

## NURTURING SOUL IN ADULT LEARNING<sup>(1)</sup>

John M. Dirkx

"The way through the world is more difficult to find than the way beyond it."

Wallace Stevens

In this "age of information," rapid shifts in careers, advancing technologies, increasing diversity within our population, and dramatic fluctuations in the personal contexts of our lives draw attention to our need for lifelong learning. Learning, however, continues to be framed within a technical-rational view of knowledge, in which we learn instrumentally to adapt to the demands of our outer environment. Bubbling just beneath this technical-rational surface is a continual search for meaning, a need to make sense of the changes and the empty spaces we perceive both within ourselves and our world. While we seek to increase performance and productivity in the workplace, our shelves fill with books on spirituality of work. Renewed calls for a return to the basics swirl among constructivist claims for a discovery-oriented pedagogy. This struggle for meaning, the need to feel and be authentic with ourselves and one another, and to realize a more just social order is the focus of several strands of research and theory referred to as transformative theories of adult learning (Clark, 1993). As reflected in the works of Mezirow (1991), Cranton (1994), Daloz (1986), and Freire (1970), transformative learning represents a heroic struggle to wrest consciousness and knowledge from the forces of unconsciousness and ignorance. They are stories of the ego and its attempts guide the human spirit through the labyrinth of self, society, language, and culture.

This ego-based view provides a helpful but only partial understanding of the process of change, self-discovery, and social critique inherent in transformative learning. It represents the way of logos, the realm of objectivity and logic, the triumph of reason over instinct, ignorance, and irrationality. Transformative learning also involves very personal and imaginative ways of knowing, grounded in a more intuitive and emotional sense of our experiences. This aspect of transformation, the way of mythos, reflects a dimension of knowing that is manifest in the symbolic, narrative, and mythological (Labouvie-Vief, 1994). It is a view of learning through soul, an idea centuries old re-emerging in this age of information, giving voice in a deep and powerful way to imaginative and poetic expressions of self and the world. But the soul dimensions of transformation have received little attention within our study of adult learning. Our journey of self-knowledge also requires that we care for and nurture its presence within settings of teaching and learning. In this chapter, I want to develop a view of what it means to attend to, understand, and facilitate learning through soul, of nurturing and caring for soul through teaching and learning. Let me begin with a recent experience from my own teaching practice, one that illustrates how soul cries out for care and nourishment in this context.

## **The Soul's Invitation: a Case Example**

Fifteen graduate students - many of whom work full time - joined me for a summer term in a course in instruction of adult learners. With this session, we were slightly half way through our course. The atmosphere was polite, comfortable, and students seemed to enjoy both the topics and the informality of our process. Through a mixture of active learning strategies and information-giving sessions, the participants seemed to be developing both a rapport with each other and a deeper appreciation for the philosophical issues involved in providing instruction to adults.

The group had just returned from a break and, as we were getting started, one student handed in his assignment, indicating that he did not want to get food on it before he handed it in. Earlier, another student had made a similar comment and I jokingly asked, "What is with this group's fear of getting food on their assignments?" Several students laughed politely but Clara cut into this friendly bantering with a comment that revealed her frustration and anger, "You know, I am getting so sick of group work in this class!" Intending to be humorous and light-hearted, I commented about moving from food on assignments to working in groups. This remark, however, seemed to infuriate her even more. Visibly angry, Clara vented her frustration with me and other instructors who use "groups" extensively in their teaching. She said she was amazed at how much group methods were relied upon in adult education in the face of so little evidence for their effectiveness. A few students joined in the discussion but the group was silent, as if stunned by the sudden turn of emotion in the group. Struggling hard to be empathic and not defensive, I mostly listened, responding occasionally in an intellectual manner to what I considered to be misinterpretations of the research and theory.

Rarely do I take such attacks personally but Clara's behavior and concerns seemed to come from left field, and I experienced strong feelings of betrayal, anger, and defensiveness. I felt stuck. If I were to pursue the emotional turn of events more, I would be playing right into Clara's hands, and exacerbate the very things about which she felt so angry. If I chose to go on with the agenda, we would ignore what felt like a significant group issue. Stunned, I meekly asked other members of the group for their opinions. A few persons mumbled some things but the tension in the group remained very thick. Feeling a need to do something, I quickly moved into information-giving, which lasted the rest of the session. The issue never came up again and we limped along emotionally deflated and anemic for the remainder of the term.

## **The Meaning of Soul in Teaching and Learning**

To interpret the meaning of this brief period of interaction, a traditional, technical-rational perspective of teaching and learning would focus on its *manifest content* and on the instructional design issues implicit within this content. The strength of Clara's objections and the group's stunned response, however, suggest the presence of powerful dynamics not illuminated through the technical-rational view. Transformation theory (Cranton, 1994; Mezirow, 1991) moves us away from the instrumental view,

helping us understand the patterns and forms of communication and what they mean, and how learning comes to frame the meaning of the participants' experiences. But framing learning in this incident as a problem of critical self-reflection understates the affective, emotional, spiritual, and transpersonal elements evident among the patterns of feelings and interactions. I sought to view what was happening through logos, the voice of reason. It was this very turn to reflective understanding, however, of trying to cut through the symbolism to see the literal actions beneath these symbols, that resulted in my feeling stuck within a seemingly unresolvable paradox. Such incidents remind us of the inherently illusive and mysterious nature of learning.

Viewed through the lens of mythos rather than logos, we might look at this vignette in terms of powerful images. Images bring us closer to learning through soul, giving voice to underlying myths which, when recognized, can illuminate aspects of our world not visible through the language of logos. In this view, the ego's role in consciousness is more limited, one that is more akin to a trusty janitor or servant of more powerful, encompassing processes, rather than the focus of change and transformation. To truly grasp the holistic nature of learning in adulthood, its mystery and messiness, we need a way of seeing that keeps learning embedded in the concreteness of everyday life. In addition to the three strands of transformation theory described by Clark (1993), a fourth "strand," represented by Boyd's notion of "transformative education" (Boyd, 1991; Boyd & Myers, 1988) and Ruether's (1995) idea of "transformative metanoia," attempts to understand transformative learning from an "extra-rational perspective. I ground my discussion of learning through soul within this perspective and in the idea of archetypal or soul consciousness (Hillman, 1989; Moore, 1992; Sordello, 1992).

It is easier to describe what is meant by soul through examples of common experiences rather than by providing a specific definition. Being awestruck by a brilliant sunset, captured by the majestic beauty of a rising full moon, or gripped by the immense pain and helplessness we feel for a child trapped deep inside an abandoned well are experiences of soul. Scenes from popular movies, like *Educating Rita*, *Legends of the Fall*, or *Schindler's List* seem to draw the viewers in an unselfconscious way to join with something greater than themselves. The experience of reading certain works of nonfiction and fiction evokes within us something difficult, if not impossible to put into words. Great works of classical music can transport the listener to a different time and place, where the language spoken is not with words but through the images evoked by the movement of the music. Experiences of mystery, like birth and death, incomprehensible tragedies, love, and separation open up a realm of being barely visible to our waking, ego-consciousness. It is this realm of being that is expressed in learning through soul.

Constructivist, active, and experiential forms of teaching and learning, marked by high levels of uncertainty, ambiguity, contradiction, and paradox, invite expressions of soul. In these forms of learning, the wholeness of learners' lives are brought into the circle, not just their *heads*, and the group itself comes into being as an entity (Boyd, 1991). Ideas and concepts being discussed or read about often trigger a flood of memories, images, and fantasies. For example, in a course on group dynamics, we talk about what constitutes group membership. As the discussion ensues, spontaneous thoughts surface in the consciousness of some members about their personal families and memories of growing up in that family as a child, sometimes filling the learners with a sense of loss and sadness. a course on "teaching methods" sends a student mentally careening through the halls of his high school years, bringing to mind

poignant moments of learning from memorable teachers. The prospect of her work being assessed by a male professor evokes within a bright, highly competent, middle-aged woman images of the small child pushed around by a psychologically abusive father, even now facing feelings that she will never measure up to his standards or expectations. For some adults, the small group itself activates unconscious fears and memories of being smothered as an individual, resulting in staunch resistance to such instructional methods.

Soul seems to speak to something that "undeniable presses in on us: beauty, time, death, the holiness of the world...the strange weave of light, shadow, flame, and breath...rooted in the spontaneous creating of continuous images and ideas about the unknown continuity of things" (Cousineau, 1994, p. xxii). We often sense it as a kind of dark beauty or a bittersweet incident. The experience of soul leads to an appreciation of the multiplicity of selves that makes up who we are (Briskin, 1996). We recognize the person sitting in the present group, participating in the discussion but we also observe the child of this adult learner as a member of a family, a youthful learner of high school, a hurt, school-aged boy chosen last for volleyball. As we become conscious of these images, we recall them with a mixture of fondness and pain, two extremes which seem to tug at the edges of our awareness. While I don't know for sure, my guess is that even Clara was surprised at the "self" that surfaced during the period of instruction described earlier. Learning through soul asks, "Who was that person and where did she come from? What does she represent to me? What does she have to say about this situation?"

Soul is more than a psychological attribute, more than attending to feelings and emotions within the learning setting. It is seeing the world and its suffering through our own experiences of these feelings and emotions (Sordello, 1992). Soul beckons to a relationship between the individual and his or her broader world. Our emotions and feelings are a kind of language for helping us learn about these relationships or transactions. Viewing our experiences through soul draws our attention to the quality or dimensions of experiencing life and ourselves, to matters of depth, values, relatedness, heart. It has to do with authenticity, connectedness between heart and mind, mind and emotion, the dark as well as the light. When we are attending to matters of soul, we are seeking to live deeply, to focus on the concreteness of the here-and-now. This perspective, in the words of Robert Sordello, of "facing the world with soul," deepens our understanding of the meaning of learning in adulthood. Learning is not simply a preparation for life. It *is* life, the experience of living. Coming to know ourselves in the world and how we experience and make sense of the other within this world are critical aspects of learning. Learning through soul is about relationship, our relationships with others and the world, but also with all aspects of our experiences, objective and subjective.

This view locates learning neither as a product of individual will nor of the powerful forces of socio-cultural structures. Rather, learning is understood as a process that takes place within the dynamic and paradoxical relationship of self and other (Dirkx & Deems, 1996; Ruether, 1995). The "other" is anything, anyone, or any group we perceive as apart or separate from our individual natures. From the perspective of soul, transformative learning results in a transcendence of the limiting, individualistic, and constraining vision provided by the ego. By "descending" deeply into the concreteness and subjectivity of our lives and experiences (Shore, 1996), we paradoxically come to see and understand the self as bound up within its broader relationships with the other. Learning through soul is thus transegoic;

it connects us to the immediacy of our present experience and, through this process, leads us into an experience which transcends more limited, ego-based views of the world. We connect in imaginative, vital, and meaningful ways with these broader aspects of our world. Robert Sordello (1992) suggests that learning through soul extends beyond a focus on the individual:

Education is a cultural enterprise, and as the word itself says, education concerns guidance of the soul into the world. Education in this sense concerns the drawing out of soul to conjoin with world soul. (pp. 49-50)

This endeavor, Sordello argues, is the primary focus of adult education. Learning through soul is a mystery that "has to do with how something outside of the world rushes in - a sulphurous mixture that ignites the spark of life where there was none before" (Cousineau, 1994, p. xix). Unlike the analytic, reflective, and rational processes of transformation described by Mezirow, learning through soul fosters self-knowledge through symbolic, imagistic, and contemplative means (Moore, 1992). Soul is nourished within our lives through story, song, myth, poetry, and the concreteness of our everyday experiences.

### **Nurturing Soul in Adult Learning**

Our interest in learning through soul is not to "teach" soul or to "facilitate" soulwork. To nurture soul is to recognize what is already inherent within our interactions, relationships, and experiences, to acknowledge its presence within the teaching and learning environment, to respect its sacred message, to give it space and consideration, and to provide it a voice through which to be heard. When we nurture soul in adult learning, we assume the unconscious represents the primary source of creativity, vitality, and wisdom within our lives - the source of life itself. We recognize how the deeper aspects of our individual and collective unconscious comes to express itself. We encourage engagement and dialogue with the unconscious through imagination, creativity, and intuition.

Perhaps our single biggest challenge is to awaken soul within teaching and learning, to stir it to life, both within ourselves and within the learning settings in which we work. We are products and members of a culture that devalues matters of soul as mystical or "new age" jargon. We need an attitude of caring for soul with ourselves and among our adult learners. When nurturing soul, we are cultivating, watching, participating in growth. We attend to how the soul manifests itself, how it operates in our lives and theirs. Soul stirs within us and our learning group as our stomach tightens observing interaction among two learners become increasingly conflictual. We might be tempted to break in before things get out of hand and bring the group back to "task." But it is in the unpleasant and uncomfortable prospects of such an interchange we find soul, within ourselves as educators and within the learning setting itself. Such an approach to the education of adults suggests a profound connectedness with learners. We must attend to the need to stay a part of the despair as well as the joy that we experience as participants within settings of adult learning; the longings we feel, the pain and pleasure, successes and failures. Through such connectedness, we come to see learning as relationship. This sense of relationship and connectedness is critical to nurturing and caring for soul. Nurturing soul is an attempt to embrace the messiness and disorder that is adult learning, to enter more fully and more authentically into the matters of the heart.

Learning through soul aims at transformation of the heart, at character and wisdom ( Moore, 1992; 1996).

**Attending to the Learning Environment.** In nurturing soul in adult learning, we value the everydayness of our learning environment and attend to its intellectual, socio-emotional, and physical aspects. The intellectual task of learning is grounded in the particular, concrete, or vernacular (Moore, 1992). We seek, through imaginative methods, the ways an "idea" resonates within the canyons of our individual and collective psyches (Hillman, 1989). This notion helps us better understand the meaning of the group events within the teaching vignette described earlier. Collaborative and other group learning methods, for example, are not disembodied sets of words to contemplate, argue about, or to disprove. Approached imaginatively, the group as a mediator of learning may take on forms of a good and nurturing mother, one that both contains and supports her family members in an effort to allow them to be more fully themselves. But it may also take on the form of the bad and destructive mother, who seeks to constrain her members, hold them, and eventually smother them (Boyd & Dirkx, 1991).

As educators, we can understand and appreciate how both images might shape how learners think and feel about learning in groups. Adult learners want the group to hold and support them, to nurture them in their quest for knowledge and understanding. But they also fear the group and are pushed and driven away from the idea and the experience because of its powerful, frightening capacity to obliterate the individual. Approached from the perspective of soul, we begin to see learning not only grounded in experience but its meaning shaped and formed through the images that make up that experience. The intellectual dimension of the environment is thus immersed in a world of images, fantasies, and myths which serve to give meaning to the task. Nurturing soul in learning means valuing and making this connection more explicit. We honor and give meaning to those aspects of the learning experience that may be denied within a more uni-dimensional focus on the intellectual.

Learning through soul also involves a deep, inter-connectedness of the socio-emotional dimension of learning with the world of ideas and intellectual tasks, a focus on the interface where these two worlds of the learning experience meet, where the inner and outer worlds converge (Cousineau, 1994). To explore an idea means also to give voice to the images which shape its value and meaning for the participants. Learning through soul actively involves the learner in this process of naming and giving voice to these images. It involves forming and working through and in relationship with others. The "other," be it an individual, the group, or the instructor, plays a critical role in stirring the soul to life in adult learning (Briskin, 1996). The other often becomes the focus of what we believe or feel to be problematic in our lives. At times, they serve as the repository of the rejected parts of ourselves. Learning through soul involves understanding the importance or value of our rejected parts ( Moore, 1992).

Nurturing soul also involves attending to the physical aspects of the learning environment. An environment that is cold and sterile, or that is cluttered, messy, and arranged haphazardly can reflect itself in the soul of the group. While a seemingly small thing, attention to the physical aspects of the learning environment reflects the soul's affinity for the particular and the concrete. Caring for the physical space is as important to nurturing soul within a learning group as our physical bodies are to nurturing soul within our individual lives. We nurture soul by giving the ordinary, everyday aspects of

these environments depth and value.

**The role of pedagogy and content in nurturing soul.** Learning through soul calls for a more central role of imagination and fantasy in our instructional methods and the content we use in these learning experiences. Stories, narratives, myths, tales, and ritual capture aspects of this world in ways not readily available within more traditional instructional methods. Unlike the ego, which prefers logic, rationale, predictability and order within the learning environment, the soul thrives on open spaces within the experience. Soul often meanders and wanders its way through our individual and collective lives, producing uncertain, ambiguous, and even messy situations. Rigid adherence to an agenda or curriculum mitigates *against* expression of soul. In the teaching vignette, the group and I retreated to the perceived safety of the schedule agenda but, in doing so, experienced a loss of life and vitality. Denial of soul within the learning environment is denial of a life force and makes itself felt through an absence of energy, enthusiasm, or vigor within the group climate.

The soul responds to less structured environments and to activities that bring one's inner life together with the outer world. The use of stories, myths, images, dreams, and symbols in our teaching can help learners connect with the imaginal and intuitive dimensions through which soul communicates. Within the learning environment itself, we need to make room for grief work, passions of fear and sorrow as well as dreams and desires. In our approaches to the learning of our students, we need to cease exclusive reliance on images that come from without and encourage learners to attend to those images that arise within their own imaginations and fantasies as they pursue their learning tasks. In nurturing soul, we don't try to solve problems for ourselves or for our learners, or move learners toward more rational, enlightened ways of being. Rather, we seek to cultivate the presence of soul, watch it gain expression, participate in its unfolding. Moore writes,

It isn't about curing, fixing, changing, adjusting, or making healthy, and it isn't about some idea of perfection or even improvement. It doesn't look to the future for an ideal, trouble-free existence. Rather, it remains patiently in the present, close to life as it presents itself day by day, and yet at the same time mindful of region and spirituality. (1992, p. xv)

Moore recommends that we "try to give what is problematical back to the person in a way that shows its necessity, even its value" (p. 6). We focus on helping individuals and groups own what it is they are rejecting of themselves, helping them see what they are projecting onto others as necessary and of value to them.

In another group in which I was the instructor, we were debriefing an extended group activity and members were talking about what went well and what could be improved. Mary confronted another male member near the end of the session by saying rather empathically, "Al, you're always responding to emotional issues here with an intellectual response. You intellectualize everything. For once I'd like to see you to tell us how you *feel*, not what you *think!* *Feel!* for god's sake!" Al tried calmly and carefully to explain to her how he approaches emotional events within a learning situation. Growing more emphatic, Mary pointed out how his very response seemed to make her point. As the instructor, I said

nothing during this exchange, symbolically creating a space through which this important aspect of the group's life might find expression. Others in the group pointed out to Mary that they, too, would need time to think about a response and that perhaps this was Al's characteristic way of being within a learning group. As the discussion ensued, Mary seemed to realize that she was projecting onto Al some rejected and undesired parts of herself. To the group she admitted that her comments perhaps reflected more her own needs than it did anything about Al's behavior. "Maybe that's just me," she said, "maybe that's what *I* need and the way *I* would react." For Mary, Al's behavior was a problem and she wanted the group and him to "fix" it. But the group wisely encouraged Mary to value the role that Al played in the group. By doing so, they encouraged her to value that part of herself which she was quick to reject in Al's behavior, as they also recognized and valued that part of themselves. We ended this session seemingly full of life and energy. For the first time since the class began meeting, groups of students stood around talking after the session ended, as if wanting to hold the experience for a little longer.

In the vignette discussed earlier, however, confrontation within the group was experienced quite differently by the members. As the instructor, I took it upon myself to facilitate a solution to the problem being raised by the student in the group. Initially, I turned to the group for ideas about how we might address her concerns. When this seemed to fail, I "took charge" and directed us on to the next topic in the agenda and asserted control through a lecturing style. In doing so, I tentatively "solved" the problem raised by the woman member. She seemed to be saying that she did not want close relationships within the group and the group's response to her seemed to acknowledge her position. I solved her's and the group's problem by asserting my authority, thereby obviating the need for anyone to engage anyone else to any serious degree. In terms of learning through soul, the woman student and the group were making problematic an aspect of their life together and projecting onto a convenient "other," in this case, me, the group instructor. I responded by doing what they wanted me to do. What was being rejected and disowned was being projected onto an other. But, for my own reasons, I was caught up in the projection myself, and I failed to hear the language of the soul. Had I framed the situation for the group in terms of the images prevalent at the time, such as the group as both good and bad mother, we may have been able learn something about ourselves as members of a learning group, and the dynamics that ensue within such groups. Both the learning task and the socio-emotional needs of the group would have been addressed.

We can also nurture soul through the various readings and other assignments we give our learners. Learning through soul occurs most readily in environments rich with metaphor, story, images, art, music, film, and poetry. In my teaching, I use novels such as William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* and Anna Quinlen's *One True Thing*, autobiography as exemplified in Studs Terkel's book *Working*, poetry through the eyes of David Whyte's *The Heart Aroused*, and video, such as *The Wall*, *Educating Rita*, and *Renaissance Man*. These works focus in imaginative and poetic ways on numerous spiritual and profoundly moral issues of our times and represent powerful ways of arousing soul to life within settings of adult learning.

## Conclusion

Transformative learning theory challenges technical, instrumental conceptions of teaching and learning and directs our attention to the role that experience and culture plays in shaping what we know and how we come to know. At its core is a vision of learning that leads individuals, through reason, reflection, and rationality, to greater levels of self-awareness and consciousness of society. Less well developed in these views of transformative learning, however, is the role that imagination and fantasy play in the development of self-knowledge. We need to better understand what it means to foster transformation that is informed by a sense of mythos, as well as logos, and learning that is rooted in a consciousness of soul. Then, just maybe our learners and ourselves might be able to find our way through this world.

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