

## **The Experiment of the Village School in Massachusetts**

Delivered in Rome, Italy at the 2010 Journey of the Spirit Festival (JOSPFest) by Rise Richardson, Director (now retired) of the Village School, Royalston, Massachusetts

### **Welcome!**

How many of you are students? Teachers, and/or work in schools? Parents? I hope that this talk has relevancy for you.

From our study of history, we know that from time to time, humanity goes through momentous changes. There is good evidence that now is one of those moments. And the changes are on an unprecedented scale. Changes to the environment, dwindling natural resources, to name a few, you can make the list. These times of change can portend great difficulties, but also great possibilities. When today's children become adults, they will have to face and deal with these world changes. They will need all parts of their nature fully developed to be prepared for the life they will have to lead.

Teachers these days are focused on the development of the mind, and to some extent the body, but the emotional and spiritual side is almost entirely neglected. Today I will be talking about a school that aims to develop all these aspects of child's nature, to give them a confidence and sense of self that will best prepare them for the future.

This talk is not theoretical, but based on my own experiences, both as a human being and as a founder and director of a small private community school, called the Village School, in Royalston, Massachusetts, on the east coast of the United States, for children from ages 4 to 12.

The question we will look at together is how spirituality can be part of education. Let me be clear from the outset. I am not looking at a specifically religious education, because I believe it is possible to have spirituality in education, or at least an education open to spirituality, without tying it to a specific set of beliefs. Let me explain what I mean by spirituality in this sense.

### **Introduction**

All of us wish to belong. Sometimes we identify with our tribe, or our college friends, or with our nationality, and use that for our sense of belonging. But I think we truly long for something deeper, the sense of, "I am doing what I was born to do and I celebrate this with those who are with me here and now."

In ideal conditions, children are born into a family and derive their sense of place from the family. If the upbringing is good, then children know their place in the family. And this gives children security, and a good foundation for development. The child is not the center: the family is the center, and the child knows his place in relation to it. As children mature into young

adults, they outgrow the family, and they seek their place in the world. If they are brave, they look beyond their tribe, or their small group of friends, or even beyond their nationality, to a sense of the place where they truly belong.

When we each have a sense of our place in the order of the universe, we feel at home. When children have a sense of place, of their position in the family, in the world and in the universe, they feel at home. This is truly a spiritual experience. But how do we get to this understanding of our place?

In fact, this sense of place, of being in our true home, is a taste of our spiritual home. How can we facilitate for this to be a part of the child's experience?

And specifically, for this talk, what can we adults do, to keep the door open to the spiritual nature of children and give this spiritual nature nourishment so that it can develop? So that someday, these children become adults who are at home in the spiritual world.

In terms of spirituality, let's look at the human being, and let's look at ourselves as having three natures. This will help us to talk about spirituality, by defining the other natures.

### **Natures: Body, Mind, Spiritual**

Three sides of our nature. Body, mind, spiritual.

Body is all in relationship to physical body, all we need for the body to thrive, eat, move, including all the physical skills we learn to exist, cooking, cleaning, etc.

Mind, learning different skills, socializing, adaptability, love of learning, developing powers, curiosity, emotions, morality, and communication, relating to others. The mind is what we use when we talk to each other, as I am talking to you right now.

So, what is beyond body and mind?

When we use the words hope, conscience, compassion and love, we are touching on spiritual values. These words evoke in us a taste of something beyond everyday life.

We can also lump the body and mind together and call it "our lower nature" and our spiritual side is our "higher nature". We can look at a human being as having a lower nature, which is visible and knowable, and a higher nature, which is invisible and beyond normal mental abilities. We need both to make us human.

As teachers, we need to see that all 3 parts develop in balance: body, mind and spiritual.

And this brings us to education.

**The job of education is to prepare, and to develop.**

Present -day education is effective, to varying degrees, at teaching reading and writing, and the many skills that prepare a child to be an adult functioning in the material world. So, the future adult can cook, clean, organize, read, understand, communicate, relate to others, learn to take on tasks and complete them, art, music and so on. Learning to work in a group, work with others.

Remember what I said before about the three natures of a human being. In education, the body and mind are generally addressed.

We probably do more harm than good if we try to “teach” spirituality directly in education. However, we must still recognize that the overwhelming focus on learning skills and academics creates an unbalanced human being. We must learn how to foster the spiritual side of a child’s nature.

### **How to address spirituality in education**

Can spirituality be “taught” to children? It is not possible to “teach” spirituality directly to children; however, we can make much available to a child, so that the spiritual side of him remains open and is fed. Above all, our aim should be to help the child to develop fully, so when he reaches responsible age, he is open to spirituality, and can begin to seek what he needs to feed that part of himself, and to connect to the spiritual world.

I believe, from our experience at the Village School, that it is possible to feed the spiritual nature of children in education, without stepping into direct religious education, or the teaching of a specific religion.

The Village School was founded with the Intention to bring spirituality into education.

The Village School is an independent elementary school, founded 20 years ago by local parents who themselves held and lived spiritual values, and held a vision of what could be possible for children. They were all from different religious paths, as are our present parents. Their vision and openness to experimentation and hard work have brought the school where it is today. The school has learned some a great deal on the topic of spirituality in education.

Let’s get practical

And here I will share what we have learned, what we do at the school to connect to the spiritual side of children. It is a bit like a soup or stew, with key essential ingredients.

### **Essential Ingredients to Nourish Children’s Spiritual Nature**

ESSENTIAL INGREDIENTS TO NOURISHING CHILDREN’S SPIRITUAL NATURE

Balance of Head, Heart and Body

## **Developing the Functions fully**

First, at the Village School, we work for balance, assisting the full development of all aspects of a human being—of head, heart and body. We, like most schools, help children develop critical thinking, rationality, logic, and reasoning. However, modern education needs to balance the work of the mind together with fully developing the heart and the body. We need big hearts in order to be open to spirituality. And singing, music, art, drama, movement and development of a social conscience are essential to developing the heart.

As for the body, children need to learn control and respect for their body. Their body will serve them as an instrument for the rest of their lives, and they need to have that relationship to their body. We help them develop strength and coordination. We encourage them to push their body, to make efforts- as they make these efforts, the big result is the confidence that their body can learn and serve them. (Examples of hiking, skiing, swimming, country dancing, and yoga) All of these help develop a healthy relationship to the body. When we talk about the body, we want to encourage love of work for its own sake. So, at the school we visit farms and do a lot of farm work, and we work hard in the garden—every child learns to love it, and to enjoy the satisfaction of a job well done.

## **Direct Experience in Nature**

We have found, at the Village School, that direct experience in nature is essential for children. There is no greater opportunity for a sense of place. We see how children love to dig, watch insects, climb trees, how they love animals, and we consciously try to make opportunities for these kinds of experience to take place. The children take weekly walks to the river in the fall; they investigate pond and stream life in the spring. They go tracking in the snow in winter. They each have a “special place” in the woods surrounding the school. They are entering directly into a relationship with the world around them. And this relationship, when established young, lasts a lifetime. When children love nature, they are in relationship to creation, to their place in the universe. I think many of us here have had spiritual experiences in the woods, at the ocean, in the garden, and of course, we wish the same for children.

At the school, we find that over time, children are calmed by nature. They experience it as the security of feeling at home. At our school, children have many opportunities for contact with nature— it is not a special treat— it is the child’s right to have this contact, and plenty of it.

Children are outside for an hour each day, minimum. In good weather, math and writing lessons take place outdoors, on the earth.

All of our children work in the garden, and the older children plan their garden, plant, weed and harvest it. We have a lovely Harvest Day in September when the older children work with their younger buddies, and harvest potatoes, corn, tomatoes, carrots squash and more. The children are active—the teachers are almost bystanders, as the older children take leadership. And they eat their harvest for snack, and take some of it home for their parents, with great pride.

### **Another ingredient is “Events” or “Observances” (ceremonies)**

By this, I mean events connected with celebrating the journey through the year, the changes of the seasons, and all the practices that make up these events. Our songs are always based in the seasons, about the fall, winter or spring. Example of “events”: May Day, Autumn Lantern Walk, graduation, all involve lots of singing. May Day and the Lantern Walk are tied into great changes in the seasons. This also gives children a sense of place, being in tune with the seasons. Events such as Publishing Parties (when children present a finished piece of writing), graduation, and birthdays honor the individual and the growth he has made.

### **Another essential ingredient—Active Learning, Open Creativity, and Imagination**

Encourage active learning—Discourage passive learning. Leadership happens when children are allowed to take ownership and responsibility. In the older grades, children run the morning meetings, some of the older children have roles in the younger classrooms. Forget sitting at desks all day—that only dampens creativity—an approach originally designed for preparing students for factory work.

When we talk about active learning, we are also talking about encouraging imagination and creativity. Imagination and creativity are links to the spiritual world directly through art, music, singing, dancing. We are often called the “singing” school. We love to sing together—I do believe that singing harmonizes a group of people, and opens our hearts. We also enjoy silence, and encourage children to become comfortable in silence.

At our school, we have a full art program, where children can draw, work with clay, paint and much more. Again, art touches the heart, and gives children a tool for self-expression and creativity. At our school, the children learn yoga and rhythmic dancing. Through the body, they can come in touch with themselves, and feel alive.

## **Fairy Tales**

Now we come to an ingredient absolutely essential for children, both for imagination and for spirituality—that children have plenty of exposure to classic fairy tales, in original versions as much as possible. In our school, we have a story of the week, which is told in different ways every day to the younger children. These classic fairy tales and myths are a way of conveying spiritual values, and bypassing the logical mind. Many fairy tales directly touch children with Hope, and can develop true Hope in children. Fairy tales also convey values such as generosity, kindness, courage and perseverance. We make a point of not explaining the fairy tale to children, because we don't want to interfere with their direct experience.

In the older classes, this develops into our Annual Play, in which the children write and perform a play based on their experience of the classroom theme. Also, in the play, children take on the role of another character, which helps develop compassion, and the performance itself becomes an act of service to the surrounding community.

## **Respect for all human beings**

Our teachers try to remember that each child has great potential that is unknowable to us. Teachers recognize that each child is unique, and has a higher nature. Teachers model great respect. How many of us remember that special teacher who really “saw” us, and talked to us as a human being? When children see us talking to another child with respect, they will naturally have that same respect for that child. Out of that, grows kindness. Kindness is a gift to each child. In our school, kindness is embedded. It is part of all of our relationships, and begins in the preschool, at the age of four. From kindness, children develop trust, trust of the higher part of others. This work of kindness brings out the best in others.

This kindness is also reflected in the relationship of older children to younger children. Every older child in the school has a younger buddy, who they read to once a week, and develop a relationship with over 2 or 3 years. The older children pick books that they think their buddy will enjoy. They sing with them at our weekly All School Sing. The relationship is sweet, and guess what? When the younger buddy grows up, he becomes a great buddy to a younger child, because it has been modeled to him. Here is an example of the results of the reading buddy relationship: relate story of older child letting younger child “win” on the playground.

## **Group consciousness**

Another ingredient in this rich stew is group consciousness. We all need each other. At our school, we focus on cooperation, as opposed to competition. Competition – where one tries to ‘beat’ others, is very egoistic. When I am competitive, I compare myself to others, I don’t share my work. I work for my rank, for my grade, not for the satisfaction of a job well done. Competition is a very lonely, isolating experience. At the Village School, children learn cooperation and trust in cooperation - they work in groups, and experience the strength of the group, how it supports the individual, and brings out the best in him. So, children break into groups and discuss topics, do problem solving together, play games together. They value the group, they feel secure as a contributing member of the group, and they feel the strength and support of the group. This is a taste of spirituality, don’t you think?

### **The role of adults**

As human beings, our tendency is to be selfish and egotistical. We often take what we want without considering others. We are “identified” —caught up with our states, with our needs, with material greed. Our self-centeredness leaves no room for another human being. It can be a very lonely condition. And unfortunately, children see us as we are, and copy us. Don’t forget, from birth onward, children are studying, absorbing and copying us, both positive and negative. We are the role models that children emulate.

When adults want to be in touch with the higher part of themselves, they struggle with their egoism, their identification, and likes and dislikes. When we don’t give in to our lower nature, this creates a space for children to be open to spirituality. Children need to be around adults who recognize something higher in themselves. What is needed, more than anything else, is that the adults around children, try themselves to be in touch with their higher nature, with spiritual qualities such as compassion, conscience and hope. These are the role models our children need.

At the school, our teachers try to be aware of their own shortcomings, noticing their own states, their negative emotions, and understanding that it is harmful to inflict negative emotions on children. Teachers model kindness, listening, compassion, and are always alert for the “teachable moment.” Our teachers meet every week and share concerns, and difficulties. The teachers sit every morning, for 5 minutes, in silence, before the day starts. How many times

have I heard a teacher say, “I was so busy this morning, so wrapped up in the start of the day—but when I sat with everyone, I felt calmed and centered, and ready to be with children.”

The founders of the Village School had the Intention to bring spirituality into education. This intention has, by itself, attracted an outstanding staff. We attract people who want to build classroom community. Our teachers work together, make tea for each other, do each other’s dishes, and support each other. The school attracts people who want to work in that way, and the school also carefully picks those with this wish to be part of it. The teachers model everything that we ask of the students. Each teacher is different and unique, much like the students, and makes a special contribution to the school. All the teachers love to work—whether it is shoveling the entrance, cleaning the classroom, caring for the school, organizing field trips, or taking extra time with a student. Our teachers are passionate about their jobs. The children imbibe this love of work from the teachers.

Those are all of the ingredients for the stew that can nourish the child’s spiritual nature. All the “ingredients” that I gave as examples earlier, such as contact with nature, fairy tales, etc., can only work when the adults themselves are working with awareness and respect.

What is lacking in modern education is very subtle. This approach is not something that can be published as a curriculum or as a method or technique. It is in us, in our attitude, in our words and actions with children.

The spiritual nature has to do with potential, (and who has more potential than children?) with the non-material, with true feeling and values—with hope, conscience, compassion and love. When we try to open ourselves to that which is possible, we are turning to the spiritual world. A powerful model for children is that in which the adults around them recognize that there is something higher in us, in the children before us, and in the world, and it’s higher than the body, even higher than the mind. This recognition of “something higher” can guide our actions; can counter our self-will and egoism. This recognition binds us together, into a community of worship. Without it, we are separated, alone. With it, we are alive and united. Children need this in us.

## **Conclusion**

Our job, as adults, is to keep the door open to the spiritual nature of children and nourish this spiritual nature so that it can develop. If after the age of 18, the young adult is truly an independent learner (which is our goal at the Village School) he will seek out what he needs. Someday, these children will become young adults who seek to continue their own spiritual development, find their true place in the world, and feel at home in the spiritual world too. Then we can say of the children we are educating, that they are prepared for the future.

