**TITLE:** ***Soil, Soul, Society: Regeneration******from the Vital-Core***

**ABSTRACT**

My talk will focus on examining the ontological and epistemological basis for our major cultural practices, such as child-rearing, schooling, and work life. The focus of my examination is to reveal the corrupt and bankrupt state of these cultural practices that manifest what I will frame as phenomenology of dehumanization that includes “Vampire Operation,” “Hungry Ghosts Roaming,” “Machine Impersonation” and so on. My examination will incorporate a reflection on my personal experience of growing up and being schooled in Korea, immigrating to Canada, struggling to raise a family and have a university teaching career, and now witnessing around me growing panic as well as denial about the state of the world. Out of all this, I will propose and illustrate a regeneration project for the endangered “soil, soul, and society” through re-animating the (for lack of better word) “vital-core” to our humanity. It is my credo that this core, if rightly understood and sufficiently cultivated, nourished, and empowered, could resist the exclusionary, atomistic, homocentric, egocentric, dualistic, moralistic, instrumentalist, and measurement-oriented ways of thinking, perceiving, and acting that currently dominate the world, including the academy. I emphasize that the first-order responsibility of the educators, akin to that of Hippocratic Oath, is to regenerate and nourish, not maim, starve, or numb this core in everyone whom we meet and teach. I will explore with you a few practical ways of going about recovering and nourishing the vital-core.

**PRESENTATION DRAFT**

Notes of appreciation and gratitude to Peter Grimmett who invited me to give this talk; this opportunity to speak my mindheart is precious to me; as well, I would like to also acknowledge that my standing before you here today would be unlikely without Peter’s compassion and solicitous advising during my pre-tenure years as I struggled with single-parenting and taking care of my mother at my home in her last eight years, afflicted with Alzheimer’s. My acknowledgement of debt and gratitude can go on for some time, but I shall summarize by quoting my mother who blessed me with “human-luck” (inn-bok), meaning that good karma of human relationships. My gratitude goes to all my teachers, the first teacher being my Mother, my two daughters, and my students, and my biggest teacher for the past 14 years being my husband, Dr. Avraham Cohen.

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Four days ago, on March 15th, Friday, hundreds of university and high school students walked out of class and marched through the downtown streets of Vancouver, after gathering at the Vancouver Art Gallery. They are part of the global youth movements demanding that their elderlies and elders to take climate change seriously and take actions. [I stand for what I stand on.]

This protest movement started with and inspired by 16-year old student, Greta Thunberg, from Sweden, who began to walk out of the class to go and hold solitary demonstrations outside Sweden’s parliament. Her reason for this seemingly drastic action is blindingly simple and totally compelling. What is the use of studying at school when she saw no healthy future for herself, others, and the whole planet. Ronald Wright, in his 2004 Massey Lecture, A Short History of Progress, pointed out, after studying all the past civilizations that collapsed, that one thing they all had in common is fouling their nest. Every one of them, however, was one-time limited experiment that, when it went wrong, put itself into extinction, but not the whole world. The current global civilization is different: when it fouls its nest, the whole biotic sphere and community suffers and risks dying out. How soon that will happen is being debated. 14 years? 50 years? 100 years? While such debate rages in some circles, a vast number of people, especially many politicians and people in industry and business, are still into climate change denial. Disaster follows denial of reality.

Isn’t there a sense, I ask you, that our whole schooling is founded upon denial of reality? In putting this question to you, I am obligated to share with you what I think reality is, or at least, how I recognize reality! This is both an epistemological and an ontological question. First: I recognize reality by interdependence and interpenetration. Call it Buddhist ontology of Pratiyasamutpada, Systems Theory, Quantum Physics, Complexity Theory, Ecology, Animism, or what have you: whichever disciplinary nomenclature you pick, they point to the nature of reality that is in contradiction to Atomism, Mechanism, and Individualism, and is in alignment with Holism, Simultaneity, Multiplicity, Synchronicity . . .. Second, derivatively, I recognize reality by flux or impermanence (anicca), which includes impermanence of ego-self (anatta).

Interdependence, interpenetration, impermanence! If these concepts capture the way reality of Life on this blue planet Earth manifests, then the current environmental devastations in this Age of Anthropocene are a clear indication of how modern humanity has been in denial of reality. And since schooling as an institution that prepares en mess the citizens to fit into, function, and perpetuate Life in Anthropocene, by extension, I would argue that schooling is an institution that is committed to denial of reality. In leveling this criticism against the institution of schooling, I am not in any way condemning teachers and administrators. They are caught in the larger dystopic system as the rest of us. And the current stats clear in showing that teachers as professionals are the second biggest casualty next to physicians of burn-out whose rate is alarmingly growing.

Now the details: the idea that students are learning, acquiring, accumulating information in the form of facts and factoids, which we call ‘knowledge acquisition,’ reveals a certain ontic and epistemic nature of reality that this practice entails and is committed to, namely that we live in a by and large atomistic, mechanical, and individualistic culture. You can’t acquire and accumulate something without seeing this something being isolatable into individual units of concrete particulars. There is a name for this way that one’s mind works: reification. To a large extent, it is hard to avoid reification when we become language users. In the act of naming ‘things,’ we isolate whatever it is that we are pointing to as isolatable and treat them as if they have independent existence. Yet this operation and process can be magnified to the point of seeing the world almost exclusively in terms of ‘clear and distinct’ ideas that name clear and distinct, that is, isolatable and independently existing objects in the world. You name ‘trees,’ ‘sky,’ ‘water,’ and so on, then the sense of interdependent and interpenetrating reality that bind these items as one simultaneous and synergistic flow of reality starts to fade. You name ‘my mind,’ ‘my emotions,’ my ‘body,’ and so on, you not only separated out the self from others, be they plants, animals, and other human beings, but also you separated your self into various parts. I don’t wish to present a black-and-white, either-or kind of picture of what human beings do and how they are. Again, problems are, as usual, due to not seeing multiciplity and dynamism, and subtle ways that all parts hang together and flow together, trying to move towards some sense of organic balance and harmony. This not seeing, known as Ignorance (*avidya* in Sanskrit), creates all manners of distortions and contortions to the way we approach, meet, and act on the world.

When I reflectively look back at my K-12 schooling, I recognize just how relentless, insidious, and pervasive this operation and process had been. I come from the family background of animistic oral culture. Another name for it, given by the modern schooled mind, is illiteracy and superstition. My mother was never schooled. Nor my father or grandmother who took care of me. Though I was born of my mother’s body close to the land and cultured by her unschooled shamanistic mind, once I went to school, reification and other alienating practices started to shape my mind. My mother, in her survival wisdom, saw that the only way to equip her children to survive and rise above poverty that oppressed her family of peasantry was through modern schooling. The upshot of her singular and fervent dedication to her children’s schooling could be seen as spectacular: in one generation, my siblings became doctors, engineers, and professors who all immigrated to North America. Call that success, but every success entails a loss of something. What did I lose?

I am part of the modern humanity that was shaped by the ontology and epistemology of atomism, mechanism, and individualism that shaped the alienated consciousness, in short, ego-consciousness. Ego is the self that has lost its intrinsic oneness with the sentient planet and all her creatures, as well as with the cosmos. The ego sees itself as a self-existing independent unit onto itself, hence operating against all other egos, competing for survival. Ego finds no mutual companionship and vital supports from trees, animals, rocks, rivers, oceans, skies, the sun, the moon, the stars—in short, the whole world. Ego is basically engaged in war against all for its survival. Either it wins, in which case, it can devour or eliminates the other; or it loses, in which case it’s devoured or eliminated by the other. However, since the nature of reality is mutual interdependence and interpenetration, devouring can never truly bring satiation and satisfaction to the ego. Therefore, egos are perpetually hungry. It devours endlessly but it’s never satiated and suffers from lack of satiation. This state of perennial lack is depicted by the figure of the Hungry Ghost.

Now, here is my question: Is there a sense that our schooling is veritably engaged in the production of the Hungry Ghosts? First of all, we coup our students inside a building for much of the day, preventing them from freely communing with trees, rocks, rivers, skies . . ., creating a consciousness alienated from Nature-Earth. The ostensive reason for this strange practice is to develop their mind, the faculty of Reason that presumably requires existential estrangement as a suitable condition for development. This “indoorism,” however, cannot be a requirement for developing the mind since the human mind had been developing just fine without such extraordinary treatment since time immemorial. But for the Industrial Age mind that are especially prepared to be slaves to the Machine of industrial production and consumption, Yes, it is a requirement! The unspoken reasoning goes like this: We need minds that are divorced from and deprived of Earth, Body, Family, and Community. We need minds that are abstracted, therefore estranged, from feelings, bodily sensations, and spheres of energetics that connects the person with the larger energy systems of the planet. Such minds, cut off and cut up, is deprived, and made hungry and powerless, thus are readied to seek and receive artificial sources of energy and power in the form of rewards, praise, grades, certificates, degrees, rankings, prestige and privileges, money and power, and so on. This process of simultaneous deprivation and artificial feeding is, I assert, what modern schooling has been about in the main. As such, schooling is absolutely instrumental to shaping of egos. By ego, I mean the self that has been cut off from its matrix of original bonds and attachments, from Nature, Cosmos, Family and Tribes, and given the understanding that it is independent and self-existing. Egos are, therefore, perpetually hungry and powerless, and are always looking for nourishment.

Nourishment supplied to the ego is typically in form of the measurables, which is what much of schooling is about. But the measurables do not, cannot, truly nourish egos to the point of transforming them into non-egos. The fact is that schooling, from K-12 and beyond, is mostly about the measurables. A steady diet of the measurables creates Hungry Ghosts who then roam around, constantly hungry and looking for something to devour. There can be no rapacious consumerism, such that we live with daily, without the production of Hungry Ghosts. Schooling, I contend, directly feeds into consumerism, and moreover, into addiction. Addiction is essentially a Hungry Ghost phenomenon, as Bruce Alexander and others like Gabor Mate, have been telling us for decades. The Buddha taught the cardinal value of the immeasurable, and offered a cluster of four, known as The Four Immeasurables. They are lovingkindness, compassion, empathic joy, and equanimity. Immeasurables, such as these, feed and nourish the Being dimension of who we are.

Instead of finding the right nourishment for Hungry Ghosts, namely food for their Being-dimension—Soul Food, we the modern humanity have been making effort to turn Hungry Ghosts into Machines so that they wouldn’t even feel any hunger, spiritual or otherwise. A few weeks ago, a visiting Korean professor was telling us that Korean students are kept at school till 6 pm, after which they go to After-schools. I asked when they would go home to eat dinner, and I was told 8 or 9 pm. Weren’t I speechless, I probably would to ask when they went to sleep. At that point, my doctoral student standing next to me commented that his younger cousin in China was hooked up to an intravenous monitor so that he could continue to study without stopping to eat, etc. Is this the educator’s ultimate dream or not? That is, to turn our students into learning machines? What are all the ways that we are insidiously transforming, akin to the process of petrification, live students into Machine Impersonators? Isn’t this a form of dehumanization? An ultimate horror for the warm-bodied human mammals? Hatred of Humanity is everywhere, disguised as Progress in Science and Technology. Existential hunger and pain is driving human mammals to a blind wish: relieve us from this unbearable hunger and pain. Turn us into Machines that feel no hunger and pain; please do! Is this what our students are saying? Or are we the educators can’t bear our own pain and hunger, and we think we are doing our students a great service by turning them into learning machines? Is this our gesture of ultimate compassion? Thou shall not feel pain and hunger?

Spiritual Hunger needs spiritual nourishment. Acquiring and accumulating more and more knowledge in the form of information, data, and skills will not nourish Hungry Ghosts. Allow me to quote Karl Marx the existential philosopher: “The less you are, the more you have; the less you express your own life, the greater is your alienated life--the greater is the store of your estranged being.” Erich Fromm, a Frankfurt School critical theorist, turned into a psychotherapist, contrasted Having and Being, making same observations as Karl Marx. The more you acquire and accumulate, be it knowledge, money, power, title, privilege, the greater is the possibility of becoming spiritually impoverished. “What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?” (Matthew 16:26, New International Version)

We need spiritual nourishment. We need Soul Food. And I am not talking about religion or even spirituality. I am talking about nourishment that will regenerate and grow us to become fully and authentically human and return us to fulfill the original condition of interdependence and interpenetration, of impermanence of No-Ego. How do we recognize Soul Food? The proof is in the pudding! Consider how junk food makes you feel bloated while stimulating to eat more, which results in degrading health, whereas real food does the opposite. Likewise, for the soul food. Satiation, contentment, humility, gratitude, appreciation, generosity, compassion, and joy: these experiential barometers signal to the being that nourishment is happening. Note how these experiences all relationally formed. They emerge from the three-fold relationality that enfolds human beings: that of self-to-self, self-to-human other, and self-to-the larger (Nature, Cosmos, etc.). When thus enfolded, one feels this sense of Being-One-Withness. You are one with Nature, one with Cosmos, one with Humanity, and so on. Even the pain you feel in compassion is fulfilling or full-feeling. Is spiritual nourishment the business of schooling or not? Should education be about spiritual nourishment? Is debate necessary? Allow me to declare, then, that the educator’s mandate is to spiritually nourish our students, not to turn them into Hungry Ghosts or Machines. Moreover, it is educator’s mission to strengthen and enlarge, not weaken and shrink, students’ bonds and attachments with the world and Nature.

Education theorists and philosophers are usually asked this question by practitioners, in our case, teachers: “So, what do you do (differently) now on Monday morning when you walk into your class?” I have my answer and proposal. As we know, there is one thing and only one thing that makes or breaks any relationship: full presence attention that facilitates being-to-being connection. Any other kinds of attention that are about getting the other person to do something or get something out of him or her is at best neglectful and at worst dehumanizing of the other. Full presence attention has only one purpose and message: “I am here for you. I am with you.” “Here I am,” not “Pay attention to me or to what I have to say . . . and if you don’t listen, you won’t learn, and you are going to pay the consequences.” I call the latter kind of attention-soliciting, the *Vampire Operation*. Everywhere, especially in this age of media, entertainment, and advertisement, are attention vampires, sucking attention out of our students. They are prey to soul-sucking vampires. And teachers have become vampires, too, although totally well-meaning and caring. Competing against all other attention vampires, teachers are doing their best to direct and pull students’ attention towards them in the service of teaching and getting the learning work done. But this, too, is a vampire operation. The first order of educating in the way we have been talking about is to return students’ attention to themselves, protecting their attention against so much invasion and extraction, and teaching them how to work with it to nourish themselves. Learning naturally follows nourishing, just as energy follows attention, as we learn in yoga.

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In closing, I propose an exercise, a spiritual exercise (a la Pierre Hadot), if you will. In Asian traditions, especially in martial arts, we practice connecting to the power sources in the universe, such as Nature and Cosmos, and for this, we need to locate the power centre within us. This place, known as Lower Dan-Tien in Chinese, Hara in Japanese, Bae in Korean, and svadhisthana in Sanskrit (and so on), is located below the umbilicus, the belly button. It is not an anatomically exact location. Gather your attention and softly focus it on this area. Now when you breathe, direct your attention to your Dan-Tien, and breathe as if your breaths go in and out of there. Do this for a couple minuets. Once you feel quite well established in this breathing pattern, then add another element like this: Visualize the vast ocean in which planktons grow supplying most of the oxygen we breathe. Also visualize the forests of trees and other plants that also supply some oxygen. Now, visualize your lungs taking in the air with oxygen generated in the ocean and the forests, and the life-giving air being directed into your Dan-Tien, completing the cycle of energy movement from the macro universe (Nature) to the micro universe (you!). Through this completion of the cycle, you are one with the Earth and Beyond. There are many other exercises, some somatic, like this one we just tried, and some affective and psychological (such as inner work) that we can do, but that’s for another occasion.

Thank you.