Voices of imagination: the artist as prophet in the process of social change

REBECCA McELFRESH SPEHLER and PATRICK SLATTERY

In this article we contend that vision, imagination and a passion for justice are in short supply in our schools and society, and we advocate the importance of creating space for the voices of artists to emerge. The preponderance of materials and programmes that emphasize the technical rationality of our work as educators continues to stifle and silence the voices of imagination. If schooling is simply technical, it has reached the end of its usefulness and is incapable of contributing to the social, spiritual and ecological problems of our communities. We are not resigned to the end of education. Rather, we believe that empowering the voices of imagination through the arts will contribute to a renewal of the metaphysical dimension of our work. We advocate such a posture. As we encourage the young to make the arts a natural means of expression we also encourage the development of the prophetic voice. And it is this voice that most certainly can attend to the pressing problems of our postmodern world.

Introduction

We begin with the premise that vision, imagination and a passion for justice are in short supply in our contemporary society. In fact, institutions, such as schools, churches, businesses and governments—despite organizational leaders’ rhetoric of creative problem solving, critical thinking, bold reform initiatives, social transformation and individual redemption—often contribute to the very inertia and malaise that render the prophetic voice impotent. This is not a new revelation or insight. John Dewey (1934a), for example, noted this problem when he wrote in A Common Faith that churches had abandoned their prophetic voice. This, in part, led to his rejection of the eschatology of his early religious training. Similarly, we find that educational leaders have abandoned the voice of imagination, leading us to re-evaluate our early educational training in melting-pot egalitarianism and scientific management. We are on a search for a new

Rebecca McElfresh Spehler is Adjunct Professor at Ashland University of Ohio where she teaches courses in talent development. She is also a doctoral student in educational leadership with a research emphasis in aesthetics and education. She currently serves as principal for the Hudson Local School District, Hudson, Ohio. Patrick Slattery is Associate Professor at Texas A&M University where he teaches philosophy of education and curriculum theory. He is author of Curriculum Development in the Postmodern Era (Garland, 1995) and co-author of Understanding Curriculum (Peter Lang, 1995). He has published articles on curriculum theory in Harvard Educational Review, Educational Theory, Curriculum Inquiry, JCT and Childhood Education.
education characterized, in part, by the artist as prophet in the process of social change. We are concerned about voice—especially the prophetic voice of imagination that contributes to positive social change. We learn from Foucault (1977) that knowledge and power are intimately linked and that the power of language serves a normalizing function in society. Thus, it is not surprising to us that prophetic voices are marginalized in schools. One of the ways that this is accomplished is by silencing the artist—sometimes a self-inflicted silence of conformity and comodification—and at other times a bureaucratic silencing by forceful imposition and programme elimination. We seek to recover and reaffirm the voice of the artist as prophet in schooling and society. Our goal is the re-enchantment of the arts at the heart of the curriculum. Our work builds on Maxine Greene’s (1995) call to ‘release the imagination’, Suzi Gablik’s (1991) challenge to envision the ‘re-enchantment of art’ and Janet Miller’s (1990) call for ‘creating spaces and finding voices’. Throughout this paper we allow prophetic artists—poets, lyricists, painters, dancers, novelists and others—to interweave their voices with ours. We turn first to T. S. Eliot (1936) with his penetrating description of the modern experience in The Hollow Men. He describes our existence as meaningless and empty, like that of men stuffed with straw. The modern experience has rendered many persons hollow and voiceless. As Eliot suggests, our whispered tones have no impact, leaving us paralysed and sterile. In this state of paralysis we have become unable to act with passion or compassion, listen with empathy or even imagine a world beyond our emptiness. In fact, for Eliot, we lack even the passion to be ‘lost violent souls’. Somehow, students and citizens become hollow, stuffed, dead.

Prophetic poets, visual artists, dancers, actors, lyricists and novelists challenge us to investigate—not ignore—such despair, injustice and paralysis. Some would argue that artists merely reflect cultural prejudices and elitist tastes; others would insist that artists shape culture and presage social change. Perhaps it is best to assume that both are possible. However, in our vision of a new education the latter will become the norm.

The prophetic voice, of course, has a long and rich tradition in religious communities where the role of the prophet demanded a voice of inspiration and advocacy on matters of grave moral and social concern. Although the role of the prophet has been officially honoured and respected—indeed, hallowed—in religious tradition, it is paradoxical that this voice is most often unwelcome and scorned in the community. As we experience the despair and malaise of the modern world, possibilities for a new education emerge when we are willing to hear the voice of the visionary calling us to create a different kind of community. These voices of imagination are present today. Like the Cueca Solo performed publicly by the wives, mothers and daughters of the ‘disappeared’ in Chile, prophetic artists yearn for recognition and justice. Voices of imagination—particularly, as expressed through the arts—continue to ‘disappear’ from the schools and curriculum. While these voices may be suppressed, they have not been eliminated. The visionary educational leader must seek them out amidst the cacophony of competing interests on urban street corners, on experimental stages, in independent films, in music-filled coffee houses, in alternative
newspapers, and in sweaty garages turned music or art studios. Urgent political, social, ecological and spiritual concerns are being discussed and debated on campuses and in church halls as well. These discussions often intersect with the arts in remarkable ways. We think here of David Orr’s (1992) work at Oberlin College in Ohio where concern for global ecological issues is embodied in new architectural designs for sustainable educational facilities.

As educators concerned about making a difference in the world, we seek to create a different kind of space for the young to learn and grow. The arts are primary in this space because of their ability to develop voice, sustain passion and evoke response. It is this passion that gives us the energy to find expression for our vision. As we provide rich aesthetic experiences for our youth, we open the possibility for the development of compassion, empathy, environmental and social activism, democratic citizenship and personal spiritual transformation. When the exploration of ethical issues is allowed to emerge within this context, the prophetic voice is legitimized and encouraged. Let us explore some examples.

The prophetic art of Keinholtz and Kiefer

We begin with an examination of the prophetic work of the visual artists Edward and Nancy Keinholtz and Anselm Kiefer, who have allowed their artistic abilities to give voice to their concerns about social and political issues. Typical of those who take on the role of the prophet, their expressions have not always been well received.

When Edward Keinholtz began his work in the 1950s, his style was likened to that of the Beat poets who ‘raged against a nation that by all outward appearances was content with itself and ostensibly relieved of the burden of self-reflection’ (Raskin, 1996, p. 38). During this time, Americans were reacting to the launch of the Soviet spaceship Sputnik and its implications for national defence interests. McCarthy-era sentiment at an apex, our national attention turned to an external enemy as we sought to rid the world of Communism. Deep personal reflection, however, led some visionary people to examine the apparent contradictions between our overt national policies and the actions undertaken by our newly developed military industrial economy. Were we really concerned about the liberation of human beings or had we come to understand ourselves in the context of the economic advantage of the business of war? Edward Keinholtz exposed such contradictions ingrained in the American consciousness of the 1950s and 1960s.

Edward and Nancy Keinholtz began to work collaboratively in 1972. Inspired by their shared vision of the prophetic nature of their work, they created assemblages to express their outrage with child abuse, war, poverty, religious hypocrisy, sexism and violence against native Americans and other indigenous and minority cultures. They also probed the decay of the human spirit in the modern age. Their sculptures were created with common household objects and discarded industrial materials—as if to say that injustice is everywhere in our day-to-day lives. This highlighted the
irony of their themes as seen in the major retrospective of their work in 1996 at the Whitney Museum in New York City. The museum presented a collection of striking images designed to both reflect and deconstruct the human condition (Hopps 1996).

One of Edward Keinholtz's earliest creations, completed in 1959, reflects the condition of the archetypal American male. This sculpture, titled *John Doe*, was constructed with a store display mannequin cut in half at the waist. The two halves were placed back to back on a baby stroller base. The penis was severed and stored in a drawer below the stroller. A carved section of the man's chest forms a hole that contains a wooden cross instead of a heart; a stovepipe connects both sections of the body leading to the cross. The sculpture portrays the American male as a bifurcated hero; he is depicted as limbless, powerless, heartless and impotent. The emptiness of his existence—void of emotional, sexual or spiritual passion—shocks the viewer and forces a re-evaluation of macho male media images.

*Jane Doe*, his counterpart, fares no better. She is constructed with the head of a child's female doll attached to a small chest of drawers covered by the lace-laden skirt of a bridal gown (Hopps 1996). The absence of arms adds to her defenceless and passive stance. As the body takes on the appearance of a table, the relationship between the feminine nature and the act of service is dramatic. The three drawers—representing three stages of womanhood—are covered with the lace wedding gown, requiring the viewer to lift the skirt of the woman-turned-servicetale in order to reveal her inner humanity. Such imposition and exploitation of women is all too common. The viewer becomes voyeur and must now confront her or his own complicity in exploitation and subjugation.

The images created by both Edward and Nancy Keinholtz enabled them to assume the role of the prophet and challenge those who viewed their art to consider important social issues. The use of common materials to construct images of exaggeration effectively communicated the struggle inherent in various critical causes. Because the images are sometimes disturbing—particularly the child abuse series—the artists are able to engage the imagination and evoke the emotional connection and response necessary for lasting impact. Adding to this response is the three-dimensional nature of the work. This dimensionality allows the observer to interact with the piece and step away from what Suzi Gablik calls the subject-object separation found in much contemporary art. Not only does the observer become a participant, but the dimensionality of the work allows movement into the space of the tableau thereby evoking, in the postmodern sense, an intense and ironic juxtaposition (Gablik 1991).

In a similar fashion, Anselm Kiefer, a German citizen born at the end of World War II, addresses political and social issues of this century in his large canvases. He challenges his German contemporaries—indeed all modern women and men—to ponder and deconstruct those aspects of Twentieth Century German history that many would like to forget. Kiefer is aware of the complexity of memory construction and anti-memory deconstruction (Weaver *et al.* 1999).
For example, Kiefer's *Lot's Frau*, completed in 1989 and found in the collection at the Cleveland Museum of Art, depicts a barren and scorched landscape with two sets of converging railroad tracks at the horizon. Constructed with a substructure of lead mounted on wood and overlaid with canvas, the work evokes images of abandonment, suffering and deep loneliness. Above the horizon explode huge white puffs of smoke or clouds or human ashes. Kiefer has even been known to mix salt, ash and semen in the paint. This painting challenges us to look back at tragedies of the Twentieth Century such as the holocaust and environmental disasters. The viewer becomes like *Lot's Frau*—Lot's wife—who looked back on Sodom and Gomorrah. Traditional religious authorities have assumed that she was cast into a pillar of salt for her disobedience to a vengeful God who had commanded that Lot and his family move away without turning around. Yes, Lot's wife ignored the patriarchy to look back to the friends and family members she had left behind. In the agony of her exodus, she would not erase the memory of her loved ones. In the looking back, she is transformed and becomes the salt of the Earth, not as a punishment as the traditional patriarchal theology has assumed, but rather as a model of the prophetic vision—for salt is the substance of wisdom in alchemy and in Biblical literature.

Kiefer has called us to become the pillar of salt for an Earth where global communities have repeatedly burned and bombed their cities and obliterated their peoples for centuries. Gilmour (1990) concludes:

Kiefer's palpable grasp of the powers of imagination enables him to fulfil one pedagogical task of postmodern art: teaching us the importance of the habitat of the earth. His refusal to forget the consequences of war, the threat of nuclear destruction, and the negative outcomes of technology keeps being projected, in his *Theatre of Cruelty* staging, against the symbol of the earth. But even more than that, this artist brings fire to the earth, which purifies our vision of the abstract images of nature and history that stand at the root of so many of these consequences. His visionary sketch of the habitat for postmodern humans recalls us to the elemental relationship we have to the earth, to its place within the cosmos, and to previous human cultures who have understood so well the limits of human powers (p. 175).

Kiefer allows us to enter the landscape of ecological concern in the broadest sense. He challenges our most intuitive and rational assumptions about our relationship to the earth and to one another. As our imaginations are engaged through our interaction with his art, the voice of the prophet may emerge. The call is compelling, the response is vital.

**A postmodern perspective: ethics and aesthetics**

The branch of philosophy known as axiology consists of the examination of both aesthetics and ethics. Ethics, the study of goodness, and aesthetics, the study of beauty, were long held as inseparable—so inseparably linked that they formed the axis of values and morality. Modernism, however, has tended to separate aesthetics and ethics into distinct disciplines, no longer viewing them as contributing one to the other. Such bifurcation, in our
estimation, is at the heart of the loss of imagination, vision and prophetic voice. Nel Noddings (1995) provides this insight:

The Enlightenment brought with it the wonderful idea that human beings might have a hand in their own destinies, that an adequate ethic would make life better here and now, and that human beings are subjects, agents—not just vessels for divine intervention. The Enlightenment brought the promise of freedom from the authority of the church and an invitation to human beings to exercise reason in the conduct of their lives. (p. 141)

Along with this freedom came an elevation of human reason which led to the Cartesian mind-body dichotomy and eventually to the bifurcation of ethics and aesthetics. In the attempts to create systems of ethics, modern philosophers have sought to eliminate moral uncertainty and provide a rational vision for the perfect society. Within the emergence of rational deontological proposals has come the gradual elimination of the aesthetic component in the ethical project. A postmodern project would seek to reunite ethics and aesthetics. This, for us, is an important first step in the development of voices of imagination for a new education.

Existential philosophy has undermined the hegemony of reason, substituting—as with Sartre—absurdity for reason. Nietzsche (1968) concluded that the ultimate meaning of human existence was to be found in the aesthetic experience. In this sense, we see the elevation of aesthetics over ethics. In her description of the dilemma of modern art in the context of the ethics/aesthetics bifurcation, Suzi Gablik (1991) writes that ‘it is perfectly true that moral purpose falls outside the scope of modern aesthetics just as surely as it falls outside the scope of scientific methodology—both are mute about responsibility, and artists today are not provided with any sense of the social or moral importance of their role’ (p. 140).

Some blame postmodern ambiguity for this dilemma, arguing that ambiguity leads to absurdity, apathy and inaction. Simone de Beauvoir (1948) counters this assumption: ‘[We must not] allow the liberating movement to harden into a moment which is acceptable only if it passes into its opposite; tyranny and crime must be kept from triumphantly establishing themselves in the world; the conquest of freedom is their only justification, and the assertion of freedom against them must therefore be kept alive’ (p. 11). In The Ethics of Ambiguity, de Beauvoir critiques metanarratives of the nature of the social condition and deconstructs totalitarian doctrines which raise up beyond the individual ‘a mirage’ of the universal. de Beauvoir challenges utopian and utilitarian visions of ethics. She contends that the individual must assume freedom in the creative and constructive moment in the face of the absurd so as to counteract the attempt by tyranny and crime to subvert freedom. Zygmunt Bauman (1993) expands on de Beauvoir’s concept when he explains that ‘What has come to be associated with the notion of the postmodern approach to morality is all too often the celebration of the “demise of the ethical”, of the substitution of aesthetics for ethics, and of the “ultimate emancipation” that follows’ (p. 2).

We concur with de Beauvoir and Bauman and propose further that this notion of paralysis and absurdity results from the modern bifurcation
of ethics and aesthetics, not from postmodern notions of uncertainty. Just as de Beauvoir would lead us to struggle with the ambiguity inherent in the world, we must struggle to find a way to weave again the tapestry of an axiological view which unites aesthetics and ethics. The re-enchanted voice described by Gablik offers such a perspective on the reunification of ethics and aesthetics. A constructive postmodern philosophy encourages us to utilize this reunification to promote the social consequences of value, as in the examples we have reviewed above. We must be about the task of allowing our appreciation and involvement with the aesthetic to inform our examination of ethics. Conversely, we must allow our exploration of ethics to inform our understandings of aesthetics. This holistic reunification drives our understandings of a new education—might we say a postmodern education—within the socio-political context.

The nature of the voice

The prophet is one who calls and inspires others to attend to matters of great significance. The development of the prophetic voice is a process involving psychological, spiritual, cognitive and emotional aspects of our being. This process of evoking vision in others is very much dependent on an inner awakening, a realization of a personal capacity to perceive and impact the future. Modernism certified the behaviourist view of human development and limited our capacity to be agents of change. If we are merely the result of our circumstances—direct causal links to events of the past—we lose the ability to have a great measure of influence upon our own development. Gershon and Straub (1989) refer to this as a model of pathology in which our focus is on the elimination of a negative nature. This result is the very bifurcation of the human soul that we seek to empower. In effect, we are battling ourselves in the attempt to become empowered. In contrast, an empowered person opens before her unlimited possibilities in the envisioning process as she embraces that which Jung called the shadow. Thomas Moore explains that our work in psychology would change remarkably if we thought about it as ongoing care rather than as the quest for a cure. Problems and obstacles offer a chance for reflection that otherwise would be precluded by the swift routine of life. Care of the soul observes the paradox whereby a muscled, strong-willed pursuit of change can actually stand in the way of substantive transformation (Moore 1992). The arts play a vital role in both the enlivening of the soul and in the development and communication of vision. Moore suggests that the life of the soul requires a different language, one that is expressed in images. Therefore, with the artists of every culture rests the burden of the prophetic voice.

The imagination plays a huge role in the development of voice. It is through the imagination that we are often able to conceive of a reality different from the one we are currently experiencing. Maxine Greene (1995) writes about the importance of the imagination in the empowerment of individuals: 'A space of freedom opens before the person moved to choose in light of possibility; she or he feels what it signifies to be an
initiator and an agent, existing among others but with the power to choose for herself or himself' (p. 22). In relationship to developing the voice of the young, she continues: 'Acknowledging the difficulty of moving the young to bestir themselves to create their own projects or find their own voices, I nevertheless believe that we must make the arts central in school curricula because encounters with the arts have a unique power to release the imagination' (p. 27). The development of the imagination empowers us to conceive of possibilities and social consequences of value (Dewey 1934a). In order to do so, we must have an understanding of proleptic time. Modernism has given us a sense of time that is linear and results in cause and effect relationships. Proleptic time views the present as coexisting with both the past and the future in a holistic experience. William Faulkner (1942) once wrote, 'There is no such thing really as was, because the past is' (p. 288). Events of the past continue to live in present experiences. Picasso (1971) spoke of the power of art created in the past to continue to create new meanings and understandings:

A picture is not thought out and settled beforehand. While it is being done it changes as one's thoughts change. And when it is finished it still goes on changing according to the state of mind of whoever is looking at it. A picture lives a life like a living creature, undergoing the changes imposed on us by our life from day to day. This is natural enough, as the picture lives only through the man (sic) who is looking at it. (p. 268)

As the past continues to influence the present, so does the future. It is not predetermined and remote; it is very much a part of our current experience as we engage in the process of creating the future. For some, this involves the process of envisioning. We are aware that our capacity to imagine a different future is the beginning of this process. John Dewey (1938) reminds us: 'The ideal of using the present simply to get ready for the future contradicts itself. Hence, the central problem of an education based on experience is to select the kind of present experiences that live fruitfully and creatively in subsequent experiences' (p. 28). A significant sense of empowerment arises from the awareness of one's capacity to envision and create the future.

**The re-enchanted voice**

The process of developing one's voice and the discovery of its prophetic role has sometimes been called re-enchantment. In a sense, this refers to a coming alive, an awareness of the soul. Musician Christopher Reynolds (1999) has described this coming alive as a process of meeting the orphan soul:

> When you meet the orphan soul
> May you talk all night because the time is full
> May you know the growing edge of you
> The secret questions
> What your dreams told you
> Where did you wake up?
> In this world, these are the meanings
And the signs I explored
Feel the words grow thick, the synchronistic clues
Feel the golden chills for the beautiful and true
Minds from all times visit our time
When you meet the orphan soul
Talk of erotic love, the southern and the northern poles
As philosophers held out their mirror
Again you know yourself, together the mind gets clearer
Once in painted caves, cathedral rooms, in Alexandria
The temple and the sweatlodge too
Know each other by laughter and heart
By the passion for your work and your art
Minds from all time visit our time
When you meet the orphan soul
Talk of your loved ones – from the young to the Invisibles
Share this ritual: Bless the human kind,
With an immortal part
That is in love with time
Minds from all time visit our time.

Notice the intimate relationship between past, present and future. They are clearly integrated into the experience of the re-enchantment, soulful life. Thomas Moore (1996) describes the enchanted life as one that is connected and full:

An enchanted life has many moments when the heart is overwhelmed by beauty and the imagination is electrified by some haunting quality in the world or by a spirit or voice speaking from deep within a thing, a place, or a person. Enchantment may be a state of rapture and ecstasy in which the soul comes to the foreground, and the literal concerns of survival and daily preoccupation at least momentarily fade into the background. The soul has an absolute, unforgiving need for regular excursions into enchantment. It requires them like the body needs food and the mind needs thought. Yet our culture often takes pride in disproving and exploding the sources of enchantment, explaining away one mystery after another and overturning precious shrines, dissolving the family farm that has housed spirits of civility for aeons, or desecrating for material profit a mountain or stream sacred to native residents. We have yet to learn that we can’t survive without enchantment and that the loss of it is killing us. (p. ix–x)

Suzi Gablik applies this notion of re-enchantment to the arts, documenting the impact of the arts on our culture. This re-enchantment of art is a shift from modernist thinking in which the individual is elevated and given a position of autonomy. Such autonomy has resulted in ‘art for art’s sake’ with no relative concern for the impact of art or artist on society and no conception of the role of the artist in the process of social change. A re-enchanted view is one that reframes the role of the artist and the very nature of our aesthetic perspective. Gablik (1991) writes:

The need to transform the egocentric vision that is encoded in our entire world view is the crucial task that lies ahead for our culture. The issue is whether art will rise to the occasion and make itself useful to all that is going on. To reframe our models of art in terms that would truly integrate moral and compassionate action would be to break the bounds of the ‘disenchanted’ culture we have been living out for so long. (pp. 141, 143)
The artist as social prophet is integral to our vision of a postmodern education. This vision will necessitate a rejection of the familiar modernistic idea that the arts exist simply for aesthetic purpose. The ethical dimension of the voice of imagination must be recovered. In other words, we need to return to the premodern philosophical understanding of the unity of ethics and aesthetics. Only in this way will educational leaders be able to make the case for integrating the arts into the heart of the curriculum. Gablik (1991) writes that ‘The truth slowly being recognized today is that we cannot look at art solely in aesthetic terms. We now know, thanks to deconstruction, that a work of art is never pure, never self-contained, never autonomous. Indirectly, a belief system is being reinforced’ (p. 148).

The community of hope

We conclude with the importance of ‘creating spaces and finding voices’ in the educational process, as Janet Miller (1990) has so aptly written. The preponderance of materials and programmes that emphasize the technical rationality of our work as educators continues to stifle and silence the voices of imagination. Neil Postman (1996) in The End of Education warns that we must be attentive to more than this technical rationale:

In considering how to conduct the schooling of our young, adults have two problems to solve. One is an engineering problem; the other, a metaphysical one. The engineering problem . . . is essentially technical. But it is important to keep in mind that the engineering of learning is very often put upon, assigned to an importance it does not deserve . . . I suggest that without a transcendent and honorable purpose schooling must reach its finish. (pp. x, 3)

We concur with Postman. If schooling is simply technical, it has reached its end and is incapable of contributing a solution to the social, spiritual and ecological problems of our communities. We are not resigned to the end of education. Rather, we believe that empowering the voices of imagination through the arts will contribute to a renewal of the metaphysical dimension of our work. We advocate such a posture.

As individuals discover the life of the soul and develop prophetic voice, a sense of community will emerge. Angeles Arrien (1993) suggests four archetypes that can inform and inspire our growth as a human community: the warrior, the healer, the visionary and the teacher. The visionary is the one who must seek to speak honestly and prophetically without blame or judgement. In this way, the visionary is able to call others to give attention to matters of great importance. We must, in a similar way, find ways to encourage the voices of those who are called to this purpose. The arts are primary in this pursuit because they engage our imaginations, our very soul. It becomes crucial that we find ways to give space and time for the voices of those who would speak through the arts. As educators we can provide this space within our schools and universities. Our places of education must create spaces where we go to hear the voices of imagination calling us to justice, compassion and ecological sustainability. If we are to survive—as educational leaders and as a human community—we must begin to hear and respond.
How can we, then, encourage the development of this voice within our communities? As we share a common life as members of a learning community, we can call upon the arts to help us express our vision, our hopes and dreams for the future. One such community of elementary students, parents and staff members created works of visual art both to express and celebrate a year long journey of vision crafting. The works of art were given a place of respect and honour as the community gathered for its vision celebration. This same community is working on a long-term relationship with the local orchestra to develop an arts integrated curriculum. By doing so, they are encouraging the natural association of the arts with the daily life of the learning community. As we encourage the young to make the arts a natural means of expression, we encourage the development of the prophetic voice. And it is this voice that most certainly can attend to the pressing problems of our postmodern world.

Note


References


