

Daring to Step into the Open: Moving Beyond Perspectives in Education and Life

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Abstract: Evolution in all spheres—cosmos, culture, and consciousness—is explored as a dynamic, creative process of shifting and settling, where shifting breaks out of existing structures and conceptual moorings and settling solidifies the movement of evolution into structures. Both are seen as essential aspects of the evolutionary process, but a bias for settling is noted among living creatures. For humans in particular, shifting arouses anxiety whereas settling promises security. The correction of this bias in the educational process to help realign human consciousness and culture with the rest of nature and cosmos is explored. Such a realignment may be necessary for meeting the unprecedented challenges of our world today, and an open, perspective-free inquiry can serve as a vehicle for it. But this inquiry calls for a new way of relating to the inherent uncertainty of shifting and to the anxiety this arouses in teachers and students alike.

Keywords: Absolutism, awareness, constructivism, consciousness, cosmos, courage, creative, dialectical, education, epistemology, evolution, heart, inquiry, nature, perspective, pluralism, settling, shifting, Shiva.

Introduction

During my first year in college as a foreign student from Europe, I was told by my American fellow students that they had dissected frogs to learn anatomy in high school. Some of them even caught and killed the frogs themselves (the latter claim may have been inspired by the horrified look on my face and was probably not true). I found such learning practices utterly amazing; nothing like that had been part of my high school education. We had read anatomy text books, painstakingly absorbing a lot of detailed information about bones and muscles and such.

Later, I came to appreciate that the difference between the European and American educational approaches went much deeper: In Europe, education had much to do with passing on the accumulated knowledge and wisdom of tradition as this had flowered in the arts and the sciences and the cultural practices of civilization (which in the early sixties still largely meant Western, Greek and Latin based culture, though signs of nascent interest in Nonwestern cultures were starting to be there). In the U.S., by contrast, the emphasis was not on transmission of culture and tradition as much as it was on personal experience and individual discovery.

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Both approaches seemed to have their own problems: European students seemed to be passive recipients of a stagnant tradition. American students seemed to be re-inventing the wheel over and over again. But it was not as simple as that. To be sure, critique of tradition and established knowledge was not part of the European high school education I had been exposed to. Yet we did criticize, under our breaths, outside the classroom, and later in all sorts of anarchist and other radical political movements. And we had learned well and knew the depths and details of what we were criticizing.

On the other hand, in the U.S. I listened to my fellow college students readily questioning and criticizing, which, I discovered, they were expected to do—it was even part of the formula for writing term papers. And the yardstick for their criticisms was mostly their own personal experience. But they seemed less knowledgeable about what it was they were criticizing, and their critiques often rang shallow to my ears.

Another thing that struck me as strange about my American fellow students was that most were voting Democrat or Republican simply because their parents were. My parents rarely agreed on which political candidate to vote for, and there were lively and often heated discussions preceding elections at home. I drew the youthfully sweeping conclusion that American students' critique conformed to, rather than seriously questioned, the establishment they were criticizing—until I got swept up in the counterculture which was gaining momentum in those years, and I felt the power of real criticism swell within the ranks of my fellow students such as I had not seen in my lifetime.

I was observing a fundamental dynamic of consciousness at work in two different cultural and educational settings. Same dynamic, taking different twists and turns in each case. The words “shifting” and “settling” later came to mind (other words like “in-breathing” and “out-breathing,” “contracting” and “expanding” also came) to describe the two poles of a dialectical tension that propelled this dynamic. In shifting, consciousness sheds its moorings and moves out but is also pulled to find a place to settle in, an anchor to hang onto whether in the form of a belief about what's real or what's good, or a goal to be accomplished, a product built. Even the ideas of change and growth, which the above sketch of the American educational vision emphasizes, can, and eventually do, become part of the settling of that vision. And yet never for long: once safe and settled in a resting place provided by tradition, ideas, and approaches, consciousness sooner or later tears loose from its resting place to shift again.

Is this shifting and settling something that can be shaped by cultural or educational influences? It seems to me that the forms of settling indeed can, but the dialectical movement of consciousness itself cannot. For this reason, no individual accomplishment, no cultural or educational practice can ever be the last word on the evolutionary process. Indeed, those educational, artistic, or other creative endeavors that do not purport to capture this process in theory or description but to actively participate in it find themselves constantly examining their existing practices and exploring new horizons. This is certainly true of educational institutions like the California Institute of Integral Studies (CIIS), which endeavors to bring its practice of integral education into resonance with the nature of consciousness and of culture and cosmos at large. The envisioning and implementing of what CIIS does is a process always in the making, never complete. And this is as it should be.

Even so, it is not easy. In particular, the aspect of the evolutionary process I refer to as “shifting” is not easy. As academics and educators, shifting tends to unravel our achievements, unsettle us just when we thought we “got it” and perhaps even staked our reputation on an article about it in print. So how do we align ourselves with, not just describe or theorize about, the evolutionary process that moves in and through us and the rest of the universe? This question is at the heart of education which strives to be truly integral.

In this article I invite my reader to take a look at how the evolutionary movement can get stuck in the forms of settling prevalent in our culture, consciousness, and education, and how it can get unstuck from these. Constructivism and pluralism are the favored forms into which liberal culture and education have settled—and in which we appear to be stuck—today. An inquiry which is prior to, and goes into, any foundational epistemological stand we might adopt is called for to get us unstuck. In the last sections, we will explore such a perspective-free inquiry and how it can function as vehicle for a genuinely transformative education which aligns us with the evolutionary shifts in the making.

Images of Evolution

There is an image of evolution inspired by the shifting and settling movement of consciousness. This image comes from Hindu mythology and is embodied in a small bronze statue depicting Shiva Natarajan, the four-armed God who dances the cosmos into existence moment by moment. It is a spontaneous dance which creates its steps as it goes, without forethought, without plan. The absence of plan or forethought underscores the creativity of the process. One can imagine Shiva's feet shifting and settling in unexpected ways, creating all the forms of the manifest world—and the creation is still going on, we are reminded. This image calls attention to what is missed in the Darwinist vision of evolution in which there is a plan—at least a direction—which moves from primitive to advanced, from simple to complex. The direction is supposed to be toward better (the “fittest” who survives), if not bigger things, materially and spiritually.

The Darwinist belief that there will be something better just around the corner can be comforting in challenging times, yet it takes attention away from the present where, Shiva suggests, creation and change happen. I once asked my mentor from India, why does Shiva dance? He replied, “for no reason, just for the sheer hell of it,” meaning that Shiva dances simply because he can. Life is inherently creative, which means that creation is an end in itself, not a means to realizing some other end via a pre-existing plan. Nature proliferates forms as much as she can “get away with.” What an exalted, joyous, life-affirming understanding of nature and cosmos!

Yes, but unsettling as well. For no preference or ontological priority is given to settling over shifting in this dance. Forms of life and consciousness appear—and disappear just as readily. There is no foundation already in place before the dance commences; all foundations are created and destroyed in the dance itself. Shiva seems to gently mock one of the most basic of human aspirations, which is to settle into something permanent, something that gives us lasting comfort and security.

The painful irony of our times is that, just when that prosperity and lasting security would seem within reach for the globalized economy of our technologically advanced world, the ephemeral and illusory nature of such security is most apparent. There is no foundation before one is created by an act of settling, and there really is nothing more to the foundation than the act that creates it. This is what Shiva's dance conveys about the cosmos at large and about consciousness itself, and this is what our postmodern world enacts in its forms of culture, arts, and politics.

The task for education today is to prepare students to live and enhance the lives of others in a world without foundations. It would seem to me that an educational practice fully aligned with Shiva's dance in the three spheres—cosmos, culture, and consciousness—is required to do the job.

A vision which encompasses all three informs the educational practices at CIIS. It was inspired by Sri Aurobindo and first implemented by Haridas Chauduri in the 1960's. Both were inspired by their heritage of Indian spirituality as well as their exposure to Darwin's evolutionary theory. The original focus on the Indian subcontinent has since expanded to include spiritual and cultural practices from across the globe. Similarly, the methods of inquiry have expanded beyond those provided by science to include other ways of knowing. The thread that connects the current vision and practice at CIIS to the original vision is the quest for connectedness in all spheres of life pursued by rigorous inquiry (Bronson & Gangadean, 2006; Wexler, 2005).

Darwin's theory has had a profound influence on educational philosophy and practice in America. The complementary view of evolution as entirely creative, captured in Shiva's dance has remained in the shadows, though some contemporary biologists have offered a fascinating scientific version of it (Maturana & Varela, 1987; Varela, Thompson, & Rosch, 1991). Now may be an opportune moment to bring it out of the shadows and let it guide our contemporary educational practices.

In the view of evolution captured by Shiva's dance, settling and shifting are both integral to the evolutionary process, and neither is better or more fundamental than the other. The same dynamic of settling and shifting is present in human consciousness as is in nature and the cosmos at large. Nature settles by stabilizing and solidifying its forms of life, just as cultures settle by building and securing their institutions, and individuals settle by formulating and adhering to their values, beliefs and positions. And in all three spheres, upheavals and shifts great and small, occur often unexpectedly and bring disintegration and renewal in their wake.

The Pluralistic Cocoon

Pluralism and constructivism provide the foundational beliefs for integral thought in education today (e.g., Palmer, 2009; Palmer, Zajonc, Schribner, & Nepo, 2010). At CIIS as well, the educational practices promote multiple perspectives and dialogue among diverse values and beliefs. Students are encouraged to become aware of their own perspectives and to engage those of others in a constructive dialogue. They are also encouraged to expand their perspectives to become more inclusive of other perspectives and to think in “both/and” rather than “either/or” terms.

The underlying premise of pluralism and constructivism is the belief that all truths and knowings are relative to perspectives and that we cannot but come from some perspective or other. But this belief is seldom itself subjected to serious inquiry, and even with thoughtful proposals to mitigate the looming danger of crass relativism available in the literature; for example, that our subjective perspectives and the world beyond these have a participatory relationship (Ferrer, 2002), most educators remain convinced that all knowing and inquiry are bound to and hence relative to some perspective or other.

We are not accustomed to thinking of pluralism or multi-perspectivism as being rigid or extreme. Yet they are, in their own way which is different from the rigidity of fundamentalists and others who endorse extreme and absolutist positions in religion or politics. The rigidity of pluralists is evident in their difficulty speaking with clarity and conviction because they believe that anything they say must be qualified by “it’s just one perspective among many.” It is also evident in their belief that ultimately, there is no distinction between truth and opinion (and what counts as “informed” opinion is endlessly debatable) and therefore, their truths are really just opinions—a conclusion fundamentalists today happily accept and turn around to their own advantage, for the latter have no doubt that their own opinions are “the truth.” Nothing one can say from a pluralistic standpoint seems effective in opening up the dialogue past this point.

The constructivist belief that we cannot touch the world directly but are always ensconced in some perspective or other, if carried to its logical conclusion, lands one in nihilism. Some flee from there back to absolutism, and I suspect the fear of nihilism may fuel the rising fundamentalist trends today. But I suspect it is this same threat which keeps the liberal pluralists in a juggling act on the edge of the nihilistic abyss, appreciating all positions (more or less) equally rather than subjecting any of them to a thorough scrutiny for fear of falling into the abyss. Absolutists have their “solutions” which shield them from the prospect of nihilism. But pluralism and constructivism fail to offer a viable alternative to the absolutism in our social and political life today, and this is because they have become absolutists in their own beliefs.

The notion that pluralists are “absolutists” in their own beliefs may be hard to swallow for those who not only acknowledge but celebrate diversity of viewpoints and places of settling. But the paucity of substantial dialogue across the great divides in our society today speaks to both sides being locked into their respective positions. In our liberal-leaning educational institutions we find ourselves surrounded by people whose beliefs and values, at least regarding pluralism and diversity, tend to agree with our own. We all like to explore different viewpoints and engage in discovering new ones. But were we to step back from this for a moment, we might wonder whether this is just stirring the same old pot.

The viewpoints may be new, but they are still just viewpoints. Within the cocoon established by this belief, it is safe and self-affirming to exchange viewpoints. Thus like absolutists of fundamentalist persuasions who live in their own cocoons, we find ourselves settling not only into our shared beliefs and values but also into a social comfort-zone of like-minded folks. As educators, we should wonder every day how much our institution is a crucible for evolutionary change and transformation and how much it is a cocoon in which we abide safe and affirmed. In nature, all cocoons are meant to burst. If they don’t, the life in them decays and dies. If our educational communities are to become relevant and potent contributors to the social and

political process, they need to break out of their cocoons to once again move with the natural dynamism of shifting and settling.

Settling, Shifting, and the Pro-Settling Bias

Let us now take a closer look at settling and shifting, their interplay in nature and in our own consciousness. This helps us appreciate the enormous challenge for an integral education which envisions itself a participant in this play.

Turning to settling first: One moment we listen with an open heart and open mind. We feel resonance with what is being said and in the next moment exclaim, “Yes, that's true!” A position, a belief is being formed and affirmed. With this, we feel affirmed in who we feel we are. This is settling. We now have a point of reference for making sense of our world and of ourselves, and anchoring ourselves in it, we feel safe and secure.

As a dynamic activity, settling resists shifting. It not only freezes life and consciousness into forms but tends to reinforce and seek their confirmation from experience and from agreements with like-minded folks. With my of points of reference in place, listening half-heartedly, absent-mindedly seems enough, because I already know what is being said and agree with it and feel safe and affirmed in hearing it. With the freezing of life and consciousness into beliefs and positions, genuine learning comes to a halt. The evolutionary movement comes to a halt. To be sure, we can still tinker with our positions, re-arrange them some, and accumulate them. For many people, this counts as learning. But we are cut off from the unknown, uncharted, not-yet-formed immediacy of life.

I now turn to shifting. Unlike our experiences of settling, shifting tends to be extremely subtle and short-lived. Most of us have experienced “unsettling” moments when something we had taken for granted turns out not so. It is as if the bottom gives way and the world as we know it falls apart. Such moments can feel unnerving, embarrassing, even frightening. No wonder we resist them, often with elaborate defenses. But they can also be amazingly enlivening and exhilarating. Recall the last time you had a real “aha!” moment, perhaps in a classroom, or in a therapy session, or just while taking a walk in a park. Not a lukewarm “yeah, I buy that” moment but one in which everything you had bought into until then suddenly fell apart. There you stood, naked, exposed to the elements—the “you” you had known blown to smithereens. Yet in that moment you were in contact with life itself, knowing nothing yet connected to all with pure awareness not mediated by any interpretations.

In the next moment, you became aware of something new, an “insight” which you could grasp hold of because it had found its place within what you had previously known. This is when that peculiar smile of recognition that goes with the “aha!” experience spread on your face.

Many people equate “insight” with what is being recognized. Yet by the time something is *recognized* settling has already taken place. Just before the recognition, shifting happened which shook and perhaps momentarily dissolved all anchors and reference points. There was literally “no-thing” there, which is why if you just dropped into that space of nothingness, those watching your face may have witnessed, for a fraction of a second perhaps, a slackened jaw and a vacant

stare. Such a situation might indeed be radically unsettling and unnerving were it to last. But it usually does not, and in the next moment, recognition and settling took place. The smile spreading on your face may speak of unspeakable bliss you just experienced, or it may speak of the relief in finding your anchors and points of reference you now experience, or perhaps a little bit of both. You are now settled, but perhaps not quite the same way as before, for you had entered the spontaneous movement of evolution for just a moment.

Shifting is indeed subtle and fleeting. But this does not diminish its potentially profound effect which can, and sometimes does, change the course of history. The spontaneous movement of evolution loosens frozen positions and allows shifting. Shifting can wreak death and destruction, yet it brings forth tremendous aliveness, exhilaration, and bliss as well. Nature is full of examples of this, small and subtle, like the dissolving of the caterpillar in its cocoon or the dehiscence of a flower bud. Or they can be large and spectacular, like earth quakes or volcanic eruptions.

Nature and cosmos have no bias for settling over shifting. Everything that comes into the manifest universe eventually goes out, sometimes the coming and going is subtle and drawn out, other times an instantaneous, loud bang. As a dynamic process, settling and shifting are both happening everywhere all the time.

Even though nature has no bias for settling over shifting, all its creatures who are invested in their own survival and longevity do. All life forms manifest a pro-settling bias in their striving for survival, security, and comfort. It is important to appreciate this same bias at work in our innermost psyche as in the cultural practices and institutions of our civilization. Thus disintegration and death, however much part of nature, are an anathema to us. Civilization was to shield us from that, and for a long time in the Western world, civilization was built and celebrated as a human triumph over nature. Today, we are facing the prospect of disintegration and death along with the rest of nature—a prospect that more than anything else has helped us recognize that we are part of nature and subject to its dynamic of shifting and settling. Still, the bias against shifting and for settling lives on in our culture and it is what provides stability and continuity to society and its institutions.

In subtle but powerful ways, the pro-settling bias pervades our intellectual and psychological lives. Earlier, we examined this in terms of the foundational beliefs of pluralism. But not only do our intellectual beliefs manifest this bias; it is evident in all aspects of our personal, professional and institutional lives. We value (or feel pressure to prioritize) products over process, safety over vulnerability, security and control over openness. We think of ourselves as pragmatists who are open and flexible, yet our pragmatism inclines us to regard shifting as being at best a means by which the fruits of settling are achieved. Shifting is a threat to what we have and who we take ourselves to be, and so we have a strong tendency to cling to ideas or practices we have settled into—even ideas and practices designed to promote change, growth, and openness! In other words, we feel more secure and comfortable with a tried and true “method” or “approach” for change and growth than if we had to step into uncharted terrains without maps or methods and surrender to the unknown.

Today we face unprecedented threats to our collective survival as species of this earth. With “threats,” I am, of course, referring to things like climate change, overpopulation, depletion of and ever more desperate competition for resources, and a global economic engine that depends on further depletion of resources and growth of population. Our pro-settling bias has us clinging to beliefs and positions that ensure continuance of the path we are currently on even if it is headed for disaster, at best allowing for superficial changes and band-aid solutions that may provide short-term gratification psychologically but without changing humanity's course substantially.

Thus the very technological-scientific-capitalistic society we have built to ensure our survival and thriving and in which our educational institutions are embedded are now threatening our survival and thriving. Put differently, the pro-settling bias which has us protecting ourselves against shifting is pushing us toward a shift of unprecedented magnitude. Confronting and resolving this bias seems necessary for the survival of nature and human civilization as we know it. But this involves confronting and resolving the very insistence we have on survival which is at the root of our pro-settling bias!

This is the ultimate paradox of our predicament. It calls for nothing less than transcending of ourselves as a species and our settled beliefs and values. Only a radically transformative education can offer a meaningful response to this challenge. The idea that education transforms consciousness is not new, but the specific kind of transformation our contemporary predicament as outlined above calls for is new. This transformation takes us from self-awareness of perspectives and the appreciation of a diversity of perspectives to freedom from perspectives altogether. The idea of such freedom is not itself new. It was envisioned by Jean Gebser (1985) in his notion of “aperspectival consciousness” which is not only aware of its own and others' perspectives but which sees through them and is thus not bound by them. Wilber (1995), inspired by Gebser's vision, incorporated “aperspectival” consciousness in his developmental schema as a stage which initiates genuine spiritual development beyond the “egoic” stages.

I want to suggest that consciousness or awareness free of perspective need not remain an abstract concept in a developmental theory but can be actualized and developed in a process of inquiry which shifts from awareness of perspective to awareness free of perspective. That is, instead of immediately pulling back to its own “givens” or settling into another perspective or set of “givens,” consciousness shifts into openness and remains in a state of openness—not, of course forever, but at least a few moments longer than it would have before the shift. In a manner of speaking, it develops tolerance for true openness which is different from a state of suspension between alternative perspectives or of integration of multiple perspectives into a more inclusive perspective. The vehicle for such development is what I call “perspective free inquiry.”

Perspective-Free Inquiry

We must begin with the foundational belief of pluralism, namely that inquiry always depends on a perspective or belief. This belief, of course, denies the possibility of perspective-free inquiry, stalling it *on a priori* grounds before it even got started. Now is it possible to inquire into this foundational belief afresh, without prejudice or bias? Recognizing the belief as just that—a belief—frees up the movement of consciousness for inquiry. But just as important is to refrain

from affirming the opposite belief, that inquiry is possible, lest the movement freezes again into an *a priori* stance.

A genuine inquiry begins with “not knowing” and proceeds in an openness which does not affirm or reject anything. So, we don’t know whether perspective-free inquiry is possible. But we can inquire into it. This would be a reversal of the usual way we approach education: we bring inquiry from the background, the context of the particular content areas, into the foreground. In the usual way, primacy is given to the content areas and skills to be mastered, and inquiry is limited by the givens of the latter; whereas, when inquiry is the starting point and the very heart of the endeavor, it can be open and not limited by the assumptions of the contents and methods of an area of theory or research. It may be important to emphasize that I am not suggesting that acquiring knowledge competence or developing skills in research methods or therapy or teaching techniques is to be replaced by perspective-free inquiry, only that their order of epistemological priority be reversed. I am not the first to suggest such a reversal in education. For example, Montuori (2010, 2009, 2006) has called for it. There are interesting parallels and points of connection between his transdisciplinary inquiry and perspective-free inquiry as I am discussing here; for example, both transform the inquirer as the inquiry proceeds, and both are inherently creative. A full exploration of these parallels, however, must wait for another occasion.

Perspective-free inquiry is spontaneous and rigorous. Yet it has no agenda or objectives, and no end point or conclusion. In other words, it is not a method and it is not undertaken to get results. As noted earlier, we tend to feel more comfortable and affirmed in our professional identities with methods than with inquiry. For the latter is an undefined, open process which continually moves into the unknown and unravels the places of settling we cling to, including our methods.

This process, when engaged wholeheartedly and with complete attentiveness (Krishnamurti, 1969) fosters a mode of consciousness distinct from the perspectival consciousness involved thinking, whether conceptual, associative, or imaginal. Unlike the latter, which involve directional activity of the mind, the attentiveness in perspective-free inquiry is nondirectional or, rather, “all-directional” at once. It begins by moving into the “givens” of the situation—the various understandings and beliefs of the inquirer which, inevitably and often unconsciously, shape the inquiry and direct it, as if “from behind.” The inquiry thus proceeds backward as much as it proceeds forward, and it may spread out in all directions at once. Spaciousness is the distinctive quality of this mode of consciousness. It does not interpret or make meaning but renders transparent all meanings and interpretations and the perspectives from which they arise.

Such a spacious awareness is available to us, and we can dimly sense its presence in the horizon of consciousness as the space that holds and at the same time has the capacity to “see through” or make transparent the contents of consciousness. Usually, though, our attention is absorbed by the contents—the incessant stream of ideas, images, interpretations that fill up the space of our awareness. The power of this absorption puts us under a kind of a spell (Puhakka, 2003) which has us take the contents of our minds to be real and the awareness that holds and sees through them as unreal or nonexistent.

Both modes of consciousness, the mode of conceptual and imaginal thinking absorbed in its contents and the mode of spacious awareness that holds and sees through these, are recognized as sources of knowing in traditional Hindu and Buddhist spiritual psychologies. They are considered functions of the “lower mind” and of the “higher mind” respectively (Puligandla, 1975). The knowing function of spacious awareness is generally not recognized in Western mainstream psychology, though the beginnings of such a recognition are in evidence in the burgeoning research on mindfulness-based meditation practices which develop the capacity to “see” thoughts “as thoughts” rather than be absorbed in their contents, and to relax into a spacious, choice-less awareness. (Williams, et al. 2007; Kabat-Zinn, 1990). However, so far the research has been concerned with the mental health benefits of such practices, for example, in reducing anxiety, depression or the suffering from chronic pain. Such an agenda imposes a limit on the knowing function of spacious awareness, for the inquiry goes only as far as is required for its objectives (symptom reduction, increased comfort and sense of wellbeing) to be achieved.

However, there is no limit as to how far or deep the knowing function of spacious awareness can be developed by an open inquiry which has no pre-given objectives. Because it is not a method, it can be extended from the meditation cushion out into the world of ideas and knowledge and into the world of other people. It can be undertaken by oneself or with others, as David Bohm (1987) explored in his group. However, while I appreciate the spirit of Bohm's approach, to fashion the inquiry after any model, even his, runs the risk of settling around a formula that will stymie a truly open inquiry. Perspective-free inquiry can start by simply attending to what arises in the moment. When attention is alert yet not shaped by agenda or objective, it naturally expands and feels its way through the “givens” of consciousness, my own and my partner's in the inquiry, as well as those embedded in the domains of knowledge we study.

An inquiry carried out in this way does not freeze into a “position” or viewpoint which might contradict or oppose another position, nor does it accommodate other viewpoints or positions in the way that larger positions accommodate smaller or narrower ones. Thus, it does not dominate or totalize. Clearly, perspective-free inquiry is integral, yet very different from approaches such as Wilber's (2001). It tends to open up positions large and small into spacious awareness that renders the positions transparent without accepting or rejecting them and without privileging one over the other. The spacious awareness within which it moves allows for a more intimate way of relating and communicating across differences, even the deep ones that now separate pluralists and absolutists. This spacious awareness—it should be clear by now—is not an over-arching meta-perspective. Rather, it is freedom from perspectives; and herein lies its potential for healing our fragmented world without reducing its myriad ways and colorful differences into a dreary blend of sameness.

I hope that it is clear from the exposition of perspective-free inquiry above that awareness of perspective is a necessary starting point for it. We can thus say that pluralism and its celebration of diversity help open the windows of our separate perspectival worlds into other such worlds. Perspective-free inquiry then takes the next step and calls us out of those worlds into a creative play in the spaces within and around them.

Confronting Existential Anxiety

There is a great yearning for connection and for healing our fragmented selves and relationships today. So why don't we just drop the beliefs and perspectives that divide us? We probably would, were it not for the great existential anxiety which the prospect of dropping all beliefs and perspectives and opening ourselves to the unknown stirs within us. Such anxiety is the power behind our pro-settling bias and resistance to shifting.

Anxiety tends to divert energy and attention to efforts to cope, and as long as safety and security are an issue, change and growth tend not to happen. As Winnicott (1974) said (I am paraphrasing here), when the needs for safety, security, and nurturance remain an ongoing concern, the person can at best maintain “mere sanity” but not manifest his or her full psychological health and creativity. The caterpillar's metamorphosis requires the safety of the cocoon, and we imagine that the caterpillar is spared of the need to give any of its energy or attention to maintaining that safety.

How to deal with anxiety is a challenge for education in general when development and growth are the objectives. But it is an exponentially greater challenge for the kind of inquiry and transformation we are exploring here. For the existential anxiety evoked by the prospect of having no beliefs and perspectives—therefore, knowing nothing, even being nothing—is such that no safety and security measures we as teachers or as students can take will spare the inquirer of having to face it.

So we must face it. Facing anxiety takes courage. We don't talk much about courage in education these days, perhaps because we tend to be more concerned with accommodating our students' safety and security needs. But great visionaries of integral education such as Parker Palmer (2009) talk about courage. It takes courage and integrity to discover something one can truly believe in and have passion about, which is what Palmer's “courage work”, is concerned with. He works within a pluralistic framework, however, and so talks about the courage to stand up for one's deepest beliefs and convictions.

It takes a different kind of courage to stand up without belief or conviction, wholly open and vulnerable, exposed to the unknown both within and without. It is important to not confuse this kind of standing up with refusal to affirm a belief or conviction or with joining in affirming whatever beliefs or convictions others may voice. These can be, and often are, ways in which we withdraw and fail to stand up, fail to manifest courage.

To stand up and enter into an inquiry without any protection such as beliefs and convictions provide takes great courage. This is courage of the heart. In contemporary spiritual discourse we talk of the heart as the seat of compassion, caring, and love. Yet it seems to me that courage is what gives depth and transformative power to these qualities. How do we foster courage which is not separate from compassion and love in our students? The answer, it seems to me, has much to do with how we as educators awaken it in ourselves and embody it in our work. There is no formula or method for training ourselves or our students in courage of the heart. But we can inquire into it. When undertaken without belief or perspective but with open attentiveness, such inquiry may be all that is needed.

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