

Review of Ben Cunningham's doctoral thesis, 'How Do I Come to Know my Spirituality as I Create my own Living-Educational-Theory?

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I am not afraid that good will be left undone. It is being done and will be done by others. But it will be left undone by me if I am there and say nothing. But I don't just want to say something, anything. (Ben's interior monologue, p. 152)

Spirituality has been defined in numerous ways, including the conviction in a power that is greater than oneself, a sense of interconnectedness with all living creatures, a wakefulness to the meaning of life, and the development of personal values. Ben in his thesis describes and explains how he creates his own living educational theory as a form of, 'improvisatory self-realisation' (Winter, 1998). The originality of the work lies in the question, 'How do I come to know my spirituality, as I create my own living educational theory?' and the improvisatory discovery of 'self-realisation' Ben makes.

Ben puts forward a metanarrative of personal and professional accounts of his educative relationships with others while maintaining his living engagement with his God. He clearly demonstrates and explains his educative relationships, in terms of how he dialectically engaged the intrapersonal with the interpersonal. He shows how leadership comes into being in his actions as he exercises moral principles of responsibility towards others.

Ben maintains that relationships are crucial to him as he exchanges ideas concerning relationships and the meaning of it. His dialogic encounters are empathetic, and at the same time maintain his own vision. He is committed to an open channel of communication as it a part of his hope for humanity. He hopes that authentic encounters would lead to processes of self-discovery that are beneficial both to him and others.

An area which interested me is his method of data gathering which follows a 'participative' rather than 'spectator' or 'observer' mode. This is comparable to Buber's (1958) I and Thou philosophy of personal dialogue, and that human existence may be described by the way in which we connect in dialogue with each other, with the world, and with God. Taking, 'dialogue to have a wide meaning', Ben (p.18) suggests that, 'I feel rather than observe relationships with others, I operate from within rather than from without. Consequently, my data gathering methods focus on dialogues that include the personal and the professional.'

In Chapter 1 Ben contextualises his thesis making it easier for the readers to understand his educational practice in terms of his personal life-giving values. Here he also explains his standards of judgment and form of representation. Additionally he introduces the others he has dialogues with.

In the following chapters we meet the others, who he offers a hand of friendship, Marion, an English teacher, John, David, who he describes as an experienced teacher of 25 years, Sue, and Valerie. While developing a sense of self through enquiring into his practice, Ben enables each of them to find a foothold into their practice. Dialogues he has with them demonstrate his educative relationship with each of them. Ben suggests that:

The encounters are educational because others and myself come to mutually accept each other, affirm each other, confirm each other (Buber, 1988: 75). In being accepted, affirmed and confirmed, we are more confidently able to answer questions of the kind, "How do I improve what I am doing?" and, "How do I live out my values in my practice?" (Whitehead, 1993).

'Wonderful, exhilarating, distressing, demanding and deeply moving', are some of the adjectives used to describe his writing (p. 278). And Ben himself puts forward that, 'I had done it, had "stimulated worthwhile thinking" (Bassey, 1995: 111) for Steve'. I believe he did that for me too. What struck a chord with me was the honesty with which this thesis is written. It was as if the Ben is communicating with my soul because I believe he wrote this thesis with his heart. I, in turn, read it with my heart and when the end came I wanted to relive all of it again. To sum it up I would like to say, I believe that all of our relationships with others can be perceived as spiritual, especially when we understand that they have in common the life-giving gift of love and care.

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