Spirituality and Teaching

The Importance of Experience

Much of the current literature on children's spiritual development strongly emphasizes the importance of certain kinds of experience. The educational process can offer (or exclude!) opportunities for learners to experience such things as curiosity, awe and wonder, connection and belonging, and mystery. It can also make space for them to reflect on their experiences of jealousy, anger, alienation, betrayal, and failure. These experiences of the wonder and the brokenness of life are close to the heart of spirituality and spiritual growth, and they can arise anywhere in the school curriculum. Consider the following reminiscence by a biology teacher:

"I was fourteen at the time. It was a Thursday afternoon biology lesson. Our teacher gathered us around the front desk and showed us a human brain in a large glass container. He proceeded to point out the various regions of the brain and to explain the functions they were responsible for. His words went over my head. I just sat there wondering what this 'person' used to think about and what had happened to all those thoughts now that his/her brain was pickled. Thirty-five years later I can still see that brain and the faces of the students looking at it. I can even visualize the slightly green color it had turned. I can't remember what else we did in biology that year."

Note that this did not take place during a prayer time, but during a biology class with the class's attention focused on the facts of human anatomy. A first step toward sensitivity to the spiritual across the curriculum is to be aware of and prepared for such experiences, wherever they might arise, and to reflect on how they can be more carefully woven into learning. What kinds of experiences do our practices foster, and how will we handle them?

The Place of Understanding

The impact of experiences upon our lives depends to a significant degree on how we come to understand them. If I have a striking spiritual experience, it makes a great deal of difference whether I come to view it as the voice of God, the onset of mental illness, or the effects of last night's pizza. Educators are not in the business of evoking experiences and leaving learners to make of them what they will. Sooner or later questions of faith

and truth arise, questions about what our experience means, about what we believe, about how coherent those beliefs are. This relates to our focus on seeing anew. Consider the following instance of a class discussion about school rules. The students are working in small groups:

"Their teacher has given them three sets of cards to arrange, each set forming a continuum. On one set are various school punishments, ranging from a mild verbal reprimand to expulsion; these are to be arranged in order of seriousness. On another set are various misdemeanors, ranging from swearing to physical violence and slashing the curtains with a knife (an actual recent occurrence). These are also to be ranked in order of seriousness. On the third set of cards are various kinds of being: rocks, fish, mammals, children, teachers, and others, including God. These are to be placed in order of value, or importance. When the cards are all arranged, a discussion begins. The class begins to explore the anomalies that emerge when they compare their sets of cards. Why are people generally considered more important than inanimate objects, and yet acts of vandalism are considered more serious (in terms of punishment) than acts of psychological violence, such as name calling? Why have many students put God at the top of the value spectrum but put using God's name in vain at the bottom of the range of misdemeanors? Students discuss with interest—and at times with discomfort—the discrepancies between their stated values, and those of the school, and the day-to-day practice of both."[1]

This activity invites learners to reflect critically on their experience and their assumptions, and to examine the coherence of what they believe. It also points the way beyond experience and understanding to the way in which we live from day to day.

Patterns of Living

The shape of our spirituality is revealed not only in how we worship but in how we spend our money, how we prioritize our time, how we conduct our relationships, how we invest our energies, where we place our trust, and how we respond to the world's (and our) hurt. These questions are as pertinent to the study of, say, history or science and technology as they are to Bible or religion classes. If our spiritual experience and understanding are disconnected from the mundane patterns of our living, they fall short of genuine spiritual growth. Compare the following example, already mentioned in a previous section, from a class of fourteen-year-olds learning a foreign language:

"A German language class has been learning about the White Rose resistance movement in Nazi Germany. One activity includes contrasting statements from Sophie Scholl, a leading member of the White Rose, and her sister: Sophie expresses willingness to die in opposition to the Nazi regime if necessary, while her sister, calling attention to the fact that the family was already known to the authorities, asked why it should be they who acted against the government. Heroism and prudence stand side by side. One of the questions posed to pupils is: 'Are you more like Sophie or more like her sister?'"[2]

This unit of work also draws students' attention to the fact that the members of the White Rose acted in part in response to the call in the Epistle of James to be doers of the Word and not hearers only. The Bible is introduced in this instance not for devotional purposes but to illustrate its impact on historical events and upon the choices made by a group of German students in the 1940s. The emphasis is on the connection between faith and actual life choices, encouraging students to engage with the underlying issues reflect on how all of this illuminates their own character and way of life.

Footnotes

1. Adapted from David I. Smith, *Making Sense of Spiritual Development* (Nottingham: The Stapleford Centre, 1999), p. 14.

2. See David I. Smith, "Teaching (and Learning from) the White Rose," in David M. Moss & Terry A. Osborn, eds., *Critical Essays on Resistance in Education* (New York: Peter Lang, 2010), 67–82.