

MEETINGS WITH REMARKABLE EDUCATORS

PODCAST TRANSCRIPTION OF

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with host

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Ba Luvmour: Welcome to ***Meetings With Remarkable Educators***. This podcast is brought to you in part by you, our friends and supporters at ***patreon.com/remarkableeducators***. Each podcast is a dialogue between me, Ba Luvmour, and an educator who sees the greatness in their students and touches the whole of their being. These educators defy generalizations. So here's a little bit about what they've done and how I know them.

Ba Luvmour: Amazingly, I met Mike Seymour back in 2002 when he visited our learning center in northern California. At that time, he was enmeshed in deep study and understanding of holistic education and principals, had been deeply influenced by Parker Palmer and many other notables in the field, and then went on to—what you'll hear—an illustrious career. Bringing forth social justice and helping international understanding of children, by children and for children and in helping teachers find inspiration in their own lives and practice. You can find Mike's bio and links to all of his works on our website at ***www.remarkable-educators.com***.

Ba Luvmour: Hey, welcome Mike and thank you so much for joining us on Meetings With Remarkable Educators. How you doing today?

Mike Seymour: Good. I'm happy to be here. Thank you Ba.

Ba Luvmour: You're welcome. Mike, we've both been in the field a while and one of the, to me, one of the most important questions I get asked all the time is, what exactly is holistic education? What is its philosophy? Especially since the turn of the century, who is really articulating this well? And when I hear that, I think of you and some of your early work especially and of course later on. So I wonder if you could talk a little bit about that? And about the philosophy and just who's who in the world right now and that sort of thing.

Mike Seymour: Well, let me put a caveat right at the front end, I don't consider myself an expert or specialist in holistic education. I am, I would probably call myself more a progressive educator. So I'm going to be speaking partly out of ignorance and so let me do my best.

What I have discerned from the people I've met and from the reading that I've done and my own experience, is that holistic education is not only about the whole person, but I think the one distinctive, is that holistic education tends to acknowledge the spiritual dimension of people in the educational process. It's really not just educating the mind, but it's educating the heart and the senses and has a focus also on, what in conventional terms, would be called social and emotional learning.

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It is a more holistic model of educating. It's not just speaking to the mind, but it's also speaking to the other dimensions of the human being.

Ba Luvmour: Great. You in your 2002 book, interviewed some pretty interesting people. Can you tell us anything about those experiences?

Mike Seymour: Wow. There were actually some incredible people there. I mean, Fritjof Capra I was really interested ... You know, he's been working in the field of education. He's got a center there in San Francisco. Nel Noddings was one.

Ba Luvmour: Yeah, Nel has been a guest of ours on this podcast. You were also speaking, I think with Parker Palmer back then?

Mike Seymour: Parker Palmer. Parker Palmer has been a real seminal influence for me, because more than any other educator that I know, he talks about the self of the educator being paramount in the process. A famous saying of his, which was also the title of article and book, is, "We teach who we are."

So the question is, who are we? And what are we bringing forward in our classrooms and in our teaching? And are being present to ourselves and our students? He has definitely helped me to inform a lot of my own thinking.

Ba Luvmour: So then, are you saying then, that a part of holistic or I don't know if we can talk about some distinctions between holistic and progressive. I don't know if that's really of our main concern here. But at least in holistic terms, it's not just bringing forth the spirituality, but it's the quality of the person teaching, that's really also critical to success. Is that correct?

Mike Seymour: Absolutely, because it's really quite evident. I mean, parents everywhere, even if they're not sophisticated about education, they have an instinct for who is a good teacher and who's not. Every single parent wants their kid to get that particular teacher. Who is that particular teacher? Fortunately, we come across ... we reach about 2500 teachers a year ... so we're exposed to a lot educators in public schools.

There's always this 15%, 20% of teachers at every school, who just somehow shine. They've got enthusiasm. They're authentic. They're connected to who they are. The subjects they teach come alive. And students are engaged. It's the passion and the aliveness of the

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teacher that engages the student and touches their heart in some way and touches their mind.

That has been a major theme that we've tried to do with the Heritage Institute. Is how do we understand what makes teaching and learning come alive?

Ba Luvmour: Well let's ... I enjoyed so much talking with people like yourself who have really thought about this and spent a lot of time considering it and one of the challenges I've come across is for instance, I have found some teachers of History or Humanities and yet the subject matter that they choose is kind of a traditional, western civilization type courses, which, as we know now, are rife with bias, prejudice and just dismissal of all kinds of people, including women and people of color and that sort of thing. What if a person has that enthusiasm, but the pedagogy isn't necessarily one that brings forth a sense of wholeness?

Mike Seymour: Well, you bring an interesting point there because you're talking content and process. Content is that the content of the pedagogy, how it's oriented, what's the spin? And the process is the human process of who's bringing it forth.

I would like to feel that we can do both, but it's not always the case in schools today. Probably Heritage Institute engages more in the process side of things. We do touch on a lot of what I call progressive content, but it's really hard Ba, and it's been hard for the last 20 to 30 years to bring in truly progressive content. You get push back from teachers. You get push back from parents.

I mean, just something as simple as a documentary on climate change, for example. Fifteen years ago, we were teaching about climate change and the Superintendent of the Federal Way School District disallowed the use of a particular documentary movie that we were recommending for our course for teachers. They were not able to bring that into their teaching.

So, I try to honor what's possible within the constraints of what teachers are dealing with. Some people might say, "Well, you're trading on your idealism for pragmatism." But I'm really most invested in, how do we help teachers to stay alive to the truth that's in them.

Ba Luvmour: Are there specific ways that you help bring that about with the teachers with whom you work?

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Mike Seymour: Well, I think the work of Parker Palmer, probably is the one that I go back to again and again and again. Because we really emphasize and we respect teacher's ability to get into touch with who they are. They get lost in sort of the default teaching mode. It's easy where teachers get lost in the pressures that are around them to do it a certain way.

They have their own baggage, their own neurosis to deal with, which are complicating factors. There could be family pressures that are complicating factors. So there's a lot of dynamics that are going on that make it hard for teachers to really be settled in who they are and to speak from that particular truth.

We have a whole series of courses around wellness that deal with physical wellness, that deal with proper diet, that deal with things like keeping a journal. Just listening to your mind and your heart and getting grounded in who you are. So coming back to what you know is really honest and true about yourself. And I have enough faith.

Most of the teachers that I have met came into the profession because they want to do something good. They have that instinct to give back. That's why they're in this profession. So we play upon that and say, "Yeah, you're here because you had a dream at one point. Let's just figure out how to keep that alive and bring it forward."

Ba Luvmour: I see. One of the places, or leverage places I've tried to concentrate on and albeit with not a tremendous amount of success in terms of bringing it forward to others. What I mean by that is bringing it forward in a wide way in kind of expansive way into society, although, I've had a lot of success with individual groups of teachers, is in teacher training.

I was appalled. We know, for instance, Nel Noddings, Columbia, Stanford, you know, all her tremendous accolades and yet when I looked on the websites for teacher training in those very well respected teaching institutions, it was the same old stuff. Very little on child development. Very little on holistic thinking. Very little on care of education, which was Noddings's point of view. Nothing on partnership education, which is Riane Eisler's really content oriented for that sort of thing.

The teacher training just seems to be a place, to me, where it's just stuck and stuck and stuck again. What about you? What do you think of that?

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Mike Seymour: Yeah. It's state driven. Right now education is a product of state mentality and as we know, the state is only provisionally oriented towards the human and the human's development. It is ... The state is looking out for its own interests. And its own interests are largely economic. So we are educating for economic being and not human being and belonging.

Every single teacher program that wants to get any kind of enrollment, has to be able to qualify a teacher for state certification. Every single state has required content in the curriculum for a graduate degree as the case in point. And even for an undergraduate degree. So it's all scripted. There's no way of getting around that except if you've got an exceptional educator or an exceptional Department of Education in a particular college or university, that says, "You know, we want to go outside the nine dots. Yeah, we want to fulfill the requirements, but we want to do so with a certain twist."

Now, Nyack University does a reasonably good job of that. Portland State University has had components in one of their strands of the graduate program of education that do that. We could probably name a dozen or so universities that have a twist to the required curriculum, but they are far and few between, unfortunately.

So you're graduating a lot of teachers from graduate schools of education who have no understanding of what we're talking about right here. They have instincts. They have natural instincts to want to come from the heart. To want to love kids. To want to do what's exciting and what's different. But the constraints around them, I think, are fairly intimidating.

Ba Luvmour: Yeah. Thank you for that. That's very well said and I couldn't agree more. I taught at Portland State and I taught a course in burnout or how to avoid burnout. People thought it was ... *ways to avoid it* were have a good home life, which certainly helps and hug your cat and that sort of thing. But time and time again, every teacher I worked with, just unbelievably, every one of them said, "The main way I get burned out is I don't have human to human relationships with my students. I came in for those idealistic, or maybe not so idealistic, reasons of wanting to connect to young people and do something different."

Mike Seymour: Yeah. And you know there's ways around that, but it takes a higher level of consciousness in the teacher. We have had the good fortune of encountering alot teachers, and we have instructors who fall into this category too, who know how to walk the line of what's required in the school district. But then who push the envelope a little bit

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and enough so that the light really comes through. And kids are excited that the teacher is passionate about what they're doing and something profound happens.

To me, when we can produce "aha" moments in kids, when we set the context where kids are waking up, waking up to who they are, waking up to their heart, waking up to their passions, as far as I'm concerned, we've done a good job. And we see that happening.

That's kind of thread that my institute has tried to weave through our existences. How do we play the game that we have to play in order to be able to have teachers take courses? Because we could ... Also by the way, I could have shifted way over to the liberal, obviously liberal side, but sooner than later, when a teacher would bring our catalog to her principle and say, "Hey, I want to take this course, can you approve it?" We wouldn't have gotten approved.

Right now we have earned our reputation and we are respected in many states across the country because from the outside, we look like, "Hey, these people are really offering useful courses and they're helping teachers to better engage students." As far as I'm concerned, that's really important that we're able to do that and we're able to add that extra twist as I said.

Ba Luvmour: Are most of the teachers who take your courses then, working in public school with large class sizes? Is that correct?

Mike Seymour: Yeah, they're working with; I'd say probably 60% of the teachers who register with us are elementary. They're working anywhere from 28 to 32 students per class. And they're right up against the wall. They're facing all the stresses we know teachers face and there's a tremendous amount of stress, of unhappiness and we see a lot of that by the way, that's coming at us every single day.

We are hand holders. I feel like we are monks and nuns ministering to the poor and the hungry here because teachers are kind of in a battlefield, if you will. Now, there's a lot of them that, not a lot, some that know how to thrive in that environment. But I can't tell you how many teachers that we encounter that say, "You know, I don't know if I can do this anymore."

And as you know, the statistics are amazing. 50% or more of the teachers who enter the profession today, will not be teaching in five years.

Ba Luvmour: Yeah, I know that. Amazing.

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Mike Seymour: Yeah.

Ba Luvmour: Just amazing.

Mike Seymour: It's a huge turnover.

Ba Luvmour: A huge turnover.

Mike Seymour: And think of all that intellectual capital that's getting wasted in a sense in public education. It's a shame.

Ba Luvmour: **It's teaching story time.**

Briefly, teaching stories invite us to see the world with a new perspective, often featuring a wise fool, or a trickster animal. It can be humorous, and often have many shades of meaning shining throughout the story. I have told teaching stories for the past 40 years, with great effect; not only for the listener, but also for me as I have learned so much about myself for recounting these stories.

Today's teaching story is called, **"Guess What"?**

A wag met the wise fool. In his pocket, he had an egg.

"Tell me, wise fool, are you any good at guessing games?"

"Not bad." Said the wise fool.

"Very well then. Tell me what I have in my pocket."

"Well give me a clue then." Said the wise fool.

"It is shaped like an egg. It's yellow and white inside. And it looks like an egg."

"Some sort of cake." Said the wise fool.

Let's have some fun interpreting this teaching story. Become a Patreon supporter at **[patreon.com/remarkable educators](https://patreon.com/remarkableeducators)**. And you'll have access to our detailed comments on how this story applies to education and parenting. Of course, that's just our perspective. The fun comes with community dialogue as the many shades of the teaching story come alive. See you there.

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Ba Luvmour: Well I know that in your earlier days, you did a lot of work on South Whidbey Island with a group there and I'd like to hear just a little bit about that. But more importantly, how it affected your outlook on education.

Mike Seymour: Well, I did retreats for teachers through the Whidbey Institute. Programs like Earth Just as a Spirit Educating for Global Consciousness. We had teachers from Hong Kong, Ireland, Turkey, England, Canada and the U.S. convene. About 15 of us with the institute for a period of a week. And we also built a social network specifically for these teachers and the students they would ultimately bring in when they went back to school.

Teachers were doing collaborative projects across cultural lines and learning about other cultures and communicating with each other. So what I saw and what we've seen a lot in our work is I judge what I do. Not according to just what the teacher says to us about, "Hey Mike, this is what I got out of your course." But what her students or his students are saying.

We try to get student input through products, articles that they have written, poems that they've published, websites that they've developed, videos that they've made, that express what they are learning from what the teacher has been teaching them according to what we gave the teacher. So we saw, in that particular case, students really waking up. Students really feeling like, hey, now I'm living in a bigger world, I'm not just living in Somersworth, England or Hong Kong or Ankara, Turkey.

I'm connecting with kids just like me, who are living five thousand, ten thousand miles away. So their worlds got bigger. These kids have a greater sense of maybe who they are. That they're not just a citizen of a particular town but they're a citizen of a larger world.

Ba Luvmour: Well ... [cough] ... excuse me. What was the effect on you as the development of a person through engaging? In other words, your self-development. How was that influence? We talked earlier about Parker Palmer and of course all about the importance of the teacher and the quality of the teacher. And I, Josette especially, but I also work in how the actual process of engaging education in this way, changes us and the quality of ourselves. What have you experienced there?

Mike Seymour: Well, I've found that when I started Heritage, I was a little cautious, maybe afraid, might be another way I could say it, of really putting out what I felt I wanted to do. Because I wasn't sure if the education

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world was going to accept it or if we would get lambasted by administrators and such and so forth.

I think my experiences have caused me to overcome some of those anxieties and concerns and say, "You know Mike, you just got to put it out there and if it works, it works. If it doesn't, it doesn't and so what? Just keep on going." I think it's given me courage. It's given me hope that small successes are possible. I'm not doing world changing things. I mean, 10 teachers at a time, 12 teachers here, 12 teachers there. Small gains.

I have faith that these small seeds that we plant are bearing fruit somehow and I've seen the results of that. So to me, it's just given me a faith that in spite of the difficulties that we know are in education, good things can be done and we can take some pride in that.

Ba Luvmour: Great. Well, Mike, I know that personally you've been doing a lot of work, or a significant event and have a new book about some work you've been doing in Africa. Could you tell our listeners about that?

Mike Seymour: Yeah. I have been engaged with a peacemaker in the east African country of Burundi, who during the ethnic wars between Hutus and Tutsis, mobilized young people to go into villages and bring the conflicted parties together and forgive and make peace through the venue of rebuilding homes together.

I was so impressed with his work that I decided to get engaged and also make it an educational project. After the first trip to Burundi in 2004, I started a non-profit called *Youth for a New World*. In the ensuing five years, we raised three quarters of a million dollars. At one point, we had recruited 15 schools in the United States and paired them with 15 schools in Burundi where students were writing letters to one another and also doing email exchanges.

Then we would go and do conferences with teachers and students in Burundi. Then we'd do conferences with the teachers and students in the United States. We'd have an auditorium with maybe 150 students and 20 or 15 teachers and I've got some African drummers in Seattle and they would come. I think they were from Zimbabwe. They would play African music and everybody would be getting up and dancing.

Then we'd sing together. We'd talk about the importance of, not only learning about the world and its needs, but being able to make

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a difference and looking at your life as something that's bigger than yourself to be involved in.

The kids really got that message of the fact that there's hope. The fact that they're caring can make a real difference. And I saw a huge shift in the young people who were engaged in that project. The book that I wrote about Prosper Ndabishuriye and his work, also mentions the educational project and sites some specific students who were involved who I just was in touch with this year as I was finishing off the book.

One was a girl called Nicky Henson. She's now Nicky Henson Duke. She's married. She has two or three kids of her own. She's working in Vancouver, Washington. Nicky was part of a class that was involved in putting on a huge, what turned out to be a huge fundraiser. And she speaks about what a groundbreaking experience it was for her that really changed her life. Changed how she thinks and changed how she's raising her own children.

I look at that and I say, "Oh my gosh. To me it just seemed like, hey that was a little project." But it had this huge effect on a lot of kids.

Ba Luvmour: That's great. Let me get something clear, when you were in Africa, then you spoke to the auditorium with African students and when you were in America, you spoke to an auditorium with American students and teachers? Do I have that right?

Mike Seymour: Yes, that's right.

Ba Luvmour: And did you do ... Was there any cross fertilization? For instance, did you show a video of one to the other or...?

Mike Seymour: Yeah.

Ba Luvmour: What kinds of cross fertilizations happened in that?

Mike Seymour: Yeah. We took videos of students in Burundi speaking to the American students and we'd bring it back and I'd show the video. We also did these lesson plans, cooperative lesson plans where students in Burundi and students in the United States were doing the same lesson plan and then they would cut out certain portions and mail them to the other classroom.

So we were able to take a look at what the students in Burundi were doing and the students in Burundi were able to take a look at what the kids in America were doing. So they got this sense of each other.

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Also, when students would write letters, I would coach the teachers on how to help the American students engage with those letters.

It's kind of like, you sort of are like an archeologist. You're really looking at this as a product of a culture and what is it saying? So one of the things that the American students just were blown away by, was how easily the Burundian students would express love. You know, "We love you America, so we love this. I love you so much." And that was really something they felt was odd because that's not part of our experience. We don't use that word as much in a public setting. And here the Burundian, brilliant students were really pouring their heart out.

The other thing that came across is how many Burundian students wrote about, "Oh, I lost my mother." Or, "My first mother and dad are gone and now I have another mom and dad." And obviously what the American students understood, well their parents were killed in the war. And they were maybe three or four years old. But how resilient they sounded and how much optimism they had in spite of all that they went through.

So that really gave these American kids pause. And I realized that I had ... I mean, when we think of giving back, I went over to Burundi thinking, "Okay, we're going to help the Burundians, but I'll tell you very clearly, they have more to give us than we them. And when I got back to the States, I said, "My gosh, what I saw in Africa, was this real sense of interdependence and caring for one another. We live such siloed existence here in the United States and if there was a way to, sort of, break down those barriers just a little bit and show kids another way of being, that was a major outcome of that whole project.

Ba Luvmour: Great. Well, thank you for doing that and thank you for relating it. Before we sign off here, I always like to give my guests a chance to either ask any questions or to say anything that I might have missed in the conversation. What would you like to say as a parting gift to us?

Mike Seymour: Well, I would say that for the most part, there's going to be educators who are going to be listening to this. And I would say continue to find ways to follow your heart. The sort of proclivity to go numb in this culture is really strong. Particularly for idealistic and you want to do things that are going counter to the current.

Find fellowship with like-minded people to keep your spirit up. And just tap into the deep silence within yourself, out of which that still

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small voice will speak and lead you to the next new vision, a new horizon. I think that's really important in our work. Is not to give up, not to fall into sort of lassitude, but just keep your spirit alive and that's what the world needs. And that's what the students that we're trying to teach need.

Ba Luvmour: That's beautiful. That is really a beautiful send off. Thank you so much Mike.

Mike Seymour: Thank you Ba.

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This is Ba Luvmour reminding you that, holistic relationships with children leads to joy and self-knowledge with the adults in their lives, with respect for you and for children everywhere. See you next time.

Reference:

Seymour, Mike (2018). *If you are going to kill them, you must kill us first: The story of an African peacemaker*. Metamorphosis Press, SC.

Through courage, wisdom and unshakable faith in God, a peace-maker from Burundi, Central Africa, helped change the course of his nation at a time of horrific ethnic violence between the Hutu and Tutsi ethnic groups in 1993-1994. Prosper Ndabishuriye's story of standing in front of guns to protect his team members is deeply moving and inspiring.