

Teaching for Wholeness: A Taoist Perspective of Holistic Education

Sam Crowell

E-mail: idyllsam@gmail.com

Received August 2022

Accepted for publication Sep. 2022

Published Nov. 2022

Abstract

This is a book review of *Taoism, Teaching, and Learning: A Nature-Based Approach to Education* by John P. Miller, with Xiang Li and Tian Ruan.

Keywords: holistic education, Taoism, nature-based learning

The field of Holistic Education is continuing to grow, expanding its relevance to mainstream education, and finding new ways to deepen the understandings and practices that lead to transformation and possibility. No one has done more to bring light to the complex nuances and perspectives within the field of holistic education than Jack Miller. In his latest book, with Chiang Li and Tian Ruan, *Taoism, Teaching, and Learning: A Nature-Based Approach to Education*, he continues to weave a tapestry of ideas and practices that are accessible to teachers and educators at all levels.

A holistic approach to teaching is widely understood as perceiving the student as a whole being and honoring the full potential of that precious being through relational, multi-sensory processes – tapping into the spirit and heart of the individual with loving acceptance and acknowledging their unique gifts and interests. While certainly continuing this theme, this book widens the holistic scope to include teaching for wholeness and how to inhabit that space with a kind of “effortless mindfulness.” Thus, it becomes a meditation on wholeness itself and our wondrous connectedness with all that is.

The wisdom of Taoist thought is blended with other traditions that provide a resonant understanding of

wholeness and how the natural world models our inherent interconnection with all things. The book integrates East and West, Indigenous and scientific, spiritual and philosophical; it shares everyday examples that translate ideas into practical, learning contexts.

It is not a book specifically about Taoism, rather it situates Taoist thought as well as other perspectives within the context of holistic education. One is able to see connections to the various kinds of relationships that constitute our experience in the world.

Ray Grigg (1989) states, “In the obvious there is something not obvious. In the simple there is something not simple” (p. 217). Jack’s book makes it possible to see glimpses into the deeper, less-than-obvious understandings and meanings that are present within any learning encounter. There is a recognition of our place within nature and nature’s place within us. As Grigg reminds us, “Be water and river, moving and staying, changing and unchanging. Know and soften. Soften and change. Change and endure. Know like water. Think like river” (p. 131). This is the feeling of Taoism, Teaching, and Learning. A core of understanding pervades the shifts of thought and the flow of examples.

Nature takes center stage in this book. The profound thinking of Thomas Berry, the spiritual insight of Teilhard de Chardin, the simple elegance of Greg Cajete feels like a gathering of elders speaking truths that need to be heard. Ancient Taoist thinking was indigenous before it was Taoism. This connection is highlighted by merging Taoist wisdom with Indigenous values that express our relational being with the world.

Both traditions use nature as a model for living and as a teacher for thinking and doing. A sense of relationship is at the heart of Native peoples' core of being. "The whole idea of 'relation' is a very simple one, yet it is very powerful in the way that it guides a life, a way of thinking, a way of acting and being. . . . We need only seek our place in the universe: everything else will follow. But in order to do so, we must first honor all our relations, treating them with kindness and respect. We must see ourselves as a part of them and them as part of us" (Garrett and Garrett, 1996, pp. 160-161).

As holistic educators, we cannot ignore this connection with the natural world and the responsibility we all have to live sustainably, in harmony and relationship. How can we be whole persons if we ignore our planetary connection? The spiritual energies that course through each one of us connect us to our cosmic identity. It needs to be an integral aspect of any holistic education as it moves us to see our wholeness and connection with all things. I appreciate the emphasis Jack places on this throughout this book. I believe it opens new doors for curriculum development as well as new understandings of wholeness.

Xiang Li opens the book with a beautiful chapter on Taoism. The flow of energies and the sense of wu wei as "effortless action" have particular relevance for holistic teaching that emphasizes trust and natural person-centered learning. Tian Ruan provides a moving account of a classroom infused with the values of connection with the natural world.

The reader also will resonate deeply with the virtues of self-cultivation, contemplation, sincerity, non-violence, and humility as they intermingle into a seamless whole, and emerge as a teacher's unique "presence" in the classroom. They are developed throughout the book and given prominence in classroom and school examples.

The last chapter of this book moved me at the core of my heart. Envisioning how Taoist and Indigenous wisdom can offer ways to heal ourselves and the planet, this chapter

"moves the needle" of holistic education. The world and our planet desperately need this healing and if our education is not addressing this, we as educators are turning our backs on the future of this generation and those that may (or may not) follow. The Ute prayer that ends the book could be an entire course. It begins with "Earth teach me quiet - as the grasses are still with new light" (Miller, 2022, p.119).

And of course, there is love. Jack's emphasis on the strength and power of love is present throughout the book. Within Nature, there is a sense of cosmic love, reminiscent of Montessori but also encapsulated in Taoist and Indigenous perspectives of the world. Love as an embodied presence brought into the teaching/learning context revolutionizes what holistic education can ultimately become. Without love, we are ultimately a song that can't be sung. So, as holistic educators, let's sing at the top of our voices our song of love and planetary transformation! We owe Jack a debt of gratitude for this book and for all his many contributions of bringing this vision into the world.

References

- Garrett, J.T. and Garrett, Michael. (1996). *Medicine of the Cherokee: The Way of Right Relationship*. Bear and Company.
- Grigg, Ray. (1989). *The Tao of Relationship*. Bantam Books.
- Miller, J. P. (2022). *Taoism, Teaching, and Learning: A Nature-Based Approach to Education*. University of Toronto Press.

Acknowledgement

Sam Crowell is professor emeritus from California State University, San Bernardino where he was the recipient of both the Outstanding Teaching Award and the Outstanding Professional Accomplishments Award. He is founder of the Masters Program in Holistic and Integrative Education and serves on the advisory council of the Collaborative for Spirituality and Education. He is an affiliate faculty of the UNESCO Chair and Center for Education for Sustainable Development with the Earth Charter at the UN University for Peace, and adjunct faculty at Antioch University and Union Graduate Institute.