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ABSTRACT

Teaching is a call to the sacred in life, for it is the field of self-knowing and ultimately of transformation. My conceptual exploration of the inner life of the teacher represents an experiment in educational research wherein I define the qualities of the “True” teacher and show how a heightened teaching “presence” cultivates a classroom of compassion and soulful learning. I have invited the voices of other writers from the fields of psychology, philosophy, spirituality and education to co-habit this text, offering their unique insights into searching/educating for spirit. This auto-ethnography presents a personal narrative of my teaching/living experiences revealing the pre-requisites necessary to be fully present in the classroom, and honoring the humanity both in myself and in my students. I examine the essential qualities of the True teacher as manifested in her presence, and in the acts of “myth-making,” “witnessing,” “compassion,” and “knowing.” Throughout my writing, I juxtapose my personal/professional inquiries with a more academic discussion revealing the tension between these two voices within myself. As well, I locate my personal inquiries in the experiences of the body honoring the kinesthetic wisdom that I have too long ignored. What emerges is a conversation between teacher and person, both identities searching for communion with the other. The classroom is the site of that communion as I come to inhabit my body and my spirit more fully, and begin to recognize the barriers and bridges to my True self/ teacher within my pedagogy and my life. This autobiographical writing is a healing journey locating transcendence within the everyday experiences of a teacher’s life.
## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract ........................................................................................................ ii
Table of Contents ................................................................................................ iii
Acknowledgements .......................................................................................... iv

I. Coming to the Sacred In Teaching ................................................................. 1
II. Myth-Making ............................................................................................... 10
III. The Mystery of the Soul ........................................................................... 14
IV. Presence .................................................................................................... 24
V. Witnessing .................................................................................................. 37
VI. Compassion .............................................................................................. 47
VII. Knowing .................................................................................................. 65
VIII. Reflection(s) .......................................................................................... 83
References ....................................................................................................... 95
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I share this writing with my students who have inspired me to be fully present in the classroom. They continue to be the source of my joy in teaching!
I. Coming to the Sacred in Teaching

Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves like locked rooms and like books that are written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.

--Rainer Maria Rilke (1962, p. 35)

In my classroom and in my life, nothing invokes greater inspiration or call to story than a great question, and I have asked many such questions searching out the mysteries of my nature as spirit, woman, teacher and student. I have fallen in love with the questions for in the asking, I have lived more deeply, entering into soulful realms where the questions hang suspended and I can come to know their nuances, concerned less and less with answers than with the sheer delight of inquiry. I believe I chose teaching as my vocation so that I might spend my life surrounded by the questions of existence and by young people who are also earnest in their search for self, for this desire to know and be known is the desire of the Universal spirit. As teachers, we are each called into the profession through some mystery that works through us, that calls us to participate both in our own inner work and in the Great Work (Fox, 1994). The call to vocation is a return to our origins, to the sacred self that is the source of the work we choose. I remember that the voices of this calling came to me early in my life — when I was a little girl playing school in the basement of my home during summer vacations. I had many pupils including my reluctant brother, the neighbors next
door, even my cat. The “lessons” were crude, most likely a series of grammar exercises. I remember being thrilled with the authority, the power of my position in the room. This was the birthplace of my “outer teacher”, or ego teacher as I have come to know her. It would be several decades before I would come face to face (or heart to heart) with the True Teacher inside. Now after twelve years of teaching, I am re-discovering the sacred within the work I do. This process is a painstaking archeology, as I excavate the parts of myself, expose them to the light of curiosity and compassion, and reassemble them in a new, greater whole. This is the Cosmic Work of creation.

I don’t remember the age at which I chose to become a teacher. I look back now, and see that there was no choosing. Something in me was always leaning toward the profession and I have come to believe that the profession was always drawing me to its center. This is the way of Truth – it is a living presence that seeks as it is sought. Matthew Fox (1994) states: “somehow the universe, the Maker of the universe, the Source of existence, calls us to be participants, at the level of our being, in the work of the universe. If we respond, the universe will also” (p. 102). So the universe is dialoguing with that deepest part of ourselves, whether we are conscious of this process or not. What emerges is a beautiful interdependence between our selves, our work and the work of the cosmos. It is all one work! French philosopher, Paul Ricoeur teaches us that psyche and cosmos are essentially the same thing in the human person, that “Cosmos and Psyche are the two poles of the same expressivity” (as cited in Fox, 1994, p. 74). Along that same thought, some mystics believe that the human body is merely an extension of the body of the Heavens, so it would follow then that when we are responding from our own beingness, this triggers a response of recognition from the universe and a cycle of energy and love is created. This is
the feeling of "Aha" or "rightness" that is experienced in the moment of right work, of mutualy, of true relationship with other and the universe simultaneously.

Teaching holds great potential for being, for mutuality, for the expression of the universal heart. When I am called to the sacred in my vocation, I am reminded of my own heart and the healing necessary there to free me to presence. I am reminded of my frailties, my limits in my classroom and my life. The sacred in teaching is not the search for greatness, for pre-eminence, an act of ascension, but rather a state of grace that emerges when all the doing subsides and my True teacher is simply present, available, open to the teaching and the learning that will come. Some would argue that my search for the sacred in teaching is a sign of great arrogance, a plea for recognition, a declaration of narcissism. Why should teaching be so special? I encountered many of these sentiments last year at our professional day on wellness. The school hosted many workshops including nutrition, meditation, health, communication, and spirituality. There was great dis-ease within many of the staff as they came to explore themselves more fully in relation to their teaching. I noticed the reluctance to acknowledge the spiritual aspects of our vocation – to even admit a presence in our classrooms greater than ourselves. This is an alarming sign of the disconnection between the sacred and ourselves. (No wonder the professional development committee offered a workshop on illness in teaching). Our adherence to a soulless paradigm of education rooted in objective knowing has produced teachers (and students) who lack deeper connections with themselves, with others, and with the world around them. Today, I can see the consequences of this increasing alienation in the apathy of many of my colleagues, in the growing carelessness of my students, and in the global struggles for security and power.
However, Divinity will not be ignored or forgotten for long. In the past several years, I have returned to my origins through meditation, writing and reading to rediscover my reverence and awe for my True self and the vocation of teaching. In the ever-expanding literature on pedagogy and the soul, I can see a shift from knowledge to wisdom, and I am filled with hope. I am reconstructing my classroom and myself to include opportunities for meaningful inquiry into the nature of my being for “self-understanding, when pursued reflectively, rather than leading to a constricted and egocentric view, is the primary link with the world” (Krall, 1988, p. 468). I have come to see my inner work as the new and true vocation of teaching; to truly teach, I must live my teachings. When I consider my responsibility to educate or to “lead out” the souls of my students, I am mindful of two central questions. 1) Who is my “True” teacher? And 2) How does her authentic presence in the classroom affect the teacher herself, and her students’ learning? These questions have become a point of origin for me in my teaching and my life as I come to realize that I teach my living and live my teaching. So I inquire into the history and reasons for those false selves who appear so often in my classroom and my life but more importantly, I wonder at the nature of my True self, the source of clarity and peace. I am being called to search the deepest aspects of myself and my pedagogy to uncover/recover the True Teacher. This inquiry is the site of the sacred in my teaching and my learning!

As I begin the journey of this writing, I am struggling with decisions of form and voice. I notice the friction between two selves, the academic and the poet. The former voice is achingly familiar drawing me into wholeness, linearity and solidity, content in beginnings and endings. This is the dominant voice of my classroom as I unconsciously re- weave the fabric of my own education. In contrast, the poetic voice lures me toward
fragmentation, mystery, the dissolution of boundaries, the darkness of space. My spiritual practice over the past five years has been leading me out of the confines of my personal history and into the void of present time. It has been a process of emptying the mind. How do I reconcile knowing with “no mind”? In this synapse is the place of emergence, the spontaneous arising of Truth. Biologists refer to this space where two discrete ecological zones meet as the “ecotone” — a place of teeming life, of creative potential. It is in this realm of “no thought,” pure unfolding that the Academy loses its footing due to its preoccupation with filling space. I am grounding myself in a new reality that is deeply rooted not in ideas but in the body — my body and the growing “body” of knowledge that is integral to the embodiment of my True self. So I write this journey of no knowing and I yield myself up to the process as it unfolds in my living. Thus the writings in these pages appear as fragments, ruminations on emergent occasions when my living and my teaching bring forth opportunities for inquiry. I am deeply enlivened at the prospect of illuminating those places within myself and within my pedagogy that rarely see the light of contemplation. I hope to bring the understanding of other writers and teachers to my process as I weave their ideas into the fabric of my own. This blending of voices through a unique form will hopefully show the power of autobiographical and narrative research in uncharted territory -- the teacher’s search for soul in her practice. The ephemeral nature of the soul requires a gentler, more whimsical style of writing, thus I have chosen an open form wherein interpretation unfolds in the act of composing (Denton, 1998). I seek to live/teach/write who I am in the moment. In Zen Buddhist practice, sometimes the master will present the student with a koan for contemplation. What the student comes to see is that the koan cannot be solved with the rational mind. I am reminded of this Zen practice as I
write both the wor(l)d of academic knowing and the wor(l)d of heart made flesh. The meeting ground of these two worlds is in the ecotone of my expanding spirit and in her writing.

When I began my search for a "body" of readings/ readings that embodied both the latest thinking and research on the soul in education, I was initially dismayed to find very little in this area. Through perseverance (and a great deal of Divine "accident") a thread of readings began to be revealed to me, one author at a time. I became excited to discover the range of pedagogical and other texts that spoke to the sacred in vocation and life. The inner voices of my post-secondary "training" argued that these texts were not "academic" enough. Where was the solid research? In the same moment, my heart was whispering pure joy at the possibility that I might make "real" the luminous, that I might make "reasonable" the mystery of these writers' ideas as I joined them with my own in a new form of pedagogical discourse. I long to unite intellectual knowing with kinesthetic intelligence, to honour the place of both in my classroom as I am learning to do in my life. I long for integration of these two worlds that have ripped me in half through the course of my life – two voices, two hearts becoming one. It is a lovers' union!

Noted scholar, James Hillman (1996), explains in his book, The Soul's Code, that our daimon or soul chooses the circumstances of its life. Put simply, we elect the parents, the body, the place and the events of this life out of a necessity to fulfill the soul's learning. According to his "acorn theory," each of us has a uniqueness that asks to be lived. I chose this incarnation on March 25\(^{th}\) 1967. It was noon and I was hungry for this life. I don't have conscious memories of my infancy; instead, my bones contain the stories of that time. By the end of the first year of my life, it became clear to my parents that my body was
struggling with some unknown force that would later be diagnosed as rheumatoid arthritis. My knees and ankles would swell angry red and I stopped walking, exploring my world. I became smaller. I can remember the feeling of compression in the body and in the soul, the agonizing sacrifice of the heart to achieve that diminishing self. In a bodywork session I re-experienced my moment of incarnation.

*In space, I feel the lightness of being, the high frequency of matter that is peace and joy. I do not want to descend into that life. I feel the density of pain approaching and my soul hardens in resistance. This is the birthplace of an iron heart. As I pass through the void, I notice the soul matter becoming heavier, moving in slower vibration. In this new place, there is no resonance for my expansive spirit. I have fallen out of harmony with the Creator. My heart breaks.*

I have lived this life through the veil of physical/spiritual pain. I have sought myriad ways to transcend the body, “mind over matter.” Eventually, I severed my mind’s connection to the body through denial and an iron will toward perfection in all other aspects of my life. After a particularly painful flare-up of my disease, I discovered massage therapy. My body revealed its long-buried relics of pain as each muscle was smoothed and caressed. I began to rebuild, to reconfigure, to re-align the connective tissues, the connections between body and spirit.

*As you touch my knees, I cry out the holding, the fortification, the hardness that deadens my soul. I am not alone here in this new womb you have created for my re-birth. Here, I am whole once again and my body sings in its amplitude.*
These are the circumstances of my soul's choosing. I have come to see that my life is a process of integrating the body and her unique wisdom into my teaching and my daily living. I can no longer resist the pain in my joints for doing so creates a hardness in the body that translates into a hardened heart. Perhaps this is my soul's learning in this life. Yesterday, on a walking meditation, I noticed the familiar pull of the mind, directing my awareness up and out of my body. As yet, I am still uncomfortable with the stillness the body offers me. This reveals both a bias and an imperative in my research into the True self of the teacher. Meaningful inquiry in this process must acknowledge direct experience, as well as the body's "knowing," as a fundamental and primordial wisdom which, in turn, underscores and supports the intellectual understanding of the mind. So my True teacher searches for the ground beneath her feet before asking herself "Who am I in this moment?"

The Process of Inquiry

Asking "Who am I in this moment?" is the first step in a process of inquiry that I have learned based on the teachings of A.H. Almaas. In his recent book, *Spacecruiser Inquiry*, Almaas (2002) clearly articulates the model of inquiry I have chosen for my autobiographical/narrative research into the True self in teaching. He notes that the manifestation of one's "True" self is a natural state. One does not need to learn how to be authentic. Instead, one needs to learn how to "get out of the way" of her authenticity. To do this, Almaas refers to the deep psychological and spiritual work necessary to remove psychological and epistemological barriers. "Challenging such barriers by questioning them leads to the insightful and directly felt comprehension of these barriers. In this way, inquiry and understanding penetrate the barriers and open up our soul to the still-unknown
possibilities sleeping in its depths” (2002, p. 112). Thus the question itself becomes the vehicle for the creative process both in this research and within other aspects of my life. The question appears as the soul’s search for truth. While my purpose within this writing is not solely to explore my own “psychological and epistemological barriers” to manifesting my True teacher, this must be a natural co-creation of my text. I cannot manifest my True self in the classroom and measure its effects on myself and my students without first confronting my own biases, identifications and projections. Almaas’ method of inquiry allows me to focus on the immediacy of direct experience within (but not subordinate to) the intellectual knowing I have garnered from other writers in the field. For “inquiry is something that arises in the midst of experience – as part of [one’s] experience, not separate from it...the inquirer has to be in the field of inquiry” (Almaas 2002, p. 113). Thus, the field of my inquiry becomes the concomitance of my spiritual and classroom experiences. This is quite different from the usual positioning of the object outside the realm of the knower. As I have discovered in my own process, the separation of knower and known only stops my inquiry. Subsequently, true transformation requires knowing through intimacy with the known. This is “gnosis” or knowing through being what you know. The purpose of my open inquiry is not to locate right answers “out there” but rather to illuminate the dynamism “in here” – the seat of my consciousness. Here I am both knower and known.

So I return to my research questions: “Who is my True teacher?” and “how does her authenticity affect both herself and her students’ learning?” The following writings represent my meditations on these questions as they arise within my daily practice. As I begin this inquiry, I feel myself opening to the transformations of the soul that will occur. I give myself to wonder...
II. Myth-Making

Myth-Maker

Once and then often
I forgot myself
took up my flute
created rapture outside of me.
Arpeggios of anger, chords of loneliness
whimsical grace notes
all told the stories of my life;
all helped resolve the dissonance of my mind.

The flute, my Syrinx
a sprite, spirit-child
escaped on the wings of Mozart, Bach, Debussy.
She was rushing, elusive, playful
free
for a brief measure.

Now she is preserved safely somewhere
in the marshy reeds of old photographs, awards, sheet music
where she is soundless
her mouth an O.

Her head rests on red velvet in a black box.
She is waiting for the moment
when I take her out, graft her reeds together
and, once again
we dance into a summer’s day
on a breath.

I first wrote this poem almost ten years ago. As I re-visit it, I see it in a new light, a
soulful light and I am reminded of the role of music, of story-making in my life. I am
saddened to recognize my unconscious denial of soul as I literally and metaphorically put
away my flute, my “spirit-child” only to await some future “resurrection.” Perhaps this
“myth-making” is the moment of re-awakening or reclamation of that lost self. I begin to
question the title of my poem, “Myth-Maker” and wonder at its significance in this process of writing and teaching. The word “myth” comes from the Greek “muthos” which means “told from the mouth.” I believe this “telling” is the soul’s vehicle of expressivity. So I write/ tell my life in my classroom as part of the natural unfoldment of the soul. The word “myth” also implies falseness, a lie. Paradoxically, I think this too, has some truth to it. My mother used to refer to an extraordinary story not totally based on fact as a “tall tale.” I think this writing will contain many tall tales as I uncover the many voices refracted through the layers of telling. The question of “truth” arises when one seeks to explain perceptions carried deep within. Is there a truth or is there only my truth? Is this distinction important? How do I write this knowing so that others may come to know my experience? Here, I return to the notion of storytelling.

*Stories go to work on you like arrows.*

*Stories make you live right.*

*Stories make you replace yourself.*

(Basso, 1996, p. 38)

This week, I am reminded of the power of stories to heal old wounds and to expose new fault lines within the core of the self. In my English 12 class, I have invited students to write the stories of their lives within many “domains” as I have explained them. I have shied away from giving specific topics in order to release my students from their usual bonds of classroom structure. I have suggested they write what needs writing. Many students have complained about this new “lawlessness” wondering if there are tricks
awaiting them up ahead in the evaluation. Others have written letters to me begging for topics because they cannot write from within, only from without. Still others have written to me in thanks for allowing them the freedom to explore themselves with few limitations. (An exciting side-note to this last group of students – they are not the “A” or “B” students in the English classroom!) On Tuesday morning, I arrived at work to find a note in my mailbox from my administrator; a parent had called to discuss one of my lessons. I could feel a rising tension in my body, a concern about having done something “wrong.” I was told that an English 12 student of mine had written a letter for the portfolio assignment in my class. In this letter to his deceased grandfather, he confronted the grandfather’s abuse of his father and uncle. Then he mailed the letter to his grandmother who is still living. This letter exposed a family secret that had lain dormant for decades. The father was calling the school in search of the teacher who gave this “inappropriate” assignment. When I heard this story, I felt the deepest compassion for my student, for his father and his grandmother, three generations of wounding that have been ripped open by this courageous act of writing. *Stories go to work on you like arrows.* This was a time for celebration! I am coming to see that we do not possess our stories, instead, they possess us until we re/member them in our writing/ our telling. *Remembering is a refusal to be anonymous, a refusal to be forgotten.*

From my student, I learn that I can go back, re-visit, re-constitute, heal old wounds. I learn that time is necessary to let the mud settle. I learn that my own stories are the many spirals of learning spun together. I learn that history is poetry even when it is ugly and painful. I learn that in the ashes of stories there is memory of what once was, and hope for what will be. I am “replacing myself over and over.” When I was a teenager, my “myth-making” manifested in my flute-playing. I remember the power of the music to tell the
stories of my joy and my pain. These were my early words. In university, I stopped playing the flute. Looking back, perhaps I discovered a new language for living/healing, one that has allowed me to dance into a summer's day on a breath. Now, writing has become my medium for healing. For me, writing is the process of taking off the bandages, revealing new skin and exposing it to the glare of the sun. Writing is about weathering the new skin so it will withstand the forces at work on it. Writing is about the search for wholeness in this life of fragments, of moments of pain and inspiration. I am, and have always been, the myth-maker.
III. The Mystery of the Soul

The final mystery is oneself.

(Oscar Wilde from “De Profundis”)

In his book, Care of the Soul (1992), Thomas Moore asks, “Who can calculate the mystery of his own soul?” Of course, no one can truly know the depths of her own soul; however, I believe it is our life task to come to know, even in fragments and approximations that part of ourselves that is both a uniqueness and a reflection of the Divine Mind. I am daunted by the task of writing about soul, my soul. Yet it is in the open inquiry into the soul substance that is the genesis of a life/an education that is transcendent. Through my readings, I have encountered many definitions of soul all of which point to its mercurial nature, its unwillingness to be defined. Perhaps this is because the soul is the consciousness, the aliveness, the presence that contains all experience. The soul is the “I” that conceives of the “I,” that is the medium for all the “I’s” impressions and capacities. Contemporary understandings of soul reflect on the soul’s innate relatedness, the need for deep connection as a vehicle for the soul’s expressivity.

As I write these words about soul, I feel disconnected. As if what I am writing about is far away. How do I write concepts of the heart from my head? How do I ask questions when the very process of answer and analysis takes me further away from the known? This is not only the researcher’s dilemma, but my own spiritual koan that has plagued me since the beginning of my own search for soul. So I breathe into the Kath, the belly center, a slow
deep inhalation and exhalation. Grief emerges from some unknown source. I begin to feel the familiar pain in the heart, a pain of longing. As I focus on the pain, allowing it to expand, I realize my disconnection comes from a yearning to know myself, to find peace in that knowing. I wonder where this writing is leading me. I wonder if I have the courage to yield myself to a process that seems to want to unfold in its own wisdom. This fear too must be released...

In this writing, I begin to see that my heart’s desire is to know who I am, to write myself into this life, to heal old wounds and to allow for the possibility of new wounds to emerge. I want to reform myself/my world through my transformations of soul. I am coming to understand that to live a soulful life is to open myself to the truth in the moment even if that truth is the expression of frustration and pain. This is indeed critical learning for the True teacher who seeks to create a space in her classroom wherein her students may acknowledge the truth of their own arising experience. In order to create a soulful classroom, the True teacher must allow the expression of her own soul’s needs. Otherwise, she invalidates her own arising truth. A teacher without truth has no words.

In his ground-breaking book, *Education and the Soul: Toward a Spiritual Curriculum*, John Miller (2000) articulates four purposes of soul in education. First, he states that to deny spirit is to deny an essential part of our being which in turn diminishes us. It should be the express purpose of education to teach our students to listen to their souls, to respond to the calls of soul in whatever unique voice is heard. Here, Miller calls for an education of the whole child rather than the fragmented schooling we see today. The second purpose of a soulful education is the creation of a more “vital space” in our
classrooms – indeed a space of teeming life and creative potential. Clearly, this atmosphere of joy and potential would foster wonderful avenues of learning and relationship. The third purpose is to help our students to establish a balance between the inner and outer worlds. So much of our education draws us out of the body and into the mind where we pursue intellectual knowing in a kind of “acquisition-style” learning. Nel Noddings (1992) has likened this to the bank-account method of learning where we make frequent deposits and withdrawals of external information. Students are then required to demonstrate this intellectual knowing in some objective performance, illustrating increasing separation between the learner and the subject, indeed between the learner and the universe. A soulful education acknowledges and supports an active “inner” journey which qualifies and clarifies the outer self and which ultimately unifies the two worlds. After all, there is no true separation of the inner and outer selves. The fourth, and perhaps the most important purpose of an education of the soul is to provide opportunities for students to ask/ to contemplate the big questions in this life, for example “Who am I?” Several years ago, I began my English 12 class in September with a writing assignment that asked the students to write on this question. I was greeted with much confusion, yet the responses were filled with soulful ruminations on the nature of the students’ beings. Some students simply listed roles they played in this life (e.g. I am a girl, I am a daughter), even this was a start. I recall being surprised at the depth of some students’ responses as they outlined deeply philosophical and spiritual understandings of their place in this life. This was a wonderful introduction to these students.

Many books and articles abound on the necessity of soulful education. It will be difficult for teachers not to see this as simply one more pedagogical fad, that will bring with
it a new set of teaching strategies and mass-marketed resource packages. In all the readings, only a few acknowledge the role of the teacher and her own spiritual process within her new, soulful classroom (Arrien, 2001; hooks, 1994; Kessler, 2001; Miller, 2000; Palmer, 1998). This is a serious undervaluing of the teacher’s inner landscape. The heart of the teacher is at the center of every child’s educational experience, whether the heart is softened by compassion and understanding or hardened by ignorance and neglect. If we are serious about creating opportunities for students to explore their spirit within our classrooms, then we must first realize our own souls. We must first ask ourselves what is the nature of my soul and how does it manifest in my teaching and in my living?

Thomas Moore states that the purpose of the soul is to “feel existence” (as cited in Miller, 2000, p. 21). I agree with Moore’s use of the word “feel” in this context as the soul’s substance is certainly apprehended through the body’s awareness. If soul is a quality or dimension of experiencing life and ourselves, then it must be a direct experience grounded in the body. It would follow then that a disconnection from soul can be felt in the body, and thus, recovered through inquiry into the body’s current state. This is the process of inquiry I outlined earlier. Because of my history with physical pain, I have struggled with spiritual inquiry that relies on the body’s wisdom. I am having to relearn the language of my body as it points to cycles of contraction and spaciousness that are created through my living. Earlier, I described the process of reconnecting myself to my work using both breathing and an unqualified acceptance of my state. This aspect of inquiry allows me to sustain attention on the arising truth in the body so that the soul’s needs will be revealed. Ultimately, the soul seeks connection – to other people, to the universe, to the Absolute. Psychologist Joan Borysenko speaks to this yearning as she defines the soul as “the substance of the universe
knowing itself and growing itself” (as cited in Miller, 2000, p. 22). She states that the soul is searching for connection (as this is its true state). She goes on to suggest: “the interconnectedness of our souls makes service for others a natural joy” (as cited in Miller, 2000, p. 22). When we “take time to open ourselves to our souls, we become better givers to others and are better able to see the love that is the universe.” Here, I am wondering if this is the reason I became a teacher – my soul’s need to connect to the hearts of others so that it may know its true nature – the universal heart. As I sense into my heart chakra, I feel the truth of this inquiry. My true nature is union with others and with the Divine.

The writings of Robert Sardello take the concept of soul to another plane altogether. In his book, Facing the World with Soul (1992), he articulates a vision of individual consciousness being inextricably linked to a world soul known as Sophia. He states:

this union of the inner soul with the outer world leads to a new image consciousness that sees through events both inner and outer, finding a circulation going on between them in which a constant re-creation of both the human being and the world takes place. (p. 15)

This “circulation” of energy or consciousness between humans and the universe again reveals the natural law of the interconnectedness among all things. Within my classroom, I come to see the cyclical unfoldment of my soul concomitantly with the unfoldment of my students’ souls as a double helix of swirling potential and dynamism. We are an inseparable conjunction of individual and universal transformation. To honour this truth requires a fundamental shift in my practice as a teacher to include what Sardello posits as necessary agreements for the realization of individual souls and Sophia within my classroom, namely the five disciplines of silence, concentration, meditation, imagination and contemplation. In
order to become conscious of our mutuality with our students, thereby optimizing all souls’
expressions, we must include as part of our daily practice, these spiritual disciplines. I
believe silence is the key to deepening our self-understanding as we turn away from the
“busy ness” of school life and offer all students (and teachers) opportunities to examine the
inner voices. In my own practice, I am learning to be comfortable with the silence of the
classroom. I am inviting my students to be silent, to meditate on themselves and on the
literature we study. Often, after these silences, I ask my students to write about their
experiences. They tell me of the difficulty of quieting the mind, of feeling into their bodies.
They tell me that silence is “weird,” a foreign and unfamiliar space. I notice that many
students cannot tolerate the silence – in fact, they are highly defended against it. I am gentle
in my reminders of the need for them to honour themselves and others in their experience of
silence. Some students, I have sympathetically allowed to leave the classroom so they do
not interfere with the process of others. I acknowledge that not everyone is ready to hear the
inner voices.

Each morning, I have chosen to carve out a time of silence in order to ground myself
in the body, to connect to the physical space of my classroom. I have even begun a practice
of “grounding” my classroom.

_I am imagining a cord running from the root chakra in my pelvis, down through the cement
floor down, down, through the center of the Earth where the cord curls around the core. I
feel the density of my body as the cells begin to settle into a solidity. I am becoming
inseparable from the earth, a giant redwood tree rooted to the richness of the soil. Now I
feel the space of my classroom... I see all the desks, my teacher’s desk, the walls that_
contain this space and I run cords from all these entities down into the Earth’s core. At the same time, I allow the return of energy up through my feet, my legs... I draw strength out of the earth and into my being. I pulse with the earth energy.

Through this silent meditation, I experience a sense of awe and reverence for the exchange of energies. I am reminded of Sardello’s comment that “the world thinks through us.” What an incredible irony, given the strength of the human belief that we construct the world with our thinking. Imagine the paradigm shift inherent in Sardello’s theory. If the world does, indeed think through us then we are mere organisms of Sophia – the Divine Mind. While annihilating for the ego, this notion is liberating for the soul who recognizes its origins.

Who am I? I sense into an arising notion of self that is at once disturbing yet exhilarating! I close my eyes and sense my body. I am afraid to let myself go, to really allow the dissolution of all boundaries, for to hold boundaries is to separate from Sophia. I resist merging with the Divine because I am afraid of death, not of the physical self but of the thinking self. There is anxiety in my chest and my head begins to feel disoriented, detached. Who am I? I am afraid of not knowing. Who needs to know? Here I feel the contraction in the muscles. My head begins to tighten, to harden. I feel like I am wearing an iron helmet. This dulls my inquiry. I am a giant head and I have no connection with my heart. I sense into the helmet, trace its edges simply noticing how it presses down on my brain. I breathe deeply into the Kath again and begin to roll my eyes first clockwise, I try to see to the extremities of my visual field, then counter-clockwise. I do this for two or three minutes
until my vision has widened. I feel a lifting of the head, a re-orientation to my surroundings. I am coming back into myself.

After this inquiry into the world soul, I see once again my resistance to merging with the divine. There exists within me a strong sense of self. I believe I have to give up my uniqueness in order to disappear into the Absolute. My spiritual teacher cautions that this is the illusion of the ego self who is afraid of death. I wonder at this ego self so concerned with boundaries and control. She is perplexed by another self, a True self who acknowledges the wisdom of Sardello, of the desert teachers, of the bodhisattvas, of the Sufi mystics, of Christ, and of the poets we study in my classroom. These Teachers see into Sophia not through intellectual reasoning but through the metaphors and myths of their time. Here I recall the Beauty and Truth of Wordsworth’s depiction of Sophia in Wordsworth’s poem, “Tintern Abbey”

... I have felt

A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean, and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man...

...with an eye made quiet by the power
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,
We see into the life of things...

(William Wordsworth, 1996, p. 78)

So the dwelling of the soul is both within the individual consciousness and within the “setting sun.” The poet speaks of harmony – the deep interdependence of all things. Like the poet, I too am “disturbed” by this awesome presence that is soul, as I struggle to transcend my familiar self and “see into the life of things.” There is tremendous responsibility in this new seeing. It is larger than the field of vision altogether. In my classroom, when I find myself within this space of contemplation, open to the boundlessness of consciousness, I am “made quiet” deep within, and in turn, bring this peace to my students and colleagues. When I am connected to my inner core, there is someone more aware, more present to the task of teaching and all it requires. In this writing, I will explore the True teacher’s essential capacities of presence, witnessing and compassion in her relationship to her students and ultimately to Truth. In my teaching practice, I have enjoyed certain spiritual “states” involving all of the above capacities; now I hope to deepen my inquiry to arrive a spiritual “stations” of Being – more prolonged experiences of my True self and her connection to the universe.

The great Tao flows everywhere

All things are born from it,

yet it doesn’t create them.

It pours itself into its work,

Yet it makes no claim.
It nourishes infinite worlds,
yet is doesn’t hold on to them.
Since it is merged with all things
and hidden in their hearts,
it can be called humble.
Since all things vanish into it
and it alone endures,
it can be called great.
It isn’t aware of its greatness;
thus it is truly great.

(Lao Tzu, 1988)
IV. Presence

(At Camp Grafton, Shuswap Lake, 1980)

*It is early morning and the cabins are shrouded in lake mist. I softly close the wooden door to my cabin and begin my morning journey. I carefully pick my way up the trail that winds itself along the small creek up to the wooded “chapel,” a half circle of rough-hewn benches in a clearing of pine trees. I take my seat on the still damp log and I breathe the fresh earth and pine. I really breathe, not the shallow in out of my usual breathing but the deep inhalation that takes the oxygen right to my toes. On the other side of the creek and up the embankment is a twenty-foot wooden cross almost hidden in the trees. As if through an inner seeing, my eyes locate this cross that the sun has now found with its early morning rays of gold. I breathe again deeply and I wonder about this place. I wonder about my place within this place. For the first time in my short life I wonder about God. I sit in the stillness which becomes my stillness; I bathe in the light which becomes my light; and I disappear. There is no fear in this death because I enter into a Presence that is both wise and loving containing me in its embrace. I feel alive, luminous. I am the earth, the stream, the rocks, the trees, even the cross!*

When I was in elementary school, each day began with the roll call to see who was in attendance on that day. When my name was called, I would respond, “present” to indicate my physical presence in the room. In this writing I would like to consider the fuller meaning of the concept of Presence. What does it mean to be fully Present? It is a challenge to define this concept because it can be both an elusive mystery and a self-evident
Presence is so simple that there is virtually no metaphor or parable that can explain this most basic reality. Thus I must rely on the phenomenology of experience to apprehend this fundamental grounding of Being in the classroom and in life. Experientially, Presence might be felt as if "there is more of me here" or a greater awareness and sense of contact with my surroundings (Almaas, 1986). It's as if the colours and textures of the world advance on my field of perception; I become all eyes and ears! In my teaching practice, I have gradually deepened my experience of Presence and found that my presence allows for a greater participation in the teaching/learning of the moment. Presence reveals my essential aspects of strength, will, compassion and joy while creating an attunement to the arising needs of my students and myself. Presence allows my soul's capacities to respond appropriately to those needs. It is astounding then, why no one asks if the teacher is present in her classroom.

Every day, I try to remember to enter my teaching space mindfully – I take time turning the lock, feeling the opening of the door, the welcoming of the room to the adventures of the day. I open the windows to freshen the air inside the space. I am careful to limit talk during the first twenty minutes of arriving at work. I am birthing the teaching Presence – this is a sacred process that determines the quality of my Being for that day. This mindfulness becomes a kind of citadel of support from which my teachings and relationships emanate. When my True teacher is Present in my classroom, it is poetry, a beautiful unfolding of learning for that day. The classroom and students experience a sort of group Presence or consciousness – a state of resiliency, flexibility, openness and awe that is felt within the body as well as the mind. I was able to see this most clearly during a Literature 12 class where we were seeking an understanding of Wordsworth's poem "Tintern Abbey."
For homework, I had asked the students to choose one or two lines within the poem that “spoke to them” in some way. I encouraged a listening deeply grounded in the body. I wanted them to choose lines that pleasured their bodies. What a concept! My students looked at me like I was crazy! When we gathered over the poem the next class, I asked my students to locate their favorite lines and to simply be in their bodies allowing whatever feelings were there to come to the surface. In doing this, we were a living embodiment of Wordsworth’s poem. I can still feel the group field of this class – there was an incredible sense of wonderment and reverence both for the beautiful poetry but also for the discovery of the True self inside each of us. We sat in silence for a few minutes and then we began to share our chosen lines, hushed whispers, tentative steps into the beauty of our true selves. Each student chose a line of poetry directly related to Wordsworth’s theme of the interconnectedness of all beings. When given the space and permission to simply BE, my students were able to tap into the hidden mysteries of the poem because these were their own hidden mysteries. What a journey! Within the group field, we individually experienced what Almaas calls the personal essence; “when this experience occurs, it is not vague, unclear, or undefined; it is not an intuition or a fleeting insight. It is a very definite, clear, precise experience of ‘I am’” (1986, p. 13). Therefore, Presence leads to the state of Being, an apprehension of oneself as both unique and universal. This state is a freedom from the mind whose habitual patterns of ideation, rumination and agitation are exhausting. Thus in the stillness of the mind, can be found a more subtle life energy much like the experience of the poet upon his return to the abbey at Tintern. This is the ultimate teaching/learning.
Today, I create a circle with the desks because I want to remove the traditional speaking hierarchies in the classroom. I am filled with excitement as students enter the space to begin our discussion of "Tintern Abbey." I feel a familiar pull to lead, to be the prophet leading her students to Truth – I taste the bitterness of pride in these thoughts and I let them slide out of my mind returning to a sort of quiet fullness. I am aware of black space seeping up from my core; I let this void expand into my chest, up into my neck and head. There is a lightness, a kind of disorientation of time and space. I wonder if there is anyone left to teach this class. We all take our seats in an air of expectation – but I don’t really know what to expect. I don’t have a formal lesson plan for this poem because some things are meant to unfold organically; however, I am aware of a distinct purpose, of sharing the beauty of Wordsworth’s words with my students. I embark on this journey with a clear sense of direction, a singularity of focus that allows the fading out of noises from the hall. I am able to forget the harshness of fluorescent lights and hard wooden desks. I begin to read the poem out loud and I lose myself between the lines of verse. I feel, actually feel the heightened awareness and attention of my students. We breathe in unison when I pause in my reading. Again and again, we are transformed by the experience of poetry, of our honest sharing, of our individual search for meaning. I feel into my expanding heart and sense the joy of discovery and of connection with these beautiful students! I am energized by their excitement as they relate their own experiences to that of the poet, as they realize they, too are poets! As students exit the classroom, many are drawn to my desk to continue our discussion; we are each reluctant to let go of the experience we have shared, our hearts still effulgent with joy. I am still smiling into fourth period where my next group of students asks me what has made me so happy. Later, I pass by students in the hall. They are speaking of
our class having heard it was so powerful. I leave the concrete school building with the
calm and reverence of having spent an afternoon walking along Jericho Beach. Wonderful!

This narrative of my teaching experience reveals the subtle nuances of Presence that are so elusive to concrete explanation. I have found that the works of both Abraham Maslow and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi have been the most helpful in defining the qualities of presence. In Maslow’s research on “peak experiences,” he indicates a number of characteristics of this optimal state that are similar to the qualities of Presence I articulated earlier, and that I am able to see in the narrative above. According to Maslow (1970) “peak experiences” are moments of almost religious illumination and revelation which offer a kind of transcendence, a fusion with the universal. He notes many intrinsic values of these experiences which are common to all human beings who attain these optimal states: truth, goodness, beauty, wholeness, transcendence, aliveness, uniqueness, perfection, effortlessness, concentration, surrender, and self-sufficiency. While these qualities in “peak experiences” are not directly synonymous with Presence, I do believe that Presence allows for the spontaneous emergence of some or all of these felt states, and that when we experience Presence we are more open to the occurrence of “peak experiences” as seen in my Literature 12 class.

In his book, Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990) examines a similar phenomenon of self-actualizing experience he describes as “flow.” Like Maslow’s “peak experience”, flow is “the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter”; it is a sense of enhanced participation in life “that comes as close to happiness as anything else we can conceivably
The author describes several characteristics of this unique condition of flow. When a person is experiencing flow, she is completely immersed in the activity to the extent that all her attention is concentrated on the task at hand. I alluded to this narrowing of focus in my example with the Literature class, when I could no longer hear external noises. It's as if the mind selects only relevant information to maintain the dynamic thrust of the activity. Paradoxically, this narrowing of focus brings with it a heightened awareness that Csikszentmihalyi notes is dependent on a disciplined consciousness not on serendipity. This supports the notion that deeper experiences of Presence, and therefore of flow, are arrived at through inquiry and self-understanding, hence, there is a necessity for ongoing spiritual work. Another characteristic of flow is the loss of self-consciousness, or loss of the ego mind that "controls" experience. As in the state of full Presence, the self becomes subsumed by its environment and experiences a union with all beings in its field. During particularly moving lessons, I have certainly experienced this state of "one flesh" where there is no separation between myself and my students. I am keenly interested in this state of union and its pre-requisites because I have noted in this writing a hesitation to surrender to divinity both "out there" and within my classroom. Csikszentmihalyi has noted that the condition of optimal experience brings with it a selflessness – there is no ego left to feel threatened!

So the loss of self-consciousness does not involve a loss of self, and certainly not a loss of consciousness, but rather, only a loss of conscious awareness of the self.

What slips below the threshold of awareness is the concept of self, the information we use to represent to ourselves who we are. And being able to forget temporarily who we are seems to be very enjoyable. When not preoccupied with our selves, we actually have a chance to expand the concept of who we are. Loss of self-
consciousness can lead to self-transcendence, to a feeling that the boundaries of our being have been pushed forward. (p.64)

Csikszentmihalyi points to a crucial outcome of both flow and Presence when he acknowledges the potential for transformation that can occur when the familiar self is set aside. I have noticed in my own spiritual practice that my ego boundaries represent a sort of shell, a hardened concept of who I am in the moment. When I reflect on my many experiences of transformation, all were preceded by a dissolution of the shell, a figurative death of ego. These times of transformation have not been easy as the ego tries to hold onto its image of self by resisting dissolution. I have experienced tremendous anxiety and fear of death, states which have persisted sometimes for days or weeks. This reveals the hardness of ego and the necessity of opportunities to challenge that hardness, to create a shell more permeable to experience. Thus each moment of Presence allows for the expansion of the soul and brings more awareness and understanding of the self. When I began my teaching career (and my spiritual work), I sought these optimal experiences as end goals. I measured my progress as teacher by the number of “teachable moments” and exhilarating lessons I could achieve. I sought particular spiritual states to reflect my growing self-awareness. However, there was always the hint of ego pushing, trying to “get somewhere.” This is a very familiar aspect of my identity, the “one who pursues perfection.”

Csikszentmihalyi notes that, “a key element of optimal experience is that it is an end in itself. Even if initially undertaken for other reasons, the activity that consumes us becomes intrinsically rewarding” (p. 67). He refers to this experience as “autotelic,” “one that is done not with the expectation of some future benefit, but simply because the doing itself is the reward” (p. 67). Presence is also autotelic. I have come to value Presence for its
own sake because the experience of Presence allows the direct experience of my essential identity. As well, I have learned that “trying” to experience Presence brings only frustration. Presence is actually a relaxation of the familiar self so that the more subtle aspects of our True nature can be felt. On those occasions in my classroom when I can relax and really breathe, the hardened structures of my “self” relax and I am able to surrender to the moment, to allow the organic unfolding of the lesson. I notice at those times, I have a basic trust that what needs to happen in the space will manifest. I experience myself as calm, relaxed, alive and aware. In the rarest of times, I become so much a Presence that there is no “I” even to reflect on the experience as it unfolds.

Optimal teaching experiences like the one I just described are certainly not the norm in my own practice; however, they are becoming more frequent as I become more disciplined in my consciousness. I have come to believe that these optimal experiences are not random happenings left up to chance or coincidence but rather the result of my efforts to understand my inner voices, the projections and identifications, my personal history and how it affects my teaching. The fact is, the True teacher is not always Present in my classroom. The reasons why not are too numerous to contemplate; however, all reasons relate to fear. When I first began my teaching career, I had no conscious awareness that my actions and reactions in the classroom centred around my fear of losing control of myself and of my students. I misunderstood notions of healthy boundaries between teachers and students to be impenetrable stone walls that would protect my many ideas of self as teacher. I mistook distance for rationality and objectivity for a sort of wise compassion. My “presence” as it was then was a sort of false way of being, a counterfeit of the ideal Presence which was intellectual in nature but without depth, without heart. This false presence did
not allow me to be fully human in my interactions with students because I was afraid to let
my students know me – I was afraid of being vulnerable – I was afraid to face the truth that I
did not know myself.

Within the past three years, since I began my inner work, I have been altered by my
True teacher as she has come to be more Present in my heart and in my classroom. I wish
that I could say, in every instance, I manifest an authentic Presence in my dealings with staff
and students. This would be dishonest. Now I notice both the Presence and the absence of
my True teacher, and the latter is terribly painful. On those “off” days, when my ego is
teaching her class, there is a flatness to the moment – a laboring that makes teaching a
Herculean task. On those days I feel like Sisyphus pushing the stone up the mountain only
to have it roll back down flattening me with its speed and weight. Gone is the efficiency and
the joy of discovery, and in their stead is a contraction and fear of the unknown.

My English 12 class is reviewing the focus questions on T.S. Eliot’s poem “The
Hollow Men.” This is a lie; I am the only one reviewing the focus questions. I feel the group
inertia but I want to resist this. I notice I am using the pronoun “I” too much – I sense this
may be the problem. I ignore this inner voice and push forward noticing that my teaching
voice becomes more strident, sometimes cajoling, sometimes sarcastic. I feel the anger
build in the belly; actually, it’s indignation at not being seen. I recall the amount of
planning that went into this lesson and I feel unappreciated. The clock says 2:30pm,
another forty-five minutes before the final bell. “Let’s discuss question number three!” No
answer. The silence feels like condemnation; an oppressive pall settles over the room. I am
walking through waist-deep water but I keep on walking because I am familiar with the pain
of impeded motion. I can hear my father’s voice “mind over matter.” I push again and a small trickle of response is squeezed out of one student who is worried that I will get angry at the class. I see him taking on the collective responsibility of all the students; he will be the scapegoat producing immediate relief on the faces of the others who avoid my gaze. I feel locked into this silent battle. My head hurts from pushing so hard. I want to walk out into the afternoon. It is 2:40pm.

There are so many of these moments in teaching, moments when a student announces, “this poem sucks” or moments when the P. A. interrupts the class right at the climax of the lesson, or moments when you ask the students what the story means to them and they all look down and the silence falls like an anvil. These moments teach me as well and I am thankful for them because they expose that other, more familiar self who believes she knows herself, her students, the curriculum; who believes she controls all things within her classroom and her life; who believes the students are just like her! I am reminded in these moments that I am human and still have a great deal to learn. So my True teacher keeps me humble and gently reminds me of my own frailty in this process of becoming. I am learning to accept my own paradoxes.

These paradoxes of the teaching self are outlined in Parker Palmer’s book, The Courage to Teach (1998) where he notes that for every teaching “gift” we bring to the classroom, we also bring a teaching “liability”. I am relieved to see this validation of the “shadow” side of my teaching, a side that is difficult to bring into the light of contemplation. As I have shown, I value student participation in the classroom – I long for student talk to demonstrate their engagement and to provide me with the necessary feedback on their
learning. I believe this is a “gift” I bring to my students; I want to hear their voices, to learn about them and from them through their own narratives. The paradoxical liability in this gift is that when students are unwilling to share their thoughts and feelings, I experience a roadblock in my teaching. I am quick to take this as a sign of disinterest, or worse, as a sign of dislike for me and my teaching. When I am Present in the classroom, I am more aware of my egoic response to the students’ lack of participation; I am able to see into my reactivity and perceive that there is someone inside my teaching self who is feeling unseen, unappreciated. At this point I usually turn my focus inward and breathe. I try to notice which self in me is pushing. I ask myself “Who am I in this moment?” When I can sustain the question and the silence, allowing the disconnection to fully manifest, I find I am usually able to return to an acceptance of myself and of my students. Within this field of acceptance, students begin to let down their walls and step into the space I have created for them through the conscious dissolution of my own armoring. When I explore my teaching paradoxes, I reconfigure my own consciousness; I lose interest in the quick fix for classroom problems and return to a more exciting inquiry into the nature of my teaching self. This entire process requires the full Presence of the True teacher who is able to maintain an awareness of her own complexities while attending to her soul’s learning and the learning of the students. I am coming to see that my True teacher contains both the gifts and liabilities of my identity and that true transformation comes only when I allow both polarities to emerge in the “otherness” of my students. I am so deeply dependent on my relationships with my students that there will always be someone inside me who is hurt when they choose not to relate to me; however, I cannot deny these opportunities for inner discovery when my “gifts” go unseen. In these moments, I return to Presence, the state of the True teacher,
which supports my inquiry and practice in the classroom. It is Presence that holds all experience and guides the process of transformation.

I take a moment to inquire into the Presence of the writer...I am feeling the writing float away from me as if it is an entity separate from my own heart. I am curious about this process of writing from the head; I am curious about this familiar separation of my ways of knowing. I sense into the heart space and find it to be filled with loss. Two days ago, I learned that I will have surgery to replace my ankle. I will not be able to work for four or five months. I wonder why this has not come up in the last ten pages of writing. Who have I been writing in this space? I begin to see patterns of duality in my writing/teaching/living and I notice the resistance against the integration of my deepest personal self with the professional self. “Be where you are!” I use this mantra to inquire further into my present state. I feel an insubstantiality in the body, a temporality that I am unused to. It is difficult to allow this feeling. I locate my heart within the building anxiety of the chest and I notice the pericardium feels brittle, like the subtle armoring is shattering. And there it begins to dissolve and the tears come – an emptying. I cry for the loss of my ankle; I cry for the pain; I cry for the fear; I cry for the disconnection from my heart. I am utterly exposed in this writing and I notice it is the most honest writing, the most fluid. I begin to experience a growing emptiness in the chest as if my heart is held in the void of space. I notice the expansion of the heart. It feels bruised yet lighter. My partner enters the room (as he usually does when he senses the fullness of my heart); he kisses my forehead and tells me I am a “lovely mess.” A beautiful benediction!
Through this act of writing, I begin to manifest a deeper Presence, as if the writing itself becomes a vehicle of contemplation – a spiraling down into Being. I sense a growing relaxation in the body that brings with it an opening in the head and heart. My thinking mind feels lost in the veils that cloud understanding, yet there is an inner knowing that I will find my way. This paradox challenges my rational self and I notice slight resistance to any “knowing” that is not guided by my head. I breathe deeply and hold both states. I become aware of the healing in my heart, thousands of tiny hands massaging, stroking, enlivening! Questions arise as to the source of the healing; I let these go knowing that answers are not always necessary. Letting go – this seems to be the key...
V. Witnessing

The second Gulf war has begun, and like others, I am drawn to my television screen to bear witness to the devastation that is likely to come. I cannot help but watch the unfolding of this war because it is a human story and I believe we are all bound to hear the stories of our neighbours – this is our calling in life. My partner also watches with me; he is drawn to the plot in this narrative, the ongoing conflict of strategy and weaponry that the news programs feature minute by minute. I am drawn to images that are absent from the screen. I find myself searching behind the faces and beyond the political talk, into the background of each location shot. I hear that the first victim of this war is a Jordanian woman and I begin to imagine her story – what narrative would she want her death to tell?

As I watch the explosions, the endless dust and rubble, I am aware of a great sorrow, a giant wound has been blasted into my own soul. I breathe into this opening and I begin to hear the sadness of the Earth as she embraces these people who know no better way than to fight, who believe the force of bombs will bring peace. I am reminded of a reading that said: “until we can heal the wounds of the individual, we will play these wounds out in the macrocosm of this world.” I see the truth of this on my television. It is my hope that by bearing witness to the collective despair of mankind, the gentle rain of healing will begin to fall upon the Earth. So I breathe deeply and fall into the spaciousness of my True self.

From here I watch for as long as I can...

To bear witness is to affirm the reality of others, as if to say “I know you exist; I really see you!” In our daily lives, we come into contact with so many others whom we pass by without truly seeing. When I contemplate the sheer number of social interactions I
engage in every day – it is staggering! In each of these encounters, I realize I am sharing the story of myself, and thus am dependent on another to hear that story – to bear witness to my unfolding. This morning, I attended a session with my spiritual teacher, who simply listened to the extended narrative that has been unfolding since our last meeting. This life story yearns for a gentle ear. I found myself revealing the events and emotions of the past weeks in a seamless re-telling. I told her of my fear of surgery, of my fatigue at work, of my joy in research. I even discussed with my teacher this thesis and the writing on witnessing and listening. She asked me to think about those times when I felt really listened to; what were the qualities of the listener and how did they contribute to the ease of storytelling? So I find myself in the midst of this contemplation, writing these ruminations on listening because I do know what it is like to be listened to and there is nothing like it in this world!

There is a way between voice and presence
where information flows.
In disciplined silence it opens.
With wandering talk it closes.

This poem by Rumi beautifully describes the space wherein transformation takes place – this is the space created through deep listening or “disciplined silence.” Here, Rumi invokes the Presence of the listener as one who holds the field so that the other may share her words. “To teach is to create a space,” notes Parker Palmer (1993, p. 69). Thus it is the role of the True teacher to create a space through silence, to encourage her students’ explorations within a holding environment that is open, compassionate and accepting not
through “wandering talk” that takes students away from their process. Through my years as teacher, I have become increasingly aware of my role as “witness” in the classroom of the soul. I have learned to speak less, to sit, to breathe and to allow the stories of my students to unfold, essentially, to allow their soul’s expansion within my stillness. Mary Rose O’Reilly refers to this as “listening people into existence” (1998, p. 29). What a wonderful thought! I sense into the truth of these words and I am reminded of a time when someone “listened me into existence.”

I remember my Biology 11 teacher who met with me after school many days to hear the sadness of my heart. He would pull his chair up in front of me and plant himself in the room as if to say: “I am not going anywhere until you show up and let yourself be known.” And I came to live in this world in more substance than before as I told the stories of my pain, the loneliness of an adolescent heart. And when the pain became unbearable and I wanted to take my life, he visited me in the hospital, helped me to tell my parents things that could not be told. I leaned into his strength, his stillness. I remember, even during his visits to the hospital, he had smudges of green overhead pen on his forehead – a constant reminder he was my teacher, and I loved him. Despite the agonies of the heart, I felt really alive! My teacher listened me into this world, aided my soul’s descent so that I might really live this life with all its ugliness and beauty, its cycles of light and dark. As an adult, I now see the tremendous risk my teacher took to be present for me in these meetings and I am grateful. His stillness allowed me to dislodge those stories caught in the throat and to see that the stories could not destroy who I truly am. What a wonderful teaching!
I have met few teachers such as my biology teacher who glide with ease between the analytical and intuitive selves. I too struggle with these seeming opposites in my pedagogy. Until recently, the role of listening in my classroom has been more of a teaching tool to measure student knowledge rather than to allow students the opportunity for personal exploration. As I have learned the priceless value of deep listening in my own process of individuation, I have been encouraged to share the gift of “disciplined” silence, of holding the space for others to take their tentative steps into this life. I have even found joy in these silences as they represent the potential for truth and transformation – the goals of the True teacher. So I am curious about this role of witnessing – a calling to which all teachers must respond in order to support the journeys of our students, because so many of our students have stories “caught in their throats.” Within this writing, I would like to consider the qualities of deep and disciplined listening and how this state manifests in the True teacher/listener and in her students. But first, it is important to re-examine the role of Presence, particularly the aspects of trust and acceptance in this process of storytelling and listening, for without these pre-requisites, there can be no flow of information between the teller and the listener.

As I have been revealing throughout this writing, Presence is the foundation for all essential capacities within the True teacher; this is especially true for the capacity of compassion. I would like to save a more complete inquiry into the compassionate heart for the next chapter; however, it is crucial to note here that deep listening, or witnessing, has its origins in the heart. When we bear witness to another’s process, we are not merely passive observers but rather heartful participants in maintaining the “field” of Presence and unconditional acceptance. We want to be Present, listening to the other because we
acknowledge the “otherness” in ourselves. At once, listening is a love of the other and of self. As an act of love, the True teacher creates a sense of trust in the student by manifesting a field of acceptance which supports the student to show up and reveal herself. Acceptance is experienced as a refined Presence that allows the self to relax, to unwind the mind and heart. All souls require essential acceptance in the holding environment in order to actualize an internal acceptance within the soul. Thus the True teacher creates trust and a kind of primordial holding through deep listening and silent validation. The True teacher does not worry about how to listen, getting lost in questions of technique. It is only through mindfulness, the conscious creation of openness and acceptance that essential compassion can manifest in the action of listening. During this state of deep listening, we become so attuned to our students that all boundaries between self and other disappear! In essence, we become the listening!

One author referred to this deep listening as “spiritual companioning” (O’Reilly 1998, p. 23), an acknowledgement of the soulful journey of the storyteller supported through the union with the listener. The origins of the word, “companion” are “com” meaning “together and “panis” meaning “bread”. What a wonderful image – two people sharing the nourishment of bread together. This has obvious Christian overtones as seen in the ceremony of communion. In this ritual, Christians eat a piece of bread which represents the body of Christ thus entering into communion with the Divine. I believe witnessing or spiritual companioning is also an act of divinity – a divinity of mutual nourishment so that the soul will expand and know its origins in the Absolute. Here the listening acts as the nourishment the soul seeks in order to be known. Thus the witness becomes a vital part of the unfoldment of the soul. The word “witness” comes from the old English “witan”
meaning “to know.” In the act of listening, the witness “knows” the other in the deepest of ways allowing the storyteller to emerge in the fullness of the True self and thus for the soul to grow.

The really moving thing in the work of education is listening to a person at the deepest level while preserving round all that he confides us of himself a halo of mystery, patience, care and love, thanks to which, sometimes, we can free him from what he is and give him access to his future. (Evely as cited in O’Reilly, 1998, p. 31)

This excerpt is a beautiful illustration of the transformation possible within the Presence of the witness; here, the teller is “freed” from the constraints of his story. These words also show the “discipline” of the witness in consciously “preserving” the space around the storyteller; therefore the act of listening is a mindful act requiring the full concentration and engagement of the listener at all times. It is through this higher consciousness and awareness that the witness becomes attuned to the vibrations of the other so that the storyteller (and the witness) might be transformed in the hearing.

In her book, The Soul of Education, Rachael Kessler (2000) shows how students may play the role of witness in emotionally charged classroom activities that require support and caring. In this witness role, students become thoughtful observers who are positioned to see and hear things those engaged in an activity will never notice. Kessler often offers the role of witness to students who feel they cannot participate with the others due to the emotional nature of the learning, thus allowing them a graceful reprieve from situations that could bring potential psychic pain. I have used Kessler’s model of witnessing within my own classroom and have found that learning activities designed to provoke deeper emotional responses are better supported through witnessing. When several students attend to the
activities through deep listening, they create an atmosphere of caring and respect that lends a transcendent quality to the experience – the class feels held and nurtured by loving energy, a necessary pre-requisite to learning at the level of the soul. Within my teacher inquiry group, I have also experimented with this witnessing, or holding, to allow every teacher voice in the group the opportunity to be heard. This is a simple yet profound act within the context of teaching, as teachers often feel unheard by their students, colleagues and administrators.

When my inquiry group explored their personal definitions of bell hooks’ “engaged pedagogy,” I asked the members to refrain from speaking until all voices were heard; we were to act as reflective mirrors simply holding the space and allowing the ideas to resonate within our circle. It was a beautiful experience as each teacher recalled moments of heartful teaching, their experiences of compassion and aliveness within their classrooms. When one teacher spoke out of turn, I noticed the energy of the room shift from transcendence and awe to a more deliberate listening and, for several, to disconnection from the group field. This was also valuable to notice as I could begin to see (and feel) the absence of the witnessing qualities in deeper inquiries. It would appear that soulful learning can only occur when there is support for the soul to appear and to be heard without wandering talk. I am left wondering how often I, too, rush in to fill those silences in the classroom, perhaps barring the emergence of a soul’s expression.

In Buddhist traditions, the act of deep listening requires that the Teacher manifest an attitude of not-knowing and a willingness to face uncertainty or fear of the new/ unfamiliar (Nhat Hanh, 1998). This openness in Presence is achieved, not through technique, but rather through ongoing meditation and spiritual work. I have experienced this openness in my own teaching. As I have grown into the spaces in my own soul, I have shifted my awareness to
the subtleties of consciousness, and this has allowed me to notice with increasing clarity the truth of my students. When I enter into conversation with my students, I am more open to their truth without my own conditioned thoughts and reactions getting in the way of the students' expression of self. I have shifted from someone “doing” the listening to someone just being Present and witnessing; I have begun to listen “through” the words right down into the hearts of my students. And in this process, I too have been changed by my listening. As Pearmain (2001) suggests in her book, The Heart Of Listening, the listener (in a state of presence) “encounters an open ground within, a space of unknowing, a space deeper than constructs and words where the sense of identity is challenged by openness and uncertainty” (p. 63). It has been difficult to achieve this level of openness, a kind of mutual vulnerability, because I have had to confront my own fears of being fully human in this world. I have spent years removing psychological and epistemological barriers to true contact with others, and I have been blessed to see the greatest gains in my relationships with my students. I notice that there is tremendous satisfaction in deep listening as I come to learn the students’ stories, indeed as I “listen them [and myself] into existence!”

In this process of listening myself into existence, I have begun to concentrate more intently on my inner voices and I have learned that a deep listening to the needs of the body and the psyche frees my True teacher to become more present for her students. Indeed, this listening within is a necessary pre-requisite to listening outside ourselves. As teachers, we are taught only the external listening for others (I recall the courses in active listening and, more recently, in non-violent communication (Rosenberg, 1999)); however, nowhere have I encountered a course for teachers on how to listen to and how to respect our own inner voices! Throughout my years as a teacher, I have experienced great disconnection from my
inner voices – voices that tell me I am tired or angry or sick. The voices of my body have been the most difficult and most painful to ignore. So often, I am in great physical pain and yet I push on in my teaching with an iron will that comes across to my students as frustration or anger. I have learned to tell my students about my arthritis pain so that when they notice me teaching from a place of hardness, I invite them to ask me about my pain. This external mirror of the teacher is crucial in my classroom as I learn to listen to my body and take time for the pain, in essence to give it a voice so that its power over me will be diminished.

Several weeks ago, I came to my Literature 12 class after lunch to find that half the class was late. I was angry about their indifference and immediately felt the pain and fatigue in my body. One student who had been watching me said: “I think you need to go and make yourself some calming tea!” Wow, such wisdom! I did what he suggested and took time to check in with my body, noticing the contraction in my knees and in my heart. I practiced breathing and clearing the tension so that when I returned to the classroom, I felt more open, the anger having disappeared. Thus I have come to depend on my students to help me in my deep listening. So often, I think we need these external reminders to reconnect with our spirits.

Mary Rose O’Reilly uses a wonderful metaphor for deep listening, and it is a metaphor I can understand because of my childhood experiences on my aunt and uncle’s farm. O’Reilly calls for “listening like a cow!” This is terrific! She notes how cows simply stand there, chewing, looking at us with those big brown eyes taking everything in. The possibility for communion is great in the Presence of the cow as she accepts all that we tell her without judgment or reaction. “We don’t need fixing” she says “as much as we need a warm space and a good cow” (1998, p. 29). When I recall my experiences of being listened
to, I remember the space created by the listener. I felt drawn into a field of acceptance where there was a sense of a welcoming emptiness. I felt invited to be entirely myself; I could show anger, pettiness, sorrow, joy or any number of emotions and I knew all would be taken in yet not held against me. The listener provided a sort of confessional wherein I could allow the fullest expression of my soul and come to believe in my own healing powers rather than having someone else “fix” me. We all depend on the open-heartedness or “warm space” of the other when we tell the stories of our lives; subsequently, the witness becomes sacramental in the sense that she is the outward sign of our inner journey. When we are truly heard, we enter into a state of grace wherein our souls are touched with gentleness, and in this mirror, we come to see ourselves luminous with humanity and divinity, reflections of the Universal Heart!
VI. Compassion

I walk through the doors at St. Vincent's Hospital for my late afternoon appointment with my surgeon to hear the results of the C.T. scan of my ankle. I am surprised by the intimacy of this old hospital – there is a feeling of lightness, of healing. I make my way to the Foot and Ankle Clinic on the second floor. When I arrive in the small waiting area, I find myself alone with the exception of two men conversing far behind the counter. Neither looks up when I enter, so I sit down to read a magazine. The words do not penetrate; I am not really present. I begin to sense into the great fear building in my chest and I tell myself to be hopeful that “all is for the best” but these words also float away. After twenty minutes, my doctor appears at the counter to ask if I am there to see him. I wonder that he does not know this – my trepidation builds. He invites me into the back office to view the C.T. scan myself. I am not prepared to see this but I don’t want to be rude. I watch while this doctor explains that my ankle is “toast” as he puts it – I am reminded of the language of my adolescent students and I feel a kind of hysteria at his word choice. The doctor scrolls through all joints in my ankle pronouncing them as various degrees of “toast” and all I can think is, “he doesn’t know my name; I wish he would just say my name!” I feel disembodied, dismembered; my ankle becomes the tangibility of who I am and I begin to taste the fear of amputation. The doctor asks me what is wrong with my ankle; he does not have my chart. I see he is embarrassed by this because he really should be prepared. I tell him my story without the usual details of character, plot, conflict; I sense he is interested only in facts. “I have rheumatoid arthritis.” (Who has this? Who is the “I” that is speaking?) I feel myself disappear deep inside the protective layers of my skin, down into
the center of my Being. From here, I watch and listen; I have no words and this strikes me as ridiculous being an English teacher! My silence fills the room with a thickness, a tension, and the doctor is unnerved. He asks me to walk with him to the other end of the hospital where he has placed my chart. He walks quickly and I have to keep up (my ankle is screaming pain now). We arrive at a post-operative clinic and I see many patients with large bandages on their feet. Some are in wheel chairs, some on crutches. I watch them. The doctor asks to look at my foot. He wants to say my name but I think he has forgotten it. “Please say my name!” I scream in my head. I cannot speak. He pulls out an ink pen and draws lines on the surface of my foot – lines of cutting; the pen feels like the blade of a scalpel. He sketches the smooth lines of surgery, where he will build, where he will take away; my foot is covered with the art of disfigurement. I am fascinated and horrified! He asks me if I understand the process. I ask him if anyone does. “No,” he replies with the pride of one who has specialized knowledge. The doctor is anxious now; he fidgets with his pager that keeps signaling him. He tells me to fill in the paper work and he will book my surgery. (So quick?) I am afraid to pick up the pen, to step into this process that I have been able to observe from a place deep within. He asks me if I have any comments or questions. I think and then my heart speaks: “I am afraid.” He is uncomfortable with this declaration of fear and looks at his pager again before responding, “this is major surgery.” With that settled, he leaves me to fill in the paperwork. He has not said my name.

I walk out of the hospital, into the glorious sun of late afternoon and I cry. They are not little tears but heaving sobs of pain and loss, of not being seen, of not being valued. My heart rips open in the fullness of my despair. I feel as though my life has turned on the head of a pin, such a small turn and my path seems totally foreign. I do not recognize my body
with its new markings, the betrayal of the flesh made real. I can’t stop crying. I am still crying inside – great silent tears of the unheard.

This narrative of my appointment with my surgeon has been difficult to write as I face my fears of the temporality of the physical body. I am curious about the amputation of my voice when my physical self feels threatened. I hope to come back to this fertile ground of inquiry in my final chapter where I will explore more thoroughly my difficulties with voice, particularly with speaking my truth, both within my writing and my living. As I write, words begin to graft together again the fragments of a shattered self. As I rediscover my voice and feel a sense of wholeness, I am able to inquire into my heart’s capacity to listen to the soul’s experience and to communicate that experience to the blankness of the page.

I am aware of a growing kindness and receptivity, an opening in the heart chakra which allows the soul’s revelation and unfoldment. Almaas (2002) refers to this sensitivity as empathic attunement which is crucial to the process of inquiry. I feel this state as the manifestation of the compassionate heart which seeks to know the truth in the moment because it knows the truth can be held; there is trust that I can be present with the truth, however painful, and it will not destroy me. I inquire into the mystery of this compassionate heart. Why do I believe in the wisdom of the heart over the wisdom of mind? This is an important question about identity – who I believe I am. Where is the dwelling-place of my essential self? I have a sense of self that is heart, a pre-cognitive awareness of my True nature held in every beat of my heart signaling my aliveness. I am drawn to the innate
softness of my heart; this feels closer to Me than the thinking mind. But this is only a feeling and I am struggling to define this feeling that feels and doesn’t speak with words. My heart has sentience and it has love. I am reminded of a mantra my instructor taught my inquiry group: “I cannot know who I am; but the deepest desire of my heart is to come to know.” In this mantra I find the gentleness of compassion, and a kind of release, for indeed, I cannot know who I am. I also sense into the lovely curiosity that these words encourage; the heart’s desire is for learning. I relax into the holding these words provide as if there is a universal heart at work in my own. I feel into the support of the compassionate heart. I breathe deeply and focus my awareness on the condition of the heart. I sense its bruising. It has been painful to tell the story of my upcoming surgery. My heart beats faster with anxiety. I cannot escape the feeling of dread around the heart; it acts like a container pressing in on the tissues. I am back in the body cast of my infancy. My breathing becomes more shallow as my lungs force the chest against the hard plaster. My heart compensates by getting smaller. There is not enough room for me in this cast that covers me from neck to feet. I cannot move. I think I am going to die. I tell myself to breathe now, to feel my feet on the floor. The panic fades somewhat but I am still aware of the pressure on my chest. I focus my attention on that invisible force pushing against my chest. I am familiar with this constraint. As my awareness deepens, I begin to come back into my adult self. The anxiety fades and I call upon the Universal compassionate heart to hold me (the infant) in her fear. The room becomes tinged in softness as I give myself up to this embrace. The softness penetrates my shell and I am once again cradled in my mother’s arms.
This Universal compassionate wisdom supports all transformation, and I believe it is manifested in the “personalness” of the human heart. There is a compassion that is inherently me. Here, it becomes necessary to fully explore the definitions of True compassion so that I might fully apprehend its innate wisdom in my own process. When I experience myself as compassion, I am really me, without notions of who I should be or how I should be acting in the moment; I can be present with the stirrings of the heart. So, compassion is an openhearted acceptance and allowing of whatever is there. It means I am a space – a warm, sensitive, knowing, contactful space. The compassionate heart is not only an open heart, it is a warm heart that is sensitive to the truth, that is sensitive to who I am and who others are. My heart experiences itself as intimate, tender and loving as it aligns itself with Truth, with the soul’s journey. Compassion is a sort of soul chemical that acts to melt the protective armor of the self or other; therefore, when it is present, compassion relaxes a certain defensive function of the nervous system. It can be felt as a loosening or melting, an energetic release, or it can be felt as an expanding, a space that can accommodate greater consciousness. This state of compassion is our natural way of Being, without protective walls that block our experience of ourselves or harden us against others. This is the paradox of protection, that in the process of defending against “enemies,” our defensiveness actually blocks the experience of our True selves. When I am contracting around the heart, I am rejecting my truth and creating pain; I cannot manifest True compassion for another because I have no attunement with myself. I cannot have empathy without the awareness and sensitivity to my own condition. Over the years, I have become more aware of my somatic holding in the upper back, a defense against the full experience
of the heart. It has only been through massage and chiropractic care that I have been able to feel into the tightness in these ribs, a tightness that blocks the flow of energy to the heart. When I am most cut off from my True compassion, my body becomes slumped, defensive in its posture. As soon as I feel the familiar muscle aches, I am made aware of the need for inquiry; “what is right about not feeling the heart?” It is at this time, I become thankful for the body’s wisdom in its drawing me back to inquiry. I have been stubborn in hearing this wisdom of my body.

So what are the qualities of the compassionate heart, the seat of true intimacy and contact with the self or others? During a weekend spiritual retreat, my instructor clearly described “Bodhicitta” or “the awakened heart” (Torresan, 2002) as it is seen in Tibetan Buddhism. According to Buddhist tradition, monks use a mantra or short prayer repeated many times to aid in meditation. The mantra “Om Mani Padme Hum” is the most holy of Tibetan mantras because it is the mantra of compassion – ultimately a mantra about the release from suffering through direct experience of the heart. These Sanskrit words reveal the subtleties of the heart. “Om” meaning “original sound” stands for a state of unity, of Being where there is no separateness. It is an openness that includes and welcomes; thus it is the compassionate heart. “Om” is the original virginal state before any duality. So the “Om”, if you feel the sound itself, is a boundlessness, ultimately a sense of oneness with the universe. This is our True nature before we even think about it – it is beyond the conceptual realm. “Mani” is the jewel, the preciousness of the heart; it is a priceless treasure. “Mani” is the recognition that we have true value in the eyes of God – that we are God! Another quality of “mani” is objectivity; thus the compassionate heart sees without sentimentality, without preferences. With “mani”, the heart recognizes the Truth of the other regardless of
any history of negativity; therefore it is unconditional love. The third word, “padme” refers to the lotus flower, an aesthetic representation of the qualities of softness, of gentleness. The petals of a flower have these qualities; we want to feel the texture of the petals, to caress our cheeks with the kind of softness we associate with new life, with babies. This same delicacy, tenderness and freshness are aspects of the “padme” heart. When we experience the True self in a state of compassionate awareness, we feel into the “padme” qualities of the heart; in essence, we become the “padme” heart! The syllable “hum” refers to manifestation, for it is not enough to understand the qualities of the heart, they must be lived out in our creations. “Hum” represents completion, the actualization of our aliveness. Thus True compassion is the totality of the virginal heart unfettered by ideas; it is a space, an allowing that is extremely sensitive; it is truly an “awakened heart” or “heart-mind” unity. It is at the time of initiation, birth, manifestation, and transformation that compassion is most needed. When we are poised on the edge of change, we require the compassionate holding of the heart to act as guide in a journey that is often frightening. Without this basic trust in our environment, few of us would venture forth on the path of personal growth.

In my vocation as teacher, I am called upon to manifest the compassionate heart in all my interactions with my students. Over the years, I have become attuned to the deep pain that lies just under the surface of all persons within my school, staff and students alike. I acknowledge the Buddhist truth that all people have suffering in this life and that the end of suffering lies in its full acknowledgement and acceptance. Therefore, it has become my intention to be Present in the face of my own pain and the pain of others, to seek understanding of the suffering so that we might all realize our True selves. In his article, “Layered Voices of Teaching,” Ted Aoki refers to teaching as “being attuned to the place
where care dwells" (1992, p. 21). This quotation beautifully illustrates the relationship between Being, awareness and compassion. From a place of Presence, the True teacher is deeply attuned to the hearts of her students; thus she does not simply show her students love, she IS love! From this place, she is able to make authentic contact with her students because true contact comes from really seeing the uniqueness of the other. The heart then supports the student in her experience of the moment, whatever it happens to be. The heart creates the space, the allowing, the acceptance of that student. This is slightly different from witnessing in that the felt Presence of the teacher becomes more personal, intimate, as if the two hearts are touching. There is a feeling of really being there with the other. When we focus attention through the heart, there is a knowing of the other that goes far deeper than knowing “about” them. We come to perceive the “suchness” or essence of the other. When I live from my heart space, I am more able to receive the fullness of others, to listen through their words, their bodies, to penetrate to that space within them that contains the foundation for their Being, and there, I listen to the soul’s whispers. This manifestation of the compassionate heart is very different from the usual experience of compassion in this life which is a false or “social” compassion – a compassion of “doing” rather than of Being.

In his lectures, Almaas (1987) clearly outlines what I have come to know (and experience) of compassion both personally and professionally. Generally, when we think of compassion, we think of protecting someone from feeling hurt. When I consider my habitual response to other’s pain, I must admit to feelings of discomfort at being present with their hurt. I am fearful of the magnitude or duration of the pain because it usually echoes unacknowledged hurt within myself. Now, I must also admit that I am rarely conscious of these underlying motivations for “protecting” others from their pain. I believe
in my genuine intention to make others feel better and I equate this with the stoppage of tears. I notice how I move my friends and students quickly through their expressions of hurt in order to resolve the issues and to attain a state of calm. Of course, this might be the right action given the circumstances of the school setting. However, as I explore this tendency further, I am able to see into my own history of receiving false compassion. Few teachers or friends have shown the required Presence to allow the fullest expressions of my heart, and this lack of acceptance has caused deep anguish that I am still learning to release.

So I become aware of an interesting paradox, that when we show false compassion, our intention is to protect the other from the truth of hurt. However, we do not see that it is in the act of protecting that we prevent the possibility of transformation, because the hurt is actually caused by a disconnection from an essential aspect of the self (Almaas, 1988). Protection simply prevents the person from reconnecting to the True self through the direct experience of the wounding. Therefore, it is a falsehood to say that compassion is a form of protection. In “social” compassion, we become barriers to the growth of the soul; instead, we perpetuate the soul’s stuckness. Lama Surya Das (1997) refers to this compassion as “idiot compassion,” an unconscious acting out of our egoic fears and laziness which is counterproductive to the other soul’s unfolding. This kind of compassion arises as a calculated response to social situations. It is the expression of sentimentality or pity rather than true empathy. Thus wisdom is an essential aspect of True compassion. If compassion calls for empathy and listening to what is really being said, then there must be clarity within the listener to be able to perceive the truth in the other and to act appropriately on that truth.

I hope to illustrate this unity of the compassionate heart with the Buddhist concept of right
action (action firmly grounded in Truth) by referring to two incidents in my teaching practice.

Sandra lingers behind after English class one afternoon. I feel her wanting to speak privately to me as she hangs back allowing all other students to have their turn before her. She approaches my desk with her piece of writing she has been working on for our class assignment. She offers it to me and I begin to read. I am aware of feeling very tired, almost wishing I hadn't given this assignment because so many students are seeking extra help. I skim her words and find several language mistakes (Sandra is an ex-ESL student). I start to give feedback about the overall structure, how she can tighten the narrative, omit extraneous passages. Sandra is silent. I look up sensing the growing disconnection between us. Sandra is crying. I feel immediate guilt because I realize I haven't been open to her offering of self. I have made the gross mistake of guessing what she wants from our meeting. I couldn't have been more wrong. I feel the softening of my heart, the relaxing of my head as I really listen into the expanding silence between us. She cannot speak because the tears are too many. I instinctively know this state of the soul so I open even more to the space. I feel the contraction of her heart as she struggles to share her story, so my own heart responds with even greater softness. Her father is in Taiwan and she has not seen him for three years. She is lonely and cannot tell her mother her pain because she fears burdening her mother. She has written a story about honoring thy parents. She has taken her pain to be a betrayal of her father's love for her, of his commitment to the family he works hard to support in his job in Taiwan. I close her paper and tell her I am honored that she would share herself with me. She cannot speak so I ask her if it is all right to just be
silent. She nods. I sense a subtle anxiety within my chest and a corresponding thought about my limitations as a teacher, but let these pass through without much thought. The silence remains for some time until Sandra tells me the pain of her loneliness, of not being able to voice her despair. I ask her what she thinks will happen if she reveals her pain. She has not thought of this. (I also know these imaginary threats of telling my truth.) I point out that she has found words in her writing and that these have been healing words. After more tears and more silence, she suggests she might do more journaling to release the stories. She says she might be able to talk to her mother; maybe it would be okay. She smiles at me and I feel her emerging joy—a giant yellow sun glowing in the center of our chests.

In this exchange with Sandra, I noticed the spontaneous opening of my heart as I instinctively descended from the hardness of the head to a space of greater receptivity. My reactions, movements, even my words felt effortless as if there were an intelligent energy directing the whole process. I felt very little need to “do something” but rather a trust that whatever needed to happen would just manifest. So I was able to sustain the silences that were so necessary to hold Sandra’s vulnerability, while noticing my own reactivity and letting it pass. I was able to suffer with her, feeling no separation between our hearts. When I look back, I see that I actually said and did very little—an interesting irony given my usual cerebral positioning in the classroom. In this next exchange, I manifest True compassion in a very different way...

Catherine and I have had an easy camaraderie all year and I notice that she has not been as responsible with her schoolwork as she once was. She has been making comments
about being bored and wanting to graduate quickly, to "get outta here!" She makes many statements that I am her favorite teacher and I notice when she does this she is acting as a young child, curling her hair around her finger, not making eye-contact. I sense into her inertia and recognize the resistance against maturity. On this occasion, I want to address a group assignment she participated in where her partner did the bulk of the work. I ask Catherine what mark she should receive and she responds offhandedly with "whatever, I don't care." I tell her rather strongly that her response is unacceptable, that she has made a conscious choice not to complete the assignment therefore she must also consciously accept the consequences. She is startled and appears hurt at my brusqueness. After explaining to her that her work has been sliding even after many discussions to the point, she grudgingly offers a failing mark. I share with her my perception of her inner voice (the Id I have referred to in class discussions) that is causing difficulties in her life. I ask her to recall her more adult self who once approached her learning with greater maturity and joy. She smiles in knowing. I re-affirm that I care a great deal for her but that if she doesn't show any signs of improving her work ethic soon, I will be phoning her parents to let them know. (Her mother, in particular, has been very supportive of Catherine's education and personal growth). Catherine expresses shock that I will go to this length, yet I am aware of a warmth in her that I am showing my caring. She leaves the classroom with a small smile at me.

In the exchange with Catherine, I sense a solidity in my core and a corresponding strength in my words. I was not aware of rehearsing my speech but rather of saying exactly what needed to be said, with frankness and strength but also with a warm heart. This act of
compassion involved the setting of boundaries – the right action was about saying “no” to the errant inner child who was wreaking havoc on Catherine’s schoolwork. The felt experience of my compassion was quite different from my exchange with Sandra who needed the “padme” or intimate contact of my vulnerable heart to hold her own suffering. However, in both situations, there was a Presence in me which was invoked to act in the manner which directly corresponded to the individual needs of each student. I am fascinated and awed by the omniscience that we all have to respond with appropriate and compassionate action to emerging situations. Here, I begin to feel into the complexity of Presence and its essential manifestation of True compassion and I have to acknowledge that this state of “heart-mind” cannot be enacted or achieved but rather, when I am not thinking too much, it is just there!

Recent events within the circles of my friends and family have produced a more concentrated experience of my compassionate heart. I have found myself surrounded in great sorrow as I support my friend who just discovered her father is dying of cancer. My own brother has had to return to the home of my parents out of deepening despair and meaninglessness in his life. I have listened to their stories with the absolute taking in of the other and I have noticed the subtle layering of suffering within my own heart as I struggle to contain their grief within the field of my own. This is especially true in my relationship with my brother because, of course, we have such a close personal history. I am keenly aware of my reactivity to his suffering. Put bluntly, I am terrified! I feel my own control issues surfacing, the “social” compassion of wanting to fix his situation surfaces with such ease that I have to be vigilant in my feedback to him lest I further damage his already fragile sense of self. I have used the Buddhist practice of “avalokiteshvara” or deep listening and
loving speech (Nhat Hanh, 1998). Within my closest relationships, we practice dyadic listening where one person expresses herself while the other listens deeply to the sound of the pain. After a time, we switch roles so that the other may also be heard in this deeply affirming way. I notice the deep relaxing of our bodies as we accept the other’s grief with unconditional love. So I learn that really seeing the pain in ourselves and others brings a lessening of that pain. This is the spirit of essential compassion, a true “suffering with” the other – our hearts merge in our shared humanity.

I am always amazed at my students’ capacity for this unconditional love and acceptance of others’ pain. One morning, after learning about my surgery, two of my grade eight students followed me into my classroom with a seeming intuition about my state of sadness. They knew I had a doctor’s appointment the previous afternoon so they wanted to ask about the results. With their inquiry, I could feel the melting around my heart, the easing of contraction. These two girls were wonderful! I experienced a profound gratitude for their innocent offering of compassion. My own story sparked a mood of sharing as they came to tell me about their own physical limitations. One of my students is legally blind. Her humorous story about navigating the busy hallways brought laughter and a feeling of kinship within our little triad. I came to learn from these students that my honesty and open-heartedness invites their own stories narrated in the spirit of mutual understanding and acceptance. For a few minutes that morning, we experienced our compassionate hearts and we came to inhabit ourselves more fully, discovering our strength, autonomy and purpose. It was a moment of grace!

These beautiful encounters with students are an everyday occurrence within the walls of my school, and my colleagues reveal many similar exchanges. So I have become curious
about the heart’s passionate search for connection, for healing within the constraints of an education system that is directed at the discrete parts of our humanness, as if we do not belong to all subjects and disciplines simultaneously – as if we do not also belong to each other! In her book, *A Challenge to Care*, Nel Noddings (1992) argues that schools must be organized around centers of care in order to create interconnection and affirmation of all beings within the system. These centers of care would include: care for self, for intimate others, for animals, for plants and the physical environment, for the human-made world of objects and instruments, and for ideas. She points to the dangers of focusing only on academic adequacy in an age of increasing fragmentation and spiritual crisis. Her writings address the systemic need for care within our society, and this must become the primary function of our education institutions. Our students must be allowed to reconnect with their hearts, to discover their own limitless capacities for compassion, and to live in wholeness. One writer notes that “education” means to “lead forth the hidden wholeness” (Remen, 1999, p. 35); thus it is the role of education to invoke the wholeness of its teachers and students in order to heal the collective wound of fragmentation. Noddings describes this view of caring as being characterized by “open, non-selective receptivity to the cared-for” (1992, p. 15). This true seeing of the other is an echo of my earlier descriptions of witnessing and the compassionate heart. She goes on to describe caring as a way of “being in relation,” not a set of behaviours. I agree with this view of caring as a relational disposition; however, I would like to shift the notion of “being” to “Being” which acknowledges the essence or True self of the carer in her manifestation of compassion. This shift supports Noddings’ call for an increased spirituality in education – we need to integrate the self through the compassionate heart, and in coming to know the self more fully, we can
come to understand people whose experiences and reality are different from our own. Here, we can see the importance of the True teacher in modeling the compassionate heart for her students. I have shown that my own experiences of depth and vulnerability within my classroom bring an opening in the hearts of my students. I believe I am practicing Noddings’ model of centers of care (despite the fact that my school is not also structured around these centers). The True teacher can create a center of care within the safe holding of her classroom; she can create an “authentic community” (Kessler, 1999, p. 115) wherein students can receive the critical mirroring of their essential natures, where they are truly seen and heard.

In closing this chapter on the compassionate heart, I am ironically returning to the field of medicine and the wisdom of Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen. In her essay, “Educating for Mission, Meaning and Compassion,” (1999) Dr. Remen describes her own experiences as a medical doctor and how she was taught to hide her heart behind the veil of “objectivity” and false strength. She notes: “In the medical culture, we do not engage with our full humanity. In fact, authentic human connection – connecting to the humanness in yourself and in others – is actually seen as being something undesirable, unprofessional, even dangerous. We have become ashamed of our wholeness and may come to see it as a weakness” (p. 36). Throughout my reading of her essay, I was struck with the many similarities between the medical and teaching fields. Both doctors and teachers (especially high school teachers) are trained to be experts in their chosen fields; we are encouraged to specialize, to examine the world only in parts. We are taught to be objective, to hold the world at arm’s length to be better able to critique it. We are both trained to ignore the stirrings of the heart in favour of the head. As well, in both professions, we perceive reality through the lens of our discipline,
and we often resist information that we feel is not relevant to our realm of interest or experience. As a result, we tend to compartmentalize our students, seeing them only as English students or chemistry students; as learning disabled or ESL; as cooperative or disruptive. We perceive our students in ways that reinforce our habits of practice. This is not wholeness nor is it compassionate! When we reject our hearts “we contribute to the cultural shadow – we contribute to sickness” (Remen, 1999, p. 37). Remen jokingly refers to herself as a “recovering physician.” I love this! I believe most of us teachers are also “recovering.” The very condition of our humanity means all of us are recovering! I have come to believe that life is really a long “convalescence,” a period of gradual strengthening (which is not to be confused with hardening). Our suffering brings us more directly into contact with our inner strength, with a deepening capacity to stay open to experience. For this is the true test of strength – staying Present in the face of suffering! In my own spiritual work, I have learned a basic trust that all experience, even pain, is a manifestation of the optimizing force of the universe flowing through me. The compassionate heart is the soul’s conduit between the physicality of the body and the Absolute; therefore, the heart’s expression is a direct apprehension of the Truth of Being!

I want to revisit an inquiry I began today over tea with a friend. Together, we recalled our experiences of deep pain, the full allowing of suffering. I acknowledged I have felt the tearing in the heart, the rending of the chest as I open to an exquisite agony. Now, I am curious about the experience of awe and a kind of pleasure at those moments of suffering. How do I manifest both states simultaneously? Why, then is there such a fear of pain? I have tried to live a safe life, always looking to avoid any physical or psychic pain;
so I am shocked to discover that in those moments of the fullest experience of despair, beauty arises. What is this beauty? Even as I contemplate this, I feel the familiar ache in the heart, a kind of yearning that leads me on in the inquiry. There is something so very fundamental to know here! I breathe deeply sustaining a profound concentration on the condition of the heart. I begin to sense an expansion, a welling up of tears. Are these tears of sadness? Somehow I don’t believe they are. I sense a kind of holding, a feathery light caress against the skin which deepens my experience of the heart. I wonder how large my heart can grow. I am now aware of really feeling myself! There is a profound sense of “I am!” I wonder if this is the source of the beauty, my deepest experience of my essential nature! I sink even deeper into the state of awareness, curious about the ache in my heart. I almost feel as if I am being called home, drawn inward toward some great energy! And now my heart bursts wide as I come into myself, the suchness, the very core of who I am! The tears continue to fall, a pouring forth of the fullness of the heart. Thus, I come to behold that the compassionate heart contains the paradox of human existence; it is the source of suffering and joy in each moment. For when I surrender to the pain, I enter into the temple of my own Truth and find such treasure there!
VII. Knowing

I have been avoiding this chapter on knowing, circling around the essential inquiry that awaits me in this next stage of my writing and personal unfoldment. There is a self inside me who lives from a place of "knowing," or of "wanting to know." I have found myself unable to begin this chapter until I knew what to write! I meditated and cogitated, read over my notes, made outlines of all the knowledge about knowing I have acquired in the past year and still I discovered that I do not know what I think I should know (but I'm not so sure what I think I should know!) So three weeks have passed, and, after all that mental struggle over not knowing what I would say, I find myself in the midst of such a wonderful confusion that I have given up! Great! Now this is a starting place—nothingness! Here, I can begin in fragments and hopefully discover a new concept of knowing that liberates my analytical self and transforms my soul. Perhaps there is a way of knowing that releases instead of imprisons. But I have to start small; my habits of mind are quick to reinstate themselves and already I begin to feel the burden of needing to know, and more importantly, of needing to prove that I know...

So I begin my inquiry on more familiar ground, with the question: "What's right about knowing?" This kind of question is really a sort of koan for the ego mind who takes itself to be "the one who knows," or "the one who should know." When I asked my partner to work with me on this repeating question, I discovered that my relationship to knowledge is about power and control. "Knowledge is power," I tell my students. However, I don't believe I have ever considered what this aphorism really means in my own life. When I
"know" something, I feel a kind of mastery over it; I feel a burgeoning inner strength. The knowledge itself becomes a commodity, something to be added to my storehouse of other knowledge. I notice that this storehouse lends me a sense of value; I feel important. I experience this state most often in my Literature 12 classes where I can hide my intellectual materialism behind the veil of curriculum knowledge and "excellent instruction." My students often comment on the breadth of my knowledge in the content areas, and I have to admit to a certain pride in this aspect of my teaching. However, there is a voice inside me that speaks to the hollowness of this celebration, that voice that reminds me I don't know anything at all! And this is the place to which I return with greater frequency. This "unknowing" is the truth from which true knowing will be discovered.

Buddhist education precepts make a distinction between "knowledge" and "wisdom." I think this is an important discrimination that has relevance to both our education systems and our inner lives. "Knowledge" is defined as our understanding which is conceptual, intellectual and philosophical—it is insight connected to our brains; whereas, wisdom is the insight and understanding that comes from our hearts. Ultimately wisdom is compassion (Rinpoche, 1999). Buddhist practice calls for the equal and balanced development of wisdom and knowledge, for both are necessary to mature functioning in this world. Knowledge provides us with the conceptual tools and insights, while wisdom gives us the compassion to really see each other, to live communally. The wonderful truth revealed in Buddhist philosophy is that both knowledge and wisdom are already present within the individual; therefore, we all have the essential capacities to know ourselves and each other in our original purity. Unlike knowledge, wisdom is sometimes referred to as being "self-secret;" we have it but we don't know we have it until it is revealed to us by our
own experience (Rinpoche, 1999). The most rewarding aspect of my teaching is helping
students to recognize their own innate capacities for knowledge and wisdom. In essence, the
True teacher “gently leads her students back to themselves.” And there is such joy and
expansion as these students come to see their capacities for self-knowing and thus for self-
healing. When students exclaim, “I know this!” or “I can do this!” the classroom feels
larger, as if the walls of the classroom are allowing the expansion of the space, an
acceptance of a more complete human being! When we come into true knowing of
ourselves, there is necessarily a quality of value in the process. We believe in our innate
goodness and capability! What wonderful self-esteem training for all of us! So knowledge
and wisdom both emanate from the universal heart, in fact, both are qualities of our True
self, which is Love! Therefore, in our classrooms, we must find ways to teach
compassionately, to create the opportunities where our students (and ourselves) can acquire
knowledge that leads to a deeper wisdom, and where we can manifest this wisdom in
openhearted communion with self and other.

In my own teaching practice, I have striven to create a classroom or “center of care”
based on caring for the hearts of all beings present within my space. As part of my function
as teacher, I bring students to the world of ideas and show them that these concepts also
have value in as much as they reveal who we are or who we might become. I have come to
see conceptual knowledge as valuable only if the “words can be made flesh”. At a
conference last week, the presenter challenged us to teach only what we think is really
valuable. Now, this is an interesting challenge for a high school English teacher who has
been trained to teach “information” to her students. When I was in secondary school and
university, I filled notebooks with subject information but was rarely encouraged to
extrapolate true knowledge let alone wisdom from the words. Sadly, I revert to this way of teaching all too often in my own classroom. In my lessons, the inquiry is most often designed by me and performed by me, with the help of some student responses along the journey. But ultimately the journey is mine, even though my students are invited to join me. When I design such teacher-centred lessons, I am limiting the opportunities for students to grow in awareness and understanding of themselves and the human condition. There is no True teaching or learning in these lessons. At department meetings, I often hear complaints about the sacrifice of content knowledge. This is especially true in my social studies department. What do we teachers think will happen if we only cover eight hundred years of history in grade eight instead of a thousand? Do we really believe that our students are empowered by the knowledge of the Feudal system? These are important questions we must ask ourselves as we “fill” our students with potentially stagnant bytes of information. How can these words be made flesh? I am not advocating the stripping of curriculum, but rather a rethinking of how curriculum can be a vehicle to the inner dimensions of our students. How can we teach for knowledge and wisdom through the use of history and literature? Indeed, how can teaching in the subject areas lead us all into communion with ways of knowing that are transforming? How can teaching and learning lead us to truth?

Before exploring transformative knowing more fully, it is necessary to say something about the nature of truth, for knowing implies that there is something to be known. In his book, Spacecruiser Inquiry, A.H. Almaas explores the relationship between knowledge, understanding and truth. He states: “Knowledge is transformed through the experience of truth, and in understanding the significance of that truth, knowledge becomes deeper, fuller, more meaningful” (2002, p. 64). Thus Almaas articulates a vision of truth
that is objective and perceived through the direct experience of the individual. This is a controversial assertion as postmodernist thought speaks of truth as being subjective and relative. In my own spiritual work, I have come to view truth as being “independent of the conceptualizing mind of the person investigating” (Almaas, 2002, p. 342). To be more specific, I believe there is a truth beyond the realm of my psychological identifications or subjective positions. In Almaas’ writings, he posits truth as “not merely the ultimate truth of reality but rather a specific element in any experience: the truth of the experience, which can be confirmed by several independent observers” (2002, p. 344). Almaas goes on to argue that:

Science accepts that the assertions of a theory concerning the physical world can be proven or disproved, and that the outcome will be accepted universally. We are saying the same thing about human experience: If different people explore, investigate, and experiment – in other words, inquire directly… they will all come to the same truths about experience. We can find out what in human experience is objectively true independent of our attitudes and our psychological, philosophical, or ideological positions. And this discovery will be a matter of common agreement.

(p. 342)

When I am inquiring into an emotional state, I ask myself what is true in my experience of the moment. Thus, at the time, I believe there is a truth to be uncovered once I remove my obscurations. If I believed truth were completely relative, why then would inquiry be necessary? I could say my experience was simply a transitory and random occurrence. In dismissing the experience, I would be losing out on the possibility of greater awareness and personal growth. I do believe there is something to uncover beneath my habitual actions,
reactions and behaviours. Inquiry leads me to the truth that lies there in the moment revealing that even truth is transitory. From one moment to the next truth will give way to new truth arising. Thus I have discovered in my teaching and in my personal life that to inquire into truth is to come into awareness of the soul’s dynamism. I am constantly becoming!

This experience of the truth through knowing is beautifully described by Parker Palmer in his book, To Know As We Are Known. He shows that the root of the word “truth” is the same as the Germanic “troth” meaning “vow” or “pledge.” “With this word ‘troth’ one person enters a covenant with another, a pledge to engage in a mutually transforming relationship, a relationship forged of trust and faith in the face of unknowable risks” (1993, p. 31). Here, we can see the relationship between the knower and knowledge itself.

To know something or someone in truth is to enter troth with the known, to rejoin with new knowing what our minds have put asunder. To know in truth is to become betrothed, to engage the known with one’s whole self, an engagement one enters with attentiveness, care and good will. To know in truth is to allow one’s self to be known as well, to be vulnerable to the challenges and changes any true relationship brings. To know in truth is to enter into the life of that which we know and to allow it to enter into ours. Truthful knowing weds the knower and the known; even in separation, the two become part of each other’s life and fate. (Palmer, 1993. p. 31)

In my teaching life, I have created a classroom wherein my students and I have entered “troth” with each other. I have sought to live my teachings in my daily interactions
with students, thus supporting our mutual journeys into self-knowing. When my True
teacher is present in the space, the knowledge that I “teach” is given life because it
originates in the truth of my heart, in my lived experiences of this world. And this invites
my students to see into my mysteries and their own simultaneously. When we are
“betrothed” in true knowing, we bridge the gap between learning and living, seeing that
these two are really one. I believe we teachers too often break “troth” with our students by
refusing to be known when, at the same time we ask them to reveal themselves. In a recent
meeting of a teacher inquiry group at my school, several teachers spoke of the difficulties of
relaxing the “professional self” in front of students. (I notice that their use of the term
“professional” seems to imply distance and reason – this differs from my own interpretation
of professionalism.) This teacher “objectivity” that so many in my vocation cling to is really
a defense against the experience of the heart within the classroom. When we defend
ourselves in the presence of our students’ vulnerability, we are rejecting their offering of
openness and thus we are breaking our “troth” with them. I have seen the consequences of
this mostly unconscious process even in my own teaching. Last week, students were invited
to share with the class something they were looking forward to after graduation. After one
student responded, I made a sarcastic remark (I tried to pass off as humour) and the class
had a collective gasp of disbelief letting me know I had broken “troth” with them. I felt so
ashamed and had to really examine my motivation for making such a comment. I began to
see the build-up of frustration that I had held for that student and realized I had broken
“troth” with myself, that student and the entire class by allowing myself to vent my anger.
At the end of the period, I asked for the class’ forgiveness for my unconsciousness. In this
asking for and receiving of forgiveness, I could feel the bonds of trust being re-created and
maybe even strengthened. When I can openly admit my humanness, my students never cease to amaze me with their acceptance.

So truth is not about perfection but rather about being who we really are – a work in progress; subsequently, I am coming to realize that my True teacher is fully human, not an embodiment of enlightenment. Both in my classroom practice and my daily life, the universe creates opportunities for me to know myself more completely. Therefore, life experiences lead me to questioning those experiences. After many years of spiritual work, I have developed my skills of self-knowing so that now, when I allow myself to disappear into my inquiry, whether it is an intellectual or spiritual question, I notice a laser-like precision, a cutting through the surface obscurations to penetrate the subject itself. However, as Palmer points out above, there is a wonderful inter-beingness that arises as truth itself seeks to be known. I have often experienced and witnessed this drawing-in of truth as if it is waiting to be seen and understood, as if it too has a heart yearning for recognition.

_Last month when I returned home to visit with my brother who has been struggling with a loss of self, I was able to bear witness to his process of transformation – a process that took him to the shores of despair and threatened to drown him. When I first saw him, I experienced him as a profound hollowness, an absence. I noticed my own reactivity about this as I could feel myself wanting to know, wanting to label his experience within the context of my own spiritual understanding. In his presence, I soon dropped my own sense of self and found it remarkably easy to simply be there listening as he described the panic attacks, the fear of death, the fear of nothingness. The gaunt lines of his face told me of the struggles he had faced in recent months. Here was someone who had completely lost
himself and yet he was waiting with a mixture of fear, patience and curiosity to see who would arise in the space left behind. I had the felt experience of some energy reaching out for my brother, encircling him, leading him toward a wonderful discovery. Last week, he called me to describe the moments of pure joy as he came into his real identity, his original purity. “I really feel like me!” Those words were hushed, tentative as if he were in the presence of something so wondrous and familiar, yet at the same time a little threatening. Again I felt myself wanting to know, to understand his experience in some sort of context. He could feel this in my questions and he told me to let him be. I felt ashamed, as if I were trying to sabotage his experience of himself, and it made me wonder how often I cut off my own experiences by seeking answers. I am blessed that my brother could remind me to let go of knowing, to simply allow the experience to unfold without containment. I am blessed that my brother can share his pain so freely, and in doing so invite me into his heart wherein I may come to know his softness. “The truth will set him free.”

Over the past several weeks, as I contemplated this chapter, I have immersed myself in the field of knowing noticing my seeming incessant mental activity and attendant somatic responses. My head has felt as if it is swimming with information, scenarios, writing ideas, teaching ideas, spiritual discoveries, and other irrelevancies. I am struck with the fact that in all this “knowledge” I have only once experienced a state like my brother’s own epiphany. And I remember that one time! It was after a particularly frustrating morning trying to write this chapter, when all my words of knowing seemed to freeze on the page, the life squeezed out of them. I sat down on the bed and cried tears of helplessness – I yelled out loud, “I don’t know what I’m talking about!” Then I began a meditation. For the first few minutes, I
felt I was going insane as I became aware of the litany of thoughts rushing through my head. It was difficult not to become attached to these thoughts as they all tried to "hook" me in some familiar way. After ten minutes of great discipline and vigilance, I could feel the contents of my head begin to dissolve. Soon there was just myself. Wow! For the first time in days, I experienced a stillness of the mind along with a subtle tingling energy in the head. I felt open, refreshed, radiant. When I returned to the computer later in the day, I was able to write for several hours. So I ask myself why? What is the relationship between giving up and true knowing?

Throughout my life, I have been taught never to give up; giving up was a sign of defeat and I have always feared the notion of "losing". As a child with a debilitating disease, I often wanted to give up, to give into the pain which always threatened to overwhelm me. I believe my experiences of physical pain created this fear of giving up, the fear of dying. This position of my familiar self has caused a kind of hardness in the head, which has led me to persevere in situations which would be better abandoned. By positioning myself as "one who knows", I have effectively narrowed my experience and understanding; subsequently I have limited my possibilities for transformation. When I consider my classroom experiences of "knowing," I begin to see how fixed I am in my perceptions and conceptual knowledge. In fact, I am simply stuck! I become most aware of this when my students and I are engaged in a discussion of a piece of literature and one student makes a comment that I would consider is inconsistent with the themes of the work. At that moment, my mind struggles to re-establish an equilibrium, to accommodate the new information within my existing framework of knowledge. I seldom consider throwing out the framework itself, acknowledging it as a limitation to the greater understanding of the
literary work. I also see this tendency in my relationships with my students, as I often perceive them through the lens of past interactions or what I know of them as students. Most years, my colleagues and myself begin the first day of school comparing class lists asking for information about any students we may not know. I am now coming to see this process as suppressive, for reliance on this way of knowing leads me into identifications with my students – I fail to see them for who they truly are. Almaas (2002) refers to this type of knowledge as “ordinary knowledge,” the knowledge we have in our minds, the totality of accumulated information. As a teacher, I have to admit to the preoccupation I have with ordinary knowledge; I often come to view this way of knowing as ultimate truth. Sadly, I am deeply identified with this way of knowing, and I begin to see that I am transmitting this rigidity of understanding to my students. So often, my students resist the deeper questions that arise in the courses I teach. Instead, they busy themselves with the minutiae of “ordinary knowledge” concerned more with regurgitating the teacher’s ideas than with developing their own inquiry. On those rare occasions when the discussion reveals a hidden truth and we all come to experience that truth just for a moment, I am asked to summarize the idea in a simple theme statement that students can remember for the test. I am asked to convert this new wisdom into ordinary knowledge, to pin it down, to capture it thereby killing its aliveness. I cannot fault them for this intellectual apathy, for I have contributed to their way of being in the classroom. Recently, I asked one of my former students if she had signed up to take Literature 12 next year. I had remembered her passion for poetry and thought this course would appeal to her. She told me she had chosen to take all sciences because she could get higher marks. “I like knowing the right answers,” she said. I was saddened by this all too familiar response – school has taught the life out of this
student. Often, I think school teaches us how to bypass our innermost selves in search of the right answer. This way of knowing cannot be transforming because there is no confronting the self; there is no awareness. Many of my students are too afraid to challenge themselves, for out of fear of getting the lower marks they avoid those courses that might offer them the greatest liberation. The student I just mentioned loves poetry yet she is sacrificing her heart in order to ensure her place in the early admission offers to local universities. This scenario plays out all too often as students are pressured to achieve those high grades possibly at the expense of knowledge that really allows them to grow.

In contrast to ordinary knowledge, Almaas describes “direct knowledge” as being that which is perceived through direct experience. Direct knowing is not secondhand but rather the stuff of our immediate experience of the moment wherein the knower and the known are united. This is in contrast to our dualistic ways of knowing taught in schools, that the observer is outside the field of experience. Even in my own inquiry about knowing, I struggle with the notion that there is something out there that I must learn or come to know rather than revealing the knowing that already exists within. Ironically, I am searching for that external expert on myself. I cannot seem to trust in the vagueness, the fragmented understandings, the elusiveness of self-awareness. Perhaps this is why direct knowing emanates from the space of unknowing. There are truths in the fragments if I can only tolerate the mystery for a time.

What is it about the mystery that I find so frightening? When I give myself up to the darkness, I sense the dissolution of the familiar self. I tell myself there is nothing to know. Sensing into my head space, I notice a tension, a kind of holding on and I wonder who is
clinging to old ways? I turn my attention to that sensation of holding on and I feel into the anxiety. For a time, I simply allow this state -- it's like having barbed wire under my skin; I am caught on all the hooks. I become distanced from myself; I am not a teacher, a student, a writer, a thinker, I am not... So who is left to contemplate if I am none of these things? My mind searches for quick answers but I let these slide through my thoughts without much attention. I sense the inquiry will take me further than thought. I enter into a deep meditation that lasts for more than thirty minutes. I feel myself letting go of all ideas, all concepts of myself as person. I let go of my body allowing my limbs, my torso and finally my head to disappear into a thick blackness. During this process, I direct my awareness to my experience of the body and I notice the wonderful softness there. I cannot perceive any pain where there was pain before. I experience myself as languid, alive and sweet! I inquire into this sweetness curious about this new awareness of myself and I sense it is linked to love -- perhaps a delicate self love. I now experience myself as more of a presence rather than a thinking mind. I am beyond conceptual thoughts, yet paradoxically, there is someone here writing in the language of conceptual thought. My knowing feels infinite and spontaneous, as if I am simply an arising consciousness, nothing more. There is now a delightful curiosity surrounding my inquiry. I feel open to any manifestation. Again I notice that what is arising is still non-conceptual but rather embodied knowing, as if my body is the ground of all knowledge. This discovery challenges former ways of knowing myself and I am intrigued to experience myself as pure spaciousness. My head feels empty yet full of potential, as if I can call upon any knowledge necessary for the moment. I breathe deeply and let myself drift in this unfolding. Somewhere in the recesses of my mind is a thought, “Who am I?” But I let this go too...
When I consider this meditation, I recognize what I describe for my students as an “aha” experience. My inquiry took me to a place of great personal discovery where I came to know myself not as a container for ordinary knowledge but rather as a vital consciousness that seeks to know itself and to grow itself in the world. It has been my experience that only through direct knowing can I achieve transformations such as this, where my Being is allowed to manifest whatever is needed for the soul’s learning. My True teacher instinctively recognizes the necessity of these occurrences within her classroom to allow her students that same access to their inner selves. So how does the True teacher create opportunities for her students to practice this way of knowing? In an English classroom, I am also called upon to teach terminology, theory and technique to my students. None of them is born with this ordinary knowledge that our schools value so greatly. Therefore, the challenge of my True teacher becomes balancing ordinary knowledge with direct experience demonstrating a love of intellectual knowledge within a framework of truth, love and acceptance. When I reflect on my best lessons, I notice that the commonality lies in the space I created wherein students were invited to explore their feelings about the topic. As I described in an earlier chapter, I have even encouraged students to listen to their bodies, to come to hear the whispers of truth the bodies tell. I have also used the silence of the classroom as an opening to allow the transformation of knowledge into wisdom. Too often teachers rush their classes into the spaces filling the students with more information rather than allowing time for the knowledge to sink into the soul’s substance creating lasting changes in the students. Thus, the True teacher knows that direct experience is the only way of liberating the dynamism of the soul.
Waldorf educator, Doug Sloan echoes Almaas’ notions of direct experience in his concept of “physical knowing” which he views as the foundation of student creativity. He argues for an integration of physical knowing with more cognitive ways of perceiving the world. “For a creative response, our ideas must be grounded in real, lived experience, not just in formal, abstract conceptions” (as cited in Kessler, 2000, p. 103). Sloan cites the necessity of physical knowing as a means of building confidence, “of being at home in the world” and he asserts that movement and play are critical to the development of this mode of knowing. When I consider the traditional high school classroom, I see an absence of opportunities for kinesthetic intelligence. Sadly, most secondary teachers believe that play is for the primary grades; high school is for teaching knowledge. I have to admit to this bias even in my own classroom where I neglect to include more activities that bring students into their bodies. I wonder how much my own denial of my body factors into this omission? As I sense into my body, I feel the truth in this question; my usual state of being is a form of self-amputation. I am cut off from my own physicality and therefore from knowing grounded in the body. How can I teach what I do not possess?

Sloan also describes direct knowing as the “feeling way of knowing”. In this second stage of knowing and learning outlined in the principles of Waldorf education, feeling is also crucial for both creative and conceptual thinking. “Relationship, sounds, color, other people – that too is a kind of lived knowledge which makes possible ideas later on that are full of life and power. Ideas that are not just abstract but also grounded in caring for the world” (as cited in Kessler, 2000, p. 104). In my classroom, I have become more comfortable offering students opportunities to explore their capacities for feeling knowing. I have often noticed that as I remove certain barriers to the expression of my own heart, I allow greater freedom
for students to express the truths of their own hearts. In this way, my spiritual work has had a direct impact on the lived experiences of my students within my classroom. However, I have not really considered Sloan's theory of "feeling knowing" as knowing but rather simply as feeling. I am curious as to why I have separated the two in both my pedagogy and in my personal life. When I inquire into feeling as knowing, I sense the schism between these two modalities. I find that I do not trust my feelings as legitimate ways of knowing. What is the source of this separation? In my family, we expressed our love for one another, yet any negative emotions were repressed. I grew up without contact with my own feelings of sadness and rage; thus, to this date, I struggle with both of these so-called negative emotions in my daily living and this transfers into my pedagogy. I have learned to separate feelings from thoughts and to value the intellectual or knowing mind over more intuitive and empathic ways of knowing. I believe this dichotomy is also due firstly to culture. In the western world, intellectual knowing has the greatest currency within the realms of education, economics and politics. Even the mission statement for education in British Columbia addresses "the knowledge, skills and attitudes" that are necessary for students to contribute to a "prosperous and sustainable economy" (B.C. School Act, 2002); therefore, knowledge is equated with productivity and not personal well being. Secondly, I have to consider what role gender has played in my complex relationship to the ways of knowing. I live in a patriarchal society where "women's intuition" becomes a derogatory comment rather than a celebration of a way of knowing that should be valued by both sexes. I see in my more empathic students a tendency to avoid the expression of this modality; these students try to hide their unique wisdom beneath a hardened exterior out of the fear that they are not valued in this world. My own childhood experiences taught me that life in a
woman's body was unsafe, and that I had to suppress my female ways of knowing. I have been forced to abandon my feeling knowing out of my own survival instinct, thus substituting a more cognitive or thinking knowing which I believed would lend me greater strength in the world. This suppression of my female knowing has been the most painful separation from my True self as I have sought to create an identity based on false strength and a denial of my most fundamental gendered self. This has been one of the most recent self-constructions to come into view and I acknowledge that I have only just begun to see how this self-identity operates in the world.

“Self-knowledge is the only basis of true knowledge” (Gatto, 1992, p. 30). As teachers we forget this most basic truth both in our professional and personal lives. We neglect to search out opportunities to explore our innermost selves, to seek greater self-awareness in order to live this life more deeply. We, like our students, need time, space and silence away from our institutional settings to develop our private uniqueness and self-reliance (Gatto, 1992, p. 31). Unconsciously, we have embraced intellectual dependency, a reliance on rigid ways of knowing that deny our core humanity and at great personal expense. Through my inquiry into knowing, I have discovered that my implacability has actually hindered my own personal growth while often contributing to my illnesses of the body. It is no coincidence that my inflexibility of understanding is revealed in the contractions of my muscles and the pain of my joints. I am coming to see that there are really only two types of knowing: knowledge that is suppressive and knowledge that is liberating. When I give myself up to the great mysteries of this life acknowledging that I cannot know, I find the truths of existence are offered up to me as if they have been awaiting my readiness. In those moments of surrender, I can be transformed. This is the freedom of
not-knowing and knowing at the same time. On the contrary, when I am mired in the world of ordinary knowledge striving to add to the great storehouse of understanding, I am suppressing the soul’s vitality and the source of my True self/teacher. The way back to myself is through the direct experience of the present moment. To know the truth of myself is to surrender all concepts and ideas, to return to the innocence of my heart which is the cosmic heart, and to enter into the mutuality of all creation wherein I am knower and known.
VIII. Reflections

Tell all the Truth but tell it slant –
Success in Circuit lies
Too bright for our infirm Delight
The Truth’s superb surprise

As Lightning to the Children eased
With explanation kind
The Truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man be blind –

Emily Dickinson (2000, p. 66)

Last night I dreamed of a river – a wide expanse of water gently supporting my body carrying me slowly toward some unknown place. I am a body of tingling cells sensing the warmth of the sun on my chest and the coolness of the water beneath my back. I see the blue of the sky above, limitless azure with wispy clouds of white – a fish pattern scaled above my form. I sink into the liquid blue around me where I become aware of a stronger current now pulling me past the water’s edge, the trees and rocks gliding by like phantoms. Soon I feel the sucking force of water tugging at my limbs as I spiral down into a funnel of cascading water over worn river boulders. I tense my muscles prepared to crash into the unforgiving rocks but I remember I am a fish, and my slippery silver skin slides over rocks into whirlpools of white water and spray. I can breathe underwater inhaling the fluidity of life.
my cells becoming spaces of air. I find I can swim through stone. This dream is very
different from the recurring nightmares of amputation that wake me in a sweaty panic most
nights. In those dreams, my feet have been severed. How can I ground myself without feet?
I am afraid I will float up into the sky straight into the blackness of the universe where I
disappear.

As the school year draws to a close, and I get closer to my surgery, I feel a narrowing
in my life, endings and beginnings becoming one. I always find this time of year bittersweet
as I say good-bye to students I have known for five years, students who have known me for
five years. I celebrate with them this important rite of passage into adulthood and
independence; at the same time I find myself filled with the sadness of farewell – I know I
will not see most of these people again. This is the life of the True teacher, we witness the
growth of our students and ourselves and ultimately we have to let go. My impending
surgery has brought new meaning to these final days in June. I am also entering into an
important rite of passage, a letting go of my body. Because of my building anxiety, I have
found it increasingly difficult to stay in my heart space, preferring instead to withdraw into
the world of theory, school politics, concerns about student achievement – I have forgotten
myself, and in this forgetting I have been wounded.

Behind my eyes, I feel the pressure of unshed tears but I do not let them go --
sometimes they are too many, and the life of a teacher in June doesn’t offer much time for
those moments of release. Instead, I feel myself becoming hardened, my flesh encased in
armor and this has brought on a flare of arthritis inflammation. Today, I walked slowly
pushing against the air to take every step. My body is telling me to stop but I cannot alter my course; I am afraid I will disintegrate. Tonight, my partner tells me I am pushing and I know he is right. He takes me into our bed and holds me with his eyes – I am enfolded in his love and begin to relax the protective fortress around my heart. I cry and cry. “Who is this person who cries so often these days?” I don’t recognize this softness but I am drawn to the peace it offers. My partner asks why I leave my body outside of my living relying solely on my head. I hear this question in my heart and I know the answer immediately. I do not feel safe stepping into this life on legs that cannot carry me. If I can retreat to the recesses of my mind I can imagine a body of iron. I place my head on the pillow next to him and let the tears tell of the price of my illusions. I fall into a deep sleep where no dreams will come.

Tell the Truth but tell it slant. In her poem, Emily Dickinson locates Truth in angles, in shifting perspectives, which allows her to approach the brilliance of Truth without damage to the inner eyesight. I have also chosen to tell the truth “slant” for the totality of the central question “Who am I?” is beyond my capacities for knowing and relating at this point in my process of individuation (perhaps, I will never be able to learn/tell the Truth directly). I am also intrigued by the play of light and shadow in my inquiries when I search out Truth in angles, for I have noticed that Truth is more than “a slant of light,” indeed it is both the light and the absence of light. My various contemplations on soul, presence, compassion and knowing represent the slants of Truth integral to the teaching life, and each inquiry has led me into the shadows of my self to illuminate those aspects of my soul that seldom see the light: my sadness, my fear, my anger, even my joy. These truths of my deepest self have been difficult at times to view even in part. Yet, what I have come to see
upon re-reading these words is that there has always been a sense of wholeness in parts, that
the discrete inquiries have really represented parts of a larger journey. I notice that I live/write
in spirals moving forward but always looping ever so briefly back to familiar terrain in
order to understand the paths I have taken and to calm my fears about change. I have
resisted the urge to go back and re-write inquiries as I came into greater awareness about the
issues I explored. It has always been difficult for me to accept fragments, incompleteness in
my life as if these pieces of self represent a sort of imperfection of my True nature. This has
been one of my central biases as writer/researcher, the search for resolution. I have noticed
the mind’s dis-ease with the dissonant qualities of the soul and the response of the psyche to
try to move myself more quickly through those moments of uncertainty. However, in
recognizing this tendency and watching for its expression in my writing, I have been able to
maintain a more fluid inquiry, which has been characterized by ambiguity, shifting
knowledge and ultimately transformation (He, 1999). My greatest learning has been in
accepting that every stage of the process was equal in value, the realizations not being
possible without those moments of obscured vision.

What is said in one set of terms may give way to something else, not because the
first set was false or has become unfashionable but because it was limited, that a new
formulation encompasses more in more intimate interconnection than did its
predecessor. Consequently, the event of change will no longer be ground for
generalized mistrust of the soundness of all knowledge. (Schwab, as cited in He,
1999, p. 135)

I am fascinated by this organic unfolding, by the energy of Truth itself to weave its
personhood within the fabric of my own life. “Talking to paper is talking to the divine.
Each time you scratch on it, you trace part of yourself, and thus part of the world, and thus part of the grammar of the universe” (Holzer, 1994, p. 55). Indeed, I have been the “myth-maker” creating my truth/ my story as much as recording it. Often times, I struggled with the sheer volume of information on the topic of soul in the classroom. I weighed the words of theorists against my own inner knowing and felt myself to be lacking. On those occasions where I seemed to lose myself in the world of ordinary knowledge, something always called me inward to record my unfolding truth in the moment. The process of inquiry yielded rich results as I found myself contemplating questions of my identity and exposing many existing structures that served to suppress my True self/ teacher. As I entered more deeply into inquiry, I began to remove the scaffolding noticing that my essential self was really quite strong, thereby dispelling old beliefs that I must depend on familiar ways of being in the world in order to navigate the uncertainties of this life. This was especially true in my contemplation of suffering and beauty, as I began to see the healing that comes in the fullest experience of pain. What a liberating discovery!

For the first time in my academic career, my process has been largely unplanned. This was both terrifying and exhilarating as I abandoned my notions of linearity and wrote from the deepest questions of the soul. I am grateful now that I was able to resist the more authoritative voice and instead, reveal the truth of not-knowing, thus allowing the emergence of whispered voices of the self that I have too long ignored in my teaching and my living. I have lived my professional and personal lives in a sort of schizophrenic state, not wanting to admit to their ultimate interdependence, not wanting to accept that I am both reason and emotion together. These writings begin to reveal the layered voices of my teaching and living, illuminating the truth that I cannot separate these two modalities of
being – and I no longer want this divided self. Indeed, I am surprised at how much my epistemological and spiritual questions play out in the landscape of my classroom and how my explorations of soul affect both myself and the lived experiences of my students. I have noted many occasions when I have invited students to journey with me into their innermost selves and these journeys have been rich with the discovery/recovery of individual meaning and purpose. As I make my own forays into the wilderness of spirit, I find that my teaching self becomes expanded and enriched by the koans of contemplation. I have not found answers but I have certainly exposed more questions – indeed, I have revealed that my True self/teacher is a question.

Throughout these personal and professional explorations of identity, I have been drawn naturally into a narrative style curious that I cannot seem to reveal knowing unless it is rooted first in story. This shouldn’t have come as such a surprise given my nature for storytelling and my love of literature. In fact, I have come to see that, as a teacher, I live my life in story; therefore, it is the field of inquiry that speaks to my heart. “Narrative inquiry in the field is a form of living, a way of life” (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 78). I have found that my narratives offer a storied perspective on my lived experiences trying to make sense out of those experiences yet acknowledging the vast mystery that still enshrouds much of my True self/teacher. This is the beauty and the limitation of narrative – it can only approximate the totality of experience. My voice as researcher came to cohabit the unfolding text as she re/lived those stories in their telling. In some passages, the researcher wove herself so tightly into the text that I could not separate my two selves, thus re-experiencing the freshness of old wounds. Throughout my analysis and inquiry, I noticed myself maintaining a slight distance from the writing, just enough to offer views of myself both as
subject and as researcher. This optimal distance allowed me to experience the fullness of
the inquiries yet at the same time to maintain a level of objectivity with which to reach
understanding and draw some conclusions (where salient). I also noticed many times in my
writing when my self as researcher removed herself from the immediacy of experience thus
severing connection with that deeper self behind the writing. Those moments of
disconnection were shadow times when I could not bear the totality of experience and
simply reverted to more comfortable (and safe) ways of knowing, usually speaking through
the voices of the academy. I learned most from those times as I discovered the heart’s
longing to be true to itself even in moments of fear.

Writing these ruminations on the True teacher has revealed an interesting paradox.
While I have consciously gathered wisdom and knowledge filling pages with inquiries about
my vocation and my personhood, I have unconsciously been emptying myself of familiar
ideas, of habits of being. This process of “kenosis” has touched my consciousness at several
stages in my writing; however, I have not given it full consideration until now. As I reflect
on my writing as a whole, I am struck with the truth that my learning has really been an
“unlearning” of my history, my body, my false selves, even my own education. In Christian
theology, “kenosis” denotes the incarnation of Christ as he emptied himself of divinity in
order to be fully human. I have come to see that this process is common to all humanity as
we indeed empty ourselves of the world of ideas, to come into communion with our true
nature, which is grounded in the physicality of the body. I have noticed that my inquiries
naturally lead to a space or void wherein I gain greater clarity; therefore emptiness is
paradoxically the ground of omniscience, which in turn is the perception of differentiation
and unity simultaneously. In the void, I come to see myself as a multi-coloured whole, a
cell in the cosmic body! Thus, the process of kenosis is similar to Hillman's "acorn theory" of incarnation (1996), the belief that we must descend from the heavens to walk firmly upon the earth, our footprints in the sand a declaration of our humanity. I have resisted claiming my humanity, shrinking from the suffering that attends my daily living. What I have come to realize is that the rejection of this suffering actually increases my experience of pain, whether it is manifested in my arthritis, or more indirectly in the longings of my heart. In my teaching, I have also resisted becoming a True presence in the classroom refusing to show my vulnerabilities to my students for fear that I might be exposed as a fake, a teacher with no true knowledge, a teacher with more questions than answers. Last week, my senior students asked if they could read this thesis. I felt both honoured and terrified that they would want to know me. I found myself rationalizing that my writing was too personal to be shared within the walls of my classroom. Now I am no longer so sure. I am curious what the felt experience of my classroom would be like if my students could come to know me in the richness of my personhood – if we could all come to know each other in such intimacy. What then would education look/feel like? I am not sure I have enough courage to fully explore this question; however, I have seen, in the process of my writing that I have brought fragments of my search into the classroom looking into the reflection of my students' eyes for deeper insights into who I am. This mirroring has profoundly affected me, bringing me into closer contact with my own heart and allowing me to take my place in the classroom as a living and growing self.

After twelve years of teaching, I now enter my classroom with more questions about this life than I can entertain in hundreds of thesis papers. While my students may look at me with skepticism, I am beginning to accept my limitations of understanding, acknowledging
my humanness in this life, that perhaps not-knowing is a form of relaxation that I should explore in greater depth. I am coming to realize the courage it takes to transgress the traditional teaching boundaries that would have me hide behind a mask of intellectualism and false knowing instead of appearing before my students in the fullness of my humanity. In her text, Teaching to Transgress, bell hooks (1994) supports a holistic education that fosters the personal well being of both the teacher and her students within the walls of the classroom. This “engaged pedagogy” requires that all “teachers must be actively committed to a process of self-actualization that promotes their own well-being if they are to teach in a manner that empowers students” (p. 15). Parker Palmer (1998) also advocates “professionally relevant inner work” in order to understand our inner voices and to avoid acting these out in the face of adolescent search and struggle. Throughout my readings on educating for spirit in the classroom, few writers have acknowledged the necessity of the teacher’s search for truth and selfhood within our profession. This omission of the teacher’s heart is a painful one. I believe I have come to a crisis of pedagogy where I can no longer teach outside of myself if I hope to heal myself and maintain my physical and spiritual well being. When I first began my spiritual work, I experienced a tremendous rending of the heart as I came to see indeed how far I had traveled away from my True self/teacher. Those first months were acutely painful when I began to explore who I had become, and more importantly, who I wanted to be both in my professional and in my personal life. As I came into greater contact with my heart, I came into my True nature and found that teaching/living from this place was the closest experience of joy I had ever known.

During the past three years I have lived in darkness and in light, noticing that all experiences are transient while my sense of self has taken on more substance. The recent
crisis of health has been a personal trial and a gift of consciousness. I have brought my body into this journey of the soul, at times hating its limitations while other times loving its unique intelligence. Perhaps in this writing, I have finally begun to hear its cries for acceptance. This summer, I will undergo my first reconstructive surgery of many in my life. This has been a painful truth to accept for I have spent a good portion of my life pretending I do not have this disease that attacks me from within. Even now, I can feel a thin layer of protection around my heart preventing me from really feeling the truth of my physical transformations to come. I am afraid. Next September, I will not be returning to school; I think this will be the first time in thirty years that I will not begin another school year either as a student or a teacher. I wonder who I will be without that familiar identity. My partner is excited to witness this absence in me – he believes something beautiful will emerge in the spaciousness. I wish I had his basic trust for I can only seem to feel a sense of loss. Perhaps this is the disappearing that threatens me, the loss of a conceptual self.

This morning, as I drove to school, I began to see the individual faces of my students who will be graduating this year, and I thanked each of them for their unique contribution to my unfoldment. I have been both enriched and humbled by their teachings. When I finally turned into the parking lot after thanking dozens of students, I wished there was some way I could share my gratitude aloud, to simply spend the day in appreciation of each one of these wonderful people. Unfortunately, the day escaped me in its usual way and I found myself immersed in the endless year-end procedures. Just after lunch, however, as I was walking to my third period class, I experienced a quality of joy in the mundane and I came to realize, this is what all the inquiries I have ever done have led me to – a single moment of transcendence, just a breath of time when I expand beyond the boundaries of my
flesh and I look outward at the beauty of my students really seeing them. As the period progressed and my arthritis pain returned, I could feel myself drift further away from my True teacher. This brought on another realization that I am also these moments of disconnection and loss. In my teaching and in my life, I am infinitely human; I am not cured nor am I enlightened – I am “recovering” and thus there is more of me here today... and tomorrow?

After all the writing, the contemplations, have I come to know myself in deeper ways? I feel anxiety in the chest when I consider this question, as if I should have achieved some particular growth in awareness. My sense of self is elusive, so many fine white veils floating in the breeze. I am afraid that the selves of these pages have moved beyond my thinking mind; I am larger than I believed; I cannot be contained in my body or in words. My mind grows branches reaching for enlightenment but they cannot touch the blue of the sky. Who I am cannot be named. A deep fear rises up in the belly; it is the fear of disappearing completely. This is what I have imagined about death, a vast nothingness, no trace of my consciousness. I try to hold this state but my mind wants to close down this inquiry; I let these thoughts slide by just noticing them. The pressure in the chest begins to abate and I move my awareness to my arms and legs; they are absent. What is this absence of limbs? As I sense into my fingers and toes, these parts of my body reappear. Now I am aware of a profound emptiness in the head and I find I am curious about this spaciousness. It seems that beyond thought, there is a void which expands into a lovely peacefulness. I breathe deeply sending the oxygen down into the chest. As it touches the fear, the pressure fades even more. Now I see the effects of peace on the tissues of the body, a wonderful
relaxation of the muscles; my armoring dissolves leaving behind a freshness, a newness, the pinkness of birth.
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