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# A Lamp, The Cross, and a Waiting World: A Personal Theological Journey into Whole Person Learning

David J. Gyertson

**Summary:** Whole person learning is a popular, often discussed, and well explored challenge of contemporary western pedagogy. The theme of the 2006 Coalition of Christian Teacher Educators International Conference called its members to a faith-based reflection on whole person learning with the theme of “Equipping for Alignment of Heart, Head, and Hands.” This article addresses the need for a theological context of whole person learning anchored to the concepts of tough minds, tender hearts, and hands outstretched for competent, compassionate service. The foundation of this paper is a personal theological pilgrimage that began as a college student. The Spring Arbor University Concept of learning, symbolized by a lamp, a cross, and a globe, is examined as a means to formulating such a theology. The article explores three dimensions of learning in the context of that Concept providing a narrative of how such a model is actualized through an intentional Christo-centric commitment and perspective.

## A Lamp, The Cross, and a Waiting World

In the fall of 1966 I began a journey that stretched my mind, penetrated my heart, and prepared my hands for service at levels I could have not have imagined. Lacking a high school diploma and convinced that the life of the mind was in direct conflict with the life of the heart, I came to what was then called Spring Arbor College in Michigan. The Bible College I was attending in Canada had closed unexpectedly and I transferred to Spring Arbor given its sister institution relationship. The idea that studying and becoming were essential to effective serving was both foreign and frightening to me. There I encountered a call to radical whole person learning. I was confronted with something called the Spring Arbor Concept.

I did not fully appreciate the Concept while I was a student. It became the focus of many inside jokes – some of them quite good but I will not share them

here. Despite my resistance, an integrated profile of those who serve God’s purposes in their generation began to emerge. Slowly, I became convinced that I must be a disciple of the sanctified mind and the purified heart if I was to use my hands effectively and contribute fully to the work of God’s Kingdom on earth. Today, my passion for Christ, vision for service, and commitment to let the mind of Christ be in me (Phil. 2:5) remains deeply rooted in the concept of a lamp, the cross, and a waiting world.

I share here a personal pilgrimage into the mission, message, and meaning of whole person education. This is primarily a theological rather than methodological journey – a process of transformation more than information. It is more autobiographical than pedagogical. It is not my intent to present Spring Arbor’s model as the primary or preferred means for this important task; rather, my goal is to encourage, motivate, and hopefully inspire you to take your distinctive understandings, experiences, and applications of this needed integration to their next levels. I believe that such a commitment can transform lives as well as the learning cultures that each of us serve. Ours is a calling to stretch minds, cradle hearts, and equip outstretched hands for competent, compassionate service.

## The Lamp of Learning: Stretching the Mind

In the context of Spring Arbor University’s Concept, I was challenged to commit my life to a heads-first journey. Having come to faith in Jesus Christ out of a troubled and dysfunctional home, I needed to understand that it was necessary to become a mature follower of Christ through the disciplines of the transformed mind.

I learned that effective discipleship is driven by the Great Commission mandate to go and make disciples, teaching them to obey all that Jesus commanded (Matt. 28:20). The building blocks of mature disciple-

ship rest upon the foundation of divine revelation. Those who follow Christ see the world differently because they understand it through the mind, eyes, and heart of Jesus. He is the clearest revelation of all that is ultimately and eternally true.

The relationship with Christ begins with revelation, the divinely initiated enlightening, that we need a Savior. "Come now, let us reason together says the Lord. Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow" (Isaiah 1:18, New International Version). Jesus spent more time teaching than in any other single activity. The primary means He used to turn fishermen, tax collectors, harlots, and zealots into revolutionaries able to turn their culture upside down was the transforming of the mind: guided, guarded, and enabled by the Spirit of Truth. While these disciples marveled at our Lord's miracles, they were enlisted by His message – a call to a Christian counter-culture delivered with a depth of insight and a level of authority they had not experienced previously.

This life of the enlightened mind shaped the western intellectual, social and cultural world for centuries after their Lord's death. The early Church Fathers believed that followers of Christ should be broadly skilled both in and beyond the teachings of Scripture and the Church in their search for truth. This heads-first calling was fueled by the conviction that all that is True finds both its genesis and its sustenance in the One who is "the way and the Truth and the life" (John 14:6), and that "in Him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28).

As a result, serious scholars throughout the history of the Christian movement emphasized following Jesus with minds transformed rather than conformed to secular paradigms. Learning and serving were anchored to the conviction that all truth is God's Truth. Martin Luther, in a sermon to the political leaders of his day titled, "Keeping Children in School" (1530), laid out the central place of education and championed the renewing of the mind across the learning disciplines. He taught that children needed to study not only languages and history but also "singing and music together with the whole of mathematics." The ancient Greeks trained their children in these disciplines and, as a result, he believed, grew up to be people of "wondrous ability subsequently fit for anything."

John Milton, in his "Tractate on Education" (1911) to Master Samuel Hartlib, emphasized the value of broad and comprehensive learning, what we know today as the Liberal Arts, when he suggested that "a complete and generous education is one that fits a person to perform all the offices, both private and public, of peace and of war." He insisted in his treatise, that the goal of learning is to "repair the ruins of our first parents" by knowing God and, out of that knowledge, to love Him, imitate Him, and be like Him.

Mary Cox Garner in "The Hidden Soul of Words" (2004) quotes Milton's belief about stretching the mind, "No one can become really educated without having pursued some study in which they took no interest – for it is part of education to learn to interest ourselves in subjects for which we have no aptitude" (p. 69).

C. S. Lewis, in a sermon entitled "Learning in War Time" quoted in *The Weight of Glory* (1976), challenged the students of his day to take time for a thorough education even in the midst of national turmoil, "To be ignorant now would be to throw down our weapons and betray our uneducated brethren who have, under God, no defense but us against the intellectual attacks of the heathen. Good philosophy must exist, if for no other reason, because bad philosophy needs to be answered" (p. 58).

One of the earliest declarations in America of this conviction that true discipleship is a heads-first endeavor are the words recorded in the statement of Harvard University's founding purposes, "Let every student be plainly instructed to consider that the main end of life is to know God and Jesus Christ and therefore to lay Christ as the only foundation of all sound knowledge and learning."

The Spring Arbor Concept challenged me to know God in every expression of creation and discipline of human learning. To lay Christ as the only foundation enables us to catch God at work in every place, plan, process, and person so that we can advance His purposes in each for the ultimate glory of Jesus Christ. At Spring Arbor, I discovered a new application of a favorite childhood game. With the belief that God is always up to something somewhere and with someone, I try to greet each new learning challenge with the prayer, "come out, come out wherever you are."

In that place I now call Alma Mater; I gave myself to the Christ-centered commitment of stretching my mind, reaching for the highest levels of learning so that others might be grounded in the deepest levels of revelation. As we master the disciplines of the stretched mind, laying hold of the lamp of Liberal Arts learning, we honor Paul's command to "not to be conformed to the world but transformed by the renewing of your mind" (Rom. 12:2). I challenge you, fellow pilgrims and purveyors of Christ-modeled teaching, to be life-long learners studying "to show yourselves approved unto God, workmen that need not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the Word of Truth" (2 Tim. 2:15).

### **The Cross: Cradling the Heart**

One of the great challenges of heads-first discipleship, however, is that, left to itself, learning can lead to arrogance, isolation, and self pre-occupation. The greater the knowledge we acquire, the more critical it is that, with the learning, we nurture compassion. Knowledge is the blossom of the exercised mind. Compassion is the fruit of the circumcised heart.

The Great Commission is focused on the heads-first calling of teaching them to obey all Jesus commanded. His other "Great," the Great Commandment (Matt. 12:30-31), is the key to employing our knowledge for the ultimate good of humanity. We must embrace Jesus' command to love the Lord our God with our total being – body and spirit as well as mind – and to love our neighbor as ourselves. The Great Commission's "teaching them to obey" is the method of informed discipleship. The Great Commandment's call to love God, our neighbor and ourselves is the motivation that produces transformed disciples.

In the context of the Spring Arbor Concept, it became clear that while I held the lamp of learning in one hand I must embrace the cross of Christ with the other. To comprehend Jesus Christ as the Truth we must apprehend Him as the way and the life in every dimension of learning, living, and serving. Jesus becomes our supreme teacher when we embrace Him as our suffering Savior. Loving God and humanity answers the "so what" questions of learning and provides both meaning and motivation to the pursuit of Truth. Our scholarship is enlivened when it becomes the means to change both hearts and minds. To embrace the cross is

to receive Christ's redeeming work following its shadow into sacrificial, risk taking love for others.

My experiences in Spring Arbor's community of learners were punctuated often by the convicting and conforming awareness of our Lord's presence in our midst. During my days as a student, and in the years following as part of the administration and faculty, my life encountered what I see now as divine appointments that forced me to confront the Lord's redeeming work of Calvary. Often these occurred in chapel, awakening me to a need for forgiveness or the hunger for a deeper commitment. At other times, it was a sustained knocking, disrupting my academic and social calendar for days until His work was completed. I realize now that He consistently was present in the curricular, co-curricular, and extra-curricular activities, reminding me that in Him my intellectual, social, and professional life has its ultimate meaning.

Embracing the saving and transforming work of the cross sets us free to pick up the love lessons of that cross challenging us to invest and spend ourselves for others. One of the most important resources for me in this quest to embrace the cross in my calling to teach is Parker J. Palmer's *The Courage to Teach* (1998). Palmer laid out the following premise:

Good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher. He continues: In every class I teach, my ability to connect with my students and to connect them with the subject, depends less on the methods I use than on the degree to which I know and trust my selfhood – and am willing to make it available and vulnerable in the service of learning. (p. 10),

In one of my teaching assignments, a student gave me a hand-made plaque. Its wording sums up the challenge to embrace the cross perspective in our educational pedagogy – "to learn and never be satisfied is wisdom; to teach and never be weary is love." I saw the crucified Jesus so often at Spring Arbor in the lives of faculty, staff, and fellow students who became His encouragers for embracing the life of the cross. Theirs was a journey of a long obedience in the same direction willing to embrace any cost and every consequence. A few of those living epistles continue teaching and mentoring today's students in the more excellent way. So many others, now held by the nail-scarred

hands of Jesus in death, live for me as models of what philosopher Elton Trueblood calls in his book *A Life of Search* (1996) disciples of both the tough mind and the tender heart.

For those who see the call to teach as a means to invest deeply in the lives as well as the minds of their students, the principle of self-sacrificing love rings true. In the conviction that “God so loved that he gave His Son” (John 3:16) and that the Son so loved that he gave His life, we find the courage to teach as Jesus taught. I urge you to embrace the liberating and enabling love symbolized by the cross. Your life, and those you teach, will be changed forever as you pursue truth in the shadow of an old rugged cross and in the presence of the One with the nail-pierced hands.

### **The Waiting World: Outstretched Hands**

With the lamp of learning in one hand and the cross of the Christ in the other, the Concept called me to a life of service that produces tangible, life-changing, and world-shaping results. The third symbol of the Concept is an ellipse representing the world. Throughout the centuries mature followers of Jesus not only thought clearly and loved deeply – they served competently, compassionately, and sacrificially. Transformed minds and purified hearts are manifested in and validated by the exceptional work they do and the sacrificial service they render. True discipleship, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer eloquently communicated by both pen and life, is usually a costly one focused on the needs and opportunities of a waiting world.

Christ-centered learning creates in us the capacity for Christ-modeled loving. Loving God with our total being and others as ourselves puts heart, hands, and feet to the lessons we have learned. Listen to this description of a disciple of both the tough mind and the tender heart recorded in James 3:13-18 (New King James Version):

***Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show by good conduct that his works are done in the meekness of wisdom. But if you have bitter envy and self-seeking in your hearts, do not boast and lie against the Truth. This wisdom does not descend from above but is earthly, sensual, and demonic. For where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing are there. But the***

***wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy.***

To and for what end are we enlightened by learning and enlivened for loving? It is so that we can do the Father’s business as revealed in the life of Christ. Like the Master we are called to bring the Gospel to the poor, bind up the broken hearted, proclaim release to captives, recovery of sight to the blind, set at liberty those who are oppressed, and declare that now is the time of the Lord’s acceptance (Luke 4:18-19). It is a call to demonstrate the breadth of our learning and the depth of our loving by stretching out competent, compassionate hands to serve a needy world.

The enlightened and the enlivened develop a compelling sense of social justice and global responsibility that calls us to touch the least, the left, and the lost. It was on a mission trip to Spanish Harlem in the inner city of New York during my first year as a college student that I touched the heart and was challenged to extend the hands of Christ. Subsequent opportunities to serve and teach abroad in Europe, the Middle East, and Far East deepened my understanding that wholeness requires a commitment to serve the purposes of God in our generation for every tongue, tribe, and nation. It is in the conflicts and contexts of cross-cultural and multi-cultural engagement that our ideas are challenged and hearts stretched to serve causes larger than ourselves.

The Concept not only challenged me to serve compassionately but competently. Too often, we are tempted to sacrifice competence on the altar of compassion. We must do all that we do with all of our might and to the glory of God. The need for discipline, diligence and the commitment to achieve my fullest potential in the work at hand became a part of my whole person understanding. Ours is a call to professional excellence if our loving acts are to be both credible and effective. The Christ taught with an authority and clarity that exceeded even the most skilled and learned of His day (Matt. 7:29, Mark 1:22). He achieved His fullest potential through diligence and courage; we who teach in His name must do no less.

I encourage you to make time in your lesson plans, and in your modeling of those lessons, to take learning and loving to these who need it most. This cup-of-cold-

water service is, as the early Church was reminded in James 2:14-26, the tangible evidence that true wisdom has been discovered and perfect love has been embraced. As poet, Annie Johnson Flint so beautifully declared it:

*Christ has no hands but our hands to do His work today;*

*He has no feet but our feet to lead men in His way.*

*We are the only Bible the careless will read;*

*We are the sinners' gospel; we are the scoffers creed.*

As you lift the lamp of learning in one hand and embrace the cross of Christ with the other, let your feet take you to the people and places where Jesus would be found if He were physically among us today. As you do it, do it with all your might for the glory of God.

### **The Concept in Action**

The fundamental understandings about whole person learning gleaned from the Spring Arbor Concept have served me well across the past 40 years of my professional career. With each new teaching and leadership opportunity, however, I found the need to adapt the constructs of heart, head, and hands to under-gird rather than unnecessarily change or compete with the historic foundations, culture and mission of these assignments. My understandings and applications of the core elements continue to mature and, as a result, change. Let me provide two examples from recent presidential leadership roles and then close with some current musings about whole person learning.

Asbury College, where I served as President from 1993 to 2000, has a rich heritage anchored to the Liberal Arts and focused on a religious perspective of western culture. Founded in 1890 as an independent private institution to challenge liberalizing trends in the Methodist Episcopal Church, Asbury took on a distinctive understanding of education characterized by the Latin motto *Eruditio et Religio* – erudition and religion. It became my responsibility to articulate a model of education that was anchored to the history of the institution but relevant to new generations of students. Asbury's residential environment provided unique opportunities for whole person integration.

Building on the foundations of what I expressed as academic excellence and spiritual vitality it was possible to discuss whole person learning around the theme of developing lifestyles of living, learning, and serving that could last a lifetime. The disciplines of the mind and the condition of the heart, already a part of the fabric of the institution's vision, needed only the addition of applied learning and humanitarian service to add the dimension of the outstretched hands. Two elements, however, led to some resistance of this addition. First was the fear of a Social Gospel, which was one of the root causes of the theological concerns that led to the founding of the institution. Second, was the belief that applied learning for vocational preparation would diminish the institution's historic commitments to the Liberal Arts. While some progress was made on both of these concerns by focusing on the college's rich history of vocational calling and service, the full embracing of the three-fold model remains a point of debate.

At Taylor University, where I served as President from 2000 to 2005, all three elements of the model were present. Due to a significant emphasis on the value of community, the dimensions of heart and service were strong and well developed. Vocational and service learning elements were an integral part of the curriculum and widely embraced as important. A long-term commitment to volunteer service characterized the compassionate nature of the Taylor learning and living community. However, the life of the mind had less visibility, resulting in the need for enhancement. Through an emphasis on balancing the three dimensions, along with the allocation of resources to help encourage and sharpen the academic program, Taylor became one of the most effective contemporary interpreters of the essential elements of whole person learning. It was there that I articulated a vision for learning as a commitment to tough minds, tender hearts, and hands outstretched in competent, compassionate service.

### **The Christo-Centric Focus of Whole Person Learning**

During my last 2 years at Taylor, I recognized the need of a connecting link pin for the sub-elements of whole person learning. In theological terms, I believed that the model needed to be more Christo-centric than what might be implied by the symbol of the cross alone. Ultimately, I contend, effective whole person learning must be centered more in a person (Jesus

Christ) than a philosophy or a process. It was through exposure to the “Statement of Purpose” (Cole & Ganaken, 2004) that came out of the Kolkata Conference of the International Council for Higher Education that I found a theology of learning emerge in the context of a Christo-centric perspective. Using the framework of the Conference’s purpose statement, I developed a narrative designed to tie the three spokes of the whole person model to the hub of Christ-centered learning and serving.

Jesus’ Great Commission authoritatively associates education and mission, Go... make disciples...teach. Christ-centered education can be distinguished from general programs of education in that it is intimately connected to the purposes of God in relation to creation and particularly humanity. Christ-centered education informs and equips the student with the Christian perspective as reflected in God’s Word initiating a positive, practical and respectful dialogue with the world about the implications of such a perspective. This is the essence of the tough mind encouraged by Christian scholars like Elton Trueblood, Francis Schaeffer, and C. S. Lewis.

Christ-centered education moves beyond cognitive learning and skill acquisition to intentional discipleship as its ultimate objective. The integration of faith and learning examines all academic disciplines, asking how the events and theories studied relate to the purposes of God. Christ-centered education not only examines the learning event but also explores its implied morality. Christ-centered education is holistic; as such, its potential for personal and societal transformation is unlimited.

To be truly Christ-centered, education must reflect the major biblical themes of love, righteousness, and justice. All three of these are part of the heart transformation and hand applications that come when the mind is challenged to see and serve the world as Christ did. Christ-centered education lives out these concepts and fosters them throughout its educational programs. Christ-centered education’s Great Commandment motivation must equip students to address poverty, illness, exploitation, discrimination and oppression in the world which is contrary to the will of the loving Father God as revealed in His Son Jesus Christ. Christian education must not just be available to those who can afford it and/or have the potential to be influential

in the future. It must be available to those in poverty and who, for reasons of culture, social position, political oppression, race, gender, and ethnicity are denied such opportunities. Ultimately, Christ-centered education must fuel the Great Commission mission and Great Commandment motivation of Christ’s Church – to address and resolve human meaningless and suffering by understanding, going, teaching, serving and loving.

With Jesus Christ as the hub, the Spring Arbor Concept becomes a creative force in both precept and application. I find new energy for and deeper understanding of whole person learning as I am forced to examine its out workings in the teachings and actions of the Christ. The theology of whole person education requires an incarnation that is found in the Word that became flesh.

### **One Final Musing**

In recent months, I find myself drawn to another way of understanding this theology of whole person learning. The Old Testament prophet Micah stimulates my thinking about these three elements of holistic development with his emphasis on “doing justly, loving mercy, and walking humbly with the Lord” (Micah 6:8). Time will not permit a full development of these three constructs of justice, mercy, and humility; therefore, I must leave that discussion to a later date and a different opportunity. I invite any insights you might have on how these ancient words might animate as well as inform our challenge of equipping the heart, head, and hands.

### **Affirmation and Exhortation**

I conclude this article with the affirmation that an alignment of heart, head, and hands, is both timely and essential. We who teach those who teach others have a unique and providential opportunity to influence the holistic development of future generations. Ours is a sacred calling not only to teach but also to model the disciplines of the tough mind, tender heart, and competent, compassionate service.

May we embrace the call to a life of heads-first and hearts-fast discipleship, discovering and appropriating each opportunity before us. May we extend our competent and compassionate hands to a world that longs

for our well-trained touch and caring embrace. May we commit ourselves to this journey of life-long learning and laying Jesus Christ as the only sure foundation. Daily may we have a fresh revelation of God in every place, plan, process, and person. Let us be fit for anything because the mind, heart and outstretched hands of Jesus have become our everything. Together let us lift up our lamps and embrace the cross – a watching world awaits the touch of our outstretched hands!

Author's Note: for a fuller treatment of the application of the Spring Arbor Concept please refer to the excellent volume edited by Beebe, Kulaga, and Overton-Adkins titled *Keeping the Concept*.

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