

FOR THE LOVE OF LEARNING

A Conversation Between Aaron Stern and Matthew Fox

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A lively dialogue ensues when theologian, author and teacher Matthew Fox sits down to talk with musician, composer, educator and learning consultant Aaron Stern. This recent conversation centers around their shared interest in and exploration of learning and spirituality.

Fox's focus is on renewing the ancient tradition of feminine-centered Creation Spirituality, which inclusively supports the arts, artists and justice in all areas. According to his vision, by "reinventing work, education and worship, we can bring about a nonviolent revolution on our planet."

Stern is founder and president of the Santa Fe-based Academy for the Love of Learning. His work aims to stimulate and support an embodied integration of the arts, education and human development by creating approaches to learning that nurture and balance the spiritual, intellectual, aesthetic and creative lives of teachers and students.

Aaron Stern: At the Academy for the Love of Learning, we're exploring new forms for education. The language we use is "learning as a practice" — a practice for waking up and transforming. So, when I think about your call for new forms of education, as well as new forms of politics and new forms of spirituality, I want to know what we're discovering mutually and how we might learn from each other. That's one of the most exciting things about your coming to be in a conversation with us in November.

Matthew Fox: What age group are you focusing on?

AS: We've come to a multipronged approach because we see the re-imagining of education as culture change. Coming up with a new way of thinking about education requires an inquiry into all parts of the equation. We work with adults who are responsible for the lives of children, and we work with parents and teachers and policy makers and, through them, ultimately children. We're currently developing a masters in learning —

MF: I like that word so much better than education. It's like the difference between spirituality and religion. Religion is a structured thing that may or may not be spiritual. So education is a structured monster that may or may not be encouraging learning. And at this time, it very often is not — it's discouraging learning. Which means the most creative kids are leaving school in droves because they're bored. So that's why what you say is so right — this is a cultural thing.

AS: The word *education*, as you well know — *educare*, in the Latin form — means to lead or guide out. But we're so preoccupied with pouring information in —

MF: And testing it. And then testing, and more testing. That's what I mean: I think the gap between learning and education is as great as the gap between spirituality and religion. Which is as great as the gap between justice and law, which is as great as the gap between commerce and stewardship. The whole thing is out of whack. So I'm really excited about what you're doing. Obviously art and creativity are at the center of what you're doing.

AS: Very much so.

MF: Which is where it should be. It's the essence. For me, the three legs of the stool are creativity, cosmology, contemplation and also compassion — which would be the four-legged stool, right? But kids aren't getting cosmology, so they're not learning their place in the universe, and therefore they have nothing to operate with. Our moral behavior comes from our relationship to the whole as we conceive of it.

In the Middle Ages, when the word *university* was invented, it meant a place to find your place in the universe. So it had this level of being and wisdom to it. It was not essentially functionary. But the modern age turned it into this functional thing.

AS: I would sign up in a heartbeat if the purpose of education was to find your place in the universe.

MF: And it's about the soul. It's about the big soul, not the little soul. How does your soul relate to the cosmic drama going on? I love that line from Yeats: that education is not filling a pail but lighting a fire. Because once you light the fire, everyone has a mind.

AS: And then we truly know what to do and how to be.

MF: It's interesting that you are focusing on adults. That's so important. Too many people think you're going to solve education by creating the perfect fourth-grade classroom.

AS: That kind of thinking just doesn't go far enough. But I don't want to lose the fact that you include creativity as one leg of the stool. At the basis of everything that we're doing, we're engaging the creative process — a creative inquiry — as an opening to what we call the "learning field." What does it mean to open to the field? What does it mean to open to the not-yet-known or the not-yet-seen — what you might talk about as soul, or the Holy Spirit, and the ineffable — and actually incorporate that into your perspective, or at least into your intent?

MF: Well, you know Rupert Sheldrake [biologist and originator of the theory of morphogenetic fields]. He says *field* is the new word for *soul*.

AS: That's exactly the direction of our thinking.

MF: I love that because for a long time the West has been stuck in Plato's notion that the soul is in the body, instead of the body being in the soul, which is a more mystical approach. The word [field] carries so much expansiveness to it, invitation to play and to roam and to explore and to discover. Then you get [mystic and theologian] Meister Eckhart talking about how the soul is unfathomable, like God is, and he says it's as infinite as God is. So you're talking about something big — our souls are cosmic in their size. And that's the problem. Our schools are myopic.

AS: Myopic versus cosmic.

MF: Exactly. And our culture is so anthropocentric and thinks so small. This is where creativity comes in. It flows from underground wells and passages, and mysterious places, and it keeps flowing. It's about being part of something bigger than all of us. We must educate the soul, not just the mind. The mind is busy. But the soul can take you beyond mind. And you need both. Obviously, you need to explore mind and train mind, but we also want to explore what's beyond mind. And there's no room for that in most educational systems today. What we're calling education banishes the soul. You can't even use the word *soul*.

AS: If you look into the history of pedagogy in this country, you find that the industrial revolution mind-set gave birth to our present-day educational system. You see why we put kids in little rooms, boxes: a bell rings, the door opens, they move to the next room; a bell rings, the door opens, they move to the next room. It's a mechanistic model, and it served a certain purpose. We peopled an economy, which was the fundamental intent. But the question is, now what? We've done that — we've done it well — and the rest of the world is doing it and doing it better. But what is the nature of education in America now? What ought we to be thinking about? In a way, we're stuck in the old form, without having imagined the new one.

MF: You know, I think kids are learning a lot on the Internet. It is certainly a way to learn, and to explore, and to be creative. What I call “edutainment” — media and the arts — is going to be a huge element of future learning.

AS: Yes and no. It can be too passive. I'm thinking about how passive people can be when listening to music. The lack of training and the lack of understanding of how music works means kids — and many adults — can't engage in musical experience actively. There's no depth. They don't perceive musical form — don't even know how to do that. That's distressing to me because in music is encoded the mystery. And without the capacity to perceive it and engage actively with it, something terribly important is getting lost.

MF: But I'm encouraged by something like rap — because I do see it as very participatory, very active.

AS: But can you compare rap to a Beethoven symphony? To me, rap is the closest thing to Shakespeare being produced now, so I love rap — and it's physically engaging, which

is good. But encoded in the music of Beethoven is a spiritual quality — something essential for us to encounter and grasp. It can wake us up spiritually — has the potential to transform us. It's as if there's a presence standing behind the piece. What is the spirit of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony? What is the spirit of any great symphony? There's something very important here that's at risk.

For example, if you look at Leonard Bernstein's Young People's Concerts with the New York Philharmonic, the most startling thing about it is that you see these 7- and 8- and 9-year-old kids enraptured. They're sitting in Carnegie Hall — remember that? And they don't move. They're completely engaged and present, attending to what's happening—

MF: They're undergoing something—

AS: Exactly. What touches me about what you said about rap and its participatory nature is that making stuff — getting engaged with creating in an active way — could be our saving grace. Not a passive receiving of information, but the active engagement with creating a piece of music. It requires solving musical problems in the same ways composers are required to solve musical problems. So, how do you end this phrase [sings a musical phrase, but leaves off the ending note]? Hmm . . . now what am I going to do here? Am I going to go “dum” [sings another tone], or am I going to go “dum” [sings a different tone]? In that very moment, you can take a student creating a piece of music and say to him or her, “That was an interesting choice. Would you be interested in seeing how Beethoven ended a similar phrase when he came to that same difficult decision in his Third Symphony?” And suddenly they're in a conversation with Beethoven.

Then something happens: They get to have their own impulses and creative responses, but also they're in conversation with Beethoven, and being shaped by that. The startling thing for me about education is that we have all the techniques that we possibly could imagine to support us all in opening to the wonder and ecstasy of learning.

MF: Absolutely. It's a great joy. Saint Thomas Aquinas goes on about that — the joy and the wonder of learning, and “Philosophy begins with wonder . . .” Of course, Descartes' philosophy begins with doubt, so it's two different starting points. The doubt is so anthropocentric. What other creature has doubt? Bears are busy being bears, and whales are busy being whales. And humans are busy sitting around doubting and making a mess of things. But if we got back to the sense of wonder—

AS: And yet, we don't seem to. About four years ago, I spoke at a Superintendents' Day about how to bring the arts into education. But, actually, the *how* is easy — there are myriad ways. Integrated curriculum programs have been developed all over the place, teaching math through music, and teaching history and social studies through drama, and so on.

The basic message I focused on was the *why*. Until we begin to value the art part of the human being — the creative part — and recognize that creativity is the core activity we're always engaged in, until we see that imagination and the capacity to create are an essential part of our development, we'll never bring the arts into education. We don't

value it sufficiently, so we don't require it. How, as people who have come through the old educational system, do we change our perceptions and grow a new understanding?

MF: That's the problem. [Educators] have been through this other system that didn't value creativity.

AS: Yes, and parents, policy makers . . . Yet somewhere inside there's a longing for something different.

MF: They have a longing for something different. [Teachers] are burning out like crazy. And the system's getting more and more expensive and accomplishing less and less. The Dalai Lama is saying that there's an educational crisis the world over. It's a universal problem, a human problem, because we're changing as a species. We're living in a postmodern time and we're still dealing in modern forms of worship — I said worship, but also education.

AS: Which is a form of worship, or should be — a spiritual practice. That's our notion of learning as a practice —

MF: Yes, I love that phrase: learning as a practice.

AS: It actually brings forth the soul. If we support rather than thwart children and believe that they have a soul and that they are incarnating beings (of course, this takes us into problematic language), then learning becomes a practice for waking up: Who am I? And who am I in this world? And what am I here to do? What if learning actually became a practice with that intent?

Of course, we have to acquire basic skills and be able to communicate with each other in written and spoken language. We have to be able to add and subtract and multiply and divide, and all of those things that we think of as education. But rather than the balance tipping toward basic skills and testing, if we begin to tip it the other way and say, "OK, a new form of education is one that tends to the emergent soul, and learning is a practice that supports that," what would that mean? What would that do? What would happen if we were in the world equipped in that way? What are the new basic skills?

MF: Creativity would be at the heart of learning. Creativity is what grows the soul. And it also makes demands. It requires the warrior — it requires self-discipline, it requires strength, it requires —

AS: Discernment —

MF: It requires going into darkness and into doubt and into the breakdown of things, and disintegration and rebirth. Part of honoring creativity and learning is to recognize that there are highs and lows. But learning does have to have a purpose. Just like art isn't for art's sake, it's for the community's sake. It's the same with learning. It's not for ego, and it's not for just a better paycheck — though that is obviously a spin-off — but it is about our citizenship on the planet and our role in the relationship of things —

AS: And what it means to be a human being. What actually is possible for us? Why are we here?

MF: Exactly. Why are we here? That contemplative side is extremely important. Being at home with solitude, that's what's missing. Today [we have] 24-hour news —

AS: Cell phones, Internet —

MF: Exactly, it's total distraction!

AS: What do you suppose we're distracting ourselves from?

MF: We're afraid of our beings; we're afraid of what's deep in ourselves. We're afraid of this mystery and of spirit — of our deepest selves. What mystical practice does is take us to our being. We call ourselves human beings, but in our culture, we're not human *beings*, we're human *doings* — we're always doing or being done to. Of course, *being* means you've got to go through stuff. You've got to live with the suffering, or live with the darkness, or live with waiting. We're running from our true selves, and we're drinking at the fountain of our false selves, which is much more superficial and immediately gratifying. But I think that's ultimately what we're running from. What do you think?

AS: I would agree completely. I'm just contemplating why it's so painful for people to enter into deeper levels, more subtle levels of the experience of true self.

MF: Well, you know, I'm not sure it is painful. I think they just never get invited! It's nowhere in the air! The churches aren't doing it, the synagogues are not doing it, the media sure as hell isn't doing it, schools aren't doing it, and the parents aren't doing it because they're running around trying to survive financially, and the grandparents aren't even around.

AS: How do we create enough spaciousness in our relationship to the prevailing educational paradigm so that we can create the conditions by which something new can be born? What would happen if at the center of a school was a community of teachers who were learners in the deepest sense — on the edge of the not-yet-known — so that the spirit of learning was being modeled to children? What if we become vulnerable and admit we do not know? What a disorienting dilemma that would be. What a death and rebirth that calls for.

MF: The blessing of chaos.

AS: You speak about instincts — you mention all kinds of good instincts, justice being one. Can you speak a bit more about what other positive instincts you think children have, that we have as human beings?

MF: Well, I think there's an instinct for justice, fairness. I think there's an instinct for beauty, for sure. I think one of the biggest lies of the modern era was this horrible phrase: beauty lies in the eye of the beholder. If beauty is subjective, why can a thousand people enjoy the same Mozart experience? It's just the opposite of that — beauty brings the community together.

AS: And we share it.

MF: I think beauty and the yearning for beauty are everywhere. Obviously peace. I think the human heart wants repose. Repose is the opposite of running around all the time and being distracted. It's about enjoying creation. So from that point of view, I think there is a yearning for delight, joy. Repose really goes with that. Obviously music and dance, playacting — and all of that is in us — and ritual.

AS: Justice making and peacemaking —

MF: But the key [instinct]: I use the word *being* because that's the Western language. In the East, their favorite term is *nonaction*. I think that's the same thing. Eckhart says we should worry less about what we do and more about who we are because if our being is just, our ways will be just. The whole thing about yearning for being and going that deep — I think it's built into us, but it can be easily covered up by distraction and by problem solving or survival issues.

Our education is set up for knowledge, and that's part of what we have to break out of. We have to break into wisdom. That's why the arts are so important. Creative practices open the door to wisdom. What we're talking about is moving from knowledge-based education to wisdom-based — from “knowledge factories” to wisdom schools. That's why I love your phrase about learning as a practice. What we've done in the modern age is stripped the heart from knowledge so much that learning has become something else. But when you reintegrate them, it is the pursuit of wisdom.

And the aesthetics . . . Descartes threw out aesthetics as a category of philosophy. What you're doing is bringing it back, and what I've been trying to do, too. And I see its results. It's beauty that wakes people up. It's aesthetics that gets into our heart. The bottom line in all these wars is that they're goddamn ugly. That's what media is showing us: the ugliness in seeing children and old women being bombed. . . . Whether they're Jews or whether they're Arabs, it's [irrelevant].

AS: I'm thinking of Keats' “Ode on a Grecian Urn”: “Truth is beauty . . .” If you know this, you know all you need to know.

MF: Yeah. Beauty, harmony, justice, sustainability — they're all synonyms.

AS: Synonyms for each other — and for love.

The Academy for the Love of Learning is a nonprofit educational organization developing and offering transformative methodologies for learning. Its work acknowledges the deep longing that we have as human beings to know ourselves and to be supported in finding our unique expression in the world. Academy programs stand for a culture of creativity that values and practices discernment, personal leadership, the sustainability of life in all its forms, connection and interdependency, and our capacity to love. The Academy's program areas include personal leadership, youth leadership, teacher renewal, parenting, death and dying, as well as organizational advising and research. For information, visit www.aloveoflearning.org.