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# Personal Reflections

Sohail Inayatullah

The origins of this book are varied. For me, they are both professional and personal, and in the spaces outside these two defining but confining categories.

The traces of this book certainly go back to a special issue of *New Renaissance* (Autumn 1996) titled "Holistic education". Essays by Ivana Milojević on women and holistic education, Marcus Bussey on redefining education, and myself on multiculturalism and education are foundational pieces for this book. We would like to thank the editor, Dada Vedaprajnananda for leadership in providing a forum for helping us and others develop the theory and practice of neohumanism. *New Renaissance* remains a social and spiritual incubator for social innovation ([www.ru.org](http://www.ru.org)).

More recent links can be traced to the *Journal of Futures Studies* (<http://www2.tku.edu.tw/~tddx/jfs/>). The links between critical theory and spirituality, between globalisation and alternative visions of education, and between pedagogy and futures studies have been developed there. Ivana Milojević (critical spirituality and education) and Marcus Anthony (integrated intelligence and education) contributed to Vol. 9, No. 3, 2005; Helene Pederson (on schools and speciecism) contributed to Vol. 8, No. 4, 2004; Marcus Bussey (critical spirituality and neohumanism) contributed to Vol. 5, No. 2, 2000; and myself (Teaching Futures Studies: From strategy to transformative change) in Vol. 7, No. 3, 2003. We would like to thank the *Journal of Futures Studies* for moving the discourse from education about the future to education about alternative futures, specifically toward neohumanist futures.

Instrumental in moving this book from an idea to reality was a seminar held at the end of August, 2003, in Dubrovnik called New Wave: Vision of Youth ([http://www.gurukul.edu/news\\_00009.php](http://www.gurukul.edu/news_00009.php)). Motivated by the enthusiasm and idealism of youth from that region, Didi Ananda Rama inspired all of us to work in writing a book on neohumanist education.

My personal commitment to neohumanism and neohumanistic education goes back decades. For me, the neohumanistic challenge is about opening

up identity from the exclusivist dimension of territory and community to far more inclusionary planetary articulations. This means challenging those attitudes, selves that 'other' others—that are racist, sexist, nationalistic in practice. Having grown up in a number of places—Lahore and Peshawar, Pakistan; Bloomington and New York, USA; Geneva, Switzerland; Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia; Honolulu, Hawaii; and now living in Mooloolaba, Australia—I've seen how I have been othered—put down, bullied, made to feel less—and how I too have used the weapons of nation, religion, gender on others. Even in spiritual practice, as we attempt to move toward universal humanism, we, I, have disowned selves that are far less inspiring. Recognizing these disowned selves is crucial in developing a neohumanist self. Without this new self, our educational content, process and structure will tend to remain tied to historical exclusionary identities.

The chapters in front of you are attempts to move out of these identities, to create new futures, particularly exploring the implications of neohumanism for pedagogy.

There is no end game to neohumanism—it is not as if we are suddenly enlightened and become neohumanist. Even the enlightened being must speak, and when she or he does so, language is used. Language is central to the challenge of pedagogy. Language is not transparent, but opaque. Our worldviews—of transcendence but also of trauma and dogma—are complicit in language. Thus, neohumanist educational futures: it is a vision, an ideal, a possibility of a different type of education. Realizing this vision, however, does not only come from theorizing, but from creating schools that practice neohumanism, so that the theory is interactively informed by day-to-day learnings. In between the theory and the practice is the person. Neohumanism is about transforming that person, expanding our selves and our societies, embracing the earth, and indeed the universe. Doing so requires liberating not just educational processes, content and structures but the self, the intellect, we use to envision these possibilities.

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### Marcus Bussey

As Sohail Inayatullah has acknowledged the sources and inspiration for this book, I would like to offer three credits of a different nature. The first is to Prabhat Rainjan Sarkar (1921-1990) who first developed the idea of neohumanism articulated in this text. His first discourses on neohumanism as a general reframing of the social were given in 1982 and

he noted its particular relevance to education. A number of educators at the time made the first steps toward applying his ideas in the context of early childhood pedagogy. Didi Ananda Mitra and Ananda Nivedita developed a curriculum that appeared as *The Circle of Love*. This book and its underlying ordering of the curriculum into stages that correspond to the yogic concept of the *Brahma Chakra*—the evolutionary cycle of creation—remains an invaluable resource today. Since then numerous texts have appeared to enrich our educational thinking, culminating in two significant books, a collection of essays on neohumanist education by Sarkar<sup>1</sup> and Didi Ananda Rama's wonderful and visually sumptuous collection of neohumanist reflections.<sup>2</sup>

The beauty of all the thinking on neohumanist education to date is its openness to the cultural contexts in which it finds itself. This openness is premised on the recognition that to write a classroom method would kill the creative and transformative spirit of neohumanism. Why? Texts have a tendency to become dogma, and any classroom method would prematurely define what is right, possible and relevant. Such definition would soon become both historically and culturally bound.

Method without deep intention/reflective/deconstructive processes will inevitably become a victim of its own best intentions—violence to self and other will always result. Sarkar wisely left no neohumanist education method. His was a cultural project in which he valued open systems over closed. He recognised that the uniqueness of the human condition—its existential condition—meant that replicability of a pedagogical process through legislating curriculum and mandating behavioural, structural and affective processes would destroy the real meaning of neohumanist education.

Intention-as-method should always unleash the creative energies of those involved and should also affirm agency. Intention-as-method means deep praxis. The core of the neohumanist method exists not in the classroom but in the human heart. Principles for benevolent action are built into it at all levels of the human condition: the physical, intellectual, and spiritual. This is what we must work with.

The second credit is to the tireless work of Arati Brim. Her part in my story is significant though we have only met face to face on one brief occasion. I have been teaching in neohumanist schools and/or contexts since 1988 and it has been a growing and deepening experience for me. I went to the first global neohumanist conference held in India in 1992, and it was then that I

was first inspired to edit a text like this. Then, in 1995 I decided to do a Masters in education focussing on neohumanist education.

Filled with confidence I went to a university, found an open minded supervisor and started work. Early on she turned to me and asked me to define neohumanist education for her. I was struck dumb. I could not find any appropriate way to communicate what I thought and felt. With my tail between my legs I went away. I dropped out of the course and thought long and hard. At this time I read everything I could find, meditated and kept teaching. Then in 1998 I received an email from Arati asking me to help write up pages for the new neohumanist education web site—<http://gurukul.edu/>. Suddenly the words started to flow. Thank you Arati!

Arati has also worked closely with Didi Ananda Rama in designing the first comprehensive diploma in neohumanist early childhood education. In addition, she has pretty much single-handedly produced the *Gurukul Newsletter* for the past ten years. Her quiet role in the venture cannot be under estimated.

My third credit is a thank you to my parents Marjorie and Victor Bussey. The creative world of ideas that is the hallmark of my parents' love of living and learning can certainly be seen to have shaped my own concerns and career. Of further note is the detail of my mother's painting *Kundalini* on the front of this book. I am convinced that my interest in education and sensitivity to creative processes as a way of engaging in transformative education owe much to her own vital engagement with art and education.

This book in many ways is a journey to the heart of learning. There is no attempt here to define a method for the classroom or school. The chapters are exploratory and open. Learning, as I have pointed out, is not something that can be codified. It is not curriculum, though this has something to do with education. Nor is it about information or even wisdom, though these too are aspects of learning. Learning, or specifically neohumanist learning, is an attitude, a stance that cannot be easily expressed and certainly cannot be prescribed. The teacher comes to embody the process; hence it is always alive and responsive to context. Neohumanist education is something you come to feel as much as think.

The paradox of futures work is that it has much less to do with the future than the present and the past. Neohumanist futures involves working in the present towards desired outcomes that foster increased levels of

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\* *Kundalini* is the coiled serpent that is the source of creative energy and the vital spiritual power within our own being.

meaning, wellbeing and purpose around the world. In this process we acknowledge our indebtedness to the past in the form of the rich and diverse cultural traditions we inherit today.

Simultaneously, we must acknowledge the debt we owe to those in the past whose lives and cultures have suffered because of the actions of our predecessors. This double debt carries on into the present where affluence in one part of the world is linked to poverty in another. Similarly, this debt is projected into the future, as affluence today is in many ways built on diminished returns in the future for future generations who will not only inherit the best of what we do today but also the foreseen and unforeseen results of current economic, social and environmental activity.

So, when we come to map neohumanist educational futures we must unpack the traditions that inform the neohumanist educational potentiality while acknowledging the deeply ethical commitment it has to a fulfilment of our debt to the hidden temporal economics described above. Indebtedness, which brings gratitude not guilt, is a necessary condition for a deepened sense of connection and responsibility towards all generations, past, present and future, as well as to the cultures and environments (both human and natural) that have, do or will sustain them.

It is hard for modern Western consciousness, permeated by a belief in individuality and personal agency and autonomy, to feel comfortable with this concept of indebtedness: the owing of an impersonal debt. Yet this awareness has many useful ethical dimensions. Firstly, it humbles those who feel 'above' or 'outside' of the social, historical and environmental contexts of their humanity. Secondly, it also underscores the relationship with past, present and future, bringing with it a sense of responsibility and the need for ethical and sustainable action at all times. Thirdly, it carries with it a spiritual imperative linked to a sense of belonging to a 'story' or 'body' of humanity by virtue of blood spilt, tears shed, and hope unfulfilled; this is what might be called belonging by virtue of *the debt that cannot be repaid*.

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Ivana Milojević

I owe a personal debt to the people and experiences that helped make me who I am today. What follows is my story. This story contextualises my attraction to the neohumanist stretching of boundaries and challenging of tightly held yet socially constructed identities. Similarly to personal

histories offered by Sohail Inayatullah and Marcus Bussey, my personal commitment to neohumanist education also goes to childhood. Furthermore, both my personal and professional engagements with core neohumanist ideas have not been an easy process but have gone through many trials and tribulations. This has been a process of both trauma and transcendence, in regard to my own identity, educational and knowledge processes that I have been part of, and indeed, in regard to my own views of life itself. One common thread in this process has certainly been the questions of who and why I am and where I may be going. Another common thread is my desire to go toward ever-expanding vistas, well beyond the confines of imposed, stifling answers and confining identity structures. In this process, some events held greater significance than others.

My first memory of a confining identity was when a group of boys didn't let me join their game as I was 'a girl'. They were moving miniature cars by hand, over improvised tunnels, bridges and roads—a task apparently beyond my capabilities and those of my gender. As a girl and a woman, I have experienced various forms of exclusion, semi-inclusion and subtle and not so subtle dwindling of my humanity all my life.

Throughout my childhood, through both formal and informal education practices, I received two messages that often collided—that I was a 'human' and that I was a 'girl/woman'. As a human, I had the opportunity to fully participate in a human society, however, as a girl/woman I had the obligation to know/accept my limitations as a member of a particular 'sub'/inferior social group. I was often confused as to what to expect from myself. For example, I could see that my academic 'achievement' in primary and secondary school was 'superior' to that of all the boys that attended the same classes as I did. Unlike me, no boy was a straight 'A' student there and then. At the same time, I could also see that all the 'important' people in human history that somehow 'excelled' in the area of academic achievement—i.e. theorists, philosophers, academics, scientists—were not of my gender. The 'best' explanation for this phenomenon given to me related to men's superior physical size/strength, ability to go into the army, late but also extraordinary development in their late teens, and the peculiar influence of male hormones and brain size.

Needless to say, I was relieved, enthused and inspired by discovering feminist theory. This increasing knowledge of feminist theory, concepts, research and methods has been slowly, over the years and decades, chipping away at the damage done in my early childhood. Thus my first

chosen identity was that of 'a feminist'—an identity that was initially giving me some freedom to cross over one particular boundary/border.

We all carry many traumas within our psyche. Two major ones for me—that continued chipping away any certainty I may have had in regard to the social construction of identity—were the wars in the former Yugoslavia and my migration to Australia. In various ways, these two qualitatively different types of event took away my national, ethnic, and professional identity based on a particular social strata. Upon my arrival in Australia, I also 'managed' to change my racial identity—from considering myself as 'white' to being considered by others as 'olive'. A peculiar racial identity indeed (!), but certainly based on particular histories of migration and various 'otherings' operating within the Australian context. The complexity of the ethnic/racial/cultural mix of my current family is yet another reason in a series of personal events that have led to neohumanism making sense to me. Beyond various geo- and socio-sentiments, there lay the possibility for a unified humanity, a vision of our identities as they truly, ultimately are. The latest scientific (i.e. human genome mapping), anthropological (i.e. where we all originally come from) and psychological research (i.e. what we need to do to be mentally healthy and happy) requires a vision and functioning cosmology that can further facilitate the development of a 'conscious' evolution of/for a global/planetary human society. To me, the not so wonderful alternatives to planetary based cosmologies and philosophies such as neohumanism will only result in further divisions among humans, environmental degradation, as well as a further increase in social anomia and various forms of violence.

But the beauty of neohumanism is that the liberating possibilities do not stop here, with consideration only given to the sentient beings we identify as human. Rather, neohumanism enables us to position ourselves within a broader context of ever evolving life on Earth, and possibly beyond. This planetary vision transcends various limitations posed by individualism, nationalism, industrialism, competitive globalism, as well as classism, castism, racism, and patriarchy. As such, it is based on the new emerging ecological paradigm rather than the anthropocentric philosophy of the Enlightenment. However, if this new paradigm is not realized, the impairment to human spirit and psyche, through various boundaries of socially constructed identities, cannot be overstated. Many decades ago Sigmund Freud discovered and described the damage done when *narcissistic injury*—the infatuation with one's self—becomes a *narcissistic*

*rage*, wherein the individual associates with a larger group such as an ethnic group or nation-state and perceives injuries to the group as an injury to the self. When such events do occur, this narcissistic rage can only be reduced by the violent 'undoing' of hurt, through forms of both illegal and legalised violence, "just war" being an example of the latter. Subsequently, the cycles of the 'initial attack' and 'subsequent revenge' perpetually continue.

Neohumanism, on the other hand, challenges these historical and contemporary developments in regard to global war, violence and social injustice in a simple yet profound way by asking the following question: What happens when the human desire for limitlessness—for identifying with something larger than the self—goes all the way, beyond limitations of ethnicity, class, race, religion, gender, nation-state, and even species? To me, the answer is again both simple and profound: There are no enemies to fight, no boundaries to thwart our spirit, no socially constructed identity based on a gripping fear of being lost, and no attachments worth human suffering.

Among many challenges neohumanism throws at contemporary dominant ways of being, thinking and doing is in relation to how we treat and what we teach our children. It is painfully obvious to me that if we continue to model and teach—in both covert and overt terms—various forms of 'othering' and limiting identities, the contemporary processes of domination, 'power over', unrelenting competition and endemic violence will continue. And so will human misery and hopelessness. It has been said many times before that our current dominant educational processes, structures and contents—which are too often in line with and directly feeding into various individual and social dysfunctions—need to be fundamentally challenged. Countless educators, parents and community members have been working relentlessly to help us both further theorise as well as put into practice alternatives that are inspiring, transformative and doable. Some of those individuals, and their influence on this book, have been mentioned earlier in this foreword. Countless others, many of whom we have not had personal contact with, are also helping the transformative praxis of planetary neohumanistic education continue, whether they are using these particular terms or not. My sincere thanks go to all who are part of this process in general, and to the writers and readers of this text in particular. Education may not help save the (human) world, but an education of a particular kind just might. At the very least, it may

help with one's own spiritual yearning, personal transformation and the walk back home.

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<sup>1</sup> P.R. Sarkar, *Discourses on Neohumanist Education*, Calcutta, Ananda Marga Publications, 1998.

<sup>2</sup> Ananda Rama, *Neohumanist Education: Documentation on Neohumanist Education as Propounded by Prabhat Rainjan Sarkar*, Mainz, Ananda Marga Gurukul Publications, 2000.