MEETINGS WITH REMARKABLE EDUCATORS

PODCAST TRANSCRIPTION OF

PAUL FREEDMAN

with host
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A Production of
Luvmour Consulting II, LLC
Portland, OR 97221

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Ba Luvmour: Welcome to meetings with remarkable educators. Each podcast is a dialogue between me, Ba Luvmour, and an educator who sees the greatness in their students and touches the whole of their being. These educators defy generalizations so here's a bit about what they've done and how I came to know them.

One day about eight years ago, I received an email from a man telling me of this independent holistic school on Orcas Island Washington. He mentioned Ron Miller, one of the prime movers of holistic education over the past 30 years, and Ron's name always moves me for without his generosity of spirit and support, Josette and I would have been hard pressed to create natural learning relationships, the first holistic appreciation of child development. So, Ron's name opened the door and Paul Freedman walked in, and in one way or another, we've been collaborating ever since.

Paul is a parent of two nearly adult children as he says and has been a classroom teacher for 23 years. Paul is co-founder and head of school at the Salmonberry School, an independent Pre-K to sixth grade school on Orcas Island Washington. Paul serves on the faculty of the SelfDesign Graduate Institute and is a contributing editor for The Journal Encounter.

Most recently Paul is the founding co-director of the Holistic Education Initiative which can be found on the Internet at holisticedinitiative.org. A passionate author, educator, activist networker and student, all focuses on bringing holistic educational theory into practice. Paul would love for you to contact him at dancingmonkey@rockisland.com. So good morning.

Paul Freedman: Good morning.

Ba Luvmour: I understand that it takes tremendous courage to start a small holistic school and I'm just wondering where in you that courage comes from.

Paul Freedman: Reflecting back on the founding of the school, it was so emergent accidental. It was not the grand vision of realizing my pedagogy, it was just very organic. It's interesting now to think back on it as a courageous act and so I have more thoughts about that but the founding of the school seemed to happen very spontaneously inorganically mostly because we had some children and they needed a place to play. It was about just providing space for the kids to play, to express themselves, to do some art, to have a safe place.
Ba Luvmour: Well the courage really comes from stepping away from cultural and societal expectations and to say okay education is going to be for the younger kids play based and that sort of thing. That's really ... so what's the insight that allows that and as a former school director, I mean parents all the time, "When's my child going to read?" and those kinds of questions.

Paul Freedman: Yes, and those emerged later for us not at the moment of founding but as the school progressed and definitely there were moments where you needed some courage. For me I had already taught public school firsts eight or nine years. I had experienced what excellence means defined by the mainstream bureaucracies and then I had a child. I think like so many educators who have some inkling that we need to rethink things, It's born out of the nurturing instinct of a loving parent and my child like so many, was not a square peg kind of kid and I had been teaching in a setting where you really needed to be if you were going to be successful.

His first intro to school was at a lovely neighborhood co-op preschool that we had sought out because it felt like a homey place that parents were welcome and all that and yet, the trappings of what we think of as necessary components to education, like time to line up, time to put toys away, everyone come to the circle, now it's rug time. Even when he was four years old that was not going to work easily and a few days in, you could see sort of the future what that path looked like and it was going to ... he could have gotten there but at what cost to his being?

The system was going to work its magic very quickly and so that wasn't working and so when I thought about formal education after that, it was always with that in mind. Kids are quirky, kids are unique and if it's not going to work for my kid there are going to be a bunch of others for whom that's-

Ba Luvmour: I am sitting here smiling because Ruby my granddaughter, I took it for swimming lessons and she was young, I guess she was four or five and they had to...they did their swim and then as each child had their chance, other children sort of just sit in the water along the edge, and she would just start floating away. The teacher became flummoxed just had no clue at all what to do except kept calling her back because she's a sweet child she's not going to say, "Oh yeah, okay." Comes back and then the water would just take her. I just would sit on the sideline and laugh and laugh.

Paul Freedman: It is interesting how the most seemingly innocuous practices or just what we expect about pedagogy in education in both formal and informal settings are ubiquitous. They have such assumptions
about what it means to educate inherent in the practices and so we just expect kids are there to learn compliance, kids are there to learn how to do what's expected and not much more and certainly nothing different.

**Ba Luvmour:** I know, I've said to the parents in the schools I've had. I said, Okay so you're there and it's the first few moments and you're holding your child and it's in your arms and you look down and you say, "I can't wait till you compete in the global market force."

**Paul Freedman:** Yeah, and over the years at our school because it's an important part of what we try to do, we're listening to parents a lot, "What are your hopes and dreams?" and we take those expressions really seriously and we do goal setting with parents as a regular part of our curriculum process and nobody says that. That's not what people want for their kids and yet it is what, you know-

**Ba Luvmour:** It's the draught, it just pulls them along. So, Salmonberry goes through what age?

**Paul Freedman:** 12 years old.

**Ba Luvmour:** 12 years old, and do you have grades?

**Paul Freedman:** Yes, loosely defined and I sort of wish we didn't. A lot of our practices I feel like are a bit of a compromise between my holistic ideals and what we need to do to the keep classes full and parents free of too much anxiety and stuff like that. I would love to be able to say this child is eight years old and he or she is getting just what they need, and we don't care if they're in third grade or fourth grade because really I don't. We do have blended classrooms so that kids of a three year age span roughly will share instructional space and learning environment, but when the rubber meets the road I do tell parents, "Your child is in third grade." because they want to know.

We try to de-emphasize it, we try not to have the kids perseverate on it, this is not third grade work and that is fifth grade work. This is just Eve's work and that is Danny's work but it's one of the many sort of tough things to erase.

**Ba Luvmour:** When you say that there are compromises between you holistic ideals, this is a great forum. Let's hear those ideals.

**Paul Freedman:** The ideals.

**Ba Luvmour:** That was supposed to be a sigh of joy.
Paul Freedman: Parker Palmer talks about the tragic gap and it's that, can you really let yourself imagine what this could be and then inevitably reflect, hopefully in a healthy way on where you are and what needs to be done to get to there and it makes this...There's a heaviness to it for me but at the same time what a privilege to even be able to ask that question compared to the millions of educators who are just plugging away in the system and don't have the breathing space to pick their heads up.

My holistic ideals include, kids should be guided to author their own lives and learning. We should be striving to provide the space, the relationships, the environments and inspiration, the content that ignites kids' learning so that they can soar. Kids should be able to do that at their own pace. They should be able to follow their hearts in terms of passions and gosh, that should be fun. There should be play and there should be laughter and I wish we could protect them from, longer at least, from the forces of time and achievement and documentation. We're all natural learning beings and given the time and space and support to let kids learn what they want to learn, when they want to learn with their friends and with a guiding teacher.

I do think there's a role for the educator, but it's a lot about ... Again Parker Palmer talks about this sheep dog metaphor which I'm not sure I fully like the imagery but he says as a teacher, you're sort of a holding space for the flock that's where it breaks down for me. The sheep but you know you're protecting the space, you're keeping forces away you're letting it evolve naturally and it will.

Ba Luvmour: When you speak of inspiration, I wonder if you could be a little bit more specific because that also seems like a more involved role for the educator.

Paul Freedman: I agree. This is where for me, looking at other alternative pedagogies and schools, some of the more democratic or free school approaches which I respect and which work for certain learners' kind of breaks down. I've just watched kids who given a lot of space but not much inspiration, tend to spin a little bit and they had an issue at a free school I visited. I spoke with head of school and they had kids who were playing violent video games fairly, addictively and were engaging in ways that weren't really stimulating their growth and development and there was no model within the school to guide them out of that, toward something that might be more challenging and stimulating and inspiring.
I think in my work with the kids, there’s a need to inspire. I do think one of the teachers’ opportunities is to model our own interest, passion and engagement...

Ba Luvmour: Can you be more specific and tell us how you do that?

Paul Freedman: Sure, you know again there’s no magic formula or right way, but for me we were out in the woods the other day working with an ecologist and had the kids out at a state park and we got out some cedar wood and some carving knives, and we were starting to make shapes and he was teaching grasps. Woodworking is something I love and I put these tools in my hands. It was tempting to go grab a couple of kids near me and teach them how but instead I just engaged with my authentic and passionate interest in making my little form and it sparks, you know it sparks, throws sparks onto little flames that we’re trying to ignite in kids and man that’s ... they've got to see it in some cases not always but they've got to see what's possible.

No one's going to just ... few people will pick up a trumpet and just start blowing in it and have success. They have to see that, "Wow that’s a really cool way to express yourself. I'm curious. I'm interested in it." See what they lean into but I think they need the models to spark that.

Ba Luvmour: So that's [Lev] Vygotsky stuff too, isn't it? The Zone of Proximal Development—that by doing around children they learn much quicker than by teaching them and leaving them on their own, and filling them with some facts, this is how you tie your shoes, rather than oh let's tie our shoes together.

Paul Freedman: Right and I think in part we surround them with sources of inspiration, with cool things that are happening and interesting people who are engaged in those activities, then you see what the kids lean into. Any given thing is not going to necessarily be the hook for everyone, but the engagement, the hook is a really important part. Once the learner, I think, feels that sense of engagement, it really doesn’t matter. It doesn't matter what the specific thing is. We're trying to bring the kids into that experience of wow learning is cool, it's fun, it's interesting. I didn't know that yesterday and now I'm ... and what it means to practice and work at something and come to a higher level of skill or understanding and feel good about it, then that is the lifelong imprint that applies to anything they're going to do.

Ba Luvmour: It's teaching story time. Briefly, teachings stories invite us to see the world with a new perspective often featuring a wise person, a wise
fool or a trickster animal. They can be humorous and often have many shades of meaning shining throughout the story. I have told teaching stories for the past 40 years and I love them and I have to tell you, each time I tell one I learn much more myself.

Today's story is called The Ferryman. The wise fool ran a ferry across a rather turbulent river. It was a cockle shell of the ferry not very stable looking at all. One day a teacher came down the path and needed the ferry. "How do you think the weather is, do you think this boat is going to make it?" "I don't know nothing about it," said the wise fool.  

"Tisk, tisk, tisk," said the teacher, "That's a double negative; half your life has been wasted if you don't know your grammar." The wise fool said nothing.

Together, they climbed aboard the cockle shell and started out into the river. All of a sudden, a storm came up and the river became even more turbulent. The wise fool turned to the teacher and said, "Excuse me, have you learned how to swim?" "No," said the teacher. "Well, then your whole life has been wasted because we're going over."

Can you find meanings in this story about education? If so, send your insights to ba@luvmourconsulting.com. A three person panel will select the most relevant stories and they will be read at the end of the subsequent podcast. Again, that's B-A-@-L-U-V-M-O-U-R-C-O-N-S-U-L-T-I-N-G.com. I look forward to your insights and to learning from you.

Those insights selected, will receive a copy of the award-winning book so valuable for parents and educators; Grow Together, Parenting as a Path to Wellbeing, Wisdom and Joy by Dr. Josette Luvmour. Yes, we have the same last name, and we are married and we have been working together in holistic education for more than 30 years but that's not the reason I offer this book. Check out her many accolades and the book reviews on our website luvmourconsulting.com.

So Paul I know you for many years now and I know you've been influenced, you're the ... to me you're the person who most goes, out seeks other people's understanding, teachings, learnings, brings them back to your own school and lets them influence you in your very sense of self. Talk about some of those ... first of all why do you do that? And second of all doesn't it get confusing at times because the messages is most contradicted at times and third of all what's the effect?
Paul Freedman: Right, great question thank you. For me, both teaching and school leadership and my journey as a writer and the other organizations I’ve connected with, has hugely been about my own curiosity, intellectual curiosity when I realized like eight years into my teaching career that there was such a thing as alternative pedagogy. It was pretty shocking because I consider myself a fairly perspicacious spirit. I’m curious and had I known that Rudolph Steiner existed I would have read his stuff and the fact that my whole teacher education program, all the other teachers at the schools I was working at, had no sense that there was a landscape that we were in, we were just it. That was the way you did things.

Upon discovering, wow there’s something called water of education, Oh there was this woman called Maria Montessori; she had some ideas and then so on. What that revealed as I dug deeper was really kind of shocking actually and started this journey of self-exploration. For me it feels like the classroom in some ways is the lab and I don’t mean in the sense that the kids are the rats and we’re experiment with their you know, but it is the opportunity to realize all kinds of creative visions and see what works for these kids, for this particular group in this moment in this place.

You mentioned earlier about the courage and yeah to kind of deviate from what's expected in the mainstream. For us at the school, it came up a few years after founding where there began to be some very legitimate concerns about what are we doing, what is the point, where are we going with this, will the kids ever have homework, does it matter, how do we know their grade level, does that matter and the conversation among the school founders began to have that edge of like self-doubt. Is this okay, well it's working for her but my kids a little behind I think. That really initiated my own sense that somebody needs some sense of what we are doing and I happily went back to school and actually I started reading first, started talking to people I was really curious to see-

Ba Luvmour: This is kind of mind blowing, excuse me for a second but you, and Marni and Josette and several others all in a post accomplishment we might say, said, Wait there's something more I haven't and went back to school or engaged in other venues to bring forward their understanding. That is so impressive.

Paul Freedman: Thank you, I mean, it was both prior to going back in to figure this thing out. There was a sense of comfort in knowing wow my career path is set, the goals and expectations are clear, I you know, moving up in my leadership roles through the discipline, the division, the whatever school hierarchy I could see my path to administration if I wanted to do that. Then for me, through my own kid I was just
reflecting like, *what would that look like*. What a hollow like soulless path. Anyway, back to my own sort of journey for inspiration and sources of wisdom, my return to graduate school connected me and it wasn't an accident I sought out Ron Miller. I was reading his stuff, he was Professor Goddard College, I enrolled at Goddard. He had just left Goddard but I found him and he directed me towards half a dozen other important, to me important scholars and authors and schools and sources of wisdom including you. Since then I'm sort of a little bit like a junkie you know.

Ba Luvmour: You are, I can't argue. And, you're known around here by the way. You’re known for that.

Paul Freedman: Yeah, I find tremendous satisfaction in connecting those dots, in noticing what this person is writing about resonates with what I’m seeing over there even though it's in another part of the country or another country. The profession tends to be so isolating and so consuming and they have conferences like the Holistic Teaching and Learning Conference where we're at now, are these points of nexus, these places where connections can happen but then we all return to our little cubbies and we're running in our little hamster wheels. For me the practice is enlivened, gains meaning from the context around it for me, which is a lot of heady kind of intellectual exploration. And I just love talking listening to people's perspectives and backgrounds and stories and inevitably, I find sources of wisdom that I can use whether it's whatever wacky pedagogy people are pursuing, I'm like wow that would be really interesting and again I feel so fortunate to have in my little school the freedom and the opportunity and the license to experiment.

Ba Luvmour: So, all of that seems to have come together with the Holistic Education initiatives.

Paul Freedman: Right, one of the people with whom I had been networking over a decade was Debbie Millon and Debbie was the head of the Bellwether School, which is the school Ron Miller helped to found. It is a very Salmonberry-like school partly by accident and partly by design. They'd really been a sister school for us and I had ... They founded maybe five years before us or so and I had leaned on Debbie for advice, how do you do this and how do you from the real mundane nuts and bolts stuff to real you know, what is the point of all this and where are we ... and she was terrific and she was very generous with her willingness to talk.

We had never met until just a couple of years ago, 2015 or something after a lot of like, "We should get together, when we going to do that?" We met and she presented to me the idea of the
Holistic Ed Initiative. Basically, the vision with that is, could we help to be the catalyst which connects people in the field, is that needed what specifically would we do? What we've sort of defined as our role at least for now in phase one is we're looking to try to accomplish three things;
One is to provide a sort of database or a resource repository for humans and their work, which for us can help define what we mean by holistic education. It's sort of a, we maintain a resource library and a blog and a site online where people can go if they're curious about what is this thing we call holistic education.

Second thing we're doing is we're funding projects and people, so people who are interested in deepening their practice or have a specific idea that they just don't have the funds to realize, we're trying to find those funds and make them available to support people's inspiration and deepen their practice in holistic education. And then...Thirdly were hoping to provide coaching and guidance for people who just need a little more so they can contract with us and we'll find them a mentor essentially.

Ba Luvmour: Seems like a perfect natural outcome for you Paul.

Paul Freedman: I'm loving it, it's one of those things and I say this about many things, I don't have time for that you know like I'm really busy. I'm in the classroom still, I'm leading the school trying to have a bake sale, or whatever. But I kind of can't stop myself and it's yeah, what a great project and it puts me in the community with all sorts of cool and interesting inspiring people.

Ba Luvmour: It's interesting to me that your natural curiosity and then your intentionality to bring things forward is a way that you've eroded the isolation. When you use the word isolation it really struck me because that has been my feeling when I've been involved in the different schools and learning centers that I've been part of and it was even at these conferences, it was just hard for me to reach out and to absorb others because it is so involved to really do a good holistic school. That isolation was strong for me. That's why I'm...that's part of the reason I do these podcasts, it's time for me to learn a lot more about other people.

Paul Freedman: Yeah, I appreciate that impulse and this is such a lovely intimate vehicle for that too it's you know, the conference works for a certain kind a learner you know like.

Ba Luvmour: But breaking down that isolation is a pretty strong challenge for us in our world because the funding stream is not just there. The checks aren't just coming so there's the serving the parents and
their needs and their confusions and their fears and the societal expectations. There is knowing each student. I'm sure you'd agree that it's in essence of what we do, who is this student? Then all the attendant careful administration, fund raising and just bringing our message forward because it's strong in all of us, it can be so isolating.

Paul Freedman: Yes.

Ba Luvmour: Thank you for the initiative but also as a for those listeners what do we need to do to break down that isolation and this conference we are attending right now is great and I don't know if it's enough.

Paul Freedman: Right and now I completely agree the ... Yeah, I mean another motivating factor for me in trying to serve in some small way that catalyst role was seeing in the Holistic Ed Community particularly, which I think has the greatest promise for building bridges I mean, all the work is about connection. In what ways are we connected and yet there's still sort of this territorialism and this tendency to ... you find you're couple of people or you're a couple of schools and that's your group and not necessarily reach out across chasms. Specifically, as I was getting into my study in holistic education, I saw the leading Holistic Ed Journal fold, I saw people like Ron Miller who was moderating panel discussions and hosting conferences with the subtitle networking the networks and really wanting to make those connections across pedagogies kind of give up, and pull out, and retire and yet it's just needed you know...

Ba Luvmour: It's so much patience. It's so much patience and I've noticed that in myself. So much patience is required but on the other hand at least for me and I would like your take on this it's not it's not a problem because it's really clear what has to be done and that inner clarity rather than external response to it, is to me anyway what keeps it just alive and enthusiastic.

Paul Freedman: Right and there is I think, a sense I have as well that there's that self-organizing principle where, as human consciousness is evolving, these little isolated projects are bubbling up and there's an inherent shared purpose whether we get together and hold each other's hands and say we're a team or not, it's happening. It's happening across space and across other boundaries. I just like to shine the light on those kinds of connections and have us notice it's not just you a crazy person doing the nutty thing and in a remote location it's actually part of a bigger evolution.

Ba Luvmour: I like to ask people, there are a lot of people who'll be hearing this who think about education and many people have seen the
challenge, the confusions in traditional education and what message, what single message would you like to bring to those educators or parents who are on the edge and understand something more responsive?

Paul Freedman: I think there is nothing more full of hope and potential than the idea of our children's latent development. Our kids have the potential, everyone one of them, for unfolding into beautiful fully actualized beings. It's that vision that can, should, and hopefully does motivate us to be a little more creative and to reach a little deeper and a little further towards realizing that goal. Our current mainstream dominant model of education takes these amazing three dimensional maybe more...

Ba Luvmour: Definitely more.

Paul Freedman: Oh my gosh, beings and puts them on these one-dimensional paths and you see dropout rates and addictions and all kinds of dysfunction and then later how healthy people behave and treat one another, and what values are as adults and how much of that stems from the formal education that we're giving kids. It's just tragic you know, it's tragic and yet every time a new child walks their first day into a kindergarten classroom, there's still that incredible unlimited potential and hope. There's the potential for us as adults and educators to have constant renewal. I have new kids every year and sometimes several times a year and every one of them is just like, "Oh, what a gift to me to have that." What a privilege that opportunity to engage a kid who hasn't been engaged, brings you to tears.

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Ba and Josette Luvmour would also like to thank SelfDesign Graduate Institute. We teach there, and at SelfDesign, we nurture each learner's ability to explore inner and outer worlds and discover
his or her own deep understanding and vision. Go to the SDGI website and see for yourself. That’s – www.selfdesigninstitute.org

This is Ba Luvmour reminding you that, holistic relationships with children leads to joy and self-knowledge with the adults in their lives. With respect for you, and for children everywhere, see you next time.