

# Engaging the Spiritual Intelligence of Gifted Students to Build Global Awareness in the Classroom

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Spiritual intelligence—using a multisensory approach to access one’s inner knowledge to solve global problems—can be an integrating theme to engage gifted students in building global awareness in the classroom. This article introduces individuals providing training in higher consciousness and presents examples of strategies to further develop the spiritual intelligence of gifted students, such as exploring existential questions, service-learning, and moral dilemmas. A residential program for secondary gifted students provides an example of engaging the spiritual intelligence of gifted students to build global awareness.

Engaging gifted students in the use of their spiritual intelligence provides opportunities for them to honor life’s most meaningful questions: How can I make a difference? Why am I here? Does my life have meaning? Discussing such questions allows students to focus on something larger than their egos; they can connect to the lives of others, the community, the earth, and the cosmos to build a global awareness of the growing challenges in the world. In this article, spiritual intelligence (SQ) is defined as the capacity to use a multisensory approach—including intuition, meditation, and visualization—to access one’s inner knowledge in order to solve problems of a global nature (Sisk & Torrance, 2001). The core values of SQ include connectedness, compassion, responsibility, balance, unity, and service. These core values can find natural expression in the curriculum. The definition of SQ, the core capacities, core values, core experiences, key virtues, symbolic system, and brain states identified by Sisk and Torrance are listed in Table 1.

This article introduces individuals who are providing training and programs in higher consciousness and presents strategies for encouraging SQ to develop and flourish in the classroom. Service-learning is examined as an opportunity for the development of the core values of SQ. Finally, a list of likely traits of SQ and ways to strengthen them gleaned from the work of Sisk and Torrance (2001) are presented, followed by a program description of a project for secondary gifted students using SQ as an integrating theme.

## POSSIBLE DIMENSIONS OF SQ AND EDUCATION

### Early Exploration of SQ

Gardner (1999) examined two classical senses of knowing—*knowing how* and *knowing that*—to decide if there was a spiritual intelligence. He recognized skills manifested in SQ as meditating, achieving trance states, and envisioning the transcendental or being in touch with psychic, spiritual, or noetic phenomena. Sisk and Torrance (2001) concurred with these skills and added the skills of “intuition” and “visioning.” Gardner said he did not want to risk premature closure by eliminating a set of human capabilities worthy of consideration with his theory of intelligence, so he considered the term *existential intelligence*. Although Gardner did not conclude that existential intelligence fits with his multiple-intelligence framework, it does represent an important aspect of human potential.

### Gifted Students Have a Unique Perception

Gifted students have a unique way of perceiving their world and their relationship to it, and they not only think differently from their peers, they also feel differently (Silverman, 1993). Gifted individuals do not know what creates the drive, energy, or absolute necessity to act. “They may have no choice but to explore, compose, write, paint, develop theories, conduct research, or do whatever else it is that has become uppermost in their minds” (Roeper, 1991, p. 90). Piechowski (1999) explained this difference as intensity, an expanded field of subjective experience. This subjective field of experience can be manifested in spiritual yearnings that include a search for purpose, a hunger for joy, a

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TABLE 1  
Spiritual Intelligence

Spiritual intelligence (SQ) is the capacity to use a multisensory approach—intuition, meditation, and visualization—to access one’s inner knowledge to solve problems of a global nature. SQ includes awareness of unity or connectedness with self, others, the community, the earth, and the cosmos. SQ is important for individuals who want to explore questions in life: Why are we here? What is our relationship to one another, to the community, and to the universe?

SQ is product oriented. People with high SQ become great leaders and problem solvers (e.g., Hildegard de Bingen, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, Jr., and Franklin Delano Roosevelt), poets (e.g., Emily Dickinson and Mahlavi Rumi), scientists (e.g., Albert Einstein and Nikola Tesla), and writers and humanitarians (e.g., Helen Keller). People with high SQ attain a level of connectedness with the world that deemphasizes self and achieves a state of being that creates an abundance of change.

*Major Components of Spiritual Intelligence*

Core capacities of SQ	Concern with cosmic/existential issues and the skills of meditating, intuition, and visualization
Core values of SQ	Connectedness, unity of all, compassion, a sense of balance, responsibility, and service
Core experiences of SQ	Awareness of ultimate values and their meaning, peak experiences, feelings of transcendence, and heightened awareness
Key virtues of SQ	Truth, justice, compassion, and caring
Symbolic systems of SQ	Poetry, music, dance, metaphor, and stories
Cognitive states of SQ	Rapture as described by Persinger (1996) and Ramachandran and Blakeslee (1998)

creative drive, and a need for service (Kessler, 1999; Noddings, 1993; Palmer, 1999).

**Education is Fearful of Things Spiritual**

SQ can find natural expression in the classroom; yet educators are fearful of things spiritual, and in today’s global world, fear is not only in education but everywhere. Parker Palmer (1999), senior associate of the American Association of Higher Education and Senior Advisor to the Fetzer Institute, stated this challenge to education:

Fear is everywhere—in our culture, in our institutions, in our students, in ourselves—and it cuts us off from everything. Surrounded and invaded by fear, how can we transcend it and reconnect with reality for the sake of teaching and learning? The only path I know that might take us in that direction is the one marked “spiritual.” (p. 6)

Palmer (1999) shared that, as a teacher, he saw the price we pay for a system of education so fearful of things spiritual that it fails to address the real issues of life—dispensing facts at the expense of meaning, and learning information at the expense of wisdom—and that such schooling alienates and dulls students. Palmer defined spiritual as a quest for connectedness with self, with others, with the worlds of history and nature, and with the mystery of being alive.

**The Caring Classroom**

In the caring classroom, teachers focus on the big picture, provide students opportunities to explore how connectedness applies to them as individuals, and stress the importance of equality and justice. As evidenced by the large number of teachers participating in training on higher levels of consciousness, it is apparent that teachers want to address the broader implications of Gardner’s (1983) interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligences; Goleman’s (1995) emotional intelligence; and the interconnectedness of the learner

and the teacher, the local and global community, and the cosmic world. This training is provided by a number of institutes including the Global Ethics Institute of Rushworth Kidder (2006), the Passage Way Institute of Rachael Kessler (2000), and the Naropa Institute of Richard Brown (1999).

**Diversity Provides Rich Resources**

The current diversity of students in today’s schools provides teachers access to many unique traditions and strategies. Writing from the inner self is one such strategy in which students explore their core values and their connections to others and to the environment. Suhor (1999) forecast that with greater recognition and use of methods such as imagining and meditation, spirituality will grow naturally in the classroom, and teachers will begin to view themselves as agents of joy and conduits for transcendence, rather than merely as licensed trainers or promoters of measurable growth.

**Encouraging Spirituality to Grow in the Classroom**

Nel Noddings (1993) developed a curriculum to address spiritual questions and suggested that teachers engage students in discussing the existential questions: How should we live? Is there meaning to life? Why is there something, rather than nothing? Noddings also recommended that schools provide gardens and animals for students, so that children can experience and build a strong awareness and connectedness with nature.

**Individuals Providing Training and Programs in Higher Consciousness**

Rachael Kessler (2000), executive director of Passage Ways Institute, identified a number of yearnings of students, such as seeking answers to questions about the search for meaning

and purpose, the longing for silence and solitude, the urge for transcendence, the hunger for joy and delight, the creative drive, and the need for meditation. Kessler said that if educators are educating for wholeness, citizenship, and leadership in a democratic world, then spiritual development belongs in schools. As schools become communities, students can learn how to bring their gifts to nourish the world (Kessler, 1999). A focus on higher consciousness and spiritual education is not about creating an educational Nirvana, it is about waking up to the sacredness of everyday living and learning. Separating the intellect from the other senses, and from the body itself, will cause all of the intelligences to suffer (Brown, 1999).

Rushworth Kidder (1999), president of the Institute for Global Ethics, and Patricia Born, executive vice president for the Institute, conducted a series of interviews with moral exemplars around the world and surveyed 272 global thinkers in a meeting convened by Mikhail Gorbachev in San Francisco. They identified five core values: compassion, honesty, fairness, responsibility, and respect. Kidder said these core values come alive in the classroom as students communicate and experience deep connections with one another, and with their community.

### Service-Learning

Many school districts require service-learning projects. These projects provide a way for students to feel connected to their community and to effect positive change in their community and within themselves. Sandra Krystal (1999), vice president of National Helpers Network, recommended that service-learning be placed at the core of every school's curriculum, because it can provide young people purpose and nurture their spirit as few experiences can. Service-learning helps students realize they can make a difference in others' lives and in their community. Students who have been involved in service-learning feel they are a part of their community and become more likely to perform service in some form for the rest of their lives (Krystal, 1999; Terry & Bohnenberger, 2003).

**Earth Force Service-Learning.** Earth Force, a service-learning program based in Alexandria, Virginia, provides programs that can be integrated into either the science or social studies curriculum. Earth Force uses a six-step process in which students (a) take a community environment inventory, (b) select a problem, (c) move from researching the problem to investigating the policy environment in which the problem is embedded, (d) identify options for influencing policy and practice, and look for ways to define a course of action, (e) plan and take action in the civic arena, and (f) celebrate completion of the project. Boston (1997) reported one of the most important results of an Earth Force Project as being its effect on the adolescents' sense of self as they form values that will shape their lives

as adult citizens. Boston called this a *transforming difference* in the lives of students.

### Importance of Spirituality

There appears to be agreement by many educators that spirituality is an important part of all of our lives. Although educators may not all agree on how to implement spirituality in schools, it is apparent that as teachers see spirituality grow within their classrooms, they experience what Suhor (1999) and Kessler (2000) called *joy* and begin to see themselves as conduits of transcendence. Using the core values of connectedness with the self and others, with the cosmos, and with the history of humankind, students can begin exploring existential questions such as "Why are we here?" By engaging in such activities, students can develop a sense of responsibility, an awareness of their gifts, and ways to give those gifts back to the global society.

### Likely Traits of SQ and Ways to Strengthen Them

Here SQ is defined as the ability to access one's inner knowledge through a multisensory approach using intuition, meditation, and visualization. The likely traits needed for SQ and ways to strengthen them for learning (Table 2) were gleaned by Sisk and Torrance (2001) in a search for a foundation for SQ in science, psychology, the wisdom of ancient traditions, and the lives of Spiritual Pathfinders.

### Assessing SQ

In searching for ways to assess SQ, Sisk and Torrance (2001) noted similarities in the lives of the Spiritual Pathfinders. Their research was based on Dabrowski's Level V in his Theory of Positive Disintegration, also known as the Theory of Emotional Development. According to Dabrowski (1964), Level V is characterized by harmonious autonomy and is manifested in empathy and internal values. Behavior is based on an individualized and chosen hierarchy of personal values, and individuals develop their own vision of how life ought to be. They express their talents energetically, through action, art, and social change, and their giftedness and creativity are applied in the service of these higher values and visions of how life could be (Dabrowski, 1964). Emotional development is a function of the interaction between developmental potential and the environment of the individual. Talents, intelligence, forms of psychic overexcitability, and capacity for inner transformation are key factors in the individual's developmental potential (Dabrowski, 1972; Piechowski, 1979). Dabrowski's theory addresses a core of personal characteristics that resonate with the behavior of many gifted students. Dabrowski said that it is in the nature of many gifted students to steadfastly uphold the principles they believe in and to attempt to be individuals who are true to themselves (Dabrowski, 1964).

TABLE 2  
SQ Traits and Ways to Strengthen Them for Learning

<i>Likely traits</i>	<i>Ways to strengthen</i>
Uses inner knowing	Provide time for reflective thinking
Seeks to understand self	Use journal writing and processing
Uses metaphor and parables to communicate	Read lives/works of Spiritual Pathfinders
Uses intuition	Use problem solving (predicting)
Sensitive to social problems	Conduct service-learning projects
Sensitivity to their purpose in life	Use personal growth activities
Concerned about inequity and injustice	Use problem-based learning on real problems
Enjoys big questions	Provide time for open-ended discussion
Senses gestalt (the big picture)	Use mapping to integrate studies/big themes
Wants to make a difference	Use group personal growth activities
Capacity to care	Study lives of Spiritual Pathfinders
Curious about how the world works	Integrate science/social science
Values love, compassion, concern for others	Use affirmations/think-about-thinking
Close to nature	Employ eco-environment approach
Uses visualization and mental imaging	Read stories and myths
Reflective, self-observing and self-aware	Use role-playing/sociodrama
Seeks balance	Discussions and goal setting activities
Concerned about right conduct	Process discussions
Seeks to understand self	Trusts intuition and inner voice
Feels connected with others, earth, and universe	Stress unity in studies
Wants to make a difference	Use What, So What, Now What model
Peacemaker	Use negotiation/conflict sessions
Concerned with human suffering	Study lives of eminent people

*Note.* From *Spiritual Intelligence: Developing Higher Consciousness* (pp. 178–179), by D. Sisk and E. Torrance, 2001, Buffalo, NY: Creative Education Foundation Press.

According to Dabrowski, emotional intensity is an important characteristic for gifted children and gifted adults, and he called this intensity *overexcitability*. Dabrowski identified five types of overexcitabilities: (a) psychomotor (restlessness, curiosity, and lots of energy), (b) sensual (pleasure in sensory and aesthetic experience), (c) intellectual (high-level analysis and synthesis, asks lots of questions), (d) imaginal (spontaneous, fantasizes, and uses imagery and metaphor), and (e) emotional (intense feelings, sensitive, and empathetic).

Overexcitabilities (OEs) were noted in many of the eminent people Dabrowski studied as he formulated his theory, and OEs were noted in the Spiritual Pathfinders identified by Sisk and Torrance (2001). When emotional, imaginal, and intellectual OEs surpass sensual and psychomotor OEs in strength, there is great developmental potential for the individual to reach higher levels of personality development (Dabrowski, 1972). OEs can be thought of as

an abundance of physical, sensual, creative, intellectual, and emotional energy, which cause inner turmoil but can result in creative endeavors and in advanced emotional and ethical development (Piechowski, 1979). The five OEs were incorporated into a checklist (Table 3) to help students reflect on their understanding of the OEs and on some abilities that suggest SQ.

### Program Description Integrating SQ

The Texas Honors Leadership Program (THLP) is a 3-week residential program for gifted secondary students selected from throughout the state of Texas (see Sisk, 2005). In 2005, the program focused on using SQ to build global awareness. The gifted students were introduced to the concept of OEs in the Dabrowski Theory of Positive Disintegration and provided time for reflective thinking and journal writing. They studied the lives of Spiritual Pathfinders—eminent people from throughout the world who pursued issues and engaged in extensive global initiatives. These pathfinders included Hildegard de Bingen, Mahatma Gandhi, Vaclav Havel, Martin Luther King, Jr., Nelson Mandela, Mother Teresa, and Lech Walesa. They discussed how Gandhi advocated a philosophy of nonviolence in the struggle for a free India despite repeated imprisonment; and how his philosophy influenced Nelson Mandela, who spent 18 years in prison, yet was still able to forgive his oppressors following apartheid in South Africa. They discussed how Lech Wallesla led the Solidarity Movement that played a key role in overthrowing communism in Poland; and Vaclav Havel, a playwright imprisoned three times in Czechoslovakia for opposition to the Communists, who eventually became president of

TABLE 3  
Overexcitability Teen Checklist

Please answer the following questions using the Likert scale of 1–5. Five represents your behavior *All of the Time*, four represents *Most of the Time*, three would be *Now and Then*, two represents *Seldom*, and one represents *Not at all*. Think of your total behavior at school, at home, and with your friends.

1	I feel really high, ecstatic and incredibly happy.	(1 2 3 4 5)
2	I meditate and have daydreams and fantasies.	(1 2 3 4 5)
3	I have lots of energy, get excited and feel “wired” with heightened awareness.	(1 2 3 4 5)
4	I observe other people and analyze their behavior.	(1 2 3 4 5)
5	I can visualize events, both real and imagery in precise detail.	(1 2 3 4 5)
6	I feel connected to others.	(1 2 3 4 5)
7	Caring for others gives me satisfaction.	(1 2 3 4 5)
8	Truth, justice, and fairness are important to me.	(1 2 3 4 5)
9	I think things around me have a life of their own including plants, animals, and all things in nature.	(1 2 3 4 5)
10	I am poetically inclined and enjoy music and stories.	(1 2 3 4 5)

*Note.* The Overexcitability Teen Checklist is adapted from the original Overexcitability Questionnaire by Piechowski (2006).

Czechoslovakia. They reflected on the six steps to creating peace identified by Mother Teresa (silence, prayer, faith, love, service, and peace) and came to realize that her SQ was manifested in her incredible life of service. The students were encouraged to reflect on their own SQ and to identify areas in which they could become advocates for building global awareness.

Twenty-five of the 150 Texas Honors Leadership Program participants were from the valley in Texas, and they shared that many of their family members live in Mexico, come across the border daily to work, and return home each evening. The students said that many of the schools on the border in Mexico have few or no books or school materials, and that their student council recently organized a service-learning project to send updated texts and book bags of materials to the schools.

During these discussions, the students from the valley shared how students feel about coming to the United States from Mexico, and the barriers to acceptance of students who are different from the majority. This led to an examination of how people separate themselves into groups based on perceived similarities. The teacher then assigned the students to groups with names of animals printed on the back of cards. Each student received a card with an animal name, and these cards were hung on their backs, without their knowledge of which animal name they received. They mingled around the classroom and were asked to find others like themselves. Each group had approximately 10 members, and when they finally were assembled in similar groups, they engaged in a small-group activity. At the end of the activity, they noticed that several of their friends were in other groups. The teacher then asked the students to talk about the “in group” and the “out group” and how we segregate ourselves on the basis of perceived similarities and differences. The students discussed how other separations occur (e.g., between the United States and Mexico, rich and poor, Protestant and Catholic, and Democratic and Socialist). One student observed how easy it is to move toward people who are more “like” us than those who are “different.”

This discussion brought about an interest in global pairing and sharing to find out more about other students from throughout the world. One THLP teacher from Israel shared a project developed in Petach Tiva, Israel; the project Global Dreamers has a discussion board, art gallery, and links to a Web page (Global Dreams, 2007) with information about how schools can share ideas. After this class session, several of the THLP teachers indicated an interest in enrolling their home schools in the program; consequently, there was a spontaneous teacher outreach for building global awareness. Another resource used in the THLP program was the British Council on Education (2007) that provides educational materials and ways to go about building international partnerships.

## Moral Dilemmas: A Strategy to Develop SQ

To further develop the SQ of the students, moral dilemmas were used, which employ the three principles of Kidder (1999): ends-based, rule-based, and care-based solutions. Ends-based principles include doing whatever provides the greatest good for the greatest number, rule-based thinking is principle-based decision making, and care-based thinking calls for individuals to put themselves in the shoes of other people. Several of the dilemmas developed by the students dealt with the conflict in Iraq, including the use of torture, detainment without counsel, kidnapping, and holding people for ransom. The emphasis on the use of dilemmas was to further develop the students’ decision-making skills. Students were guided to become aware of their “knowing” and they discussed how some decisions are made based on emotion, others through thought processes, and some through the senses. These observations led to powerful discussions and reflections on the OEs of the students.

The concepts of Noddings (1993) in *Educating for Intelligent Belief or Unbelief* were quite intriguing to the students; particularly, the idea that if one is going to be a believer, one ought to be an intelligent believer and know what it is one has accepted and, if possible, why one has accepted it. Noddings emphasized that this same principle applies to unbelief. As the students sought to defend their positions and statements, these ideas added to the discussions of the moral dilemmas.

Another resource used with the THLP students was *The Global Village* (Hester & Vincent, 1989), which suggested three ways of building good relationships: (a) get rid of petty irritants, (b) be thoughtful, and (c) stop trying to dominate and change others. Pondering the concept of a global vision, the students decided to write a pledge to be more humane toward themselves and others in order to affect global peace and awareness. The pledge read:

We pledge that the purpose of being here, or wherever we are, is to increase the capability of making a difference in the lives of others, and in ourselves. We pledge to work toward respect and deep caring between all peoples.

The students decided to use the word “peoples” since, they said, peoples means everyone. After the wording of the pledge was agreed upon and shared with all of the students, they asked to have a culminating project. One student brought in a catalog from Heifer International, an organization that works with impoverished families worldwide, and he suggested that sending animals to a needy family would be a great project. As the students read more about Heifer International, they were amazed to find how rampant hunger and despair is in many parts of the world, and how small amounts of money can provide three rabbits for a family or a flock of chicks. They organized a carwash and as a group were able to donate enough money for a trio of rabbits and a

TABLE 4  
THLP Student Scores on the Overexcitability Teen Checklist

Item #	Pretest Scores	Posttest Scores	Difference
Item #1	2.4	3.7	1.3
Item #2	2.4	3.9	1.5
Item #3	4.0	4.1	.1
Item #4	3.1	4.7	1.6
Item #5	3.3	4.7	1.4
Item #6	3.3	4.6	1.3
Item #7	3.0	4.6	1.6
Item #8	3.0	4.7	1.7
Item #9	3.0	4.6	1.6
Item #10	2.9	4.3	1.4

flock of chicks. One student said, "I never thought about how great it was to give a trio of rabbits, and because they have so many offspring, our gift will keep on multiplying." Another student shared, "My grandparents have chickens; they take so little space; they can live on just scraps, so the families won't be spending much, and my grandpa said chickens eat insects and fertilize gardens—we are really living up to our pledge."

The checklist in Table 3 was administered to the 150 16-year-old student participants in the Texas Honors Leadership Program as a pretest prior to involvement in the program and as a follow-up posttest of the program (Sisk, 2005). The results of the evaluation are in Table 4, and it can be noted that the students earned higher scores, indicating that the program increased their awareness and understanding of the overexcitabilities and some possible insight into spiritual intelligence. While the checklist items do not necessarily correlate strongly with conceptions of spirituality, there is some suggestive congruence, which begs future research.

Using engaging strategies that provide opportunities for gifted students to connect to the lives of others, the community, the earth, and the cosmos not only helps to build the global awareness of the growing challenges in the world, it also empowers the students to engage in activities to make a difference, as evidenced by the Heifer International project. The strategies of probing existential questions to explore global issues, the use of moral dilemmas to build decision-making, and service-learning all engage gifted students in using their SQ. In addition, by exploring the OEs of Dabrowski (1964) the students were able to build an understanding of themselves and others that enabled them to reflect on their perception of self and possibly on their SQ.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Gifted children and youth have spiritual yearnings that can be met in the classroom by building global awareness using

the SQ proposed by Sisk and Torrance (2001). Strengthening the traits likely involved in SQ will help develop and strengthen students' SQ.

Diversity in today's schools provides rich resources for teachers as they become aware of the traditions and strategies that the students bring to the classroom. In the classroom, involvement in activities that encourage spirituality to grow can result in the development of the core values—compassion, honesty, fairness, responsibility, and respect—identified by Kidder (1999) and Kessler (2000) and can bring joy to both students and teachers as they feel a connectedness with self and with others. The institutes of Palmer (1999), Kessler, and Noddings (1993) are good examples of how training in higher consciousness can improve students' spiritual experiences.

The questionnaire designed by Sisk and Torrance (2001), and based on the OEs of the Theory of Positive Disintegration (Dabrowski, 1964), was used in a 3-week residential Texas Honors Leadership Program for secondary students at Lamar University. The questionnaire provided a means for students to reflect on their behavior and was administered as pre- and posttest follow-up of the program. The results of the questionnaire suggested that the program increased their awareness and understanding of the OEs and possibly gave some insight into their SQ. Follow-up research on these connections are encouraged. Studying Spiritual Pathfinders, eminent people from throughout the world, enabled the THLP students to see how these individuals pursued issues and carried out global initiatives. One trait that all of the Spiritual Pathfinders possessed was that of wanting to make a difference, and the students were encouraged to visualize and reflect on their own traits of SQ to identify areas where they could become advocates for building global awareness.

Small-group activities were used to reinforce the "in group" and "out group" concept, or how people segregate themselves on perceived similarities and differences. The students worked with teacher- and student-made dilemmas to practice the three principles of Kidder (1999): ends-based, rule-based, and care-based decisions. The books of Noddings (1993), *Education for Intelligent Belief or Unbelief*, and Hester and Vincent (1989), *The Global Village*, were useful resources for the teachers in the THLP program.

The THLP students drafted a pledge to guide their behavior toward building global awareness and making a difference. They identified and carried out a culminating activity of global outreach by raising money to send rabbits and chickens to people in poverty through the Heifer International Program.

A daily activity in which the students engaged was to share an uplifting thought. One of the quotations shared serves as a summary of their experiences in building global awareness and connectedness—in the words of Thomas Merton (1993), "We do not find the meaning of life by ourselves alone—We find it with one another" (p. 194).

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