

# Chapter 8

## *The Heart of Education and Well-Being Is Spiritual: Autoethnographic Inquiry as an Educational Practice for Sustainable Well-Being*

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*As an initial attempt at connecting education with well-being, spirituality, and autoethnographic inquiry, I suggest that autoethnographic inquiry harbors extraordinary potential as an educational practice to contribute to sustainable well-being for both individual learner and communities of learners. Autoethnographic inquiry offers one possible way to view and connect education with well-being and spirituality. To illustrate these points, I present two examples. One is an autoethnographic inquiry into one of my own life/educational experiences, and the other is a sharing of insights gained from employing autoethnographic inquiry as pedagogy in teaching a graduate course on curriculum development.*

### Two Kinds of Intelligence

There are two kinds of intelligence: one acquired, as a child in school memorizes facts and concepts from books and from what the teacher says, collecting information from the traditional sciences as well as from the new sciences.

With such intelligence you rise in the world.  
You get ranked ahead or behind others  
in regard to your competence in retaining  
information. You stroll with this intelligence  
in and out of fields of knowledge, getting always more  
marks on your preserving tablets.

There is another kind of tablet, one  
already completed and preserved inside you.  
A spring overflowing its springbox. A freshness  
in the center of the chest. This other intelligence  
does not turn yellow or stagnate. It's fluid,

and it doesn't move from outside to inside  
through conduits of plumbing-learning.

This second knowing is a fountainhead  
from within you, moving out.  
(Rumi, 2004, p. 178)

‘And what is as important as knowledge?’ asked the mind.  
‘Caring and seeing with the heart,’ answered the soul.  
– Anonymous –

Since joining the conferences organized by the Education for Sustainable Well-Being Research Group (<http://www.eswbrg.org>) at the University of Manitoba I have been contemplating about the possible connections between well-being, education, spirituality, and how autoethnographic inquiry can serve as both a research methodology and an educational pedagogy to link the three interconnected dimensions of a human being. The need for reflecting on these interconnections and on the purpose of public education is never greater, considering the ecological, environmental, social, and economical challenges of our time. Pinar (2012) summarizes it all by stating that “it is a terrible time for America’s school children who are pressed not to discover or cultivate their talents or understand the world they inhabit, but are pressed to do one thing: produce higher scores on high-stake standardized exams” (p. xii). In such commerce oriented, lean model driven neoliberal mindset and practice, educational institutions only produce “more effective vandals of the earth” (Orr, 2004, p. 5) and further increase the gaps and inequalities in society. The challenges and problems of current educational institutions are obvious.

In the new world of globalization and migration, the classroom has become a receptacle for a mosaic of minds shaped by history, ethnicity, personality, prejudice, opinion – diversity that may enrich the educator-student experience and may also push to the surface underlying dialogic malfunctions. Sometimes the school is the safe haven, or sadly, it may be a source of trauma. . . . However nicely and caringly we may treat students in this kind of education, still fundamentally we are treating them as learning machines that are in the service of obtaining products (grades, awards, status, jobs, security, social approval) as opposed to validating their intrinsic beingness and inherent worthiness. No wonder, then, that people who are “produced” through such a mold of education in turn see and relate to the world (other people, the environment) primarily instrumentally and proceed to turn the forest into a lumberyard and people into human resources. (Bai, Scott, & Donald, 2009, p. 332)

This paper is an initial attempt at linking education with well-being, spirituality, and autoethnographic inquiry. The human heart is often seen in association with emotions, with love and compassion, as well as indicating the confluence of things. Hence, the focus for this chapter is the confluence of education, spirituality, and well-being – the intersection, connections, and the need for congruency of all in the often spirit – deprived landscapes of most educational institutions in North America, which tend to disregard the holistic well-being of students. For this task I set on myself as a human being and as a teacher educator I focus on autoethnographic inquiry as an

educational/pedagogical practice for sustainable well-being. I will illustrate my points with two cases - one from an individual learner such as myself, and the other from a community of learners in a graduate course on curriculum development. First, I will lay out the theoretical framework that has guided my autoethnographic inquiry into the relationships between education, well-being and spirituality.

### Theoretical Lenses

The work of many scholars has guided the formation of my understanding of the intricate/intimate connections between education, well-being, and spirituality. Autoethnographically speaking, the awareness of these interconnections was inscribed in me as someone who was born and who grew up in the People's Republic of China, where education is viewed as the most important part of a human life. This is similar to Dewey's view that "education, life, and experience are one and the same" (cited in Huber, Caine, Huber, & Steeves, 2013, p. 220). For Dewey, "education is life and life is education, and to study life, to study education, is to study experience" (Huber et al., 2013, p. 220). Education is also closely linked to if not equated as spiritual cultivation, which is an important path to enlightenment and to ultimate well-being. Ten years of graduate study and living in the United States almost led me to forget about the early life influences on me if I had not been reminded by the work of the following scholars.

For this article and its title I draw inspiration from Parker Palmer's work on "courage and renewal" in human service professions and in particular from two of his books – *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life* (Palmer, 2007), and *To Know as We Are Known: Education as a Spiritual Journey* (Palmer, 1993). Also, perspectives from deep ecology (Naess, 1995) and from humanist geography (Tuan, 1999, 2007, 2012; Tuan & Strawn, 2009) have informed my understanding of these important aspects of being human and have guided the autoethnographical inquiry part of this paper. To visually represent my understanding of the interconnections between education, well-being, spirituality, and autoethnography I have created the diagram in Figure 1.

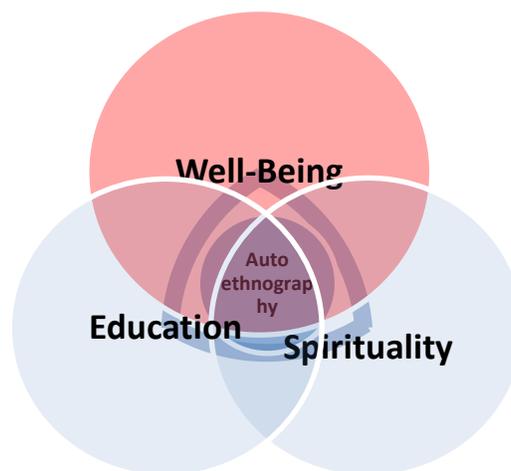


Figure 1

Ideally it should be shaped as a 3-D water molecule structure of oxygen and hydrogen. When education, well-being, and spirituality are bound together, the ‘water molecule’ is formed, which is resilient, vibrant, creates and sustains life. Autoethnographic inquiry is potentially a mighty chemical bond connecting the three vital dimensions of a human life: education, spirituality, and well-being. What unites education, spirituality, and well-being is their connection to life. Autoethnographic inquiry – either as a research methodology or as an educational practice – centers around life and life experiences embedded within / across / beyond cultures.

When education is thought about and carried out without regard to life, to well-being, and to spirituality, it may lead to distress, isolation, and even harm for some students, which is reflected in Cohen’s work as a psychotherapist and an educator. Cohen (2006) writes that

The educational system has contributed significantly, even decisively, to the wounding experience of my clients. My clients speak of alienation, feelings of despair, loneliness, and emotional pain. My students and my colleagues in graduate school also speak of these experiences. I have lived these experiences in my own life. (p. 16)

Palmer (1997) suggests a few points that would transform education if we could embody them in our knowing, teaching, and learning. First, if we could “recover a sense of the sacred in knowing, teaching, and learning, we would recover our sense of the precious otherness” of the things of the world (p. 7). Second, know and pay attention to the “precious inwardness of the things” of the world (p. 8). If we do not respect the “inwardness of things we study (genes and ecosystems, symbols, artifacts, materials, people, communities, the shapes and colors of music and art, etc.)” (p. 8), we do not respect the “inward learnings” that those things have for us. “Recovering the sacred might be one path towards recovering the inwardness without which education does not happen” (p. 9). I would add that without inwardness, well-being cannot be fully experienced. By sacredness Palmer means “worthy of respect”. Third, by recovering the sacred, we could recover our *sense of community* with each other and with all of creation. Palmer has become increasingly convinced that “this recovery of community is absolutely at the heart of good teaching” (p. 9). Fourth, if we recovered a sense of the sacred, we would recover the “*humility*” that makes teaching and learning possible. And finally, if we recovered a sense of the sacred, “we would recover our capacity for wonder and surprise, an absolutely essential quality in education” (p. 11). According to Palmer (1997), we should carry these qualities of the sacred in our hearts into the world in solitude and in community.

We cannot address the need for a sense of the sacred without addressing spirituality. One indigenous view shared by Lee (2006), a Cree Elder, is that

being spiritual is . . . remembering the first thing that was gifted to you when you came into being was the spirit. Sadly we tend to forget that. Then we neglect our spirit and take it for granted. So we need to remember where we came from and the gifts that were given to us as human beings. (p. 3)

Palmer (1997) speaks of spirituality as primarily about “reality... an effort to penetrate the illusions of the external world and to name its underlying truth” (p. 12). Spirituality can also be understood as being aware of and connected with the life in each of us regardless of our life happenings or life situations (Tolle, 1999). Spiritual cultivation and development is described by Jason (1997) as undergoing four stages. Stage one is called “Chaotic and Antisocial, where people are unprincipled and selfish and incapable of empathetic responses to others, and they tend to be manipulative and

self-serving” (p. 54). Stage two is called “Formal and Institutional”, which is the stage of most churchgoers. Stage three is called “Skeptical and Individual”, where people reject formal religious life but remain committed to social causes. Stage four is called “Mystical and Communal”, at which stage the seeker experiences the “underlying unity and interconnectedness of all things” (p. 55).

Naess (1995) proposes a similar view on “self realization” as he ponders upon the thousands of years old questions about “who we are, where we are headed, and the nature of the reality in which we are included” (p. 225). Naess’s (1995) “deep ecology” theory encompasses six points. First, as human beings, we tend to underestimate our self – where self should not be confused with the “narrow ego”. Second, human nature is such that, with sufficient comprehensive (all-sided) maturity, we cannot help but “identify our self with all living beings; beautiful or ugly, big or small, sentient or not” (p. 225). Third, the development of our self may go through stages of ego to social self (comprising the ego), and to a metaphysical self (comprising social self), and eventually to “ecological self”. Fourth, the meaning of life, and the joy we experience in living, is increased through increased self-realization, which may be different for different persons, but all implies a “broadening and deepening of the self” (p. 226). Next, because of an inescapable process of identification with others, with increasing maturity, the self is widened and deepened. We “see ourselves in others” (p. 226). Our self-realization is hindered if the self – realization of others, with whom we identify, is hindered. Thus “we act beautifully, but neither morally nor immorally” (p. 226). Finally, Naess (1995) writes that one of the great challenges today is to save the planet from further ecological devastation which “violates both the enlightened self – interest of humans” and more than humans, and decreases the “potential of joyful coexistence for all” (p. 225-226).

In terms of what is meant by well-being, there will be probably as many ways to understand and to experience well-being as there are many of us on this planet. I am of course talking about our subjective sense of well-being. Falkenberg (2013) extends conceptions of human well-being from the notion of subjective well-being, which he viewed as focused on “hedonistic perspectives” prominent in psychology. He summarizes three other notions of human well-being: “objective” measures of well-being – measuring “living condition aspects” that is prominent in health research; the “capabilities approach” to well-being, which is based on choice and ability to act as seen in philosophy and economics; and “eudaimonia / character approach” to well-being: that is “living a meaningful life in light of ethical standards” as evidenced in philosophy and psychology. Falkenberg is doing groundbreaking work in developing an index of well-being for schools using a multidisciplinary / interdisciplinary / transdisciplinary approach.

To add to our understanding of well-being from an indigenous perspective, Lee (2006) shares her “Tipi Teachings” about the Medicine Wheel. She says that “there are four parts of a human being: the spiritual, physical, emotional, and mental aspects of the self. The self is symbolized as fire at the center of the Medicine Wheel” (Lee, 2006, p. 2). Lee brings home the need to balance these four parts that were given to us, to function as people. All the above views and teachings informed my understanding of well-being. For me the idea of education for living a harmonious and meaningful life resonates well. I see well-being intricately related to Naess’s notion of “self-realization”. The urgency to search for meaning and purpose is dramatically summarized by Tuan (2012).

Let’s say that our life span is the biblical ‘three score and ten’; that is, seventy years translate into approximately 600,000 hours. Subtract a third of that time for sleep, and we have 400,000 hours left to do what we need or like to do. Now, if we work full-time for fifty years, we will have spent something like 150,000 hours earning our daily bread;

250,000 hours remain during which we live and live it up; eat, socialize, go to the movies, watch television, play golf, potter around, daydream. A practical course in college can be of use to us in the working life but impractical for the rest.

Humanist geography, by contrast, is impractical for the working life but practical for the days, hours, and half-hours that are our own, when we are free. How so? It empowers us to be engaged productively with certain questions that are incumbent upon us as thinking men and women to raise – and to raise them with a sense of urgency, for our time on Earth as individuals is the briefest. The questions are: ‘What is it- what does it mean – to be human?’ More specifically, ‘what does being human mean for me?’ (p. 3)

So, what is education for? Bai (2008) beautifully writes that

education is learning the ways of life that promote well-being for all sentient beings with whom we share our planet. Ultimately, what else is education for? If that is not the ‘bottom line’ for any conception of education, such education is *mis*education. (p. 110)

I hope that with Figure 1 and the above texts I have illustrated in some way the inter-connections between education (defined as drawing out from what is within each person), well-being (holistic), and spirituality (“certain altered states of consciousness and a sense of connection characterized by a sense of non-duality between the perceiver and the perceived, subject and object” (Cohen & Bai, 2008, p.46)). Although I am presenting the diagram in Figure 1 at the beginning of this paper, it did not come to me until toward the end of my autoethnographic inquiry, which to me shows the revelatory potential of attending to autoethnographic endeavour. Our brief time on Earth as individuals should arouse an urgency in us to attend to our spiritual core/inner being, to attend to our “somatic, sensuous, relational, perceptual, as well as intersubjective well-being” (Bai, Scott, & Donald, 2009, p. 332), which autoethnographic inquiry seems to be a promising practice to assist with.

Next, I like to focus on education and autoethnography as a form of narrative inquiry. Huber et al. quote Angela Sidney, who said that “story is education in its most holistic form, a kind of education that honors the knowledge of previous generations” (Cruikshank, 1990, as cited in Huber et al. 2013, p. 215).

### **Autoethnography/ Autoethnographic Inquiry**

For the scope of this paper it is not my intension to give a thorough and comprehensive overview of autoethnography, but to share the ones that have resonated well with my understanding. The term autoethnography, originated by Hayano in 1979, has been in use for more than 30 years and has become the term of choice in describing studies of a personal nature (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). The popularity of self-narratives such as memoir, autobiography, diary, journal, self-reflective essay is not new, especially in the disciplines of arts and humanities. The study of the self as a subject of research studies is becoming acceptable in many social science disciplines with the “waxing interest in self on the back of postmodernism” (Ellis, 2003, p. 31). Ellis and Bochner (2000) state that “autoethnographers vary in their emphasis on the research process (graphy), on culture (ethno), and on self (auto) and that different exemplars of autoethnography fall at different places along the

continuum of each of these three axes” (p. 740). It “overlaps art and science”, and is “greater than its parts” (auto, ethno, and graphy) (Ellis, 2003, p. 31-32).

Autoethnography as an emerging qualitative research methodology “allows the author to write in a highly personalized style, drawing on his or her experience to extend understanding about a societal/cultural phenomenon” (Wall, 2006, p. 1). The intent of autoethnography is to “acknowledge the inextricable link between the personal and the cultural and to make room for non-traditional forms of inquiry and expression” (Wall, 2006, p. 1). As a form of autobiographical inquiry as well as a form of ethnography, autoethnography has become “the term of choice” (Ellis, 2004) to refer to more than 60 similar and related research genres. Autoethnography helps researchers and educators understand their relationship to others. Chang (2008) claims that autoethnography is particularly helpful for professionals who work with people from various backgrounds, e.g., ministers, educators, social workers, and health care providers. The benefits of autoethnography include “self transformation, cross-cultural understanding, and coalition building” (Chang 2008, p. 51). A longtime proponent of autoethnography, Ellis (2009) values the “concrete understanding and theorizing that can be evoked from personal storytelling” (p. 361). She further argues that “you can’t have autoethnography without heart and soul: caring, feeling, passion, and vulnerability as at its center (p. 362). Ellis (2009) likes to see autoethnography as “unruly, dangerous, passionate, vulnerable, rebellious, and creative in motion, showing struggle, passion, embodied life, and collaborative creation of sense-making” (p. 363). As diverse as the viewpoints are about autoethnography, most autoethnographers seem to agree on the importance of connecting the personal to the social cultural, and on seeing autoethnography as both a process and a product. I am in particular drawn to the valuing of “narrative truth based on what a story of experience does – how it is used, understood, and responded to for and by us and others as writers, readers, participants, audiences, and humans” (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). Richardson (2000, as cited in Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011) believes that writing is a way of knowing, a method of inquiry. Consequently, writing personal stories can be therapeutic for authors as we write to make sense of ourselves and our experiences (Kiesinger, 2002, Poulos, 2008, all as cited in Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011), purge our burdens (Atkinson, 2007, as cited in Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011), and question canonical stories – conversional, authoritative, and projective storylines that plot how ideal social selves should live (Bochner, 2001, 2002, Tololyan, 1987, p 218, all as cited in Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). In so doing, we seek to improve and better understand our relationships, reduce prejudice and bigotry, encourage personal responsibility and agency, raise consciousness and promote cultural/societal change (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). Writing personal stories thus makes “witnessing” possible (Denzin 2004, Ellis & Bochner 2006, all as cited in Ellis, Adams, & Bochner 2011). “Carr’s (1986) exploration of the need for ‘coherence in our lives’, similar to Dewey’s (1938) understandings of experiences where we feel continuity” (Clandinin, 2013, p. 87) help strengthen my conviction that autoethnographic inquiry has much to offer education and to contribute to human kind’s pursuit of happiness and well-being.

Although we have seen growing interest in and engagement with autoethnography as a research methodology, little has been done to utilize autoethnographic inquiry as an educational practice with the potential to bring about learning experiences which are deeply meaningful and personally /socially transformative. Huber et al. (2013) write a comprehensive and in-depth review on narrative inquiry as pedagogy in education, where the authors quote King in saying that “the truth about stories is that that’s all we are” (p. 153). If we change the stories we live by, quite possibly we change our lives (Okri, 1997, as cited in King, 2003, as cited in Huber et al., 2013, p. 212). Huber et al. draw extensively on the scholarship of Clandinin and Connelly, who understand that it is

education that lived at the core of narrative inquiry “and not merely the telling of stories” (Clandinin & Connelly, 1998, as cited in Huber et al., 2013, p. 213). A group of narrative inquirers continue to draw on “stories as a way to share, and to understand, who we are, who we have been, and who we are becoming” (Huber et al., 2013, p. 214). Indeed, “storytelling is about survival” and “our very identities as human beings are inextricably linked to the stories we tell of ourselves, both to ourselves and with one another” (Huber et al., 2013, p. 214). These scholars/ practitioners call us to “imagine pedagogy through the transcendent power of story, to see how much difference, openness, and place matter” as they wondered about “possibilities for storying and restoring ourselves and one another into being”; they wonder about new kinds of, or maybe “forgotten or written over, obligations and ways of interacting and responding to and with one another” (Huber, et. al., 2013, p. 216).

Huber et al. (2013, pp. 226-227) propose that when thinking narratively with stories as pedagogy, we need to stay wakeful to the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space – *temporality* (which draws attention to the past, present, and future), *sociality* (which draws attention to interaction between the personal and social/cultural), and *place* (which draws attention to the place or places where stories of experience are lived and told. In their words, “thinking narratively about pedagogy is a complex undertaking, and entails the asking of hard questions about ‘what is educative’” (Dewey, 1938, as cited in Huber et al., 2013, p. 227). “Education is interwoven with living and with the possibility of retelling our life stories” (Clandinin & Connelly, 1998, as cited in Huber et al., 2013, p. 228). In this way, we understand that “we meet on storied landscapes with a sense of wonder about who students and teachers are, and are becoming” (Huber et al., 2013, p. 228). Huber et al. (2013) present powerful cases where “narrative inquiry is shown to hold extraordinary potential for envisioning new pedagogical ways of considering teacher education for diversity” (p. 232).

This chapter aims at proposing autoethnographic inquiry as an educational practice for both individual learners and communities of learners, harboring great potential for uncovering/getting in touch with “the other tablet” or “inner intelligence”, which Rumi wrote about and which is quoted at the beginning of this chapter, and for contributing to our subjective sense of well-being (Witter, Akun, Stock, & Haring, 1984, p. 165). To illustrate the above ideas further, I now take a “turn to the narrative” – the autoethnography part of this chapter by looking at two examples.

### **Example 1: Autoethnographic Inquiry into One of My Life / Educational Experiences**

The angle to this autoethnographic inquiry are not so much chronological memories/stories of things and events, but is rather a sharing of practices, reflection, re-evaluation, and “sharing of emotion, mind, and spirit” (Tuan, 1999, p. 9). Autoethnography is partially autobiography in that it writes about “epiphanies” – remembered moments perceived to have significantly impacted the trajectory of a person’s life, times of existential crises that forced a person to attend to and analyzed lived experiences, and events after which life does not seem quite the same (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). As Leggo (2012) writes, “the story of my education is a tough text full of wonder, and, if I ever hope to make sense of it, I need to approach it with reverence” (p. 90). Here I like to share an example of my awakening to the “other tablet” along the “living water” journey.

As I ponder upon my own “narrative beginnings” (Clandinin, 2013, p. 89), my memory immediately takes me back to my involvement with the Keepers of the Waters and the Living Water Garden projects in Chengdu, China, and in Lahsa, Tibet, between 1995 and 1997. After finishing

another ordinary university year in late June 1995, I was not all that eager to go back home to Taixing – which was about 48 hours away by train - for the summer holidays as I had always done in previous years. As a student arbitrarily admitted to the English Department instead of the School of Clinical Medicine at the West China University of Medical Sciences, my dream of becoming a medical doctor was more and more like a bubble drifting away. I dreaded thinking about what I was going to do after graduation. Up to that point I had lived two thirds of my life resolving around schools – 14 out of 21 years to be exact. I had become seasoned at accumulating credentials which measured up to external expectations, such as certificates, language proficiency, political affiliation, a Bachelor's degree soon. In Bai's (2012) words, all my life to that moment "I knew best how to study hard, compete, win and survive" (p. 66). I survived the "examination hell" (Bai, 2012, p. 66) in China. University years are supposed to be about "big learning". What I lacked or failed to really learn or embody is how to live a life "illuminated by spirit and infused with soul" (Palmer, 1997). Now in the midst of my university life I suddenly realized and was dreading the perceived certainty of life after graduation – finding a job, getting married, having one child (due to the one-child policy of China, unless I am lucky to have twins), being a considerate, caring wife and a kind, gentle mother. Is that all to my life?! I dozed off with this uneasy awakening in my summer nap.

Why am I telling this section of my life story here? To me, this experience reminds me of the sense of urgency I felt. It was the "half hour" of my own where I felt "free" as I was winding down from a busy semester of study in university. Somehow I woke up to my inwardly distressing reality, which appeared fine from the outside. I wondered about the possibilities for my life and for my future. Although not versed that way at the time, I became aware of the perennial questions of "what does it mean to be human? What does being human mean for me?"

"Amy, wake up fast!" I woke up to the pressing voice of my friend and roommate Helen. She continued as I sat up, rubbing my eyes to figure out what was going on. "There is opportunity for summer work here in Chengdu, and they are interviewing students at the Foreign Teachers' Residence on campus. Let's go and check it out!" We all had English names as students majoring in English. So, Helen and I went to the Foreign Teachers' Residence on campus for the interview. Keepers of the Waters was the hiring organization, which was initiating an international art and science collaboration project focused on learning the ways of waters so as to restore health to them through public education, community engagement, and influencing public policy. I got the job as an interpreter. It turned out to be a watershed event in my life in that working with the Keepers of the Waters projects presented many opportunities for me to explore the boundaries and limits of who I am, what I am, and "revealed aspects of me to myself that would otherwise remain hidden" (Tuan, 2004, p. 18). This summer work experience also allowed me to peek into others' worlds – both people's and the more than human worlds.

My experiences in working with the Keepers of the Waters and with the Living Water Garden project awakened me to the "mystical and communal" and enabled me to experience the "underlying unity and interconnectedness of all things" (Jason, 1997, p. 55). It taught me the importance of getting in touch with my inner wisdom – "the capacity to cope with uncertainty, and the ability to frame events and issues in their larger contexts" (Jason, 1997, p. 53). Betsy Damon, an environmental activist, an artist and designer, was the Executive Director of the Keepers of the Waters project. She embodied her work, her vision, and her teaching. One of the very first things I learned from Betsy was the microscopic images of "living water" drop and the "dead water" drop (<http://www.keepersofthewaters.org/ArticleLiving2012.cfm>), which stay with me to this day. Living water refers to life-giving water and dead water refers to death-dealing water. As a science major since high school and mostly throughout my university, I never doubted that water is the same

everywhere. How could these water drops show up so differently under powerful electron microscope? How would they impact life when we consume these different waters? These two images and Betsy's teaching woke me up to the realization that many forces in our lives can be either life-giving or death-dealing. Forces of death abound in society. Growing up in mainland China, sexism, urbanism, ageism, and scientism stood out for me the most. I did not realize their crushing power and how they had kept me small and caged until my work with Betsy Damon.

Here, I like to share a particular experience I had while working as an assistant to Betsy Damon for the eight week voluntary Re-evaluation Counselling (RC) group sessions she facilitated and I interpreted for project staff. At the time I was not aware of autoethnographic inquiry or even narrative inquiry as a research or education tool. However, now looking back, the eight week RC sessions were *de facto* what Chang, Ngunjiri, and Hernandez (2012) call "collaborative autoethnography" in that we shared our life stories within all sorts of social cultural and political contexts that have shaped and coloured our lives: gender, social class/economic status, age, urban/rural upbringing, family tensions, political ideologies, etc. During these sometimes timid, sometimes generous, sometimes distressful, sometimes joyous and happy, sometimes emotionless sharing, the unity, uniqueness, and diversity of each of our lives were played again and again. I never felt such compassion for other people. I never felt such compassion for my own life and for all life forms indeed. What made these weekly RC groups sessions powerful and transformative was the practice of deep listening – which is listening with our whole being and undivided presence, with love and compassion, with no intension to judge, evaluate, fix, or to offer advice and direction. What I learned from this process and practice is that when we listen better, we become better human beings. When we listen better, we allow others the space and freedom to be better human beings.

Ever since my encounter with the Keepers of the Waters, I have embarked on a journey of my own – a journey that really brings out and nourishes the life in me. What I experienced in the Keepers of the Waters projects and in particular the eight week RC groups sessions was what Palmer (1997) describes as

education at its best—these profound human transactions called knowing, teaching, and learning—are not just about information, and they're not just about getting jobs. They are about healing. They are about wholeness. They are about empowerment, liberation, transcendence. They are about reclaiming the vitality of life. (p. 3)

Applying Naess's theory on deep ecology, I see the example of "self realization" and formation of "ecological self" in my experience with the Keepers of the Waters and the Living Water Garden projects.

To link back to the "water molecule" framework for integrating "Autoethnography, Education, Spirituality, and Well-Being" I like to share the following few points. First and foremost, the framework for the interconnections between education, spirituality, well-being, and autoethnography as a water molecule (see Figure 1) occurred to me long after I finished the first draft of this article, in particular during my sustained and sometimes frustrating contemplation with the feedback/critique from reviewers of the first draft over a year's time. This shows that autoethnographic inquiry sometimes may not have a clear destination as one embarks on such a research/inquiry journey. But as long as one remains open to what's emerging, we can stumble upon some new views on or insights into things. The learning/discovery from such re-searching is an on-

going unfolding/witnessing/living of new views and possibilities. We as teachers and/or teacher educators should strive to be lifelong learners. Autoethnographic inquiry is one of such tools.

In my examples of the Keepers of the Waters and the Living Water Garden projects, autoethnography – especially collaborative autoethnography – was implicitly practiced as a voluntary part of working together on these various projects as a way to work out the tensions of working together and differences in languages, disciplines, perspectives, values, attitudes toward and approaches to problems. It has transformed my understanding of education, awakened me to domains previously unknown to me, and led me to a life centred around truth, compassion, and well-being.

### **Example 2: Initial Insights from Employing Autoethnographic Inquiry as Pedagogy in a Graduate Course on Curriculum Development**

In my current work as a teacher educator I noticed both during class and in students' class journals that many of them were under constant stress or feeling unwell and many got sick towards the end of the 16 week semester at the university. This prompted me to wonder how experiences in formal educational institutions are contributing or not to these people's health and well-being. If these pre-service teachers experience their educational experience at the university teacher education programs as stressful or harmful, will they replicate those experiences for their K-12 students? If they have not experienced education as life-giving and soul-elevating how will they then envision the best possible educational experiences for the children in their care? In light of my own educational journey and practices so far I will now address the implications for teacher education, which might lead to personal/professional transformation and to sustainable well-being for all.

A couple of years ago I taught a graduate course on Curriculum Development as part of a Summer Institute on Anti-Oppressive Education. The guiding questions I had for teaching this class of eight in-service teachers/education professionals were: What contributes to/sustains my well-being? What contributes to/sustains our collective well-being? What does it mean to be an educated person? How can education contribute to/sustain the well-being for all? What learning experiences can we engage in to answer the above questions? What questions do you have and like to explore? In this course we drew extensively upon Pinar's notion of curriculum as "complicated conversations" (Pinar, 2012), where the central question is "what knowledge is of most worth?" We explored together what it meant to "teach autobiographically". Pinar writes that to teach autobiographically is to "thread one's subjectivity through subject matter, converting private passion into public service attuned to the historical moment. Such autobiographical labor takes allegorical forms, knowledge that is simultaneously specific and general" (Pinar, 2012, p. 6).

Students in the Curriculum Development course were invited to practice two minute silence (which eventually extended to 5 minute silence at the requests of students) at the beginning of each day's gathering, which I called "practice of silence and stillness". Others may call it meditation. Students were also encouraged to keep a daily personal learning journal so as to engage with the course materials at a deeper personal level – to weave their little stories into the larger/ bigger stories of racism, sexism, ableism, ageism, and many other forms of oppression and injustice. This pre-class practice of "silence and stillness" was meant to help them relax and focus, but also to enrich and deepen their exercise with one assignment where I asked them to engage in an autoethnographic

inquiry into “curriculum as lived and life as curriculum – re-storying the ways we live our life and education”. Here is the description of the expectations for this assignment:

Based on the purpose of this course, guiding questions, your assumptions about self, others, the environment, aboriginal peoples, citizen, teacher, student, text, technology.... and what you have learned throughout the Summer Institute (readings, lectures, in class discussions, guest speakers, field trips, etc.), critically examine your own lived experience of curriculum. BE CREATIVE with this assignment as with all assignments. The format of the final product/ presentation of what you have learned is open to your imagination (i.e. autoethnography, essay, multimedia blog, performances, art work, drama/skit, documentary film, etc.

We visited this assignment daily for two weeks– treating it as work in progress. Every day we practiced deep listening as we shared our assignment in progress with each other, and engaged in one another’s study through questioning. What came out of the two week autoethnographic inquiries was astounding– jaw-dropping for me and for everyone who witnessed and participated. Due to ethical concerns I cannot share the details of what the students presented for the assignment on “Curriculum as Lived and Life as Curriculum” or from their weekly learning logs. What I can share is that there were performing autoethnography, poetry and singing, multimedia blogging regarding schooling experience of students with special needs, intimate partner abuse, societal stigma toward teenage pregnancy, challenges of being raised by a single parent, white /male privilege, and racism. What I saw and read in students’ journals regarding this assignment experience was, “relieving”, “reconciling”, “healing”, “peace-bringing”, and “beautiful”. At the end of the sharing we all stood there in the circle – speechless! It seemed that we just wanted to savor that moment for as long as possible. I remember myself speaking after a long period of silence: “I really don’t know what to say, but I want to openly tell you that I am in love with each of you”. Tears poured out, hands were shaken, and mostly we found ourselves hugging each other. Now almost two years later, it dawned on me that what happened in that summer Curriculum Development class was what Palmer (2000) writes that “we are exploring together. We are cultivating a garden together, backs to the sun. The question is a hoe in our hands and we are digging beneath the hard and crusty surface to the rich humus of our lives” (p. 103).

How does the above example illustrate the power of autoethnographic inquiry as an educational practice to potentially link education, spirituality, and well-being? For myself as the course instructor, teaching this way was exhilarating, humbling, transforming, challenging, intimidating, and required conscious attending to the moment to moment “lived curriculum” (Aoki, 1993) as one keeps in mind the planned curriculum. It required a “radical presence” of the instructor/teacher (O’Reily, 1998, p. 3). One thing I know for sure is that I intentionally encouraged students to use autoethnography to explore the historical, political, racial, cultural, social, ecological contexts of curriculum development and of education overall. I did this primarily with my own autoethnographical stories integrated with brief presentation of main ideas related to these various contexts of curriculum-making/ education. In terms of achieving the educational objectives I had for this course, the various issues in education were no longer abstract and somewhere out there happening to some faceless people, but were concrete lived stories as shared by the people sitting right by us. Here is an observation I made of one student. She went beyond her comfort zone to experiment with performing autoethnography – to weave her own personal/family stories with the larger stories of Canadian society. Her sharing of “Life as Curriculum and Curriculum as Lived”

project in class brought home the complexity of lived lives and educational experiences as a Métis woman growing up in Saskatchewan. Her stories and story-telling made "witnessing" the lived racial/cultural tensions of her/our time possible.

In terms of the potential power of autoethnographic inquiry to effectively teach/learn and to spiritually awake both the story-teller and the story-listener, Bai and Cohen (2014) borrowed the Bakhtinian notion of the "space of authoring" (Holland et al. 1998, as cited in Bai & Cohen, 2014) as a good way to understand the power of story as a transformative teaching tool. Bai and Cohen (2014) proposed that

a story presents to the reader or listener a virtual world populated not only by human action but also by intention, desire, emotion, perception, volition, and sensations. By virtue of entering and participating in an imaginative story-world, a person lets go of, or at least may hold more loosely, his or her old patterns and meanings, and thus is open and receptive to trying out vicariously patterns of thinking and ways of looking and feeling that are unfamiliar and fresh. Story listening has the potential to facilitate a different state of consciousness in the listener, at least temporarily, and in that altered state an openness may emerge that allows for new possibilities of being—possibilities that are predisposed to be in line with the experience of awakening and seeing the world nondually. (p. 603)

Although I cannot cite directly from students' learning logs, I can summarize the impacts of autoethnographic story-telling on one another in this course as the description in a popular children's book "Stellaluna" – "we are so different, yet feel so much alike, also, we can feel so different and be so much alike!" (Cannon, 1993, p. 28).

How might have the autoethnographic practice of teaching and learning contributed to students' sense of well-being? I will probably never know for sure. What I do know is that by opening up with my own stories and with my invitation to everyone to share, the teaching and learning space became blurred and united. I witnessed a strong community of human beings and learners forming during the short three week intensive Summer Institute. Here, I will share one anonymous comment in the course evaluation for this Curriculum Development course to illustrate my point.

Dr. Xia Ji humbly and courageously embodied qualities of anti-oppression and civic discourse in the Curriculum Development course, creating a vital learning community within the classroom space, both indoors and outdoors...This course allows one to reflect on the ecological self for sustaining well-being for self, others, and the earth which is rare in academia. Students explored their lived curriculum in creative ways that brought connections within the class that will be maintained as friendships into the future. Dr. Ji walks her talk in contributing to sustaining the well-being of all.

Another comment in the anonymous course evaluation referred to my teaching style as follows:

She created an atmosphere within the class that lent itself to learning. And the way the curriculum was negotiated and co-constructed by the instructor and the students worked out really well. . . . She is a great role model for teachers and she models what she teaches.

Finally, from what I witnessed as the course instructor, it was hard to tell the lines between education, spiritual nourishment, and well-being. It was humbling to teach this way, and I learned alongside the students. My understanding deepened of the course content, pedagogy, and most of all, each of the students as unique beings full of possibilities.

Since I was reminded of the healing and transformative power of autoethnography during the Eighth International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry in Urbana-Champaign in 2012 I have been engaging in autoethnographic writing regularly – almost daily – for personal and professional reasons. This practice keeps me awake and attuned to the “fountainhead”, the “fire”, and the life within me. It reminds me and enables me to live my being well one day at a time.

## Conclusion

In this chapter I tried to make a case for what autoethnographic inquiry can do as an educational practice for education, spirituality and well-being at the individual and community levels. With my ongoing active engagement with autoethnographic inquiry over the last two years, but more so from living the first 40 years of my life as revealed through autoethnographic inquiry, I have come to a temporary conclusion that what is at the heart of both education and well-being is spiritual, meaning that it requires “innerworkings” (Cohen, Porath, Clarke, Bai, Leggo, & Meyer, 2012) and “an inner transformation” within each of us as individual human beings and as citizens of institutions and communities. It requires connection to ourselves as spiritual beings; it requires the human soul finding home and/or feeling at home in our being and in the “grace of great things” of this world (Palmer, 1997). Imagine how different our lives might be if we approached each day with an appreciation of ourselves and each other as spiritual beings. Placing spirituality at the centre of our lives opens a realm of possibility that leads to our deepest self (Cole, 2011, p. 1). I even go so far to suggest that education, spirituality, and well-being are one and the same.

Plainly speaking, this chapter is about the need for connecting education with well-being and spirituality through autoethnographic inquiry, about learning from personal narratives, which are stories about authors who view themselves as the phenomenon and write evocative narratives specifically focused on their academic, research, and personal lives (Berry, 2007, Goodall, 2006, Poulos, 2008, Tillmann, 2009, all as cited in Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). Personal narratives propose to understand a self or some aspect of a life as it intersects with a cultural context, connect to other participants as co-researchers, and invite readers to enter the author’s world – to “world-travel” (Lugones, 1987, p. 3), and to use what they learn there to reflect on, understand, and cope with their own lives (Ellis, 2004, as cited in Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011).

Whether or not this sharing of my understanding along with two examples of my own educational experience and teaching practice have done enough to illustrate the potential power of autoethnographic inquiry in the attainment of true education – education for enlightenment (Bai, 2012, p. 63), or education as a spiritual journey (Palmer, 1993) – is up to the reader to decide. I hope that at least the possibility has been established for the reader that autoethnographic inquiry may offer to both writers and readers to shape and transform their identities and to lead to a new understanding of themselves, of education and well-being. I also hope that this chapter has shed light on the small but growing area of interest in spirituality in education, which has been “definitely under researched, but also severely misunderstood” (Abdi, 2011, p. xiii). In Palmer’s words, “what will

transform education is not another theory or another book or another formula but a transformed way of being [I would add ‘living’] in the world” (Palmer, 1997, p. 1).

To conclude, I like to quote O’Reilly (1998): “Some pedagogical practices crush the soul; most of us have suffered their bruising force. Others allow the spirit to come home: to self, to community, and to the revelations of reality” (p. 3). There is a saying in Chinese, 抛砖引玉 (Pao Zhuan Yin Yu), meaning that we attract jade by laying out bricks. I hope by offering my humble views, proposals and imperfect examples, others will offer something better to enhance our collective understanding of the three dimensions of being human: education, spirituality, well-being. There is tremendous potential in autoethnographic inquiry to connect these dimensions and to help us move towards true realities and infinite possibilities.

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