view of human nature was also changing drastically at this time. The Skinnerian view of a person as an electro-chemical stimulus-response machine (so helpful to the needs of governments during the war and so popular with those who saw conditioning of others as a solution to their own aspirations) was being rejected as only a very partial view of the mind. Behaviourism seemed more of a tool for exploiting people than for understanding them in any depth. In the wake of the many explorations into consciousness of the 1960's, Freud's very compartmentalised views of the mind lost popularity while Jung's more open ended and mysterious understandings gained support. Carl Rogers, Abraham Maslow, and R.D. Laing became almost cult figures, and several new forms of psychology emerged that took the science of mind further and further away from the strictures of conventional measurable science. Gestalt therapy with its slogan 'the whole is greater than the sum of its parts' corresponded to the everyday common sense experience that many people had of themselves. There was too much of us that seemed to be unmeasurable and non-mechanical, if not ineffable. The view of mind as

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<sup>2</sup>One commentator on the development of American culture said that 'Americans changed from wanting to do good, to wanting to do well', but this criticism could equally be levelled at many modern cultures. The great depression and the two world wars are seen as traumas that produced an extreme materialism in the survivors.

<sup>3</sup>E.F. Schumacher, *Small is Beautiful: A Study of Economics as if People Mattered* (London: Blond & Briggs, 1973).

machine, while increasingly popular as a model of some thinking, especially that involving computers,<sup>4</sup> was seen as only a part of the mind's functioning - usually the lesser part.

Traditional nationalism and localism were also being challenged, and were seen as inadequate to meet the world's realities. The ecological crisis is not a respecter of political boundaries. The greenhouse effect, the depletion of the ozone layer, air and water pollution, radiation leaks, and the elimination of species and rain forests are perhaps national or local in origin but they are global in impact. People began to see that by serving national or local interests these problems could not even be understood, much less solved. The earth had to be seen as a whole, and Lynn Margulis' and James Lovelock's 'Gaia Hypothesis' found wide and popular support.<sup>5</sup> Environmental interest went from being a gentleman-sportsman's concern for conservation (usually to maintain hunting) to a critique of modern western thinking. The epistemology which claims to understand things by breaking them into their constituent parts was seen as not only unable to meet the problem, it was part of the problem. Creating locally wanted conditions and looking only locally seemed often to produce problems elsewhere that eventually became unwanted local conditions. 'Wholism', 'whole earth ideas', 'wholefoods', and 'the whole child' described things that might not have been fully examined but which seemed to many people to make sense. People began to feel they needed to look at the global to see the local. Years after the 'Gaia Hypothesis', educators and ecologists like David Orr and Gregory Cajete suggested that seeing the interconnectedness of all things with nature as the foundation, was the basis of the new mind that the world needed for its survival, and that the creation of this mind was the first responsibility of education.<sup>6</sup>

Many people began saying that looking at 'wholes' was necessary to understand other things as well: the economy, which had become global; human interchange, where satellites and computers had made the global village a reality; and cultures, which were increasingly international. It is not without reason that some nationalities like the French speak of cultural imperialism and find difficulty in countering a movement that is literally coming at them from all directions (even if the origin seems to be Hollywood). The youth culture is global. The computer culture is global. Many modern cultural icons (such as media stars and products) are global. One doesn't need to see the six foot tall blonde fashion models in Japan, or jeans-clad Marlboro-smoking teenagers in Mongolia, or Coca Cola drinking farmer's wives in Uzbekistan to know this is true; the evidence is constantly before us. Many post-modern philosophers had been telling us we are socially constructed, but the society that was constructing us was now an international one, and many of the values that were imbedded in this construction seemed alien to the places in which they were being lived. Many cultural institutions (like schools) assumed a local culture, but the culture of the young was not local, and the conflict between the young and the institutions that claimed to exist for them was painful for everyone.

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<sup>4</sup>A fascinating study of the way in which computer use has altered the way people see themselves can be found in the book by Sherry Turkle, *The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1984).

<sup>5</sup>James Lovelock, *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979).

<sup>6</sup>David Orr, *Ecological Literacy: Education and the Transition to a Post-modern World* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992). Gregory Cajete, *Look to the Mountain: an ecology of indigenous education* (Durango, Colorado: Kivaki Press, 1994)

Looking at 'wholes' or what some scientists came to call the 'systems approach' began to be seen as necessary for understanding even traditional disciplines. Respected scientists such as David Bohm, David Peat, Karl Pribram, and Ilya Prigogine were even insisting that seeing things as systems (or 'wholes' within 'wholes') was a better way to understand their traditionally reductionist disciplines as well as most other things. They said that for the sake of convenience we can look at parts, but separate parts do not actually exist - there are no discrete bits of reality. Contrary to the way we had been thinking, we can't understand the 'more' from the 'less' - the 'more' does not derive from the 'less'. To understand anything is to understand its relationships to larger 'wholes' - the larger the 'whole' and the more extensive the relationships being understood, the truer the understanding. The extension of this thinking (and it extends by its very nature) to questions about general human existence resulted in these scholars becoming popular with readers who knew nothing of their professional disciplines. Many scientists in seeing the particulars as inseparable from the larger context also felt they could not de-contextualize themselves; they as observers could not be separated from what they observed. In this many scientists found an interest in Krishnamurti who had for years been exploring the relationship between the observer and the observed.

Books and conferences linking science with religion appeared and became popular with people who before had not been interested in either of these subjects. People were excited by the possibility that two disciplines which had held truths that seemed mutually exclusive might be converging. Whether people were correct in thinking this is another question; but people felt new understandings were being reached that went beyond the partial truths to which each discipline had previously been confined. The old dichotomies of head and heart, science and religion, beauty and function seemed to be about fragmentation and we needed to see things in larger wholes. 'Truth' needed to be unshackled from the claims of the traditional authorities. If education was to reflect this, then the traditional division between disciplines had to go, and the world needed to be understood from the largest possible wholes and not through the fragments.

The extended seeing of 'wholes' within 'wholes' brought many to a religiosity that seemed inherent in the approach, and something that many holistic educators feel is fundamental to what they do. The largest 'whole'; that which has relationships to everything; the ultimate 'more' from which all the 'less' derives was described as the absolute, the sacred or some form of ultimate order. There is remarkably little conflict amongst holistic educators on the details of this, itself an extraordinary break with tradition and something worth noting in view of the problems we have in our pluralist schools. The physicist David Bohm postulates an implicate order into which everything is enfolded and from which everything unfolds to be re-enfolded.<sup>7</sup> Many Depth Psychologists postulate a higher self which extends beyond the individual. While a few holistic educators refer to the soul or atman of traditional religions, most speak in terms of some universal order, or of common threads running through all religions, or archetypal mythologies, or what Aldous Huxley called 'the perennial philosophy'<sup>8</sup>. These timeless and perennially re-seen insights are said to have been expressed differently in different times and places and so to have given rise to the different religions. These perennial truths are felt by some to be seen in their most

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<sup>7</sup>David Bohm, *Wholeness and the Implicate Order* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980).

<sup>8</sup>Aldous Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1946).

unadulterated form in the religions of premodern cultures.<sup>9</sup> Hence the popularity of rediscovering indigenous religious traditions as though this was the finding of ancient lost religious truths. These rediscovered truths echoed the truths found in other areas: the oneness of all life (which seemed in accord with the Gaia Hypothesis); the importance of a person understanding his place in the community and the community's place in the environment and in ever expanding circles to the environment's place in the full order of things (which seemed to be in accord with systems thinking); and the emphasis on self knowledge (which seemed to be in accord with all therapeutic psychology).

For many holistic educators, these perennial truths expressed in their general form rather than a particular cultural form was the key to the spirituality that must be part of every education. There is little argument in holistic education that there can not be an education of the whole child if there is no education in what is transcendent. And there is also little argument that cultural expressions of transcendence have been a source of millions of deaths in thousands of conflicts in history. The three hundred years of violence in Ireland between the Catholics and Protestants is just one example. For today's pluralist world, arguments about whose expression of 'truth' is more correct are social suicide and might be in contradiction to the very 'truths' we espouse. Many holistic educators feel that all expressions of 'truth' can only be partial and remaining with the most general expressions of 'truth' not only remains closer to the original insight but helps people see for themselves beyond what is culturally bound to what might be timeless.

A spirituality that remains generalised and inclusive and therefore equally nurturing to all resonated with another pressing concern of the 1960's and 1970's - equality. Religions had frequently been dominated by particular races, classes, castes, and/or gender as were most other aspects of most cultures. Some feminist historians and feminist anthropologists demonstrated convincingly that inclusiveness and equal nurturing had been characteristic of many cultures in history and remained characteristic in some current pre-modern indigenous cultures<sup>10</sup>, and many feminist spoke of the gender dominance in our modern cultures as destructive to all of us.

The focus on gender issues was only one of the ways in which relationship structures in modern society were being questioned in the 1960's and 1970's. Increased divorce, one parent families, and experiments in communal living all had people looking at what relationship meant. This questioning of relationship based on structures of meaning rather than structures of tradition was one reason why holistic education gave a central value to relationship skills. Frequently people are first interested in holistic education through the perceptions that we need to learn to live together much better and that our social ills cannot be solved without new community building skills. In holistic education

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<sup>9</sup>The widespread assumption that some timeless wisdom can more easily be found in less sophisticated cultures has led many modern young people to seek meaning in their own lives in the native cultures of North America, Africa, or Australia; a proposition that on the face of things seems ridiculous - how can a boy from Huddersfield find meaning in his life from the Arapaho? But this view of humanity and our common grounding in some universal truths is common and many books and movies with this theme are popular. For Example, *Black Elk Speaks* (Kansas: University of Nebraska Press, 1988). Contrast this with assumptions in 'the white man's burden' of not so very long ago. Even insights into how to raise our young are being sought from native cultures because of their supposedly superior wisdom. See Jean Liedloff, *The Continuum Concept* (London: Duckworth, 1975) and (London: Penguin Books, 1986) and Forrest Carter, *The Education of Little Tree* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1976).

<sup>10</sup>Riane Eisler, *The Chalice and the Blade* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987).

the classroom is often seen as a community, which is within the larger community of the school, which is within the larger community of the village, town, or city, and which is, by extension, within the larger community of humanity. How life is lived at the smallest level should reflect what is considered to be 'right living' in the largest context.<sup>11</sup> For this reason many holistic educators feel that the claims made by conventional schools to foster freedom and democracy are spurious, as most conventional schools are based on authoritarian classrooms. They feel that learning to assume responsibility, to question for oneself what is right, and to stand by one's convictions can not be accomplished by a childhood of unquestioningly obeying rules, conforming to codes of behaviour that seem meaningless, and believing that the authorities have the answers. Holistic educators feel that schools must be places where the relationships we want as adults exist for the students as much as possible - where open, honest and respectful communication is the norm; where differences between people are appreciated; where interaction is based on mutual support and not on competition and hierarchy; where the common weal is the responsibility of each individual; and where the decision making process (if not engaged in by everyone at some level) is at least accepted by everyone. This emphasis on co-operation rather than competition often results in holistic schools giving no grades or rewards. In this view of human nature, people are seen as being more fulfilled from nurturing and helping one another than from being placed above or below one another, and competition is seen not as producing excellence but anxiety, aggression, self-centredness, low self esteem or inflated self images. Relationships between students, between teachers, and between students and teachers are seen as both a primary source of education and a topic of education. As a source, relationships are an excellent mirror in which to see ourselves - we can learn a great deal about ourselves by seeing how others respond to us.<sup>12</sup> As a topic, learning about healthy mutually sustaining relationships - how to create them and sustain them - is seen a necessary to solve many of our social and personal ills. Community building began to be seen in the 1960's as one of the principal ways of dealing with urban decay, and it remains one of the most successful approaches to problems in America's inner cities.

The commitment to school as community, and community as arena for participation, assuming responsibility, and self-determination, does not accept that schools should be directed by governments. Most holistic schools are not. National governments, even where democratically elected, can be unresponsive to the evolving needs of individual schools each with its unique and changing population. In the 1960's and 1970's governments were being questioned, and government directed educational programs began to be seen as more responsive to political expedience than to the needs of the individual child; and it is individual children and not undifferentiated masses that educators and parents feel are being educated.

Most political, economic, or social movements that claimed to be 'wholistic' were decentralised, democratic, grassroots, and co-operative, and whatever the shortcomings<sup>13</sup>, this was seen as a more natural human society and a more accurate

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<sup>11</sup>Krishnamurti, *Education and the Significance of Life* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1955).

<sup>12</sup>Most of the problems of learning about oneself in relationship in a school community are explored extensively by Krishnamurti in a book of discussions he had with the students of the school he founded at Brockwood Park in England. See Krishnamurti, *Beginnings of Learning* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1975) or (London: Penguin Books, 1978).

<sup>13</sup>Many failures at instituting social change by the holistic education groups and the green parties in different countries are seen as resulting from not having centralised structures. Many green parties, alternative

reflection of human nature. These movements not only reflected values that seemed to go back to our most distant past, these movements claimed to be forums for the development and refining of 'wholistic' values. People felt they would become more decent human beings by working in a non-hierarchical way with each other and caring for each other. The hidden power structures in schooling and the implications of that structure are powerfully described by Paulo Freire. In his 'liberation education' he described that changing the traditional structure of authority and submission in schools, and eliminating the training in uncritical acceptance normally found in schools was essential to addressing the social injustices that plague the undeveloped nations and the underclasses in the developed countries.<sup>14</sup>

The respect for the individual inherent in such decentralised democracy, where people were not seen as part of a social or economic system, was linked to the religiosity I mentioned before. In most holistic schools every child was seen as an expression of, an arena for, or an entity containing the sacred, and must be recognised and treated as such.<sup>15</sup> Many holistic educators expressed that the sacredness inherent in each child was not just something for the educator to be aware of, it was something that each child should discover. This led many to feel that education was only partly a process of instilling or pouring in - it needed to be mostly a process of unfolding, a leading out or bringing out. If education is a process of discovery and uncovering, and every child was unique; how could the traditional educational judging of children be anything other than inherently wrong? How could a child be a slow learner if he was learning at a pace that was right for him? How could a child be disruptive if he was doing what he was interested in rather than what others wanted him to do, or were those others not in fact disrupting him? If a child doesn't learn through words and numbers, is he unintelligent or can he be learning through other intelligences? In this, the work of Howard Gardner gave form and legitimacy to what many educators felt - that some children who are poor at words and numbers are never the less geniuses and terribly short changed, if not brutalised, by traditional education.<sup>16</sup> Gardner demonstrated that learning takes place in many capacities of the child, not just the verbal-numerical capacities; and that this learning process is different for everyone - echoing two themes in holistic education and the holistic view of human nature. Many people felt it was not just a matter of valuing everyone, it was also important to value the different capacities that we all have; to do otherwise is to denigrate some individuals and to denigrate some aspects of each one of us.

Holistic teachers took pride in developing new methods that reflected their new views of what a child is. Research with individual learning styles, co-operative learning, critical thinking, cross disciplinary curricula and multiple intelligence theory have inspired many

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schools and co-operatives have disintegrated because of not understanding the fine line between participation by everyone in decision making and anarchy. Never the less, despite the failures and drawbacks, this view of how people should live in groups seems not just to continue, but to grow.

<sup>14</sup>Paulo Freire, *Education for Critical Consciousness* (New York: Continuum, 1973).

<sup>15</sup>'The secret of education lies in respecting the pupil. It is not for you to choose what he shall know, what he shall do. It is chosen and fore ordained, and he only holds the key to his own secret...' Ralph Waldo Emerson, from an essay 'Education' 1864, published in *Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York: New American Library, 1965).

<sup>16</sup>'The child is the spiritual builder of humankind, and obstacles to his free development are the stones in the wall by which the soul of humanity has become imprisoned'. Maria Montessori, *The Absorbent Mind* (Madras: Kalakshetra Publications, 1973).

<sup>16</sup>Howard Gardner, *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* (London: William Heinemann, 1984).

new initiatives in holistic classrooms. The teacher became less of an authority who directed and controlled and was more of a friend, a mentor, a facilitator, or an experienced travelling companion. Psychology talked of the mutual dyadic responds of infant learning and the importance of empathy in learning relationships, and the importance of these seemed to extend into adulthood. Goethe's quote, "You only learn from someone you love" became almost a slogan.

Classes in holistic schools are almost always small, mixed-ability, mixed-age, and extremely flexible. If it becomes appropriate for a child to move to a different class, he moves - regardless of the time of year or the subjects he has been studying. Rigid categorisation by age and progression in large groups up some educational ladder was seen as a reflection of the manufacturing thinking of the industrial revolution when public schooling began, and not as a reflection of new thinking about human nature.

The 1970's saw some very surprising institutions proclaim respect for the uniqueness of each individual, encouraging non-conformist thinking, and decrying hierarchy. These institutions were large businesses. Several multinational corporations came to understand that traditional authoritarian structures were inhibiting the productivity of their members. They created 'flat management structures' (as opposed to the pyramid management structures of the past) in order to foster healthier, happier, more responsive and successful organisations. They spoke of decentralising, encouraging the uniqueness and growth of all their members, and needing dialogue amongst all levels and departments of their enterprises. Peter Senge from MIT became famous for demonstrating to businesses the need to be 'learning organisations' where personal growth is defined in terms any holistic educator would applaud. This was seen as essential, not for philosophical reasons, but for purely pragmatic ones; it produced better business results.<sup>17</sup> The bottom line in business was confirming what holistic education had advocated but had failed to satisfactorily prove.<sup>18</sup>

That humanity's view of itself and the world has changed over the last twenty five years seems incontestable. Indeed it would seem strange if it hadn't. What is in question is whether conventional schools reflect those new views and values, or whether, like many large institutions, they have a life of their own and lag behind the population they wish to serve. What does seem clear is that our traditional ways of understanding and preparing people for life have not solved our personal, social, national and international problems. If the modern western world is changing as rapidly as some people say it is, it may be instructive to look at eastern Europe where the last seven years has seen a more obvious 'paradigm shift'. There the understanding of what it means to be human, the understanding of the relationship between the individual and society, the understanding

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<sup>17</sup>Peter Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* (New York: Doubleday, 1990).

<sup>18</sup>This might be because assessment in the two areas is so different. In business the assessment is highly abstracted from many of the processes involved; a new product, a new solution to a vexing problem, or better service come about from highly complex behaviours and interactions with often no single person or process able to take the credit. Co-operative discovery or learning through dialogue describes what most participants in these new business arrangements seem to feel occurred, and this seems to need what some in holistic education started calling 'authentic assessment' - looking for the evidence of learning or intelligence in application; in demonstrations of learning about real things in the real world. By comparison, educational testing that focuses on right and wrong answers, memory, solving rehearsed problems, and the assumption that there must be some common criteria by which everyone - with all of their differences and different ways of understanding - can be measured, is felt to greatly restrict learning. Many holistic educators feel that assessment is the single largest obstacle to meaningful change in education.

of the nature of society and of their society's role in the world, have gone through a complete upheaval. The total inadequacy of most eastern European schools which still reflect old paradigms to meet people's new needs and aspirations is painfully obvious to all those involved. As one traditional Russian school principal told a friend of mine, 'I have been in education all my life, but I don't know how to educate anyone for today's world. I only know how to indoctrinate into the old.' Whether conventional western schools are similarly inadequate is the question posed by holistic education.