



# the Heart of the Matter

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*Heart of the Matter* is a small publication that you will find in your parent mail box from time to time. I hesitate to even call it a “publication,” as I hope it is more like having a conversation with me. Think of it as a way for me let you know some of the things that are on my mind...and in my heart.

This issue has one piece I wrote that is simply an introduction to the term *transformative education*. It provides some history of education in America, leading up to Rainbow Mountain Children School’s vision for the future. In later issues, I will be defining some aspects of our curriculum and pedagogical approaches, explaining how RMCS nurtures our ideals.

-Renee Owen, Executive Director

## *Transformative Education for a Sustainable World*

*The fate of empires depends on the education of youth.*

—Aristotle

At our most recent community circle, the topic was, “Is Rainbow Mountain preparing our children for success in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century?” Before the meeting, Anne Stieber, board chair, asked an important clarifying question, “So what is different about the 21<sup>st</sup> Century?” In other words, what is it we are preparing our children for?

For much of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the mission of school was narrowly defined as preparing children for the workplace, or preparing children to compete in a capitalistic market. School was a place to gain knowledge and to learn marketable skills—period. The church and the family (two institutions that weakened noticeably during this century) were expected to provide the rest of a child’s education, including his/her values and higher beliefs. The spiritual domain was not considered the school’s territory.

The first amendment has historically been interpreted in such a way that educators are warned to stay clear of all matters having to do with deep beliefs. Even the current trend toward character education has been accused by some as humanism (“a religion”) and, therefore, not appropriate for the public school arena.

Speaking in evolutionary terms, the “survival of the fittest” concept ruled the previous century. This made sense for a country whose perceived greatness was founded upon rugged individualism.

The iconic American—the individualistic pioneer who pushed through fear, endured great hardships, and used his cleverness and persistence to gain freedom and a piece of land—successfully built a nation.

Clearly, our culture idealizes the individual. Our economic system serves the individual, and our public educational system was designed to train the individual to seek material gain—above all else.

Schools were traditionally set up to breed competition between individuals rather than cooperation. Teachers routinely administered final grades based on a grading curve, where students’ scores were lined up from best to worst, and a defined percentage of students received A’s, B’s, C’s, D’s, and F’s. This system ensured there were winners and losers and those who didn’t quite measure up (or down).

It’s interesting that the motivation behind the “No Child Left Behind Act” is to get schools to perform their traditional functions better (rather than differently). I would argue that our schools have performed their job quite well. The product of the last century of education is generations of materialists—savvy competitors who are masters at extracting wealth from the once vast natural resources. From this vantage point, the education in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century was incredibly successful. But, why would we want students to be *better* at it?

David Myers, author of *The American Paradox: Spiritual Hunger in an Age of Plenty*, asserts that our material

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successes have come at deep spiritual loss. As proof, he cites statistics that include increased rates of suicide and clinical depression, and environmental concerns of apocalyptic proportions.

There is, however, another way to touch this spiritual longing for what we have left behind or overlooked. Those who have felt their own pulse resonate with the pulse of the planet instinctively know that a deeper life is more satisfying.

I believe that most of us can sense that the 21<sup>st</sup> Century will be, *must be*, very different. Survival in this century won't just concern individuals, it will concern entire cultures. The "fittest," or those who will survive the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, will be those who know how to cooperate, those who instinctually think and work communally.

Children who develop a deep spiritual life—who perceive living beings and nature as One—are children who understand their own happiness is inextricably linked with the happiness of others. These are children who understand personal happiness cannot be built on the suffering of others. These are truly human children who will create a beautiful world.

Education has the power to transform individuals and, by transforming an entire nation of individuals, it has the power to transform culture. Can we transform our culture from one that is suicidal to one that is sustainable? *The fate of empires depends on the education of youth.*

Yes, we are training students at Rainbow Mountain for the workplace (see attached article), but we are preparing them for something far more important, something much bigger. We are preparing them to be the new pioneers of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, the generation that will build a sustainable, compassionate future.

One of our most fundamental aspirations at RMCS is for students to desire a life of purpose. We encourage our students to develop a strong and authentic sense of self, but we place an equal emphasis on community service. We encourage our children to value serving others and connecting with something greater than themselves. Our curriculum is designed to help our students make a life, not just a living.

In upcoming articles in *The Heart of the Matter*, I will share how Rainbow Mountain provides an education that seeks to transform the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. RMCS's model of transformative education provides hope that we can become fully evolved humans.

Our children have the potential to transform our world.

## Renewed by Child Spirit

In November I was blessed with an opportunity to attend the third annual, national Child Spirit Conference, which was held in Chattanooga, Tennessee.

The Child Spirit Institute put together a fabulous series of key note speakers and training sessions, while providing personal renewal and an invitation to gather with like-minded (like-hearted) people — those who have a personal mission to recognize and engage the beautiful spirit of children.

A few of my favorite sessions included a half-day seminar on the heart-mind connection (Dr. Pearce), a session on contemplative prayer (Bourgeault), and the a heart-wrenching key note address by Jean Houston, in which she told stories about her time with Margaret Mead and her mission to teach the spiritual lessons she learned from native tribes to people everywhere. I also attended a wonderful workshop on children and meditation taught by Sarah Valley, a RMCS preschool parent and parent council member.

While I was attending a session on helping children and parents tame anxiety, I heard a breath of excitement behind me when I introduced myself as the director of Rainbow Mountain. It turned out to be Aostre Johnson, one of the three visionary women who founded our school. Later, I had the honor to take a gorgeous walk with Aostre over the Chattanooga River and then out to eat. Aostre is currently the director of graduate education at St. Michael's College in Colchester, Vt.

There were many other visionary and inspiring people I learned from and got to know at the conference — Dr. Joseph Chilton Pearce, Cynthia Bourgeault, Jane Garland, Rachel Kessler, and Tobin Hart to name a few. Without a doubt, I will be referencing some of their writings in publications of *Heart of the Matter*. I am looking forward to sharing their experience and expertise with everyone at Rainbow.

I left the conference feeling like I was in touch with Rainbow Mountain's founding vision, and inspired to take the Child Spirit vision back to Asheville and RMCS.

I would like to express thanks to former director, John Shackelton, for his gentle support throughout the transition process. It was John who told me about the Child Spirit Conference, recommending I attend. Thanks, John. It was life changing.