

Awakening the Spirit: Dr. Lisa Miller on Spirituality and Education

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Abstract

In this illuminating interview, Dr. Lisa Miller, Professor of Psychology and Education at Columbia University Teachers College and a pioneer in the field of spirituality and education, discusses the profound impact of nurturing the spiritual core in children and educators. Interviewed by Renee Owen and Paul Freedman, co-editors of the *Holistic Education Review*, Dr. Miller shares her journey from groundbreaking research in the neuropsychology of spirituality to founding the Spirituality, Mind, Body Institute.

The conversation highlights the concept of the “awakened brain,” a neurocognitive capacity for perceiving connection and oneness, and explores the benefits of spiritually supportive school cultures, including increased resilience, ethical development, and well-being in children. Practical applications, such as the 12 Drivers of Spiritually Supportive Schools, are presented as actionable strategies for educators. Dr. Miller’s insights underscore the role of spirituality in fostering a democracy, where schools prepare students not just for individual flourishing but for meaningful participation in a connected, compassionate society.

Keywords: *Lisa Miller, holistic education, spirituality in education, awakened brain, Awakened Schools Institute, Collaborative for Spirituality in Education, democracy*

Introduction by Renee Owen:

I am honored to know Dr. Lisa Miller—visionary, mentor, colleague, and friend. I first met Dr. Miller while pursuing my doctoral degree at Teachers College, Columbia University. As Chair of Clinical Psychology at Teachers College (TC), Dr. Miller had recently started the Spirituality Mind Body Institute (SMBI) where students could earn a

Master’s of Art in Psychology in Education. The theme of SMBI is “individual inner work for collective outer change.” As the institute’s name and theme suggests, it considers human spirituality as the core of our being. Although I was in a different program at TC, in 2017 I received an invitation to attend a unique conference Dr. Miller and her program were hosting about spirituality in

education. Four hundred people attended the conference. I was astounded.

Concurrently, I was Executive Director at Rainbow Community School, a holistic preK-8th grade school in Asheville, NC, founded by Sufis who centered the human spirit as the lifeblood of human development, and thus a core aspect of our educational model. I knew of very few schools with similar holistic philosophies and often lamented that American education was ignoring the human spirit in education. I was thrilled to learn that one of the most esteemed schools of education was acknowledging the spirituality in education, thanks to Dr. Miller's visionary leadership and cutting-edge research.

After studying for her PhD under Martin Seligman, the luminary leader of the positive psychology movement at UPenn, Dr. Miller went on to conduct meta research and studies in her lab at Columbia University on human spirituality, the neuropsychology of spirituality, and the benefits of developing our spirituality as individuals and a society.

Dr. Miller's research has been published in journals including *JAMA Psychiatry*, *The American Journal of Psychiatry*, and the *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*. She is the Editor for *The Oxford Handbook of Psychology and Spirituality*, Founder and Former Co-Editor of the American Psychological Association (APA) journal, *Spirituality in Clinical Practice*. She has been elected as Fellow by the APA as well as for the Virginia Sexton Mentoring Award of graduate students. In addition to her academic publications, Dr. Miller published two New York Times bestselling books, *The Spiritual Child* and *The Awakened Brain*. She has been interviewed by Oprah and has appeared on CNN, Fox News, MSNBC, NPR, and Weekend Today as an expert sharing her message of how natural and necessary

spiritual development is for human wellbeing to a broad audience.

She founded the Collaborative for Spirituality in Education (CSE) in 2017, through which she conducted research with "spiritually supportive schools" —Rainbow Community School was one of those schools. Thus began a years-long collegial relationship with Dr. Miller, exploring the underlying aspects of spiritual pedagogy and culture. In 2019, Dr. Miller was on my dissertation committee for my dissertation on the spiritual development of teachers. In 2021, she initiated the Awakened Schools Institute (ASI), a year-long course for K-12 educators learning to lead spiritually-supportive school cultures. I have been honored to be included as an instructor for ASI and to watch the work of ASI unfold and expand over the last three years. The interview included here was conducted after the most recent ASI launch.

Transcript:

Paul Freedman (PF): Dr. Lisa Miller, it is our sincere pleasure and honor to have a bit of your precious time for the benefit of our readers at the *Holistic Education Review*. By way of a bit of background, both Renee Owen and I, Paul Freedman, who will be talking with you today, are Co-Senior Editors at the journal and have been for the last four or five years.

My background is in elementary education, and I am the Co-Founder of Salmonberry School, a holistic preK-8 school in Washington state on an island in the San Juans. I have been steeped in holistic education for a while and think highly of your work and your contribution in the area of spirituality, which is something so central to our understanding as holistic educators. So, thank you for your time this morning.

Lisa Miller (LM): Well, thank you both Paul and Renee for nourishing the spiritual core of our children and enriching our national educational community with the *Holistic Education Review*, laying forth opportunities—a road map—so that every school can move towards holistic education.

PF: Thank you. So, to help our readers understand a little bit of where you're coming from, I thought we'd just start by allowing you some time to talk about your journey, your personal journey, that got you into the work of exploring spirituality in children and the importance of spirituality in education. Your academic background is in psychology, and what has happened since that initial interest in the brain and its cognition that brought you here?

LM: I would dial back this discussion to my childhood. Like every single other child, 7.2 billion new children on Earth, I was a very spiritual child. I remember being three/four years old and feeling the numinousness and the ecstatic presence of who I call God, the universe, spirit in and through all life. I can remember feeling the presence and consciousness and deep relationship—dialogue really—with trees. I remember knowing that animals were the same as us, fully conscious and in relationship. This was all clear. So, when I heard that upon turning five, I could go to big girl school and start kindergarten, I couldn't wait to talk about this grand symphony. I couldn't wait to share these experiences and find out what this all meant and what it was all about.

I vividly recall the first day leading up to kindergarten. I laid out my favorite outfit. I had my favorite breakfast and the setup was wonderful. I got to kindergarten, and I couldn't believe that by the end of the day, no one had talked about the symphony. So, I thought, "Well, I guess it's so important that we're going to talk about it tomorrow." Time went by and we had fun and we did some nice things, and I'm very grateful to my

school, but we never talked about the symphony—the deep, spiritual core of life. It was a progressive school, and it was a loving school, and it was an excellent school, but the school itself did not address the spiritual core, and I really wanted to know, feel, and talk about the symphony. So, I figured I'll just be patient. And you know, this patience lasted through first, second, fourth grade and through high school.

Eventually, sitting in the front row of college, I thought, well, maybe as a psychology major interested in human development, we're going to talk about the symphony. So, I sat there looking intensely at the professor to see if she might reveal something in her being about the symphony, and if we might read something about the deeper core of life. And 98% of what I read as a psychology major concerned a pretty mechanistic view of who we are as people. I figured, you know what? I'm just going to be really patient and I'm going to find a way to explore the symphony. And so after college, I went to graduate school in Clinical Psychology. I had a wonderful mentor, Martin Seligman, who was developing the Positive Psychology Movement. What made him a great mentor was that he both shared his stories and authentically listened as I shared mine. Even though Marty thought the symphony is what we play as humans on our instruments and the epiphenomenal experience of our collaborative endeavors felt spiritual, I had a different point of view which was there is a great spirit whom I call God, and through all of us it is felt and heard and moves the strings on the violin. And Marty listened and understood and said, "You ought to write about that." He didn't fully agree, but he was a very, very good mentor and respected my view.

Years later, coming out of graduate school, I started at a school of education, Columbia University's Teachers College, and I said, you know what? We have wonderful courses on the diversity of human expression of human beings,

diversity of race and gender, and we have courses on diversity of orientation and pedagogical approach, but we have yet to have courses on the richness of spiritual diversity. And they said, oh, well, okay, is there something empirically grounded here? I said, yes, yes, there is a body of science and a good one in top peer review journals. And because Teachers College, to their great credit, is open to novel, broad, and radically diverse ideas, provided they are rigorous and well-grounded, Teachers College said yes, and it was the start of a series of courses that have now become the Spirituality Mind Body Institute (SMBI) at Columbia University Teachers College. We teach teachers and counselors, and people who work with children and adults across their lifespans, a foundationally spiritual approach to human development and flourishing.

It's all based on three pillars. One is empirical science. There's now a clear road map of developmental spirituality and its profound footing, as the anchor for character and flourishing, as a source of resilience against the most prevalent forms of addiction, depression, suicide—the diseases of despair.

Two, there are multiple inborn organic epistemologies, different, if you will, ways of knowing and we are hardwired with all of them. MRI studies show us that when we can engage multiple forms of knowing, ask a question with our so-called head of logic, and receive an answer of inspiration through intuition or mystical experience, we myelinate the tracks. We pave the highways between multiple forms of knowing and we are more innovative. We are more aligned. We're more situationally aware. We have a so-called "better brain," but more importantly, a more engaged life in the deeper fabric of existence—so based on science, based on multiple forms of knowing.

Third, is walking a path, a spiritual path, both inner and outer. So, walking a spiritual path is both about the realization of our deep connection, and finding guidance from who I call God, and just as we are loved and held and guided, showing up for others to be loving agents of spiritual service. Holding and guiding inner growth for outer change, the spiritual power, both inner and outer, both in our guidance and in our contribution. That's how we landed where we are.

From here, we realized that there was a specific need to bring this science to child and adolescent development, to bring this science to live hand-in-hand with the rich pedagogical movements in our country. You know, spirituality in American education is alive and well, but it needs to come together even more. In the past 10 years, thanks to efforts like yours, thanks to efforts like the Collaborative for Spirituality in Education, it has come together to know itself as a field where we support foremost the spiritual core of the whole child. If we look at the data, science says it is the spiritual core from which runs all lines of moral, social, and ethical development. The spiritual core is not a belief. The spiritual core is a seat of perception. It is a deep innate capacity to perceive our oneness or connection with a sacred presence in and through all life, and then to live that out, realized in our relationships with one another and the good Earth. Holistic education embraces, elevates, touches, and cultivates the spiritual core. That's why the science from the Collaborative for Spirituality in Education, the science of our natural, awakened awareness, mirrors and elevates what you've been doing by embracing the spiritual core in holistic education.

And now we know more of the science of spirituality. For example, that spirituality is innate. We know through epidemiological twin studies, spirituality is one-third innate, two-thirds environmentally formed, just like IQ is innate, but it's also very much impacted by our teachers, the

pedagogical culture, parents, or community. What you are doing in holistic education offers the rich two-thirds influence on the natural spiritual core in every child. Spirituality is already there in the child and the opportunity for education then, of course, is to nourish and nurture natural spirituality in every child.

PF: That's really inspiring. I love the metaphor of the symphony. In talking about your own elementary education, and your waiting to hear, when do we talk about "the symphony" I was also wondering, maybe it isn't something we talk about, maybe it's something that we embody. And, for example, the school that Renee used to direct, Rainbow Community School, was so intentional about creating those centering moments that punctuate every day for every child, as opportunities to *experience* the symphony and not necessarily *talk about it*.

LM: I think you're right. We must phenomenologically experience it and embody it and awaken it as lightning rods for one another. *And* I do think there needs to be a language, so that it locks into the child where we're going and what we're doing. I do think a conceptualization is helpful for the child. So, I would say yes and yes that it is foremost important, that there's a lived spiritual life which is, of course, the goal of the Collaborative [for Spirituality in Education] and Awakened Schools Institute. That it is more than anything that lands on the desk; it is in the air and water of the culture in every school. The most active agent of learning is the pedagogical, relational culture. Who are we on Earth? Who are we to one another? What is the standard of how we walk and speak and feel and know the ultimate reality? What is the standard of how we know one another as emanations of ultimate reality? And of course, the same applies to the good Earth. So, I think we absolutely need both the experience *and* a

language and a roadmap. I think we need to call it out so that the child is prepared to know what they know and how they know. Language such as: "You know that's a form, perhaps, of mystical perception." "You know that, deep in your inner wisdom? Is that where you know that?" "You feel that in your intuitive gut, uh huh, yes. That's real knowing." So shall we ask the question, "Why now?" Shall we pose the logical question, "Why now?" And receive an answer from our intuition or from the so-called outer world of synchronicity? The child perceives synchronicity until we rub it out of them. Let's not eviscerate the naturally spiritual child. Let's do as holistic education does: nurture and put fresh sunshine, gentle nourishment, and rain on the child's growing natural spiritual awareness.

PF: Yeah, also a beautiful metaphor that I've used myself: it's about cultivation and nurturing those capacities that are already there if they're given both permission and value in our school systems.

I'm so grateful for all the teachers, the educators, who have gone through a program such as your Spirituality Mind Body Institute that elevates the spirit and calls teachers to recognize the essential part of the teaching profession of whose responsibility it is to see and cultivate and nurture those capacities. That's so different from what I hear are traditional approaches to teacher education.

LM: Paul, you and Renee are speaking to the future, to all of these rising, emerging teachers. And as you suggested, a teacher can go as far as he or she or they have gone in their own journey, and then perhaps a centimeter further in the forward heel strike of spiritual discovery. The teacher, from within their own soul and their own spirit spreads out a picnic blanket, if you will, the sacred consciousness field, and all of the students sit upon the picnic blanket. So, it's really the formation and the expansion of the teacher as a conduit. The

teacher as a lightning rod of sacred presence, of spirit, of sacred consciousness, who I call God, and that process says that the most important thing a teacher can do in their professional development is to honor and take primary, lovingly, joyously, seriously, their own spiritual path, their own spiritual walk and journey. If there's one thing I would say to emerging educators, Renee and Paul, as you both know well as being spiritually developed people, it is your own spiritual path—it is the awakening of your own heart, your own consciousness, and then living that out.

PF: Beautiful. I'm sure you occasionally hear from teachers that spirituality sounds lovely, "I would like to practice more spiritually. I'd love to incorporate that into my classroom, but I don't have time. Look at the pressing issues that I'm facing. We have kids who have violence in their homes. We have kids dealing with poverty. They come to school hungry. There are issues of equity. Our schools are failing all the standardized achievements, and I have these mandates from my administrators..." I know you've heard it all. There is a *tremendous* pressure felt at every level through our educational system on achievement, documentation, and assessment. And I have heard this concern that your focus, not you, specifically, Dr. Miller, but as a field or a corner of the discipline, your focus on spirituality is, at best, a luxury, but at worst, an irrelevance, and an additional pressure and a distraction, when we're just trying to get the kids through the day and meet our principal's demands or our superintendent's benchmarks. So, I'll give you a chance to speak to that theoretical concern that is very real for a lot of teachers practicing in difficult climates.

LM: A metaphor: When you walk into a classroom, the light bulbs in the overhead fixture cast a feeling on the entire classroom. Harsh fluorescent light bulbs can give a feeling of anxiety, and it doesn't matter what's on the desk, whether it's math or conjugating Spanish verbs, the

light makes the room feel comfortable and natural, like real sunshine or artificial and off-kilter.

Spirituality is the sunshine that comes through the heart of the teacher and touches every child. It is a deep seat of being within the teacher through which shines the love, the presence, the creative, spiritual consciousness guidance of inspiration, how to change a moment, how to respond to a child, how to adapt a lesson. Spirituality is a deep inborn seat of being in the teacher through which shines ultimate consciousness to guide and love and hold the classroom. And as spiritual presence shines through the teacher, it is illuminated and illuminates every child from within. So, spirituality is not one more thing to do. It is a realization of who we really are that allows the source of all life to guide our classrooms, awaken our students, and change our communities to align with who we really are.

PF: Beautifully said, Thank you.

Dr. Owen, I invite you to add your voice.

Renee Owen (RO): I remember when I first read *The Spiritual Child*, how excited I was about the vast amounts of research that were clarifying and validating what I inherently knew in my heart, in my practice, and in what our school, Rainbow Community School, where I was at the time, was already practicing regarding the awakening of the children's spirit, which is innate. Then, *The Spiritual Child* was followed up by your book, *The Awakened Brain*. So, if you can clarify for our readers, some who might not have had an opportunity to read the research yet, what is the core of what's being "awakened" according to the research, and how does the brain become awakened?

LM: So much of education has a hidden curriculum of radical, splintered, isolating materialism where we basically learn (sometimes it's said, sometimes it's not) that everyone is a separate being, a hard-bound separate being.

Period. We learn that our brain, like a 1970s automotive factory, makes thoughts. From that perspective, how we treat each other is cultivated by a theory of mind. I try to figure out what you must be thinking over there in your very distant head. And so there's no doubt that by the end of 12th grade we have very lonely, isolated, cut off, and marginally ethical young people, because everyone is a billiard ball left to bounce around and knock into each other. But what you have in holistic education is an understanding mirrored by the science in the awakened brain, which holds that, sure, we are distinct, we are a point, as you would say in the quantum world, but we are also a wave. We are part of a deep unity of reality. There is a field of life, and like emanations—rays from the sun—we all come forth from one source. We are a point and we are a wave. We are magnificently distinct and also beautifully diverse expressions of one great, sacred source, whether you call that source God or the universe or Hashem or Allah or Jesus, or the force or source of all nature. The awakened brain is in tune with the felt sense of being of that one source: a daily experience of being in the oneness, together with the articulation of being separate. The goal of education, I believe, is to help the child live out the sacred dialectic of being part of the oneness of all life while also experiencing and fulfilling the responsibility in their unique path, their callings, their endowments, their special gifts. To realize the oneness through distinction and separateness, to realize a unity of love through goodness, toward people who are different, who act differently, who think differently, who live differently. I want every Democrat and Republican to go hug each other today. A day of civic love. What is articulated in the world of separateness is different from what is known in the spiritual heart as one world. So that is the opportunity of an awakened school, of holistic education—that the child has everything the child needs to perceive both the unity of reality in the world of separateness. Now, unfortunately, we only

teach separateness. We really don't teach how to feel and know the source of unity of reality, but holistic education does, and that will save our society. That will absolutely save our society. That is my view.

Now when it comes to neuroscience, the brain is built with both capacities. We are built to perceive the unity of reality. We are built to use our awakened brain, which is a seat of neuroperception. There are circuits in the brain of every child, 7.2 billion human beings on earth all have the identical circuits to awaken to the unity of reality, and we can point with our finger, looking at the MRI machine. Ah! It is the parietal that allows us to see that we are part of one reality and yet distinct. The parietal perceives within and out of hard boundaries. Ah! It's a shift from one form of attention, the dorsal to the ventral, that lets us be goal-oriented, and then in the next minute, to look at the field of life for a grander direction. Ah! It's the bonding network that lets us know when to step forward and enact love of neighbor, to show up for the child who's new or maybe has low EQ [emotional intelligence], to step out to the parent who's really irascible and defensive and doesn't know if they belong in the school. When we enact love of neighbor, we awaken. Our bonding network comes online, and we see that love is written into the very reality, the fabric of life. So, this is our inborn, awakened brain! It is sitting there ready to go, waiting for us to live out being loving—holding, guiding, and never leaving anyone alone. When we awaken our brain, our natural circuits of spiritual perception that we can point to in MRI studies grow thick and strong the more we use them.

Remember, spiritual awareness is one-third innate, two-thirds cultivated. The awakened brain shows cortical thickness when we practice a spiritual life, when we practice an awakened walk, an awakened talk, an awakened community, as you do in holistic education. Holistic education, through the lens of

science, is an awakened community. And as we strengthen the cortex across the regions of the awakened brain, it becomes our go-to seat of perception. We walk, get up, go outside and look immediately into the sacred nature of life, into the loving unity of reality. The more you cultivate awakened awareness in a child, the more the cortex is thickened, and for the rest of their lives, they will see the deeper awakened truth and live it. That's a sustainable society.

RO: That's beautiful and I appreciate how you drew the link between the individuality of our awakened brain—how that might inspire our lives and benefit us as individuals—and how that transfers to a collective view of society and the communal benefits. Would you be willing to speak a little bit more to some of the research around the benefits of the awakened brain, specifically the benefits for children who are raised with their spiritual core nurtured?

LM: When we strengthen the awakened brain, when we cultivate natural spiritual awareness in the child, we build the spiritual core in much the same way as physical wellness. In so much of our culture we talk about physical fitness: how the physical core helps us to hold our back straight and have good posture and gives us health and physical wellness. Most of education disintegrates the spiritual core. Disintegration is unhealthy. On the other hand, the holistic approach that cultivates and nourishes the innate spiritual core integrates the child. And it is absolutely awesome, truly, the difference. It is awesome because the child has been realized for who they are intended to be. When we build the spiritual core of the child—when we strengthen the natural birthright in the child and offer the nurturing of the natural spirituality in the child—the data is jaw-dropping.

A child with a strong personal spiritual awareness who says, "I turn to my higher power for guidance," "Nature is sacred," "My community or

family is a spiritual home," is 80% less likely to become addicted, 70% to take dangerous harmful risks (like drive 90 miles an hour and jump out the second story window).

What is the number one killer of high school students today? The number one killer of high school students is suicide. The rate of death by suicide now rivals the rate of death by auto accident as the number one killer of high school students. And that's pushing down to middle school. And yet, if I were to say, "We have the pill, we've got the pill. It's right here, and you can protect every student in your classroom, 85% against this epidemic of suicide, the number one killer," who wouldn't give that to their child? Well, it turns out that when spiritual life is shared, to your point Renee, *in community*, we know each other as rays of the sun. We know each other as souls on Earth, beings of infinite worth. We know that in all time and space, we are brought here to walk with each other, not compete against each other. When we have a deep sense of who we really are, when spiritual life is shared, we are 82% protected against completed suicide. In a meta-analysis over 2000 plus tragically completed suicides and 5000 match controls, there is an 82% decreased relative risk of completed suicide when spiritual life is shared, shared in the classroom, shared in the Sangha, shared in the squad, shared in the community. The classroom to the point of John Dewey, is an *in vivo* community where the child learns how to be in relation to community. It becomes the *de facto* set point go-to the rest of their lives. And when you build an awakened community, you have helped that child realize their natural spiritual awareness and realize a spiritual understanding of who their classmates and their teachers are, which transfers to their co-workers and their family and their neighbors. You have set a lifelong seat of perception for awakened relationships. It's extraordinary. And at the level of the brain, we see the imprint.

RO: I wish we had a video and photos to look at. I've seen some of the MRI studies and the pictures of the brain and the difference between brains that have had that experience of living that in vivo experience and of having their spiritual core nourished throughout their lives.

LM: Yes, and to emphasize, or summarize: Spirituality is one-third innate and two-thirds environmentally cultivated, which means an awakened classroom, as in holistic education, provides the rich two-thirds that cultivates natural spirituality. A child who lives in a sustained spiritual community literally builds a thicker cortex, evident in brain scans like thick trees across the regions of the awakened brain. This means the child's go-to way of seeing and knowing the world is at the level of the spiritual reality. The gift of a holistic education is it nourishes the awakened brain and lasts the rest of the child's life.

RO: Yeah, it's almost like the same concept of "windows of developmental opportunity"—there's that window of opportunity to develop our spiritual core, and we don't want to miss that, because it lasts throughout our lives.

LM: Yes, and it is a life protected against the tidal wave of the epidemic of the diseases of despair. Half of Gen Z is depressed, addicted, or anxious to a point that is excruciatingly painful and debilitating in their work life. So, half of Gen Z suffers from a disease of despair at a moderately clinical level. But when we look today through the MRI and see strengthened cortical thickness across the regions of the awakened brain and come back a year later, we can see that a strong awakened brain today is neuro-protective a year from now against the level of depression—prospective evidence that a sustained spiritual life is neuro-protective at the level of brain against depression.

RO: And given how much time our children spend in schools and classrooms, why not recognize that's our opportunity for developing that spiritual

core? Whereas I think we used to expect that the small amount of time that children might be in a church, if they had a church community, was supposed to be where spiritual life was contained. But statistics show that fewer and fewer children are members of a religious community, and, again, the time spent in those communities is very small anyway, compared to the time spent in school. School truly is our best opportunity to develop the spiritual core of children and society.

And so, I think this is a good transition to elucidate on what can happen in schools and how schools can further develop the spiritual core of children and create that protectiveness and the spiritually awakened brain. The Collaborative for Spirituality in Education, which I was so fortunate to learn about and be a part of that original research beginning, I believe it was 2017, identifies 12 "Drivers" of spiritually supportive schools. Using the research that you did through the Collaborative for Spirituality in Education, can you paint a picture of the essence of what educational institutions that are spiritually supportive look like and what those drivers are, so our holistic educators can enact those?

LM: Renee, as the Head of School, you were so generous to contribute such wisdom and pedagogical illumination to the Collaborative. You were one of our founding Spiritually Supportive Schools. As we have talked about, there is a strong basic science that shows a natural developmental path of spirituality in the child. But how do you educate for that? How—if we know that spirituality is two-thirds cultivated, not taught, but nourished in the child—do we create a culture, a classroom, a world where the spiritual life of the child is engaged, where the deep spiritual core, instead of left to atrophy, is strengthened and built strong? The Collaborative for Spirituality in Education, for three years, ventured out to look at schools we designated as "spiritually supportive schools" around the United States. So, rather than a

bunch of scholars cooking up in the lab of how to translate basic science into practice, we went out to conduct a three-year-bottom-up field study: interviews, assessments, measures, site visits, and listened to experienced, innovative, and brilliant educational leaders. We went to Jewish schools and Hindu schools and Muslim schools and Catholic schools and public schools and independent schools and magnet schools. We went to many types of schools, and they were very geographically diverse. Some were religious. Some were not religious. We harvested the experience, the acumen, the ingenious innovation, the expertise of some of our nation's leading educators. We panned for gold, effectively, and came up with the common DNA—foundationally common methods—across all foundationally, of spiritually supportive schools.

What we found foremost was that there was absolutely nothing that landed on the desk of the child. There was no homework assignment, there was no textbook, no whole child curriculum. No worksheet. But the most impactful, transformative pedagogical tool was in the *relational culture*. A deeply inspired, mission-driven, devoted attention to relational culture was at the fore of the heads of school and all the faculty whom they guided through this common mission and purpose—a deliberately, deeply intentionally designed relational culture that was a spiritually supportive relational culture. We found there were common core drivers within the pedagogical culture in each of these spiritually supportive schools. There were 12 in all, one school might have nine, another 11, but these 12 drivers embraced the operative translational way through which spirituality was engaged in the child. The 12 drivers are shared in our article, published in *The Oxford Handbook of Psychology and Spirituality*.

The 12 drivers are also translated into a teachable form and offered for free through the Awakened Schools Institute [ASI]. Why for free? Because this

wisdom was given to education, from educational leaders like yourself, Renee, in a generous, open-handed way. And so, we share it forward through the Awakened Schools Institute. ASI is the transformational eight-week program in which any teacher or educational leader can learn the 12 drivers of spiritual pedagogical culture and go back to their own school and lead their own school community through this awakening process.

What are the 12 drivers? They're listed in full in our article, but I'm going to highlight three that were extremely prominent. One is there is a practice of transcendent relationship. Transcendent relationship is the capacity to feel the relationality with the force through life, God, a higher power, nature. For some, it has to do with nature-based ways of being, engaging in relationship with spirit or force in and through nature, and expressed through our relationship in nature. God literally, is *in* that tree, *is* that tree and the little squirrel, and you, the student. For some people, it's a form of meditation, a guided visualization. For others, it's prayer. Now, I am 100% supportive of mindfulness as an attentional practice that quiets the brain, but mindfulness brings us to the threshold through which we can then *receive* and *perceive* transcendent relationship. So transcendent relationship is *received* and *perceived* through our awakened brain.

A second driver of pedagogical spiritual culture is that there's a language, a lexicon, of the sacred reality. In religious schools that can be the language of the faith tradition. In highly diverse schools, it can be pluralistic and universal in the language of life, but we spend so much time teaching children, in kindergarten and first grade, you know, this is the word for "truck," and this is what it looks like when it's written, and this is the word for "sky" and "banana" and "orange." Can we teach the language of the sacred reality and our way of knowing it? Give it a word, lock it in. So, Paul, to our earlier conversation, to have the

phenomenological experience, the transcendent relationship, and then call it something.

A third driver is that we are on a journey. We are evolving. We are a work in progress and spiritually supportive. Schools might give a prize to the very nicest student or the very most community-oriented student or the very smartest student, but rarely look at us all as being on a journey and point out growth, transformation, emergence in students. This year's prize for character does not offer character as an endpoint, but explores character as a journey, an evolutionary process, and it goes to Sam, for really digging deep and finding within his heart a way to be forgiving of fellow classmates for really reflecting and finding a way to have commitment and grit even in the headwinds. It has to do with transformation, because that is available to all of us.

RO: That was a great summary of some of the most important research and aspects of spiritually supportive, holistic education. I'm going to turn it over to Paul.

PF: That's great. And by segue I will say that, I, wearing my other hat now as the Head of the Salmonberry School, am a participant in this cohort of the Awakened Schools Institute journeyers, and today, this morning, I just received my access links and codes to begin that journey, having spent a day with my fellow journeyers at Teachers College just a week or so ago. So, I'm really excited for that. As the leader of a nonprofit, having a strategic plan to not only illuminate the work, the research, the validity, the importance to inspire, but then to *advance* the mission and actually bring these practices to new schools who might not be fully immersed in the potential to support the spirituality of their kids, teachers, parents is brilliant, brilliant. I'm so grateful.

My last question, which wasn't on my list, but I feel is important today, is this, in the United States we are now in that liminal space between what was

our election day and the inauguration of our new administration. It is a period that is following a time of tremendous hope and optimism and also fear and anxiety. We are now in that dark, messy, uncertain, but fearful phase that includes a lot of depression among many educators. Do you have some advice for how we deal with our own challenges and depression? And for some of this work, I go back to one of my inspirations, Parker Palmer, who has written so many beautiful books and essays about the human spirit, about our potential and capacity for full unfolding, including a more recent book of his called *Healing the Heart of Democracy*, where he really talks about our failure as a culture to live into the tremendous spiritual potential of our form of government, our chosen form of government. But in that book, he also talks a lot about his own personal journey with depression and through depression. And I am just reminded of your incredible TEDx talk from quite a while ago, where you courageously gave us viewers a little window into *your* journey through depression. And one of the things that you said that is sticking with me today is that depression and transcendence are two sides of the same door. So as a way of closing us out, in this time of a lot of fear and anxiety and depression amongst our educational community, I just want to give you a chance to share current thoughts on that, or remind us, for those who may not have seen your beautiful TED talk of what that journey was like for you, or how you've seen in others.

LM: Depression can be a knock at the door for spiritual growth and awakening. "I didn't get what I wanted. I lost what I cherished. I don't know where I'm going. I just wake up feeling horrible. I'm anxious." It's like a seizing, little dread feeling creeping through my back. Despair. These moments are moments for us to make a choice. "What life are you asking of me now? What higher power might be revealed to me now? What in my walk of nature is suddenly set upon my heart?" It's very natural in moments of suffering. We all can

have moments. We all face this. No one's exempt. "What did I do? What could I have done differently? What did he do to me? What did she do to me? What am I going to do back to them?" These are moments that don't lead anywhere new. These are moments that are revisionist, that don't carry any information beyond this moment of looking backwards over my shoulder.

But in moments of real struggle or despair or anxiety or even anger or rage, even hatred – we have the opportunity to choose to turn to the sacred presence in life. It can be through meditation. It can be a walk in nature. We all know how to get there. We all can do this. My way is prayer. And through this deep dialogue, feel where we are guided. Feel the buoyancy, first and foremost. That you're not going to fall through the abyss. There's not a black hole through which you're going to back dive and never return, but you're caught, you're buoyant. And we're all caught, and we're all buoyant. That actually you are never alone. You are loved, and there is no need to know your next move, because it will emerge as you gently, lovingly, patiently pay attention. You will meet people. They will be laid in front of you on your path. You will have flashes of insight. You will have gifts of the universe, guidance from God that says, here's a way forward. And in this way, awaken to a deeper connection with the sacred presence in life. Depression is a banging at the door, and the more despairing we are, the louder the pounding to awaken and say "Hey, what is God asking of me now?"

I recently was grateful to visit the Dalai Lama, His Holiness. We were each allowed to prepare a question to present to His Holiness the Dalai Lama and mine had to do with, "Is it not the case that all living beings, including humans, access the same source of guidance? And don't our fellow sisters and brothers share a common awareness with us?" And his doctor liked the question, and a number of people in our group liked the question, but His

Holiness had a very different response. He said, "Your job is to love. Your job is to love the way the mother dog loves the pup, or the mother cow loves the calf, or your mother loved you, in the mother's milk. Your job is to love." And love is not a feeling alone. Love is a practice. It is a very devoted discipline. It's a choice to love. And I can love someone whether or not they love me back, whether they love me at all, whether they outright dislike or hate me, I can still choose to love someone. It is a non-reactive stance. It is one in which we are a source of the force of all life, of creativity and possibility, generativity, and peace.

So, I walked away from visiting His Holiness, realizing that we have a very, very elegantly simple way to live, which is radical love. It doesn't mean we agree with one another. It doesn't mean we have the same point of view or way of life, but it is what you teach in holistic education. When I walk in the door as your student, you love me, and you love me whether my parent is a Republican or a Democrat, and certainly, no matter what my bio-body suit looks like, you love me. You love me as a soul on Earth. You love me as a child of God. You love me, and that's the love—where every child is your child in the mother's milk, same as the cow and the calf and the dog and the pup.

How can we go from a pretty splintered country to one of radical civil love? The united family of the United States, with all of our different ways of living and different beliefs? John Dewey said that deep bond was the possibility that could emerge through the classroom. Through education we have a really great shot.

Now Stephen Rockefeller, one of the co-founders of the Collaborative for Spirituality in Education is a leading scholar on John Dewey and democracy. Dr. Rockefeller and John Dewey shared a very important point of view, which is that in the holistic school, the awakened community fosters in the child the deep civic bond that is the moral and

spiritual democracy necessary to sustain a *political* democracy. That before we can begin to sustain a political democracy, with voting booths and different points of view, there has to be in the deep seat of being in every child a civic bond, what the Dalai Lama called a deep common love, a radical love, that is far more tenacious than the winds of political opinion.

PF: Yes, and I think Parker, Palmer would echo much of that, and, yeah, that we have sort of reduced and again, “eviscerated” what it means to be in public life within a democracy to the act of the vote. And that’s such a corruption, because being a member of a civil society is so much deeper than that. It is about that sacred relationship and membership within a collective, and the classroom is for some the family. The classroom should be the training grounds for what it could and should be to live in a spiritually awakened community. And then the democracy is one incarnation of that when done well.

LM: Education is supporting democracy because every single day, every instant, every pore of our being says that you, the student, we, the classroom, and with you, the teacher, we create civil society, we create moral, spiritual democracy. It’s not the job of government to create your civil society. It’s our job in the classroom, this instant. Here, now we are filling it with life and love and color and creativity and possibility. There’s no government on earth that can create a civil society. Governments come and go, candidates come and go. Certainly, policies come and go. Civil society is the job of the people and you prepare students, not just to inherit civil society, but to be co-creators of ever-changing civil society.

Stephen Rockefeller, in his extraordinary book, *Spiritual Democracy in our Schools*, points out how the classroom is the seat of spiritual community that will sustain a spiritual moral democracy as the foundation, the bedrock, for a

political democracy. When in the classroom, if you will, as a mini democracy, the child learns together in community to work through challenges and difficulty amidst a plurality of opinions anchored by a common civic bond. Real love. Therefore, when we take up the call of shaping the spiritual core of the school there is enduring impact on the strength of democracy.

PF: Beautiful Thank you so much. Thanks for the validation for the inspiration for the languaging that we can use to go forward with our work. I so appreciate your time today, Dr. Miller and Dr. Owen and also I have such gratitude just for all that you are offering to educators who have that intention to nurture our kids. Spirit. Thank you.

LM: Oh Renee, thank you. Paul, thank you both.

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Lisa Miller, Ph.D., is Professor in the Clinical Psychology Program at Columbia University, Teachers College, where she founded the Spirituality Mind Body Institute, the first Ivy League graduate program in spirituality and psychology. Dr. Miller's research has been published in journals including JAMA-Psychiatry, American Journal of Psychiatry, and the Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry. Dr. Miller is the Editor of the Oxford Handbook of Psychology and Spirituality and Founder and Former Co-Editor of the APA journal, Spirituality in Clinical Practice. She has been elected as Fellow by the American Psychological Association, as well as for the Virginia Sexton Mentoring Award of graduate students. A graduate of Yale, she received her doctorate from the University of Pennsylvania from Martin Seligman. She has appeared on CNN, Fox News, MSNBC, and Weekend Today as an expert. She lives in Connecticut with her husband and three children.

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