

# TEACHING IN THE NEW PARADIGM

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EVERYWHERE WE TURN SCIENTISTS ARE FINDING that systems we had previously thought were separate are actually interconnected. Chaos theory has demonstrated that nature is awash with patterns of fractal iteration and holographic inclusion. Bell's theorem reveals a universe that is instantaneously aware of itself across vast distances. Weaving together findings from quantum physics, post-Darwinian biology, cosmology, and consciousness research, Erwin Laszlo has written compellingly about the A-field, the superimplicate order behind our explicate world, a domain where nonlocality and superconductivity is the norm (1999, 2003, 2004). Though quantum entanglement was originally thought to be restricted to the sub-atomic realm, we are now finding evidence that its effects "scale up" into the macroscopic world (Brooks). Clearly, interconnectivity is a major theme of the new paradigm.

And yet when we turn to the practical art of teaching, it is as though we still live in a Newtonian universe of separate selves and isolated minds. The revolution of connectivity has not yet transformed our pedagogical models or changed how we engage our students in the classroom. But the interconnected universe shows itself here too if we

allow ourselves to see it. If we open to the deeper textures of our lived experience with our students, we discover that underneath the obvious truth of our separate and distinct minds lies a less obvious but equally important truth – that our minds mix and mingle in a subtle web of influences, that they move in sync with one another forming larger wholes, and that in our depths we are never isolated from one another.

After thirty years of having my teaching transformed by these dynamics, I wrote *The Living Classroom: Teaching and Collective Consciousness*. While it draws on scientific research, it is primarily a story of experiential discovery. It offers a sketch of how I think we will teach in the new paradigm.

## EARLY SPARKS OF SYNCHRONICITY

It was an ordinary day at the university where I teach in the department of philosophy and religious studies in Ohio. The lecture was finished and the room was emptying when a student came up to me and said, "You know, it's funny that you used the example you did in class today, because that's exactly what happened to me this week." Then he described his recent experience and it was, indeed, a perfect match to what I had said in class.

I had been searching for an example to illustrate a particular concept I was trying to convey. Quickly running through the possibilities in my mind, my stream of consciousness had paused, and out of the stillness an example I had never used before suddenly rose to my awareness. "Try this," it said. I used it and it had worked. The students got the point and the lecture continued. But what had been a randomly chosen example for other students in the room cut closer to the bone for this particular student. When he heard his life experience coming back to him in my words, it grabbed his attention. It was as if he had been extended a personal invitation to get more deeply involved in the course, and he did.

The first time this happened, I brushed it off as mere coincidence, as good academics are trained to do. In the reigning materialist paradigm, we are taught that our minds are fundamentally separate and discrete entities, one mind per brain. Any suspected overlap or bleed-through between minds is said to be impossible

– an illusion, a fiction of our imagination. When you think of all the life experiences tucked inside our students, surely we’re going to bump into some of them once in a while. If you lecture to a hundred people week after week, sooner or later you’re bound to hit a few bull’s-eyes even with your eyes closed. Do the math and it looks less significant than it feels.

And yet this “coincidence” happened again a few months later, and again after that. In the following years, it became a not uncommon occurrence in my classroom, happening often enough that I couldn’t dismiss it. My students were finding bits and pieces of their recent life experience, or the experience of a close family member, showing up in my lectures. Without my intending it, without my even being aware when it was happening, my consciousness seemed to be tapping into some kind of information field that held their life experience. The fit between life and lecture was so precise and repeated itself so frequently that eventually I was convinced that something more than chance had to be operating here. But how and why was this happening? Both as a philosopher studying in consciousness and as an educator, I had to understand what was driving these events.

#### RESONANCE IN THE CLASSROOM

One evening, for example, I was teaching a night course on Eastern religions. There were about thirty students in the room. In the middle of my lecture, I found myself taking a little unexpected detour in which I told a story about a Zen master who had had an accurate precognitive perception of his impending death, similar to the accounts Sushila Blackman later published in her book *Graceful Exits*. I had never talked about this subject in this particular lecture before. It was just a little aside, something dropped in to add some anecdotal interest to the discussion we were having about the capacities of the mind from an Eastern perspective.

After class, a silver-haired elderly lady came up to talk with me. She was not part of our usual group but had been brought to class that evening by a friend who was worried about her. Her husband had died three months before, and her friend thought she was languishing at home and needed to get out of the house. In the conversation that followed, she told me this story.

Her husband had been a used car salesman in good health. Shortly before his unexpected death, he had cleared out most of the cars from his lot without any explanation and gotten all his financial papers in order. A few days later, he and his wife were watching TV when he put down his newspaper and, in a way that was quite out of character for him,

turned to his wife and said, “Darling, I just want you to know that if I died tomorrow, you’ve made my entire life worthwhile.” A week later, he died in his sleep.

What she wanted to know was whether I thought her husband might have been unconsciously aware that he was going to die, like the person I had described in my lecture. I said that it sounded like a possibility, and this thought was comforting to her. This led to a longer conversation in which she described the challenges and opportunities his passing had created for her. After touching her grief, she began to talk about how overprotective he had been and how she was now being given the chance to develop herself in ways that his well-intentioned care had always prevented. In the middle of the conversation, she suddenly decided to come back to college. She did so and thrived here for several years, eventually bringing two generations of her family back to school with her.

When these things first started happening in my courses, I was in the early stages of my career and the early stages of my spiritual practice, and here the plot thickens. To make a very long story short, as my spiritual practice deepened through the years, these synchronicities became more frequent in my classes. It was as though by entering more deeply into conscious communion with the underlying fabric of life, the threads of that fabric were being activated around me in the physical world. The experience of greater *depth* seemed to be triggering experiences of greater *breadth*, as though depth and breadth were two different dimensions of a seamless whole.

Not only were these synchronistic resonances becoming more frequent, they were also targeting increasingly sensitive areas in my students’ lives. It was as though a radar had been activated that was operating below the threshold of my awareness, a radar that zeroed in on some part of their life that was hurting or constricted. Sometimes it touched a question they had been holding for years or triggered an insight they had been searching for, something they needed to find before they could take the next step in their development. Sometimes it lanced a private pain that had been festering inside them. In this mysterious communion that opened between us, it was as if my students’ souls were slipping messages to me, giving me hints on how I might reach them – telling me where they were hiding, where they were hurting, and, most importantly, what ideas they needed to take the next step in their lives.

As the years passed and the process deepened, my students also began to have unusually deep experiences around some of the concepts I was presenting

in class. It was as though they were being activated by more than just verbal ideas, as though they were being touched by the actual *experience* of these realities that now lived in me to some degree because of my spiritual practice.

As a professor of religious studies, I have taught more sections of “Introduction to World Religions” than I care to remember; it’s a staple in our department. My approach to this course has been deeply influenced by Huston Smith and the “perennial tradition” – ideas so essential they keep showing up in multiple cultures throughout history, like perennial flowers that reemerge each spring. When students hear the perennial truths of the world’s spiritual traditions simply spoken, when they are reminded of things long ago forgotten but always present at the edge of their awareness, there is sometimes a spark of recognition that can explode into a flame. This flame is contagious and sometimes stimulates sympathetic resonances with other students in the room. Students may collectively feel their energy shift to higher centers of awareness, though they may not understand what is happening at the time. Symptoms of chakra-opening and kundalini-type arousal may begin to manifest. Energy runs, hearts open, and insights arise.

These can be very powerful experiences for students. One sophomore described such an experience in an essay she wrote at the end of a course. It happened to her on the day I was describing the Buddhist understanding of the relationship of individual mind to non-dual consciousness. To convey this point, I sometimes develop the analogy of a tree, contrasting leaf-consciousness (the personal mind) with tree-consciousness (non-dual consciousness). In this exercise, I ask the students to imagine that the leaves of a tree are individually aware but not yet conscious of the tree they are part of, until the moment of breakthrough. It’s a powerful exercise that I save until I think the class is ready to absorb its full import. On this particular day, this young woman experienced the following:

*The thing that hit me the hardest of all that we talked about in class was tree-consciousness and leaf-consciousness. It was what brought everything together for me. What made me understand everyone’s interdependence and stopped me from living in fear. I was so moved that it took everything that I had not to cry in class, not from sadness but from being hit by a life-altering realization. It made an emotion rise in me that I had never felt before and I wasn’t really sure how to react to it (2008: 27-28).*

Another student, a woman in her mid-thirties, summarized a similar experience in a different class in the following way:

*Sitting in class, I felt like I was inside one of those glass ball snow scenes that folks use as paperweights. Shake the ball and mass confusion begins with flakes of fake snow swirling*

*all around... I couldn’t hear the lecture. My mind struggled to focus and stay with your words, but I was missing it.*

*Later... at home... alone. It would all return to me, the lecture... Mostly feelings. Tears. Recognition. Understanding after I let it simmer for a while. Realization that if I didn’t grab at it, it would be there waiting, this knowledge. These tiny bright spots of revelatory insight. I’d journal. I’d cry. Sometimes light and gentle, warm feel-good crying. Sometimes sobs, wracking and exhausting. I THOUGHT I WAS LOSING MY MIND A FEW TIMES ...*

*The result? I’m becoming who I was long ago. The field by-passed my intellect and went directly to my heart to pry it open.... I now know what I had deeply buried in me for years, and the gift of the pick and shovel for the ongoing process comes from being in the energy of the folks in our classroom. It didn’t come from me alone (2008: 28).*

I want to emphasize that it wasn’t my intention to trigger such deep existential reactions among my students. In fact, fearing that they were out of place in a university setting, I often tried to damp them down, but I found that this was impossible without damaging the teaching process itself. Whenever my students and I would gather and simply cover the day’s assignment, these events would spontaneously occur without my consciously intending them. It was as though fire was lighting fire. When we would simply focus on the task of sharing understanding, these *resonances of living experience* would spring up unpredictably – not always but often – drawing the students into heightened states of awareness.

#### THE CHALLENGES OF SELF-TRANSFORMATION

Most of the students who were touched by these dynamics experienced them as uplifting, even exhilarating “Aha!” moments. For some students, however, the process presented them with difficult personal challenges. As the spiritual literature makes clear, purification is the companion of liberation. Before we can realize the greater being that we are, we must confront and release whatever is holding us back from realizing this potential – some habit of thought, some emotional constriction. When some of my students were activated by what I believe is a life-enhancing process, their systems began a process of spontaneous detoxification – shedding of old patterns, old ways of thinking and feeling. I do not believe this would have happened to them if they had not been ready for it at a deeper level, even inviting it. They entered this transformational process because they were ripe for it.

These cathartic activations became particularly pronounced during a period of several years when I was undergoing a series of powerful transformative experiences in my personal practice that were breaking me down at very deep levels. The details of these

experiences are not important here and are described in my book *Dark Night, Early Dawn*.

Many spiritual traditions describe a phase of inner work that involves dissolving the boundary between self and other. They describe a membrane that marks the boundary between one's individual mind-field and surrounding fields of awareness. On the near side of this membrane, the world appears to be composed of separate beings, each with their seemingly private existence. On the far side of the membrane, the world appears as an integrated whole, a continuum of energy that is unfathomably complex and extravagantly beautiful. Hence, this boundary membrane is often described as the domain of death and rebirth, death to the prison of the private self and rebirth into a larger order of wholeness that underlies and saturates life's diversity. When a practitioner is transitioning through this territory, standing at the interface of these two paradoxically compatible realities, powerful synchronicities with surrounding persons sometimes manifest.

As my inner work came to focus on this boundary, triggering the purifications that typically accompany this transition, some of my students began to simultaneously undergo particularly difficult challenges in their lives. Most of my students did not enter these waters, of course, and passed through my courses untouched by these dynamics, but some did enter them. Those who did so sometimes felt themselves coming to a breaking point in their lives or a moment of supreme risk-taking. It was as though they and I were being drawn together through a collective death-rebirth vortex, a vortex that was breaking all of us down in different ways, uprooting deeply buried pains, and crushing restrictive barriers in our lives.

Some students chose to end bad marriages or to heal wounded ones. Others left careers they had outgrown but were still holding onto. (Thirty percent of the students at my university are older, non-traditional students.) Some began to confront their addictions and others to re-approach persons from whom they had been estranged for many years. One woman in her mid-forties hints at the profound disruption of her inner and outer worlds that occurred during this period when she began to spontaneously recover painful memories of child abuse, in a Buddhism course of all places:

*During and after having been in your classes, my internal world became increasingly chaotic as demons from painful psychological gestalts began to emerge, and eventually coloring my external world too, challenging everything I thought I was and dissolving familiar reference points [...]. As I struggled to break through powerful gestalts of pain, you spoke to and nourished my soul, making it possible for me to move more deeply into my spiritual journey (2008: 32).*

Obviously the phenomena I'm describing raise important pedagogical and ethical issues. As my students came to me with these reports and I saw how deeply they were being affected by this mysterious alchemy that had opened between us, I was more than a little shaken myself. Neither of us had solicited this connection, yet here it was. Did I need to protect them from what was happening? Obviously this was not what they had consciously signed up for when they had signed up for my course. How does one ensure informed consent when the dynamics are so involuntary and beyond the pale of current academic discussion?

While the activation some of my students experienced during this period was quite powerful, there were no casualties and many positive breakthroughs. On the rare occasion when a student's self-transformation became particularly turbulent, I referred him or her to a gifted therapist in the area with whom they could process what was emerging in a safe setting.

#### THE ECOLOGY OF CONSCIOUSNESS

While these kinds of responses might be expected in certain types of courses, such as a counseling course, this is not the case for the kind of courses I was teaching. It was not the content of the course that seemed to be driving these effects but something deeper. I believe it was the *interaction of our subtle life energy underneath the exchange of words and ideas*. What was triggering these effects was not what I was *doing* but what I had *become*. Because of the intense practice I was doing at the time, my energy was running differently. Or to put it more carefully, the field of energy of which "I" am a part was flowing more strongly.

The experiences my students were having appear to demonstrate a simple principle: *clarified states of consciousness are contagious*. My efforts to realize deeper states of awareness seem cause my person to begin acting as a kind of lightning rod triggering sparks of a similar awakening among those students who were receptive to this influence. Like ripples spreading across water, this is an utterly natural effect. When one person begins to throw off layers of egoic conditioning and to awaken to clearer, more inclusive states of awareness, surrounding persons will be affected. This is due to the nature of consciousness itself. Our spiritual ecology simply does not permit private awakening. The ecology of consciousness is an *inherently* collective ecology.

Though this suggestion is still regarded as heretical in most academic circles given the dictates of the Cartesian-Newtonian paradigm, it raises fewer eyebrows in spiritual communities, which have long known

that persons undergoing deep transformation affect those around them in subtle ways. Satprem, for example, discusses this phenomenon in his biography of Sri Aurobindo (1993) where he writes:

*[...] Sri Aurobindo and the Mother would realize that transformation is not just an individual problem but one involving the earth and that no individual transformation is possible (or at least complete) without some degree of collective transformation [...] It should be noted that each time Sri Aurobindo and the Mother had some experience indicating a new progress in the transformation, the disciples, without their even knowing anything about it, experienced in their consciousness a period of increased difficulties or even revolts and illnesses, as if everything were grating. Now we begin to understand how things work (291).*

Similarly, scholar-practitioner Mike Sayama mentions this phenomenon in his book, *Samadhi* (1986). In his discussion of the dynamics of *ch'i*, Sayama quotes the Japanese healer Kaneko Shoseki who observes:

*Apart from the normal communication between men through language and action there is another quite different sort of mutual influence. It is that of the rhythm of the Original Strength which permeates all human beings and Nature. Through it every individual thing [...] is connected with every other. If then one who is further removed from the working of the Primordial Force is close to one who lives more in accord with it, the rhythm of the Primordial Force will certainly be transmitted from the one to the other. The latter without knowing it exerts a good influence on the other (80-81).*

#### LEARNING FIELDS AND GROUP MINDS

In addition to the experiences listed above, there were other anomalies taking place in my classroom that pushed me to look beyond these individual resonances to the collective dynamics of the *class as a whole*.

Perhaps the most important observation that pushed me toward a collective reading of these events was the sheer magnitude of the forces that seemed to be involved. Too many people's lives were being too deeply affected for me to conceptualize what was taking place solely in terms of resonance with my individual energy. If my person was in some way a catalyst for these experiences to surface among my students, what was actually surfacing was something larger than I alone could be generating. As I made the shift to thinking of this larger "something" in terms of a *collective* field of consciousness, a variety of conceptual and experiential pieces began to fall into place.

Students were becoming more porous not only to me but also to each other. They sometimes showed up in each other's dreams in significant ways. Synchronicities were increasing between them, and life-expanding coincidences were becoming common in

my courses. As one male student who returned to college after a twenty-year absence reported to me:

*Each quarter seemed to bring new and unexpected changes and synchronicities. I entered into a web of personal relationships and meetings with people that profoundly influenced my life. I was "finding" individuals whose circumstances were eerily similar to my own; people who knew friends of mine from obscure places in the world; people who seemed to be reading the same books at the same times and having experiences that were transforming them in the same shattering yet exhilarating ways (2008: 44).*

A female student sent me the following description of the connectivity she had experienced with other students in several courses.

*All of us who have been in your classes feel a deep connection to one another. We don't know what it is. We only know that it is there. All that I know is that I have felt something binding us all together. I remember things going on around me in class with the other students. We were sensitive to each other's thoughts and feelings [...] I always wondered if you knew what was going on because you never said a thing in class! (2008: 44).*

Sometimes insights surfaced in the room that seemed to come not from me or from any individual student but rather from the strength of our *combined collective awareness*. This is a very subtle but distinctive experience.

Sometimes when I am simply doing my job covering the day's assignment, it's as if the floor suddenly falls away. The atmosphere in the room becomes supercharged, and everyone seems to congeal into a unified state. My mind becomes unusually spacious and clear, and my students' eyes tell me that they have moved into a particularly receptive state. Our hearts seem to merge, and from this open field of compassion comes a slow stream of thoughts that I, as spokesperson for the group, unfold and work with.

In these transient moments of heightened awareness, I sometimes have the acute sensation that there is only one mind present in the room. It's as if the walls that usually separate us have become gossamer curtains. Individual persons melt into a softly glowing field of energy, and this unified energy thinks and feels and hungers to speak. Because this field incorporates the life experience of everyone present, of course we sometimes find the details of our separate histories surfacing spontaneously in it. Because it embodies our private hopes and fears, of course we are sometimes deeply touched by what comes out of it.

And then there was the strange way that my students began to periodically "jump forward" in their learning *en masse*. I found that periodically I had to adjust my course material because the students seemed to have taken a quantum step forward in their receptivity to the ideas being presented. After years of using a carefully designed roadmap to achieve a specific

intellectual outcome, a new crop of students would signal me that they were already weeks ahead of me in the syllabus. It was as if they had found a shortcut to certain conclusions and no longer needed to be taken the long way around.

Of course, many factors may have contributed to this development, including general shifts in cultural insight, self-selecting student populations, and improved pedagogical delivery. But after watching this cycle repeat itself numerous times through the years, I'm convinced that there was more going on than just this. These shifts take place too suddenly and too frequently for them to be fully accounted for by these explanations.

Slowly I began to recognize that there was a *meta-learning* taking place behind the scenes, a pattern of collective learning that ran deeper than the learning of individual students. I began to hypothesize that there were *learning fields* growing around my courses, fields of consciousness that registered the learning taking place semester after semester, fields of influence that were making it easier for subsequent generations of students to learn the same material.

Readers familiar with Rupert Sheldrake's pioneering work on morphic fields will recognize his influence here (1981, 1988, 1991). Sheldrake helped me make sense of these phenomena by allowing me to see them as symptoms of a collective mind growing stronger over time. His work gave me permission to take the radical step of recognizing that not just individual persons with complex nervous systems have minds, *groups also have minds*. My experience with my students year after year pushed me to take his revolutionary hypothesis concerning the species mind one step further. Even *transient groups* can manifest a kind of group consciousness under certain conditions. From my perspective, these conditions are: 1) collective intention focused in an emotionally engaging group project; 2) a project of sustained duration, and 3) repetition of the project in approximately the same form many times<sup>1</sup>.

If consciousness is a field and fields are by nature porous, the learning of one individual cannot be isolated from the learning of others nearby. Recognizing the field-like nature of mind makes it easier to understand how minds might link together, even "phase lock" with other minds to form larger operational wholes. This tendency to synchronize with nearby systems is not unique to consciousness but is characteristic of nature as a whole. As Steven Strogatz says in his book, *Sync*, "For reasons we don't yet understand, the tendency to synchronize is one of the most pervasive drives in the universe, extending from atoms to animals, from people to planets."

To teach consciously in a world where minds are separate at one level and yet "entangled" at another calls for a more intentional pedagogy than envisioned in the atomistic Newtonian paradigm. The paradigm emerging today emphasizes the inherent connectivity of life and the powerful tendency of nature to synchronize its many parts into larger wholes (Bloom, Kaufmann, Radin). Accordingly, the pedagogy that will accompany this paradigm will recognize the innate connectivity of consciousness and the contagious quality of states of awareness. In *The Living Classroom*, I outline the strategies I developed over many years to work constructively with these natural forces.

#### INTERCONNECTIVITY AND INDIVIDUALITY

In closing, I want to emphasize that the collective dynamics of consciousness I've been pointing to here do not cancel or negate the individuality that we rightly prize so highly in the West. While a growing body of research suggests that our actions and intentions affect each other in hidden ways, within this matrix of connectivity individuality is not suffocated but is paradoxically liberated into deeper forms of self-expression. The self that consciously participates in the larger flows of life and the transparency of being becomes more than the self who did not do so. Experientially opening to the collective fields that surround us melts the boundaries of the private ego, bringing about the "death of self" spoken of in the spiritual literature, but as the ego dies a *deeper form of individuality is being birthed* – not an isolated individuality but one that thrives in this subtle give and take, an individuality with expanded responsibilities and a longer time horizon. In the end, I think we will see that expanding the breadth of our conscious participation in the surrounding matrix of life is actually bringing forward a new depth of personal presence in history. ◉

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<sup>1</sup> See Bache, 2008: § 2. When I say that a group has a "group mind," I don't mean to suggest that it has a centre of prehension or agency that controls its many members in ways comparable to how "I" control the limbs of my body. Nor am I suggesting that it is self-aware in the same way or to the same degree that we are self-aware. As a field of influence, a group mind does not usurp the freedoms, rights, or responsibilities of the individual minds that compose it. The challenge here is to envision forms of integral intelligence that augment and complement the individual human abilities we rightly value so highly.

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