

## Longing for the Sacred in Schools: A Conversation with Nel Noddings

Joan Montgomery Halford

**From developing curriculums that address spiritual questions to creating aesthetically attractive classrooms, a leading educator urges public schools to make space for the sacred.**

Author and educator Nel Noddings is noted for her work in feminist ethics, moral education, and mathematics education. Her 11 books include *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (1984) and *Educating for Intelligent Belief or Unbelief* (1993). Recently, she spoke with *Educational Leadership* about spirituality and public education.

***You've written and spoken extensively about spirituality in schools. What does it mean to educate for belief or unbelief?***

First, it means educating for religious and spiritual literacy. So often, educators are afraid to address religion in the schools and cite the First Amendment, which is really silly because the First Amendment doesn't prevent teaching *about* religion. We need to teach about religion as part of our cultural heritage.

The second part of educating for belief or unbelief would be to examine religions from historical and philosophical perspectives. I'm well aware that many people would find that problematic. And yet, that's what is done at the university level, where students confront the history of religion.

If one is going to be a believer, one ought to be an intelligent believer. We ought to know what it is we've accepted, and, if possible, why we've accepted it. And ditto for unbelief. Many people just discount religion entirely, and that's not intelligent either.

***Why is teaching for belief or unbelief important for public school students?***

It's important for everybody because religion has had such influence on both our public and our private lives. Religion is one avenue to the existential questions. It is a rather poor life that never asks the questions, How should we live? Is there a meaning to life? Why is there something rather than nothing?

***How do you differentiate spirituality from religion?***

Spirituality is an attitude or a way of life that recognizes something we might call spirit. Religion is a specific way of exercising that spirituality and usually requires an institutional affiliation. Spirituality does not require an institutional connection.

***Many educators are afraid to address anything spiritual. What do you see as the basis of this fear?***

The primary fear is rooted in a mistaken view of the Constitution. Administrators often say that we can't touch religion in schools. Textbook writers have taken religion out of textbooks—rather than try to treat it fairly and then incur someone's wrath. Even when textbooks discuss the Pilgrims and the Puritans, they find a way to avoid talking about religion.

A second issue is ignorance. Many educators are not well educated about religion. This ignorance is what interested me when I wrote *Educating for Intelligent Belief or Unbelief*. For example, some people don't understand that belief is only one part of religion. Several rabbis have pointed out that belief is not nearly so important in Judaism as it is in Christianity. Belief is central in Christianity. But nonetheless, most religions also have rituals, a sense of affiliation with a historical group, sacred music and art, and other facets in addition to belief.

In schools, belief is the one thing we *can* tackle because we already insist on addressing critical thinking. In an age when we're stressing math, science, logic, and critical thinking, it is reasonable to bring critical thinking into all the aspects of our lives, including religion.

***What can teachers do to address spirituality in classrooms?***

Without proselytizing, we could restore sacred music and art to schools. Some schools have managed to hang onto them. In the holiday season, these schools will still play Christian sacred music and then celebrate Hanukkah, and if substantial numbers of kids are from other religions, they will bring in those traditions as well. That would be an intelligent way to approach religion—to acknowledge that it is important to people and to present some of the rituals and ceremonies in which people delight.

We could also look at religiously inspired art and discuss the stories behind that art. That then leads into Christian mythology or Judaic mythology. When you say, "Now we're going to look at the Adam and Eve story," someone is bound to say, "But that's not a myth." Then you have to explain that a myth is not necessarily a falsehood. In fact, philosophers have shown that myths acquire new power when they move beyond the literal stage. Some insist that there can be nothing unbelievable and that a myth must be accepted literally, whereas others say that there's nothing in a myth that can be accepted as true. An intelligent approach would be to ask, How has this myth had such a tremendous effect on our culture? What does this myth mean? We could certainly consider religious traditions, music, art, and myths as part of cultural literacy and intelligent thinking. Another thing we can do is to include religious history in our history.

***What material about religion should be included in the public schools that is usually excluded?***

Elizabeth Cady Stanton and *The Women's Bible*. Stanton pointed out to her friends in the suffrage movement that the Christian religion hadn't been much help in liberating women. And so she got after ministers to make them change their tune, starting with the creation story. She wrote *The Women's Bible* with interpretations of various passages, and she pointed out to women the evils that religion had done to them and the kinds of passages that male ministers regularly drew on to keep women in subservient positions.

Educators can also look at both creation stories in Genesis. The first story is very simple. It says, "God created man in his image, male and female, he created them." That's it. So woman is in God's image as well. The question then arises why the second creation story is the one that has become so popular—that's the Adam's rib story. That's the one you hear from the pulpit that is elaborated all over the place.

***Tell us about the intersections among feminism, spirituality, and contemporary public education.***

Somehow feminism has to be included in social studies. We have to know something not only about the suffrage movement, but also about stories like the one I just shared. And we don't have to tell them as "the truth"—I would never do that—but to say that there are archaeologists and feminist theologians and philosophers who consider the past and tell one story, and that there are others who consider the past and tell another story. And people should be aware of all.

Kids should know also that feminism is not antagonistic to spirituality. Many feminist philosophers have remained in their traditional faiths. Such information should be part of a secular education as well.

Another logical possibility is for students to look at the roots of a religion. When we do, we see that the world's great religions almost all started out as liberation movements. If we go back to origins, we'll see much more equality and egalitarianism. And students can see that some people claim that religion is dynamic, but that others believe that religion can never change.

Educators don't have to end such inquiry by saying, "Which position is right?" But students should be familiar with some arguments that good thinkers have put forth. Educators never need to say, "I think," but they can say, "Biographically and historically, here are some of the things people have said about religion."

I spent a good many years as a math teacher. Exploring religious issues could even be done in math classes because many of the great mathematicians were very interested in religion. Descartes, for example, tried to prove the existence of God, but Pascal said, "No, it's a wager." Pascal was interested in probability and invented a gambling machine, and Descartes was interested in doubt and absolute truth. Their approaches to religion were congruent with their approaches to mathematics.

***You have worked as an administrator. What do you see as the administrator's role in educating about spirituality and religion?***

First, lighten up a little. Don't be so scared all the time. Become more familiar with school law and how it is related to the First Amendment. And don't fall back on falsehoods and say, "We can't do it," but rather say, "We have to do it sensitively and considerately, and we have to talk about what we're going to do, and I want to be informed when you're going to do this." No administrator likes to be caught cold with a complaint from a parent.

The administrator's role is to open up the avenues of discourse and to learn enough about spirituality and religion so that he or she knows exactly what educators can't do. That leaves so much that they *can* do.

The next step is communication with parents. Recently in my class at Teachers College, a teacher talked about how he was handling the Clinton scandal with 5th graders. He was not discussing the sexual aspect of it because the students are too young. But they were talking about leadership, honesty, and certain governmental procedures. He was wise enough to send a letter home to tell the parents exactly what he was talking about, what he would not talk about, and why. The principal also knew what he was doing. This is an example of effective communication. This teacher said that he received letters from the parents, all of which were supportive. But if he had begun discussing the scandal without communicating, we'd have some of the same problems that we'd have if we just jumped into a discussion of religion. Parents would pick up just a fragment of the discussion and would be alarmed.

***You've written about the power of recognizing the sacred in our everyday lives. How can we recognize everyday spirituality in ordinary schools?***

Educators can recognize everyday spirituality through poetry, music, biography, ordinary conversation—and even just slowing things down once in a while and letting the students look out the window. So often when a child looks out the window, we say she's off-task. Well, she may be on the biggest task of her life. We don't take moments like that into consideration, nor do we consider how powerful it can be if the teacher comes in and says, "Did any of you see sunrise this morning?" Sharing those experiences briefly gives kids a glimpse of everyday spirituality. Students realize that they're not the only people in the world who are moved by these things. You know how kids like to lie flat on the grass and feel the earth spin? Did you do that when you were a little kid? I know I did. To acknowledge such things is a part of everyday spirituality.

And I'd teach poetry differently.

***How would you teach poetry?***

We kill poetry. We analyze the pants off it. Most little kids love poetry from about ages 2 to 7. I often read poetry to my children, and I now read it to my grandchildren, but by the time most students are in high school, they hate it. Perhaps I may sound like an extremist, but I would use poetry for the pure love and enjoyment of it. I would never test kids on poetry. I used to recite poetry in a math class occasionally to demonstrate that some adults take great pleasure in poetry.

***What could be done with school buildings to foster everyday spirituality?***

Schools should have gardens. Schools in California have started that movement. And I applaud them.

High school classrooms should be more like elementary school classrooms. If you go into a typical elementary school classroom, you see that it is literally alive. There are plants, possibly an aquarium, and maybe even a hamster running around its wheel. When you go into a typical high school classroom, the only animals may be pickled ones in the biology room. Even the kids seem dead. The contrast is truly dramatic.

Would I have schools without windows? No. I'd also think about the view from the windows, when possible.

***There's been an explosion of general interest books about various aspects of spirituality. Why do you think there's such an interest in spirituality now?***

Because people are longing for the sacred. Even those of us who have rejected institutional religion still have that longing. If spirituality is removed entirely from schooling, if it becomes a topic that is more or less forbidden in everyday conversation, then that longing becomes repressed until people go out and buy books about spirituality.

***How does educators' interest in spirituality relate to such trends as the standards movement and the emphasis on preparing students for the marketplace?***

Educators are realizing that education is a multitask, multigoal enterprise—not a single-goal enterprise. Only in the last 20 or 30 years have people begun to talk as if the only end of education is a batch of academic information that appears on tests and that the only reason students do academic work is so that they will go to college and get a good job and make money and buy lots of stuff. Such thinking is enormously harmful. To buy into that economic, consumerist argument, explicitly or implicitly, is enormously damaging. Such thinking is connected to this longing for the sacred that hasn't been satisfied where it could be—namely, in education. Which isn't to say that I'm for low standards.

***How do your personal views inform your thoughts on spirituality in public education?***

I would not want to try to convince students to believe as I believe. That *is* forbidden constitutionally. I am not a member of a traditional faith, but I was brought up in one and gave it up some time ago. My mother was brought up Catholic, but she brought us up in the Protestant church, so I received a pretty heavy dose of both Catholicism and Presbyterianism.

Philosophers have tried for a long time to reconcile philosophy and faith, but there's never been any universally convincing argument. It isn't the sort of story that can be told convincingly except from a personal perspective. It isn't like mathematics, where if you have certain axioms, then everything follows. That is the rationale for talking about the personal path. To be convincing, such a story has to be well informed.

And that goes back to the question of why students should learn about religion and spirituality. You can't make an intelligent decision if you don't know what you're talking about. So you have to know the arguments on both sides.

Both my husband and I would describe ourselves as humanists—but even there we've got a bit of a problem—the same problem that the philosopher Bertrand Russell had with it. When Russell was asked to join a humanist society, he said no, reluctantly. He said, "I agree with almost everything that you stand for, but I don't want to put human beings at the center of the universe." Which is a humble position to take. He wanted to take God out of the center, but he didn't want to put human beings in the center, either.

Russell declared himself an atheist. I'm not ready to declare myself an atheist because you can't prove anything on that side of it anymore than you can on the other. I suppose I am agnostic. But there have been many agnostics who admit to fairly deep spirituality. Interestingly enough, Bertrand Russell's daughter said that her father's whole life was a spiritual quest.

***Tell us about your family.***

My husband and I have raised 10 kids. We had five biological children, and then we were a little embarrassed about adding to the population explosion, so we adopted five more. That experience has colored my life more than anything else. I've learned so much from having this vast variety of children. It has been dramatic. And, naturally, when you have 10 kids, you're going to wind up with a lot of grandchildren.

The other life experience that has greatly informed my thinking was my first three years of teaching. I didn't get a math job my first year out, and I taught in a self-contained 6th grade classroom. And then the junior high was overcrowded, and I stayed with the same students for another year. We stayed together in 7th grade, and a few more kids joined us. And it was still overcrowded the next year, so we stayed together another year. So I taught the same students for three consecutive years.

That experience has shaped my educational life—and so I am a firm believer in that kind of continuity. If teachers and students stay together by mutual consent for three years, you can do ever so much more than you can in one year. By the second year you can talk with kids about things that would be intrusive early in the first year when you're a stranger. It's an experience that's been extremely important. In fact, when I went into high school teaching, I insisted on teaching kids for more than one year. So there were lots of students whom I took right from geometry through their AP calculus, including one of my own daughters. This is where teachers get their renewal—from children they know well.

University, 525 W. 120th St., New York, NY 10027 (e-mail: [nel.noddings.stanford.edu](mailto:nel.noddings.stanford.edu)). **Joan Montgomery Halford** is Senior Associate Editor of *Educational Leadership*.

---

Copyright © 1998 by Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development

Longing for the Sacred in Schools: A Conversation with Nel Noddings. *Educational Leadership* 56, no. 4: 28-32. Hanna, J. L. 1979. *To Dance is Human: A Theory of Nonverbal Communication*. Austin: University of Texas Press. Hirschman, E.C. 1983. "On the Acquisition of Aesthetic, Escapist, and Agentic Experiences." In *Moving and Learning for the Young Child*. Edited by Stinson, W. J. Reston, VA: AAHPERD. Stinson, S.W. 1997. "A Question of Fun: Adolescent Engagement in Dance Education." *Dance Research Journal* 29, no. 2 (spring): 49-69. Suhor, C. 1998/1999. "Spirituality" Letting it Grow in the Classroom. "Longing for the sacred in schools: A conversation with Nel Noddings." *Educational Leadership*, 56(4), 28-32. Google Scholar. Hill, P. C., & Pargament, K. I. (2003). Cite this chapter as: Gross Z. (2009) A Quest for the Realm of Spirituality. In: de Souza M., Francis L.J., Higgins-Norman J., Scott D. (eds) *International Handbook of Education for Spirituality, Care and Wellbeing*. International Handbooks of Religion and Education, vol 3. Springer, Dordrecht. Nel Noddings (/ˈnɒdɪŋz/; born January 19, 1929) is an American feminist, educator, and philosopher best known for her work in philosophy of education, educational theory, and ethics of care. Noddings received a bachelor's degree in mathematics and physical science from Montclair State College in New Jersey, a master's degree in mathematics from Rutgers University, and a Ph.D. in education from the Stanford Graduate School of Education.