Ben F. Nelms

# Spiritualizing English: Another Dimension of Literacy

Ben F. Nelms argues for the necessity of civic literacy and responsibility, of educating students for citizenship. He urges educators to consider the visionary thoughts of James Moffett and others on spiritualizing teaching and learning—in particular, the idea of "[s]erving ourselves through serving our communities and redefining community in a global sense."

If I were asked to list ten authors from the twentieth century that all educators and educational leaders should read, including legislators, school boards, government officials, and Congress, I would not frighten them away with Ivan Illich, Paulo Freire, or Neil Postman—maybe not even John Dewey. I would include such practical voices as Deborah Meier, Linda Darling-Hammond, Howard Gardner, Maxine Greene, Charlotte K. Brooks, Parker J. Palmer, and Robert N. Bellah.[1] But I would let myself include one visionary. It would be James Moffett, and from among several of his books I would choose *The Universal Schoolhouse: Spiritual Awakening through Education* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1994).

One of my regrets as a former editor of *English Journal* is that I did not recognize the significance of this book immediately and respond to it by devoting an issue to the themes he promulgates. I had known Moffett's work for many years. I had followed and admired his writing, recommending titles to students, colleagues, and professional leaders. I had publicly expressed to him the gratitude of teachers for ideas we had borrowed, especially from his writing sequence developed at Phillips Exeter Academy. But when *The Universal Schoolhouse* first came out, I was in the last year of my editorship, covered up with manuscripts to consider, topics still to be addressed, new books to review. I must admit I thought Moffett's latest ideas were idealistic, other-worldly. Maybe I thought there was an element of escapism in his neo-Romantic vision. I had to grow into it.

In the meantime, school reform has proceeded in the opposite direction. The culture has not grown with Moffett. Schools have, in many ways, reverted to the 1950s, when I first entered the profession. What he called "flag-and-dollar schooling" has triumphed. For all practical purposes, the curriculum has been nationalized, assessment has been standardized, corporate control has been asserted, and someone—but definitely not educators—is raking in the cash from text materials, tests, and test-preparation programs.[2] We need to ponder Moffett's vision and to promote his strategies for reform to teachers and learners who are clinging to the edge in desperation.

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## Achieving Balance: The "Trick of Our Era"

As our population grows, technology mushrooms, and diversity becomes more apparent and problematic, Moffett identifies the "trick of our era": "[c]reating social coherence while fostering personal self-realization" (15). Now that's tricky indeed. *Social coherence*—serving our community, our society, working together instead of becoming polarized—and *self-realization*—asserting self-awareness and independence—sound like opposites. Neither gets high priority in current lists of national standards.



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Moffett is quick to explore their complementarity and their necessity if we are to deal with the problems we confront in the twenty-first century.

The subtitle of his book, *Spiritual Awakening through Education,* is likely to turn some folks off, especially in an age when our traditional separation of church and state is being threatened. However, Moffett immediately distinguishes between spirituality and formal religion:

> "[Spiritualizing education] validates *the inner life of thought and feeling* and the sense of personal being *in the face of depersonalization* and a preoccupation with physical things. It calls us back from surfaces to essences, to whatever may be at the bottom of things or beyond our immediate kin and ken. It invites us to seek commonalities beneath commonplaces, for the sake of mind as well as morality" (19; italics added).

> "[P]eople who *extend the range of their identity and sympathy* naturally do what is good for others as well as for themselves, because they dissolve the boundaries of the ego and feel always the *connectedness*. If [social] evolution reverses involution, then its direction is spiritual in that . . . more and more people will see life whole and act accordingly" (22; italics added).

> "The Hindu notion of the manifest world as *maya* or illusion has always assumed the "constructionist" view of knowledge that reigns today in cognitive psychology circles, that is, that humans *make knowledge or meaning, collectively and individually, by putting together their perceptions of the world*" (28; italics in original and added).

That, at its heart, is Moffett's vision. Serving ourselves through serving our communities and redefining community in a global sense are first steps in realizing a "cosmic consciousness." This is spirituality, not religion, but it coincides with worldviews espoused by many of the world's religions, including but not limited to Taoism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Sufism, as well as some forms of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.[3] Developing inner as well as outer consciousness is one pathway to spiritual growth, developing intuitive as well as rational thinking, creative as well as critical thinking, collaborative as well as independent thinking, in other words, exercising both sides of the bicameral mind.

Himself a student and instructor of yoga, Moffett would have education balance physical, emotional, intellectual, altruistic or activist, and reflective or meditational approaches to learning. "These multiple pathways," he maintains, "develop body, heart, mind, and spirit for the realization of the individual at all levels of being. Were they offered as means to an ideal secular education, one might never suspect that they issued from a spiritual discipline aimed at enlightenment or awakening. As a program, these paths would fulfill the traditional [US] American goals of citizenship, employment, and personal development" (29).

It's as simple—and as profound—as that. "The old polarity between spirit and matter," Moffett says, "may turn out, like the one between matter and energy, to be a costly habit of mind more than a representation of reality" (31). He concludes, "Even if you understand spirituality only as metaphor or myth, it can help you to think big and see deep when contemplating educational and societal transformation" (32).

## Achieving Transformation: Civic Literacy

Citizenship. Employment. Personal development. Those, supposedly, are the goals of mandated public education, our Jeffersonian ideals. Moffett proceeds to deal with some of the practical issues of educational reform to address those goals, not simply to reform schools but to transform culture and to transform consciousness. Part 3 brings him to actual strategies for teaching and learning that characterize his "universal schoolhouse." Let me list just a few of them, randomly, without taking time to define or expand on them: concentric learning centers, "rippling," activity/assignment cards to provide student options, trade books instead of textbooks, individual and group projects, practicing the arts, playing games, peer tutoring, self-teaching, visiting and observing, community service, apprenticing and interning, individual modular courses, class-within-a-class and school-within-a-school, tutoring and coaching, on-site alternative assessment, electronic networking, home-schooling, global thinking.

For practical, if not ideological, reasons, citizens in the twenty-first century should talk about Moffett's ideas, try out some of his strategies for teaching and learning, maybe even read some of the books on "universal spiritual traditions" that he recommends.[4] It couldn't hurt.

Ultimately, one goal of public education is civic literacy—developing a citizenry prepared to play an active role in a participatory democracy. How are we doing? *Accountability* has been a big word in professional education since the early 1970s. So how accountable are we? Every student who graduates from high school has studied "language arts"—reading, writing, listening, speaking—for twelve years. Therefore, as adult voters, consumers, taxpayers, they will be perceptive readers, critical listeners and viewers, and articulate speakers. Right?

I was a teacher and teacher educator for forty-five years. It was my vocation, in the most genuine sense of that word. I wish that I were more optimistic now, in what are said to be my "golden years," about the effectiveness of schooling and the future of teaching and learning in our culture.

Can the United States survive through the twenty-first century?

Public education in a modern democracy requires a new quadrivium. To survive, basically all citizens must master the four Rs: reading, writing, arithmetic, and responsibility—that is, civic responsibility. The first two Rs must focus on communication arts, including critical reading and viewing of media presentations; the third R must include statistics, logic, and scientific reasoning. But, if the United States is to survive as the republic envisioned in our Constitution, that fourth R must not be neglected. Indeed, civic literacy and responsibility could well be seen as the reason for universal public education.

*Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* by Robert N. Bellah and his colleagues is the kind of reading that should be required of all citizens. Based on social research, involving extensive interviews and observation of "middle-class Americans," it explores tensions that have inevitably arisen between earnest individualism and the sense of community, between a competitive marketplace and social idealism, between rigorous self-reliance and mutual supportiveness. Ultimately, in the last chapter, *Habits of the Heart* points to ways that a balance might be renewed and sustained.

These writers envision a transformation requiring, among other things, (1) restoration of "the dignity and legitimacy of democratic politics," (2) recovery of a social motivation that would "link [personal, individual] interests with a conception of the common good," (3) elimination of "differences that are patently unfair while respecting differences based on morally intelligible commitments," and especially (4) awareness "of our intricate connectedness and interdependence" (Bellah et al. 287, 289). Does that sound like James Moffett's *spirituality?* One shouldn't be surprised.

Such a transformation, the authors freely admit, would not be easy. It would involve reform not only in education but also in public media, government, and the economy, indeed in public and personal consciousness. In their later book, *The Good Society* (New York: Knopf, 1991), Bellah and his colleagues offer a practical chapter on education, albeit with emphasis on colleges and universities. "The idea of education for citizenship in a complex world is not some quaint leftover from a nineteenth-century curriculum," they maintain. "It is an essential task for a free society in the modern world" (177). Significantly, they restore rhetoric to its central place in schooling, but a new rhetoric as defined by James Berlin and Richard Ohmann: instead of persuasion alone, it also emphasizes communication, contemplation, inquiry, and self-expression; instead of the aggressive manipulation of an audience or readership, it emphasizes cooperation, mutuality, and social harmony; instead of the transmission of a truth, it is seen as a pursuit of truth (Bellah et al. 171). "In contrast to the standard classroom as a locus for individualistic competition of students pitted against each other for high places on the grade curve," Bellah et al. insist, "learning communities emphasize the cooperative and interactional nature of learning" (172).

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Influenced by the thinking of theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, they too see the Scopes trial of 1925 as "the most dramatic event in the American *Kulturkampf*" of the twentieth century. Like Niebuhr, they see both the religious fundamentalists and the scientific community restricting education to "cognitive truth resting solely on objective evidence" (Bellah et al. 157). By way of contrast, John Dewey and his followers would insist that one learns, "not through accumulating tested propositions about the objective world, but through participation in the social practices, by assuming social roles, by becoming familiar with exemplary narratives and with typical characters who illustrate a variety of patterns of behavior. One does not feel like an autonomous subject learning specific facts about an objective world out there. One becomes what one knows" (158). Thus, the new fundamentals of education should link objective cognition with culture, character, and citizenship. Basic standards of education should go beyond the three Rs to these four Cs. Religious fundamentalists and scientific rationalists should reach some sort of consensus around this broader agenda.

*Should,* I said. But will they? Would our profession even agree to such a vision for our future?

## Redefining English: Resistance and Retreat

A decade or so ago, I was engaged by a state department of education to serve on a commission charged with reviewing and revising state standards. A week-long retreat was scheduled in a rather commodious hotel. On the first day, did they let us get acquainted and organize ourselves, share some of our ideas, establish a pattern of work? Hardly. The whole day was spent with one bureaucrat after another deluging us with handouts, videotapes, PowerPoint presentations, talk, talk, talk. This was the period when America 2000 and Goals 2000 and what, in that state, was called Blueprint 2000 had made their way into the mainstream media: the Bush/Clinton education agenda. So we heard, over and over again, what Business had identified as the need for beginning employees, in other words, corporate America's vision for education and schooling. In fact, there were some sensible angles embodied in these documents: the need for multicultural understanding, language skills used in negotiation and consensus-building, independent and collaborative writing, critical thinking and decision-making, and the like.

So we decided to take them seriously. The next day, when they went back to their capital offices, we began to sift through their documents, identifying language skills appropriate to a high school English classroom. Eventually, in the course of the week, we came up with a number of standards, which we listed in three major categories: Investigation, or critical reading and research; Deliberation, or articulation of one's ideas, understanding others, drawing inferences, and making judgments; and Communication, or speaking and writing, drafting and editing, presenting and performing. I do not remember the details of our proposal, but this was the gist of it. Sincere English teachers that we were, we insisted on a fourth category, which I think we may have called Imagination—independent leisure reading, "cultural literacy," and close textual analysis, for example.

We were even excited about what we were doing. The word got out. The state "language arts" consultant—who had little or no public school experience and no graduate work in English education—sent a warning to her state department colleagues. On the last day they landed in on us. Obviously, we had taken them too seriously. There was to be no more consideration of the high-flown ideals of Blueprint 2000. What we were proposing clearly did not match the textbooks they would choose among, the standardized tests they were adopting, professional "traditions" and public "expectations." Where was the standard requiring *Romeo and Juliet* for all ninth graders? Plot-setting-character-and-theme? Grammar "review"? Paragraphs with topic sentences? Well, we'll have to think about all this, we were told. Then we were dismissed. Eventually, our other meetings that had been planned for the year were cancelled. Our proposals were never heard of again. When a new commission was appointed the next year, we were not invited back.

So much for educating for citizenship. *That* was a job for social science teachers. And many of our colleagues back home in English departments agreed, especially those advocates of E. D. Hirsch's cultural literacy, the hard-rock grammarians in middle schools, those who every year "covered"

their textbooks and depended on drill sheets to maintain order in the classroom. Were we, as a profession, ready for the rhetoric of inquiry and self-expression? For rhetoric as a pursuit of truth, not simply the support of a predetermined thesis sentence? Were we ready to envision classrooms as collaborative communities? Or a speaker's or writer's audience as an "interactive consciousness"?

One other regret from my days as editor of *English Journal* still haunts me. I had written an editorial after a presidential election, called "Toward Literate Citizenship." I concluded, "[T]he primary task of teaching the use of the language, whether in critical reading or deliberative talk or persuasive writing, still falls to us [English teachers]. To shrink from the task is to handicap our students and imperil the future" (89).

I received a scathing rebuttal.[5] Though the authors—English professors at a private, liberal-arts college—insisted that they agreed with the gist of my argument, they disagreed wholeheartedly with methods I seemed to recommend. Their self-proclaimed caricature of the English teacher I envisioned read, in part, "Wanted: Expert in political rhetoric, especially analysis of media imagery and symbolism in political campaigns. . . . Also: must be able to teach consensus building and decision-making skills. . . . Must firmly believe that poorly informed, apathetic citizens 'are a menace to democracy.' (Certification to teach English preferred.)" Clearly, to these professors anything that English teachers did to foster civic literacy should be attached to the study of imaginative literature. If we want to "consider the intricacies of leadership and followership," we can stick to *King Lear* or *Lord of the Flies* (26). "We can explore oppression and equality in *The Grapes of Wrath* or *The Autobiography of Malcolm X,* deception and truth-telling in *Invisible Man* and *Beloved,* and demagoguery and totalitarianism in *1984* or *Fahrenheit 451*" (26).

"Hear, hear," I wanted to say. But English teachers do not have to limit their use of close textual analysis to imaginative literature. Essays, articles, oratory, films, even editorials (as they had just demonstrated) should be appropriate subjects for critical examination. Language competencies involved in "deliberative talk or persuasive writing" should not be limited to talking and writing about literature. It had always struck me as ironic, and ill-advised, when English teachers confined themselves to imaginative literature for the teaching of reading, and to expository prose in the assignment of writing. "Critical literacy," I had argued, "requires giving students access to sources of information *and* practice in discriminating among such sources" (89; italics in original). Along with *Beowulf* and *Death of a Salesman,* I had argued, there was a place for analyzing the language and rhetoric of *The MacNeil-Lehrer News Hour* and *CNN Headline News, Mother Jones* or *New Republic* or *National Review.*

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During my forty-five years as an English teacher and teacher educator, I was privileged to have many kinds of assignments in different settings with different kinds of students. One of the most satisfying roles I played—and one that my bachelor's and master's degrees in English literature had ill prepared me for—was four years of teaching first-year composition in college. One of the unexpected pleasures of this course was the attention we gave to expository and argumentative prose—both as models for student writing and as a source for ideas and stimulus for writing. From a book called *Pro and Con* (Boston: Houghton, 1960) we read Douglas Bush and James Bryant Conant on education; H. L. Mencken and the editor of a college English handbook on the possibility that one can be "taught" to write; Vance Packard (*The Hidden Persuaders*) and a Madison Avenue CEO on advertising; Albert Einstein and Sigmund Freud on the causes of war; Albert Schweitzer and Edward Teller on nuclear testing. We made our way through a casebook (this was in the 1960s) called *The 1950s: America's "Placid" Decade* (ed. Joseph Satin, Cambridge: Riverside, 1960). The students practiced—and taught me—critical reading, deliberative talk, and persuasive writing. I picked up a practice called "freewriting" from a young professor named Ken Macrorie, who (I learned later) had picked it up from Dorothea Brande.

As editor of *EJ,* I got to recommend such works as the Foxfire series and *Missouri Bittersweet* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1969) by MacKinlay

Kantor; Barbara A. Lewis's *The Kid's Guide to Social Action: How to Solve the Social Problems You Choose—and Turn Creative Thinking into Positive Action* (Minneapolis: Free Spirit, 1991) and *Footsteps: Looking Back, Moving On,* written, edited, and published by high school students in Saginaw, Michigan; *The Majic Bus: An American Odyssey* (New York: Harcourt, 1993) by Douglas Brinkley; and *Montage: Investigations in Language* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1970) by William Sparke and Clark McKowen. All of these provided clear-cut examples of English teachers striving for a new level of civic literacy.

But when the professors caricatured my vision of the English teacher, I simply published their rebuttal and let the issue lie. I should not have let the argument die out so quietly. I should have had the stamina to clarify the issue and promote a redefinition of high school English. "Do the right thing!" I should have said. "Leave no child out." Be sure they all get adequate practice in civic literacy. They all will soon be eligible to vote. Soon they may be serving in our military. They will be paying taxes—local, state, federal. They will either be on welfare or helping support welfare; they will be in prison or helping support the prison system. We need them to be enlightened citizens. Our children and our grandchildren will live in a society and in an era with them and their children.

## Redefining English: Toward the NCTE Centennial

Of course, corporate America got its vision of school reform enacted. The Bush/Clinton "goals," that Blueprint 2000, became, in the euphemism of the century, "No Child Left Behind." Does it guarantee the teaching of civic literacy? Does it provide resources to reach alienated and ill-prepared students? Does it recruit and reward effective teachers? Does it achieve the "balance and reconciliation" of such opposites as social coherence and self-realization? Of collaboration and independence? Of investigation and deliberation and communication? I'm not sure politicians would welcome that kind of literacy at all. It might threaten their use of spin and twenty-second sound bites.

In the last chapter of *The Universal Schoolhouse,* Moffett takes his concept of "spiritual awakening through education" to a higher plane than school reform would now dare entertain. Ultimately Moffett sees the goal of a lifelong education as cosmic consciousness. "Most of the strife in the world today is occurring between religious and ethnic groups, that is, between group souls that ferociously refuse to accept each other because each takes itself for Spirit instead of for one localized manifestation of Spirit" (341). To balance self and humankind, local community with global community, the many with the One, was his lasting vision, his way home. He saw models of this process "in the lives of avatars like Moses, Buddha, Jesus, and Mohammed who achieved cosmic consciousness while incarnated in mortal form" (343). We would be wise to spiritualize education, Moffett would insist.

Maybe so. Maybe not.

At least Moffett's message should prod us to define "fundamentals" in visionary terms. As Senator Bob Kerrey has said of writing, "Our spiritual lives, our economic success, and our social networks are all directly affected by our willingness to do the work necessary to acquire the skill of writing. In a very real way neither our democracy nor our personal freedoms will survive unless we as citizens take the time and make the effort needed to learn how to write" (par. 3).[6] I believe that he found the right focus in this statement; furthermore, I believe that in this century our nation must concentrate the same attention on reading and literature, the analysis and criticism of media, the presentation and performance of texts.

English as a high school subject was defined by the Committee of Ten in 1894. As NCTE approaches its centennial in 2011, I believe it is time to insist on a redefinition. I still believe—as I always have—that there's a spiritual dimension to education. I still believe that the English class is a natural home for movement toward a higher consciousness. I believe that our nation can learn—and must learn—how to reconcile "standards" and "assessment" with responsibility, cognition and culture with citizenship and character. And, last, I believe that our republic will survive, in large part, because we will insist on a higher literacy—a spiritual literacy, if you will—for all our citizens, for all the students who enroll in our English classes.

## Notes

1. For example, Deborah Meier, *The Power of Their Ideas: Lessons for America from a Small School in Harlem* (Boston: Beacon, 1995); Linda Darling-Hammond, *The Right to Learn: A Blueprint for Creating Schools That Work* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997); Howard Gardner, *The Unschooled Mind: How Children Think and How Schools Should Teach* (New York: Basic, 1991) and *The Disciplined Mind: What All Students Should Understand* (New York: Simon, 1999); Charlotte K. Brooks, *They Can Learn English* (Belmont: Wadsworth, 1973); Maxine Green, *Releasing the Imagination: Essays on Education, the Arts, and Social Change* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1995); Parker J. Palmer, *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998); and Robert N. Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1985).

2. For example, consider operations like Neil Bush's COWs (Curriculum on Wheels), as described in "No Bush Left Behind: The President's Brother Neil Is Making Hay from School Reform," *Business Week,* October 16, 2006. See http://www.businessweek.com/magazine/content/06_42/b4005059.htm.

3. Cf. Sheldon Cheney, *Men Who Have Walked with God* (New York: Knopf, 1946); and Huston Smith, *The World's Religions* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1991, rev. and updated ed. of *The Religions of Man,* 1958).

4. For example, Richard Maurice Bucke, *Cosmic Consciousness: A Study in the Evolution of the Human Mind* (New York: Viking, 1991, orig. pub. 1901); Julian Jaynes, *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind* (Boston: Houghton, 1976); Robert Coles, *The Spiritual Life of Children* (Boston: Houghton, 1990); and James Moffett, *Harmonic Learning: Keynoting School Reform* (Portsmouth: Boynton/Cook, 1992).

5. For the text of the editorial and the rebuttal, see "Toward Literate Citizenship," *EJ* 82.1 (1993): 88–89; and John G. Ramsay and Tom Bell, "Toward Literary Citizenship: Reply to January Editorial," *EJ* 82.5 (1993): 25–26.

6. "Panel Says Most American Students Must Improve Writing to Meet Demands of College Success and Career," http://www.writingcommission.org/pr/pr_4_25_2003.html.

**Ben F. Nelms,** who served as editor of *English Journal* from 1987 to 1994, retired in 2004 after forty-five years as an English educator in Tennessee, Texas, Iowa, Missouri, and Florida. He still reads, writes, and thinks in terms of lesson plans, editorials, free verse, and five-paragraph essays.

## Search for New Editor of *English Education*

The Conference on English Education is seeking a new editor for *English Education.* In July 2010, the term of the present editor, Michael Moore, will end. Persons interested in applying for the editorship should send a letter of application to be received **no later than August 31, 2008.** Letters should be accompanied by the applicant's vita, one sample of published writing, a one-page statement of the applicant's vision for the future of the journal, and two letters of general support from appropriate administrators at the applicant's institution. Please do not send books, monographs, or other materials that cannot be easily copied for the Search Committee.

Applicants are urged to consult with administrators on the question of time, resources, and other institutional support that may be required for the editorship of this journal. NCTE staff is available to provide advice and assistance to potential applicants in approaching administrators. Information can be obtained by calling or writing Kurt Austin, Division Director for Publications, at NCTE (217-328-3870, extension 3619). The applicant appointed by the CEE Executive Committee will effect a transition, preparing for his or her first issue to be published in October 2010. The appointment is for five years, nonrenewable. Applications should be sent to Kurt Austin, *English Education* Search Committee, NCTE, 1111 W. Kenyon Road, Urbana, Illinois 61801-1096; kaustin@ncte.org.