

Preface: The Call for a Radical New Story of Learning and Schooling

*Stories become “testaments,” old or new, that choreograph
the life of the community.*

—Stephen Larsen, in Phil Cousineau, *Once and Future Myths* (2001)

Eighteen years into my career as an educator, I was invited to create an innovative statewide public residential institution called the Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy (IMSA). Now internationally recognized, this pioneering institution was established to offer a uniquely challenging program for Illinois students (grades 10 through 12) talented in mathematics and science and to serve as a catalyst for the stimulation of excellence in mathematics and science throughout Illinois.¹

Although neither a mathematician nor a scientist, I felt confident to lead in creating this unique institution: my preparation in mathematics and science was comprehensive; I had almost two decades of successful educational leadership and advanced degrees in learning and organizational development. What more would I need? Within a year, I humbly had my answer. My education and experience taught me to navigate the landscape of traditional schooling, but they were clearly inadequate for creating a generative new landscape for deep and integral

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learning. I would need to think profoundly differently about learning and schooling.

A NEW CONTEXT for LEARNING

Intuitively, I understood that the dynamics, creative processes, and organizing properties of living systems must guide the design of this generative learning landscape—life must be my mentor. So I asked some members of our science team to teach me about living systems. This simple inquiry changed my mind and my life.

It soon became abundantly clear that life is about learning and that cognition or knowing is the essential process of life.² I was fascinated by the deep patterns of wholeness, order, interdependence, and creativity in the natural world. Needing to probe deeper, I sought out pioneering thinkers in a variety of fields and disciplines, especially Margaret Wheatley, Myron Kellner-Rogers, Fritjof Capra, Sally Goerner, Dee Hock, Parker Palmer, and Howard Gardner.³ Their revolutionary and trailblazing work provided a foundational and illuminating context for my inquiry. From these explorations I gained a deeper understanding of how complex living systems—including our mind-brain—organize, grow, and learn. I sensed that this synthesis—this story—would be the roots of a radical new story of learning and schooling.

Our guiding metaphor of the universe, living systems, and the mind-brain was that of a deterministic, mechanistic, and predictable machine. But science had changed its mind about how the world works: the natural world is now understood as an interdependent, relational, and living web of connections—inherently whole, abundant, creative, and self-organizing. I believed our children's learning would thrive if they could learn as life does, by being immersed in environments that are natural living habitats—"learning arboretums," as one of my students called them, for nurturing integral and wise minds.

This understanding of the dynamic relationships, sustaining organization, and boundless creativity of the natural world as context for learning and schooling is fundamental. Because we unconsciously institutionalize our scientific worldview in our beliefs, assumptions, thinking, and behavior, we shape the structures and processes of our institutions, including our schools, according to the science of our times.

Yet despite new discoveries, rigid conceptions of world-as-a-machine have calcified into unquestioned models of thinking and design principles that continue to shape our language, stories, policies, and institutions. This worldview and its illusions of predictability, precise measurability, and external controllability continue to influence almost every dimension of our culture. But nowhere is the imprint more debilitating than in the processes and structures of schooling, in what and how we ask our children to learn and in how we were taught to lead them.

WATERING *the* ROOTS

Learning is the most natural and creative of all human endeavors. When we jump back from a hot stove for the first time, marvel at ants living intricate lives just beneath the topsoil, stand in awe at the magic and mystery of a rainbow, or simply wonder at the vastness of the universe, we are learning. Yet despite the inherent spontaneity and naturalness of learning, the nature and quality of our minds are powerfully shaped by the nature and quality of the learning environments in which they are immersed, activated, and nurtured. *How* we are asked to learn matters profoundly. Mind shaping is world shaping.

In the absence of a holistic context of purpose, meaning, and connection, our current processes and structures of schooling have restrained our children's access to all of who they are by creating false proxies for deep learning. Finishing a course and a textbook has come to mean achievement. Listening to a lecture has come to mean understanding. Getting a high score on a standardized test has come to mean proficiency. Credentialing has come to mean competence.

During the most formative time of human development, childhood through adolescence, our children are immersed in learning environments and schooling systems disconnected from their deepest learning needs. These environments stifle natural learning and great thinking; they diminish curiosity and constrain our children's natural capacities to explore, create, imagine, and make genuine contributions to their communities and their world while they are young. The nature of schooling as we know it has become the unquestioned answer to educating our children. *It is not.* Knowing what we now know, we can no longer do what we now do. It is time to reconnect

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our children to their abundant learning potentials and reengage them in the joy of learning.

I know many remarkable educators and schools that swim courageously against this powerful tide and many students who emerge from schooling still eager to learn. Yet despite their efforts and excellence, the current story and system of schooling too often results in tentative and risk-averse learners, ill equipped to creatively reframe and resolve the deeply complex and interdependent problems of our time. As a result, many children feel disconnected from themselves, each other, and the natural world, uncertain of where and how they belong. Over time, this lived story creates a system of schooling that masks or erodes the unknowable potentials our children can so naturally bring to learning.

We know something is wrong, so we try to fix the schools and the children—altering the schedule, increasing standards and course loads, and adding remedial classes. But re-forming or restructuring schools has not transformed our *system* of learning and schooling or the nature and quality of the minds it invites and educates into existence. In the wise words of the Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh, “If you want the tree to grow, it won’t help to water the leaves. You have to water the roots.”⁴ It is such a simple idea. Yet when it comes to deeply educating the minds of our children, we are watering the leaves of schooling and not the roots of learning.

Schools are powerful places for shaping minds. They provide the cultural practice field for how we learn to know about and meaningfully engage in shaping our world. From age three to eighteen, children are in schools that profoundly shape and reinforce their worldview; their orientation to self, others, and nature; and their identity as learners. And although they graduate from its walls, they do not leave the habits of mind created by its boundaries. We cannot underestimate the tenacious hold our current story of learning and schooling has over the growing minds of our children—the leaders and cartographers of our future.

We can no longer “water the leaves” of schooling, continuing our singular focus on reforming its contents. It is time to water the roots of learning—radically transforming its contexts and conditions. This is a paradigm shift. Our current context and conditions of schooling are completely at odds with the creative principles of life and learning and

who we naturally are as learners. It is time to author a new story of deep and mindful learning and schooling and to design learning systems and environments that embody the natural creativity and joy of life itself. It is into this unexplored new terrain that we will venture together.

THINKING DIFFERENTLY

As leaders, many of us were trained to manage and measure our system's success through rigid and externally imposed processes and structures that left little room for variance and professional judgment. As a result, we focused on "predictive" cause-and-effect models of learning and change. We separated knowledge into discrete and unconnected "subjects." We reengineered teaching and learning relationships based on efficiency and productivity. We fragmented our selves, our organizations, our learning, and our world. We separated our rich exterior and interior lives and forced unbridled individualism, acquisition, and competition to compete with collaboration, innovation, and exploration.

Our system's roots are not being nurtured. Preparing our children for wise world shaping requires a generative learning system that (1) recognizes the processes and structures of learning as nested and interdependent and (2) understands learning as a continuous natural process of constructing meaning through creative inquiry, sustained engagement, and imaginative exploration and discovery. A generative learning system invites learning that increases our capacity for continuous self-creation and nurtures the development of minds capable of integral and wise world shaping. The properties of life and the principles of learning are the deep roots for creating generative and life-affirming systems of learning and schooling. It is through this natural story of abundance, wholeness, creativity, and interdependence that our children can reclaim their own wholeness, meaning, creativity, and sense of belonging.

As leaders, it is our responsibility to create learning conditions that immerse and engage our children in the creative story of life so that they can walk connected paths and author whole and connected lives. Using life's own design principles, we can reweave our children's frayed and severed connections to the web of life and to one another. We can

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create natural and generative learning systems by reconnecting our children's schooling and learning to the dynamic and creative story of life itself. Deeper roots will enable us to reach higher ground.

The CALL

My explorations have led me to understand that engaging all our ways of knowing is what makes us fully human and that we can no longer separate our interior (more experiential and intuitive) mind from our exterior (more observational and objective) mind. This call for a radical new story of learning and schooling is a call to reconnect learning to life. It is a call to heal the intellectual, emotional, and spiritual fragmentation caused by denying the legitimacy of all we are in learning. Life is about freedom, interdependence, creativity, novelty, relationships, exploration, and discovery—and so is learning. I believe it is the power of this generative new story of leadership and learning that will transform our system of schooling and enable the creation of integral and wise minds that can reimagine humanity's collective future. It is this new global consciousness that will lead to the emergence of a just, compassionate, and sustainable world.

This book is that call. Rather than offer best practices or prescriptive "solutions," it creates a context for a new story by inviting you to think differently about learning and schooling. It illuminates the why and what of educational transformation and explores its deepest roots. It opens a new conversation about the generative nature of living and learning systems. And it offers new language, new questions, new design principles, and a new map for creating learning landscapes that integrate the dynamic properties of living systems with the generative principles of learning. It is from this natural integration that the new paradigm of learning and schooling unfolds.

I invite you to engage in this fundamental question: What would it take to create a generative and life-affirming system of learning and schooling that liberates the goodness and genius of all children and invites and nurtures the power and creativity of the human spirit for the world? When our children are invited to joyfully engage in and meaningfully experience their learning and their world as a living network of relationships to which they belong and for which they have

responsibility, the quality and wisdom of their minds will astonish us and the creative power of their dreams will shape the world.

Mind shaping is world shaping. Our habits of mind and patterns of thinking are shaped and developed through experience and practice.

When our children engage in powerful questions, they learn to explore and inquire; when they engage in discovering connections, they learn to seek and discern relationships; when they engage in solving significant ethical problems, they learn to creatively resolve complex interdependencies. How we engage the minds of our children in learning profoundly shapes the patterns of their thinking and their thinking shapes the world.

There is a new world struggling to be born. This transformation will not initially emerge through the reinvention of social structures and institutions, although that will occur. Nor will it emerge through the reformation of governing policies and priorities, although they too will change. Rather, it will come from an altering of mind—the transformation of human consciousness and the emergence of integral and wise global minds that will creatively live into a new worldview of an interconnected living planet and a sustainable and interdependent human family. It is my belief that the fullness of our humanity and the sustainability of our planet rest with the transformation of human consciousness and the nurturing of decidedly different minds.

I hope there will be passages in this book that deeply resonate with what you have already come to know. If so, they are calling to your imagination. They are inviting you to claim your voice and lead in the creation of a new landscape of learning and schooling that reconnects our children's learning to life and creates learning systems that liberate their goodness and genius for the world.

Now is not the time for a new learning theory. Now is the time for a new learning story. Individually and together, we can become new storytellers and bring the new story to life.

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Stephanie Pace Marshall

