

# *Embrace the Spirit*

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Newsjournal of the  
Religious and Moral Education Council  
The Alberta Teachers' Association



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# Embrace the Spirit

Spring 2015

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## *A Note from the Editor*

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We seem to have experienced a bit of a time warp with the previous issue of *Embrace the Spirit*, so my editor's note geared toward Christmas was somewhat out of context. This issue will provide you with summer reading and much food for thought.

This issue features a collection of essays by education students at the University of Alberta. In his introduction, their professor, Jim Parsons, describes our collaboration and the process that brought about this special issue. I am delighted to support this project that gives voice to future educators.

Kaleidoscope features Greater St Albert Catholic Schools, which is celebrating 150 years of Catholic education. Also, teachers from Lakeland Catholic Schools share their district's ambitious project.

Gay-straight alliances (GSAs) are a hot topic at the moment. Mark DeJong offers some thought-provoking insights in his piece in Reflections.

Check out the Religious and Moral Education Council (RMEC) website at <http://rmec.teachers.ab.ca> for resources and award nomination forms.

We look forward to seeing you at our annual conference in October.

*Dorothy Burns*



## *From the President*

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Conference 2014, held in Banff last October, was the most successful conference RMEC has ever had. However, at one point, it didn't seem so promising. Many movies build suspense to keep viewers on the edge of their seats and then bring in a saviour archetype. Of course, this harkens back to the first Easter: Jesus was arrested, scourged and crucified. His death left his followers in a state of shock, wondering where they would go and what they would do. It was the resurrection that opened their eyes, helping them understand God's plan.

The conference planning committee was in great shock when we learned that our keynote speaker, Ray Guarendi, was unable to be with us. The conference hinged on him—no speaker, no conference. Uncertain about what would happen next and where we would go, we began to reach out. Father Stefano Penna, of Newman Theological College, responded to our plea and was able to cover Saturday's morning sessions but not the afternoon sessions. Bishop Frederick Henry, of the Catholic Diocese of Calgary, was able to cover the afternoon but not the morning. The conference went from life to death to new life. Some may say that enlisting Father Penna and Bishop Henry was mere coincidence. Others, myself included, would recognize a divine plan greater than ourselves at play.

Our next conference, to be held in Banff in October, promises to offer an exciting discussion about science and religion. Although many see science and religion as being in conflict, keynote speaker Karlo Broussard will lead us into a world where both are practical and relevant.

We look forward to seeing you in October!

*Carl Fakeley*



## *Editorial Board 2014/15*

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Dorothy Burns, Editor, Christ the Redeemer Catholic Schools, Okotoks

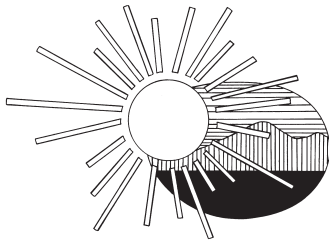
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### **Religious and Moral Education Council of the Alberta Teachers' Association**

#### **Mission Statement**

The Religious and Moral Education Council exists to inspire and foster learning communities by providing professional development for teachers to help them nurture the moral, ethical and spiritual lives of students.

#### **Vision Statement**

The Religious and Moral Education Council will, in search of peace and the common good, be a principal resource for Alberta teachers.

#### **Values**

We are committed to serving teachers of all traditions and cultures, through the values of faith, dignity, respect and collaboration.



## Special Feature: Essays on Faith and Teaching

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# Introduction

Jim Parsons

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*Jim Parsons has been a professor in the Department of Secondary Education at the University of Alberta for 40 years. He teaches EDSE 378: Curriculum and Teaching for Religious and Moral Education Minors—the course for which the student essays that follow were written.*

I teach EDSE 378: Curriculum and Teaching for Religious and Moral Education Minors, at the University of Alberta. It is a wonderful course, because it is an open and (I trust) a safe space to discuss one's faith and how that faith influences one's teaching. During the past two years, I have revised the course to focus on that key question: How does your faith influence your teaching? Before, the course was more like a survey course of world religions and a preparation for teaching religion classes, mostly in Catholic schools.

I also love the course because it allows students and me to create a community of conversation. But we don't neglect skills and knowledge: we also do practical things, such as talking about how to shape lesson planning and how to engage students in learning. We also read and share insights about a

seminal book in Christian religious and moral education, and we teach each other. It is a space for hard work, collaboration and (as I noted) much conversation. The space seems to work, because students seldom miss class and, in the course evaluations, they mention how much they have learned from and have come to value each other and how they appreciate each other's insights.

I have been a professor in the Department of Secondary Education for 39 years. In fact, I am the longest serving professor in the Faculty of Education—probably by several years. I am also an active researcher. Over the past seven years, I have undertaken large, funded research studies on student engagement, instructional leadership, and teacher professional learning and teacher efficacy. This research matters to me, and I am trying to put my findings into action. The past two years have seen me reshaping my teaching to align with those findings.

The research shows consistently high correlations between authentic curriculum (having students engage with real issues) and student learning. It occurred to me that this invites a different kind of assignment at the postsecondary level. In fact, it seemed that my

students were completing assignments for the wrong audience—me. Why not have them engage in something real and tangible? So I negotiated and reshaped our final course assignment.

I did three things. First, I approached my students with the idea of working together on essays. They agreed, and even seemed eager. Second, I contacted Dorothy Burns (the editor of *Embrace the Spirit*), outlined our plan and asked if we might create a special issue of the newsjournal. She agreed. (Bless her for trusting us!) Third, I invited my old mentor Adrian Peetoom, a retired publisher and author, to speak to my class. He wrote a paper on faith and teaching for the students to read, and then he came to present his paper to the class. We then discussed the implications for our work as teachers. His paper leads this collection of essays.

We then began to organize. I asked the students to write short responses to Adrian's paper, taking into consideration our discussion of that paper. I read their responses and then assigned them to groups of two or three students who were considering similar ideas.

We then began to write. Over the course of a few weeks, students

talked in their groups and wrote back and forth to each other. I responded as an editor. I tried to respond to what they had written and how I believed they wanted to say it. I was very specific, but I noted that although I thought my editing helped improve their work,

they could choose whether to accept my notes, reject them or use them to revise. These essays went back and forth probably three times. Each time, the writing groups considered my notes and each other's ideas during class time. As a teacher, I found this

assignment fruitful because I was able to separate my feedback from students' grades. And I believe that the students were able to respond more openly and creatively through this process.

Here, you see the results of our work.



# Presentation to Religious and Moral Education Class

Adrian Peetoom

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*Adrian Peetoom served Scholastic Canada in several capacities for more than 30 years, and during that time authored many books and articles. After his retirement in 1994, he wrote many more articles and two books. He has been friends (and, occasionally, a coauthor) with Jim Parsons since the early 1980s.*

*The following is a presentation he gave to the students in EDSE 378: Curriculum and Teaching for Religious and Moral Education Minors, at the University of Alberta. He was delighted to meet with them and found them "a lively and committed bunch."*

When Jim Parsons asked me to meet with you, he also sent me the list of your key throughline questions for this course.<sup>1</sup> The questions immediately piqued my curiosity. They also awoke in me some dormant memories from my time as an educational publisher. In those days, I would regularly ask myself, *Why am I doing what I'm doing? And how should I be doing it?*

I would then be reminded of the following parable. In medieval days, a visitor walked by a building project. He asked a mason, "What are you doing?" The mason answered, "I'm laying bricks." A second mason answered, "I'm making a living." But the third mason said, "I'm building a cathedral for God." All three were right, but only the third mason had a vision.

The way I read them, the key throughline questions ask for vision, notably the second question: "How does my orientation to religious and moral education shape my teaching?" I will limit myself to making a few observations that will help (or perhaps hinder!) you in finding your own answers.

As I reflected, I asked myself another question: *Can religious and moral education ever be a curriculum subject?* My answer was yes and no. It all depends.

As I see it, the *yes* points to something such as comparative religion or a course on ethics currents in history and today. The first would compare and contrast global religions. The second would compare and contrast various ethics philosophies—some stressing "eternal" rules; others, contextual responses to historical circumstances of thought and action.

Such courses do not require a teacher to have much personal commitment. All he or she needs is a textbook and a collection of lesson plans.

However, that is clearly not what Professor Parsons has in mind. The 20 key throughline questions point to a teacher's being sensitive to religious and moral aspects in the lives of students and in his or her own life. As I read them (and perhaps I'm wrong), the questions recognize that religious and moral aspects are ongoing components of classroom culture.

I am reminded that PhD candidates must face an ethics committee, which scrutinizes dissertation proposals for morality. For instance, a classroom teacher or a teaching assistant cannot use his or her own students as research subjects. Question 20 asks, "To what extent should I, as a religious and moral education teacher, practise what I preach?" I shouldn't wonder that Professor Parsons, as he formulated the question, had as his own answer, "To the largest extent possible, taking into account human imperfection."

Having decided that, I then began to sweat a bit (metaphorically speaking) as I realized how difficult a task it is to do justice to a religious and moral presence in your classroom life. Here is what I mean.

There was a time—say, 75 years ago—when students in Canadian schools, Catholic or public, brought similar values to class. Most parents took their children to church, and all children were taught (at home, at school and at church) to behave in certain ways.<sup>2</sup> I draw on my own boyhood. I lived on a big city street that had about 85 homes. We lived in number 33. If I misbehaved in front of number 65, say, and if the adult living there spotted me doing it, chances were that I would be dragged back to number 33, with the number 65 adult confidently expecting that my parents

would hand out the same kind of sanctions he or she would impose on his or her own children. It was a village atmosphere, with many eyes guarding the street, which, after all, was also the children's playground. Our street housed Catholics and various Protestants, who would eye each other with suspicion but who proved to be more alike than either would ever admit then.

However, the saying "It takes a village to raise a child" seems to have little validity today. There doesn't seem to be a village anymore. Canadian streets now house multiple sets of values, multiple religious communities, immigrants from various corners of the world, multiple first languages, multiple kinds of food. The children in your class may come from various backgrounds and be in various stages of integration into Canadian culture. (Is there such a thing as Canadian culture?) Moreover, privacy legislation and an often overwhelming contemporary individualism have turned many houses into castles with an invisible moat around them, one you don't cross. As a teacher, you will be faced with a variety of religious and moral behaviours, and with parents who do not want you to impose religious and moral variations on your students, their children. So what should you do?

One approach would be the following.

You could approach religious and moral education in this spirit: *Regardless of what my students bring to class, I shall get them to understand that there are religious and moral values that supersede what they bring to class. They may think they are different from each other, but when I'm through with them, they will be united. All human beings ultimately*

*share the same values. All religions are ultimately the same. And, with enough talk, we can come to agree on moral standards.*

To that I have two responses, one simple and one disturbing. The simple response is that if all religions and moralities are the same, then none matters much. Then, the tension represented in your 20 questions is a mirage, the mistaken notion of an old professor who is out of touch.

The more disturbing response is the following.

I attend a church that, through liturgy, preaching and congregational life, tells me who I am. It hopes, and I hope, that for the next seven days I will remember the following and act accordingly:

- I am created in the image of God,<sup>3</sup> as part of the human community and with the task of being creatively busy cultivating the earth garden.
- I am a sinner who so easily forgets who I really am.
- God, through Scripture and community, accepts me nevertheless and forgives my failings.
- Through Scripture and community, God reshapes me into full humanity, into a servant and sharer.

But here is an alternative gospel that offers a very different answer to the question, *Who am I?* It uses a different vocabulary, and holds out a different hope. This gospel comes at me through the full force of popular media, popular music, popular entertainment, dominant politics and fashion:

- You are what you make yourself.
- The world is your oyster.
- What matters most is matter.
- If you are not pleased, cast about for what is pleasing. It's there for you to find, whether in places, possessions or lifestyles.

- Science and technology will save us.
- It's the economy, stupid!

This gospel batters me from all sides. The media spew out choices that threaten to make my Christian faith invisible with their strobe lights, noises and colours.

And does it matter? Yes, it does. Here is a telling example.

In the business section of major newspapers (including the *Edmonton Journal*), a reporter finds people who want help with their particular financial situations. Key to a financial plan is what the subjects see as the good life. The desired lifestyle shapes the wishes for the future. Here is a typical example from the *Globe and Mail*, a year after the financial crisis of 2008 (Maley 2009).

Zoe, 58, and Eberhard, 64, have seen their portfolio hit, and both have gone back to work after a short retirement. Their question: Can they afford to retire for good, travel and do all the "happy" things they want to do?

Their assets (home, cottage, RRSPs, savings) amount to \$1,511,400, and they have no liabilities. Their monthly net income is \$5,700. Their monthly disbursements are as follows:

Food and eating out \$1,200; clothing \$105; drugs, dental \$335; miscellaneous \$317; property taxes \$218; condo fees \$360; house insurance \$180; gas, hydro, water, phone, cable \$245; painting, repairs and maintenance \$75; replacement windows \$378; vacations \$220; entertainment \$100; boat fuel, maintenance and insurance \$122; auto expenses, including insurance \$795; critical illness insurance \$60; donations \$30; gifts \$175; business expenses, Eberhard \$548; business expenses, Zoe \$237.

For a total of \$5,700.

Why are these people worried? By all accounts, they are wealthy. I suggest that their worries (their real liabilities) are caused by the kingdom they have chosen for themselves, which is modelled everywhere for them, including in the pages of the *Globe and Mail*. That kingdom limits donations to 0.5 per cent of their net income. (Even if you add what they spend on gifts for family and friends, the percentage is only 3.6 per cent.) Compare that with what it costs them to eat out and have their cottage, vacations, a boat and other entertainment, and I for one have no difficulty in determining what the values are that rule their lives. Those values contradict the teachings of Jesus, who told us to love God with heart, mind, soul and strength, and to love our neighbour as ourselves. By and large, every *Globe and Mail* column of this kind tells the same story. It's rare that donations constitute more than 1 per cent of net income, and the chosen lifestyles are all self-centred.

I believe that the skill and the persuasive power with which media and daily life bombard us with secular narratives constantly threaten to overwhelm us, every day. But I go to church to hear, and to act out, an alternative vision of what it is to be human. Jesus invites me to be a citizen of the kingdom of God (no, not heaven), which is life on earth as it should be lived. If church does its job, then every Sunday highlights the contrasts between kingdoms, through liturgy and preaching. I go to church to be bathed in story and language that enable me to see the poverty of alternative stories, specifically the poverty of the rich West.

So, when we consider religious and moral education, we do well to ask, Whose religion? Whose

morality? And we should realize that teachers enter classrooms with their own brands—brands crafted by upbringing and thought, shaped by the community that raised them and the community they are part of now. They may well have rejected former positions and have turned into atheists and libertarians. They may come to their students not ever having been part of a faith community. But the inescapable fact is that we live in a religiously and ethically pluralistic society, and common ground is hard to find, if it exists at all.

So, who are you, teacher, when you enter a classroom to tackle the task of religious and moral education?<sup>4</sup>

I suggest to you that you enter your classroom with a world view.

What is a world view?

Consider the following questions:

- Where are you?
- Who are you?
- What's wrong?
- How can the wrong be fixed?

The answers to these questions form your world view. A world view takes into account our relationship with the earth and its creatures and with other human beings, the misery and brokenness of the world (pollution, wars, broken human relationships), and hope (or lack thereof). A world view involves "deep-level human perceptions of reality" (Wright 1992, 123). Or it is "the grid through which we view reality" (p 38). A world view precedes articulation. It is, as philosophers would call it, pre-theoretical.

How do I know you have a world view? I know because you tell stories, all the time. We all do. Anecdotes, longer stories. About the people in our lives. About the troubles we have seen. About sad and glad moments. And if I were

to listen to your stories, it would not take me long to get a picture of how you relate to the world in which you live (Is it a good place or not?) and how you relate to other people (you value them or you don't). Moreover, you will reveal what irks you, and you'll at least hint at what should be done about it. Careful listeners will spot the answers to your world view questions, discover what you feel responsible for, what you think others should do, what is most important in your life. Moreover, having views on where you are, who you are, what's wrong and how it should be fixed inevitably leads you to choose certain actions and reject others (morality) and to offer reasons for your choices (beliefs).

People sometimes volunteer their philosophy of life, and we admire those who do. They usually cover the first two questions, and may cover the other two as well. But a fine set of eloquent statements is one thing; actually living them is another, as Christians especially know. I want to illustrate this difficulty by citing Brian Walsh, chaplain of Christian Reformed Campus Ministries, University of Toronto, and coauthor of *The Transforming Vision: Shaping a Christian World View* (Walsh and Middleton 1984).

Walsh (nd) was once asked by a student to comment on his PhD preparation questionnaire, which was intended to probe the effects of Christian college education. But that survey asked only for what people thought. Walsh wrote back and suggested different survey questions. Here are some (and I have paraphrased them):

- Would you please send us a photograph of your living room? (What does the art on your walls say about your values? Where is

the TV? What will the organization of your furniture tell me about your focus?)

- How much time do you spend each day watching TV and surfing the Internet?
- Would you be so kind as to send us three credit card statements? (What do you spend your money on?)
- Would you give us permission to sift through your garbage? We're curious about what you throw out.

The point he was making is simple: it is through what you do (which includes telling your stories) that your world view is revealed. You may not always like what you discover.

Let me add one more observation. What I have said about the power of stories to reveal gave me the clue. How can you cope with more than one world view (embedded in the language and behaviours of your various students) without lording your own world view over them and without upsetting parents? My answer is simple (simple answers are often very complicated!): use quality children's literature. In good stories (and plays and poems), world views are embedded.

James Britton (1970) was a splendid British academic who more than 40 years ago wrote a seminal book called *Language and Learning*. In the book, he drew attention to the power that literature has in getting diverse voices to talk together. He argued that a quality story allows readers (and dialoguers) to enter when they feel comfortable, and to bow out when they feel ill at ease. Readers can be spectators or participants in the world of the story, and they can be participant one day and spectator the next. In both cases, readers can weigh new ideas without feeling

threatened. The world of the story is a different one from the world inhabited by the reader, and that distance is both safety valve and spur.

I'll finish with an example of what I consider a quality book that is eminently suitable from both religious and moral corners. It is old and may be a bit dated for children aged 8–15, but it would be a splendid read-aloud, I believe. I wrote the following support materials for parents in my church.

## Book Study: *One-Eyed Cat*

*One-Eyed Cat*, by Paula Fox  
Aladdin Paperbacks, 2000 (originally published in 1984)  
216 pages

### Synopsis

Ned is the son of an older Protestant minister and a mother who is suffering from painful and debilitating rheumatoid arthritis, in New York State. The family home is short on play and laughter, and Ned does not get the same attention as he would with a healthy mom and a dad not quite so busy with parishioners. The housekeeper, Mrs Scallop, is a bit of a nasty number.

For Ned's 11th birthday, Uncle Hilary (the brother of Ned's mother and a travel writer) brings him a pellet gun. Dad is appalled and (in his usual kind way) forces Ned to promise that he won't use the gun until he is 14. The gun is stored in the attic.

In the middle of the night, Ned retrieves the gun and shoots from out of the backyard into the darkness. *Just once will be enough*, he thinks. As he is about to shoot, he sees something moving. As he shoots, he hears a strange noise.

Ned has a friend, 78-year-old Mr Scully, who lives across from

them in a ramshackle home. Ned does paid chores for him. On his next visit, Ned and Mr Scully spot a grey cat who is behaving a bit strangely; he has an eye missing (still bleeding) and is deaf. Ned realizes that he may well have been the one to shoot out the cat's eye, but he doesn't tell Mr Scully. He tells no one. However, for months he lives with the conviction that he is guilty. This guilt affects everything: his relationships with his parents and with his school friends, as well as his schoolwork. He learns how to lie, and is surprised by how easy it is. In the meantime, he and Mr Scully diligently nurse the cat and feed it, through summer and winter.

One day Ned finds Mr Scully unconscious in his home. He has had a stroke, and he must spend the rest of his life in a nursing home. At first Ned continues to look after the cat, but when Mr Scully's daughter puts the house up for sale, he has to let go. Will the cat survive on his own in the wild?

And will Ned receive the forgiveness he has been seeking all these months? Especially from Mr Scully and his parents? That forgiveness requires confession, and Ned's confession, at least to his old friend and his mom, comes when there is nothing else he can do but confess. From both he receives forgiveness.

### Discussion

Here are some elements of the story to watch for especially:

- Ned's dad is a good man, in the eyes of Ned's mom and his parishioners. But he is perhaps too good, and that goodness certainly becomes a burden for Ned's mom (p 26). How can that be? And is the fact that Dad let Ned shoot a gun at the fair



inconsistent with his prohibiting Ned from shooting the gun he got for his birthday (p 45)? And is it a good thing that Ned must behave as his dad wants him to (pp 14–15, p 40)?

- Someone saw Ned shoot the gun. If it was Mrs Scallop, will she blabber? It could have been his mom, but she often has too much pain to get up. Was it God, maybe?
- Ned talks himself into shooting the gun just once: “Then he would be able to do what his father had told him to do—take his mind away from it” (p 44). But two things bring immediate doubt: the moving shadow and the strange noise as he shoots, and a shadow in the upstairs window of his house. From then, Ned’s awareness of his guilt steadily increases, especially as he meets the cat time and time again. The author lets us in on the boy’s growing unease, through his thoughts and his behaviour (fighting with friends and having trouble concentrating in school), but she does not spell out any moral rules. We must infer what she means by this or that event. For instance, why does Ned “feel a touch of fear” (p 66)?
- One strand that shows the boy’s unease is his lying in a variety of circumstances (p 101, p 117, p 158)—“He didn’t know how to stop lying” (p 118). Then again, his dad lies too (p 143)!
- The author has woven a web that leads readers to conclude that at some point Ned will have to tell Mr Scully (and perhaps his parents) what he has done. But we also come to admire Ned’s caring for the cat, as well as for Mr Scully (especially pp 150ff). What does this tell us about Ned’s character?

- Having done something wrong, Ned finds it hard to own up to it: “He felt his secret had frozen around him. He didn’t know how to melt it” (p 162). And even when the door to confession seems wide open, he pulls back (p 164). But the author offers us two moments of confession toward the end of the book—one with Mr Scully and one with his mom. Both moments seem natural, and they include Ned’s realization that he has been forgiven (demonstrated through Mr Scully’s hand and his mother’s words).

Stories reveal characters to us. When we ask, “What kind of a boy is Ned?” we are really asking, “What are his values? How does he relate to others? To animals? How does he see himself after his firing of the rifle? How does that affect his relationships—with his parents, with his school friends, with his aged friend? What has gone wrong in his world, and what is the way to fix it?” The author’s answers are embedded in her story creation. These are not only moral considerations; they also point to faith—in this case, the Christian faith of Ned’s parents. Our answers are expressed in post-reading dialogue, and in dialogue voices are to be equally heard (even though some voices will be more persuasive than others).

I am not suggesting that, using this novel, we make a neat catalogue of answers to the four questions about world view in a tight lesson plan. Rather, I am suggesting that through dialogue with students (who may well contribute stories of their own!), their perceptions of reality may become more obvious, and also subject to modification.

I am also suggesting that the stories we all tell each other do not

really differ in kind from this quality children’s novel. As “deep-level human perceptions of reality” (Wright 1992, 123) are revealed in this novel, so they will be revealed in the stories you tell—certainly to those who deliberately struggle with the profound questions of life, to those who have ears to hear, as Jesus observed.

Teaching with sensitivity to moral and religious (faith) considerations is tough. You may want to take the easy way out and teach math instead.

## Notes

1. For information about throughline questions, see den Heyer (2009). In brief, “Throughlines are questions the content of our courses help students address” (p 31).

2. Childhood pranks were tolerated, of course, and even celebrated, if they were kept within the bounds of the acceptable. For examples, read some of W O Mitchell’s prairie town tales.

3. Just to be clear, I do not mean to thereby un-accept the theory of evolution.

4. For what follows in discussing world view, I must acknowledge the influence of two academics: Brian Walsh, a University of Toronto chaplain, religion scholar and author, and N T (Tom) Wright, a British theologian and former Anglican bishop.

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# “I Can Teach You How to Bewitch the Mind and Ensnare the Senses”: The Power of Story in the Classroom and How It Affects Our Teaching

*Jared Lovie, John Marchione and Alexa Ayala*

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Stories are powerful. They change lives, inspire people and revive those who tell them. Some may lie dormant in our memory until we are ready to fully appreciate them. We may have been told stories before bed, listened to our elders share their lives or even shared a moment with a perfect stranger. While we are privileged to enrich our lives with others' stories, we are also privileged to have our own stories to share. In this short essay, we will each discuss the power of story, the impact stories have had on us and how story can be used in the classroom.

## Jared

When I began thinking about the power of story, the idea of words and their relationships with stories was significant to me. I have a particular love of words. I love discovering, understanding and using new words. I love etymology—enough so that an etymological

dictionary is on my Christmas wish list, and I become giddy at the thought of owning one. Words are an integral part of my life, and many words have come to define my experience and shape my pedagogical practice. I particularly like C words—such as *confluence*, *conviviality*, *congeniality* and *community*. All have an integral place in the classroom and in the student-teacher relationship.

I think it is no accident that books in the Bible are named after people, because it seems to me that people are books, volumes of a lifetime. Our stories are continually being written; every moment adds a few more words or pages to our story. Every moment adds a new passage—however exciting or boring, emotional or stoic, vague or clear. And all play an important role in how we interact with others. When I consider stories, it strikes me that our own stories are nothing without others in them: stories are stories only if relationships are involved.

Relationships seem especially important for teachers. What fascinates me about the student-teacher relationship and the impartation of knowledge is the confluence of two stories, two books converging to add to the tome of life. This individual interaction is also concurrent with itself. A book is being written in each of the other 29 relationships a

teacher maintains with students in the class. Every student also builds a similar story of relationship with each contemporary.

A classroom can be an amazingly beautiful, complex web of interactions, relationships and dialogue. It can be an uplifting, engaging environment, something teachers are wont to strive for—a created world of congeniality and conviviality, conducive to a classroom where each student is genuinely interested in the well-being and prosperity of others. Furthermore, in a religious instruction setting, congeniality and conviviality are conducive to a community joined in Christ.

See what I mean about C words?

Convening in Christ is an essential aspect of Christianity. Christianity doesn't work in isolated contemplation. Through Christ, our stories are intertwined, intermingled and integrated. We may share in the joy, happiness and love that Christ helped deliver to this world. Convening in Christ is where I fail most as a Christian. I often miss the fact that my best learning happens in community, my happiest memories originate in community, and my most revelatory and spiritually moving experiences occur in community. By forgoing or overlooking community with others (for example, by not attending Mass and by limiting my religious discourse with

others), I have missed the solidarity that enriches my communion with Christ. I hope that as my spirituality and my pedagogical practice progress, I can reclaim that community of spirituality necessary to the Christian life. I hope I can embody this sense of community in my classroom—through congeniality and conviviality—so that I might strengthen my relationships with my students. I hope I can add to the pages of my students' books and lead them to include Christ.

## Alexa

Storytelling, or oral history, is a powerful way to pass on culture, to share history and to inspire social change. Stories need no difficult terminology or deep philosophy because, no matter what words you use, a story is always a lesson. A story inspires and motivates someone.

My family came to Canada as refugees, escaping civil war and violence in El Salvador. My uncle was killed while protecting his family. On every anniversary of his death, my family gathers together to tell the story of how we came to be who we are. My grandparents share their stories as parents and as political and religious activists. We always come away with a renewed sense of family and purpose.

Such lessons are seldom learned in classrooms; yet these lessons are crucial for a wholesome and enriched life. They are the stories I carry around as part of my identity. I have learned about my culture and family through the stories we tell and the questions we ask and answer. I am never more alive than when I am listening to my grandmother weaving our family's intricate, life-changing story. I am learning who I am.

No written history does my family justice. No textbook has had a greater impact on me than my family's stories. I may forget the facts from textbooks or PowerPoint presentations that I am asked to recall for exams, but I will always remember the stories I treasure in my heart and mind. I want to share my story with others because I believe others will be helped. After all, aren't gospels, movies and books just different forms of story? Don't we all have our favourite stories that influence our lives when we need them?

We are a people of stories, and we cannot deny the impact they have had on our growth as human beings. As teachers, we become part of other people's stories—that, for me, is part of the vocational call. Thanks to my grandmother, I am more ready to engage others who are creating their own stories.

## John

Stories are a defining feature of our lives. They are interwoven into our history, our culture and our religions—in fact, they become our faith. Stories enrich conversations, enhance lessons and amplify emotion. Most of us use stories without even realizing it. Whether relating the details of last night's hockey game or reminiscing about a trip to an exotic paradise, we use stories to captivate and to ensnare attention. But how may we use stories as a pedagogical tool in the classroom?

Greg Power, a consultant and the president of public relations firm Weber Shandwick Canada, has given an enthralling TEDx talk that shares the power of story.<sup>1</sup> Power believes that stories are the difference between "speaking and being heard." He delves into the attributes of great storytelling and

how stories unite people. Stories are powerful enough to win elections, shape culture and mould history.

To begin his talk, Power tells the story of the 2008 United States presidential election. He believes that Barack Obama's story connected with people, offered them hope and gave them someone to believe in. In many ways, great storytellers do this. They connect their stories with your stories. This connection provides a shared experience, which deeply resonates with all of us and creates an irresistible emotional episode.

When I think of my best teachers, I remember how they used stories to connect with the class and with me. When teaching me to cook, my grandfather would tell stories about Italy. I learned about the town he grew up in and the fields of tomatoes in his backyard. When lecturing on the details of war, one of my favourite professors would tell of the times he witnessed the derelict battlefields and reminisced about the once-fiery age-old theatres of war, where lives were lost and battles won. Golfing around the world with me, my father told stories of holes where amazing things had happened and ordinary golfers had become extraordinary golfers.

All the best teachers in my life have shared stories that have shaped my understanding of the world. Their stories have become part of my own story, which I continually use when teaching, to enrich the experience.

I have found stories to be powerful tools of experience, wisdom and empathy. In the classroom, using stories can mean the difference between a good class and a great one. Whether personal stories or case studies, stories offer lessons. We can all learn from the



power of story, and in the classroom we can use stories to provide meaning and personal relevance to students. As I listen to my teachers and my family, I realize that my students will be listening to me and that my story will become part of their stories. Teacher as a story builder—as a teacher, I am learning that I am becoming part of a powerful profession.

## Conclusion

Stories are one of the most powerful tools in our pedagogical

arsenal. They have the ability to encapsulate, entice and engage students' minds, bodies and spirits. Something remarkable happens during storytelling; in effect, it is ineffable. Here, we have briefly shared our own stories. Perhaps you now know a little more about Jared, Alexa and John. But our stories are only an invitation to consider your own stories and the stories of your students.

How might all our stories be shared? What do our stories mean? How may they influence our lives as teachers? How do stories shape

our identity? What will we remember in a week, six months, a year, a lifetime? For us, these are the stories worth investing in. We are becoming teachers, and in the classroom our stories will merge with the stories of others.

## Notes

The title of this essay borrows a line from the 2001 film *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*.

1. Greg Power, "The Power of Story," YouTube video, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=iExl\\_rF7zgQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iExl_rF7zgQ).

# Building a Community of Inclusion

*Nicole Lemire, Katie Thomas and Amanda Jantz*

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## Katie's Story

I am a dwarf, and everyone who meets me knows it. All my teachers and all my peers knew I was a dwarf from the moment they met me. The thing that had the biggest impact on my schooling was how my teachers approached my dwarfism. Each teacher approached it a bit differently. Some never mentioned it and acted like I was not a dwarf. I can see where they were coming from; they did not want to make me feel different or to upset me. Sadly, those well-meaning teachers actually made me feel the most uncomfortable. I was uncomfortable in their classrooms because there were no accommodations made for me. I did not feel that those teachers considered my needs.

But there were teachers who did help. The teachers who made the most difference and who made me feel the most comfortable, physically and mentally, were those who talked to me like a real person. They spoke to me with respect and did not shy away from the subject of my dwarfism. Teachers

who considered my needs and made sure I was comfortable made a world of difference. They allowed me to be part of the classroom. I never felt that they were holding me back or limiting me by acknowledging my obvious differences.

Being comfortable in the classroom allowed me to learn and changed my perspective on the class entirely. Mostly, my dwarfism did not affect my day-to-day life in school, and I did not need extra help in most classes. My differences were more noticeable in gym class. A couple times at the beginning of the school year, gym teachers said to me, "We'll see what works best." Some teachers thought it would be best if I were treated no differently from anyone else. But I am different, and I simply could not do the same things in gym that those of average height could do. When teachers, probably trying to make me feel the same as the person next to me, had me do activities without modifications or changes, I felt isolated and frustrated—like I was missing something.

I learned a few things from my experiences as a student, and I would especially like to share those with new teachers.

First, ask students. They know their limits better than anyone. They know what will make them comfortable and what will make it easier for them to learn. The topic doesn't have to be talked about daily, and it need not be the focus of teaching. But making sure a

student feels comfortable in the classroom can make a world of difference.

Second, I don't think that children should be limited. But I also don't think that teachers should assume. Again, students have a good understanding of their needs. As a teacher, you don't have to assume that students need help or figure out what to do on your own. Obviously, being a new teacher is stressful; everything is new. But being different is not new to students like me. Talk to us about what you can do as a teacher to make sure the learning environment is as comfortable and as accessible as possible. Don't limit your students or allow them to limit themselves, but also consider their comfort.

I hated gym with a passion. I hated how obvious my differences were in gym class. However, I didn't always hate physical activity. I thank those teachers who took the time to talk to me about what I wanted to do differently; they respected that I had been a dwarf for my entire life, and that I knew what I needed. Challenging me in gym did not make me feel part of the group or "normal." It simply made me feel frustrated and as if a big spotlight shined on me and on all my differences.

Third, I would encourage teachers to realize that children are all different. And, mostly, they know that they are different. When you talk to them, do not shy away from these differences; instead, allow

them more control over how their situation is handled. And never assume. Inclusion is about allowing children to be themselves, to have an equal chance at success. It is hard to be successful in the classroom when you feel isolated, or when you feel that there are so many more barriers up for you than for other students.

## Making Sense of Katie's Story

Katie's story is just one example of how students in the classroom can have experiences and perspectives that are different from what we anticipated. Katie also makes suggestions for how to approach inclusion in the classroom. As teachers, we need to ensure that we are creating inclusive environments for all our students, because students who are uncomfortable or who don't feel welcomed in our classrooms simply cannot learn. As new teachers, we know that we will be overwhelmed; however, based on Katie's experiences, we also know that if we can shift the focus from ourselves and place it on our students, we will be well on our way to better identifying their needs.

As students in the last years of our teacher education program, we have spent much time thinking about how we can be the best teachers we can possibly be. Being new teachers, we realize that there are so many aspects of the teaching world we need to consider. We must come to know the curriculum, design activities and lesson plans, and make sure we incorporate the outcomes for our subjects. We will have a lot on our plates and, because we are young, emerging teachers, we realize that this is only the beginning. As we gain experience in the profession

during our novice years, our list will surely become longer. We accept that we must engage in our vocation considerably; if we do not, we may easily become overwhelmed by the various aspects of our work. Throughout our teacher education program, we have studied the many attributes of good teaching; now we must engage in them.

Of all the aspects of good teaching that we are trying to remember and incorporate into our effective teaching practices, one of the most important is the learning environment we create for our students. We hope to build a community of inclusion. If we want our students to achieve at their highest ability, we must make sure that they are learning in the best possible environment. In fact, we believe that creating this positive learning environment may be the most important role that we, as teachers, have.

In the face of what seems to be an overwhelming list of ideas to incorporate and things to achieve, it is easy to forget how important it is to create an inclusive, welcoming environment for each of our students. We are sure that we are not alone in our concern. In fact, because we believe that most new teachers share a similar concern, we wish to offer a gentle reminder to ourselves and to our first-year teacher colleagues. No matter how intense our workload may seem, it is important to take a step back and evaluate our classroom environment. We might be surprised just how much having an effective teaching environment will help students learn.

We realize that students need our help. Some students are segregated into separate classrooms, some are unable to attend a neighbourhood school, some have

no choice but to ride the special education bus, and some simply silently struggle (we don't even know who those students are). Without considering their real learning needs, how can we build a community of inclusion?

We believe that humans can flourish in positive communities. This includes our students. In a community, everyone is included and recognized for their gifts and purposes. In a community, everyone is respected; their differences are valued, and they feel safe. If we are correct, it is essential that new teachers create inclusive classroom communities. It is important to remember that each student is unique and will have personal strengths and weaknesses. Furthermore, some students have disabilities that are invisible. All these must be considered when we plan lessons, as well as when we are in the moment with our students. As teachers, we are in a leadership position and will shape our students, intentionally or not. Our responsibility is to model acceptance of all people and to become positive role models for our students.

Inclusion in the classroom benefits all students—those with disabilities and those without. By including students with disabilities in the classroom, we help our other students learn life skills: they are learning to accept others and to recognize that differences should be valued because those differences make each of us who we are in our own uniqueness. Including students with disabilities inside the classroom also helps include them outside the classroom. Although we will have many responsibilities as first-year teachers, we must not forget the importance of creating inclusive classrooms.

# What Do We Hold Dear in a Material World?

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Perhaps the most damning of all Bible stories of misspent treasures and false dears is the story of the Prodigal Son. A young man asks for his inheritance and then wastes it, surrounding himself with wealth and adopting a partying lifestyle with countless false friends who take advantage of his poor life decisions. Then, true to life, the Prodigal Son realizes that when the wealth is gone, so is his entourage, and he has lost everything he should have held dear. How many celebrities or rock stars—who are envied by millions—have similar stories?

Fortunately, the Prodigal Son returns home to a loving father. But the lesson doesn't end with his return. There is also the devout older son, who, upon seeing his black sheep sibling return, resents his father's joy and feels jealousy and hatred when his brother is accepted with open arms. Although his emotions are very human, they are not Christian.

Here, we are shown the failures of both sons. The Bible teaches many lessons, but the parable of the Prodigal Son tells us not only that

we must be above the trappings of the material world but also that we must live good lives ourselves, love one another and cherish people rather than possessions.

This story raises a key question: What do we hold dear as Christians? As a class, we came up with multiple answers, but we focused on friends, family and one another. Christianity, no matter what branch or denomination, has always called for a faith-based community, with an emphasis on communal and spiritual growth. One only has to look at the Ten Commandments or the Beatitudes to get the sense that Jesus was talking as much to a community as he was to individuals. Humans are stronger as a group, because we all accomplish more by working together. We believe that faith is no different.

Without a doubt, the things we hold dear affect our relationship with God. For example, if Christians come to hold materialistic things dear, we lose an important element of our faith—the value of other people. On the other hand, if we are content with what we have materially and instead value other people, then we are truly Christian and truly close to God. Often, we adopt the values of today's society and hold dear the things that distance us from God, including time, self-worth, personal success, wealth and even grudges.

And these are just a few of the things that distance us from God. Even governments, whose goals include a “healthy” economy,

seem to hold up material things in ways that create needs and wants; sometimes the head can make the wrong decision for the heart. How many times have we seen a social program or an outreach campaign shuttered for being redundant for fiscal reasons, rather than being kept for the positive impact it has had on the community?

False dears such as materialism can hurt us far more than we may think. As Christians, we must remember that material goods—as *good* as they might be—are temporary and that if we come to care too much about them, they become false idols. In the end, they do not help us establish God's kingdom—unless we are willing to move past them, or even to give them all away. Material goods are a necessary evil, and few of us can live without at least a few creature comforts; however, they can also be seductive magnets that draw us in the wrong direction. It is important that we think deeply about the things we should really hold dear—our family, our friends and our faith.

One of the hardest aspects of Christian faith is that while it focuses on a community-based relationship with God, our world continues to champion individualism and self-value. Although our modern, capitalist society has inherently good qualities—no one can argue with the statement that we generally eat better, are healthier and live longer—it seems that faith and those who act on their faith have become dramatically

overshadowed. We often wonder what impact Christianity still has in this modern world, which has created new false idols.

For example, Nick Squires (2014), in the UK's *The Telegraph*, writes, "The cardinals who elected Pope Francis 18 months ago had no inkling that he would turn out to be such a 'rock star' pontiff, two of the 'princes of the church' have revealed." This says more about what the world values than it does about Pope Francis. That it was said by two "princes of the church" also leaves us with much to ponder. We aspire to become celebrities or rock stars. Does Pope Francis, spiritual and political leader of the Catholic Church, have as many followers on Twitter as, say, Lady Gaga?

Not surprisingly, the Bible tells us much about how we should feel about materialism, and about what we should truly hold dear. Our Christian faith is strengthened by the word of God, and through it the Bible is the cornerstone of our faith. How often do we forget that the Good Book still has much to teach us? The Bible allows us to become closer to God by guiding us to live morally and, perhaps most critical to this essay, to live within our means. In Luke 18:22, Jesus says, "One thing you still lack; sell all that you possess and distribute it to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." Similarly, Mark 8:36 asks us, "What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?" And, as Matthew 19:24 tells us, "it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God."

Our goal here is not to depress readers but, rather, to remind us Christians that we still have a role to play in this world. Christianity was not always a popular religion in the past, and we are misguided if we believe that it is our duty as Christians to win a religious popularity contest. Rather, our goals should be to emulate Jesus, to follow his teachings and to affect the world in the same meaningful way he did.

Wayne L Gordon's (2007) piece "The Eight Components of Christian Community Development" points out that living the gospel means not necessarily bettering ourselves but, rather, bettering the quality of life for people around us who are spiritually, emotionally, physically or socially in need. We need to truly want to help our brethren, as our duty is to love our neighbours or, if we are teachers, our students.

Jesus died to redeem humanity, and we can honour his sacrifice through our own sacrifices to aid others. We're not talking about giving all your possessions to the poor (although this wouldn't necessarily be wrong), nor are we saying you should leave the world behind and become a wandering ascetic. Still, there is much we can do to help the less fortunate, but we often choose not to do so. How hard would it be to donate a day, or even just an afternoon or an evening, to help out at a local soup kitchen? Or instead of buying that new cellphone, to wait another year and donate the money to charity? When was the last time we gave money to a homeless person, or even just treated him or her with the dignity a human deserves,

rather than sticking our hands deeper into our pockets and refusing to make eye contact? We (the writers of this essay) are no less guilty of this than anyone.

We want to see heaven, to see God's kingdom, but we refuse to build the roads necessary to obtain this grace. Often Christians forget that our duty is to create the kingdom of God on earth and not just wait to see it in heaven. There is much we can do in the world as Christians to show our faith and to show that we want to do God's work in the mortal realm. What we can accomplish as individuals, however, is greatly surpassed by what we can do as a group that becomes the living embodiment of Jesus's teachings. Our relationships with our church, our faith, our family and our friends are all unbreakable bonds that give us the strength to be the change we want to see in the world. We just need to find the will to do it.

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# Bias in the Classroom

*Robert Pepper, Matthew McCallum and Melissa Yaceyko*

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## What Is Bias? Why Is It Useful?

As teachers of religious and moral education, we face the challenge of dealing with controversial topics that are often met with conflicting viewpoints. In dealing with these difficult topics, we may see bias as a threat to learning and to the entire learning environment. It is not possible to completely get rid of bias, however. All humans come with their own sets of biases and perspectives; in part, these biases make them who they are. Biases are always inevitable and often not problematic; indeed, bias can have its advantages. Often overlooked by teachers is the positive side of bias in the classroom. When teachers are aware of individual biases and how to properly work with them, bias in the classroom can become a tool for encouraging learning and widening world views.

If teachers view bias as a potential resource, it can enrich student learning. In any classroom, with

children of any age, a wide variety of perspectives, beliefs and opinions exist. If teachers create environments that explore and examine these biases safely, students have opportunities to understand a topic from other perspectives. We believe that bias itself does not cause problems; instead, our failure to explore biases in a safe space can cause much grief, narrowness and sadness. With the opportunity for students to examine different perspectives comes the opportunity to teach students to observe information objectively. Because we all have our own biases, it is important to teach students to be aware of the biases at play. Learning to be aware of bias is important—not because all bias is bad but because exploring biases teaches our students to be open-minded and influences the growth of their own perspectives.

Bias can also inspire interest for students and teachers. When students have personal experience with or an opinion on a topic, they will be more inclined to learn about that topic, regardless of whether they agree with the material presented. For example, if young Christians are presented with the proofs against God, their bias could push them to compare the information with their prior knowledge of Christianity's belief in the existence of God. They might even be inclined to look further into the topic. Students without bias related to a particular

topic will likely be indifferent to the lesson and will need to be motivated differently.

Teachers are also motivated by bias. For example, bias sparks their interest in the material they are teaching. Developing and presenting lessons becomes easier when teachers have a passion for the topic. However, teachers must understand the difference between having a bias and turning that bias into mild propaganda. In other words, when teachers hide their bias from students, they are engaging in a power play that attempts to push their personal agenda onto students.

For the purposes of this essay, we are interested in discerning between bias and mild propaganda. We believe that bias is inevitable and healthy and that it ought to be encouraged in teachers and their students. If teachers have a bias, they have an opinion. Opinions shape the world around us, and opinions are difficult to abandon and to criticize in and of themselves. The problem comes when we allow our biases to control what we do and what we teach. Each of us enters the teaching profession with a world view, and this view shapes our thinking about the topics that interest us. However, our world view or bias ought not to distract us from our teaching intention. Our intention as teachers should be to help students explore their own biases and world views, and to make them aware of alternative viewpoints.

An example is a professor who was wrapping up a class discussion about the case of Jim Keegstra, an Alberta social studies teacher who taught that the Holocaust was a hoax and never happened. This case involved extreme propaganda in the classroom and the terrible ramifications. The professor devoted the last 30 minutes of class time to introducing a new topic: how political policies can shape the education system. The professor scathingly belittled the Ralph Klein government's reign during the 1990s, and how detrimental its neoliberal policies were to education in Alberta. All the class heard about from the professor were the negative effects of a specific provincial political party. This irreversible staunchness in the professor's teaching style probably would never allow an alternative viewpoint on the topic.

After class, one author of this essay asked the professor about his stance. The author suggested that he agreed with many things that were mentioned and that the first portion of the class regarding extreme propaganda was important. He then asked the professor what the difference was between mild propaganda and bias. The professor replied, "Ask your administration when you begin teaching." Then the professor walked away. This is disheartening.

In our understanding, mild propaganda is bias without grace. Bias goes awry only when we teach one world view, either indirectly or directly. Mild propaganda starts with what is not correct about a world view or with what is correct about a world view — with nothing else added. Obviously, teachers have their own beliefs about the subjects they

are presenting; however, bias is mediated if it is followed by an opposing argument or ideology. Bias is good and healthy, provided that we demonstrate alternative viewpoints and allow equal air time for opposing viewpoints. In such cases, bias promotes learning. Propaganda, on the other hand, props up one world view and ignores or critiques others.

## Using Bias in the Classroom

As religious and moral education teachers, we have a chance to turn bias into a learning opportunity for students. The questions that arise are, How do we turn bias and differing viewpoints into something useful and beneficial for our students? Once bias is recognized, where do we as teachers go from there?

Teachers should be fully capable of approaching the classroom courageously and engaging in discussion with students about difficult issues. As teachers, we can use students' opinions to facilitate discussion and help them better understand each other's perspectives so as to build on their own beliefs and opinions. Students should never feel that they are being pressured to change their beliefs, but the intention of dialogue in the classroom should be to encourage growth in thinking. As Lee Warren (2000) explains in his article on managing controversial topics in the classroom, the tensions that arise from opposing opinions can deepen learning but challenge one to make those moments useful.<sup>1</sup>

Groundwork must be laid to create a safe space in the classroom where students can openly present their perspectives and, once all ground rules have been clarified,

to find ways for productive discussion to take place. The teacher can encourage dialogue among students and allow students to embrace different perspectives by assuming the role of discussion facilitator. A facilitator steps back from the regular teacher role of directed and organized lecture and relinquishes some control to the class to encourage peer learning and participation.

When the teacher is facilitating a classroom discussion, students are essentially doing the work by providing ideas and dialogue, and the teacher directs focus and keeps the conversation relevant. A teacher can even have students write down their thoughts and opinions before entering into discussion. That way, they can consider and share their own thoughts, and other students will better understand a peer's stance in the conversation. A key to engaging students in thinking about and sharing what they value is to not avoid topics that may be difficult to discuss. Even controversial topics have benefits in terms of classroom dialogue.

Sadly, students can go through their whole academic career without challenging their own views. Good teachers allow this to happen in ways that allow students to grow in their beliefs, expand their opinions and gain new perspectives. Although it may be difficult to facilitate discussion about difficult topics and to open the classroom to different perspectives, teachers must "trust that by creating opportunities for inquiry, exchange, and self-reflection, we are laying the foundation for transforming our academic spaces" (Bing 2008, 13).

We have seen how the challenges related to dealing with controversial topics can be met by seeing

bias as positive, by working to prevent mild propaganda and by facilitating classroom discussion. The diversity of opinion present in any classroom means that teachers must be prepared with tools that allow students the best opportunity to enhance, shape and respect their own world views and those of other students. It is important that teachers do not shy away from controversial topics but, rather, address those topics with grace

and understanding. The more graceful the teacher, the more students will feel comfortable talking and being open about their own biases and the better they will understand the biases of their classmates.

### Note

1. A version of this article is available at <http://isites.harvard.edu/fs/html/icb.topic58474/hotmoments.html> (accessed April 28, 2015).

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# The Fuel for Our Journey: The Importance of Religious and Moral Education

*Izabela Jedrych and Kristie McLaughlin*

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*Izabela Jedrych and Kristie McLaughlin are undergraduate students in the Faculty of Education at the University of Alberta. The following essay is a project undertaken by them in EDSE 378: Curriculum and Teaching for Religious and Moral Education Minors. It is, in part, the culmination of their learnings throughout the course.*

**I**n this essay, the question we will address is why we both chose to engage in this journey to become religious and moral educators. Although we come from similar backgrounds, we are in different stages of the journey. Nevertheless, we are on the same journey and for the same reason. Each of our journeys was fuelled by an event: a single moment that struck us—our “Aha!” moment. We would like to share those moments with you.

## Izabela's Story

I have always considered myself to be a religious person. I grew up in a Catholic family who attended Mass every Sunday. We still do. Although it was kind of routine, I felt I got something out of it. Perhaps not always, but faith was there. I always understood religion as being something influential. People have fought wars over religion or have faced persecution for their beliefs; hence, religion must be important in people's lives. Hoping to understand other religions, as well as my own, was my initial

motivation to become a religious and moral education teacher.

Although I already knew that I wanted to teach religious and moral education, attending World Youth Day 2013 in Rio de Janeiro reaffirmed my decision. Specifically, I experienced a wonderful moment in Santos, Brazil, during Missions Week (the week before the actual World Youth Day). I had the opportunity to visit that city's slums. I was skeptical at first; frankly, I was scared and did not know what to expect. When I arrived with my group, I was quick to notice that, despite the poor living conditions, everyone there seemed happy.

One family was even kind enough to invite us into their home. About 25 of us—pilgrims and family together—shared a prayer. At that moment, I was overcome with emotion and started to cry. I felt as though my happiness was their happiness, and their sadness was my sadness. It didn't matter that we came from different backgrounds and spoke different languages. We were united in faith. Afterward, we invited the family to join us for lunch at the parish that was hosting us.

Despite there being a number of people there, the family wished to speak to me. They mentioned how they never imagined that they would have people from North America in their home, let alone have those people show such compassion for them. They then asked for my name, and when I told them they broke down in tears. They explained

that their niece of the same name had passed away and they had been praying for her. It was as if I was the answer to their prayers. In that moment, I realized how meaningful my existence could be to someone. Sometimes it's easy to forget (or even hard to figure out in the first place) what purpose you have in life, but in that moment I understood mine.

I believe that my time in Brazil helped me reaffirm and shape my own beliefs. It was outstanding to see people from all over the world come together for the same purpose. It served as a reminder that I am never alone and that my faith has meaning.

## Kristie's Story

Like Izabela, I grew up in a Catholic family who attended Mass every Sunday; however, I have chosen not to continue practising. I left for university and there discovered an entire world of beliefs and religions I had never been exposed to. I had been ignorant and biased toward my own beliefs. I began to challenge and even renounce Catholicism, committing to not labelling myself until I was firm in my beliefs—not just a Sunday Catholic.

I continued my education in world religions, travelling and experiencing other traditions and practices first-hand, and struggling with my own faith along the way. It was hard for me to believe without

question and without doubt (but I am learning that that sort of belief is not necessary). Unlike Izabela, I do not have a specific “Aha!” moment but, rather, an accumulation of moments with my sister.

My sister has clinical depression. For as long as I can remember, it has been a battle—one that has almost taken her life many times. I have seen my mother break down and admit defeat; I have seen my family struggle and pray over her, hoping that God would help. He never did. I witnessed the life fade from my sister, emptying right out of her eyes and leaving a fragile shell of a human that reminded me of someone I used to know. With that, I got mad. As I was searching for my faith, I lost a great friend to brain cancer, a grandmother to alcoholism, a grandfather to kidney failure, an uncle to prostate cancer and now a sister to depression. If there was indeed a God, I didn’t much care for him.

I got the phone call when I was living in Camrose, attending university. It was my aunt. She was calm as she told me, “Your sister is in the hospital. We don’t know what is happening, but she is being rushed to the University of Alberta intensive care unit. Please come.” My heart sank as I drove an hour to the hospital, every possible scenario playing in my head. I was mad at my sister, at God, at myself, at everything and everyone.

I arrived at the hospital and was greeted with a hug from each member of my family. My other sister was eight months pregnant and was attempting, for her and her baby’s health, to stay calm. We all sat in silence as my mother paced, white as a ghost. I remember sitting in that chair, after I had found out that my sister’s medical emergency was not self-inflicted, with my resentment festering. I hated God. I could not believe

that he would do this to me, to her, to my mother. After everything, after every attempt my sister had made to take her own life, how dare he take it from her? I decided that there was no God. There could not be and, if by some chance there was, he was nothing to worship. He was a masochist, a child with a magnifying glass using the sun to torture us ants.

It has now been years since this happened. Thankfully, I did not lose my sister that day. She had been prescribed a painkiller that could not be mixed with the antidepressant she was on. She was seizing when my mother found her and had been for approximately 10 hours before they were able to intubate her. Since then, she has come back to us: the life has re-entered her eyes, and she is again that girl I looked up to and played dolls with. She has a job for the first time in 10 years, has a sense of meaning and purpose, and wakes up every day.

These may sound like small accomplishments, but to anyone who suffers from depression, they represent triumph. The seizure my sister experienced changed her life. We are not sure if she suddenly regained the will to live after almost losing her life or if the seizure rebooted her brain to release serotonin. These events remind me not only how fragile life is but also how spectacular it is. Although I actively resisted, having an understanding of God and my faith helped me through a terrible time in an unexpected way. I realize now that we do not have to be firm in our beliefs; believing is not without doubt. Instead, I have come to understand that sometimes things are out of our hands and that this fascinating journey of living should be embraced.

As I continue on my journey of spiritual discovery, I have come to

realize that this is exactly what I want to do. I will continue to learn, search out my faith, and collaborate with others and help them do the same. My religion, my faith and my spirituality are incredibly powerful not only in my own life but in others’ lives as well. I see religious education as a journey toward meaning and toward helping us answer life’s questions—even if those answers come in unexpected ways.

For us, Curriculum and Teaching for Religious and Moral Education Minors was not just a class. It was a space that welcomed doubts, beliefs, struggles, and the sharing of deeply spiritual and meaningful moments in life that might not otherwise be shared in a classroom setting. It encouraged us to delve deep into ourselves and to challenge our own beliefs and then stand up for them. It became a class where tolerance and understanding were essential, where we learned love for our neighbours, love for ourselves and love for the world around us.

We learned that even in a world that is becoming more secular, religion is still relevant. Religion need not always be routine. Sometimes one must experience things outside the norm to truly appreciate the value of religion or spirituality. Even if our faith wavers, we need to remember how our society began, what Dante was writing about, and why a terrorist is not a Muslim but a terrorist. We are pursuing our bachelor of education degrees because we see the need for and importance of educating our young people about morality and religion. We realize that our need for faith is very much alive and that, regardless of what happens in the world, we need comfort and answers. Religion and spirituality offer that.

# Sharing One's Gifts: Insights from 1 Corinthians 14:26

Jim Parsons

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*Jim Parsons has been a professor in the Department of Secondary Education at the University of Alberta for 40 years. He teaches EDSE 378: Curriculum and Teaching for Religious and Moral Education Minors—the course for which these student essays were written.*

The Bible is a book of stories with lessons. After the four gospels, the New Testament contains a number of books filled with stories about the works of the early Christian church and those who worked to enact Christ's kingdom on earth, or failed to do so. Paul, once the great persecutor of the church, became its greatest promoter—a sort of go-to guy and mentor for others. In his letters to the young church in Corinth, one can see that early church services were quite different from the more formal worship we engage in today.

Corinth was an ancient city, about 48 miles west of Athens on a narrow stretch of land that joins the Peloponnese to mainland Greece. Its location made Corinth an important trade city in ancient Greece and a great naval power. Today, Corinth is still the second largest city in the Peloponnese.

The church in Corinth was filled with new believers, who worshipped exuberantly but wrongly. As Paul writes, they all wanted to contribute to worship—to have a piece of the action. They had gifts they wanted to share openly and often. In 1 Corinthians 14:26, we

learn that these Christian gifts included prophecy, words of knowledge, tongues, revelations and interpretations. In other words, these new Christians really were gifted—and Paul does not discount those gifts. However, the church lacked order and insight. Worship was confusing, and spiritual gifts were flaunted, with each member trying to outdo the other in worship. Enthusiastic? Yes. Considerate? Not so much.

Paul's letters to the church in Corinth show a spiritual mentor working to temper enthusiasm with instruction. Paul guides new Christians toward practices that more faithfully express their Christian lives. In this short essay, I hope to share a key idea from this text that I believe Christian teachers should remember: we are all gifted, but the end toward which we use our gifts matters.

Let's look at the passage under discussion:

What then, brethren? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification. (1 Corinthians 14:26)

Most Bible commentators believe that this verse is about orderly worship, which it certainly is. However, it also establishes a rule for living with one's gifts—a goal we should seek personally and also teach our students.

First, in this verse, Paul outlines the state of confusion in the church's worship. The church's members

have many gifts but are trying to employ them all at once. Worship has become a confusing show—as in *showing off*. Things need to change, and Paul offers practical instructions for turning self-centred confusion into order and community.

When we come together for worship, Paul suggests, we each have something to share. No one is specially gifted. We all have gifts, which we should claim and use. However, we are not to use them in disorder. Even if we feel moved (in this case, by the Holy Spirit) to use our gifts, disorder and confusion reap no benefit. Paul simply says don't do it.

Note that Paul does not deny that we all have important gifts to share, but he suggests that we should share them rightly. For Paul, the Holy Spirit is the author of order, and our worship should prompt peace and regularity, not discord and selfishness. People are gifted with psalms (songs or praises for expressing our thanks publicly). People are also gifted with doctrine (religious truth that should be shared). People are also gifted with a tongue (in the early church, often a foreign language, but today, the power of speaking in ways that produce insight). People are also gifted with revelations (truth that is revealed to us—and the power to explain truth). And people are gifted with interpretations (ways of explaining things others have shared).

Finally, Paul shares the principle for our actions—and I believe that

this principle is both a lesson for our lives as teachers and a lesson we should teach our students. “Let all things be done for edification.” *Edification* is “the act of edifying” or “the state of being edified” — uplifted toward moral improvement or guidance. In short, the goal is that our gifts should be used to build up other people.

Paul tells us that we should both accept and use our gifts. When we join in community, our thought should be to engage our individual gifts. If we have the gift of praise,

we should use it; if we can deliver insightful discourse, we should; if we have insight into the spiritual world, this insight should be shared. But we should not use these gifts for our own gratification, or even for our own spiritual growth. If we do so, our gifts will not be used well. Instead, our goal should be to exercise our gifts to build up others—to enhance our community. All gifts should promote community, and edification (building others up) should be our main concern.

“Let all things be done for edification.” We are all gifted, and our gifts must be used. However, if our gifts are used ostentatiously—to show off our talents or to nourish our vanity—they are used incompletely. When we use our gifts to edify each other in community, we truly worship. These are the apostle Paul’s directions. Edifying others is the measure of the right use of our spiritual gifts. It is a goal we should live as teachers and teach our children to live, as well.





## Greater St Albert Catholic Schools: Celebrating 150 Years of Catholic Education

*Louis Kloster*

*Louis Kloster is the religious education consultant for Greater St Albert Catholic Schools.*

Greater St Albert Roman Catholic Separate School District No 734 was formed in 1995 by

amalgamating three school jurisdictions. Catholic education in the region dates back 150 years. Today, the district provides Catholic education to more than 6,000 students in the municipalities of Morinville, St Albert and Legal.

It began a century and a half ago.

Three Grey Nuns were invited by Father Albert Lacombe to help him with his work at the St Albert Mission. The sisters arrived from Lac Ste Anne, 70 kilometres west of St Albert, on March 23, 1863. They brought with them seven orphaned girls. Sister Alphonse



*Sister Alphonse*



*First Youville Convent and orphanage, opened in 1864*

*Photo courtesy of the Missionary Oblates, Grandin Collection (Provincial Archives of Alberta)*

immediately resumed her role as teacher, not only to the seven First Nations girls but also to the children of families in the area.

The sisters taught school in their own residence—a small log cabin. It was often cold, and cracks between the logs made it drafty. Still, the Grey Nuns continued teaching and caring for the sick there until September 19, 1864, when a new two-storey convent was built. The convent also served as the school and orphanage. Thus, St Albert's first school building opened.

Most of the school's students were Métis. Their fathers were French Canadian, and their mothers were Aboriginal. The students would have learned French and English, history, mathematics, religion, and practical skills (such as weaving, spinning and agriculture).

And so, September 19, 2014, marked the 150th anniversary of this story—of our story. In appreciation for the abundance of God's blessings since that first school was erected in 1864, Greater St Albert Catholic Schools dedicated the 2014/15 school year to celebration and thanksgiving.

In 1910, St Albert's first dedicated school building was built. A sign that was originally mounted on the front wall of the school,

above the main door, now sits in front of the district office. Information posted with the sign states,

After having held classes in the Youville Convent for twenty-five years, the St. Albert Roman Catholic Public School District No. 3 opened its first school building in 1910. . . . Officially named after the parish priest, Father Merer, the structure was commonly called "The Brick School." The four-room, two-storey building served the community until its closure in 1958 [and was] demolished two years later. . . . [T]his building stood approximately 300 yards south of this sign, facing the east.

The district's 150th anniversary celebrations began on September 19 at the Little White School (opened in 1948), which is situated on historic Mission Hill and which now serves as a museum. The board of trustees gathered with community members for breakfast and a brief formal program, which included a historical account by a local historian, a former principal in the district and a former student of the Little White School. Board chair Noreen Radford commented, "This is a significant milestone locally, provincially and nationally as the establishment of education in 1864 predates the city, the province and Confederation taking

their place in our history books.

The attractiveness of developing a moral compass in our children still resonates and has withstood the test of time in our community for over 150 years."

In early September, we received an apostolic blessing from the Vatican to honour the anniversary. It was addressed to St Albert the Great Catholic Schools; apparently, the apostolic nuncio in Ottawa didn't quite understand that we are Greater St Albert Catholic Schools. The framed blessing has been travelling through the district, with each school having it on display for about two weeks.

To commemorate 150 years of Catholic education, an eight-minute video was professionally produced for the district. The video not only features the history of our schools to the present day but also addresses the rapid changes taking place in education, with new technologies and pedagogies being introduced to enhance student learning. On Catholic Education Sunday last November 1, the video was presented before or after each Mass in our parishes. To view the video on our district website, please go to <http://site1.gsacrd.webguideforschools.ca/about-us/latest-news/post/video-chronicles-150-years>.

Special street banners with historical images were designed and then mounted on lampposts along the streets of Mission Hill, as a reminder to the community of our rich heritage. As well, a 150th anniversary logo was designed and appears on all our communication this year.

So that the celebrations would be spread out over the entire school year, two schools were assigned to each month and were each encouraged to plan eight or nine events at



*Sign from The Brick School, 1910*





the school that would bring attention to the 150th anniversary. The goal was to acknowledge the anniversary in 150 different ways over the course of the year. Schools were given suggestions but had the creative licence to plan whatever events would be meaningful to them. As a result, myriad events have taken place, with more to unfold in the remaining months of the school year.

École Georges H Primeau Middle School, in Morinville, created a time capsule that was then sealed and stored, to be re-opened in 50 years.

Legal School, in Legal, went 150 years back in time for a day.

Students dressed as if they were from *Little House on the Prairie*, while staff dressed as Oblate priests and Grey Nuns.

J J Nearing Catholic Elementary School, in St Albert, invited seniors

in to share their experience of Christmas as it was celebrated in the old days. They also took a picture, from the rooftop, of the entire school community and a 150th anniversary banner.



*Rooftop photo of students at J J Nearing Catholic Elementary School*



*Legal School students dressed as schoolgirls from 1864*





*École Father Jan students and staff*

Similarly, École Father Jan (EFJ), in St Albert, took a picture from the school roof of students and staff on the playground, forming the phrase EFJ 150.

École Marie Poburan, in St Albert, celebrated French culture through teaching traditional songs and dances from pioneer days.

Local artists Maureen Rooney and Paul Punyi prepared a 50-minute dramatic production that featured a mock interview with Saint Marguerite d'Youville, foundress of the Order of Grey Nuns. One of our schools, École Secondaire Sainte Marguerite d'Youville, in St Albert, included this presentation as one of their events in March.

Other celebrations took a variety of forms, all of them meaningful, memorable and fun:

- A day without technology —no computers or electronic devices, just chalkboards, pencils and paper
- Bulletin board displays highlighting the past, present and future of Catholic education
- The learning of playground games of old, such as jacks, hopscotch and marbles
- The creation of a cross-graded, one-room schoolhouse for a day
- Lunch in a Pail Day
- The creation of a 150th anniversary quilt



*Bulletin board display at Bertha Kennedy Catholic Community School, in St Albert*



- The collection of 150 items to donate to Catholic Social Services
- Recognition of the cultures that were present in 1864: Cree, French and English
- Horse-drawn wagon rides around the playground
- A duck race that involved the selling of ducks that would be raced down Mission Hill, with all proceeds going to charity
- Service projects for the Grey Nuns and the Oblate retreat house

And the list continues to grow.

The year of celebration will conclude with two special events.

On June 11, the entire district will gather with community members for an outdoor Mass on Mission Hill, just below the district office. Archbishop Richard Smith, from the Archdiocese of Edmonton, and Bishop Paul Terrio, from the Diocese of St Paul, will celebrate, along with the parish priests from the four parishes within the district. We expect over 6,500 to be in attendance. We are praying for favourable weather.

On June 13, a gala event will take place at the bottom of Mission Hill. The event will include a plated dinner, a silent (and live) auction emceed by the legendary Danny Hooper, and a formal program featuring local dignitaries—all under a large tent.

Father Lacombe once said the following about the Grey Nuns:

In spite of sufferings, constant struggles, all kinds of privations, never a word of complaint, never a regret, never a glance at the past security and comfort of their dear mother house. . . . They never give up, they encourage each other, they support

each other; it is like an uninterrupted contest as to who would do most for the glory of God and the salvation of their brothers and sisters.

The legacy of the Grey Nuns continues in Greater St Albert Catholic Schools as we strive to “awaken the hearts and minds of students while educating and nurturing each to learn, live fully, and serve others” (from the Greater St Albert Catholic Schools mission statement).



*Father Albert Lacombe*



*Cree drumming ceremony at École Georges H Primeau Middle School, in Morinville*



*Horse-drawn wagon ride*

# Sowing Seeds of Justice in Assumption School

*Angela Seguin and Cara Kelley*

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*Angela Seguin is the youth minister and a teacher at Assumption Jr/Sr High School, in Cold Lake. She teaches several senior high religion courses and some science. Cara Kelley is a junior high immersion teacher at Assumption Jr/Sr High School who also teaches several religion courses. Both are on Lakeland Catholic School District's Religion Rep Committee and are the leads in their school for the district's social justice project Sowing Seeds of Justice.*

What the Lord requires of us is this: to do what is just, to show constant love and to live in humble fellowship with our God. (Micah 6:8)

**I**nspired by this passage from Micah, Lakeland Catholic School District this year is focused on enhancing our learning and our work for justice. This virtue is an integral part of all our schools and one that the staff and students of Assumption Jr/Sr High School, in Cold Lake, feel strongly about, since we live in a city where the gap between poverty and wealth seems to grow every day. Every year, Assumption School is involved in several social justice fundraisers and activities, including donating money and supplies to local charities (such as Healthy Babies, the Dr Margaret Savage Crisis Centre and our emergency food bank). To build on this work for justice, Assumption School has recently joined in the We Act and the Adopt a Village programs.

Through these initiatives, we will be raising money for our local Habitat for Humanity project, as well as our global Adopt a Village campaign in Haiti.

Over the next two years, Lakeland Catholic Schools will be working closely with Habitat for Humanity to provide affordable housing for two families in need of a hand up in our own community. Habitat for Humanity is a well-known global organization that believes that building homes builds hope for families. As a district, we were inspired by the ability of Grande Prairie and District Catholic Schools to raise enough money to help Habitat for Humanity build two duplexes in their area, and we hope to mirror their success.

At Assumption School, We Act will help us achieve our goal. We Act is an educational program of the Free the Children foundation that helps students see the reasons for taking local action on social justice issues. It is easy to forget that, even in our own community, people struggle with many social issues on an ongoing basis. Hunger, poverty and homelessness are everyday realities for thousands of families across Canada. They affect big cities and small towns, including our own area. They affect adults and children from all walks of life. The We Act program teaches that understanding the challenges that face your own community is the first step toward making a difference. The actions you take can have a huge impact,

both for you and the people you help. The local action allows students to develop a deeper awareness of the issues affecting those around them. It also helps them make new connections with people and causes in their own neighbourhood, and allows students to see up close the tangible impact they can have when they take action.

Assumption School students have been working diligently to raise funds for our campaigns to experience first-hand our theme of justice. As part of the We Act program, Grade 9 students did a coin drive challenge to see who could raise the most money for our local Habitat for Humanity project. In just one week, they raised \$2,123.75! The winners of the challenge were rewarded with a trip to We Day, which celebrated empowerment with 16,000 other young people at the Saddledome in Calgary. This event featured amazing music and speakers, including Much VJ Scott Willats, singer-songwriters Virginia to Vegas and Nikki Yanofsky, motivational speaker Spencer West, astronaut Dave Williams, Olympian Silken Laumann, and actress and activist Mia Farrow. It was an excellent experience, and the students were inspired to continue with their work through We Act and Adopt a Village.

Future plans for the Grade 9 We Act campaign are to raise funds and awareness for Haiti's equitable education programs. The goal is to help fund the education

programs in order to improve access for all students, build or refurbish existing schools, and provide training for teachers and other staff. This will be our school-wide Lenten project, beginning Ash Wednesday and ending at Easter.

As a staff, we initially chose We Act because we wanted our students to be able to participate in We Day. We Act is how students earn the trip to We Day. Tickets to We Day cannot be bought; they must be earned through service in the community and globally. We decided to do service because it aligns with the Grade 9 religious education program of studies. Grade 9 students are gaining leadership capabilities through the We Act campaign.

We Act believes that students should choose their own cause. The Grade 9 students viewed Free

the Children videos online, as well as learning about issues facing each of the eight countries where Free the Children works. Students then voted on which country they would like to support, and Haiti won. Students were moved by the video that showed the devastation of the earthquake. They were able to empathize with the people of Haiti as homes and other structures with major essential services were destroyed.

According to educators who participated in the 2013/14 program, the We Act program is one of the most rewarding things they have ever done. They stated that it taught students valuable skills in communication, leadership and teamwork while they worked hard to take action. The program itself is not about charity—it focuses on sustainability. We Act provides skills and training to help

struggling communities become self-sufficient without foreign aid. We Act provides each school with a coordinator and provides a lot of support for staff and students in the program. Its many representatives and celebrities are easy for students to relate to, which allows for cross-curricular opportunities between English language arts, social studies, religious studies, the fine arts and so on.

Our school continues to encourage all students to be involved in our social justice projects. Everyone is given the opportunity to volunteer time, donate funds or materials, and spread awareness of the many people in need here at home and around the world. We were inspired by Grande Prairie and District Catholic Schools, and now we hope our story will inspire you to join us in working for justice.





## Gay–Straight Alliances Represent Continued Failures in Alberta Public Schools

*Mark DeJong*

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*Mark DeJong is a religion and social studies teacher at Notre Dame Collegiate (Grades 7–12), in High River.*

There was a time in education when we sought universals to understand our nature and the nature of things in our world. We then taught these universals to our students, explaining that the world was knowable and humans were definable. These discoveries were expressed as rights and freedoms based on human nature and dignity, and they were upheld in our classrooms as fundamental to basic education.

Freedom is perhaps our highest value in Canadian society. We essentially permit all actions until they undermine the freedom of others. The latest overturning of moral laws by the Supreme Court, because of violations of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, is definitive evidence of this.

There remains, however, a hierarchy of the many things we seek through our freedom. We are aware that certain things we desire are better than other things we

may want. Actual good things are those that uphold our human nature, rather than those desires that are peripheral. Actual good informs our dignity and our basic human rights. On the other hand, things that are only apparently good typically erode our understanding of human dignity altogether, though we are free to pursue them. An example for the educator is the student who forgoes studying and homework while trying to improve his or her online gaming score for hours on end. Although not immediately detrimental, the apparent good (online gaming) can easily become an addiction that causes the future deterioration of grades. To contrast this, by choosing the actual good (studying), the student will continue to succeed academically and move through his or her study to greater opportunities. Also, it is important to point out that we do not speak of good study habits as an addiction but, rather, as a virtue.

Analogous to the freedom of choice between actual good and apparent good is the approach adopted by schools with regard to bullying and discrimination. Some

students still routinely face discriminatory circumstances throughout schooling systems in Alberta, and deprived approaches to addressing the issue remain. These approaches, despite being popular and creative, remain reactionary in their attempts to deal with violence, bullying and discrimination. Though some programming that demonstrates solidarity of students and social justice exists, these programs are not intentional or explicit in their appreciation of human nature and dignity.

It seems obvious that there could exist an approach that is rooted in an actual good (celebrating human dignity) rather than the reactionary alternative (antibullying). This approach ought to be focused on the nature, rights and dignity of the human person. It ought to be explicit in its purpose and approach and create not a neutral attitude of tolerance but, rather, a deep desire for justice for all students.

It has been argued that gay–straight alliances (GSAs) serve as a potential kick-start to the ideals stated above. Though the sentiment

of this argument can be appreciated, the logic does not follow. GSAs offer safety and a voice to discriminated-against students within publicly funded schools. The students find allies in the not-discriminated-against population and begin to have representation in the wider majority.

This model primarily fails on the grounds of identity. The LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, queer or questioning) community has worked at length to identify its nature based on sexuality and gender identity. This is not particularly conducive to human rights, as it focuses on something that is peripheral to human nature. The weakness in the argument is not their gender or sexual identity; rather, it is the fact that they are not arguing for their humanity. Instead of adopting a discriminated-against identity, discriminated-against groups and their allies need to adopt the tried-and-tested rhetoric of human nature. If we look to the heroes of civil liberties and human rights,

the argument is always the same. For example, Martin Luther King Jr (1966) once said, "I had hoped that the white moderate would understand that the present tension in the South is a necessary phase of the transition from an obnoxious negative peace, in which the Negro passively accepted his unjust plight, to a substantive and positive peace, in which all men will respect the dignity and worth of human personality."

It is impossible to argue for equality from the position of "that which sets us apart." Rather, a successful argument can stem only from a standpoint of "that which makes us equal." Why should children in Alberta's publicly funded schools not be discriminated against? Because they are dignified human beings. Why are children physically and verbally abused in schools by bullies, or why are they outright ignored? Because the students and teachers do not possess a proper understanding of what it means to be human.

The other failure that seems obvious is the lack of concern for students who are discriminated against and bullied for other reasons. We cannot claim rights and justice for ourselves while ignoring the rights and justice of other human beings. This is simply a logical fallacy.

There is a clear difference between the culture of antibullying and the culture that promotes human dignity. There is a desperate need for the latter in Alberta schools. Schools that need GSAs and other antibullying programs only need them to the point at which those institutions fail to promote the dignity of the human person.

## Reference

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**We are there for you!**



The Alberta Teachers' Association

[www.teachers.ab.ca](http://www.teachers.ab.ca)

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## **Specialist councils' role in promoting diversity, equity and human rights**

Alberta's rapidly changing demographics are creating an exciting cultural diversity that is reflected in the province's urban and rural classrooms. The new landscape of the school provides an ideal context in which to teach students that strength lies in diversity. The challenge that teachers face is to capitalize on the energy of today's intercultural classroom mix to lay the groundwork for all students to succeed. To support teachers in their critical roles as leaders in inclusive education, in 2000 the Alberta Teachers' Association established the Diversity, Equity and Human Rights Committee (DEHRC).

DEHRC aims to assist educators in their legal, professional and ethical responsibilities to protect all students and to maintain safe, caring and inclusive learning environments. Topics of focus for DEHRC include intercultural education, inclusive learning communities, gender equity, UNESCO Associated Schools Project Network, sexual orientation and gender variance.

Here are some activities the DEHR committee undertakes:

- Studying, advising and making recommendations on policies that reflect respect for diversity, equity and human rights
- Offering annual Inclusive Learning Communities Grants (up to \$2,000) to support activities that support inclusion
- Producing *Just in Time*, an electronic newsletter that can be found at [www.teachers.ab.ca](http://www.teachers.ab.ca); Teaching in Alberta; Diversity, Equity and Human Rights.
- Providing and creating print and web-based teacher resources
- Creating a list of presenters on DEHR topics
- Supporting the Association instructor workshops on diversity

Specialist councils are uniquely situated to learn about diversity issues directly from teachers in the field who see how diversity issues play out in subject areas. Specialist council members are encouraged to share the challenges they may be facing in terms of diversity in their own classrooms and to incorporate these discussions into specialist council activities, publications and conferences.

Diversity, equity and human rights affect the work of all members. What are you doing to make a difference?

Further information about the work of the DEHR committee can be found on the Association's website at [www.teachers.ab.ca](http://www.teachers.ab.ca) under Teaching in Alberta, Diversity, Equity and Human Rights.

Alternatively, contact Andrea Berg, executive staff officer, Professional Development, at [andrea.berg@ata.ab.ca](mailto:andrea.berg@ata.ab.ca) for more information.



## Guidelines

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The RMEC newsjournal *Embrace the Spirit* is published to

- promote professional development of educators in the areas of religious and moral education and
- provide a forum for contributors to share ideas related to religious and moral education.

Submissions are requested that will provide material for personal reflection, theoretical consideration and practical application. Where appropriate, graphics and photographs are welcome.

The following areas will be addressed in the newsjournal:

- Classroom and school projects
- Upcoming events
- Book reviews
- Reflections
- Feature articles and interviews
- Humour in religion
- Liturgies

Manuscripts should be submitted electronically, in Microsoft Word format. The manuscript should include a title page that states the author's name, professional position, address and phone number(s). Submissions should be typed and double-spaced and may be any length to a maximum of 5,000 words. References must appear in full in a list at the end of the article.

Send contributions or enquiries to the editor: Dorothy Burns, 1 McRae Street, Box 1318, Okotoks, AB T1S 1B3; phone 403-938-6051 (res) or 403-938-4265 (bus); fax 403-938-4575; e-mail [dburns@redeemer.ab.ca](mailto:dburns@redeemer.ab.ca).

The editorial board, which reserves the right to edit for clarity and space, reviews all submissions.

