



BY DENNIS SPARKS

Leaders Nurture the Soul

Growing our souls could be defined as the steady accretion of empathy, clarity, and passion for the good.

—Mary Pipher

Schools possess “souls,” an awareness that struck me recently when I heard someone describe a school she obviously admired as “a place with soul.” Soulful schools are places that members of the school community experience as authentic, profound, personally meaningful, and emotionally stirring. Schools with soul have a uniqueness and integrity based on the principles and moral imperatives that guide their efforts. A soulful school’s aspirations, commitments, and, as Mary Pipher expressed it, “passion for the good,” are both informed by and expressed in its symbols, rituals, ceremonies, and spirit.

Soulful schools can only exist when leaders welcome, honor, and nourish the souls of all their members. In *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward An Undivided Life*, Parker Palmer describes such leaders as individuals who make “a commitment to act in every situation in ways that honor the soul.” Consequently, leaders cultivate soul when they:

- First and foremost nourish their own souls (the subject of my next column). Having done so, leaders are more likely to display the generosity of spirit, empathy, and profound respect for others that calls forth the soul of the organization.
- Promote teamwork focused on clear and compelling purposes and principles that

enable individuals to link their own heartfelt intentions to the common good. Leaders keep these purposes and principles foremost in community members’ minds at all times so that the purposes and principles inform every decision and action.

- Cultivate and value the whole person, not just his or her intellect or technical skills. To that end, leaders use faculty meetings and other venues to provide opportunities for individuals to reveal their uniqueness. Staff members, for instance, can be invited to tell stories of people and events that have shaped their lives and that underscore that they are not simply replaceable parts in the school’s machine.
- Value the unique perspective and wisdom that that each person brings to the school community and encourage its expression. Leaders do so when they promote relationships that are honest, trusting, compassionate, and cooperative. Such relationships provide the emotional safety in which individuals can express the most soulful aspects of themselves, qualities that are most precious and closely guarded against judgment and criticism.
- Use stillness and silence to create opportunities and a safe place for individuals in meetings and one-to-one conversations to listen to their own inner teachers and discern their own truths.

When leaders value and nurture the souls of individual and the collective soul of the school community, they lead through learning.

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