

**"The Journey of Social Conscience:
Putting Transformation at the Heart of Education"**

Mel Kieschnick Lecture

October 23, 2013

"The crisis of our education system is that it treats students as burden-laden camels. Missing is the deeper understanding of the human journey . . . Real education is about transformation."

- Scharmer and Kaufer (212-213).

Abstract:

The frequent use of the term *transformation* in the lexicon of educational institutions suggests that 21st century educators are searching for new pedagogical approaches that place personal and systemic change at the heart of education. In this presentation, Hong Kong International School humanities teacher Dr. Marty Schmidt asserts that the one master story that needs to be told in our schools is the journey of transformation. Drawing upon Joseph Campbell's "heroic cycle," Marty shares how he takes his students on this journey through his "Humanities I in Action" curriculum, which combines in-class study and out-of-class service learning experiences. Understanding the truly transformative nature of what Marty calls *social conscience education* can offer joy, purpose, and belonging to students who want to make a difference in the world. As followers of Christ, who called on his disciples to be "born again" (John 3:3), Marty calls upon Christian educators to combine the best of modern pedagogy with a living faith tradition that challenges students to "be transformed by the renewal of your minds" (Romans 12:2).

Opening thanks

It's an indeed an honor and privilege to be asked to present the Kieschnick lecture at this year's Global Symposium, so let me first offer my deep thanks to Wheat Ridge Ministries and the Center for Urban Education Ministries. Mel spoke at HKIS two years ago, and it was without a doubt one of the highlights of my 23 years at HKIS . . . because I was able to connect to the creation story of our institution. As Mel spoke of his vision for HKIS at the school's inception in the 1960's, I realized that we share a lot of the same desires for ministry. For starting HKIS with such vision and heart, I feel very much in Mel's debt.

I was particularly struck in his speech at HKIS when he was asked what does it mean to be a Christian teacher, he said teachers should think in this way: "Every child is of God, and therefore of infinite value, and every person has a calling in life." Grace and vocation - this is the short-hand phrase that I think represents the best in our Lutheran educational tradition. Grace and vocation are our Lutheran touchstones, and I'll return to these again near the end of the presentation.

Opening Stories

See if you recognize these stories.

Once upon a time there was a young aristocrat who abandoned his life of luxury for the desert where he had an encounter with the divine. He returned to his homeland as a man transformed and led a socio-spiritual revolution crying, "Let my people go."

Once upon a time there was a zealous legal scholar who persecuted followers of a new religious sect until he was literally knocked off his high horse. He became our faith's greatest missionary, and planted the seeds for its global expansion.

Once upon a time there was a precocious young man who refused to follow in the footsteps of success of his father instead choosing to enter a monastery, where he found a beauty, power, and freedom in the Bible that had been lost, and he began the Protestant Reformation.

There are so many stories of personal transformation beyond our own particular sphere of the universe - from other religions to other cultures, and finally, of greatest relevance to our students, many come from popular culture - think of Dorothy, Luke Skywalker, Neo in Matrix, Harry Potter, and Avatar.

The One Story

So many stories, but is it possible that underneath all the stories there is only one real story? And what if we could identify what that one master story is, and then put it at heart of Lutheran education? This would meet the very deep needs of our students!

Perhaps you have heard of Joseph Campbell, who came to some fame in the 1980's when he was interviewed by Bill Moyers in a series called, "The Power of Myth." Campbell was a scholar who studied myths and stories from around the world. He came to believe that there was "only one story that really matters"(Hartogshohn), and it has been with us from the beginning of human culture and will remain with us to the end. And that one story is about personal transformation. He called it the "heroic cycle."

This one story has three basic components:

Stage 1: An individual feels a call to adventure to depart from his or her ordinary world of everyday existence.

Stage 2: The hero then goes on a journey and experiences a special world filled with great test and trials, monsters and villains, but there also many helpers who guide the adventurer. Eventually, there is a great confrontation, which leads to a death experience, but also to rebirth,

Stage 3: and then the hero leaves the special world and returns to the ordinary world with some elixir or gift, some healing balm or magic potion, that restores vitality to the everyday world.

My Story

So let me start with my own story as seen through the lens of the heroic cycle. In 1990 at the age of 25, I remember my mentors from Concordia Teacher's College laying their hands upon me at St. John's Lutheran church, commissioning me to become a Lutheran missionary-educator in Hong Kong. My call to adventure was to leave the cozy Cornhusker confines of Seward Nebraska - my ordinary world - and teach history and religion at Hong Kong International School. I idealistically wanted to make a difference in students' lives. The stories of Moses, Paul, Luther, and so many others that I had been raised with told me that the true heart of education was about transformation of the human person. II Corinthians 5:17 was particularly inspiring to me, "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, the new has come."

However, as Campbell predicts, my initiation to the special world of HKIS included many tests and trials. As a middle-class American school teacher from Nebraska with little international experience, I was woefully ill-prepared to teach highly privileged, success-oriented Western expatriate and Hong Kong Chinese students anything that could make a difference in their lives. I remember the shame of unintentionally blurting out at a gathering of Lutheran teachers in my second year that I felt "alienated" and "shot at." My efforts as a young teacher fell embarrassingly, and even despairingly, short.

It was in the midst of my initiation into the special world of teaching that I had a very dramatic dream of being suffocated by two men towering over me with pillows. It was two of my close colleagues, one of whom is in the room today. (Ted, please raise your hand.) As the Heroic Journey suggests, my entry into the special world of international education involved a death experience - my way of seeing the world was being suffocated. It was painful and disorienting and I was left with a sense of emptiness. Confused, I wondered: where is the *power* of Christian education, especially the power of the gospel, to transform lives?

However, later in that second year I received a gift in the special world - I was assigned to co-lead a weeklong service trip to an orphanage in Thailand. The trip was a success, and much to my surprise, students starting talking about the deep impact that the week had made on them in terms that were transformative in nature. The sought-after power I had labored fruitlessly to realize in the classroom seemed, by comparison, tantalizingly within reach by the relatively simple task of taking students to play with orphans for a week. And it was oh so much easier than laboring over lesson plans!

Now we can see how heroic cycles inter-relate. My *special* world of HKIS was my students' *ordinary* world - they needed to leave their everyday life of ultra-high achievement and privilege and join the special world of human need in Asia. I started taking students to orphanages in Thailand, China, and Vietnam and students started to say the most amazing things. Bethany Wetjen, daughter of one of our Lutheran educators at HKIS, wrote in her journal: "Service **scars** you in the most **beautiful** way possible." What a profound statement! The orphanage was her special world of initiation, death, and rebirth.

The Soul of Service

Or how about Grace. Following a class trip to the Foshan orphanage in southern China, our class was discussing what we had really accomplished in a mere three days of visits. Why, I pushed further, do we not simply give up when we are barraged with the overwhelming needs all around us – when we watch the news, when we pick up a newspaper . . . or when we visit a country with an endless number of healthy baby girls abandoned simply because of their gender? I repeated: why don't we give up? Silence . . . a long pause. Then from the right hand corner of the room, Grace broke the silence with a voice of conviction, almost exasperation, "WE HAVE SOULS."

We have souls . . . we have souls . . . Harry Lewis, former dean of Harvard, wrote in his book *Excellence without a Soul*, "The students are not soulless, but their university is." So much of our ordinary world of education, whether at HKIS or Harvard is about dates and facts, formulas and theorems, GPAs and SATs - so often they are not of the soul.

So, what is of the soul? I have come to believe that service learning is the most powerful pedagogy I know of to initiate students into the one story that really matters.

The Journey of Social Conscience in Humanities I in Action

So, what is possible when you put that one story at the heart of a course? Nearly a decade after leading many extracurricular service trips, I moved service into the curriculum by creating a 9th grade core course called, "Humanities I in Action."

Drawing again upon Campbell, the course curriculum is itself a call to adventure. We took the three most compelling issues that kids care about - genocide, globalization, and the environment - and put them at the center of the curriculum. But rather than a straightforward academic approach, we use **psychological** and **sociological** lenses. So, when we study the Rwandan genocide, we ask: What psychological processes as well as what social forces can explain how 800,000 Rwandans were killed by hand by machete?

But then there is an even deeper layer - all of our study leads to the big questions: is human nature fundamentally good or evil? What is my purpose? What do humans really want from life? We dance on all three levels to reveal the depth needed to be a good citizen in the 21st century. In the end, we aim to help students develop a worldview, or a life philosophy, that will guide their actions.

That's in the classroom, but the course also includes 10 experiential and service learning opportunities, like beach clean-ups, a refugee simulation, visits to a recycling center, and of course the weekend at the Foshan orphanage. And all students do an elixir project during the second semester - where students create their own action project in the community.

Given that background on the course, I want to invite you to step into the special world of social conscience education by watching a video that my colleague Mike Kersten and I made last year. We interviewed students that had taken Humanities I in Action - and we've placed their reflections on the spiritual

symbol of a labyrinth, a replica of the one that graces the floor of Chartre Cathedral in France.

<http://martinschmidtinasia.wordpress.com/2013/10/30/the-journey-of-social-conscience-putting-transformation-at-the-heart-of-education/> - [video found in this blog]

In this first segment, listen to how the students describe their ordinary world before they stepped into the special world of our Humanities I in Action course: 0:00-1:24.

My students' ordinary world - unaware, apathetic, and unable to make a positive impact on the world. And if you ask students why they don't have a social conscience, they will readily tell you that they are trapped in a bubble of ignorance and self-focus. Then they stepped into the special world of Humanities I in Action: 1:24-2:15.

From day 1 of the course we ask students the big questions of life - the questions their souls hunger to address. But a big part of the power of the course is that we ask these questions together as a community of learners. As Campbell suggests, everyone needs helpers on the journey, and that makes the course both very meaningful and a lot of fun: 2:15-3:20.

In the course students gain a special knowledge that is unavailable in their ordinary world: 3:20-3:42.

The secret knowledge and magic of the course comes from the pedagogy in which we link in-class study to out-of-class experiences, bursting their bubbles of ignorance and connecting them to the real world: 3:42-4:21.

The highlight of the course is a 4-day trip to an orphanage in China. What do we do? We play with babies for about 10 hours in a weekend. Seems so simple, but it's a profound experience for students: 4:21-5:35.

Empathy is the most powerful positive force in the special world, but the special world is also a dangerous place because it's hard to study what's wrong with the world, especially in our genocide unit. There is something of a death experience at work amongst these 9th graders: 5:35-6:14.

Yet following this death, there is resurrection: 6:14-6:32.

Having experienced resurrection, students want to take their new-found knowledge that they gained in the special world and bring some type of healing back to the ordinary world: 6:32 -8:05.

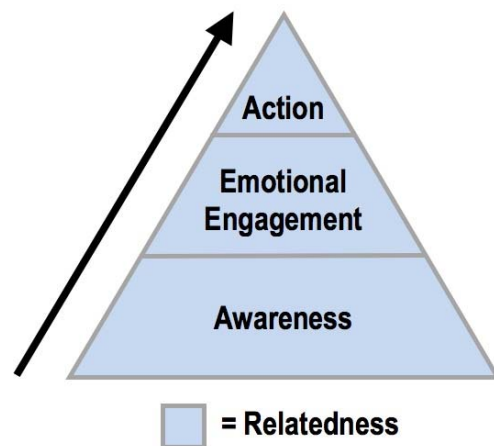
Reflecting on their time in the course, students realize they have been on a journey of transformation, and that that journey will continue as they leave the course and return back to everyday life: 8:05-8:50.

I want to highlight a non-Christian student named Willie who again appears in this last segment. Eventually students need to leave the special world and return to the ordinary world, but the journey continues. Pay attention to the Chinese boy in this last segment, Willie, one of non-Christian students at HKIS: 8:50-9:26.

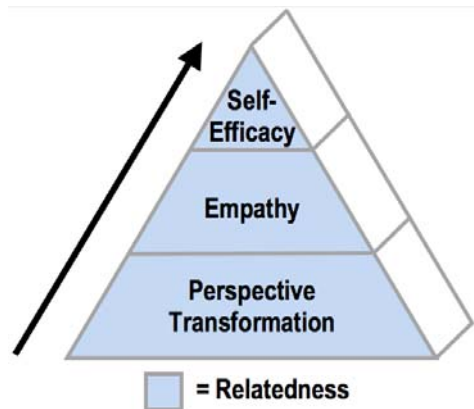
The year after Willie took Humanities I in Action, he joined a group of 15 students, led by my colleague Mike Kersten, to serve at a Christian-run orphanage in Cambodia. At the end of the week, these Christian orphans, whose English wasn't so strong, decided they wanted to **show** their appreciation to our students like Jesus would do it, and so . . . they decided to wash our students' feet. And so one by one, each orphan began washing each of the 15 students' feet. As soon as it began, Jackie, the Chinese girl, said to Mike in a Peteresque manner, "Tell them to stop - this isn't right." Yet this most powerful of Christian rituals continued - for an entire hour. These Cambodian orphans, no doubt among the world's most innocent victims, continued to take hold of our students' feet, wash them, and dry them. Near the end of the foot-washing, Hannah, a **Christian** young woman pictured on the right, turned to Mike and with eyes wide, whispered, "He's here . . . He's here." To bring this story up-to-date, when I left HK last weekend, Willie was attending an all-night Christian retreat at HKIS - as he says, he is still on his journey.

Impact on Students

Now that you have gotten an insider's view of the inner journey of a few students in our classes, let's step back and ask about the more general impact upon students. What I found in my research is that when you raise student awareness about current social issues and in a way that engages their emotion, even if a good number of those emotions are what we consider negative - fear, guilt, hopelessness, helplessness - many students come away from this study and want to do something. At each one of these levels, students gain a new-found sense of relatedness between themselves and their world.



What happens if students are exposed to this kind of education for four years?



First, awareness becomes "perspective transformation," which means that core concepts like self, other, world, and 'God' (p. 5) are all redefined. Secondly, all those negative emotions of fear, guilt, helplessness and hopefulness are now become transformed into the quintessential Christian virtue - love. Finally, action becomes self-efficacy, which means students gain the confidence to act on the world to make a difference.

Now, let me do something a little bit un-Lutheran - that is, I'd like to toot my own horn a bit. In all the reading I did for my doctorate, I never came across research at any level - high school or university - that developed the kind of depth that we just saw in this video. In fact, my key research paradigm was something called, "**Adult** Transformative Learning Theory" by a professor at Columbia called Jack Mezirow. Note the word "adult"! According to this theory, only adults with fully developed cognitive structures can experience a transformative experience.

With all due respect to Professor Mezirow, I believe that his theory should be revised - 14 year olds can experience transformation - I see this happening on a daily basis. But secondly, and more practically, I believe that the state of our world is so desperate that we can't wait for 35-year olds to wake up, have a mid-life crisis, and ask, "What is my purpose in life?" My research suggests, and the state of our world demands, that we build transformative opportunities into our curriculum in high school, and maybe even younger.

The Yin of Social Conscience Education

The original title for this talk was going to be the "Yin and Yang of Social Conscience Education," but in truth I've only told you about the "Yang," which is the more dramatic, service-learning, action-oriented approach. Allow me to briefly sketch out for you the "Yin" side, which actually contains a necessary critique of service-learning.

This "yin" side can best be explained by a presentation made by one of my students, Jaclyn, at one our chapels at HKIS. She said,

"For the first two years of high school, I separated life into the big and small things. The big things meant much more to me than did the small things. When I learned about the Rwandan genocide, factory farms, and other pressing global issues in Humanities In Action, I was moved to help solve these big issues. I was so busy

advocating against animal abuse and the unfair treatment of refugees yet I would come home every day and act ice cold with my grandfather . . . Every time I think of it I cringe in disgust and guilt. "

What Jaclyn's story helped me realize is that the powerful outer-directed pedagogy of "service-learning" needs to be complemented by an inner-directed pedagogy of spiritual practices. I have been experimenting with all kinds of mindfulness practices and, just like I felt a calling in the 1990's to provide service learning for students, I now feel that same sense with regards to spiritual practices.

So, this means that I'm doing a lot with meditation and other mindfulness activities in my classes. Now, maybe you're thinking that meditation is associated only with Hinduism and Buddhism, well, let me share the good news that I realized in the mid-1990's when I met Father Basil Pennington, who was commissioned by the pope to share the ancient Christian practice of Centering Prayer with the world. Centering Prayer is a deeply Christian practice of resting in God beyond fickle emotions or the ever-analytical mind. Centering Prayer has become my own preferred spiritual practice, and one that I'm sharing with students. My intuition is that combining the yang of service learning with the yin of spiritual practice is not only a powerful & holistic pair of pedagogies, but more importantly when I think of the Gospels - with Jesus alternating his healing and teaching of larger groups of people with occasional retreats to be alone with God - I think this combination imitates Christ's **actual ministry rhythm**. When I think what can we as Lutheran educators give to the world in the 21st century, this is it: we can take students on a transformative journey through the outer-directed path of service learning and the inner-directed path of Christian spiritual practice.

Reflections on Grace and Vocation

Finally, I'd like to return to Mel's handy summary of Lutheran education - grace and vocation, and I'd like to re-think that relationship a bit in light of this journey. In the traditional Lutheran upbringing, we learned about grace, the love of God, from early on, and as we grew and became young people our sense of vocation grew out of this foundation of grace. But for my mostly secularized, success-at-all-costs students, accepting the concept of a God of love is a huge intellectual chasm that many of them can't leap across. However, by contrast, whenever I talk about finding meaning and purpose in life in class, it's always a winner! Everyone wants to find a calling in life! So, I would like to suggest that we reverse the arrow of our traditional upbringing. Let's lead with vocation, and when they want to know the source of vocation, it's the love and grace of God. The arrow can go the other way.

Our students are so hungry for happiness, for a meaningful life, and service learning puts them on this path. But we hope that they investigate also our hidden aquifer that lies beneath the the path of service, the cosmic generosity that flowed through Jesus when he said, "Love your enemies," or "Be like your Father in heaven who sends rain on the just and unjust." I believe that social conscience education is our most potent way of leading students to consider the reservoir of grace that underlies our passion for service-learning.

Conclusion

So, allow me to conclude. Again, let me reiterate my deep thanks to Mel Kieschnick and to Wheat Ridge Ministries for this opportunity, but let me put my gratitude in terms of the Heroic Cycle. In 1990 I left my ordinary world of Nebraskan cornfields for the special world of Hong Kong. And now 23 years later, I've had a chance to return, to you, my original community, and offer a few things that I have learned. So, again Mel, thanks for helping me make this turn in my own journey.

And in summary, this is what I have learned in my years away. First, I believe that the true mission of Christian education is to lead students on a sacred journey of personal, social, and spiritual transformation - and that this transformation will positively impact the world in the present and extends into eternity. Second, I do believe that this journey of transformation is the one story we need to enact in our schools. Third, I find that Joseph Campbell's Heroic Cycle is a true and practical framework that can help students make sense of the smallest and largest of journeys.

My plea to you as a teacher speaking to school administrators and church leaders is to do **more** than simply provide the freedom to implement courses like I have done at HKIS. Rather, what would happen if at the highest levels, schools would say that offering transformation - helping students become new creations in Christ - is what we do! Let's make this one story "intentional, systemic, and curricular, rather than accidental, piecemeal and extracurricular" (Parker & Zajonc). Let's put the journey of transformation at the heart of Lutheran education.

I'd like to finish with a song by one of my students, Jodie Chan, who joined me on two trips to a school for orphans in southern Thailand which was built after the devastating 2004 tsunami. Jodie's first lines are significant, "Too much love to put into words." [music video is currently unavailable - 2:30.]

Our students' souls are very large - remember, Grace's "we have souls" - and what they want to do is to explore the mystery of love, for that is what we were created for. Jodie and so many others are searching for the hidden aquifer of love. Putting transformation at the heart of education puts them on the path towards seeking the One who offers, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink."

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Extras:

Mezirow's Adult Transformative Learning Theory

I'd like to take a few minutes and talk about what happened at those service trips from the perspective of educational theory. In the 1970's Columbia professor Jack Mezirow proposed an insightful theory about how adults change called **Adult Transformative Learning Theory**. Mezirow's theory explains what happens when we cross the threshold from our ordinary world of our daily lives into the special world of service.

Here are the first four steps:

1) A disorienting dilemma:

In my case, taking my students from their top 1% world to a Chinese orphanage is disorienting.

2) Self-examination with feelings of fear, anger, guilt or shame:

Along with this realization are a set of emotions like fear, anger, guilt or shame. Last year when we returned from the Foshan orphanage, I asked the students - who feels guilty living back in HK, and nearly every hand shot up. Tremendous amounts of guilt accompany my students' privilege and affluence.

3) a critical assessment of assumptions:

Then come the questions: why is the world like this? Why am I rich and so many are not? What is the purpose of studying when so many are suffering? What should I do with my life?

4) recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared,

Here's the magic of doing with this with a group - they can process their disorientation and the quest for transformation in a group.

The first four steps happen quite naturally when we take students on service experiences, and too often teachers stop at step 4 with kids that might be even traumatized by their experience. In fact, I could make that case that stopping at stage 4 is a form of educational malpractice - it's possible that such an experience could leave students scarred. For "service to scar you in the most *beautiful* way possible", for the caterpillar to be transformed into the butterfly requires us to follow Mezirow and the heroic journey through to its conclusion. Steps 5-10 where we should provide our expertise as Lutheran educators, which means that we as educators need to accompany students on the journey. Take a look at the last 6 steps.

5) exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions,

6) planning a course of action,

7) acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans,

8) provisionally trying new roles,

- 9) building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships,
- 10) a reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's perspective.]

The last six steps are all about integrating the new information about themselves and their world, and finding a new balance. Ultimately, it's about the big questions, and this is all about vocation. Given the reality of the world, what is my calling?

Now, hopefully someone has picked up the contradiction here. Mezirow calls this an ADULT learning theory. He and his fellow researchers assume that only those with a fully formed cognitive foundation can truly have a transformative experience. However, my interviews and writings from HKIS students suggest that some do indeed experience what Mezirow defines as transformation.

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Let me give you an example how this works. So let's take an example. We'll take the issue of poverty in Hong Kong. Just a few weeks ago Hk for the first time defined a poverty line, and now we know that about 1.3 million people, or 1/4 of our population, lives in poverty - in one of the world's richest, most successful cities. 1 out of 4 children and 1 out of 3 elderly don't have enough to eat. The poorest of the poor in HK live in cages, as we can see in this video: 0:00-2:30.

This video is quite shocking to my students, who are among the wealthiest students in Hong Kong: 4:18-7:15.

So, in one class period I can raise students' awareness in an emotionally engaging way that is very striking, for this reality is within a half hour bus ride of our school. But if I really want them to impact the students, I need to give them an action component.

So I went over to one of our Lutheran schools in Kowloon and said I wanted my students to learn first-hand about the needs of poor students like Jessica. To make sure the principal understood what I wanted, I showed her the video. She stopped the video and said, "Jessica is a student at our school." Did you hear what they video said - the mother brought Jessica to HK from China so that she could attend a better school? That better schools in one of our Lutheran schools. And here we are with Jessica at a party at her school.

This is the miracle that can be social conscience education - putting awareness, emotion, and action all together. Over an entire year, there is a growing relatedness between them and the world.

So, what does it look like? Let me tell you about Brian Li, a kid that I taught in Humanities I in Action in 2005. Brian was a typical 9th grader - swimmer, goofy sense of humor. He always complimented me on my nice shirts, which tells you something about his poor fashion sense. Brian enjoyed the class, but he was fairly unremarkable compared to other students. Two years later we went with me was on a trip to Calcutta where we worked with some of Mother Teresa's

homes. Then in the middle of his last year Brian came to me and said, "Mr. Schmidt, I'd really like to do something important with my senior project." I said, "Well, you know refugees in HK really need help, but . . . if you want a bigger project, thanks to our LCMS World Mission people, I know of a hundred very bright, but very poor girls across the border in China who can't afford to go to school. What do you think?" Brian came back the next day and said, "I want to start a girls scholarship fund." Brian and his friends worked extremely hard during their senior year and raised 45,000 US for the girls, and today hundreds of girls have gone through the program. Let's watch the first half of this program: 0:00-3:12 with stop with Brian at 2:46.

I met up with Brian last months. Brian is no longer the goofy swimmer kid that strangely liked my fashion sense. After graduating from college in California two years ago, he didn't pursue a high finance job like his friends. Instead he landed a position at an NGO in Los Angeles that provides health care advice for 90,000 people in underserved communities in Los Angeles. And just over the summer he was asked to be the interim chief operations manager of three branches. Brian is testament to my conviction that service learning can offer students the opportunity to escape the self-centered ethos that dominates many of our education settings, and provide them instead a life of purpose, joy, and belonging.

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I would like to suggest that this hidden aquifer is a useful metaphor for the relationship of grace and vocation.

We have something very powerful in our hands in the concept of service-learning. It's predictable, I see it happen day-by-day, year-by-year in my school. This, I believe, is the metanoia, or repentance, that Jesus is speaking about in the gospels - a deep change. This is what is possible - and I believe every student deserves the opportunity to choose this kind of education. My own next step is to explore the spiritual practices complement to service-learning in the years to come to make social conscience a truly holistic pedagogy.

My final word, then, is let us as LEA figure out how to put this one story, the journey of transformation, at the heart of Lutheran education. My way has been to do this through service-learning and I'm beginning to understand the special world of spiritual practices.

When students come into grade 9, they can either choose the standard history and geography course, or they can choose the "in Action" option. So, from Day 1 the kids in our classes want to be there.

With the power of Jesus' example that remains palpable in far-flung places like the Cambodian countryside, students are attracted to Christian teachers like Mike.