MEETINGS WITH REMARKABLE EDUCATORS

PODCAST TRANSCRIPTION OF

PHILIP SNOW GANG

with host

Ba Luvmour

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Meetings with Remarkable Educators

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 little bit about what they’ve done and how I know them. How is it that Phil Gang and I never met one another? His was a name revered in holistic education circles for his pioneering work in Global Alliance for Transforming Education.

Ba Luvmour: We knew many of the same people in other fields of consciousness exploration as well. Yet, it was only at the Alternative Education Resource conference in 2016 that we met. Happily, we’ve become friends and neighbors and spend as much time talking about consciousness as we do about education. As our conversations evolve, we seem to agree that they are so intertwined as to be inextricable.

Ba Luvmour: Philip Snow Gang is founder and director of the Institute for Educational Studies, TIES. In conjunction with Endicott College, TIES offers two Master’s degrees: Integrative Learning and the Montessori Integrative Learning. He’s been active in holistic education for 45 years. In 2000, he founded the Global Alliance for Transforming Education and was a principal in its seminal document, Education 2000: A Holistic Perspective. He’s recently released a documentary to educate eco sapiens, which explores his vision for teaching and learning.

Phil Gang: 01:57 You know, if I look back on my life’s contributions, it's a result of me wanting to create an education that was contextual so that people would treat the planet more peacefully and be more peaceful with themselves. In order to do that, they had to get the largest possible context, which is cosmology and ecology.

Ba Luvmour: 02:25 So then the essence of the way you've approached education is through creating this cosmological context, and then trying to bring that down to how we can bring that forward in education. Is that a fair way to say that?

Phil Gang: 02:39 That's a good way, and the first consequence, which is easy to understand because it's close to us, is the ecological situation. Then you can have a sense of wonder about how the planet works, and say, "Well, how did this happen?" It's a derivative of the cosmos unfolding.
I see. So for you, then ecology, and I guess nature ... Well ordinary, I mean the nature that we experience through our five senses and the intuitions we come from that are kind of the ... What would be the word? The clue or the place-

Keystone.

A keystone in which we can engage a deeper understanding of self and world?

Yeah. That’s really the place for children, to be intimate with the natural environment. It’s really hard with so many, most of the population living in cities.

Well, to be a bit of a devil’s advocate, I lived 17 years in the Sierra Mountains, and I didn't see those children having that deep of an understanding that you're indicating here where they were really fundamentally connected to nature. In fact, they yearned for cities and that sort of thing. Yet, their parents are and were some of our well-known ecologists and environmentalists.

I don’t know what the form of their education took, or whether they were brought out into that world and explored in a way that allowed them to be self-reflective.

So then your work in education is not only about the connection of the physicality of being in the natural world, but also an educational approach and pedagogy that allows them to, what, to understand? To participate?

Even in a garden, even in a school garden. Well, how did all of this happen? Let's look at this flower, take in the flower-ness of it, not just the plant biology, which is what we’re up to in traditional formal education, but the essence of “flower.” What does it mean? Flowers, I mean...If it weren’t for flowers, we wouldn’t be here.

So how do you bring forward that essence in a child, that essential understanding? Because as I said, the environmentalists that I lived with those years did
resolve to biology, soil composition, and it did not work.

Phil Gang: 05:32 Well, my background is Montessori, so I've been doing that since 1973. There are ways that Montessori, there are Montessori ways that she really came to understand when she lived in India for seven years during the war, about the child's relationship to the environment. So before that, it was more about physical biology, but during in India she would go out into the garden with the children and just go into relationship with them noticing, "What do you notice? What do you see?" It's a, "How did this come about? Would you like to hear the story about how this came about?" So it's story and it's witnessing the magic in a garden.

Ba Luvmour: 06:34 Well, most of us are aware of Montessori through the teaching tools, and that sort of thing, and most of the education ... I don't have extensive but I have some experience with some Montessori education on the West Coast in America, and it does seem to be more concerned with the teaching tools and the teacher as guide and that sort of thing, and not so concerned with this relationship approach that you are indicating.

Phil Gang: 07:06 I'm sure it's that way because this is like third-generation, and it's become, in many ways, formalized. Like any system, people in succeeding generations lose a bit of that inspiration. I was fortunate to know Maria Montessori's son Mario and her grandson Mario Junior. I worked with somebody in New Zealand that was a course assistant to Maria Montessori before and after the war, and those relationships revealed the true spiritual nature that seems to be co-opted, not in all Montessori schools but in many by the same forces that co-op traditional education, parents wanting class-level skills, seeing progress grades, testing.

Phil Gang: 08:12 It isn't that way so much outside the United States. My experience in New Zealand was quite different. The school that Marsha founded, Ripple Montessori, and then changed to Nova Montessori, is quite different in that school and within the New Zealand government. Your certification comes if you're
meeting parents' expectations and there's no testing country-wide.

Ba Luvmour: 08:43 So the essence of the relationship part of what you’re bringing forward is that the educator is genuinely interested in allowing the students to come forward with their perceptions, their understandings, and so on, and then helping them contextualize it into the natural environment.

Phil Gang: 09:06 Yeah. I think you’ve got it right there. It gives them a way to organize not only the way we traditionally organize subjects but spiritually, and that takes, as you well know, an incredible teacher preparation because that’s the problem with most teach preparation. They’re not teaching the teachers in a way that’s congruent with what they want the teachers to do with children.

Ba Luvmour: 09:37 Right. I couldn’t agree more. The leverage point for changing education, and we all, there's the litany of problems with it, but the leverage point is in teacher education. There’s no question about that. So now you are involved in that. How is that? Tell us about that.

Phil Gang: 09:55 Well, 20 years ago, 22 years ago we ... It was a bit disillusioned with the Montessori world in the late 80s, and walked away and began working globally. I was in contact with Ron Miller who was just about to publish the holistic education review. I wrote one of the articles in that first issue, and then we started talking. I said, "Let’s get a meeting together of all the different holistic organizations and see if we can create a common vision."

Phil Gang: 10:39 Well, that actually happened in '89 and then again in '90, and the outgrowth of that was a statement that we made called Education 2000: A Holistic Perspective, which elucidated ten principles. I was the Executive Director and got an opportunity to present these ideas in the United States and around the world. People would say to me, "How do I get an education like that? Where?" That's what led to the creation of the Endicott TIES, Masters of Education in Integrative Learning, and Montessori Integrative Learning. So we’ve been doing it for 22 years. It’s hard for me to sit here and talk about success, but-

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I wish everyone could see you right now because I can palpably and viscerally feel the welling up of joy and just tremendous care and love, and I don't know, satisfaction or meaning I guess-

- that you find in all this.

It’s also stunning, not just the outcomes and contact with graduates from 20 years ago, 22 years ago, it’s the fact that this was done in a rather radical format. In 1996, no one was really doing online programs let alone ones that were focused on building a learning community. We never used academic software. We designed our own, which helped build learning community. So it’s not only ... Yeah, it’s practicing the principles of what you want to do in the classroom.

I want to return to something. You said, when we were talking about nature in the garden and flower-ness, you said something about, "And this actually is somehow participatory for the child in their spiritual sense of self." Can you elaborate on that at all? What do we mean by that? I’m not looking to hear to confine us to some words, or as if anyone could define spirit, but what can you tell us about that?

I can only speak for myself.

Well, you're the one who's here so that's fine.

I have observed children, and there's certain kind of quietness and inner reflection that happens when they’ve been gardening. It just happens. After gardening, there’s this excitement about it but there's also this inner understanding. Going into myself, when I’m in the forest or by the seaside, I can actually let go of all the stuff we carry with us throughout the day and be more present, and just aware, and just noticing the beauty of it and the intimacy of the relationships. For me, that's a spiritual experience.

It's teaching story time. Briefly teaching 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. I have to tell you, each time I tell one, I learn much more in myself.

Ba Luvmour: 14:39

This story is called *Changing Our Vision*. There was a very wealthy man who was bothered by severe eye pain. He consulted many physicians and was being treated by several. He did not stop consulting a galaxy of medical experts. He consumed heavy loads of drugs and underwent hundreds of injections, but the ache in his eyes persisted with more vigor than ever before. At last, a monk, who was supposed to be an expert in teaching such patients, was called for by the suffering man. The monk understood his problem and said that for some time he should concentrate only on green colors, and not to let his eye fall on any other colors.

Ba Luvmour: 15:29

It was a strange prescription but he was desperate and decided to try it. The millionaire got together a group of painters and purchased barrels of green paint, and directed that every object his eye was likely to fall upon be painted green, just as the monk had directed. When the monk came to visit him after a few days, the millionaire servants ran with buckets of green paint and poured it on him since he was in a red dress, lest their master see any other color and his eye ache would come back.

Ba Luvmour: 16:05

Hearing this, the monk laughed and said, "If only you had purchased a pair of green spectacles worth just a few dollars, you could've saved these walls and trees and pots, and all the other articles, and also could've saved a huge share of your fortune. You cannot paint the world green."

Ba Luvmour: 16:29

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 a subsequent podcast. Again, that’s B-A at 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 Well-Being, Wisdom and Joy* by Dr. Josette Luvmour.

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Ba Luvmour: 17:20 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 where ... You and I, we’ve both been around the block many, many, many times, and one of the essence principles of spirituality that we’re both aware of is the idea of letting go and the idea of not holding onto the past. Yet, given the extensive experience we’ve each had in our personal lives, in our professional lives, and in our commitment to meaning and education, letting go is not that easy a process, is it?

Phil Gang: 18:20 When I was younger I would say, "I just want to get to the part of life where the sailing is smooth. Doesn't this ride get easier as you get older?" I think that awareness increases ... As awareness increases over time, these issues, there is no smooth riding. It’s just dealing with it in a way that is more congruent to well-being. I don't always accomplish that. I've been through a period of six years dealing with my wife’s decline from Alzheimer's. She passed away a few months ago, and I'm still recovering from all of that inner stress that I couldn’t release, I'm still trying to release. So, the past is carried with you. Don't you feel that?

Ba Luvmour: 19:27 It's interesting, yeah. Yes. Well, there’s two aspects of what you said. One is, I know that I came to look at the deeper aspects of consciousness, partly because I have an inclination but also out of grief and suffering, but my entry was, "Okay. I’m going to find this place in consciousness and it’s going to solve my problems, a smooth ride." Right, Phil?

Phil Gang: 19:51 Right.

Ba Luvmour: 19:53 Then, it starts to happen and you go, "Wait a minute. It's opening into more complexity, deeper questions and more profound inner relationships, to feelings and grief and trying to appreciate that, in the larger context that you earlier spoke of, of great nature, universe and so on.” So I deeply relate to what you were saying, but you've had a wonderful expression of creativity in the last couple of years as well. So how
does the grief, creativity, context, how all that happens for you?

Phil Gang: 20:32

So one of the things that happened as Marsha declined is I wasn’t able to deal with it, and I had to short-circuit my mind when thoughts came in that I knew would take me down the tunnel. If I went in that tunnel, it would just get worse so I began catching myself and looking at, "How did those thoughts originate? What was the conditioning behind that thought?" So over time, I think I freed up a part of myself so that I don’t go down that rabbit hole or as deep into the rabbit hole as I used to.

Phil Gang: 21:17

Out of that emerged this immense amount of creativity, not only because I was awakening to more of myself but also, I was trying to contextualize what this relationship with Marsha created over 20 years... because it wasn’t just husband-and-wife. It was a co-creation of this learning environment, ... it was a love of both intellect, spirit, body, mind and spirit. In dealing with that, just all this creativity emerged. Now I'm beginning to see that yes, a lot of it was with Marsha, but a lot of it I also brought. And that’s what I’m trying to write about now.

Ba Luvmour: 22:14

Would it be fair to say, and I'm exploring this in myself, that grief, and the participating in grief and the ... I’m going to say the destructive aspects of universe, without any judgment around that, the change that’s evident in universe, that participating in that without judgment opens up a dimension of creativity and spirituality that erodes conditioning?

Phil Gang: 22:46

WOW...

Ba Luvmour: 22:46

Well, that’s what I heard you say.

Phil Gang: 22:50

It's true. It is true. In the middle of your talking, I flipped from the personal to the planetary, and I’m trying ... The grief I felt last week with the floods and the hurricanes and the forest fires over in Portland...whew...that’s a hard one.

Ba Luvmour: 23:07

Well, I think that’s it. I walk around with a feeling in my chest all the time that is, I can only identify as connecting to that suffering that’s implicit in life.


Phil Gang: 23:26 Yeah. Both...

Phil Gang: 23:28 Yeah, and what does it does to me is the education that you and I have both been involved in is more important than ever. I'm not blocking it out, but I can't do anything about it, except what I'm doing, and that's to hopefully raise awareness through teacher education.

Ba Luvmour: 23:52 I'm going to the Holistic Teaching and Learning conference this weekend in Ashland, and they asked me to do a presentation. One of the foci in my life has been on the way children understand death, and I feel strongly, and I want your opinion is why I'm bringing this up, that there is a natural unfolding of a child's consciousness in relationship to death, and that is very much has to be included in this contextual understanding that you're asking us to participate in.

Ba Luvmour: 24:30 I feel it's terribly missed in an understanding of education, and I feel like if, in my experience with the people I've worked with, when that does ... when people allow that death in the natural process, the grief is experienced in a different way. It's not experienced with cultural conditioning as much, but more in this kind of openness that you've been experiencing.

Phil Gang: 24:58 Kind of a taboo in our culture to even talk about it.

Ba Luvmour: 24:58 Right.

Phil Gang: 25:01 It's like the essence of living is dying. How do we take it out of the box? Kids come to school, I remember one time a child came to school, he was just...tears rolling down. His grandma died, so we sat in a circle and talked about it. The kids understand viscerally what it means without adults around. It's the adults that create a closed membrane ... with their conditioning about death. Let me go back to the garden too. Death really, for the three, four, five-year-old can be experienced in the garden and brought to a dialogue. How do you see it happening?
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Well, in the briefest terms, the children below seven or eight have basically a magical approach. "I'm going to die and I'll see grandpa in heaven," or wherever, whatever their parents have said, "But will I still have this withered arm from cancer?" So it's a body-centered age. In other words, my body, the magical thing is in thinking, "my body is still going to go across."

Around six or so, we start to become aware of, "My body is going to go." In other words, it's deaded. Not my body, it's dead-ed, and the kids will poke at it, they'll play with it, and you'll see kids at this age play, "I'm alive, I'm dead. I'm alive, I'm dead. I'm alive, I'm dead."

By the way, that's not gender specific. But it's not...and this is universal...it's so interesting to me...it's not until eight and a half or nine that "I die." "I die," becomes the fact in my life and it switches perception entirely, and so that's a really key moment. What do we do right then? How do we participate in that in a relational way with children without co-opting it? There are all sorts of things around this. It's when children will go to Sunday schools or go to a religious service. There are all sorts of things we can notice around this, behaviorally as outcomes of this, but fundamentally I know I'm going to die.

Parents and educators miss this because it's expressed in nightmares, it's expressed in... There's all sorts of "regressive behaviors," which aren't regressive at all, but actually are signs to us that something is changing. Something is really deeply changing, and we need a different kind of connection to allow that. It's here that Montessori and Pierce and many others have noticed the movement to nature. There's a gigantic movement more to nature at this point, and you'll see kids start the Save The Nature Club and Save The Elephants, and they'll be okay with predator and prey.

They won't argue that. They'll be okay with it, even if they feel sorry for the zebra being eaten by the lion. Then we can trace that all the way up, so to me there are giant implications in this for our field.
Phil Gang: 28:32 Yeah. What comes to mind is the kaboom. People just, teachers don’t want to cross that line because they’re afraid they’ll interfere with some religious training and get in trouble, and it’s worse here in the US, as you know.

Ba Luvmour: 28:51 The taboos everywhere with the glorification of youth, the marketing. Nobody wants anything to do with death, and yet, here it is. Say more about that. Well, death is in life. You said it.

Phil Gang: 29:10 Oh, oh. I thought you ... could say more about the marketing.

Ba Luvmour: 29:13 Oh, say more about marketing. Well, you have a youthful body, you have a slim body, all those kinds of things.

Phil Gang: 29:22 Get rid of our wrinkles.

Ba Luvmour: 29:23 Right. We don’t see any, what do you call it, funeral homes advertising on TV, do we? Right? "Bring us your body!" Right?

Phil Gang: 29:23 In New Zealand I did.

Ba Luvmour: 29:38 Really?

Phil Gang: 29:38 Yeah.

Ba Luvmour: 29:39 Well, there you go. That’s really interesting, but it’s crazy. It would be taboo. So if we start to notice how it unfolds in children, then we can at least begin to make it, "Yeah, that’s right." It’s, "That body is not coming back. That’s right. That’s right, you will die."

Phil Gang: 30:01 I think as important as it is for the ages you spoke of, for adolescents, my God, there is a huge amount of damage that’s done during the adolescent years by not acknowledging Death.

Ba Luvmour: 30:21 Huge, and so we get the daredevil adolescent, we get the belief in ... you know, they’ll just do wild things.

Phil Gang: 30:31 Impervious.

Ba Luvmour: 30:31 Impervious, yeah.

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Phil Gang: 30:35 Part of that, I think, is natural because I think adolescents and ... Maybe not as natural ... because if you look historically, they were involved in the hunt, they were involved in the society, and they didn't have to act out because life in itself was acting out.

Ba Luvmour: 30:52 And, 99% of them had a *Rite of Passage*, which drew them to an edge. The key part of the *Rite of Passage* is a liminal experience. Okay, you want to look at the edge? Let's go look at it.

Phil Gang: 31:06 Right. Now it's drugs or whatever.

Ba Luvmour: 31:10 Yeah. Rachel Kessler, did you know Rachel? Yeah, Rachel did all that great work on the mysteries program and her work was really conclusive. Motorcycle gangs, cigarettes, promiscuity, all those kinds of behaviors, all those behaviors are attempts to go to an edge among populations that really have had no guidance and no opportunity, no mentorship to bring them there.

Phil Gang: 31:38 So where do we go?

Ba Luvmour: 31:39 Well, we go where we're going. You do incredible work, and we just keep knocking on that door because what else is there?

Phil Gang: 31:49 I'm a big supporter of Brian Swimme's work. Ever since I read his first book in 1986, *The Universe Is a Green Dragon*, and his collaboration with Thomas Berry on *The Universe Story*. He put out a series of, several video series, but in one of them he talks about creativity and how it always happens on the edge of an ecosystem. I feel like we are on that edge of that ecosystem. It can't happen if we are in the middle of it because there's too many restrictions to what we might accomplish, or do, or try, and eventually people will ... This might become mainstream, and it might not, but it'll be here when everything falls apart because its root is Right Action and Love.

Ba Luvmour: Great. Thank you.

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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.

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