

Holism in the Classroom: A Transpersonal Approach by Toni Gilbert

"The Times They Are A Changin' "

The energy of the psychology class was high, fun loving and loud. I tried three times to begin my lecture for the day. After the third try a student shouted, "let's meditate!"

The concept of meditation had been discussed in one of my previous lectures having to do with self-development. I hesitated for an instant. I was a new teacher and didn't know if I should risk teaching "out of the box." Upon reflection, I felt safe to go ahead because Susan, the director of my department, and I had talked about meditation and I knew she was studying and using meditation for herself. When I shouted back, "OK, let's do meditation," you could suddenly hear a pin drop in that conservative Oregon community college classroom.

I instructed the students to notice the difference in their energy before and then after the meditation. After five minutes of meditation (on a voluntary basis) I was back in the saddle with the reins in my hands. The class was calm and alert and had just learned first hand one of the benefits of meditation. They were impressed.

I continued to use meditation in my classes not only to quiet and focus the students but also before tests. As an educator, I have every good reason to employ this teaching method. Research has shown that students study better and do better on testing if they have five minutes of meditation before the stressful event. Other studies have shown that stress can lower students' intelligence. A study by Dr. Bernard Brown of Georgetown University discovered that increased stress impaired learning, thinking, memory and problem solving in over 4,000 participants. In fact, increased stress even slashed IQ scores by fourteen points.

Teachers observe such results routinely in the laboratory of their classrooms. The more stress, the more students tighten up and underperform. But teach a simple meditation technique and student stress is reduced. Meditation reduces the release of hormones linked with threat, while enhancing those linked with the ability to meet a challenge. Simply put, a relaxed nervous system functions best for learning. An increased ability to concentrate also means increased creativity (Jensen, 1996).

Seeking the higher potential

I am a third generation Oregonian with a graduate school education from the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology (ITP) in California. As a student, I wanted to learn about the whole person, what we really are, and what our potential is. Though not a member of an organized religion, I possessed a rich spiritual life. I knew I had a depth and breadth to myself, and I saw it in others. I may not have known what to call this higher development but I knew I wanted to study where "It" was taught. As the course of my education unfolded, I found definitions, concepts, and research about our higher potential in Transpersonal Psychology.

A series of synchronistic events led me to ITP, and in my first class there, transpersonal psychologist, researcher, and author Frank Lawlis gave me a welcome confirmation that I was in

the right place. I learned things I could never have learned anywhere in Oregon at that time. One concept that intrigued me was Abraham Maslow's theory of the self-actualizing person, a major tenet in transpersonal psychology. I had heard of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, with the self-actualizing person at the top of his pyramid, but no one had taught it to me in a way that I could relate to myself. To teach this requires that the teacher know first-hand about her own self-actualizing process and potential.

As fate would have it, when I became an instructor at a local community college, I was given a class where I could teach students that they too were capable of self-actualization. My class syllabus began with the title "Who Are You and Why Are You Here?" It went on to state that the study of psychology is a journey of self-discovery—a search for who you really are, the authentic self. Psychology helps you uncover your innate gifts, talents, and purpose in life, and teaches communication skills so you can effectively and tolerantly relate to others in a world of diversity and change.

One of the things I did to make the promise of the syllabus come alive was bring in a guest speaker, Peter Moore, to tell his life's story. Peter is an independent thinker and editor of a regional magazine "Alternatives for Cultural Creativity," and is one of the founding members of a well-known retreat and conference center, [Breitenbush Hot Springs](#). He told a wonderful story of three generations of determined men. He contrasted and compared how his grandfather and father's thinking differed from his own. His grandfather and father followed all the rules of conventional thinking of their time. By contrast, Peter's life story demonstrated the concept of post-conventional thinking in many ways. He told the students about the Vietnam War and how he and others of his generation had burned their draft cards to protest an immoral war in the face of opposition and consequences from family and government. This was not something his elders would have done as they followed their life scripts of duty to social norms. Peter went on to describe how he and other young friends began an "intentional" alternative community in the mountainous area near Breitenbush, Oregon. They codified and tried to live by ideals distinctly different from the dominant culture. These pioneers creatively blazed a new way of being in the world, one that honored being alive and the interconnection of all life. They honestly tuned into who they really were, and discovered and learned to express their natural and authentic selves. Without subsidy, they were able to make the retreat center they created "compete" in the "real world." In the process, ideas considered radical twenty-five years ago became accepted and are now eagerly sought after by thousands of visitors each year at Breitenbush.

The students of my classes were intrigued with his story. I instructed them to write about him in their journals and to analyze his character using the terms from the class text. Without my prompting, they (almost without exception) correctly identified him, from the characteristics we had discussed, as a self-actualizing person.

I taught my students that they too could self-actualize. My classes were full to overflowing, and my evaluations from students premium. I felt I earned and kept the trust of my students each term.

I taught at an entry-level college and most of the students were from lower to middle income families. Many were working at low paying jobs and going to school to try to better their lives.

The class lecture and discussion (with chairs set in a circle) centered around such issues as building and strengthening self-esteem, healing past hurts, living consciously, changing negative self-fulfilling prophecies and seeking positive relationships, to name just a few.

Many students had never considered questioning the values that were handed down to them. They brought an intense spirit of enquiry to classroom discussions. But it didn't stop with discussions of personal development. Things like succeeding in your career, developing enriching relationships, and ending relationships were other favorite subjects. Many students told me the class contained much needed, helpful information and they felt they could apply the content of the class to their lives.

Though my class was thriving, not all was well in the social sciences department, it turns out. During my second year at the college, I started to hear a grumbling through the grapevine that other teachers were of the opinion that my class was "therapy" and that therapy had no place in the classroom.

Changing Times

The face of psychology is changing. The concept of applied psychology—what I was teaching in my class—which is concerned with increasing consciousness and improving one's life, has come of age in the last thirty years. However, there are some old-guard teachers and administrators who hold allegiance to a different standard. They received their education in the fifties and sixties. In their time, psychology class was a dry linear list of names, materialistic research theories, and definitions. They haven't bothered to look up and see what is happening at the beginning of the new millennium.

For the rest of us, the seventies ushered in a new kind of psychology. Humanistic and Transpersonal Psychology are relevant and applied psychologies that discuss real life issues, promote self-development leading to an enriched life and, if one is persistent and disciplined, lead to self-actualization of one's innate gifts and talents.

Susan, my Director, was fired. The rest of us heard through the grapevine that she wasn't a "team player." My observation is that the thirty-plus staff members (of the forty under her direction) who attended her going away dinner never thought that. "Who was she not a team player with" I wondered? I suspected Susan thought differently from the old-guard.

Susan once told me that she took the school's philosophy seriously. Our college's single paragraph creed mentions diversity as a way to enrich the community and contribute to the learning environment. It goes on to state that each person is endowed with an inherent dignity.

Susan understood the fundamental principle that there are many ways to be in this world. She took the college at its word when it proclaimed that we should honor and represent that diversity. During her tenure, Susan hired several teachers whose race, cultural and educational backgrounds, and whose ideas differed from the old-guard.

The last line of the school's philosophy states, "To diminish the dignity of one is to diminish the dignity of all." In the end that's exactly what happened. I felt the school's dignity was tarnished

by its action toward Susan. In turn, Susan's individual dignity was harmed, and we who knew her felt the injury. What happened to her diminished us all.

Following her dismissal, the teachers hired by Susan felt quite insecure. Deciding to go on with my life as usual, I put in a request to go to an International Association of Transpersonal Psychology conference that summer in Vancouver BC, at which I was to be a presenter. I stated my case clearly to the acting social science director and the dean. They agreed and granted the funds to help me with my expenses.

During this process, an influential social science faculty member whom I will call "Old-Guard" let it be known that he disagreed with Transpersonal Psychology, calling it a pseudo-religion. In his time, behavioral psychology was the only valid psychology and he still clung to that way of thinking. Rather than investigating transpersonal psychology to explore its possible validity, he dismissed it out of hand. He was opposed to the college funding my expenses to the international conference but was overruled by the college administration.

Not to be deterred, "Old-Guard" made a point of talking to his colleagues (many of whom he mistakenly assumed thought like him). Acting shocked and puzzled, he criticized the Transpersonal Psychology conference, claiming its subject matter was not "real psychology." It made no difference to him that the conference was approved by the American Psychological Association, nor that it was presented and attended by psychologists, nurses, medical doctors, and researchers, many of whom were also teachers. He went on to tell all who'd listen that my graduate school ITP credentials were not adequate to teach at the college.

"Old Guard" had been a faculty member for decades and knew enough people in high places. The class I had been teaching for two years was cut before I reached the conference. I was not notified of this action; instead, I noticed it missing from the printed schedule of classes. When I pressed for clarity I received a curt e-mail from "Old-Guard" giving the names of the dean and acting social science director and himself. The e-mail stated in part "After careful analysis, we are all in agreement that your qualifications do not meet the needs of our institution: hence, we do not have any psychology courses to offer you, and we consider this matter to be closed."

I was stunned. Not only was this unfair to me, but I felt the students were getting "ripped-off" from a valid and relevant educational opportunity. Though the college has a few old-guard teachers and administrators who don't understand that self-development is as much a part of a quality education as mathematics, I know I am not alone in my thinking. There are many teachers who understand the importance of teaching holistically in order to give important life information that empowers the student. It's a legitimate point of view and educators need to be heard and respected for it.

While achieving a graduate degree in transpersonal studies I came to understand, through working with my mentors in transpersonal psychology, the importance of nurturing the whole student. We are not just "a head" and "a body." Teachers and students are wholly human with feelings, hopes and a destiny. It is possible to consider this life a sacred opportunity and a privilege, and to think that each person has the "responsibility" to be and do the best they can. The quality of life we live directly affects our career and other work we do in the world. I think

we need to be teaching this in the psychology classroom. Teaching students how to nurture self-esteem, be truthful in relationships, choose an appropriate career for talents and gifts, heal from injuries inflicted by participation in life, choose the values to live life by—all of these qualities should be an accepted part of the curriculum. I am talking about a holistic curriculum, and holistic teaching.

It is common knowledge that, within bureaucracies, some people gain authority solely by virtue of holding a job position longer than others, and not because of any profound expertise or wisdom. I realize that, in the current political climate, it has been the practice to keep quiet and work behind the scenes to effect a change, or to just wait out the arrogant (they eventually leave or retire). But keeping quiet only allows the actions of the inept few to hurt the dignity of the college and the dignity of us all. It isn't fair to those not in authority and it gives too much power and influence to those who are in a position to hurt others.

For the time being, the psychology department is managed by enough entrenched old guard that it sits stagnant. But that which ceases to grow begins to die, and I notice that a particular tune runs through my mind as I patiently wait and watch. I know that the winner now is criticizing something they can't understand as they stand in the doorway and block up the hall. They can't see that the old road is rapidly agin', their order is rapidly fadin' and that the loser now will be later to win. Some think the old order needs to get out of the way if they can't lend their hand. And I just have to sing out loud "Come gather round people wherever you roam, and admit that the waters around you have grown, and accept it that soon you'll be drenched to the bone. If your time to you is worth savin' then you better start swimmin' or you'll sink like a stone, for the times they are a-changin.' "

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