The Soulful School

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Schools that pay attention to the cultivation of their souls become sanctuaries for both students and teachers.

That a school itself has a soul is rarely acknowledged. Schools tend instead to be seen as machines or factories. An example of this approach is the importation of principles and language from the business world's Total Quality Management (TQM) movement, where management is seen as a linear process that includes mathematical models, "measurement controls, process controls, statistical analysis, data collection tools, cybernetic systems, and feedback loops" (Secretan 1996, 17). In keeping with this approach, there is little room for the institution's soul. The result of these activities is what Dalla Costa calls "change fatigue" (1995, 10). Referring to industry, Dalla Costa (1995, 10-11) gives some examples of this phenomenon.

Employees read the new corporate mission, attend its launch meeting, or see the explanatory video, and still walk away lethargic, un-inspired, or even ashen. In subsequent meetings, they will say things like: "We need to wait until the mission is worked out."

Throughout the company individuals use the language of change like real pros, with the facility of the consultant who introduced it into the corporate culture. They have mastered the vocabulary because they know it is important, but though they try, they do not mean a word of it, since no one was there to help them through the mess of implementation. They resort to old practices for the sake of getting things done.

Senior management and employees come to value the opinions of an outside change specialist more than any opinion generated internally. This continuous seeking of a second opinion is perhaps the most telling symptom of change fatigue because it suggests an exhaustion of judgment.

Teachers also suffer from change fatigue. They are constantly asked to respond to curriculum policy changes, new testing and accountability procedures, and social problems such as drugs and teen preg-
nancy. There is little or no in-service to help with these changes; thus teachers are asked to do more with less. This is one of the “rocks” that Dalla Costa believes contributes to change fatigue, which he calls being “paralyzed by paradox.” Dalla Costa states that asking people “to do more with less” or “do better with fewer” leaves people confused and disheartened. As a result of these phony paradoxes, purpose [is] lost, vision obtusated, and credibility compromised” (p. 13).

Information overload is another “rock” that Dalla Costa discusses. He refers to the problem of information pollution, which he defines as individuals being overwhelmed by so much data that they lose focus. In our society and in schools, information pollution has made it difficult to acquire knowledge and wisdom.

Another problem that Dalla Costa identifies is people’s belief that they are experts, when they are merely informed. This, then, prevents deeper forms of learning. Some educators argue that technology, including computers and the Internet, should be the main focus of schooling. Yet these tools, however useful, rarely let us see into the deeper nature of things.

The rocks that Costa refers to, as well as the problem of chronic fatigue, are usually part of organizations that are mechanistic in nature (Secretan 1995). Again, many schools fall into this category. The mechanistic organization is characterized by “performance measures, strategic planning models, organizational charts” (Secretan 1995, 33). In schools, we have outcomes, rubrics, and performance indicators. In the mechanistic organization or school there is little opportunity for “innovation, creativity, fun or adventure” and if they are used they tend to be labeled “touchy-feely thinking.” Secretan asserts that the result is an organization that is heavily weighted to the masculine and, thus, leads to the inevitable repression of feminine energy. The successful mechanistic school is one where students score high on standardized tests but have little interest in how the school is helping to develop whole human beings. Teachers usually suffer from change fatigue in the mechanistic school, while students tend to find the school a cold and non-invitational place.

The second type of organization described by Secretan is the chaotic organization. This is based on the notion of Chaos Theory, which suggests that underlying disorder is order and structure. For example, smoke rising from a chimney looks as though it is spiraling chaotically, yet each movement can be explained through some mathematical formula that can also explain other activity such as the swirling of sand grains, the collision of subatomic particles in an electrical resistor, and also the behavior of people in organizations (Secretan 1995, 34). The chaotic organization is characterized by “high energy, enthusiasm, innovation, risk taking, survival, growth, focused strategy, commitment to the customer, hands-on practices, lack of complexity (Secretan 1995, 35). Sometimes the chaotic organization is a hybrid of the mechanistic organization and the chaotic. Within it there still may be goal-dominated and linear behavior that is linked to the spontaneity of the chaotic organization. Secretan suggests that power and control are the defining characteristics of the mechanical organization, while fun and spontaneity characterize chaotic organizations. Secretan gives the example of Microsoft as a chaotic organization.

A chaotic school would be characterized by lots of innovation, with teachers and students enjoying what they are doing. Spontaneity and fun would also be hallmarks of the chaotic school. However, there is an underlying order that insures that learning and growth are occurring.

Secretan defines the soulful organization, calling it the sanctuary. For Secretan the sanctuary is “not a collection of parts but an integrated system of souls — not so much a place but a state of mind in which they may flourish” (1995, 38). In the sanctuary, people’s feelings are acknowledged, as well as their thoughts. Human solutions are not diminished by technological solutions. The soulful school, then, feels like the sanctuary. Both teachers and students look forward to being at school, as they feel that their souls are nourished by the environment they find there. This environment is one of respect, caring, and even reverence. People in the soulful school feel validated as human beings and can speak authentically from their hearts. Love, rather than fear, predominates. When people speak, they feel that they are heard, often at a heart-centered level. Most of all,
there is a deep sense of community. In the sanctuary of the soulful school, people don’t just communicate or exchange ideas, they experience a communion of soul touching soul.

Like the chaotic organization, the sanctuary includes spontaneity and fun. Because it nurtures creativity, students and teachers feel comfortable taking risks in their learning, which is at the heart of the soulful school. In contrast to the mechanical school and its focus on testing and grades (often at the expense of learning [Cohn 1995]), learning in the soulful school is holistic. It integrates body, mind, emotions, and spirit.

There are no recipes for developing a sanctuary, or a soulful school, but we can begin to create conditions that allow for the development of soul. Here are the things a school staff can do:

Recognize the importance of the nonverbal. Diana Hughes, who is head of the teacher education program of the Rudolf Steiner Center in Toronto, states that holistic education occurs in that invisible space between teacher and student. It could be argued that soulful learning also occurs in that place. What does this mean in practice? When we focus on the nonverbal, or that silent space, we become aware of how we carry ourselves, how we engage others through eye contact, and the tone of our voice. We realize that the quality of our being and presence has as much impact on student development as anything that we say. When we become aware of the nonverbal, a balance can develop between talk and silence. At all levels, education has focused on verbal exchange, on the head. We have forgotten how we can communicate in silence, with the rest of our bodies. A warm smile directed to a child can send a message of support and love.

Pay attention to the aesthetic environment of the school and classroom. We can help to transform schools into sanctuaries by making their physical environments more beautiful. For example, plants can become part of the decor in the halls and in the classrooms, and walls can be painted in soft, warm colors. Artwork, both student and professional, can be placed on the walls. But care must be taken to create a balance between artwork on the walls and the surrounding space. Sometimes school classrooms are so completely covered that we cannot see what is there. Don’t overdo it; leave plenty of space around the art that is displayed. The importance of art can be seen in some Waldorf classrooms for younger children, where teachers sometimes use pictures of the Madonna and Child. They feel the warmth of this picture can have a healing effect on children. In this way, we can soften the school environment as much as possible. Some classrooms even have couches where students can sit and read.

Tell stories about the school. Every school has a story or, more accurately, a set of stories, that can be collected and put in a booklet, or told to the school community on special occasions. As stories are shared over time, community members can begin to see the continuity and uniqueness of their school, and the process of collecting stories can provide both written and visual sketches of former teachers and students. In telling stories about the school, recurring themes will emerge that will form the heart of the school's mythology. This mythology represents a shared sense of meaning and values for the school, whether academic, sports, or community-service related, or a combination of all three. Private schools often engage in this practice of telling stories and creating a shared sense of meaning, but there is no reason this cannot happen in a public school that has its own unique history.

Have celebrations and rituals. This suggestion is closely related to the last one because rituals help give people a sense of connection to their communities. The most common ritual in schools is the celebration of graduation, but there is no reason to limit rituals to this one event. For instance, celebrations could be conducted to mark changes in the seasons. These could include playing music, reading poetry, and telling stories. Rituals can also be part of the daily life of the school. In one school discussed later in this chapter, the students of the entire school meet every morning to sing and perhaps listen to an elder from the community. These morning meetings help form a deep sense of community within the school.

Truth and authenticity. Secretan argues that telling the truth is an important aspect of cultivating soul in the workplace. In an atmosphere where people are not telling the truth, integrity and community break down. As much as possible, leaders should attempt to speak and live according to what they see as the
truth. We should recognize that although we are imperfect human beings, our integrity and our credibility come from our ability to live authentic lives. For example, in the 1960s a "credibility gap" appeared, especially as related to the Vietnam War, as government officials' truthfulness and credibility began to be questioned. One of the behaviors that helps build authenticity is promise keeping. When we keep our promises, others can learn to depend on our word. We have certain clichés about this process and one of the most frequently cited is that he or she "walks the talk." Sometimes in schools, gaps can develop between what we espouse and what we do. For example, a principal might talk about the importance of collegial decision making and then make all the important decisions on his or her own. When a gap occurs between what a principal says and does, cynicism develops and trust is almost non-existent. On the other hand, when we work with someone who we feel is trustworthy and authentic, we feel empowered. Energy seems to increase in an atmosphere of trust, while it dissipates in one of nontrust. This energy can empower others to take risks and be creative. A soulful school is a place where people can speak without fear. As David Whyte (1994) has noted,

Inhabiting the full body, the long body as many North American Native traditions say, with the voice, may be one of the great soul challenges of adult life. If the voice originates and ends its journey in the bodies of the speaker and listener, it is also true that many parts of our bodies are struck deaf or dumb from an early age. We walk through the door into organizations every morning looking like full-grown adults but many parts of us are still playing emotional catch-up. (p. 127)

Whyte suggests that one of the ways we can reclaim our voice is to learn to say no. By saying no, we gradually learn to say yes to what we ultimately value and feel is important to our soul. Of course, the leaders in our schools must be comfortable cultivating an environment where voice can be heard. Accordingly, the principal needs to be aware of his or her voice. Each person needs to ask himself or herself, Where does my voice originate? Does it come from my head, or from a deeper part of me?

Soulful Schools

In this section we will look at some schools that have put into practice some of the principles outlined above.

Fratney School

This school, an inner city school in Milwaukee Wisconsin, was formed in 1988 by a group of parents who wanted a two-way bilingual school, teaching in English and Spanish. Its goal is to enable students to speak and write in both languages by Grade 5. Students begin work in their mother tongue, then gradually include the other language in their studies. Fratney School was founded on the principles of bilingualism, whole language skills, multiculturalism, and gender equity. Learning focuses around major themes, such as Our Roots in the School and Community; The New Native American Experience; The African American Experience; The Hispanic Experience; The Asian American/Pacific American Experience; and We are a Multicultural Nation.

George Wood, who included the Fratney School in his book, Schools That Work (1992), suggests that this school is partly successful because of its focus on community and cooperation in the classroom. Teachers emphasize cooperation over competition by involving students in setting classroom rules and by the development in each classroom of a conflict-resolution structure. In this way, interpersonal problems can be "resolved within the spirit of maintaining the classroom community" (p. 23).

The school is run by a team of parent and staff representatives, and the principal. This team makes all major decisions about what happens at Fratney. One parent sums up why she sent her daughter to Fratley:

When time grew near for [our daughter] to begin her school year, we were concerned. She was on the waiting list for several schools, but not high enough. Then we heard about Fratney. A group of parents, frustrated with even some of the best schools in the system, and some 'young Turk' teachers, some of the most talented and principled educators in the city, were coming together to form a school where decisions would be made onsite. Those involved consciously decided to have an anti-racist, non-sexist curriculum. The children would learn
that we are all together on this planet and that what we and our teachers do every day affects every person and place. Our responsibility to each other is to care and nurture and provide a successful experience for all our students. (Wood 1992, 25)

**Hope Nursery School**

The Hope Nursery School opened in Annapolis, Maryland, in 1990. It is founded on the principles of the Japanese educator, Tsunesaburo Makiguchi (Bethel 1989). Makiguchi believed education should foster values in three different areas: “economic value or private gain, moral value or public gain, and aesthetic value relating to the senses” (Bliss 1992, 53). Bliss describes how these values are explored in a unit on trees:

We examine economic or personal value, such as, How can fallen leaves benefit us?; moral or social value, as how our planting a tiny tree benefits the community; and aesthetic value, as how the beauty of the fall foliage inspires us in aesthetics and ecology. As we walk through the woods, we sometimes gather “treasures,” such as leaves or seed travelers, and at other times we gather trash. When our recycling barrel is full, we take a class trip to the recycling center. We also visited a neighbor who sheltered injured birds for the state department of wildlife, watched and fed the birds, and became acquainted with a woman who acts on her values in caring for wildlife. (p. 53)

Although the school is based on Makiguchi’s principles, it also incorporates principles from other educators such as Montessori. The school uses a thematic approach to curriculum, where disciplines are integrated around major themes. Often these themes are connected to real life experiences. For example, in studying homes and shelters, students build shelters from sand or snow, and look for animal shelters in the woods. Bliss (1992) notes:

We practice using real hammers and saws and hand drills for manual competence; measure our shelters and map them together; discuss forms of energy used in our homes; identify forms of shelters used in different environments by primitive people from Townley’s 1978 art curriculum entitled “Another Look”; sort puzzle pieces of various architectural styles that require careful discrimination of detail; sing the Afro-American song “Old House”; and discuss personal, social, and aesthetic values, as we create a neighborhood of paper houses. (p. 54)

The Hope School also attempts to provide what might be called a “soulful” physical environment for students’ work and play. The room is carpeted and is meant to have the feel of home rather than an institution. For example, there is a couch where both adults and children can sit as stories are read; classical music is played while the children work; and there is often an artist-in-residence, whose works are displayed.

Finally, every attempt is made to link Hope School to student families and the surrounding community. Teachers involve parents in the everyday life of the school and encourage them to reflect on their own approaches to child rearing and learning.

**The Environmental Middle School**

This is an alternative school which began in 1995, within the framework of the Portland, Oregon, public school system. The school consists of 135 adolescents, seven teachers, and many parents and volunteers; it has five mixed age classes drawn from grades six, seven, and eight. The school is based partly on the thinking of Thomas Moore, whose concepts give inspiration to activities that are designed to nourish students’ souls. These include “the morning meeting, preparation of the community meal, contact with nature, and participation in community service” (Williams, Taylor, and Richter 1996, 19).

The daily morning meeting is seen as a ritual that involves the entire school community. One of the teachers, John Richter, plays a guitar and teaches everyone to sing songs that focus on peace and care of the earth. People involved in the school feel that to have students sing together with parents and staff helps to create a deep bond within the school community.

The morning meetings also involve storytelling, usually by elders from the community. On other occasions, teachers present information on topics of interest to the community. For example, one day a teacher made a presentation on bats and used slides to show “bat habitats, their features [and] classifications, what they ate, what they liked, where they lived in Oregon, and which were endangered spe-
cies" (Williams, Taylor, and Richter 1996, 19). The next day, John Richter sang a song he had written about bats. These meetings were followed by an activity where students made bat houses for distribution to people in the community.

Another important feature of the school is community service. Students are encouraged to do a variety of activities in the community. Some of these activities have included planting trees at the local arbor 


retum; distributing brochures about Dutch Elm disease in the school neighborhood; pulling ivy from trees at one of the city creeks; building raised-bed community gardens for the elderly and the handicapped; feeding the hungry at a local homeless shelter; making and distributing birdhouses to the elderly; nature-scaping and planting trees for ecological restoration in the city’s watersheds (Williams, Taylor, and Richter 1996, 21).

Thomas Moore also claims that shared meals and good conversation are nourishing for the body and the soul. Once a month, one of the classes prepares a meal for the entire school community.

Finally, students participate in ecological projects that are an integral part of the curriculum’s core. For example, one term the curriculum was organized around the theme of rivers. The students picked a river in the United States and studied it from historical, geographical, and environmental perspectives. Students also read “historical novels; created art projects; sang songs about rivers; performed experiments, and studied ... water properties; learned about water conservation techniques in their own homes; and monitored streams as they participated in stream walks” (Williams, Taylor, and Richter 1996, 22).

Soule School

Yes, there actually is a school explicitly based on the concept of soul. It is an alternative school that exists within the Freeport, Maine, public school system. It’s creed was developed by students, teachers, and parents in 1975:

We believe that children should be encouraged to be self-directing, to make decisions and accept the consequences.
We believe that children need time to follow their interests, to experience success and failure — in other words, to give the child practice in some of the behaviors that make responsible adults.

We believe that children should have the freedom to pursue their personal interests and goals and to develop new ones.

We believe that children should be encouraged to think for themselves and to take responsibility for their actions.

We believe that children should have the total community as their learning environment and should be taken to every possible place of interest.

We believe that children should practice self-government and should come to feel important as part of the school community by [participating] in decisions that affect the school.

We believe that children should be allowed to work and play with children of other ages in a family-like atmosphere.

We believe that children should evaluate their own progress, have regular input into their curriculum, and take some responsibility for the planning and carrying-through of related learning activities.

We believe that children should feel good about themselves, and should meet regularly for the opportunity to discuss their feelings and concerns.

We believe that children should have fun in school.

We believe that children should have personal freedom, but not at the expense of the freedom of others.

We believe that teachers should identify individual needs and make provisions for work at different levels of difficulty and for different styles of learning.

We believe that teachers should take children’s ideas into consideration when planning learning activities.

We believe that teachers should provide an environment of mutual trust and understanding — an environment that is warm, loving, relaxed, and non-competitive.

We believe that, where appropriate, teachers should share decision making with parents and students.
We believe that teachers should recognize that the learning process is usually as important as its content.

We believe that teachers should report students' progress by stating what they have accomplished.

We believe that teachers should be encouraged to expand the basic curriculum by bringing their own interests into the classroom.

We believe that teachers should enjoy their work and share their enthusiasm with the students and each other.

We believe that teachers should be available and unshockable so that children will not have to live with unnecessary guilt for their human behavior.

We believe that teachers should foster a close association with parents based on honest communication.

We believe that teachers should have personal freedom, but not at the expense of the freedom of others.

We believe that parents should play an active role in the education of their children and in the Soule School program.

Recently, a former teacher and student examined this creed in relation to the work of Thomas Moore (1992). Peter Corcoran and Eric Home (1996) state that "Soule School was a place that appreciated the existence of soul as a matter of depth, value, relatedness, heart, personal substance, genuineness, attachment, love, and community, as described by Moore" (Corcoran and Home 1996, 25). In its attempt to connect students to surrounding communities, both human and natural, the school also recognized the importance of the world soul. According to Corcoran and Home, a sense of community was developed by bringing students together in regular meetings. Students attended a "Big Meeting" and got together in small groups to discuss important issues. Home describes the "Big Meeting" as a place where students could state their views about anything from "teacher smoking to snowball fights." For Corcoran and Home, an essential element of the school community was expressed and developed through the listening that took place in these meetings — listening by and to the students.

As teachers, it behooves us to listen as well as to lecture. Departing from abstract discussion at times to move to issues of the students' "lived lives" brings depth and power to classroom life. (Corcoran and Home 1996, 26)

At the Soule School, another important part of school life is the connection which is created between students and nature, a force which Moore believes is healing (Moore 1992, 12). The natural environment of Maine provides an excellent setting for this connection.

Teachers in the school also accept the shadow side of the student, which Moore says in an integral part of the soul. This is reflected in one of the belief statements of the school, "We believe that teachers should be available and unshockable so that children will not have to live with unnecessary guilt for their human behavior" (Corcoran and Home 1996, 25).

Peter, who taught at Soule School, felt that his work in the school had a strong impact on his later work. For example, he continued using group meetings to deal with student issues, and he also used ritual, which was part of life at Soule School. He writes, "After inviting students to lead opening activities for class, yoga, tai chi, and meditation became fairly regular opening rituals. Indeed, the importance of ritual has became clear to me in caring for the soul" (Corcoran and Home 1996, 26). Corcoran and Home describe the Soule School as a place where students and teachers wanted to be.

We never knew a child who didn't want to come to school. Even the most doubting parents were persuaded by this passionate love of school. Children cried at vacations and, at the end of Soule School, were known to cry for days. Teachers, too, loved the place passionately, and almost never did one leave other than to go to graduate school. (Corcoran and Home 1996, 25)

It is apparent that this school created Secretan's sanctuary.

If people who work in schools can bring an awareness of soul into the workplace, I believe that the type of atmosphere described by Corcoran and Home could arise in other schools. Bringing soul into the school will not be done through plans or implementation models, but through the awareness and sensitivity of each staff member. Through this awareness we can bring a new vitality to schools, a vitality
that is so often missing. In the film, Mr. Holland’s Opus, the new music teacher comments that he knew kids didn’t like high school, but as a new teacher he learned that teachers hated school as well. Bringing soul into schools can make them places where both students and teachers want to be.

Final Thoughts

In Waldorf schools, teachers openly acknowledge, and talk about the soul life of the children. These are also good examples of soul schools. The physical environment, the aesthetic surroundings, the curriculum, and the teacher’s presence, are all viewed in the context of how they can nurture the inner life of the child. One of the key aspects of a Waldorf education is the continuity in a child’s classroom. The same main-lesson teacher works with the same group of students from grades one to eight. This is done so that the teacher can develop a strong connection to the students and the classroom can take on an almost family-like atmosphere. The Waldorf curriculum itself is rich in stories and images that nourish the soul. In one example of how a teacher can consciously work with the soul life of a child, in the evening, the teacher sometimes visualizes the child, and an approach that might help the development of that child’s inner life.

References
