The Soul as the Root, the Ground, and the Flowering Dance of Religious Dialogue: Toward a Worldview of Evolving Equanimity

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In 2010, in San Francisco, the philosopher Hanan Alexander, at the invitation of Kevin Gary, gave a well-attended and very highly regarded paper to the PES Spirituality and Religion SIG, entitled "Openness with Roots," in which he beautifully showed how free thinking and culturally sectarian thinking are not in inherent opposition to one another, but, in fact, are *necessary* complements to one another—especially, but not exclusively, in a culturally diverse lifeworld. If thinking is *deeply* reflective, it must be deeply rooted and grounded to bring forth the sweetest fruit. And it is the natural tendency of roots themselves, while growing deeper, to also sprout new life that is germinative not just for its own species, but for a habitat and planet of more and more abundant, more and more diverse life.

Emily Wenneborg was in her last term of high school when that paper was delivered, and was not familiar with it when she wrote this. But her article both thoroughly revisits its insights—and, as Alexander would, of course, deeply appreciate—roots its concerns in the muck of practical life, as Alexander was not able to do to any meaningful extent in his talk.

I will never forget how hearing Alexander's talk nearly a decade ago newly crystallized, and rooted, many of the ideas I had long been pondering as a philosopher whose life path *as* a philosopher had first led me, starting in the late 1990s, to explore my own Jewish heritage in philosophical terms; had, second, led me to center my Philosophy of Education classes on the noncanonical text *The Soul of Education: Helping Students Find Compassion, Character, and Community in Schools* by Rachael Kessler,[1] which I used to help students become rooted in personal existential ground first for the reading of Platonic dialogues, and

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then for the writing of personal dialogues centered on the existential questions of beginning teachers, whose souls were starting to flower, and to help others' souls flower through their teaching; and had, third, led me, in 2007, to spearhead the founding of the PES SIG to which Alexander eventually gave that talk and which Emily became a new member of last year. So, I want to deeply thank what René Arcilla once called "the PES gods" for allowing me, in this response, to revisit those existentially crystallizing ideas; to engage in a brief reflective dance with Emily, a new partner in those ideas; and perhaps, through this new dialogue, to produce new, hitherto unexpected fruits.

"Students must learn to affirm as well as to deny, to assert as well as to question," Emily remarks at the end of the first paragraph of this beautifully written and deeply articulate article. The problem is that most current nonsectarian, liberal public education is ungrounded in any deep practices of affirmation. And most current sectarian education (which can include quasi-fundamentalist monocultural forms of public, civic education) is *only* interested in affirming and reaffirming roots, and if it occasionally peeks out into daylight sees nothing new by only attempting to assimilate what it sees to what it already thinks it knows.

Most of Emily's article is devoted to the depiction of the quandaries of Christian Worldview Education, which seeks to articulate difference in a grounded way, but has only succeeded *so far*, as far as she can tell, in seeing difference in its own light. The article ends quite movingly, with her being critical of the results of this education to this point, but deeply affirming its aspirations and hopes for the attainment of a deeply alive world through our each seeking to authentically experience what Alexander called "openness, with roots":

> … both the difficulty and the necessity of living in the midst of this tension demand not despair, but rather further study into how to do this *well*. For, after all, education is truly educative only when it is neither entirely closed nor wholly uncommitted, neither mired in the mud nor floating in midair but standing firmly on solid ground. Only then can we move forward; only then can we dance.

I *love* that ending. In no small part because it contains implicit religious metaphors that I want to spend the rest of my limited time today teasing out. Let us ask: *Who* is the "we" here? *When* is the "then"? And *what* is the "dance"? I will suggest tentative answers to these questions through a pedagogical example of a profound student-initiated moment in one of my classes that I think deeply illustrates this "we," this "then," and this "dance."

Mohammed (not his real name) technically failed my Freshman Composition Class by not getting enough writing done. And yet, by deep human measures, he was the most excellent student in that class, and "passed" in the sense of "transcendence," with literally "flying" colors. The central assignment in that class, for which I won a University-Wide Teaching Excellence Award, was for students first to write, then to present in front of the classroom community—and not least important to receive responsive feedback from that community—a Personal Creed Project. In the context of Emily's, and Hanan's, papers, this project might be called a depiction of the roots and open-ended aspirations of their souls. Mohammed entered that day in his white, flowing robes and turban. He spoke quietly of his deep Islamic faith, and illustrated it with choice quotes from the Koran. A few years before I had taken a course in Rumi, and learned the term "*ihsan*," which can be loosely translated as "manifested personal holiness." I had encouraged Mohammed, in a coaching session prior to his presentation, to hold this rooted idea in his head as he spoke. And that he did. He was focused and truly present in a way that amazed the other students. To that point he had been by far the quietest kid in class. But at that point he suddenly became an embodiment of far more than himself. He became an embodiment of holiness. He spoke touchingly of his uncle being killed by a rifle shot while sitting next to him in the car, and how traumatized he was by that. And he then used this as a metaphor for the newly traumatized state of the world after 9/11, for which many blamed his culture. But in seeing *Mohammed in this moment*—this "who," this "then"—the students saw, blazingly clearly, that you cannot blame a culture, and if you do you fall into the closed trap of cultural blindness. I think it is possible that in that one deep, educational moment Mohammed may well have permanently averted the minds of each

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one of his classmates from cultural prejudice toward his people. And he did this by baring *his* roots to open *their* souls.

At the end of the term, students are each asked to come briefly before the classroom community and to name, among a number of other things, the most personally meaningful wisdom to them that was shared by another student over the course of the term. Almost everyone in the class named Mohammed—and not just one or another thing he said, but the whole of his grounded presence. In the terms of Emily's paper, that deep groundedness, and how it spoke at the same time from afar but deeply and clearly, had opened their souls to a new dance with the world, had made the world seem newly whole in taking what was foreign, and in some ways threatening, and humanizing it. And here *I* am, nearly a decade later, naming this one moment of the soulful teaching of a student who technically failed as the holy of holies of my teaching career. See what I mean by "passing with flying colors" in a transcendental sense?

From the grounded, rooted, and at the same time transcendent perspective of this moment, let us ask again, Who is the "we"? When is the "then"? and What is the "dance"? The "we," I think, is the universal "*ecclesia*," the community of souls all yearning to connect. The "then" is the moment of connection, of holy communion—all the *more* holy when its different-rootedness deeply moves our souls from our culturally constricted comfort zones. The "dance" is how we both surrender to and actively transform ourselves through these moments of connection. How the world as a whole seems to dance when *we* manage to. And doesn't just *seem* to but does *in fact* dance, when we consider that each of our souls is an organic part of *the world's* yearning to better connect.

The research that informed Rachael Kessler's *The Soul of Education* (which I referred to earlier as the central text of my Philosophy of Education classes) showed a clear consensus on just what students' understanding of "soul" is: "soul" is "deep connection," said student, after student, after student. My guess is that the key to Emily's quandary as to just *how* to authentically pedagogically instantiate "openness with roots" lies in teachers' laying the ground to help students' souls to dance with others, themselves, and the world as a whole by providing manifold opportunities for this "deep connection" of soul to soul to

soul. As I hinted at in the title of this response, this understanding of the truth of life as the dancing of souls, aspiring to this deep connection, can become—if we play our educational and philosophical cards right (in ways I set out more thoroughly and systematically in a SIG session at the 2019 Conference)—the shared ground of an all-roots-all-souls-embracing, *nonsectarianly* religious worldview: a worldview of democratic "*equ-animity*," seeking to see soul (the deep, rooted "who," the deep, rooted "we") everywhere and at all times (in the open, flowering "then"), and to dance with it in deep, open connection. As Emily hints at the end of her article, this actually makes the ultimate philosophical-educational question a simple one of just three words: "*Can we dance?*"

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1 Rachael Kessler, *The Soul of Education: Helping Students Find Connection, Compassion, and Character at School* (Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2000).

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