

# ***Book Review: A Holistic Educator's Journey: Seeking Wholeness in America, Canada, Japan and Asia by John P. Miller***

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Received March 2021

Accepted for publication March 2021

Published May 2021

## **Abstract**

Jack's life is a story of a loving compassionate soul who has served and continues to serve the people in his life. More than this, though, it is an expose of the field of Holistic Education. It records the arc in which Holistic Education has emerged and which is steadily expanding around the world. Jack's place in this expansion has been pivotal for those around him and the places to which he has been fated to contribute. At the memoir conclusion, one is left in wonderment of and gratitude for his accomplishments.

Keywords: Book Review, Holistic Education, Memoir

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Jack's memoir starts in 1969 and uses a series of flashbacks to describe his childhood and early adult years. His story moves between the past and the specific time that is focused in each chapter. There is a strong essential chronology to it so readers can see his personal and professional development, the ideas and people that have influenced development, and his life-defining events. The text reads fast and holds a reader's interest as it progresses to 2020. It is interesting how the author proceeds to outline his early years in Chapter 2 and 3 and tease out meaning so the reader sees how our early years do influence our life path. Like all of us, we sometimes think back and connect a childhood incident to what we are doing or thinking in the present. Jack uses early remembrances like a thread that traces up to his lifelong journey that has contributed to the development of his holistic education philosophy and knowing in education. As he traces these threads, he weaves a larger tapestry of his life. As well, the reader tends to slip back into their own memories to relive their childhood and teen years and gain a sense of how our early life experiences have influence who we are. This weaving of the threads of the memories of his early life provides insight into how he became the influential educator that many holistic educators have come to know.

Jack's life is a story of a loving compassionate soul who has served and continues to serve the people in his life. More than this, though, it is an expose of the field of Holistic Education. It records the arc in which Holistic Education has emerged and which is steadily expanding around the world. Jack's place in this expansion has been pivotal for those around him and the places to which he has been fated to contribute. At the memoir conclusion, one is left in wonderment of and gratitude for his accomplishments. Chapter 13, "Holistic Education in South American, Bhutan and Asia" is especially powerful. The section on Bhutan is authentically fantastical, for it presents a culture and government that is based on spiritual unity and ecological awareness that surpasses anywhere else in the world. Jack's contribution in Bhutan acknowledges his esteemed position on the world stage that seeks and promotes wholeness.

This memoir is a story of a man who is guided by deep spiritual principles that help to change the educational world to a happier, more loving place to live. His generous support has changed the life of many of his students, particularly those many educators who have taken leadership positions in the field. As a meditator for the past 46 years, he has also

**1(1), May 2021**

taught meditation to over “2500 students” (p. 127) and has modelled a meditative contemplative worldview to emulate. This is offered in loving detail in Chapter 15, “The Classroom” in which he lists many such people. The tone and voice that emerges in this chapter is full of affection and humble gratitude for his ability to impact so many people. Another thread that is prominent in his life story is one of supporting and mentoring other educators outside of his university classroom and position. In particular, he influenced the educators of the school boards and schools in the communities around Thunder Bay, Ontario (Chapter 9), which included his workshops and support for school and school division initiatives. Not only did this work influence the teaching and curriculum in schools but helped him clarify and strengthen his understanding of holistic education. He would continue this outreach work with school boards in and around Toronto in southern Ontario after he moved to take up a position at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE). His influence on the development of three holistic schools (Chapter 12), in three different contexts, is also evident of his willingness to take his ideas, beliefs, and philosophies of holistic education into the field and into practical contexts. This is another indication of his caring and compassionate support for the educators who are interested in moving holistic education into public education.

Jack’s has a life-long meditation “practice”. This means it is ongoing, informing sustaining, and done without judgment. A “practice” serves us as it inspires us to serve others. It supports as it illuminates our ability to see and compassionately respond to life’s call. Jack lives in his “practice” and his “practice” lives in him; through this he is humbled and empowered at the same time. His voice speaks with love and gratitude for the various opportunities he describes for us. This makes clear that he is motivated to help others realize their fullest potential and to also serve others through compassion and love.

Most of us know Jack has promoted an orientation of “transmission, transaction, transformation.” He tells us on page 73 that this “arose” out of his meditative “practice, after his first twelve-day Vipassana retreat in 1982. As the rest of the book progresses, Jack comes back to this orientation explaining that it is at the root of what he does, but he also cites Barbara Fredrickson’s definition of love to reveal classroom activity. Fredrickson writes that, “love is the momentary upwelling of three tightly interwoven events: first a sharing of one or more positive emotions between you and another; second a synchrony between your and the other person’s biochemistry and behaviors; and third a reflected motive to invest in each other’s well-being that brings mutual care” (p.17). Jack explains further by adding “This experience can give rise to a sense of oneness where we feel

connected to something larger than ourselves (p. 144). Love is at the center of Jack’s life and it has kept him focused on that which is larger than himself. Love bubbles up out of his “practice” and drenches all he does; Chapter 14, “My Practice and What I Believe” succinctly describes the source(s) for such power.

The love theme is expressed in his acknowledgement of the love and support received from his life partners. Jean was his first, and he highlights how a loving partner can support and guide one’s life work. Jean’s influence is woven through chapter 5 to 10. Their marriage of 20 years was an inspiration to him and even though her death was a sad time for him and their children, he grew from this life experience. His relationship with Susan Drake although brief did provide more support for his career, writing, and work with school boards in the area of holistic and interdisciplinary curriculum. His traveling to Japan to spread the holistic education message led him to his current partner, Midori. Her support and connections to Japan have assisted Jack in making major connections to Japanese education and again strengthened his insights and philosophy of holistic education. These intimate threads of his relationships with his familial partners helps us, the reader, come to an understanding of this man who has become so influential in the field of holistic education.

Jack closes his memoir in Chapter 16, “My Life as a Series of Gifts.” This is the strongest example of loving service he inserts into the book. He saves the best for last. It is impossible to read it without feeling gratitude and love for Jack’s generosity and service to the world. Do we recommend Jack’s latest book, a spiritual memoir that records his own growth as well as the growth of our field. Without a doubt, it is a good read that uplifts and sustains us as holistic educators.

**Reviewers’ Connections**

Both of us have had significant connections to Jack’s life. We both worked with Jack as he passed on to us the editorship of *The Holistic Educator* newsletter, which he had written and edited for 14 years. Jack handed us the editorship to the newsletter at the Holistic Conference in Ontario in 2011. It has been an honor to continue his legacy of developing a holistic education readership and broaden and strengthen the understanding of holistic education and curriculum. We also co-planned and organized the Holistic Conference in Winnipeg in 2016. It was our way to pay back our gratitude for the many years we had attended the Holistic Conferences in Ontario, which Jack was a founder and inspiration. He was also the keynote speaker at our conference and was very much part of its success.

**1(1), May 2021**

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Gary's educational life has intersected and has been influenced by Jack. In 1994 he started a doctoral program at OISE and took Jack's class (Chapter 15). It was the first time he had encountered the concept of holistic education and meditation. His experiences in that class and the taking of an independent study with Jack have influenced his own teaching, administration and teacher education career. Over the next 20 years he has used the concept of holistic curriculum and meditation in his own teacher education classes. Jack was also his thesis advisor and through that relationship, he helped Gary write his story of creating an organization and structure for a holistic school. His experiences with Jack in his doctoral program had a profound effect on and grounded his next 30 years of his educational administration and post-secondary teacher education teaching and scholarship. As he outlines in Chapter 15, Jack's holistic classroom practice and philosophy have influenced many educators and Gary is one.

Jack also invited him to assist in passing the holistic education message on at the yearly conference of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD), one of the largest education organizations in the USA. He presented, in Jack's place, for a number years and then passed on a written update from each conference to be included in the Newsletter.

Susan's work in spirituality in writing naturally drew her to attend the Breaking New Ground Conference in 1999. Like others there, she met Jack who influenced holistic teaching she would do since that auspicious conference. She began introducing meditation practice to her students and eventually wrote *Creating the Joyful Writer* in 2007, for which Jack wrote the Foreword. The second edition of this text was titled anew in 2014 as *Sustaining the Writing Spirit: Holistic Tools for School*. She's been a contributor to two anthologies edited by Jack and others. It was an easy decision to collaborate with Gary when Jack asked her to co-edit *The Holistic Educator*. In this way, she and Gary followed Jack's model of public service to a community of educators and sought to sustain and grow a venue for sharing ideas in holistic education. As these short biographies show, both of us have been deeply influenced in our educational lives by the opportunity and blessing to intersect with Jack's life and work.

**References**

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