The Spirituality of the Sacred Heart Educator: one teacher's perspective

We are living through a historical shift in responsibility for the Sacred Heart educational ministry. Sacred Heart sisters are not leading us now. RSCJ has committed itself to the developing world. It may feel, from our US point of view as if the movement is disappearing. But it is alive and well. Will we stay connected to it in a way that is integral and sustainable as we move into the era of full lay leadership?

1. Orthodoxy is not a central concern to Sacred Heart spirituality.

The most important thing I can think to say about the SH spirituality is that it is not focused on orthodoxy. This is not an oversight or a weakness. It connects with the heart of Sacred Heart spirituality—the deep sensitivity to the uniqueness of individual spiritual experience.

In my first year as a teacher we had a meeting like this one and in a small group discussion on Goal One an RSCJ responded to a teacher’s opening remark that we were challenged as a community because so few people were Catholic at Sacred Heart. She said, “God is not Catholic either; we are.” Catholicism is our way of expressing our community’s faith, but we recognize that others have good ways of expressing their faith and we can learn from each other. As a mid-twenties recovering Catholic, I remember thinking how welcoming it was to hear that. I felt I could show up for work and be spiritually honest, be honest about the fact that I was trying to figure out my relationship to Catholicism.

I also remember thinking that, of course, she could say that because she is a nun and no one is going to challenge her. Well, I was wrong to think that nuns don’t get challenged, and wrong to think that we should or could leave it to the women religious to explain the difference between having a relationship with God and participating in a specific religious tradition.

Last year, an RSCJ at St. Joseph’s, the grade school in Atherton, ended a community prayer by saying something like: “We ask this in name of Jesus Christ or however you name God.” An uproar ensued. Some parents felt that this inclusive language was a sign that we had lost our way and were afraid to assert our Catholic identity. The school cooled the parents down and affirmed that we were still Catholic and life went on.

I think that was an important moment to say to those parents, wait a minute: we are being Catholic—in the Sacred Heart spirit—when we pray that way. We should not ask people to excuse us for being inclusive, for our inter-faith commitments. We should let them know that this is who we are. If they want a school that refuses to recognize multiple names for God, they should find another school.

My point is not merely a veiled attack on conservative Christians. I sometimes hear students and colleagues say, I like Sacred Heart because it is not very Catholic, not nearly as bad as some other Catholic schools I have been in. What they mean, I think, is that they do not feel forced into one kind of spiritual practice. But, again, I do not think that we are less Catholic because we do not force people. Our Sacred Heart way of being Catholic recognizes the uniqueness of individual spiritual experience. This is not weakness or ignorance on our part but a manifestation of our Sacred Heart commitment to the dignity of the individual.

2. Activation of the imagination.

So I think our spirituality is open to all-comers and has much more to do with invitation than submission. Our approach to spirituality has much more to do with activating the imagination than teaching doctrine.

I had a 9th grade religion teacher named Ms. Boudry who used to lead the class in guided meditations. Maybe 20 minutes long, we squirrely 14 year olds would relax into a deep silence. Ms. Boudry would focus us on our bodies and our breathing and then move our mental cameras slowly out into nature and farther and farther until we could imagine our inter-connectedness with all beings in a universe animated by love.
We would beg her for meditations. Of course, the meditations were not a part of the curriculum, never appeared on any tests, were, from the point of view of the business of teaching introduction to Scriptures, time wasters. For me they did something that liturgical practice at the parish level had never done: They engaged my imagination.

I see and hear about this kind of thing on campus today. Of course, we still have teachers who meditate or pray with students in authentic ways. But in so many ways we cultivate the interior life through the imagination—through such choices we make as what plays to stage, what novels to read, what music to perform and songs to sing. When we have a social justice film festival or an exhibit of student photography around social justice themes, we are challenging one another to activate the imagination around spiritual values. I think appeals to imagination are respectful of individual conscience in ways that lessons on authoritative teachings are not; I think our activation of the imagination is more effective as teaching.

3. Experience of being known/teacher as mother.

Another powerful experience of the Sacred Heart spirituality in my student memory was the experience of being known. When I showed up for school, people knew who I was, in and out of the classroom.

When I think of this, I think of Henry Schimpf.

Henry was the recess monitor and ball room guardian when I was in elementary school. He kept the balls properly inflated, and broke up the fights and sometimes pitched when we played kick ball. He was a kind old man who had no classroom responsibilities. He was the only adult on campus whom we called by his first name.

When I was in second grade and my parents were divorcing, Henry was the guy who took me to the father-son spaghetti dinner. I do not know whose idea that was—but someone was watching out for me. Someone kept me inside the circle of inclusion.

We recall Sophie’s idea about acting “for the sake of one child” so often that the phrase can sometimes feel empty. But Henry embodied that spirituality. Not just at one dinner, but every day. And it was not just Henry, but so many people in my life at Sacred Heart who paid attention, who knew who I was.

When I was a student, there was a phrase in the school handbook that described Sacred Heart’s pedagogy by identifying the teacher as mother. This phrase strikes me as another way of describing my experience of being known as student. Male or female, my teachers were nurturers far more than they were judges. Of course teachers knew and loved their subjects and knew how to be tough with an undisciplined student, but under the tough business of teaching was love, expressed through personal conversation and counsel out of class, sharing of books; movie, lecture and activism invitations—so many ways that adults helped me recognize my worth, develop my own interests and take myself seriously.

I see this happening every day at Sacred Heart. A couple of Fridays ago, a student came to see me after school about an essay in progress. When that work was done, twenty minutes later, she stayed. And we talked about school, and her sense of her classmates, and her parents’ divorce. Sometimes we looped back to our earlier talk about Dostoevsky’s Notes from Underground, a novel that ought to be sacred text for alienated youth. We had real conversation. I was not her counselor or therapist. I did not offer professional guidance. I listened and shared my own experiences, like an older person, like a mother.

4. Authentic speech; authentic relationships; community.

At the adult level, I think our spirituality as Sacred Heart educators is manifest in and sustained by our collegial relationships. Sacred Heart, as I know it, is a community of intellectuals who care deeply about justice and spirituality. And the spiritual practices that sustain us are the daily rituals we engage in—lunch, of course, but stopping for coffee and hallway chats and email exchanges. When these work well—and they do most of the time, these are fundamentally about authentic speech. We share hopes and fears; we support and challenge each other.
I came back from a service project in Tijuana a three weeks ago, and I felt wretched about it because of the immature behavior of some of the boys I brought with me. I felt burned out. I had these ideals about solidarity with migrants, about student transformation, and I discovered my ideals were not real.

Colleagues asked me about my trip, and I told them. Again and again, I got words of support, and challenging counsel. I needed both. I’d been feeling so bad about this project that I did not have the energy or courage to deal with it; I was going to let it go unaddressed. After a couple of days of lifting me up, my colleagues reminded me of my deeper obligations to teach about right relationships. They challenged me not to avoid these difficult conversations I had to have with students and parents. That was intense and difficult set of conversations. But I feel like I grew a lot from the experience, and I think I challenged some students to think about things they had not been thinking about. I do not think I could have done that without being challenged by colleagues to frame my experience in terms of our fundamental questions—what kind of values do we want to pass on? What should one do in this circumstance to make sure those values are passed on?

Sacred Heart is the place where I talk to other adults about stuff that really matters to me. I think I can compare favorably my membership in the Sacred Heart school community with my membership in the several parish communities I have passed through in the last 10 years. At school—my workplace—I get spiritual needs filled that one would normally expect from a parish: Authentic conversation; authentic relationships; table fellowship; intellectual stimulation; an experience of mutual respect when working through disagreements; time for quiet reflection, for retreat; for prayer and meditation. So, when we talk or think about the spirituality of the Sacred Heart educator, I think we should call to mind our experience from everyday life.

5. Commitment to social justice.

The last feature of the spirituality of Sacred Heart educators I want to talk about is the commitment to social justice. This is the element of our spirituality that is most important to me, and also the one I am most hesitant to describe as a common value. As an English teacher who moved sideways into service and activism, I feel transformed by the Sacred Heart commitment to social justice. Working at Sacred Heart has allowed me to develop concerns I have cared about in superficial ways—like interest in and concern for immigrants and people in prison. And I hear my colleagues talk about the ways they bring social justice concerns into their curriculum all the time. But when I ask my colleagues—as I did this week—if they think it is accurate to say that our spirituality as educators is manifest in a concern for social justice, they hesitate. One colleague summarized it this way: As a faculty, we are, but not as an institution. That strikes me as an accurate judgment. Still, I want to claim a commitment to social justice as an unfinished dimension of our spirituality as Sacred Heart educators.

And I want to make this tenuous observation: that many students and adults connect with Sacred Heart ideals through service and activism as a first step engaging with our spirituality. And if they hang with our activism long enough to get whipped around by it, they recognize that having a spiritual practice is not some frill on the side, but a necessary component of sustainable activism, that action without spiritual practice leads to burn out, and spiritual discourse without meaningful and challenging action is empty. That is a long way of saying that the more we commit ourselves to service and activism, the more we will feel in touch with and in need of our Sacred Heart spirituality.

6. Reality check?

I want to conclude by stating a fear I have—that Sacred Heart could also be a place where we do not have to have any spirituality at all; it could be merely a good place to work, a good job where you do not need a credential and have a lot of freedom to design your own curriculum.

Our sensitivity to individual spiritual experience suggests that we will be a supportive community for people in many stages of spiritual practice. I am not saying that I fear that someone who does not believe in God has snuck onto the faculty (I am not worried about that). Rather, I am asking: what will happen if we collectively disconnect from our Sacred Heart spirituality by not taking active responsibility for it?
Sacred Heart spirituality is counter-cultural, and there are forces from the dominant culture pulling at our collective identity—the materialist culture of wealth that surrounds us, and the corporate culture of standardized tests and name-brand colleges that feeds on us—to name two obvious ones. It is so easy to get swept up in the business of teaching. How do we stay attuned to the spirituality? How do we make sure that our ideals stay connected to the real? I am not a doomsayer. I think we will hold onto our spirituality. But I do not think it will get delivered to us from the Network, or even from a Director’s session like this one. It needs to be something that most of us care about, struggle with, and take joy in.

Part Two: How do we, corporately, nurture our Sacred Heart spirituality?

In partial answer to my own question about how we take care of our community’s spirituality, I want to tell you about some grassroots organizing down at Atherton. A couple of years ago the Sacred Heart Network sent out an email with a proposed revision to the Goals and Criteria. As the service learning person at Atherton, I often rely upon the criteria for Goal 3 as sacred text. The language is so much more radical than anything we actually do. And I want to do some of the things that the criteria called us to do—like train students in nonviolence, act for peace, and establish reciprocal relationships between my school and poor people’s organizations.

So, because I regularly invoked on the Goals and Criteria to defend projects, I was curious to see the proposed revisions. I was shocked to see all of my favorite phrases gone—the language about awakening a critical consciousness, peace and nonviolence, reciprocal relationships...

It was a clarifying moment for me. I was aware that I felt personally responsible for the mission of the school—especially around Goal 3. It felt like someone had slipped in and changed the mission, deprived us of all the challenge. Suddenly our Goals were not goals at all, but descriptions of any fairly functional private school.

So I sent out a highly inflammatory email to 10 colleagues and everyone got riled up, and we sent out a less inflammatory email to all of our colleagues summarizing the proposed changes and asking them to come to a meeting to draft a response.

We held a meeting at 3 o’clock on a Friday afternoon to discuss the Goals and Criteria, and 30 people showed up. The first 20 minutes or so was letting people say what they had to say, and it was absolutely clear that individual teachers really cared deeply about the ideas and the language of the Goals and Criteria. So, to summarize a bit here, we organized written responses to the revisions and ended up happy, for the most part, with the final result.

But through that process we also recognized that though we cared about the Sacred Heart mission, we did not have the language or place or mechanisms to talk and learn about it, to steep ourselves in Sacred Heart philosophy.

A veteran colleague, Connie Solari, told us about a group that she had heard about in Grand Coteau or New Orleans in the early 1980s called ESCJs—educators of the Sacred Heart—and we pledged to revive the idea.

For the past year and a half we have had a grassroots organization at Atherton called the ESCJs. It is not an invention of the administration to trick us into formation to mission activities. We are 70 faculty and staff who are interested in Sacred Heart spirituality. We propose and organize our own events—all of which are open to anyone and optional for everyone. We generally get about 20 or 30 people to show up. We had Barbara come talk about prayer; we had a few soup dinners with local RSCJ; we had a two-day retreat at San Damiano in the East Bay.

We have taken responsibility for planning the all-school retreat day. Faculty used to whine like sophomores over this day. Now thirty of their colleagues are responsible for it, so it is either more relevant to their lives or less politic to criticize it publicly because the chances are you are taking to one of the organizers.
I feel good about what we are doing because the leadership is wide open. Last month, my colleague offered a guided meditation for faculty and staff. A dozen people showed up. They meditated, then drank some wine and ate some cheese. Recently I invited people to join me for dinner and a discussion at Stanford on interfaith spirituality and social activism; fifteen people have said yes. In April, 18 people will do a week-long retreat in Joigny and Paris. We are keeping an active dialogue going, even as the participants shift from event to event.

Yesterday, our high school principal took the faculty out for margaritas, and I, in my most optimistic speech-writing capacity, tried to persuade friends at my table that we really were committed to social justice. But they refused to certify that idea. I pressed them with examples, and they acknowledged that many or even most Sacred Heart educators were committed to social justice, but that was not true of our corporate identity. I asked them, but what do we do about it, if we care about social justice individually but not institutionally? How do we change that? Someone said, that’s what the ESCJs are about. If we talk about social justice as Sacred Heart philosophy they can’t ignore us. We’ve got a powerful voice.

And I thought, if the malcontents at Sacred Heart—among whom I count myself—talk over drinks about challenging the school to be true to its Goals, then the mission of Sacred Heart education is in good hands. In these margarita drinkers, I could see the spirituality of the Sacred Heart educator: intellectually critical, socially engaged, and deeply individual. I feel blessed and challenged by them. They affirm for me that the Sacred Heart spirituality is already among us, is in our hands and in our dreams, and it is our job, continually, to articulate it, defend it, redefine it, live it, and be transformed by it.

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