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Unleashing a Student's
River of Being: A Dialogic
Exploration of Expanding
Possibilities

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Abstract: Sociology professor Phoebe Godfrey and her former student Juan Pablo Yepes Tobón, engage in boundary-crossing explorations of the relationship between the academy and spirituality – recognizing dialogue as intimate and animate, reflecting the character of spirituality. The purpose of education is posed as the cultivation of the students’ inner life. This entails nurturing intrinsic curiosity; encouraging cross-disciplinary, spiritual/ontological consideration; holding space for students to explore their “authentic Self”; and thusly helping the students to discover their “gifts”, which arise innately from this spiritual cultivation and flourishing.

This stands in stark opposition to the realities of the modern academy, which has predominantly assumed the patterns of the capitalist context within which it is embedded. The modern academy serves to produce a workforce and echoes positivist notions of “objective knowing”. Accordingly, a hierarchical model is assumed, along with an orientation toward grinding intrinsic curiosity out of students from a young age and into higher education. This at once supplants tendencies for “disruption” with an inclination to please authority figures, while predisposing students to forgo autonomous and experiential exploration in exchange for “handed-down” knowledge. Yet there is hope, as our dialogue illustrates, when students’ inner lives and spiritual autonomies are prioritized.

Keywords: autonomy, dialogue, academia, Spirituality, pluriverse

Introduction

Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer (Rainer Maria Rilke, 1929).

The authors of this article were, at one point, professor and student. The former, Phoebe Godfrey, a White, US-born, Europe-raised, woman-identifying lesbian female (“although not very female, but that’s fine”) – a sociology professor off the tenure track, a community creator, an artist, among other things. The latter, Juan Pablo Yepes Tobón, a Colombian-American, man-identifying male, raised in both countries – an eco-anarchist, a facilitator, an artist, among other things. Yet both were seekers, even before meeting – spiritual seekers, seekers of life and all its connectivity. Both also recognized that the modern classroom, as it exists, holds no space for seeking in this manner. In Phoebe’s holding of space through years of tutelage and mentorship, the flourishing of Juan Pablo’s spiritual autonomy was nurtured – as was the spiritual autonomy of countless other students that had been ready for such spiritual journeys. As Rilke says, we each must live into our own answers.

Our seeking has brought us together into multiple dialogues, through which we intended to mesh our understandings of spirituality’s relationship to academia, under the context of modern capitalist institutions – as well as weave our understandings of where lie the possibilities for spiritual flourishing. In short, we seek to explore the possibilities for the growth and development of the Self (which we understand as our spiritual beings, as opposed to our socialized, socially constructed selves) within today’s academy and in so doing we explore deeper questions as to the meaning and purpose of education – as in the overlapping processes of teaching, learning and knowledge making.

These dialogues responding to such questions were the seeds from which this article was grown. Understanding dialogue as a communal weaving of knowledge, our explorations shed the constraints of mathematical argumentation and instead reflect an illustrative form, like a tapestry. We forgo isolated and abstracted conclusions, and instead present the fruit of our

knowledge-making process as this painterly illustration of understanding and experience.

Why a Dialogue?

Our choice of dialogue reflects our understanding of reality as *socially constructed*, as propounded by social theorists such as Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann who in the seminal book *The Social Construction of Reality* recognize that in its essence social reality is created through conversation. They state:

The most important vehicle of reality-maintenance is conversation. One may view the individual's everyday life in terms of the working away of a conversational apparatus that ongoingly maintains, modifies and reconstructs his subjective reality... It is important to stress, however, that the greater part of reality – maintenance in conversation is implicit, not explicit.

...

We have seen how language objectifies the world, transforming the *panta rhei* ["everything flows" – added] of experience into a cohesive order. In the establishment of this order language realizes a world, in the double sense of apprehending and producing it. Conversation is the actualizing of this realizing efficacy of language in the face-to-face situations of individual existence (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 173).

Given this fluidity of reality construction we additionally recognize the *plurality* of reality. In this article, this takes a central role in how we situate spirituality in academia; namely, via emphasis upon *spiritual autonomy* – practiced through direct, autonomous, and experiential exploration of the world by the experiencer. We align ourselves with the notion of the "pluriverse" – as defined by Latin American post-development theorists rooted in Indigenous thought. Arturo Escobar intuits that the cultural intentions of the "capitalist hetero patriarchal modernity" (2019, p. 121) have invented the notion of

objectivity in order to imbue its own epistemologies with absolute authority, while invalidating those plural ways of constructing reality developed outside of this hegemony. The editors of “Pluriverse: A Post-Development Dictionary” – Escobar included – elaborate: “Whereas the West managed to sell its own idea of One World – known only by modern science and ruled by its own cosmovision – the alter-globalization movements propose pluriversality as a shared project based on the multiplicity of ‘ways of worlding’” (Acosta et al., 2019, p. xxxiv).

Thus we value dialogue as a medium for the constructive intersection of co-existing, impermanent and continually emerging realities. From here, we shall argue for the spiritual empowerment of the student body toward autonomous and communal construction of realities, in opposition to the trend of “One-World” impositions under modern academic institutions.

Glimpses of what we seek for today’s young people can be witnessed in the recent Pro-Palestinian, ceasefire, and military-divestment encampments (as in students are asking their universities to divest from the for-profit military industrial complex), which have been supporting multi-racial, religious and political collectivist perspectives, even while remaining focused on these larger transnational and highly complex goals (Abu El-Haj, 2024). What these students seek are dialogues, across political, religious and institutional divides, in opposition to the hegemonic imposition of a singular narrative, so that their views can be collectively heard and their visions collectively woven into reality.

Building on Berger and Luckman’s work, we also recognize the insights of Aboriginal scholar Tyson Yunkaporta who describes how the dialogue ritual of Aboriginal epistemology honors this plurality, through the ritual of what he refers to as “yarning”.

...[Yarning is] a ritual that incorporates elements such as story, humour, gesture and mimicry for consensus-building, meaning-making and innovation. It references places and relationships and is highly contextualised in the local worldviews of those yarning. It has protocols of active listening, mutual respect and building on what others have said rather than openly contradicting them or debating their ideas (2019, “Advanced and Fair” section).

Additionally, Standing Rock Sioux author and activist Vine Deloria Jr. illustrates a similar practice of communal knowledge-weaving in Native American epistemologies:

In most tribal traditions, no data are discarded as unimportant or irrelevant. Indians consider their own individual experiences, the accumulated wisdom of the community that has been gathered by previous generations, their dreams, visions, and prophecies, and any information received from birds, animals, and plants as data that must be arranged, evaluated, and understood as a unified body of knowledge. This mixture of data from sources that the Western scientific world regards as highly unreliable and suspect produces a consistent perspective on the natural world. It is seen by tribal peoples as having wide application... (Deloria et al., 1999, pp. 66-67)

Reflected across these vantage-points is the fathoming of reality as synonymous with both *experience* and *relationship*. In fact, we assert here that both reality and knowledge are created through relationships; relationships that must be continually co-nurtured and thus co-constructed.

Quantum physics has come to understand that observation is intrinsically interactive, that the very act of perceiving unavoidably influences reality. “At the subatomic level, we cannot observe something without changing it. There is no such thing as the independent observer who can stand on the sidelines watching nature run its course without influencing it”, says Gary Zukav, author and teacher, who, in his book *The Dancing Wu Li Masters*, explores the overlap between quantum physics and Eastern spiritual understandings (1984, p. 112). The known can never truly be objectified, and the knower can never truly isolate themselves – both are instead always dynamic participants in reciprocal relationship, collectively manifesting reality.

We argue that spirituality is not only intrinsic to, but to some degree synonymous with, knowledge-making. Spirituality, too, is woven from relationships; it is cultivated through direct experience – the intuitive act of touching-as-knowing – of the world’s myriad beings. Thus, we claim education should be as participatory and experiential as spirituality is, and as this relationship-reality encourages and even demands.

Dialogue, we understand as the medium which reflects how existence and epistemology are inextricably patterned by relationship, and honors this participatory, experiential animacy of knowledge-making.

Methods

We engaged in multiple recorded dialogues using an online virtual platform to aid both in transcription, but also interestingly enough, heightened intimacy from our cameras' foci on our faces. These dialogues are the basis from which the text for this article is drawn. Through the punctuation and more informal expressions preserved through this medium, the recorded dialogues reflect the emotions and lively engagement that we shared when we had them.

The pattern of our unedited dialogues naturally assumed a spiral pattern of topics – “A-B-C-A-B-C-A-B-C”. The richness of our dialogue arose from this animate freedom to ‘bounce around’. Writing this article involved resequencing and linearizing this pattern – “AAA-BBB-CCC” – for the sake of accessibility. The body of this article is divided into three sections, reflecting this resequencing. That said, this does not erase the value gleaned from the dialogic process.

Additionally, we have used our dialogues both as our data, and to experience from a meta-cognitive perspective how we individually and collectively understand the embodiment of our own spirituality, as well as human spirituality in general.

Given our transition from quoted dialogue to distanced analysis, at some points we speak in the first person, at other points in the third person. This is done to mimic the scale of intimacy in which we experience our spirituality – as in, sometimes, we are “it” and sometimes we are out of “it”, reflecting upon “it”.

The dialogue between authors will be presented in the format of:

⋮ JP: ...

⋮ P: ...

We are the living, amorphous data; thus, our methodology is straightforward, and not.

Spirituality: One's Place in the Self, One's Place in the World

We endeavor to coax and paint a loose and vivid illustration of a possible understanding of spirituality, rejecting the notion of a 'one, true' spirituality. Spirituality is a living plurality of the myriad spiritual experiences of beings across place and history, rooted in specific lived experiences and thus sprouting unique inroads into what many Native Americans refer to as the "Great Mystery" of existence and being. That which we present here is the emergent notion of spirituality co-weaved from the intersection of our spiritual explorations, as detailed above.

"Seeking Life"

Education – to learn – is discerning, coming to know and getting to know the patterns of our world. It is a deeply intimate experience – especially when recognizing the continuity and animacy of the world. Education is intrinsically linked to the spiritual process of exploring the world, exploring existence, exploring the plural and continuous beings of existence. At the heart of spiritual development is education. And at the heart of education, lies spirituality.

The cultivation of the inner life represents this same educational expedition, but directed inwards – a familiarization with the Self, to situate oneself within the Self.

Understanding the ways in which one's Self is embedded in the world/cosmos is a dimension of the spiritual journey. Education should ideally become a process of situating oneself within patterns of being – reconciling one's own *beinghood* with those of the beings that one is in relationship with. Cajete reflects this understanding in the introduction of "Native Science" – explaining how Native Science recognizes and practices the interconnectedness of knowledge-ways:

In Native languages there is no word for “science”, nor for “philosophy”, “psychology”, or any other foundational way of coming to know and understand the nature of life and our relationships therein. Not having, or more accurately, not needing, words for science, art, or psychology did not diminish their importance in Native life. For Native people, seeking life was the all-encompassing task. While there were tribal specialists with particular knowledge of technologies and ritual, each member of the tribe in his or her own capacity was a scientist, an artist, a storyteller, and a participant in the great web of life (1999, p. 2).

In this sense, education is, or rather should be, deeply and innately ontological as well. By ontology, what we refer to are the stories which the human being comes to hold, regarding the nature of humankind, the nature of the Universe, and *the ways in which humankind should interact with the Universe*. Education intrinsically entails learning how to be in the world. Learning how the Self, the community, and the human being, should participate with Nature, with what *is*. In our case, living upon Mother Earth, this implies learning to settle into *reciprocal co-living* with the many non-human communities within which we are embedded.

Here lies “seeking life”, in this ontological wrestling with the “Great Mystery”, with the fundamental questions of how the human being should interact with the cosmos.

The Experiential Exploration of Beings

We would assert that one’s spirituality can be developed, grown, through a direct experiential touching of beings (as in, “the light in me sees the light in you”).

JP: On the one hand, this can be about – if it’s me practicing the touching-knowing of other beings, it can entail a profound recognition, a fathoming, of the other’s beinghood, the quality of their animacy and spirit. Diametrically opposed to othering, or alienating them. On the other hand, this spiritual exploration of other beings can be about “knowing” them through experience, as one comes to know a relative, as one’s familiarity with them gestates the more space and time you share.

In this we see Juan Pablo taking a panpsychic stance on spirituality, asserting the animacy of all matter, and the illusory nature of the boundaries between all beings; the Universe framed as a continuity of being. Similarly, together we understand *othering* as not solely an act of social estrangement, but an attempt at existential estrangement – the imposition of illusory boundaries between beings. We would assert that a shared character across the plurality of authentic spiritual experiences is a gradual approximation toward the realization of the continuity, animacy, and divinity of all things in the cosmos.

Thus, we assert that spiritual exploration can be directed into the Self, toward other beings with whom we share the animate cosmos, or even toward the living continuity of all beings.

Some of these insights have emerged during a class of Phoebe's, from our collective reading of "Native Science: Natural Laws of Interdependence" by Tewa scholar Gregory Cajete. He refers to Native American epistemology as one of innumerable spiritual expressions that emphasizes the experiential dimension of spiritual exploration, "rooting the entire tree of knowledge in the soil of direct physical and perceptual experience of the earth" (1999, pp. 23-24). From these insights, we too have, as already, argued above based on our own experiences that authentic spiritual exploration is indeed woven from relationship, including the one we have co-created.

JP: While conceptualization is a tool in the knowledge-making process, concepts are illusory, and often deceptively used by the powers-that-be to control the narrative, to impose a singular reality.

Versus, autonomous spirituality, a personal – yet often and I would say preferably communal – engagement, with one's direct experience of reality, and the community's interwoven direct experiences of reality.

Juan Pablo's exploration here reflects a well known Zen saying; "To point to the moon a finger is used, but do not mistake the finger for the moon". Similarly phrased as, "to not mistake the map for the territory", these both evoke a more subtle implication: conceptualization – which seeks to hold and objectify

the world – will always amount to a cerebral imitation, and cannot discern the dimension of truth gleaned through direct experience of the world.

Autonomy and the Self

Along with this broader conceptualization of spirituality, we explored in our dialogue the particular focus of one's "knowing" of the Self – whether this be cultivation of the peace and fulfillment fruited from one's inner life; a grounded sense of continuity with the world/cosmos; or coming to embody one's intrinsic, authentic "dance", one's pattern, one's way of being.

· P: It's like the Zen saying that I love. "Show me your Original Face, the face
· you had before your parents were born".

This exploration of the authentic Self, an intrinsic and autonomous exploration in itself, often fills the explorer with a fitting sense of freedom. It reflects and reinforces autonomy back into one's way of being. Phoebe continues.

· P: That's part of the package, right? That spirituality should give you that
· feeling of freedom – autonomy? I think freedom and autonomy are two sides
· of the same experience, or sense of identity. Identity as in the Self, and not
· just our socially ascribed identities as in being male or female, white or
· black, etc.

· I'm a very autonomous person, and I feel very free because I allow myself
· to explore new ideas and insights in almost any given moment, regardless
· of the social norms that constrain people's thoughts. When I was younger,
· that was more challenging. Now that I'm older, it's easier, as I see it as part of
· my spiritual – and I would add creative – practice, and so I'm more used to it.

The very cultivation of the inner life – as Phoebe shares – previously framed as a "compass-to-wellbeing", can come to imbue the cultivator with the fathomings and energy to further circumvent the pressures of the dominant

culture and the coercions of institutions, for the sake of further reaching toward that which nurtures the soul, further cultivating the inner life.

Spiritual Autonomy vs. Coercive Doctrine

There is an important distinction to be made, between what we have thus far elaborated upon – the authentic and autonomous exploration of spirituality – as opposed to the traditions of “spirituality” often enforced by the dominant culture (which we would assert to be a “dominator” culture) and its institutions.

JP: I've often distinguished institutional (and often patriarchal) religions, and their handling of spirituality, from autonomous spirituality. I think this dichotomy is very vivid – though often not clear-cut. The former embodies doctrine, and the culture of allowing spiritual authority to be imbued in, say, a hierarchy of priests, often for the sake of coercion and social control. The patriarchal – or often-patriarchal – religions' way of approaching spirituality is like Paulo Friere's “banking” model of education, where students are posed as receptacles for swallowing and regurgitating the objectified knowledge given to them by authority figures (Friere, 1972). It's a handing-down sort of model.

When I was 12 or so, I got into a heated argument with an authority figure in my life. I said that my little sister shouldn't be told that “Catholic doctrines are law, whether you like it or not” – that she should be given options, and the freedom to choose for herself. I'll qualify now, Catholicism, Christianity, they can be grounds for authentic spirituality – when they're autonomous, when they're fed by spiritual experience.

I was scolded. “If you try to do that, I will stop you. You know how I was raised? The people like you, the doubters, we're supposed to snuff you out”.

Both religious doctrine and this banking model of education are about accepting what you've been fed – what you've been told is important, valuable, real – regardless of your own actual experiences.

Thus, as we further discussed, our dominant culture and its spiritual institutions have a coercive tendency to encourage others to accept and digest the doctrine, the “handed down” conceptualizations of the dominant culture – as opposed to gleaning the truth of the world through direct experience, then digesting and weaving their own stories of the world (preferably in community). The latter is a grassroots, pluriversal way of knowledge-making, threatening to the dominant culture, which of course includes us and our own emergings.

The Modern Academy

⋮ To be nobody but yourself in a world which is doing its best night and day to
⋮ make you like everyone else is to fight the hardest battle which any human
⋮ being can fight; and never stop fighting (E.E. Cummings, 1965).

This section will spotlight first-person dialogue with very little emphasis on secondary sources and analysis. The intent is to explicitly oppose the positivistic and linear thinking of the modern Western academy, which insists upon an on-going stream of literature and analysis, usually representing the accepted perceptions of social reality – the current hegemonic intellectual paradigm – in order to justify its validity. We instead choose to allow our dialogue to speak for itself, in a manner that is raw, vibrant, and animate, thus from our understanding deeply spiritual.

We posed to ourselves the simple, yet deeply complex question, “What is the relationship between spirituality and the academy?”. Here, we address modern educational institutions in particular, understood to largely be expressions of the aforementioned “capitalist hetero patriarchal modernity” – a control-oriented, “dominator” culture.

⋮ P: I like to look at the history of the Academy.

I like to remember that the academy came out of the religious emphasis on study and withdrawal from society, the monastery. And so now, here we are hundreds of years later, where we've got a piece of that – the expectation that students will be completely immersed in the text, and have time to read and reflect and critically think. But we've also got the contradiction that they have all these courses to take and all these credits to accumulate and all these topics that they are not interested in. And many of them have to work, many of them are just struggling to survive.

That tension is really playing out more and more in the modern world, as more students who are low income are coming to the University, along with more students who previously had been legally banned from the University – either because of race, or gender, or sexuality, or religion.

JP: Yeah. I would phrase it as, that original university, with its focus on inner life, has been stripped down – in the same way that capitalism strips the value from anything within its reach for the sake of productivity, like meat from the bone. That's just sort of its nature, exploitation for the sake of exponential growth, right?

P: And alienation, I think we have to add a nod to Marx's estranged labor: the alienation of the learner from their learning.

JP: I would go further; I think that, from the universities as they exist under capitalism, there is very little genuine focus on spiritual cultivation, on the genuine and internalized knowing of transformative learning – Paolo Friere's concept (1972). And I think that this is very much intentional.

I would say the culture purposefully orients the university against the intrinsic dimension of genuine spirituality. Instead, education is extrinsically motivated, structured around conditioning and meeting the demands of a hierarchy, and that's for the purpose of getting the student accustomed to servicing the capitalist engine, dissuading the student from exploring reality and their own spiritual life autonomously. Getting the student to instead...

P: To become a worker.

JP: To become a worker. It is for breaking spirits! To predispose them to coercion, to get them to be as willing to submit to the whims and demands of capitalism as possible.

The culture does not only vaciate – I take “vaciate” from the Spanish vaciar, which means to empty, but to me it connotes a more active, violent voiding – these institutions don't just vaciate education because “that's what capitalism does”. This phenomenon is not only a microcosm of capitalism's broader tendency to exploit, to plunder the fullness and value in the world. It is useful and strategic, to vaciate the student body, the citizenry. It is disempowering.

Here, Juan Pablo crosses lingual barriers, a pluriversal act, to weave and expand possible meanings, and to reclaim some epistemic autonomy.

The described emptying of education serves to socialize the student body into a workforce adjusted to capitalist society's hierarchical structuring – as the neglect, repression, and erosion of spiritual and *creative* autonomy is essential to dispossessing the human being of that threatening ability for ontological self-determination.

As Henry A. Giroux, Marxist educational theorist, argues, higher education is molded by “corporate culture [which refers] to an ensemble of ideological and institutional forces that functions politically and pedagogically to both govern organizational life through senior managerial control and to produce compliant workers, depoliticized consumers, and passive citizens” (Giroux, 2013, p. 104). We continued.

JP: Most students under modern academies – again, intentionally – have been kept away from that which might show us the value of the cultivation of our inner lives. We've been pushed away from calibrating that existential compass-to-wellbeing; wellbeing can only be consistently and heartily achieved through autonomy.

And so, the students stay domesticated, sacrificing their own mental, emotional and physical wellbeing for the sake of performing those tasks that they don't care about, as efficiently as possible.

P: I want to also bring us to questions around the mental health crisis. Because one of the things I'm noticing is that no one is saying it's a spiritual crisis. It's a crisis of meaning. And it's a crisis created by the very institution that claims that it's going to solve it by providing students with more mental health support, or by handing out flowers on campus, or whatever else they're coming up with. Rather than putting the whole institution under examination. What is it about the classroom? Or the average classroom; there is something that is making students feel so spiritually numb.

JP: It's a pattern that is reflected throughout capitalism. All that's offered are symptomatic solutions, without a preventative lens, without looking at the underlying structural flows that are pushing people towards these outcomes. It's what Daniel Quinn calls "sticks in a river" (Quinn, 1999).

P: Yes, in this metaphor, the river is capitalism, which is inherently oriented against spiritual development. And yet we are having this dialogue, and these dissident ideas and so there is resistance, there are ways that we can, not stop the flow of the river, but to use another Quinn quote, to "walk away from the pyramid" (Quinn, 1999). And for me that is the solution.

There is the education under capitalist institutions which reflect the dominator culture, and there is the emancipatory education we seek to manifest, oriented toward empowerment of the student and care for the student. We recognize the former as comparable to Friere's "banking" model of education, and the latter as being rooted in spiritual and creative autonomy. To even use the term "education" to describe both of these is questionable, given how qualitatively different their processes are, and how diametrically opposed their goals are.

Moving towards what we claim to be "the purpose of education" necessarily involves shedding the hierarchical model dominant through our modernity. That

said, we understand the purpose of education to be a complex and dynamic plurality. In the coming section, we'll paint out our fathoming of the purpose of education, our inroads into this plurality.

For the Flourishing of the Student

P: This, for me, really challenges my questioning of, what is the purpose? What am I, as an instructor supposed to be doing for myself, and thus for my students? And the answer I've come up with is – to go back to the spiritual, go back to the creative, or as Marx put it our “species-being”, as I have written about previously (Godfrey, 2017). To go back to feeding their souls and letting the capitalist part be insignificant – to the best that I can do. Deadlines, the best I can do, grades, the best I can do; and it seems to be working.

We continue to honor, emulate, and recognize the unpredictability of the flow of spirituality by preserving dialogue as a space for capturing the emergent inherently creative alchemy of two people.

Here we dig deeper into the relationship between spirituality, creativity and the academy – past the context of a deprived academic regime, into explorations of nurturing, flourishing, and possibilities.

A sociology classroom, an Inroad, a Space for Emergence

JP: I was fortunate enough to not only come across your – very non-traditional, feminist, creative and mindful – sociology classes, but also, external to the University, go through my own educational journey towards spiritual development.

I got to a point where, at the University, I had it as a goal to be as intrinsically motivated as possible, and to actively go against those impulsive, socialized narratives that replay in your head from years of being subjected to the school system. And I did it for the sake of... of being happy! And for the sake of making something of value out of my own education.

P: Yeah. I think that there is the possibility that anybody can see through the production model. And sociology, as we've discussed, gives you tools. For me that's the power of sociology is to see through the illusion of our social story. Right?

And students who take sociology, I think often go through this kind of crisis where they realize that the things that they've been told are important, when put in comparison to your own inner life, pale.

But if you don't have that inner life to compare them to, it's like grasping for gold because inside is a desert! Because nobody's ever told you, that's where the real happiness and the real fulfillment and the real feeling of freedom can be found.

We the authors, as teacher and student, have had our journeys grounded within the context of sociology, the realm of academia which we navigated. Sociology, with its vantage-point and the tools it provided, was central to our experiences bridging, mending, spirituality and education. Given the modern academic hegemony, in objectifying and deanimating the world and knowledge of the world, spirituality and education have been torn apart. This is what Marx and Engles identify as having happened under capitalism, where all professions have lost their halos (Marx & Engles, 1848).

That being said, sociology holds no primacy as a knowledge-way in serving as a guide toward the inner life. That is to say, there are a pluriverse of possible inroads to spiritual education. The mess of socializations and institutional pressures can be navigated and untangled via innumerable entryways.

A plurality of attempts at alternative classrooms, including Phoebe's, have the teacher holding space – that is to say, establishing and maintaining a constructive setting – in the classroom for educational *emergence*, like waves cresting from the ocean of the students' inner lives. Space for a harmony of constructive interference between these waves to emerge; creativity from chaos – again reflecting Native Science, in its recognition of the creative impulse inherent to the chaotic patterning of the Universe (Cajete, 1999, p. 16). This is realized by releasing one's stranglehold and allowing the animate education to breathe and present itself via the students, encouraged by the beckoning of their explorations.

JP: I've been engaging with my own existence and with be-ing, and with other beings, for as long as I've had those curiosities. The question, the great question, "The Great Mystery" or whatever you might call it.

Your classroom naturally uprooted the radical questioning of the assumptions of the doctrine that the dominant culture hands down to us, naturally your class uproots the ontology of civilization.

That allowed me the space for developing my own ideas about ontology, about living in the world; and the space for even considering spirituality as a way of knowing.

P: If I can add in, I think more than all of that, when we're given autonomy, freedom, and a certain amount of stimulation, it gives us a space to figure out who we are.

JP: Yeah, it was the autonomy you gave us to explore.

P: And to me that's the ultimate goal of learning is, the ultimate spiritual experience – to keep inviting students to question, "Who are you, what are you thinking? Why do you think that way? How could you think it differently? How could you feel differently? What would it mean if you felt differently?"

But I do think, no matter what subject you're teaching, there can always be space for the inner life. You're teaching chemical engineering; ask the kids, "For what? For whom? For what kind of world?" You could always invite students into that inner space to ask the more philosophical questions about meaning and values and identity and... really struggle with, "How do we solve the crisis that we have created?" 'We' being Western culture.

Nurturing the "Metaphoric Mind"

Phoebe's approach to teaching rejects the hegemonic tendency of the dominating cultural river, that perpetuation of the "banking method of teaching" which seeks to atrophy the autonomy of students. She recognizes that despite many educational institutions' excessive emphasis upon positivist thought-ways like linearity, rationality, and atomization; that students – especially children – often hold divergent, creative, intuitive thought-ways in equal, if not greater degrees. These nascent seeds of spirituality and creativity within all children/students are in fact what Cajete refers to as the "metaphoric mind" (1999). He states,

In Native science, the metaphoric mind is the facilitator of the creative process; it invents, integrates, and applies the deep levels of human perception and intuition to the task of living. Connected to the creative center of nature, the metaphoric mind has none of the limiting conditioning of the cultural order. Its processing is natural and instinctive... It is inclusive and expansive in its processing of experience and knowledge (1999, pp. 29-30).

A well-realized metaphoric mind – one which practices holistic and intuitive knowing of the world, one which weaves dynamic, transformative, animate knowledge – such a mind is capable of fathoming, accepting, and holding space for the autonomous spiritual explorations of others; such a mind can embrace ontological plurality. Thus, it is 'dangerous' to the required monoculture of hegemony. Like spiritual autonomy, the metaphoric mind is not passively repressed for efficiency in the classroom, but actively repressed for its potential

to threaten the hegemonic culture and its ideological grip on what it claims to be 'the truth', as Juan Pablo explores here.

JP: I'm reminded of another sort of space held in your classroom, oriented towards spirituality, creativity. One dedicated to creating arts, so as to understand sociology and ontology. Creating a stage play about wolves questioning the "civilizational human" – the value lying in the fun of creation and play, and in weaving and communicating understanding through metaphor and poetry. Not for the sake of creating a product – though that was important, because we were trying to touch people – but also just intrinsically, for the sake of cultivation, for the sake of artistic expression.

P: Yeah, and for the experience. And the growth that comes from taking ideas and turning them into experiences right. The art show that I'm doing right now is called "From Ideas to Art".

Artistic avenues are deeply saturated with the potential for story-telling – by which we broadly refer to the divergent communication pertaining to the realm of the metaphoric mind. To circumvent objective conceptualizations, and instead, through communicative freedom of movement, to capture and express the intuited, and essentially unlimited patterns of the world.

Such an intimate internalization of meaning is essential to transformative education; with this digestion comes the ability to rearticulate, reconfigure and/or create new meaning. The aforementioned free exercise of theater and poetry embodies this creation of meaning – using the arts to pierce through the superficial, through the realm of conceptualizations and abstractions, and to intimately interact with one's interlocutor, to stimulate transformation, as was done to the student.

Becoming the Teacher, Unleashing the Self, Discovering One's Gifts

Through the creation of art – and more broadly, through the student expressing their transformed and unleashed inner Self – the student takes steps along

their journey to becoming their own teacher. This is evident in the ways Juan Pablo here is not beholden to Phoebe but rather teaches himself, her and others from who he has *become*, more than from what he knows. We assert that this level of ontological transformation is, or rather should be seen as, the deepest purposes of education.

American education activist Parker Palmer elaborates on how the realization, the “self-knowledge”, of the teacher themselves must come before they are able to teach.

...Knowing my students and my subject depends heavily on self-knowledge. When I do not know myself, I cannot know who my students are. I will see them through a glass darkly, in the shadows of my unexamined life – and when I cannot see them clearly I cannot teach them well. When I do not know myself, I cannot know my subject – not at the deepest levels of embodied, personal meaning. I will know it only abstractly, from a distance, a congeries of concepts as far removed from the world as I am from personal truth (1997).

This paints but a piece of the cyclical process which we assert education should embody. Here lies the goal of the student, the goal of education, of Self-exploration to become their own teacher. As Chinese Buddhist monk Linji Yixuan once said, “If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him”; among its plural meanings, this reflects how the guide must not be idealized, but instead supplanted – anything less cannot promote the level of spiritual and creative autonomy we seek.

“Becoming the teacher” needn’t mean assuming that formal role. In fact, to phrase it as “becoming the teacher” limits the breadth of this endeavor which we situate at the center of education. Whether or not one explicitly becomes a guide, the self-realized student lives upon the weavings of their understanding, embodies the meaning they have autonomously created, resonates their dance of being into the world. The student’s authentic Self – unfettered from the suppressive and control-oriented socializations of the dominant culture, and cultivated through attentive care – unabashedly manifests, daring to make itself

visible through the unshackled creativity and vivacious expression. Education must be oriented towards the realization of the student themselves. This is what it means to “become a teacher”.

Potawatomi scholar and botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer articulates this intuition about the purpose of education – and again it becomes saturated with, linked inextricably to, ontology.

...Were we to act ethically, don't we have to somehow compensate the plants for what we received?... I love listening to them consider such a question... The students ramble and laugh as we work and weave, but come up with a long list of suggestions... The gifts they might return to cattails are as diverse as those the cattails gave them. This is our work, to discover what we can give. Isn't this the purpose of education, to learn the nature of your own gifts and how to use them for good in the world? (2013, p. 239)

Thus, the realization of the student is grounded in the ontological endeavor – to situate the Self, the community, and humankind within existence, to learn how to live, and how to co-exist with the other beings of this living universe in which we are embedded. The realization of the student, the cultivation of their inner life, their journey to the Self-discovery of their “original face”, thusly is not realized only for its own sake; but because the unshackling of this resonance inextricably implies the unshackling of a generous abundance of being.

“Sol Rivering”

JP: In my own lived experience of my spiritual autonomy, I came to embody a term that I called “Sol Rivering” – Sol, Spanish for sun, and referring to one's inner life, one's fire, one's spirit, one's energy, one's way of being, one's dance, one's pattern, one's verb, the “whirlpool in the stream”; and the “Rivering” being a verb-form of “river”, representing a sort of out-flowing that isn't consolidated into a noun, that's allowed to live, that is dynamic, emulating Kimmerer's Grammar of Animacy (2013, p. 48).

While we have thus far used “river” to refer to the cultural flow which manifests society and socializes the people therein, we assert the versatility of the term “river” in repurposing its dynamism here to describe the expressive, emanating, outward flow of one’s Self. To distinguish our uses of the term river, for Sol Rivering we are using capitals.

JP: Unshackling this Sol Rivering, I feel, is the purpose of education. Because the Sol Rivering, in being this expressing of one’s intrinsic life, the shining of one’s sun, the outflowing of one’s energy, one’s animate, creative energy – is about giving. It’s about gifts, as the birds give their gift of song and the trees give their gift of fruit and medicine.

We humans, I believe, are the same as all other beings in nature – all the other beings of existence – in that we are oriented towards giving.

And so I want to give to others what I’ve been gifted. This spiritual autonomy, this knowing-what-my-gifts-are, or at least beginning to know what my gifts are and continuously exploring this. And, I think this is done through giving attention.

P: Yeah, I like that.

JP: I think, “What you pay attention to grows” (brown, 2021, p. 18). It’s a quote from adrienne marie brown, the activist who wrote *Holding Change*.¹

“Paying attention” as nurturing, and as caring. Giving attention to the inner lives of others so that they may discover their own spiritual autonomy, their own Sol Rivering. And so that they may discover their own gifts.

P: Yeah, I like that. And... I think your gifts are also yourself, right?

¹ Pleasure activist adrienne marie brown advocates for self-determining her spelling; brown’s name is customarily spelled with lowercase.

JP: Absolutely. We are the gifts – the sunlight is inseparable from the sun. And I think it relates to “being the change you want to see in the world”. Because once you embody that genuineness, just by existing, just by doing the dance that is your way of being, you are enacting change, you are giving gifts.

P: If you can find the face you had before you were born, then that is your gift, right? Your gift is inseparable from that face. That original Self, or soul, or spirit.

I think it's about enabling students to see that a career is not the same as your gift. We don't allow everybody to fulfill their gifts as a way of getting supported by society or getting rewarded enough to live, but it doesn't mean... You could stock shelves and still develop your gifts, your inner life, right?

And people who find that, people who embody their authentic spiritual Self, become gifts. When you think of the people we admire, if we take the Dalai Lama, or Robin Wall Kimmerer, or Greg Cajete – these are people who have become themselves. And out of them flows that authenticity. It doesn't have to be written. It could be just their presence. It could be their song, it could be their art, it could be their sport!

A saying that I love, mentioned by Jack Kornfield, a Buddhist scholar, he says, “The purpose of Buddhism is not to become a Buddhist. ...It's to become a Buddha. To find that unshakable part of a Buddha, and that spacious awareness within yourself” (Kornfield, 2019). And the purpose of education should not be to become a sociologist or a biologist or a tax writer or accountant – it's to become yourself.

Conclusion

For the mind does not require filling like a bottle, but rather, like wood, it only requires kindling to create in it an impulse to think independently and an ardent desire for the truth (Plutarch).

For our conclusion we decided that the greatest proof of our collective claims were to be found in Juan Pablo's own "Sol Rivering" – a term he created from his own "species-being" – and thereby Phoebe hands the conclusion over to him. What more could she say – what is called for here is to listen and be taught.

I, the student, now speak alone.

Within me, the fire has been lit. Through my experience submerged in freedom, through space held and attention paid, my spirituality has flourished. Ever more, I learn to foster my intrinsic curiosities. Ever more, I root myself in an animate universe. Ever more, I express the outflows of my authentic Self, ever more I transform the world into art with the resonance of my being, ever more I come to know the gifts I have to offer.

My own experience has proven to me that the oppressive socializations of the academy, and of the broader cultural hegemony, can be shed; that there are possibilities for an experience of education where the student's exploration and empowerment of their Self is prioritized – especially when the teacher steps forward to hold space for such an endeavor.

I hope to do the same, as has been done for me. I hope the sun within me can spread its flame to others. I hope to nurture in others that smothered inner strength, that curiosity for the world, that birthright to spiritual autonomy. I hope to welcome others back to this shared home in the Great Mystery; and I hope to spur others to contribute their "real" to the rich diversity of the pluriverse.

I am certain that I will, as I already have. Yet I shall always be a student; my *student-hood* I shall never shed. I am eager for this flame within to keep burning with awe and wonder at the sublimity of the Mystery, to compel me to keep exploring my ever-transforming Self, for many years to come.

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