

Beyond Humanism:

A Review of Kathleen Kesson's Becoming One with the World: A Guide to Neohumanist Education

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Abstract

The author reviews the extraordinary new volume *Becoming One with the World* by Kathleen Kesson. This book provides an excellent synthesis of the core principles of holistic pedagogy as well as an outstanding introduction to the philosophy and practice of neohumanist education.

Keywords: *neohumanist education, pedagogy, holistic education*

In Kathleen Kesson's extraordinary new volume, *Becoming One with the World: A Guide to Neohumanist Education* (2024), she takes us on a beatific journey of discovery. The text spans great distances progressing step by step from the philosophical and pedagogical foundations of holistic consciousness theory to the contemporary practice of neohumanist education. This book also plunges through many layers of depth reminding us of the deep spiritual connectedness of all beings as the rock-solid foundation of a worldview beyond humanism and the educational models that have emerged from it. This volume offers tools for individual reflection and personal and professional growth through its offer of probing questions compelling the reader to integrate these concepts into our own life and practice. Kesson's ambitious book represents both a challenge and a delight to

anyone serious about reimagining and re-enchanting education from the roots up.

To readers of this journal, some of Kesson's chapters in Section 1 of *Becoming One with the World* will traverse familiar philosophical terrain. She reminds us of many core principles of holistic education, while she simultaneously poses the existential questions, "What does it mean to be human?" "What is the purpose of life?" "How do we come to know?" These questions drive an initial exploration of a humanist approach focused on the individual, towards the possibility of an ontological shift, from an absolute sense of epistemology and truth towards one that is more relational. Kesson identifies several prominent philosophical traditions that undergird specific approaches to contemporary education, namely,

perennialism, behaviorism, romanticism, pragmatism, and critical pedagogy. She then proposes a kind of post-humanist approach that is holistic and presupposes much deeper and more essential levels of mutuality and interconnection.

Kesson powerfully describes the need for teachers who embrace this more holistic worldview to be willing to work on developing themselves, unpacking the self in all its complexity and nuance and embracing a journey towards wisdom. Relational and connected teaching is not defined by technique but by being and presence. One must endeavor to see oneself before one can see and engage with learners. Indeed, this is not a journey for the faint of heart.

In Kesson's chapter on child development, we see an example of the courageous approach the author takes to questioning and rethinking *everything* related to our ossified understanding of the educational mission. Here we are encouraged to look through a worldview lens as we consider such "sacred cows" as stage theories of development, our norms-based approach to teaching and assessment, and even the nature of child development as rooted within and focused upon the individual. In every case we are stretched and challenged to wonder, might there be a different way? Could child development be considered relationally, true to our holistic understanding that everything happens in context and in relation to the surrounding beings and the cosmos?

The final two chapters of the book's Section 1 embark on a thorough deconstruction of the ideology and power structures undergirding the contemporary system of mainstream education as well as exploring a radically contemplative alternative perspective. Specifically, a chapter on decolonizing school systems lays bare the power structures that are served by school systems. While contemplative approaches are presented as a tangible decolonized alternative.

The author encourages even deeper presence and a kind of reciprocity from and with the reader by the inclusion of prompts for guided reflection at the end of each chapter. In this way, the journey does feel guided as the author walks beside the reader in a way that mirrors and models her understanding of the relational nature of learning.

If Section 1 offers a more familiar and philosophical foundation needed for holistic education, Section 2 is a departure into new terrain. In these chapters, Kesson asks us to consider what kind of education embodies these holistic values and understanding of the world. What sort of educational practice might promote, kindle and nurture this most needed worldview shift, one that re-animates our understanding of life lived in deep connection with the cosmos? It is in this context that the author leads us to take a meaningful look at the practice of neohumanist education.

These chapters constitute the bulk of the text. They are a true gift to those of us who have not had the opportunity to visit a neohumanist school in person. Kesson allows us to examine the process of curriculum development in a neohumanist school, where the term "curriculum" itself takes on new and profound meaning. We get to see and feel the way in which yoga is practiced, taught, and integrated into the beautiful holistic pedagogy of a neohumanist school. We get to see and feel the many ways arts are incorporated in these schools, from fine art to movement to music. There is a visceral, textured and practical approach in these chapters. Together they allow the reader to experience the essential practice and beauty of neohumanist education.

In these urgent times, as we find ourselves on the brink of crisis and the prospect of the degraded planetary ecology leading inexorably towards an impending Holocene extinction, education must be reclaimed as holding the potential for evolution and transformation. Educational reform efforts

have been woefully inadequate to affect the profound worldview shift that is so desperately needed. *Becoming One with the World: A Guide to Neohumanist Education* offers an opportunity to contemplate humanity's most existential questions and to reimagine our system of education based on a truly holistic consciousness. This approach to educating the new human, neohumanist education, already exists. Kathleen Kesson powerfully and comprehensively makes the case that *this* is the shift we have been so desperately needing.

References

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Author Bio

Paul Freedman is a Senior Editor for *The Holistic Education Review*. He is the Founding Head of School of the Salmonberry School in Eastsound, WA. He serves on the faculty of the Institute for Education Studies (TIES) where he leads the MEd in Integrative Learning program. Paul recently received his EdD in Educational Leadership for Change at Fielding Graduate University. His current research focuses on holistic school leadership. He lives with his family on Orcas Island, WA.