

Welcoming the Inner Life at School

by *Rachael Kessler*

Most high school students grapple with profound questions of loss, love, and letting go; of meaning, purpose, and service; of self-reliance and community; of choice and surrender. The classroom community can profoundly influence how students respond to these questions—with love, denial, apathy, or even violence. When students work together, they learn that grace, love, and profound gratitude can meet any challenge—even wrenching conflict, prejudice, or death. Creating authentic community is the first step in the soul of education.

When soul is present in education, attention shifts. We listen with great care not only to what is spoken but also to the messages between the words—tones, gestures, the flicker of feeling across the face. We concentrate on what has heart and meaning. The yearning, wonder, wisdom, fear, and confusion of students become central to the curriculum.

Questions become as important as answers.

When soul enters the classroom, masks drop away. Students dare to share the joy and talents they feared would provoke jealousy even in their best friends. They risk exposing the pain or shame that might be judged as weakness. Seeing deeply into the perspectives of others, accepting what has felt unworthy in themselves, students discover compassion and begin to learn about forgiveness.

How Can Classroom Teachers Invite Soul?

For almost twenty years, I have worked with teams of educators in both private and public school settings around the country to create curriculum, methodology, and teacher development that can feed the awakening spirit of young people as part of school life. This is the “PassageWays Program” for working with adolescents—a set of principles and practices that integrates heart, spirit, and community with strong academics.¹

To achieve the safety and openness required for meaningful exploration of spiritual development, students and teachers work together

carefully for weeks and months. They collaborate to create agreements—conditions that students name as essential for discussing what matters most to them. Carefully designed play helps students fully focus, relax, and form teams through laughter and cooperation. Symbols that students create or bring into class allow teenagers to speak indirectly about feelings and thoughts that are awkward to address head-on. Moments of silence and stillness provide respites from the mad pace of modern life and schooling, a nectar that quenches a powerful thirst for students and teachers alike. In dyads and triads, a sharing circle unique to PassageWays, and in council, students learn the art of “deep listening” and its twin, “authentic speaking.”² These forms allow each person, sitting in a circle where all can see and be seen, to speak without interruption or immediate response. Students learn to listen deeply and discover how it feels to be truly heard. When teachers call for moments of reflection or when the room fills with feeling at the end of a class, silence becomes a comfortable ally as participants pause to digest one story and wait for another to form.

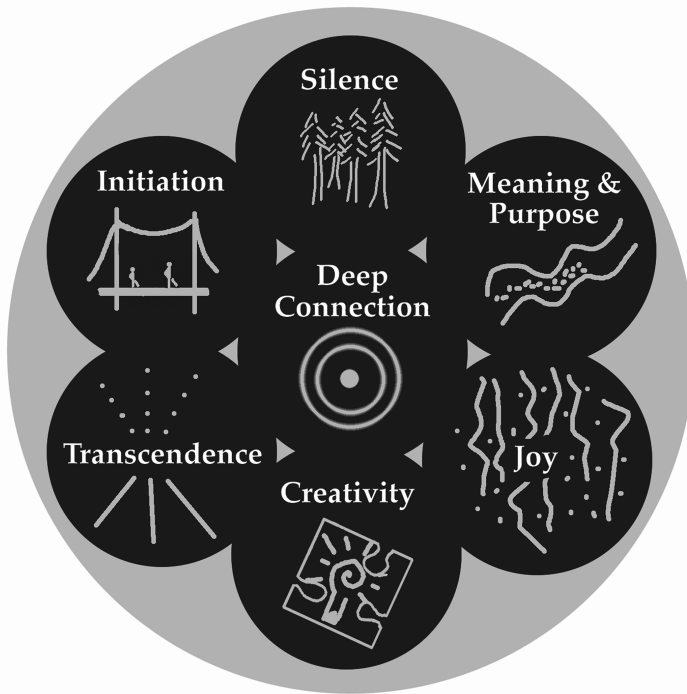
Because “we teach who we are,” teachers who invite heart and soul into the classroom also find it essential to nurture their own spiritual development.³ Teachers develop personal practices that cultivate awareness, serenity, and compassion, as well as collaborative efforts with other teachers to give and receive support for the challenges and joys of entering this terrain with their students. When teachers develop their own presence—open hearts, the ability to discipline with love, and comfort with the full range of human emotion—when a climate of honor and respect is co-created with our students, the stories, feelings, and thoughts that most matter to students emerge. As I listened over many years to students’ stories and questions, I began to see a pattern.

Gateways to the Soul of Students

My map of spiritual development, based on such stories and questions, comprises seven interrelated yearnings, needs, or hungers in adolescents who may or may not have a religious tradition or other beliefs about the nature of spirituality. Meeting such spiritual yearnings supports, strengthens, and fosters the development of a young person’s spirit.

1. The *longing for silence and solitude* may be a realm of reflection, of calm or of fertile chaos: an avenue of stillness and rest for some, of prayer or contemplation for others.
2. The *search for meaning and purpose* concerns the exploration of big questions: “Why am I here?” “Does my life have a purpose?” “How do I find out what it is?”

Seven Gateways to the Souls of Students



3. The *hunger of joy and delight* can be satisfied through experiences of great simplicity, such as play, celebration, or gratitude.
4. The *creative drive*, perhaps the most familiar domain for nourishing the spirit in school, is part of all the gateways.
5. The *urge for transcendence* describes the desire for young people to surpass their perceived limits.
6. The *need for initiation* deals with rites of passage for young people—guiding adolescents to become more conscious of the irrevocable transition from childhood to adulthood.
7. Finally, the *yearning for deep connection* is the common thread that describes a profoundly caring relationship, resonant with meaning, that involves feelings of belonging or of being truly seen and known. Students who feel deeply connected don't need danger to feel fully alive. They don't need guns to feel powerful. They don't want to hurt others or themselves. From connection grow compassion and passion—passion for people, for students' goals and dreams, and for life itself.

Schools can become communities where students, teachers, and families experience deep connections. In the search itself, in loving the questions, in the deep yearnings that students feel, we believe, young people will discover what is sacred in life, what is sacred in their own lives, and what allows them to bring their most sacred gifts to nourish the world.

Notes

1. The PassageWays Program has three roots: the Mysteries Program at Crossroads School for Arts and Science in Santa Monica, California, originated by Jack Zimmerman and expanded by a team of teachers I led as chair of the school's Department of Human Development—1985-1991; teacher-training programs I have offered over the last decade through the PassageWays Institute; and collaboration through CASEL (the Collaborative for Academic, Social & Emotional Learning) with colleagues from social and emotional learning.
2. See Jack Zimmerman and Virginia Coyle, *The Way of Council* (Putney, Vt.: Bramble Books, 1997).
3. See "The Teaching Presence" on <<http://www.PassageWays.org>>.

Rachael Kessler is the founder and executive director of PassageWays Institute and author of The Soul of Education (ASCD 2000).