

**AASN Conference  
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Fostering the use of imagination in the service of spiritual development  
Dr Vivienne Mountain**

Aims of this session

- For participants to experience the use of imagination to clarify what is known- liminal knowledge- what we don't know we know (c.f what we know we know, what we know we don't know and what we don't know that we don't know)
- To consider the importance of spiritual development and its relationship to imagination
- To identify ways in which imagination can be used as a learning tool

My interest in this topic has come from my involvement in a Creative Art Therapy course at MIECAT- The Melbourne Institute of Experiential and creative arts therapy. The MIECAT system of inquiry is both a therapeutic method and a research tool. It is founded in a process of companioning; using the dynamic of intersubjective dialogue. The companioning process is focused on representations (creative arts) where unexplored areas of experience are brought into greater understanding (Mc Niff, 2004). The creative arts include the production of, images, sounds, movement, verbalization and writing. The exploration and understanding come through amplifying the ideas of the representation and then reducing the experience to key words and themes. The companioning relationship is vital as human resonance to ideas and impressions from the arts allow progressive understanding to arise. The companion process helps the student to find greater understanding of how life is, (an understanding of "being") that then allows for possible choices to be made regarding how life can be lived (Mahoney, 2003).

The heightened understanding from the use of imagination reflects the different aspects of spirituality. The relationship with the inner self is primary, self awareness is the first aspect of spirituality that help form other aspects of connectedness. Secondly, understanding of relationships with others flows from our personal understanding of experience. Thirdly, there is awareness of our connection with nature on the wider environmental plane and finally the possibility of relationship to the sacred or divine. The companioning process allows the client or researcher to expand the creative experience through phenomenological enquiry and then reduce the creative experience through a selection of key words and themes (Pearmain, 2001; Csikszentmihalyi, 2002). The process is open-ended, in that, knowledge continues, and we live in approximations of knowing, this is a constructivist epistemology (Herman, 2005; Kincheloe, 2005; Orange, 1995).

Imagination through the creative arts is used in person to person adult therapy and it is also used as a research method. In this paper the MIECAT process based in imagination is used as an educational tool and the use of imagination is also proposed as a tool for the teacher, to analyse and evaluate the educational experience.

### *Imagination as an educational tool.*

I have been experimenting using the creative arts inquiry method as an educational tool in my work as a teacher at Firbank. It is in this context that the process has been in some ways truncated and adapted, but I believe has remained true to the original intent of extending consciousness of meaning and understanding. The concept of companioning is central to the MIECAT process and in the class room situation this involves a strong teaching emphasis on how to listen and respect the other. Most class rooms provide time for group interaction and pair work as a teaching method. The MIECAT process extends this teaching methodology. The relationship of companioning, of listening with respect and helping each other to find depth in thinking and feeling, is modelled by the teacher and explicated at each lesson. This method extends relational consciousness and acts as a stimulus to spiritual development in children. It can be said that the content is in the process. As students are encouraged to listen to each other, they find self understanding as they struggle to relate to different experiences and ideas. This leads to a deeper awareness of who they are and how and why they behave in a certain way. The companioning process also has a dynamic of social awareness. As the engagement of listening and responding takes place, various levels of understanding and empathy are experienced. As the companioning engagement focuses on the creative art work a place of safety is entered where judgement and criticism of the person is suspended as understanding the art becomes the primary focus (Mc Niff. 2004).

### *Possibilities for imagination as a research tool.*

Using the MIECAT research method, the teacher uses the data from the students i.e book work, test results, oral feed back as well as her own experiences as a basis from which to evaluate the quality of the lesson. This can be valuable self-assessment and can be used as part of the formal school evaluation process, as the experience is shared with a colleague. The use of art-work, creativity and imagination reveals greater depth of understanding about the self, the interaction with the subject matter of the lesson and the interaction with students- the total package of education.

### *What is spirituality?*

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (2004) include spirituality as an aspect of life that should be developed through education, but the definition of the term is complex. The UN document is broad in that the spiritual is identified as the non- material aspect of life.

The basic dictionary definition, shows the original Latin root of the word Spiritual - "of or pertaining to the spirit or soul as distinguished from the physical nature" (*Macquarie Dictionary*, 1981, p. 1661). In this sense spirituality is a deep part of being human. It is part of the unique human consciousness as in " a wellspring of love and wisdom" (Hart, 2003, p.2). Although spirituality can be conceived as being outside of the religious traditions, it usually involves an awareness of interconnectedness with transcendence. "Our way of being in the world...in the light of the Mystery at the core of the universe" (Harris & Moran, 1998, p. 109). " A desire for connectedness, which often expresses itself in an emotional relationship with

an invisible sacred presence” (Tacey, 2000, p.17). In the introduction to the Medical Journal of Australia supplement entitled *Spirituality and Health* Koenig (2007) speaks of spirituality as possibly being defined in the terms of mental health with the additional aspect of awareness of the sacred or the Transcendent.

Hughes (2007) draws on the ideas of the philosopher Kierkegaard (1961) to identify the spiritual realm of life as the highest level of human relationships – the level of love and commitment. Kierkegaard identifies three stages of human engagement in life- the aesthetic stage of living in the here and now, a life of pleasure. Secondly, the ethical life with a sense of responsibility that focuses on rational understanding and right action. The highest level he calls the religious phase (that we could call the spiritual). This involves a leap of faith that takes the person into sacrificial love as part of unitary thinking.

“Relational consciousness” (Hay and Nye, 1998, p. 113) is the definition of spirituality that I have used in research with children. Hay and Nye suggest that this broad definition of spirituality has four areas. First there is relationship with the self, then relationship with others, relationship with the environment and finally relationship with their image of God. Hay and Nye regard spirituality as part of children’s experience, a kind of inner knowing, but different from the cognitive “knowing” of formal education. In their writing spiritual “knowing” is linked to a deeper, more primary awareness or experience as outlined by Hardy (1979) and Robinson (1977). Hay and Nye proposed, that the spiritual capacity has evolved in humans as a survival mechanism, an “insight” which helps humans navigate through the “overload of demands on our consciousness” (Hay and Nye, 1998 p.20).

#### *What is imagination?*

Imagination is another well-used word with a variety of meanings. Satre (1972) speaks of the “imaginative consciousness” as “one of the four or five great mental functions” (p.107), it is a mixture of objective and subjective perception, combining both intellectual and affective experiences. Satre places imagination not as contingent on consciousness or an extension of consciousness but rather at the very centre of human consciousness. Imagination shows the human as “transcendentally free” (p.216). That is, the human stays in the world but the imagination produces the “unreal” outside of the world. This unreality of the real is explained by Satre in the example of listening to a symphony by Beethoven. The symphony is not here, in a place, nor in the past when it was composed by Beethoven. Although it depends on the real musical instruments for its appearance, it is not real, we listen to the symphony through the imagination. Imagination for Satre is not an optional quality of life reserved for a few in the art class room, rather imagination is at the core of being human, being able to perceive objects and being able to see beyond objects, seeing the unreal. The imagination provides the place of contact, or relationship, deeply involved in making meaning.

Ricoeur (1995) considers religious narrative and imagination as constantly working together, providing a sense of meaning that is within the text and at the same time within the reader of the text. Judaism and Christianity show a tension between ‘promise’ and ‘fulfilment’, that is, they rely on the “absurd logic of hope’ or ‘the passion for the possible’ (p. 206). It is in the imagination

that faith and hope take root. For example, the imagination can change the negative concept of captivity for the Jewish people into the more positive emphasis of “the exile” ( Brueggemann: 1986). In the harsh experience of history, suffering and joy are woven together into a concordant-discordant whole (Ricoeur, 1995 p. 239). So the imagination is recognised as the vehicle for meaning-making and hope.

Weber (2000) speaks of the “expansive nature of the self” (p. 177). That is, the self, seen in the body, persona and spirit, is in a state of constant development and change. It is the imagination that is active in these changes. Humans are engaged in experimenting with different ways of being. The body is decorated to communicate a variety of messages and over time these change and eventually settle into a preferred pattern. Like masks, different social selves can also be tried on. They first arise in imagination and are then enacted, modified, and finally claimed as part of the core self. It is through imagination and experience that the self is created or found.

Knill (2004) presents imagination as part of effective reality, reality that is a tool for living. It is part of the human sense of living as social engagement, like the “I-Thou” relationship ideas of Martin Buber (2004 [1939]). Knill identifies two forms of effective reality one ‘literal reality’ from experience with the material realm and the other, equally valid reality, is the ‘imaginal reality’ (p.62).

Burke (1999) identified imagination as an advanced human component of identity central to our survival. Richard Lewis, the educator cited in Burke, (1999) defines imagination as ‘a deeply felt experience and intuition...below the level of speech and verbal articulation... a language that tries to make sense of who and what we are; a bridge which connects unknowns to knowns’ (p.9). Herman (2005) expresses a similar idea, showing the value of the creative arts as an experience of the liminal. The liminal space lies between the actual event and the imagination that allows the experience to be portrayed as a response. “Only figurative discourse allows the expression to that which is un-representable” (Herman, 2005, p.476). Particularly in experiences of distress, the imagination can provide the liminal space needed to process the event, discover new truth and find a way forward.

The two complex concepts of spirituality and imagination are both therefore portrayed as inner aspects at the core of being human. They are part of human consciousness enabling successful living, where the individual is recognised as part of something larger than itself. Both qualities of imagination and spirituality are interrelated with the experience of living and both facilitate the development of meaning-making.

From this theoretical discussion spirituality and imagination are shown to share much in common. As deep aspects of consciousness connected with being fully human, they are in dynamic relationship. It seems that the spiritual depends on the imagination. An understanding of life lived in all types of relationship depends to some extent on the use of imagination. That is, to be conscious of abstract relationships it is necessary to create an imaginative “picture” of something beyond the normal concrete senses. For example, the imagination is needed to grasp the concept of my relationship with the tree outside my window. Imagination allows me to “see” the flow of the oxygen

produced by the tree to my use of that oxygen for breathing. On the other hand, it could be said that, the imagination is a wide form of consciousness of which spiritual awareness is part. In imagination there are the added images of isolation, dislocation, separation and abandonment that are experienced as opposites to spiritual connectedness.

In our current state of human evolution with our consciousness and ego-self well developed we are in danger of falling into despair. Life has become complex with competing pressures and no recognised meta narrative to bind us together. The psychologist Robert Kegan (1994) in his book *In over our Heads* recognised that we need to move to a higher order of understanding in order to face the challenges of our current social crisis. We have so many competing voices that the temptation is to turn off, or turn up the media babble.

Life cannot be simple, the reality is that life is complex and we need spiritual strength and imagination to cope. We need the sense of connectedness in relationship of care to give us hope to move forward. We need self awareness not only of our strengths but also of the shadow (the “beast” that is only just below the surface). We need resources to cope with negative experiences and cognitive dissonance in order to have courage for the future.

### *Conclusion*

It is my contention that spiritual development is a central part of education. Advances in technology, scientific and economic progress will only bring well-being if the deeper relational bonds are in place. It seems we need a greater emphasis on spiritual development in order to find a way through the “me-first” generation. The report of the *International Commission on Education for the Twenty first Century* (Delore, 1996) identified four guiding principles of education – “to know, to do, to live together and to be” (p.94). The first two categories are addressed in the large bulk of our curriculum time. “To live together” and “To be” demand more serious attention. As we look at how these goals can be realized, the use of imagination in education is one way in which the spiritual dimension of life can be strengthened.

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[viv.mtn@bigpond.net.au](mailto:viv.mtn@bigpond.net.au)