

Book Review: *Unfolding Bodymind: Exploring Possibility Through Education*

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By Brent Hocking, Johnna Haskell, and Warren Linds (eds.)

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This is a book for the good pedagogues we all try to be, whether as parents, teachers, professors, and/or as promoters of a more caring disposition toward Earth and its contents. The 17 essays plus commentaries aim to re-sensitize bodyminds to their origins and to their day-to-day sustenance by the miraculous surrounding universe. In academic style, each piece is followed by notes and lengthy reference lists, making the book a mine of up-to-date information on education-for-wholeness. Like all worthwhile movements in their early stages, Holistic Education has its weaknesses but these, fortunately, are secondary to its promising strengths.

Bodymind Education is a currently emerging field based on concepts of humans as ecological beings in reciprocating relationships with a living world — a reaction against the Western “idealist” tradition that sets mind above body, intellect above emotion, ethics above aesthetics, objectivity above subjectivity, culture above nature, and masculine above feminine. A difficult problem is how to overcome and constructively merge such pejorative dualisms, promoted historically by language/culture as well as currently by much that passes for New-Age, disembodied spirituality.

New synthesizing terms are needed of which “bodymind” and “lifeworld” are examples. The capitalization of Earth might be a small start. A rationale is provided by phenomenology, particularly as enunciated by Husserl and Merleau-Ponty. Familiar contemporary thinkers taking up the challenge include Fritjof

Capra, Neil Evernden, Theodore Roszak, and Charlene Spretnak. For this volume, David Abram's book *The Spell of the Sensuous* is seminal and he, with David Jardine, have contributed an afterword whose title, though true, is not as sexy as it sounds: "All Knowledge is Carnal Knowledge."

Focused on "embodied learning," the essays are drawn from a conference, held in May 1999 at the University of British Columbia, that brought together scholars influenced by phenomenology, Buddhism, ecological theory, "sophisticated expressions of Deep Ecology," and the holistic biology of Maturana and Varela. Dr. Ron Miller, President of the Foundation for Educational Renewal (based in Brandon, Vermont), supported publication of the book as Volume Four of the foundation's Holistic Education Series. In the preface he writes: "This book represents the leading edge of holistic education theorising. I think all the authors on the following pages would agree that our work is not merely theoretical or academic, that it aims passionately to transform the world."

The three editor-authors — Brent Hocking, Johnna Haskell, and Warren Linds — attended the University of British Columbia together and were graduate students when they organized the conference. Like them, most of the other contributors are young enthusiasts eager to change the traditional teacher-student relationship from that of imparting and receiving knowledge to a mutual engagement in wondering (and wonderful) discovery.

The book is divided into four sections of informative essays, each prefaced by a long, rambling "Editorial Conversation" that mirrors the prolixity of graduate seminars and university bull-sessions. These commentaries might better have been shortened and appended as section summarizations. Following are the Section Titles with brief remarks on the contents. Only a few exemplary authors are mentioned.

Turning Together on Paths of Awareness.

Four articles concern pedagogic practices whose intent is to teach/learn with the whole person. The sensory interplay between bodymind and the worlds of which humans are parts is the essence of the ecological view of pedagogy. Key ideas are unfoldment, resonance, reciprocity, engagement, complicity, and relationships between teacher/students and the surrounding inter-penetrating visible/invisible worlds. Examples are drawn from improvising dance and drama, scuba diving, and second-language classes.

Embodying "Pedagogical Possibilities": Teaching Being, Being Teaching

The focus of the second quartet of articles is on embodied awareness, learning to be mindful of the environment. An article by Heesoon Bai gives the Buddhist perspective on "being present" in the world, aware that direct percepts embody reality while concepts (which the mind makes of percepts) are disembodied, abstract, apt to be inert (Whitehead) and autistic (T. Berry) because they do

not always engage emotions. Other writers raise the issue of teacher education, because holistic education needs holistic teachers. Students learn the teacher not the topic, “We must be the change we wish to see” (Gandhi), and “We teach who we are” (Palmer Parker).

Education and Culture: Experiencing Im/possibility

The third foursome concerns the affectionate intertwining of bodies with other bodies and landscapes, what Alison Pryer in the previous section calls “Towards an Erotics of Pedagogy.” The question of the goals of education is answered by another question, “What kinds of human beings do we want our children to become?” Pille Bunnell and Kathleen Forsyth draw on Maturana’s philosophy in proposing that love is the natural human propensity that expands intelligence. *Homo sapiens amans* evolved as a different kind of primate (compare with bonobos?) because of their propensity for friendship, affection, love (amans). Other essayists point out the child’s inborn sense of morality, so easily destroyed by “objective” science, and the natural empathy of children with animals.

Ecological Interplay: Humans/Nature in Freefall

The last five articles explore the implications of ecological interplay for ethics, science education, and for the renewal of life-sustaining ideas. Franc Feng contributes a scholarly survey of ecophilosophy and its relationship to his maturation following his father’s death, and editor Brent Hocking explores the embodied nature of cognition by invoking remembrances of spring in Vancouver.

And just here a major obstacle is revealed. I too have been in Vancouver in the spring when the city streets, even downtown, are fragrant with the “balm-of-Gilead” odour from bursting black-poplar buds, mixed with the smells of industry and asphalt. I have wandered in Stanley Park among the giant trees, while the ceaseless traffic roars by. I have visited the campus of the University of British Columbia, only partly rescued from its architectural ugliness by the grandeur of its setting. We are mostly urban people now. How can we relate to Earth, to Nature, in holistic ways when the city imposes on everyone’s senses a virtual reality of human artifacts? In such settings, what is the spell of the sensuous? The only ecology that teachers know in their bodyminds is an abstract kind that features chemical reactions, vector forces, competitive “ecological relationships,” and especially predators chasing prey. Somehow the goal of holism must rescue young children from the city milieu and get them back to Nature for protracted periods. Wandering in the Botanical Garden for an hour every month is not enough.

A related pedagogic gap is the lack of any serious attempt to explore holistic education in relation to the dead weight and inertia of Western Culture (in the broad sense). Sonia MacPherson’s essay comes closest, she having personally suffered from one of culture’s prime shibboleths; viz., patriarchal, value-free science. Brent Hocking briefly mentions the importance of culture (pp. 145-6) and both Franc Feng and Lyubov Laroche make reference to important books

by C.A. Bowers (as does Ron Miller in the Preface), but that is the end of it. Yet Bowers has raised the fundamental question for education: How can *Homo sapiens*, the Cultural Creature, be sensitized ecologically when the deep, taken-for-granted axioms and values of the Western world force an opposing homocentric orientation? A contemporary example is the mostly uncritical elevation of consumerism to a cultural goal. The recommended salvation of New York after September 11th is: Get out and spend! Other deep debilitating ideas accepted as norms are the fact/value separation (reason above ethics), unlimited human fecundity, unlimited economic growth, unlimited human progress through science and technology, Earth as raw materials and resources, *et cetera*. While such falsities rule, no enlightened pedagogical art can make much of a difference.

Somewhere Heidegger is quoted to the effect that “Language Speaks Us” rather than that we speak language. The heart and soul of culture is language, and therefore, Culture Speaks Us. In a culture that denies its own importance, accenting the false proposition that individualism is the central reality, most have been sold on the idea expressed by Krishnamurti (and many others) that society/culture will only change through change for the better of individuals. Wrong way ‘round (or at least 90 degrees out of kilter), but it explains today’s deluge of self-help, self-motivation, self-realization books and lectures that convey the conventional wisdom: If anything’s amiss in your life, it’s your own personal fault. Will someone please deconstruct this myth? Most teaching is based on the premise that individuals, whether teachers or students, are blameworthy unless they concentrate on bettering themselves and others. People are led to believe themselves sinners rather than to damn the culture that makes them so. The “It’s up to You” bootstrapping message has been preached by gurus for 2000 years, perhaps never more loudly than right now. It has not worked and it will not work.

A people’s culture frames and focuses their realities, and the latter in turn prompt appropriate ethical action. Hence Arne Naess’s insistence that we get our worldview as right as possible, for only then will we act ethically toward the Earth and its components, of which the human race is one. Perhaps the goals of education should be set higher than the perfection of just one genic lineage? Holistic teachers are called on to be more radical than this worthy book recommends.