



L'Arche Canada

L'Arche Canada offers this "thought sheet" as a contribution to the public conversation about values and the shaping of the social ethos in which we live. Our perspective comes from two broad sources: (1) from thirty-five years of living together in community as a diverse group of people, differently abled and from various cultural, ethnic and religious backgrounds; and (2) from contemporary thinkers who are open, fresh and responsive to the human spirit and are reflecting deeply on the individual and society today.

The vision and confidence to create a healthy Canadian society lies in the nexus where humanistic thinking and spirituality cross-fertilize. Indeed, today the best spiritual thinking engages contemporary culture with a view to the good of human society and the best humanistic thinking integrates spiritual values. We believe it is possible to live consciously in the gap between an ideal society and everyday reality and to make choices that contribute to the closing of that gap. It is a hopeful view, based on human and spiritual values embodied in daily life.

A Human Future

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Radical Amazement as a Door to Learning: Abraham Joshua Heschel's Vision of Education by Otto Baruch Rand



Otto Baruch Rand is a respected educator, Heschel scholar and lecturer, and friend of L'Arche. A former teacher and principal in Toronto and New York and director of Winnipeg's Jewish Board of Education, in 1995 he co-founded the popular Toronto Heschel School, which he describes as "a mini-laboratory for shaping a society guided by Heschel's lofty principles." He studied at the University of Chicago, the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. He is currently completing a textbook, *The Story of Civilizations*.

Perhaps no Jewish thinker is more appreciated by non-Jewish readers than Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. Of enormous moral stature, he was not only an outstanding teacher but also a social activist, an ecumenist and a builder of interfaith understanding who contributed importantly to Vatican II. Many people are familiar with the educational contributions of Maria Montessori and Rudolph Steiner's Waldorf schools. Heschel's thinking on education, more recent and less known, is extracted by Otto Rand. We offer this issue with the hope that it will inspire parents, teachers and all who continue to learn.

A Human Future is a free e-quarterly. We invite you to read back issues and to subscribe at: www.larchecanfoundation.org – Beth Porter, ed.

Abraham Joshua Heschel's views on education emerged from theological concerns – his seeking of answers to ultimate human questions. As a rabbi and university professor he considered himself first and foremost a teacher.

How might Heschel's concerns affect the education of our children today? Heschel deplores the quantitative orientation

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of education. Conveying the *love* for learning is what matters. His thought challenges school systems that practice constant testing. They miss the point. When teachers

Diane L. Hill

In Aboriginal thought, a whole person consists of spirit, heart, mind, and body – the capacity to see, feel, know, and do... [Thus] learning activities are designed to help the learner develop a capacity for learning in four primary ways – intuitive-spiritual, emotional-relational, mental, and physically centred... The learning cycle repeats itself in a never-ending spiral [of] awareness, struggle (to integrate), building (of new knowledge constructs) and preservation (of new understanding).

Because Aboriginal teachings stem from an oral tradition, the use of dialogue plays an extremely important role... Small group discussions, individual interviews, and [interactive] activities are used to develop the Aboriginal adult learner's capacity for oral discussion and presentation. Engaging adult learners in dialectical discussions and public presentations helps them to reclaim their skills for oration and storytelling – the two most vital elements of a traditional educational practice that is based on an oral tradition.

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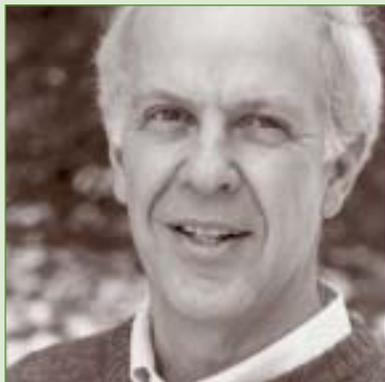


complain about their students' lack of intellectual excitement, he suggests the problem lies in the habit of evaluating students by their ability to answer questions rather than their ability to solve problems – and to ask pertinent questions. Furthermore, he asserts, “our systems of education ... fail to teach how to wonder, to stand in awe, and to discover the sublime.” Yet, “without this ability, the world becomes flat and the soul a vacuum.”

Heschel incorporated in his own person the secular and the sacred. He saw a unity to all knowledge, converging on a search to know God's will. This leads to a holistic approach in education. Rather than dividing knowledge into innumerable subject areas, this approach encourages exploring the same theme through a variety of disciplines, using as many of the senses as possible. Thus “relevance” is enhanced – another element Heschel stresses. In a math class at the Toronto Heschel School, students may calculate dimensions for a garden they plant and study as part of their science curriculum, and later harvest and serve as a salad to their fellow students. History studies will include creative projects on the art, literature and science of various periods. Study of the Bible will lead to reflection on ethical and social justice issues.

The core of Heschelian education is the development of the capacity for “radical amazement.” Heschel points out that we witness miracles daily. We need only allow ourselves to recognize them. The Heschelian approach engages students' interest in a subject by helping them first arrive at questions that they themselves formulate. Initially, students will focus on the rational, scientific answers. They may learn that they can “create” a particular chemical reaction. But are they creating, or only releasing something? And from whence comes their capacity even to think about this process? With the help of the teacher, students gain awareness of the known *and* of the unknown and inexpressible. This sense of the ineffable essence of things challenges the human mind and thus becomes, he

Parker J. Palmer



Teacher-bashing has become a popular sport.... Teachers must be better compensated, freed from bureaucratic harassment, given a role in academic governance, and provided with the best possible methods and materials. But none of that will transform education if we fail to cherish – and challenge – the human heart that is the source of good teaching.

...

To teach is to create a space in which the community of truth is practiced.... At its best, the community of truth advances our knowledge through conflict, not competition. Competition is a secretive, zero-sum game played by individuals for private gain; conflict is open and sometimes raucous but always communal, a public encounter in which it is possible for everyone to win by learning and growing.... The hallmark of the community of truth is in its claim that reality is a web of communal relationships, and we can know reality only by being in community with it.

Parker J. Palmer is senior associate of the American Association for Higher Education and founder of the “Courage to Teach” program for K-12 teachers in the U.S. and Canada. He is author of several books including, *The Courage to Teach* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), from which the above excerpts are taken, and *Let Your Life Speak* (Jossey-Bass, 1999).



argues, “the source of all creative thinking in art, religion, and moral living.” Of course, there must be a balance. “The sense of wonder and transcendence ... must not be a substitute for analysis where analysis is possible; it must not stifle doubt where doubt is legitimate,” he cautions.

“Indifference to the sublime wonder of living is the root of sin,” claims Heschel. The absence of wonder leads to taking things for granted, the surest way to suppress our ability to understand the intentions of God. God intends that we respect creation, including the dignity of every human being, young and old, healthy and ill, strong and weak, more capable and less capable. Heschel sees the giving of dignity as the key to unlocking human potential. The denial of dignity is a form of abuse. Teachers need to know this. A school environment of deep respect helps each one develop a strong self-image and reach his or her full potential. Heschel reflected much on the biblical verse, “God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.” “The basic dignity of a human person is inherent in his very being,” he notes. And he quotes the rabbinic source, *Pirkei Avot*: “Let the honour of your disciple be as dear to you as your own, let the regard for your colleague be like the reverence due to your teacher, and let the reverence for your teacher be like the reverence for God.” Never put another person to shame, for to do so can cause terrible damage, he warns.

Because of his regard for teaching, Heschel placed heavy demands on teachers and also on parents, who are the primary teachers. Teachers fulfill a sacred duty of connecting present and past, and of guiding the student to the fountains of meaning. “It is not only the information the teacher imparts; it is who he is ... which is the ‘text’ the students read; the text that they will never forget.” Children should revere their teachers but this reverence must be earned. As a father, he wrote, “Unless my child will sense in my personal existence acts and attitudes that evoke reverence – the ability to delay satisfac-

tions, to overcome prejudices, to sense the holy, to strive for the noble – why should she revere me?”

Steeped in the prophets of Israel, Heschel believed that the ultimate act of worship is upholding justice and combating evil. He lived this conviction to his last days, writing and speaking about civil rights, marching with Martin Luther King Jr. at Selma, protesting the Vietnam war, visiting Daniel Berrigan in prison when ill himself. He taught that students should be guided to have a sense of responsibility for the society in which they live, and be urged toward involvement rather than isolation or, worse, “fence-sitting,” which is the most damaging and reprehensible behaviour in Heschel’s eyes, and a source of the malaise of the world. “Some are guilty, but all are responsible,” was Heschel’s great mantra in front of social ills and injustice of all kinds.

This article is drawn largely from Heschel’s essay collection, The Insecurity of Freedom, (Random House, 1985) but also from other of his numerous works. O.B.R.

A Human Future is edited by Beth Porter.

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FOR YOUR INTEREST

- Books by or about A. J. Heschel: *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997 (reprint); *I Asked for Wonder: A Spiritual Anthology*, ed. Samuel H. Dresner, Crossroad, 1982; *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity: Essays*, ed. Susannah Heschel, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997; *Abraham Joshua Heschel: Prophetic Witness*, by Edward K. Kaplan and Samuel H. Dresner. Yale University Press, 1998
- Bio of A.J.Heschel: www.crosscurrents.org/heschel.htm.
- First Nations Technical Institute, Deseronto, Ontario: www.tyendinaga.net/fnti/index.shtml
- First Nations University, Regina, Saskatchewan: www.firstnationsuniversity.ca
- Parker Palmer: “The Grace of Great Things: Recovering the Sacred in Knowing, Teaching and Learning,” csf.colorado.edu/sine/transcripts/palmer.html
- “Courage to Teach” program: www.teacherformation.org
- On teaching, by Gloria Floren: www.miracosta.cc.ca.us/home/gfloren/teach.htm#top
- Children’s Peace Theatre: www.peace.ca/childrenspeacetheatre.htm
- Canadian Centres Teaching Peace: www.peace.ca/
- Canadian Special Education resources: www.schdist42.bc.ca/ProjectInfo/CanSpEd.html



The L’Arche movement was founded by Jean Vanier, in France in 1964. Today there are 121 communities of L’Arche on five continents, 26 in Canada. In L’Arche, people with developmental disabilities and those who come to assist them share life together.

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