

Teaching spirituality the answer

Quaker Meeting at a Philadelphia Friends school provides students from many different religious persuasions with a meaningful framework to explore their own spirituality. Because Friends schools operate on the belief that every person is endowed with an inner light, enabling them to know God's will directly, worship is silent, leaving each person free to search for spiritual truth in their own way and, if deeply moved, to stand out of the silence and share a message with the gathering.

Sitting in silence, reflecting on the meaning of one's life, listening to and acting on the concerns of others addresses one of the most pressing needs of schools today — how to teach children to be good.

Robert Coles, author of "The Spiritual Life of Children," tells us that educational institutions originally founded to teach their students "how to become good and decent, as well as broadly and deeply literate, may abandon the first mission to concentrate on a driven, narrow book learning."



WILLIAM C.
KASHATUS

For Coles, teaching a child to be "good" goes well beyond the academic study of religion or even school prayer. It involves cultivating their spiritual lives in ways that will allow them to take that big step from thought to action, from moral reasoning to fulfilled moral commitments. Often the methods — rather than the creed — embraced by a religiously affiliated school help to achieve this goal. The difficulty, however, is convincing those who run the public schools of the inextricable relationship between spirituality and moral education.

Religion seems irrelevant today. Our scientific culture educates us to focus on the physical and material world while religion has been reduced to the intellectual assent to a creed. We've removed the spiritual in our lives, supposedly to preserve and protect the separation of church and state.

In fact, the danger in eliminating the spiritual from our schools has little to do with the Bill of Rights and everything to do with the purpose of our schools: to teach our children how to discover what is truly meaningful in their lives, the things that give them a sense of self-esteem.

Whether we choose to admit it or not, children are a trust. All we can do is care for them and nurture a sense of self-worth in them. Helping them to discover their own spirituality is not only critical, but one of the most important responsibilities of any public, private or parochial school. ■

William C. Kashatus is chair of religious studies and director of community service at William Penn Charter School.



TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 13, 1996