In Pursuit of Education’s Highest Aim
Reimagining Education through a Spirituality of Communion

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Teachers, students, and all other stakeholders in education share a common purpose that is realized through two specific objectives: to teach individuals and to build community. This might seem a utopian goal, particularly given the circumstances found in contemporary classrooms and schools. How can education be reimagined, given the many constraints that make change difficult? Our research has revealed an approach whereby teachers, students, administrators, professors, and parents can construe the many challenges of education not as problems to be solved but as opportunities to live within the inherent tensions and to transform the reality around them. This paper explores the nature of a spirituality of communion and its function in education—not only in schools sponsored by religious institutions, but in all education.

It discusses the nature of education when it is approached from this perspective and presents narrative examples of individuals whose experience demonstrates how education can be reimagined through a spirituality of communion. It concludes with reflections from Chiara Lubich concerning rules of formation for dialogue that suggest how those who differ might establish genuine relationships. These principles also suggest how others might extend the research we have done in North America to other cultural contexts.

Introduction
The cover of the current issue of Living City, the Focolare Movement’s North American magazine, bears the saying, “Life: Put it into theory.” This cover illustrates what is known as the Focolare method of investigation, which in philosophical terms might be described as phenomenological or ethnographic. Chiara Lubich began with practical gestures—for example, the pact with Igino Giordani—and the theoretical consequences of this life choice emerged through subsequent experience and reflection. Such reflection, if it is genuine and done well, will generate more life. My purpose in this paper is not

2. Igino Giordani, a member of parliament and noted author, was one of Chiara Lubich’s confidants. The story of their relationship, particularly their Pact of Unity, can be found at Chiara Lubich, “The Pact,” Claritas: Journal of Dialogue and Culture 2 (2013): 4–6.
simply to present and reflect on theory but to draw theory out of life, and in turn to direct those theoretical principles back into life. It is a way of responding in our professional life and work to the phrase from John’s Gospel that inspired Chiara and her companions: “That they may all be one . . . so that the world may believe” (Jn 17:21).

Let us begin, then, with an example of life, taken from our most recent research on reimagining education through a spirituality of communion, as documented in Education’s Highest Aim. The dramatic circumstances in this vignette are not typical of most classrooms in America or in other parts of the world. But how the teacher—Nancy Madison, who is formed in the Focolare spirituality—responds to the chaotic circumstances in which she found herself suggests the first priority for any teacher: establishing the spirit of reciprocity. Without reciprocity—what in Confucian thought would be called “humanhearted” relationships—she could not teach and the students could not learn. Such relationships are the basis for unity in any educational setting.

Nancy Madison describes the first day of her teaching career: “When I walked into the classroom, the students were all plastered against the window. Since I had been warned that they threw dictionaries out onto the ground, I went over to see the situation. Instead, I found one of the boys being hung out the window by his heels. We were three flights up.” She realized that before all else, they would have to begin to treat each other in a positive way. They seemed to know only violence and antagonism. She tried to reason with them, without effect.

After a particularly horrendous event, when a quarter of her class were removed because they had helped plan to set fire to the school, she took the opportunity to talk with those who remained about another way of relating to one another, which could be summed up in one word: unity. She challenged them to take part in a “deal” to attempt to have a cooperative, collaborative relationship with “whoever walked in the door” and asked those willing to try to add their signatures to a contract she had drawn up. Intrigued, a few did sign. As he left, one boy said, “I ain’t never heard no teacher talk like this before. You’re really strange.”

In class the next day, when the usual antagonistic behavior began, she made eye contact with one of the students who had signed the paper, and in mid-sentence he stopped short. Other students noticed. The culminating experience came some time later when another teacher accused Madison’s students of stealing an object from her classroom. What that teacher said created an uproar, and in response Madison told them, “If you say that you have not stolen the item, then I believe you.” She then suggested that they write a letter stating that they had not stolen it, that they were sorry it had happened, and that they would like to help in some small way to contribute to its replacement. This suggestion provoked an outrage of self-defensiveness. Students began shouting out reasons why one of their classmates could not have done it. One boy’s voice carried above the din, “Hey! Ms. Madison, is this what you meant by unity?”

At that moment the student stated exactly what Madison had meant by “unity”: The other teacher’s accusation had inspired these students, who had previously seen each other only in terms of antagonism, mistrust, and violence, to have the first flickers of a

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4. James, Masters, and Uelmen, Education’s Highest Aim, 62.
5. James, Masters, and Uelmen, Education’s Highest Aim, 62–63.
sense of dignified individual identity, which allowed them to take a first, tentative step toward forming a community. The “deal” in which Madison invited them to participate requires each person to reveal the seed of “humanheartedness” that had been covered over by their social environment. By acknowledging the fundamental value of one another, they could begin to establish a community of reciprocal relationships. Those two goals—recognizing in ourselves and in others a true and authentic identity, and establishing a harmonious community based on reciprocity—form the foundation of “teaching and learning through a spirituality of communion,” which is the heart of the educational practice and theory that Education’s Highest Aim documents.

This paper, then, presents four principal objectives, drawn from our research for Education’s Highest Aim:

- First: to explore the nature of a spirituality of communion and its function in education—not only in schools sponsored by religious institutions, but in all education.
- Second: to discuss the nature of education when it is approached from this perspective.
- Third: to present stories of individuals, like Nancy Madison, whose experience can be considered a living laboratory of education being reimagined through a spirituality of communion.
- Fourth: to conclude with some reflections by Chiara Lubich, whose experience and thought has motivated the educational practice that we researched.

At its root, education is a relationship established through conversation, and Chiara lays out some rules for creating dialogue that suggest how those who differ might establish genuine relationships. These principles also suggest how others might extend the research we have done in North America to other cultural contexts.

A “Spirituality of Communion”
The teachers, students, administrators, and parents whom we interviewed for Education’s Highest Aim differ in religion, nationality, age, gender, and state in life, but they all share a common conviction that the world can be a better place and that education can be the means for making it happen. They have come to this conviction because they have experienced something that is paradoxical but true: A person discovers his or her deepest, most authentic identity in relationship with others, but to enter into relationship, we must identify and embrace our own self-identity, while at the same time relinquishing it for the sake of the other. The subjects in our study have lived out these simple words of Chiara Lubich. Discussing Jesus Forsaken6 as a “master of light, of thought . . . of philosophy,” she explains:

Jesus shows us that I am myself, not when I close myself off from the other, but when I give myself, when out of love I lose myself in the other. . . . Genuine consciousness of self is born from the communion with being: a communion in which consciousness seems to lose itself but, in reality, it finds itself, it is.7

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7. Lubich, Essential Writings, 211.
This is what Nancy Madison wanted her students to experience when she asked them to develop a cooperative, collaborative relationship with “whoever walked in the door.” They would discover their true identity if they could begin to move from being closed off within themselves to experiencing the freedom of losing themselves in the other. That is what she meant by “unity.” They could discover peace and harmony, but they first had to “lose” themselves in order to “find” themselves in relationship.

Such a proposal is challenging. It asks people to take a step that in theory sounds straightforward but in practice is demanding. Those with years of experience in the classroom have seen many “good ideas” surface, only to fade away. The inertia of tradition and the familiarity of doing things as they have always been done absorb attempts at change and renewal. Change seems like a utopia, and if it is not grounded in a complete understanding of the human person, it indeed is a u-topia, which in its Greek roots means “no-place.”

The consciousness of self that Chiara describes, however, because it is grounded in the very nature of being, is both possible and practical. In her address at the Catholic University of America, Washington, D.C., in 2000, she called for “an educative process consistent with the demands of unity.” Such a process of education might seem utopian, but in fact it is necessary for the world and the people in it to realize their true nature, which is not only moral but also has origins in the divine. Human nature, Chiara says, is essentially Trinitarian. In her talk at Fu Jen University, Taipei, in 1997, she explained, “Christian life consists precisely in participation in the life of the Blessed Trinity, because, through grace, we are made one with Jesus.”

Of course, those who live this Christian life share the same human essence as do their brothers and sisters who do not call themselves Christian. By their very nature, because they are made in the image of their Creator, human beings share the same Trinitarian design—all are made for relationship, and relationship in its most authentic form consists in the giving of self to the other out of love, seeing oneself as a gift for others.

In the same address to the Catholic University of America, Chiara spelled out the connection between the practical and the spiritual in an educational milieu:

Unity is a very timely aspiration. Despite the countless tensions present in our world today, the human race, almost paradoxically, is striving toward unity. Unity is a sign and a need of our times. However, this innate drive toward unity—as the etymology of the word “education” (Latin e-ducere: “draw forth”) indicates—must be drawn out in a positive way. This implies, on all levels of human endeavor, an educative process consistent with the demands of unity, so that our world will not become a Babel without a soul, but an experience of Emmaus, of God with us, capable of embracing the whole of humanity.

This might seem a utopia. But every authentic educational approach includes a utopian thrust; that is, a guiding principle which stimulates people to build together a world which is not yet a reality, but ought to be. In this perspective, education can be viewed as a means for drawing nearer to this utopian goal.  

As utopian as it might seem, teaching and learning through a spirituality of unity is eminently practical. As demonstrated in the lived experiences that we witnessed in our research interviews, a spiritual approach empowers all stakeholders in education to address the challenges that education faces.

The Nature of Education from the Perspective of Unity

Education has two fundamental goals. To cite Chiara’s Washington, D.C., speech again, these are “to teach the individual and to build the community.”11 For over sixty years, students, parents, teachers, professors, and administrators who have constructed their personal and professional lives on a spirituality of unity have discovered that it is possible to live for both goals simultaneously. Their experiences embody not so much an answer to the challenges they face within the educational system as a whole, as well as in their particular circumstances, but a way of living within the tensions that are inherent in education and transforming the reality around them. One of the major questions of our research is how those who have lived out a spirituality of communion have resolved what appears to be an educational paradox. In an American context, both independence and relationship are held in seemingly equal regard. Paradoxically, education seeks to form the human person so as to render him or her independent, but it must do so in the context of relationships.

Education’s Highest Aim presents the experiences of about a hundred people from across North America, the Caribbean, and Mexico. They come from different ethnic backgrounds, school settings, and socioeconomic statuses. They share in common, however, the conviction that every individual is a particular creation of a loving creator—a conviction that has profound and far-reaching consequences.

They also share the desire to live out a “spirituality of communion,” which presumes that each person has an essential dignity and worth. Every individual can come to possess what in her Washington, D.C., speech Chiara called an “existential unity.”12 That is, individuals are most themselves when they recognize their own inherent integrity and value as human beings and, by extension, that of every person they encounter.

Individuals are most themselves, therefore, when they acknowledge and accept that they are loved by God, as is each person they encounter. Educating individuals in a way that builds a harmonious community requires that they be properly formed as persons integrated within themselves—individuals whose identity does not change from one situation to the next. For educators who live the Focolare’s spirituality of communion, the goal of “teaching the individual” becomes one of “teaching individuals how to recognize God-Love within themselves.” And the twin goal of “building the community” becomes, to a certain extent, 10. Lubich, *Essential Writings*, 222–23.
Both the method and the consequence of individuals who are discovering God-Love.

Many of the persons whose stories are presented in *Education’s Highest Aim* based their actions on what Chiara Lubich calls the “art of loving.” This is a practical way of implementing a fundamental tenet that every system of belief and that all people of good will, including those who have no particular religious affiliation, subscribe to: the Golden Rule, “Do to others as you would have them do to you.” The Golden Rule reflects the same dynamic as is found in existential unity. It is reasonable that a “you” would reciprocate with “others” because both recognize each other’s essentially good nature, or, as the Chinese philosopher Mencius taught, each other’s inherent human dignity.

Chiara’s art of loving is implemented through a kind of rubric for living out the Golden Rule. She describes it in this fashion: “It requires us to *love everyone*, [that is, to include everyone in our embrace of love], to *take the initiative in loving* [to not wait for the other, but to take the first step yourself], to *love always* [that is, in every circumstance, even those that might not seem favorable], to enter into the reality of the other person, *making oneself one* with the other person [to take as one’s own the perspective of the other and to act accordingly], and to see and love Jesus *in the other, in any other person* [as Jesus explains in his account of the last judgment in the Gospel of Matthew: “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” (Mt 25:40)].”

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These steps in the Art of Loving are implemented through a game-like technique called the “Cube of Love.” Each of the statements is written on the face of a die: “Love one another,” “Love everyone,” “Share the other’s hurt or joy,” “Love your enemy,” “Love the other as yourself,” and “Be the first to love.” In a classroom, for example, at the beginning of the day the die is rolled, and teacher and students alike attempt to live out the particular injunction; at the end of the day, students and their teacher can journal or share aloud their experiences.

**Narrative Examples from Our Research**

In her inner-city Baltimore classroom, Basima Gabayan begins each day by having her first-graders sit in a circle on the floor and take turns rolling the Cube of Love. She is moved by the way they help each other live the thought suggested by the Cube and by their willingness to make up immediately if they have a disagreement. When a problem comes up they say to one another, “That’s not loving,” or “Why don’t you just say sorry,” or “That’s not the right way to treat your brother.”

She provides a specific instance where the Cube allowed a student to recognize the worth of a classmate and take the first step toward re-establishing reciprocity:

One of my difficult students had an argument with another classmate. I had to pull him out and talk to him. I was amazed to hear him say, “I’m sorry Ms. Gabayan for not making the right choice.” When he came back in the classroom, it took him a few minutes to make the first move. He was struggling. First he pretended to be absorbed by swinging in between desks. Finally, he found the courage
to approach the other classmate and say, “I’m sorry for hitting you.” He then shook his classmate’s hand and gave him a hug.15

That same dynamic is revealed in the experience of a physical education teacher in Toronto who was asked to use the Cube of Love in a sports context. At first, he was skeptical. “I thought that it could work in many forms but not in sports. From my experience, sports was ‘Win at all costs . . . better to die trying than not try at all . . . death, before dishonor . . . take no prisoners.’ And here, I was asked to do a Cube of Love ‘GENTLE’ intramurals.” But the results exceeded his expectations:

The players from different grades definitely had different athletic abilities. I noticed a smaller, younger player going through all the players and taking a shot and scoring. A clean path had opened up for him! When I asked why the other team members let him do that, one of the better players said, “Sir, he has to score too!”

This coach then reflected on the effects of the Cube on his students’ lives off the playing field:

The greatest effect of something is to see its values being practiced long after the lesson has been taught. The children continued to practice the Cube of Love principles in the schoolyard long after the intramurals had finished. The idea of the better players including those with lesser abilities.

15. James, Masters, and Uelmen, Education’s Highest Aim, 50.

The whole notion that we can make everyone feel better, feel welcomed, feel wanted, feel loved.16

Let us shift to another academic context, this one between a university student and her professor. The ethos of academic freedom in American schools, from middle school all the way through college, gives teachers and professors the power to require material that parents or students may consider objectionable because of their sense of moral integrity. Such experiences can serve a salutary purpose, such as helping students recognize their unquestioned assumptions or prejudices. In the absence of a reciprocal relationship, however, students can feel compelled to place a higher value on academic success and its rewards than on the sense of morality and self-worth they have brought to the classroom.

Roxanne Gordon is a Ph.D. student in dance at a large East Coast university. The program’s curriculum centers on dance and body politics, viewed through a post-Marxist, deconstructive theoretical lens. One professor claimed that critical theory should serve to make students question the value of religion or conventional notions like truth, goodness, and beauty. The focus within his course on technology and sexuality included explicit and controversial material that made her feel squeamish, a discomfort compounded by her natural reserve and fear of receiving negative evaluations. She attempted to deal with her predicament by choosing topics that she felt comfortable with but that fit within his critical framework, such as the social significance of precision dance performance like the Rockettes or the value of 1960s social protest musical groups like “Up With People.”

This professor didn’t acknowledge or respond to her uneasiness, or to her attempts to find a way to work within his worldview without compromising her own values. His lack of response and what she thought was his disapproval of her ideas and values made her think about dropping out of the graduate program entirely. Gordon sought advice from her academic advisor, who urged her to remain in the program because the advisor thought she had so much to offer the other students. Gordon comments, “I didn’t want to run away, but neither was I ready in any way to compromise my beliefs.”

Even though, as a student, she had relatively little power in this circumstance, she tried again and again to find a way to open up authentic dialogue with the professor. That did not happen until the final class. On her way to the restaurant where the class was meeting for its last session, Gordon found herself in the same car with some other students and the professor. During that ride, he expressed interest in the topics she had chosen for research, suggesting that they were worthy of further investigation. Then he turned to her and asked her directly, “How is your spirituality going?” He had read her application file and was intrigued by her involvement with groups that sought to implement a collective spirituality in various social settings.

Although he did not use the terminology I have used to describe the relationships typical of a spirituality of communion, he acknowledged her existential unity and tacitly responded to her desire for a dialogue based on reciprocity.

One more story, this one from a professor’s perspective, will serve to illustrate how education might be reimagined through a spirituality of communion in a university context. The academic ideal is reflected in the word “college,” which is derived from the Latin collegium, meaning “community” or “society.” The actual relationships in institutions of higher learning, however, often fall short of that ideal. The breakdown in relationships and dialogue and subsequent abandonment of a sense of mutual respect can occur between individual colleagues, between factions, or within and between departments. By living a spirituality of communion in such contexts, however, some professors have found a way to live within the problem and to transform the isolation that comes from strong personalities, professional rivalry, suspicion, and disciplinary boundaries.

Ryan Leahy found that a big part of his job at a large urban state university in the Midwest of the United States included building bridges between individuals who had isolated themselves from their colleagues. He found that divisions between some faculty members reduced meetings to “screaming matches, with two distinct groups in constant opposition to one another.”

He describes his strategy for addressing this tension: “I have always known and believed that difficulties are best resolved by working collaboratively with others, and by building authentic relationships with them.” He does not underestimate the difficulty of acting in this fashion. He says, “It is one thing to believe it. It is quite another thing to put it into practice, especially when you feel that you are dealing with people who are antagonistic towards you and unreasonable. It is a delicate balance to live the virtue of justice, by giving recognition to those that deserve it, while at the same time trying not to slight the others.”

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17. James, Masters, and Uelmen, Education’s Highest Aim, 82–84.
18. James, Masters, and Uelmen, Education’s Highest Aim, 88.
19. James, Masters, and Uelmen, Education’s Highest Aim, 91.
Being elected chair of the math department put to the test his desire to live a spirituality of communion. In some cases, his administrative duties required him to take action that he would prefer to avoid. This happened, for example, when students lodged complaints about the academic competence of a lecturer for whom Leahy had respect and trust. He investigated the situation, found that the students’ accusations were justified, and had to move to dismiss this lecturer. During the long process of terminating the faculty member, he sought to avoid antagonism with him, as well as with the union representative who was assisting him in his case. Ryan reflects upon his experience as a professor and as a chair:

I have found that a spirituality of communion has given me the strength but also the knowledge to handle difficult situations. The key is the Art of Loving, learning to make ourselves one, knowing how to set aside our own ideas, being the first to love, building unity with our neighbor and being able to live well the present moment. Learning to live well the present moment allows me not to be weighed down with endless problems. By trying to love everyone and by being ready to transcend old hurts, much of the past antagonism has gone. Faculty meetings have once again become productive, and faculty members are beginning to work together and cooperate more, for the good of all.20

Here, I would like to emphasize that from the explanation and examples that have been offered, it might seem that living a spirituality of communion in an educational setting presumes that a person holds a particular belief system. All the protagonists in the anecdotes presented above are Christians. But everyone can live this way—those who profess one particular faith or another and those who hold with no particular system of belief. What is essential is the fundamental conviction expressed in the Golden Rule: “Do to others as you would have them do to you.” If one individual acknowledges the value of the other’s existential unity, the difference between them becomes not an obstacle but a reason for bridging the divide. The way to build that bridge, whether through words or through deeds, is dialogue. Teaching and learning through a spirituality of communion is, in essence, a way of dialogue.

Conclusion: Chiara Lubich’s Experience and Reflection
Speaking at Westminster Hall, London, on the possibility of a multiethnic, multicultural, multifaith society, Chiara described the prerequisites for such dialogue:

Dialogue means that people meet together and even though they have different ideas, they speak with serenity and sincere love towards the other person in an effort to find some kind of agreement that can clarify misunderstandings, calm disputes, resolve conflicts, and even at times eliminate hatred.21

During an interreligious seminar at the Initiatives of Change Center in Caux, Switzerland, she described how to achieve what she calls “serenity and sincere love toward the other person”:


“Making yourself one’ is not a tactic or an external way of behaving. It is not just an attitude of goodwill, openness and respect, or an absence of prejudice. It is all that, but it is something more.”22 What Chiara calls “something more” constitutes the core of reimagining education through a spirituality of communion. That “something more,” whether we call it “existential unity” or something else, begins with the action of one person in relationship with another. As I mentioned at the beginning of this paper, such a gesture begins with the choice to behave one way or another. Nancy Madison’s students began to choose to defend one another. Basima Gabayan’s student chose to acknowledge that he had not done to his fellow student what he would want done to him, and he acted to repair the rift. The physical education teacher’s students chose to allow the smaller and weaker student to succeed in their soccer game because they acknowledged their own identity in the little boy and that the point of the game was not so much to win as to continue playing. Roxanne Gordon’s professor realized that despite Roxanne’s natural reticence, she was trying to participate in the conversation that he was controlling and made the move to turn the focus from his values to hers. Ryan Leahy took the initiative to recognize the worth of his colleagues, even when they did not acknowledge it in each other, and that “something more” allowed them to step out of the antagonistic roles that had become so familiar to them that they did not see another possibility.

Chiara Lubich sought to live out Jesus’s prayer “that all may be one.” Hers is a universal vision. All the examples cited in this paper come from a North American context. The challenge scholars face is to examine the lived experience in their own ethnic, linguistic, and cultural contexts in order to develop the theory that is at work there, and how it may be reimagined.

In her meditation from 1950, “The Resurrection of Rome,” Chiara outlines both the method for such research and its results:

We need to allow God to be reborn within us and keep him alive. We need to make him overflow onto others like torrents of Life and resurrect the dead.

And keep him alive among us by loving one another (and to love it is not necessary to make a lot of noise: love is dying to ourselves—and death is silence—and life in God—and God is the silence that speaks).

So everything is renewed: politics and art, school and religion, private life and entertainment. Everything.23

To conclude, let us turn to another passage from Chiara’s Washington, D.C., address, which sums up the practice and theory outlined and demonstrated in Education’s Highest Aim. In it, she describes the relationships formed within a spirituality of communion as “Trinitarian,” that is, operating as do the three divine Persons who live in a constant dynamic of love, one for the other. When it is true and authentic, human love reflects such total self-giving.

In our approach . . . in which the spiritual and the human penetrate one another and become one . . . education’s goal, its highest aim, becomes a reality. . . . We experience the fullness of God’s life . . . a Trinitarian relationship, in

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22. Chiara Lubich, Essential Writings, 347.

23. Chiara Lubich, Essential Writings, 175–76.
which a wonderful synthesis is achieved between the two goals of education: to teach the individual and to build the community.24

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