

Caring Without Justice: how we deaden the spirits of gay and lesbian youth in schools

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ABSTRACT *Too often 'spirituality' and the methods of leading students toward it are defined in terms of religious beliefs. Even when the notion of spirituality is connected to such benign terms as 'love' or 'caring', it is open to dangerous interpretation. In this paper, I provide illustrations of such interpretations. The way that some people define the many notions that surround spirituality serves to deaden the very spirits they claim to want to save. This is particularly true vis-à-vis the issue of homosexuality in schools. I argue that the spirituality of gay and lesbian students can best be served by heeding certain principles of justice.*

Introduction

In the United States there have been renewed calls for schools to take on the role of providing such things as moral guidance, values education, and character education. The inevitable debates emerge around valid questions like 'whose morals?' or 'whose definition of character?'

These questions are raised because suggestions of moral or character education are immediately suspect. They are suspect for two related reasons. First, the United States has followed a relatively strict interpretation of the first amendment of the Constitution separating church and state. (The 'state' includes public schools and the US Supreme Court found organized school prayer unconstitutional in 1962.) Second, over the past decade or so, the religious right in the United States has become increasingly vociferous in its attacks against this strict, but widely accepted, separation. In this context, it is not surprising that a seemingly benign notion like 'character' would become suspect. It should be even less surprising that any suggestion of 'spiritual' education is immediately seen to be loaded from the right.

Notions of 'spiritual' and 'spirituality' need not and, in the name of the spiritual well-being of *all* children, should not be narrowly construed in religious terms, as is the wont of the religious right. Ultimately, a non-religious notion of spirituality will be embraced by far more people and some of its basic tenets agreeable to all.

In this article, I merely begin a discussion of what secular spirituality is. Secular

spirituality has been defined elsewhere, most notably in 1923 by Martin Buber in his seminal *I and Thou* (see also Howe, 1975 and Newby, 1996). Therefore, I devote much more time to demonstrating the ways in which religion can and has influenced people's actions in the education arena and the negative and dangerous consequences of these actions. In other words, my primary purpose is to demonstrate why a secular notion of spirituality is required, using homosexuality as a case in point.

An underlying point of my argument is that spirituality, properly construed, is not an improper issue for schools to take on. I, however, am unwilling to leave it at that. I will argue that we must link spirituality to justice. Not to do so is to risk allowing our schools to be influenced by certain dangerous religious elements. I should emphasize that I am in no way suggesting that religion is necessarily dangerous or bad. However, as we shall see, certain dogmatic interpretations of religion can cause real harm to students.

Spirituality

I do not know what 'spirituality' means. It has been said that 'spiritual is a meaningless adjective for the atheist and of dubious use to the agnostic' (Priestley, 1997, p. 24). This, I believe, is simply wrong. Many non-believers would claim to have a spirit. Getting one's brain around what it means 'to have a spirit' is, however, much more complex. Some days I feel more 'spirited' than others. When do people feel more spirited? We feel more spirited, I think, when we are with people who love us, care about us, or take an interest in us. But complete spirituality here requires reciprocity. It is then that we feel most whole. Perhaps this is because, as Huebner (1995) posits, 'in spite of this culture's bias toward privacy and individualism, we cannot be human beings without others' (Huebner, 1995, p. 19).

Spirituality, in this view, is human 'wholeness'. Seymour, Crain, and Crockett argue that 'wholeness includes our relationship to the Holy, to others with whom we share the earth, and to our inner selves' (cited in Huebner, 1995, p. 15). As alluded to above, I don't think that a relationship to 'the Holy' is a necessary requirement to feeling whole. I do think, however, that Seymour *et al.* are correct about the last two requirements. Wholeness, to my mind, requires fellowship (involving reciprocal love, caring, and interest) and the freedom to live one's life from the inside out. In this sense, 'spiritual' can be a meaningful adjective for everyone.

Promoting Wholeness in Schools through Love and Caring

A number of approaches have surfaced to promote spirituality of school children. Among these are Huebner's religiously based notion of redemptive love and Noddings' more secular pedagogy of care.

Huebner (1995) argues that we cannot pinpoint anything special that can be identified as spiritual in the activities of the school because all activity in school has moral or spiritual consequences. One of the faults of the school in this vein is its perpetuation of the myth of redemptive violence: that the world can be corrected and redeemed through power (including the power of knowledge) and might, but

not through love' (Huebner, 1995, p. 22). Huebner insists that the spiritual must be realized instead through redemptive love, noting 'because the myth of redemptive love is not deeply ingrained in our characters (a major failure of religious traditions), our educational system short circuits the journey of the self or leads it to dead ends' (Huebner, 1995, p. 21).

The great moral purpose in education is 'to care for children so that they, too, will be prepared to care' (Noddings, 1992, p. 64). Such caring requires attentive love which 'involves responsibility for direct care: the physical care of infants, the bodily affection needed for emotional growth in children, and a holistic concern for the physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being of particular others' (Noddings, 1993, p. 46). It may also involve, among other things, 'direct involvement in the other's project' and support in 'acceptable behavior' (Noddings, 1993, p. 48). This is because as carers teachers 'want to produce acceptable persons—persons who will support worthy institutions, live compassionately, work productively but not obsessively ...' (Noddings, 1993, p. 50). Carers help to shape moral people by helping students to understand and evaluate their thinking and behavior.

I do not have a problem with either of these approaches, *prima facie* (except for Huebner's insistence on a relationship with God). What concerns me is how these many notions can play out in actual classrooms and educational policy. The problem is determining what these notions actual mean. For there are many competing conceptions of the very abstract ideals of 'caring', 'spiritual well-being', 'acceptable behavior', 'acceptable persons', and 'moral'. The way that we define concepts like "spiritual well-being" also determines how we love and care. The importance of my concerns becomes clear when we look at the controversial issue of whether and how to include homosexuality in school curricula.

God, Conservatives, and Redemptive Violence

The redemptive violence that Huebner writes of is particularly evident *vis-à-vis* gay and lesbian students. By this I mean that violence (physical, emotional, and spiritual) is used against gay and lesbian students in an effort to force their own redemption. In this process, God is often used to support hateful positions. The problem is that the purveyors of these positions see them not as hateful but loving and caring.

In a recent article, I describe the reactions of some of my students in a Social Foundations of Education class to the issue of homosexuality (Petrovic, 1998). I describe these reactions briefly here to illustrate typical uses of God and 'the Holy'. One assignment in this course was to write a coming out letter—whether you were gay or not. One of my students, wrote of being 'in the midst of more turmoil than [she had] ever experienced' due to her sexuality. She explained that:

Being blessed with incredible love, the Lord sat me down immediately, helped me examine my heart, and for the next few days I was nowhere but on my knees in prayer. I was feeling these homosexual feelings, but was faced with the reality of God's word. Why was He putting me through this?

Why couldn't I be normal? I studied His book, praying constantly for guidance and strength to overcome this ever-so intense temptation.

This student clearly viewed homosexuality as an evil choice, as mortal sin. If she were a lesbian, she would be cleansed of it with the help of God. In fact, if she were a lesbian, Jesus would '[hold her] hand through it all, [open her] eyes to His glory, and [cleanse her] heart from the evil which was strangling [her].'

Another student, similarly invoking God, also saw homosexuality as an evil to be fought. Her reaction was to a video shown in class. This video follows two teens — one lesbian and one gay—both of whom have come out. The girl's parents accept her sexual orientation without question. At the end of the video this girl happily and confidently attends her senior prom with her girlfriend. The boy's mother is not as accepting. While she does not reject her son outright, she cannot accept his sexual orientation. At the end of the video, the boy throws himself from an overpass in front of a speeding truck.

The student in my class reacted as follows: "I am dedicated to treating homosexuals with as much love and respect as anyone else. While I might hate their actions, I hate all sinful actions." Therefore, she "related most to the first scenario [the boy who killed himself] most [*sic*] in the film and thought that was the situation better handled." She emphasized that she didn't think "suicide is good" but believed that "to face the problem head on and be unhappy is far better than accepting the problem and live [*sic*] with it in bliss." She thought "it was wonderful for him to fight it [his sexual orientation]."

These types of reactions against homosexuality permeate all levels of society. In the United States, these arguments are heard in the US Senate, school boards, and principals offices. LaBarbera (1996), for example, includes homosexuality among the other 'evils' of alcoholism and adultery. 'Even were it true that self-perceived 'homosexuals' are prone to commit suicide in higher numbers than other youth,' LaBarbera argues, 'it does not mean that schools should be confirming young teens in an immoral and dangerous lifestyle.' In a briefing in the Capitol to fend off recognition of gay marriages, LaBarbera is clearly aghast when he writes:

As surely as summer follows spring, legal homosexual 'marriage' would quickly be seized upon by pro-gay educators as the latest teaching tool to inculcate the normalcy of homosexuality to young minds. How young? The publishers of the latest homosexual children's book, *Daddy's Wedding* tells us it is 'appropriate for children ages 2 to 6'. The book uses colorful pictures to tell the story of a young boy, Nick, who is best man at the 'wedding' ceremony between his 'gay' daddy and his homosexual lover. One page shows the men kissing at the altar as young Nick looks on (<http://www.students.uiuc.edu/~obroin/gayschool.html>).

Clearly LaBarbera embraces the outlandish heterosexist notion that 'homosexuality means sex and heterosexuality equals love, family, and much more' (Friend, 1993, p. 216).

The revulsion of two men (or two women) in a loving relationship (and demonstrating it by—gasp—kissing) has also reached the floor of the US Senate. Senator Robert Smith asked, "Do we really want our youngsters subjected to that? Do we

want to educate them to it just to make sure that they have a good shot at becoming lesbian or homosexual?" This he asked during a debate on withholding federal funding from school districts that 'promote' homosexuality. "We can and must protect the taxpayers by keeping this kind of trash out of our schools," Smith concluded (Chasnoff & Cohen, 1996).

Certain schools' policies, born from similar mindsets, border on the absurd. When parents in Byron Center, Michigan, learned that there was a gay teacher at their school, they called for his dismissal. The school board in response proclaimed that 'individuals who espouse homosexuality do not constitute proper role models' and promised to 'monitor' the teacher. In Merrimack, New Hampshire, the school board adopted a policy which states that the school district 'shall neither implement nor carry out any program or activity that has either the purpose or effect of encouraging or supporting homosexuality as a positive lifestyle alternative'. Since the decree, a video on Walt Whitman and Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* have been dropped from the curriculum. In Salt Lake City, Utah, the school board voted to ban *all* after school clubs in order to avoid having to grant permission for a gay/straight alliance club to meet in the local high school. The state legislature subsequently banned gay clubs in high schools statewide (Smolowe, 1996).

A principal in Wisconsin was reported as saying to a gay student who had just been beaten up, "If you're going to be openly gay, you have to expect this kind of treatment" (Wilson, 1996). An associate superintendent of schools in Maryland 'pulled the plug' on a student's television production dealing with homosexual marriage. The Superintendent was quoted as saying, "It's not something I think appropriate to run on the educational channel" (Beyers, 1996).

The Effects of Redemptive Violence

Richard Friend (1993) offers a useful way of looking at the policies—such as banning books, clubs, and student work, and condoning violence (physical and spiritual)—defended above. Friend distinguishes between systematic exclusion and systematic inclusion. Systematic exclusion is 'the process whereby positive role models, messages, and images about gay, lesbian, and bisexual people are publicly silenced in schools' (Friend, 1993, p. 212). The implicit message here is that heterosexuality is the only acceptable identity. The message becomes particularly insidious when systematic exclusion is paired with the systematic inclusion of homosexuality 'only as a pathology, only in regard to sexual behavior and/or framed as dangerous' (Friend, 1993, p. 215). Additionally, as the examples of my students illustrate, systematic inclusion often holds the message that homosexuality is evil and sinful.

The results of both systematic exclusion and systematic inclusion are the same. Both add to the message to gay, lesbian, and bisexual (GLB) students that a part of their identity should not and cannot be shared. GLB students are forced to act straight in order to fit in and often feel that there is no where to turn, even, or perhaps especially, to teachers and other school personnel. As a teen participant in one study commented:

School was a definite hell hole... Like, you sit in class, right, and all these girls are talking about which boys they like and all that crap. And you make stuff up, like 'oh yeah, he's really cute. Yeah Tom Selleck, wow.' You don't know how many times I wanted to lean over and say, 'hey, what about Julia Roberts? Some fox, huh?' (O'Connor, 1994, p. 9)

The effects of such closeting have been well-documented and include alcoholism, drug addiction, and poor academic performance. Consider these two typical recollections of school days:

John: "Ninth grade was the worst. I wasn't accepted. I knew I was gay, and I knew everyone else knew because they told me I was a faggot every day. But I was still trying to be straight with the friends that I did have. I stopped doing homework and didn't pay attention to school. I felt like something was exploding inside of me. I started smoking pot too. I was trying to hide from what I really felt". (Bass & Kaufman, 1996, p. 45)

Michele: "More and more I was using alcohol to try to avoid uncomfortable parties and things, where I knew there would be boys." Michele was aware that she drank a lot, a lot more than her friends and recalls, "I took the first sips and made sure I had the last". (Chandler, 1995)

Such self-destructive actions are commonplace among GLB youth. Of course, the most serious effect of systematic inclusion/exclusion is suicide. Approximately one-third of all teen suicides are committed by GLB youth (Remafedi, 1994). Fifty-three percent of gay youths served by Los Angeles' Youth Services Department had attempted suicide at least once and forty-seven percent more than once (The Center for Population Options, 1992).

This is not to say that the effects of being gay in a heterosexist society are always so obvious or lead to the same results. For example, instead of going through an academic decline, a gay teen at local youth group confided in me that he threw himself into his schoolwork and became a 'model' student. Behind this façade was hidden his personal despair and loneliness. While he had never attempted it, he had contemplated suicide "nearly every day through high school."

Creating façades is a forced 'option' for GLB youth. Consider William who tells us that he "wasn't having any harassment problems, but [he] was isolating myself from the rest of the students. I knew if I came out, there would be consequences, either verbal or physical, and I wasn't willing to do that" (Due, 1995, p. 187). Another student eloquently summarizes the circumstances of GLB youth. When asked what he thought being gay will mean to him, he responded:

It will mean a lot more secrecy about life. Not being able to show my affection, having to lie to a lot of people, my friends not knowing as much about me as I think they should. Right now I'm worried that it will have a real profound effect, like what kind of friends I'll have and what kind of job I can get. And not to say the least, violence. If people would just let me, I would have no problems being gay. I don't know what it does to a person

who has to live in that kind of constant fear: Who might know? (Due, 1995, p. 74f)

In partial answer to what it means to live in “that kind of constant fear,” Al Ferreira, director of a program for GLB youth, observes, ‘Living with lies destroys the fabric of who we are as people. It imprisons us spiritually—and that’s a terrible thing to do to other human beings’ (cited in Bass and Kaufman, 1996, p. 68). By being forced to hide a major part of their identity, GLB youth cannot live their lives from the inside out. They cannot engage in the fullness of reciprocal love, caring, and interest because others do not wholly know them. (Those who might assert that our sexuality is not a major part of our identity need but count in a day the number of times sexuality, especially heterosexuality, is displayed. Count the number of couples you pass holding hands, kissing, or flirting. Count the number of family pictures seen on desks in the office place. Count the number of wedding rings seen on hands. Count the number of second glances at a good pair of legs. Count the number of male comments about how pretty Julia Roberts is and female comments on what a hunk Mel Gibson is.)

Democracy, Justice, and GLB Youth

In order to avoid spiritual imprisonment, we must promote reciprocity of love and caring for and interest in whole persons. But the many (mis)interpretations of the approaches in doing this lead me to believe that we must approach it from another avenue. We must promote this spirituality vicariously through democratic justice.

Democracy requires, *inter alia*, equality of educational opportunity. Clearly, the students whom we have read about have not enjoyed equality of educational opportunity. For most of them, so much of their energy goes into protecting themselves from abuse that educational opportunity is rendered a sham.

Kenneth Howe (1997) develops what I believe to be an interpretation of equality of educational opportunity that, if followed, offers principles by which both equality of educational opportunity and the general well-being of GLB youth could be improved. Howe develops what he calls the ‘participatory ideal.’ This ideal builds into the principle of equality of educational opportunity ‘the requirement to include the needs, interests, and perspectives of all groups – especially groups that have been historically excluded—in determining what educational opportunities are indeed worth wanting’ (Howe, 1997, p. 4). This requirement is served by and requires ‘the virtue of recognition’ and the ‘principle of nonoppression.’

The virtue of recognition Howe borrows from Charles Taylor. According to Taylor (1992), justice requires that ‘we all recognize the equal value of different cultures; that we not only let them survive, but acknowledge their worth’ (Taylor, 1992, p. 64). Only then can historically excluded voices have real authority—i.e. beyond being heard and tolerated (and then dismissed)—in democratic discussion. Howe broadens Taylor’s notion somewhat by including—in addition to culture—race, ethnicity, gender, language, religion, and sexual orientation within the scope of those characteristics that must be recognized.

Howe's interpretation of recognition stops somewhere short of the 'fusion of horizons' that Taylor embraces. This is utopian. Thus, we must interpret 'worth' as meaning that a particular culture (here I use 'culture' generically to encompass all of the other characteristics that should be recognized) has value perhaps only to the identity of its members. Even so, the members of different cultures must be included in democratic discourse. The weight given to various cultures in such discourse depends on the extent to which they are democratic themselves and recognize the importance that other people place on their own cultures.

This also means that we need not recognize all cultures as 'worthy.' We can, for example, reject Nazism out of hand. We can reject it not because it is 'immoral' (which it happens to be) but because it is undemocratic to the extent that it does not practice reciprocity of the virtue of recognition. I make the distinction here between passing judgments based on the moral versus the democratic nature of visions of the good since moral arguments are the most common made against gay, lesbian, and bisexual rights. Such arguments should carry little weight in democracies, especially since gay and lesbian groups do not betray any democratic principles in pursuit of their goal—namely, recognition.

Historically, whether or not groups or their individual members have been 'recognized' has been a function of differences in power and privilege. Designed to deal with this fact, nonoppression is the principle by which recognition is assured. The principle of nonoppression assures recognition because it 'requires identifying groups that qualify as oppressed' (Howe, 1997, p. 70) and putting into place rules and procedures such that recognition occurs.

In order to identify oppressed groups, Howe calls upon Iris Marion Young's five forms of oppression. They are exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence. Howe observes that while schools have a responsibility to help eliminate each of these forms of oppression, cultural imperialism along with violence are most directly under their control. Cultural imperialism is, in short, the imposition of the cultural meanings, view of the good life, and the value system of the dominant group on all groups.

Notice that the opportunity for schooling is an opportunity not worth wanting for many GLB youth. The abuse that they must endure on a daily basis places a disproportionate burden on them to take advantage of this opportunity. This abuse takes many forms from verbal and physical abuse from peers (occasionally the former even comes from teachers and administrators) to simply being ignored. GLB youth are ignored when teachers fail to take action against the pejorative and abusive use of terms like 'fag' and 'dyke.' GLB youth are ignored when teachers fail to include GLB issues in the curriculum.

Notice that by not taking action against abuse and by not including GLB issues in the curriculum teachers betray the fundamental principle of nonoppression. For one of the 'rules' that must be in place to ensure recognition is that GLB youth see themselves represented in the curriculum and that others see them as well. In other words, what is required for true equality of educational opportunity *vis-à-vis* GLB youth is 'positive systematic inclusion.' As one student pleaded, "Let the [gay

people] be mentioned [positively] once in a while. The loneliness can eat a person up" (Kissen, 1993, p. 61).

Under this democratic framework, all of the policies and reactions that I outlined in above – from the many invocations of God to the banning of GLB-themed books—are rendered 'immoral' by applying justice (i.e. the principle of nonoppression and the virtue of recognition).

One of the effects of recognition is the human wholeness that I presented earlier as a definition of spirituality. It is the ability to live one's life from the inside out, i.e. being who we are and not hiding. Being able to share oneself wholly with others is the source of our spirituality. After years of abuse in high school, one student reports on the joy of living from the inside out:

Now that I'm a junior in college and head of the campus gay group, the best part of my life is a sense of inner peace, a sense of knowing that I'm not lying to myself and that I'm not lying to anyone else anymore. And if someone else has a problem with my being gay, then that's their problem and not mine. (Bass & Kaufman, 1996, p. 24)

I am not claiming that the application of principles of justice will lead to all students living from the inside out as this student. This is the typical reaction of those that finally do (see Woog, 1995, for other examples). But, the participatory ideal still serves those students who don't or, more appropriately, can't. Teachers who promote recognition demonstrate to their GLB students that they are not alone, that somebody truly cares. Another student recalls from high school:

We were doing civil rights stuff. For part of our test we were supposed to write about how you would encourage gay people who are fighting for equal rights to use the lessons of the civil rights movement. I was very happy about that. It took a lot of guts [for the teacher] to do that. (Bass & Kaufman, 1996, p. 213)

Summary and Conclusions

Clearly there are many competing notions of caring, spiritual well-being, acceptable behavior, acceptable persons, worthy institutions, and morality. The ways in which people view these notions become particularly polarized when applied to the issue of sexual orientation. The people in the many examples provided above do not see homosexuality as acceptable. They do not see it as worthy or moral. Gays, lesbians, and bisexuals are not spiritually well; they are sinners. The institutions that gays, lesbians, and bisexuals might defend (e.g. same sex marriage) are not worthy of support.

The problem here regarding the notions of redemptive love and care theory is that many of the people whom I would call heterosexist or homophobic genuinely care about GLB youth. One of my students in a pre-service teacher course, for example, pointed out that the Bible says that we should 'be merciful to those who doubt; snatch others from the fire and save them; to others show mercy, mixed with

fear—hating even the clothing stained by corrupted flesh' (Jude 22–23). This, she observed, means that we should "have mercy and love those who do not know Christ, but with fear, hate their clothes (actions and thoughts) which are from Satan." The sexual acts that homosexuals engage in are from Satan. This is why another student also commented that she could "love the [homosexual] person, but hate their sinful actions." Another student, lamenting Diane Elze's work on homophobia, wrote to me, "I can't believe she was telling a flippin' five year old about same sex marriage. He's **FIVE**" (student's emphasis) (Elze, 1992). (To reiterate, this student is coming from the heterosexist assumption that homosexuality is solely about sex. I am not suggesting, nor does Elze for that matter, that five-year-olds be taught about sex. But they can and should learn about love and marriage, learning which is automatic as regards heterosexual marriage.) This student also balked at Elze's suggestion that we 'empower young people to integrate the joys of sex into their lives, protecting and caring for themselves at the same time.' The student sarcastically replied, "how about the joys of alcohol, as long as they are using it 'wisely.' That's how I interpret 'protecting and caring for themselves.'" The point, to reiterate, is that these students engage in, to their minds, caring. If we care about students we should not allow them to engage in sin. We should not allow them to embrace a 'lifestyle' that is dangerous. For homosexuality is, like alcoholism, dangerous. But care and love within such mindsets take on a very undemocratic, oppressive, and imperialist form. I don't think these views and actions are instances of the 'care' that Noddings and other care theorists defend. However, these examples do demonstrate the danger in bandying about notions like 'caring' or 'moral' without looking carefully at the potential (mis)interpretations and without providing some guiding principles for their application. For caring is not caring unless it includes principles of democracy, unless it includes justice. For GLB students in schools, the major requirement of caring and justice is positive systematic inclusion.

Finally, I would like to point out that in this article, I have chosen to focus on the effects of certain policies—namely systematic inclusion, systematic exclusion, and positive systematic inclusion—on GLB youth. But this story has many other sides. For example, we also need to consider children who have gay parents (cf. Petrovic, 1999). Another side concerns the effects of these policies on other 'straight' students, indeed the effects on all of us. Both systematic inclusion and exclusion give implicit (often explicit) endorsement to all forms of violence against GLB youth. These policies fail to educate all students and teachers to other views of life. This failure to educate breeds prejudices that affect (read: limit) all of our choices, from the decision to become sexually active (many students, both straight and gay, become active just to prove they are not gay) to the kinds of leisure activities we engage in (cf. Elze, 1992).

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