

EDUCATING FOR WISDOM AND COMPASSION



**CREATING CONDITIONS
FOR TIMELESS LEARNING**

John P. Miller

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Associate Professor
Department of Psychology
State University of West Georgia
Carrollton, GA

Robert London
Professor
College of Education,
California State University at San Bernardino
San Bernardino, CA

David Marshak
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Seattle University
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Pearl Solomon
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About the Author



John P. (Jack) Miller, PhD, is professor in the Department of Curriculum, Teaching, and Learning at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) at the University of Toronto and Head of OISE's Centre for Teacher Development. He has also been visiting professor at Shinwa Women's University in Kobe, Japan, and at Rietsumeiken University in Kyoto, Japan. Professor Miller teaches courses in holistic education and spirituality in education. He has also led workshops and given keynote addresses on those topics at conferences around the world.

Notable among his many books, chapters, and journal articles are *Holistic Learning and Spirituality in Education: Breaking New Ground* (2004), *Education and the Soul: Toward a Spiritual Curriculum* (2000), *The Contemplative Practitioner* (1994), *Holistic Learning: The Teacher's Guide to Integrated Studies* (1990), *Curriculum: Perspectives and Practice* (1985), *The Holistic Curriculum* (1988), *The Compassionate Teacher* (1981), and *Humanizing the Classroom* (1976).

PART I

Timeless Learning: Definitions and Fundamentals

CHAPTER ONE

Timeless Learning

*In the pursuit of knowledge, every day something is added.
In the pursuit of the Tao, every day something is dropped.*

—Lao-tzu

Spiritual traditions can provide a unique perspective on learning; a perspective that has been overlooked in our approaches to education. For many educators learning involves “adding” or accumulating knowledge. Critically named the “banking” approach to learning, this method requires students to memorize and retain knowledge. This approach is almost always assessed by paper-and-pencil tests. A current rendition of “adding knowledge” is Hirsch’s (Hirsch, Kett, and Trefil, 1988) *The Dictionary of Cultural Literacy*. Hirsch argues that students need to acquire specific information in order to be successful in the world. This shared information is also important in “holding together the social fabric of the nation” (p. xi). Hirsch also suggests that the development of such skills as reading are closely related to how much a student knows. He states: “An important key to solving the twin problems of learning and literacy is to attain the broadly shared background knowledge I have called ‘cultural literacy’”(p. xiii). Hirsch endorses what “Ernest Gellner calls *school-transmitted cultures*” (p. xiv). Acquiring knowledge is at the heart of the transmission orientation. This orientation tends to see learners as passive as they absorb information from the teacher and textbook.

Transmission has a role in learning but needs to be complemented by what I call *timeless learning*.

WHAT IS TIMELESS LEARNING?

When it comes to defining time, only the oceanic need apply—the Montaignes or Joyces, Shakespeares or Rousseaus, eastern philosophers or children. They know their now, they know the really wild vibe of the present is this; now is the only time when the moment can meet the eternal- and they know that moment is momentous (Griffiths, 1999, p. 36).

Most of us have had the experience of the timeless moment. We feel we are in unbounded space. It is in timeless moments when powerful learning occurs. The way that Helen Keller first learned hand sign language from her teacher, Annie Sullivan, is an example of timeless learning. Annie put Helen's hand under the water coming from the pump and at the same time her fingers tapped out the word "water." In that one moment the world opened to Helen. Helen's story is well known. Below is another good example of timeless learning as Helen wrote about being present in the moment through nature:

Hear the music of voices, the song of a bird, the mighty strains of an orchestra as if you would be stricken deaf tomorrow.

Touch each object as if tomorrow your tactile sense would fail.

Smell the perfume of flowers, taste with relish each morsel, as if tomorrow you could never taste or smell again.

Make the most of every sense.

Glory in all the facets and pleasures and beauty which the world reveals to you. (cited in Goleman, Kaufman, and Ray, 1992, p. 174)

In the timeless learning our experience becomes much more immediate. We are not thinking of the past or the future. Wittgenstein said "Only the man who lives not in time but in the present is happy" (cited in Griffiths, 1999, p. 33). One of the teachers in my class commented that after practicing being more in the moment the students told her that she seemed happier.

As a teacher, I have become more aware of my students and their feelings in the class. Instead of rushing through the day's events, I take the time to enjoy our day's experiences and opportune moments. The students have commented that I seem happier. I do tend to laugh more and I think it is because I am more aware, alert and "present,"

instead of thinking about what I still need to do (Miller, 1995, p. 22).

Let's turn now to the examining the characteristics of timeless learning.

WHAT ARE THE CHARACTERISTICS OF TIMELESS LEARNING?

Timeless learning is multidimensional and includes a variety of characteristics. Although a specific experience of timeless learning would not necessarily include all of the characteristics outlined below, these characteristics are the most often linked with the learning experiences described in this book.

Holistic/Integrative

Timeless learning is not limited to the intellect; it also is connected to the emotions, the body, and soul/spirit. *Soul/spirit* is defined here as a vital, mysterious energy that can give meaning and purpose to our lives. Timeless learning recognizes that all these elements are linked interdependently. For example, if I have an insight or idea, it can quicken the heartbeat which again affects the rhythms in the body. One description of timeless learning comes from a student who describes his experience in meditation:

The session began with many thoughts and physical sensations, which quickly settled down and although they didn't totally disappear, were not much in my awareness afterward. It was a very quiet and uneventful meditation with the mantra barely present. In fact, there was not much present at all except the awareness of myself just being there. This continued until towards the end of the session when I began to have certain feelings or knowledge; it's hard to explain how the two combine into one. It's like you know something with every cell of your body, to the point that you actually feel it everywhere. . . . I was keenly aware that I was part of all that was around me. There was no distinction between my inner self, my body, and my surroundings. This awareness extended out so that I felt a part of all that there is. As I read what I'm writing, the words sound grandiose, whereas

the experience was very simple. However, it was also profound, peaceful and fulfilling at all levels; physical, intellectual, and spiritual. (Miller, 1994, p. 130)

This example of timeless learning had an impact on the intellect, the body, emotions, and spirit.

Timeless learning also is integrative in that it tends to link the different parts of ourselves. Too often we compartmentalize learning into different aspects such as the intellect and the physical and they are left separate. In timeless learning they are seen as connected.

Embodied

Timeless learning does not just remain in the head; it becomes embodied. This aspect is related to the integration just described in that the person begins to live what is learned. What many people find so inspiring about Gandhi and Martin Luther King is the way they embodied their own teachings. They were living examples of nonviolent action and protest. It was exactly this embodiment of their teachings that inspired their followers. Stanley Wolpert (2001) makes this point in his biography of Gandhi:

By re-creating himself, through the power of his passion, in the humble, vulnerable image of India's poorest starving naked millions, Gandhi could, when moved to do so by his "inner voice," call upon that unarmed ragged army, whose pain he mirrored and magnified in his own naked body, to follow him barefoot up India's Via Dolorosa to freedom. And countless millions unhesitatingly did follow him, not as a modern political leader, nor as a medieval native prince or martial maharaja, but as their own Mahatma, India's "Great Soul," the only title he ever enjoyed, until even that became too burdensome and honorific for his passionate spirit. (pp. 4–5)

Gandhi himself summed up this point so well when he said: "My life is my message."

As teachers we need to embody qualities that are conducive to timeless learning such as caring, mindful presence, and conveying a sense of respect to the student. Carl Rogers (1969) identified some of these characteristics in his work as he identified empathy, respect, and genuineness as key factors in the success of teachers.

Embodiment does not mean sainthood or striving to be perfect. Rather there is simply the desire to live in a way that is congruent with our expressed beliefs. It is this congruency that leads to embodiment.

Connected

Timeless learning connects. First there is the connection to various aspects of ourselves (e.g., intellect, emotions, soul, and body) which involves the integrative dimension that was mentioned earlier. Second there is the connection to others. In timeless learning the sense of separate self tends to lessen and we see ourselves in relationship to others. A natural sense of compassion arises as we realize how other beings desire much of what we desire (e.g., health and happiness). Connecting to others leads to a communion and community. Communion occurs when the souls of two people connect with each other. Community involves more than just two people experiencing connection to a much larger group.

Another connection that can arise is our link to the earth. Timeless learning often leads to sense of how we are supported and nourished by the earth. Indigenous peoples have felt this connection and reading their literature can help restore the connection in ourselves. Finally, timeless learning connects us to the cosmos as a whole. This last connection can deepen our connection to the mystery of being in the universe.

Connectedness is an extremely important aspect of timeless learning. Sometimes people involved in spiritual practice can pursue a path that leads to solipsism. Instead of being connected to others the person can feel separate and sometimes superior to others. Cults, or cultish behavior, can also arise from this false sense of separation. The ego subtly uses spiritual practices such as meditation to differentiate oneself from others and to see oneself as more “evolved.” A real test of spiritual practice and timeless learning is the development of deep and lasting compassion.

Soulful

Timeless learning reaches that part of ourselves that Emerson and more recently, Thomas Moore, have called *soul*. Soul is defined as a vital and mysterious energy that can deepen meaning and purpose in life. Timeless learning usually connects with this part of ourselves

and can give the student a deeper awareness of his or her place in the larger scheme of things.

How does this happen? Sometimes it can happen through the presence of the teacher which somehow connects with the student's soul. On occasion it can arise through a particular learning experience. For example, reading a poem or story can touch the student's soul. Experiences with the earth such as gardening or caring for an animal can also touch the soul and I have described some of these possibilities in my book, *Education and the Soul* (2000).

I like Emerson's view of how colleges should educate young people:

Colleges . . . can only highly serve us, when they aim not to drill, but to create; when they gather from far every ray of various genius to their hospitable halls, and, by the concentrated fires, set the hearts of their youth on flame. (from "The American Scholar," an oration delivered before the Phi Beta Kappa Society at Cambridge, August 31, 1837).

"Setting the hearts of their youth on flame" is another way of describing touching the soul. It moves education beyond just acquiring skills to a level that again touches every aspect of the student's being.

Transformative

Timeless learning can lead to profound change in the individual. John Gerber offers the following definition: "Transformative learning (for me) is a process of personal and community growth toward a state of egolessness and communion" (Zajonc, 2003, p. 16). Gerber emphasizes how timeless learning leads toward the connectedness described earlier.

Although timeless learning can be transformative, there is certainly no guarantee when, how, or under what conditions the transformation will occur. Some transformation can be incremental; other changes can be monumental.

One of my favorite examples of transformation comes from Satish Kumar. Satish has spent much of his life walking. His first walk was a halfway around the world for peace. He describes the experience and transformation that occurred:

In wandering I felt a sense of union with the whole sky, the infinite earth and sea. I felt myself a part of the cosmic existence. It was as if by walking I was making love to the earth itself. Wandering was my path, my true self, my true being. It released my soul-force; it brought me in relation to everything else. (Kumar, 1999, p. 100)

Transformation can also come through suffering. Thomas Moore (2002) makes the point that the spiritual teachers that he trusts have been people who have often dealt with difficulty in their lives. He says: “Some of the best priests I know are homosexual; they have struggled with themselves in a fearful, phobic and unaccepting culture” (p. 78).

Flow

Timeless learning is often characterized by what Csikszentmihalyi has called the *flow* experience. Flow occurs when a person becomes fully immersed in an experience. Csikszentmihalyi (1997) gives the example of someone skiing:

Imagine, for instance, that you are skiing down a slope and your full attention is focused on the movements of your body, the position of the skis, the air whistling past your face, and the snow shrouded trees running by. There is no room in your awareness for conflicts and contradictions; you know that distracting thought or emotion might get you buried facedown in the snow. . . . The run is so perfect that all you want is for it to last forever, to immerse yourself completely in the experience. (p. 29)

Flow experiences usually give immediate feedback to people so that they can react quickly to the situation. The situation itself is usually challenging but not so challenging that success is clearly not possible. These challenges call on people to focus their attention completely. It is interesting how Csikszentmihalyi describes the experience: “Self-consciousness disappears, yet one feels stronger than usual. The sense of time is distorted: hours seem to pass by in minutes” (1997, p. 31). He makes the direct link to timeless learning.

Csikszentmihalyi also states the state of flow is also optimal for learning. The state of awareness that arises in flow helps the individual in acquiring new perspectives and skills.

Participatory

Timeless learning often occurs in a context where we are participating in the co-creation of knowledge. Ferrer (2002) makes this point: “Participatory refers to role the individual consciousness plays during transpersonal events. This relation is not one of appropriation, possession, or passive representation of knowledge, but of *communion* and *co-creative participation*” (p. 121). Ferrer makes the point that knowing in this way is not restricted to individual experience. It is profoundly relational.

St Basil discusses this type of knowing in a Christian context: “Knowing God occurs by participation in the ‘true life . . . returning to the original good.’ In this participation God offers ‘intimacy,’ a result of our ‘affective’ and ‘moral’ knowledge of God” (cited by Chirban, 1986, p. 304). The participatory aspect can also be explained by referring to Buber’s famous *I-thou* relationship where two or more people encounter one another in an open and free manner. There is no attempt to control the relationship or activity that occurs within the relationship.

Satish Kumar (1999) in encountering another individual seeks the “door” of mutuality even in the most difficult of relationships. One of his teachers explains: “Like that, when I meet a landlord, he has many faults and shortcomings, and his egotism is like a wall. But he has a little door. If you are prepared to find this door, it means you have risen above your own egotism and you enter his heart” (p. 53).

Nondualistic

Timeless learning tends to be nondualistic in that the knower and known become one. Emerson wrote: “A painter told me that nobody could draw a tree without in some sort becoming a tree.” He adds: “By deeper apprehension, . . . the artist attains the power of awakening other souls to a given activity” (p. 134). For Emerson, nondual knowing can awaken others. Nondual knowing is also called contemplation which is discussed in more detail in Chapter 6. In contemplation we do not just reflect on something; we merge with the