

## ***Nemachtilli: The Spirit of Learning, The Spirit of Teaching***

*“The true teacher is the learner.”*—Elbert Hubbard

Once in 1999 I spent ten days among the Rarámuri people in the Sierra Tarahumara. I was taken to a cave where Apaches, who had wandered this far south from Arizona in search of food during Geronimo’s time more than 100 years before, had created a school. A roughly hewn maguey ladder led to the mouth of the cave. To the side of us, several holes in the volcanic rock served as rooms. At the highest point of the cave was a larger area, an opening to the sky, mortared with mud and limestone. My Rarámuri guide said this was an Apache classroom.

The Apaches in those days were nomadic hunters and gatherers. The Rarámuri were mostly corn farmers, relatively peaceful compared to the fierce Apaches. My guide said Apaches were known to shoot arrows down from their caves to ward off stragglers who wandered by.

Those caves shattered preconceptions I may have had about Apaches. Here was a deerskin, bow-and-arrow culture, while also excellent with horses and guns. Somehow, though, they went the extra mile to create classrooms for their children. I had imagined learning among indigenous people to be fluid, organic, composed more of firm but loving guidance, based on nature’s elemental laws, dangers, as well as gifts. More like sharing knowledge, not instruction.

In my mind, classrooms didn’t fit into this scenario.

Yet, here they were, a testament to how learning had to also include lesson planning, a removal from actual experience, and perhaps a lecture or two from the learned women and men of the tribe. Crude drawings of animals and other symbols on the walls got me thinking there were probably more than a few

bored students among them, sneaking in graffiti when a teacher's back was turned.

This is something I knew about: I was one of those bored school kids in my youth. Didn't I want to learn? Or was I just too troubled to care—or to be bothered with? I had smarts—I picked up English fairly well by fourth grade in my English-only classes (I also watched a lot of TV and read books). My grades were fine in elementary school. But from middle school to high school, I became a “problem.” School became “a drag.”

I dropped out. I would've stayed out, but throughout the East L.A. area, teachers, parents, students and others had been walking out of schools (the largest school walkouts in US history—the “Blowouts”—occurred in East L.A. during the spring of 1968). A social movement was afoot—for better schools, better housing, decent jobs.

These efforts were part of the Civil Rights struggles of the 1960s and early 1970s. Self-identified as Chicanos, we faced similar issues and concerns as other oppressed peoples. I returned to school at 16 because now I had a cause, something to rally around, to help focus my angers and hungers. I headed a Chicano student organization and led three walkouts, took over buildings, brought in Chicano Studies classes, and even ran for student body office. I went back to school not to be lectured at, but to make notable changes in the school environment.

Schools have been important for me ever since. I not only obtained my high school diploma, I was accepted into college. Unfortunately, I never finished after my last arrest. Instead I went full steam into industry. Even now, I speak at hundreds of schools all over the country mostly because my memoir, *Always Running*, became popular among teenagers and their teachers, It's one of the

most checked out books in many libraries and schools ... and one of the most stolen!

Classrooms are important. But beyond the important concerns about class size, standardized testing, zero-tolerance, and lock-downs, I think what's truly missing in all this is what I call *nemachtilli*, the *Nahuatl* word for the spirit of learning. *Nahuatl* was the language the Mexicas and other Mexican tribes spoke at the time of the Spanish conquest, and close to 3 million still speak it today. In 2003 Mexico officially recognized *Nahuatl* as among 68 official languages, although most experts say there are 287 distinct indigenous idioms and their variants in the country.

While this spirit of learning is innate in every child, and quite active in most classrooms, the more time children spend in uninspired schools, the less this spirit is appreciated or engaged.

One of the reasons for this is that its counterpart, the spirit of teaching, has been compromised or forgotten in too many public schools. You can't have the spirit of learning without the spirit of teaching—they're yin and yang, the feminine and masculine energies active in the classroom.

Anthony Lee, our family's spiritual elder, who also helped establish and teach at Diné College in Tsaile, AZ, is a renowned teacher of the Diné integrated teaching systems. He says true teaching is "prayer in motion." He's not talking about conventional prayer here. It's what's bound up in our intentions. What a teacher is really doing is drawing out the sacred within, and praying that this child's life will not be so traumatized or neglected that such callings will be missed or forgotten.

I think most teachers really want to engage this way. But I've also talked to countless teachers who've told me, "Our hands are tied." Most mainstream politicians insist they know what's best for kids. The result is that education

standards are artificially low. The standard for reading, for example, is generally at a 7<sup>th</sup> grade level for most high school students, particularly in urban core communities. Why? Well, this happens to be the same level that newspapers, radio, TV, smartphones, the internet, and advertisers aim at—to impart information, to entertain, and sell products. I know—I worked in the media for many years and this is the level we were told to write at.

Stronger reading levels should also accompany critical thinking, full range of history and science, strong mathematical foundations, and the appreciation and teaching of art, music, theater, dance, and writing. Unfortunately, too many schools aren't places where true education can blossom, where learning is student-centered, constant, and exciting, where interests in life and its myriad wonders keeps growing and the love of books and ideas is paramount.

A majority of schools, particularly public schools, have become factories to prepare children to be consumers and “productive” citizens, not active and interested readers and socially responsible creators. In those schools, we insist on certain behavior (zero-tolerance) before we even start. We stress out six year olds with too much homework (information overload). We've cut out or limited sports, music, arts, and play, although these mediums are also how children learn. We insist on conformity and passive participation (a few students take active part in school-sponsored events, the rest are spectators). We insist on following rote patterns and direct-instruction manuals. Active and positive imagining are discouraged, monitored, or censored.

There was a conservative Christian school whose goal was to circumvent the adolescent period of a person. “A waste of time,” the director declared, without understanding this period of growth is about finding oneself, gaining access to knowledge and internal powers, and becoming awakened to one's particular place in family, community, and society. Too many adults don't want to

guide, to be elders and mentors, so they decide to get rid of this crucial time in life instead. Absurd.

None of this has anything to do with providing spiritual nourishment to our children. As Meade says, it has nothing to do with how genuine teaching “combines the imaginal with the concrete, the spiritual with the practical, the artful with the necessary.”

As a result, too many good teachers are leaving schools.

My wife Trini left teaching elementary school after seven years, and my daughter Andrea gave up on high school after one stressful year teaching troubled teens (she now works with pre-school kids and autistic children). The problem wasn't the students—both Trini and Andrea love working with children. It was the pressure from the administrators, who in turn are pressured by politicians to get pedagogically questionable results, the most expedient and, therefore, the least substantial way possible. It was the pressure for teachers to stop being creative themselves, to stop interacting emotionally and meaningfully in the lives of their students, to follow the direct-instruction type systems where a teacher is told what to teach, when, and how, regardless of the particular needs of children and youth. *Don't think, don't interact, don't react. If you show your humanity, you'll be punished. If you show you care, you'll be reprimanded. If you show you're independent but knowledgeable, you'll be ostracized.*

It's time we put a stop to this nonsense. It's time for *nemachtilli*—even in a contrived classroom setting, to have connected and imaginatively-engaged teachers working with children who are already thinking and feeling along those same lines.

To be clear, I'm not against tests. I'm not against guidelines and methodologies and good administrators. I'm saying don't discount or underestimate the human/spiritual element.

What gives us movement, energy, and life is our spirit. I'm not referring to anything religious here. I'm talking about what animates and pulsates beneath our social masks and exterior armor. I'm referring to why people can learn through poetic images over strictly pragmatic directives. This is also about challenging and countering the status quo, to make classrooms organic places for internal and external development.

We tend to leave the "spirit" concerns for Sundays. But, to me, every day should be a day for spirit (while keeping the separation of Church and State). Every day our interests should be peaked and our challenges incorporated. Every day we should feel, not just think; love, not just withstand; want more, not just do what's expected.

Wanting more schooling? Who does that?

I've always read books. I've always studied, spent time in libraries, kept learning. It's a life-long thing with me: I love being exposed to new ideas. I'm into science, history, psychology, mythology, philosophy, literature, and more. I have an astounding library—I'm one of those people who can't part with books, no matter how many times I've read them. Yet, I have friends who are college graduates, including from engineering or law schools, who studied late nights and all-night, who lived in dorms and attended lectures, and received internships and passed tests. Ask them now about reading books. Most say they have no desire to pick up a book ever again.

When my youngest sons, Ruben and Chito, reached the 10<sup>th</sup> grade they expressed how they could hardly wait to get out of school so they wouldn't have to be "learning" anymore. They were both identified as "gifted," read at college level by middle school, received good grades. But they also insisted on not going along *with* the program. Even with this confusion, Trini and I inculcated a love of learning in them, not schooling, and they are both voracious readers and writers.

To paraphrase Mark Twain, we should not let schooling get in the way of education.

I'm worried about the "education" of our future generations. A 19-year-old former student of Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, shot and killed 17 students and teachers in February of 2018. Taking the lead from the outspoken leaders from that school, on March 23 thousands of people marched in some 800 rallies in city after city to protest gun violence. In the five years before that incident, there were over 300 school shootings in the US. But the Parkland shooting, in response to the excessive number of assault guns in the country, sparked a more sustained outcry. The whole dialogue about schools shifted dramatically to school safety, and rightfully so. The NRA, a powerful lobby with many elected officials in its pockets, had never been as challenged, even with 58 dead in a Las Vegas mass shooting just four months before.

How can you have better schools when parents wonder if their children will make it home?

Still the issues I'm raising here have weight, especially for the original meaning of the Latin *educare*: "to lead out, bring forth." Innovative teachers have extended this to mean "lead out" one's genius, "bring forth" one's gifts. The way things are now, with schools chained to standardized tests and inadequate mental, drug, and family resources, a severe "education" crisis is upon us. In more than 2000 years of civilization, in the most militarized and resource-rich country in the world, this is where we've come to?

It's clear: Learning is not just about books. A safe and innovative environment for teaching, as well as mental, spiritual, and physical health, must involve the whole community—and communities that are whole. With everyone in agreement from the bottom up—parents, students, teachers, administrators,

police officers, businesses, higher education institutions, other governmental bodies.

We're far from that.

For years, I've organized and participated in study circles with students and teachers outside of school time. One such circle met once a month for a year in East Los Angeles. Ten to twenty young people showed up, mostly from Garfield High (one of L.A.'s most notorious high schools). A few kids said they liked being at the circle because they had nothing else to do. Once a young man arrived at 4:30 PM and waited, although we didn't start until 7 PM. Another time, eighteen of us went to see the Michael Moore documentary, "Fahrenheit 9/11." Afterward, we talked at the home of one of the students, with her parents sitting in, until past midnight.

In addition, myself and others have held healing, talking, and "warrior" circles in schools for decades—where a "safe" space is established to allow any and all issues, even tears and rages, held in council, and then perhaps addressed in actual practice and policy.

The point is that learning should go on all the time, anywhere, including (or especially) when there's trouble. There's medicine in such trouble, if properly sought and utilized. We must learn to stay steady during the turmoil, find our language, our strategies, our directions, and make sure all voices are taken into account.

I assume those Apaches in the Chihuahua caves had their own problems getting children to sit still and pay attention. But I'm convinced it was never as bad as it is now. From ADHD to the growing number of Autistic spectrum children being recognized in our schools to dire mental imbalances among our youth, something phenomenal is happening. Not that they are "sick," but that



they are symptomatic of an already sick, deeply alienated, and superficially engaging social matrix.

I'm convinced these issues are not just chemical imbalances and genetic propensities; we now have several generations suffering through the same difficulties. These are due to *life imbalances*.

When we have a country run by people who act no better than street gangs, where violence and force are paramount over dialogue and relationships, when we have so-called leaders who rarely read, study, or think, then we can see why this is a top-down problem. Children and youth learn from the examples around them—their own parents, teachers, politicians, bureaucrats, businesses, and cultural models.

Nothing short of a revolution in education is needed: a sweeping and visionary process that should bring teachers, parents, administrators, and students together in this time of new technologies and methodologies. We need to foster truly rich and vigorous encounters, where we draw from curiosity, invention, intensity and risk.

Classroom as life, life as classroom.

This is not about avoiding trouble. It's about getting into the *right* kind of trouble. Whatever we do has trouble in it. It's better to be in the trouble of engaging everyone on a soul level, of incorporating all voices and experiences, of aligning every aspect of our broken communities, of discovering the assets in all people and circumstances, instead of working off the "deficits." This is better than the trouble that comes from disengaging, blaming parents for all that's bad with the kids, or blaming schools for that matter, of just pushing "trouble" out and closing doors to inventive ways to make schools the human-making, community-saving dynamic they can be.

This is not simply about charter schools or public schools—although I'm for the public financing and maintenance of schools, instead of schools that serve private interests.

It's about *nemachtilli*—the energies, powers, and spirits intrinsic to all learning and all teaching. It's about *loving* to teach and *loving* to learn.

Wow, what a concept!

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