

**INTERVIEW WITH THOMAS H. GROOME**

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Once every decade there appears a book that spontaneously captures the imagination and affection of teachers and administrators. References to it appear everywhere. Quotes from the book perk up faculty newsletters; and speakers paraphrase it in their talks and repeatedly recommend a thorough reading of it. Principals give the volume as Christmas or end-of-year gifts. Recently we have witnessed this fascinating phenomenon with the publication of Thomas H. Groome's *Educating for Life: A Spiritual Vision for Every Teacher and Parent* (Thomas More, 1998). Marcella Fox reviewed the book in the March 1999 issue of the *Journal*, referring to it as "an essential text for Catholic educators" (p. 369).

It is fitting that the *Journal's* Book Reviews section acknowledge the impact of the Groome text by discussing some complementary ideas with its indefatigable author and by learning more about him as a Catholic school educator. I asked a number of Groome's greatest fans, among them Dr. Gini Shimabukuro, Dr. Marcella Fox, and Sr. Jeanne Hagelskamp, S.P., what they would like to ask Tom if they were sitting across from him, sipping tea for a couple of relaxed hours. Many of their questions are embedded in this interview, which came after a very long and hard day for Tom.

Thomas H. Groome began his academic career in his native Ireland. He earned a master's degree at Fordham University and a doctorate in religion and education at Union Theological Seminary and Columbia University Teachers College. He is professor of theology and religious education at Boston College. A prolific writer, Groome has had more than 60 articles published in scholarly collections and journals. His books include *Christian Religious Education: Sharing Our Story and Vision* (1980), *Sharing Faith: A*

*Comprehensive Approach to Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry* (1991), and *Language for a "Catholic" Church* (1991). Groome is the primary author of the *God With Us* religion series (William H. Sadlier, 1984), and the *Coming to Faith* series (William H. Sadlier, 1995). Groome maintains that his children's texts have "had the most impact on the actual praxis of religious education/catechesis in Catholic parishes, homes, and schools."

Groome is president of the Association of Professors and Researchers in Religious Education, an ecumenical learned society for people who teach religious education as an academic discipline in a university or seminary. He teaches, serves on institutional committees, and engages in academic research. He has lectured with legendary clarity and humor throughout the United States, Ireland, England, Canada, China, Pakistan, Australia, New Zealand, Lithuania, Korea, Hong Kong, and Japan.

Tom is married to Dr. Colleen Griffith and lives in the Boston area.

***You are a gifted storyteller. Where did you learn to tell stories so effectively?***

Some years ago, after a public presentation to a large congress gathering, someone came up and asked, "What course did you take on storytelling?" I was taken aback; I didn't even know that one could take such a course! So I said, "From my grandfather—and my grandmother as well." And that's still my most adequate response. The storytelling came with the culture. In my Irish village we got electricity when I was in middle school; our first television came the year I finished high school. So, the winter nights of my childhood were often spent in storytelling. And I sat at the feet of masters there!

***You obviously have a deep respect for women and a sensitivity to things feminine which comes through in your books. Where or from whom did you learn that?***

Thank you for the compliment that I have a "sensitivity to things feminine." I certainly desire to have as much because I am convinced that it is God's desire for us all, women and men. In other words, a feminist consciousness and commitment to the equal dignity and full humanity of women is a mandate of our Christian faith, an abiding aspect of our call to holiness of life. Of course this is a political, a social, a cultural, a legal, a theological issue, but ultimately it is a spiritual matter. It goes to the very soul of who I am as a person and who we become as a Christian people of God.

How did I come by the little of this consciousness that I have? I am keenly aware of my "miles to travel" yet. I received it from great and strong, confronting and loving women I have met along my pilgrim way. And I was blessed from my family with a keen sense of justice and of siding with the

marginalized; both my parents had a strong social consciousness and commitment. On good days at least when I am living my faith, the struggle for justice is a central passion of my life. I have much growing to do in this regard. So, when I became aware of the injustice and oppression of women, so much of it legitimated and often caused by religious symbols, it seemed imperative to embrace a commitment to feminism, integrating it first into my own life, and then committing myself to struggle in Church and society for what Elizabeth Johnson names as the intent of the whole feminist movement, namely, “the full humanity of women.”

***Your latest book, *Educating for Life*, has enjoyed a tremendous reception among the Catholic elementary and secondary school teachers of this country. What is the most common reaction from these educators as you make presentations on its core message?***

So often I sense that I am stating the obvious and yet people seem delighted that someone is doing so. I have spoken to thousands of Catholic school and parish personnel since the book appeared and the positive response has been amazing. So many of these educators are people who may not have a strong formal background in Catholic theology and philosophy of education—in its “spirituality.” Often, I am telling them what they are already doing so well—and explaining why—so that they can do it even better and more deliberately.

***Who are the people who helped you form this vision of education?***

Oh my, I could tell the story of my life here. But let me say a little. First I think of the great “communion of saints and sinners” in Catholic Christian faith who have gone before us. For truly, *Educating for Life* is my attempt to take the 2000 years of Catholicism, its theological, pedagogical, and spiritual traditions, and the “deep rivers” of faith and meaning that flow through the Church throughout all the centuries; and I have tried to imagine what it all means for how and why we educate, for “Catholic education” in the richest sense of the term.

Note too that throughout the book—and hopefully throughout my life—I refuse to limit Catholic education to formal schooling. It includes our schools, but a Catholic spirituality should permeate how and why we educate in faith in our homes and parishes, how we conduct RCIA programs, youth ministry, and every aspect of the Church’s educational mission and ministry.

So, my primary source and influence is the tradition of Catholicism itself. And I try to be honest about it, too, not whitewashing our sins and shortcomings; for indeed we have often honored our better traditions more in the breach than in the observance. Yet, at its best, Catholicism can suggest a

powerful and life-giving approach to education of all kinds, and one that can inspire people of other or no religious traditions as well.

*You make the point that the spiritual vision you propose is not new—that indeed the founding fathers of this country had such a vision. Has the spiritual vision proposed in your book touched today’s public school educators?*

Well, this is happening more slowly, though I have had some significant response. Recently on a radio talk show, I was insisting that the reform of American education will require a regrounding in spiritual values; I cited Plato, i.e., that the educator’s function is to “turn the soul” of the student toward the true, the good, and the beautiful, and this is essentially a spiritual task and function. A caller to the program, said, “Professor, we can’t do what you recommend here in America because the Constitution forbids it.” My immediate response was, “On the contrary, the Constitution requires it.” I proceeded to explain that our Constitution is itself grounded in great spiritual values, that all people are created equal, that all have the inalienable right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, and so on. To educate in ways faithful to our founding documents (“One nation under God with liberty and justice for all,” etc.) actually requires American educators to draw upon great and common spiritual values as their foundations for pedagogy.

Instead, we glibly allow a philosophical ideology to shape our public pedagogy; pragmatism seems to be the reigning paradigm, though I don’t think Dewey would recognize it. And we presume that such philosophy is value free, whereas it is value laden, with a very particular understanding of the person, of society, of how to make meaning out of life. The point is that education can never, and should never, be value free; it must always propose ways of making and keeping life human. So why not draw upon the great spiritual values of humankind—and the core values are generally common to all—as the grounding of our education?

There is something radically awry with American education. Now, make no mistake: Some of American education is among the best in the world, but some of it is among the worst in the world. Tragically, it is worst where we need it to be best, in our poor rural neighborhoods and inner cities. I am fully in favor of more money for more teachers, for more technology in the classrooms, but all such measures treat only symptoms. If we are to reform American education, we must reground it in spiritual values—or at least not exclude spiritual values from its undergirding ideology.

Writing out of the deep structures and 2000 years of Catholic education, my hope is that *Educating for Life* may make some small contribution to the public discourse needed by way of the spiritual reform of American education.

*You often quote Yeats, insisting that education addresses the “deep heart’s core,” and adding that “at best, education is a spiritual affair.” What specific qualities of heart and mind are required of young aspiring teachers to implement your holistic vision of education?*

Well, they need to be willing to draw upon the depths of their own soul. By soul I don’t mean Descartes’ “ghost in the machine of the body” but rather (and here Yeats names it for me) to draw upon their own “deep heart’s core.” By this I mean their own personhood, gifts and talents, hopes and fears, desires and longings. This is another way of saying that to be a great and life-giving teacher, a humanizing one, demands your very self. It demands the identity and integrity of who you are. So teachers cannot be teaching machines, maintaining some feigned objectivity about their science and aloof from the lives of their students; rather, they must be leading learners, walking with students, open to new horizons, taking the risks of learning and being changed by the students and by their own teaching, investing in people’s lives and nurturing their own.

Second, in their teaching style, educators need to be willing to reach into the hearts of their students—without invading their privacy. Ask students what they really think, encouraging personal reflection, what they imagine and hope for, what they remember and cherish; and why not inquire about their feelings as well!

Third, teachers need some personal spiritual disciplines that help them maintain their own spiritual journey. Each can choose what seems most suited to her/himself, but taking some time regularly to center in on one’s teaching vocation, to reflect meditatively upon one’s teaching praxis, to bring it all and one’s students to God in prayer, asking for the graces needed and desired. However one does this, I have found it necessary if I am to teach as a spiritual person and engage students likewise.

And this is what I wish to emphasize. We are not so much human beings who have a spiritual life; better to say that we are spiritual beings who have a human life. Let’s stop thinking of our bodies as having souls but rather that our body is in our soul—with no division between. In other words, essentially, we are spiritual; so, then, let us so proceed in how we invest ourselves and engage our students.

*You write in your book about educating for the common good: fostering social consciousness, thinking about injustices, and committing oneself to oppose social evils. Traditionally, schools have tended toward the academic side of thinking about the injustices and calling on one another to “walk the talk.” What role, if any, should the schools, Catholic and public, play in activism against injustices?*

A major breakthrough in this regard toward “walking the walk” beyond “talking the talk” is the wave of service projects that have swept the curricula of our schools, parishes, and families; and many public schools now have service components in their curricula. Now, indeed, such programs can be token. However, I have seen what a service immersion experience can do in the lives of young people here at Boston College; they can be life transforming and toward “life for all.”

Every school, family, and parish program can have outreach efforts toward the poor and suffering; even if they are not explicitly justice related, they can do the works of mercy and compassion. Such praxis of Gospel values is essential for formation in Christian faith.

Beyond this, the curricula of all schools and parish programs throughout all the grades should raise consciousness about injustice in society and the world, and should dispose people to act to change social structures that are unjust. If education does not raise the moral consciousness, then it domesticates and simply prepares people to fit into society as is, to become good producers and consumers. But our vocation is to become “fully alive to the glory of God” (Irenaeus). I’m fairly confident that critical social consciousness and ongoing conversion in Christian faith are simpatico, maybe even first cousins.

*Is it realistic to suggest that allowing spiritual values to permeate one’s teaching as well as the ethos of schools will actually transform students? Don’t our Catholic schools do that now? If you had to critique Catholic formal education in its record of educating for life, where would you say that we have been most successful? In what aspects have we failed?*

Well, lots of empirical research is now available pointing to how well Catholic schools have succeeded and are succeeding. I don’t need to repeat that here, and yet we should recognize the success that is evident. Take a look at Bryk, Lee, and Holland’s research, *Catholic Schools and the Common Good* (1993), or the research of John Convey (*Catholic Schools Make a Difference*, 1992), and one realizes that Catholic schools typically have a strong sense of community, of commitment to values, and so on. But, you ask, can we do better what we are already doing well? Or are there things we now do poorly? What is our cutting edge as Catholic educators?

Let me make just one proposal, and much of this is already hinted at in Chapter 9 of *Educating for Life*, the chapter on what it means to be “Catholic,” which I caption with Joyce’s great phrase, “Catholic means here comes everybody.” Why not imagine Catholic schools becoming an “educator to the nation”—where students of any or no religious tradition would feel welcome and receive a good education, grounded in spiritual values, in char-

acter formation, as well as in core curricula that are humanizing and prepare one for life. I have said, somewhat whimsically but to make the point, that “Catholic schools should require from their students as much prior religious identity as does Quaker Oats for breakfast.” In other words, lots of us who are not Quaker eat Quaker Oats, and benefit from it greatly, and it could be likewise with Catholic education.

Such catholicity, in the sense that “all are welcome,” would be a challenge for our schools and their identity; but I believe we have the imagination and hearts to meet the challenge without diminishing the Catholic identity of our schools one iota.

A special challenge to our catholicity is to welcome and be equipped to educate well those who have difficulty learning or are physically challenged. Many of our schools simply don’t have the resources to provide the special education programs needed by some students and so do not admit them; surely we are challenged to be more catholic in this regard.

*We use parts of your book in our moral development class at the University of San Francisco, and some students have noted that you reference Fowler, Rest, Gilligan, Noddings, and Lickona but not Kohlberg. Is there a reason?*

I have always appreciated Kohlberg’s work, but also find his whole paradigm very cognitivistic; and I was persuaded by Gilligan’s critique of Kohlberg (and then, of course, there have been critiques of Gilligan, even from a feminist perspective). But I didn’t mean to exclude Larry as a conversation partner, more of an oversight I would say.

*In your book you refer to a Catholic school in India that has virtually no Catholic students enrolled, nor Catholic teachers employed, and you assert that it still maintains the Catholic identity. How long do you suspect that this climate of Catholic identity can survive?*

Actually, it was in Pakistan. And I don’t know how long that Catholic school system can maintain itself. It certainly will require a core group of people who have imbibed the charism of such educating and can socialize others into it. This challenge seems more acute in Pakistan than here, in that at least most people coming to staff our schools have a sense of Catholic identity. Yet, here too, we need well-crafted programs to ensure that the charism is passed on and constantly renewed by our younger teachers coming into the system.

*Many of your admirers with whom I spoke about this interview want to know if you think that your example could be applicable to Catholic schools in the United States in spite of the diverse ethnic and religious pop-*

*ulation here. Have you witnessed this phenomenon in any schools in the United States?*

I know there are many inner city American Catholic schools that have significant percentages of students from religious traditions other than Catholic, even as high as 85%. And such schools seem to do well with maintaining their Catholic identity. It presents a particular challenge for the religious education curriculum. But, I think this can be met and negotiated (e.g., have a full catechetical curriculum for Catholic students, and then alternative options for students from other traditions—in world religions, in spiritual values, or in the Bible as a general course of study).

*If we are to prepare and form teachers who can implement a humanistic and holistic education, what changes will have to take place in our teacher training institutions?*

Wow, what a big question! My own sense is that we need to rethink teacher education as forming people more than training technicians. There is a place, indeed, for courses in teaching methods, etc., but they need to be situated within a broader philosophy and pedagogy that is humanizing for the participants. Future teachers need to be taught in the way we would like them to teach.

I believe such a shift is beginning to happen in teacher education. Parker Palmer's book *The Courage to Teach* (1998) has had an extraordinary reception. Though he only rarely uses explicitly religious language, the whole book is about a spirituality to undergird the vocation of teacher and the mode of teacher education.

*Do you know of any institutions which are attempting to make such changes?*

Truth is that I don't know of any—though I'm sure there are some.

*The continuing development of one's spirituality is critical to education. Yet the demands on those who work in our schools are tremendous. Some even hold second jobs so that they can meet their financial obligations. How do educational leaders go about nurturing educators' spirituality, given the time constraints on their schedules, state regulations about numbers of hours school must be in session, and so on? Faculty retreats here and there just do not do it.*

No—but don't give up on the faculty retreats either. There is no sure way of doing this, and all we can do is the best we can. So thorough orientation for

new teachers into the spirituality of Catholic education (I could imagine at least a few days of this before beginning a new school year); days of teacher enrichment that always include at least something on the spirituality of the educator; faculty meetings that give a half hour or more to conversation around the foundations of Catholic education and how the school or program is doing in this regard; circulating articles that nurture people's spirituality; mentoring programs between senior teachers and new recruits, and so on, all help.

*With the breakdown in family structure, the concept of community is not a reality for many children once they leave the schoolhouse. How do those in formal educational circles attenuate that pain? While we can never really make up for that absence in students' lives, how do we foster a sense of community that will be strong enough to transcend the absence of community in some family structures?*

Oh, teachers "on the ground" in schools could answer this so much better than I. I do know the empirical evidence that Catholic schools do well with lending students a sense of community and that a positive school community can be remedial for kids from negative home or cultural environments.

One fairly simple suggestion I would make is get kids to talk, and then listen to them. I'm convinced that so much violence among our young people comes from pent-up stuff that they never get to articulate. Ask them questions that get into that deep-down place—like their fears and hopes, their feelings and sentiments. And then, be willing to truly listen—even "between the lines."

*In September, Cornelius Riordan and David Baker wrote an article in the Phi Delta Kappan (LXXX, 1, pp. 10-23, followed by LXXX, 6, p. 462) on the results of Riordan's study on Catholic schools in America. He expressed the view that American Catholic schools have a history of being inferior educational institutions and have only in the last 10 years risen to excellence because the public schools have failed. How would you respond to Riordan on either of his assertions?*

I have not read the piece to which you refer, but why can't we move beyond odious comparisons among our school systems and support them as good alternatives to each other, giving people a real school choice—as they have throughout all the Western democracies, regardless of parents' financial means? Catholics must be as concerned about the quality of public school education as they are about their own school. To begin with, about 80% of Catholic kids are in public schools, and even if there wasn't a single Catholic in an American public school, as good citizens we should be deeply con-

cerned about them. I take no solace at all that so many public schools are doing poorly and Catholic schools are doing better; I want both systems to be providing a humanizing education—promoting life for all and genuine school choice for Catholics and everyone else as well.

*The two great institutions that have been largely shaped by women religious in this country are the Catholic health care system and the Catholic school system. Now that health care is no longer a principal apostolate of the sisters, we see all the way to its bottom line, money. We are seeing the beginnings of similar trends in Catholic education. How do you address the question of maintaining broad-based Catholic education for all Catholics, not just the rich?*

We have made good progress with development programs and have become much more adept at appealing to foundations, local businesses, alums, etc., for support and scholarship monies. However, under the proper conditions, I strongly favor a voucher system, and do so on the basis of justice that all parents should be able to give their children access to the best education of their choice, regardless of economics or religion. This is the case in all other Western democracies; why not here in the United States? It is a matter of justice.

*Some suggest that it is more Christ-like for Catholic parents to enroll their children in public schools and work to support excellence in education for all children, rather than just their own. What is your thinking on this issue?*

I think there will always be Catholic parents who will make the choice—and for a thousand good reasons—not to have their children in Catholic schools. Their choice must be respected; genuine school choice for all is my hope. Concomitantly, it is imperative that our parish programs be as strong and effective as possible. And indeed, there is significant evidence that a well-run parish program that has the positive social capital of a good parish around it can have very high religious learning outcomes. In other words, there is growing evidence that a good parish program does work by way of informing, forming, and transforming people in Catholic Christian identity. So let us provide well for the faith education of all our children and young people regardless of where their parents choose to send them to school. To do less is irresponsible to our faith.

And I can imagine lots of social contexts—in fact, I know many—where the public school system is an excellent one and parents want their children to have more local friends, and so on. Catholic parents who send their children to public schools should certainly get involved in the well-being of their

school; again, all the research indicates that parental support is imperative to an effective school. Beyond that, I think the responsibility for parents is to choose what they consider to be the best available education for their children.

***What role, if any, do you see the Catholic universities playing in supporting Catholic education? Is there a place for specialized institutes within Catholic university schools of education, outreach programs, provision of facilities and resources?***

A sensitive issue, but I believe there is a place for such institutes to prepare the future leaders of Catholic education in our schools, parish programs, and homes; in fact, I teach at such a place, the Institute of Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry at Boston College. Though we have, by tradition, been more focused on parish, we are finding ourselves with a broader student body, and we are helping to break down the unfortunate division between school and parish that has marked the American Church for far too long and in debilitating ways for both school and parish.

***You speak about our call to be partners with God and our responsibility to keep our side of the covenant. You also suggest that active imagination is essential in developing insight as to what that might mean for us. In light of the new cosmology, could you talk more about your view of partnering with God and how that fits into the new cosmology? What if we don't fulfill our side of the covenant? If God really depends on us, what does that do to the larger view when we don't do our part?***

Some years ago, Gordon Kaufman, in a book entitled *Theology in a Nuclear Age*, posed the question, "What if this life of ours really is a covenant?" and if we blow it—so to speak—God will not step in and interfere with our choice. This should really heighten our sense of responsibility for the well-being of our cosmos—that we are to be good stewards of it with God. Now God will always give us the grace to respond, and yet our responsibility remains. Surely Catholic education should prepare people to be responsible stewards of creation, indeed of all of life.

***How would you structure education in our formal institutions to allow for truly educating the whole person, making ample time to tend to body and spirit as well as mind, especially in light of all the external demands on schools regarding required curricula, preparation for entrance and scholarship tests, and so on?***

Three simple—hopefully not simplistic—suggestions: a) Maintain the core curriculum: reading, 'riting, 'rithmetic, rhetoric—and then I add three more—respect, responsibility, and reverence. These are still the core of a humanizing education. b) Teach the arts—to appreciate them and to participate in them, according to talent, gift, and interest. c) Have good sports and recreational programs—“a healthy mind and a healthy body” is still a worthy goal for all education.

*What aspects of our current formal educational system most inhibit the vision that you elucidate for us in **Educating for Life**?*

The lack of a spiritual grounding for our vocation as teachers.

*As we move into the new millennium, rewrite mission statements, and reshape visions, what are the most critical elements of educating for life that you believe need to be tended to so that we can immediately move toward the vision you have laid out for us?*

I see Catholic education as a configuration of all eight characteristics I outline in *Education for Life* and I am sure there are others that could be added. In a sense it is the coalition of all those characteristics and commitments—rather than any one—that lend the spirituality of Catholic education.

*What effects do you see the movement of fundamentalist Catholic schools having on mainstream Catholic education?*

Hopefully, the movement of fundamentalist Catholic schools will have no effect on the mainstream Church. Let me make just one parenthetical comment. Perhaps it is worth noting that in the history of Christianity, most of the serious deviations from orthodox faith have been “to the right” although we always suspect heresy as being “to the left.”

*If you could have one wish for Catholic education in the United States, what would it be?*

I have many obvious hopes—that Catholic education in home, parish, and school will continue to thrive, but let me name some hopes that occur to me today; and it is the end of a long day and interview: a) I hope a real unity will emerge between parish and school; that we can transcend the division that has marked American Catholicism between, to use old language—“school versus CCD.” We must come to see that all Catholic education, in home, parish, and school, should be of top quality, conducted according to the best of Catholic spirituality, and reflecting a deep partnership between all three agencies. b) I

hope the charism of Catholic education can continue to be handed down—and then renewed and built upon by this era—as vowed religious become fewer; having carried this legacy so well for so long, may the torch pass well and we find the ways and resources to prepare the next generation of Catholic educators to meet the challenges of our time and place in history. c) Whether as tax deductions, vouchers, or something else, I hope there will be public funding for children to attend Catholic schools—providing real school choice to all our citizens, and as a matter of justice to all. d) Lastly, my perduring life passion, I hope that all Catholic children, whether in parochial school, parish program, or home-school, will receive the best of religious education possible—a catechesis that informs, forms, and transforms them in Christian faith and identity, to live out their discipleship to Jesus in the midst of the Christian faith community and for the reign of God in the world. That is the epitome of Catholic education—for all.

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