A FESTIVAL OF LIGHT: A HIGH SCHOOL HEALING ARTS EVENT
CELEBRATING THE ETHNIC DIVERSITY OF THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY

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A unique multicultural healing celebration was created for an ethnically diverse high school community, resulting in a student performance with singing, poetry reading, storytelling, dancing, art and drama. Most of the student body, their families, the faculty and staff were involved in the festival. At the time of year when seasonal darkness is at its peak, many cultural and religious traditions celebrate the return of the light. The event, entitled The Festival of Light, unfolded as a many-leveled symbolic process. Candles placed upon altars are often symbolic of remembering the sacred light. "To see the light" means to see the fundamental truth and, after serving a year on the Parent Diversity Committee, it occurred to me that there would be real value in giving the students an opportunity to appreciate some of the fundamental truths of diversity and commonality. The capacity to see the light and its many meanings frequently comes about through an experience of the Light, and the arts have been used throughout time for this very purpose (Khan, 1979).

In the following description of the creation of The Festival of Light it is hoped that the reader will see how the power of the inclusion of the transpersonal helped to create a uniquely powerful event, which, during the last week, seemed to have a life and spirit beyond what the community could have anticipated. Those directly involved experienced how a creative process and performance that honors a range of ethnic, religious and racial differences fosters a genuine appreciation of the commonality among differing world views. Although difficult to describe, many experienced the ways in which the transpersonal draws individuals together through manifesting a conscious intention that had the power to transform all who participated. It is felt that the creation of a sacred dimension in a project such as this can augment the power of the arts to move and influence not only the artists but the audience as well. In this way the adults, who may have more deeply rooted prejudices, can be influenced by the capacity of a community of diverse youth to experience communal healing.

Phase One: The Vision

We began with a meeting entitled "Some Initial Ideas for Creative Brainstorming, Visioning and Discussion." Present were performing arts faculty and students who represented the different multicultural student clubs. The initial vision and ideas for discussion included:

1. The creation of an artistic experience that honored the diversity of the high school community through a program that created different expressions of light from different cultures and traditions, through music, drama, storytelling, art, dance, poetry and ritual;
2. The breaking down of distinctions and differences that divide students by participating actively in planning, rehearsing, performing and participating in different rituals and traditions of different cultures together with those of different backgrounds;

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3. The creation of a sacred atmosphere made manifest through the enactment of an opening ritual that might include a procession of all of the performers singing while holding candles. This might be followed by the lighting of candles on stage and the invoking of the energy, soul-essence of each of the cultural traditions that were being represented;

4. The provision of a musical thread and possible narrative thread throughout the event to help ensure an integrated tapestry; and lastly

5. The completion of the program on an upbeat ending, such as one of the Gospel hymns to which audience and performers could sing and dance freely as a total community.

Phase Two: Implementation

This unique performing arts event unfolded organically with students and faculty. The entire evolution was a creative, therapeutic/healing process as more and more students rose to the occasion to create and present their light-filled offerings.

After the Parent Diversity Committee approved the idea, the head of the Music Department supported the importance of creating an artistic expression of the high school’s diverse cultural population. He became the spearhead for the Performing Arts Department’s involvement. He persevered through the doubts and minor setbacks that challenge such a new program that had as its ideal the involvement of the whole community, not just The Performing Arts Department.

Keith Daniel, the Music Director, commented about the process:

What teacher, administrator, facilitator, or performing artist would ever embark upon a new project without trepidation? When you are adding a new event to an already crowded calendar, and when you are asking a handful of students and teachers whose plates are already full to put an entire program together from scratch, you are in for tribulation.

As we sat down in early September to start planning a Festival of Light for November, what was clear to us was that we were all enthusiastic and motivated because of the potential for such a program to inspire and heal, to show diversity rather than just talk about it. We also knew that we wanted students to do the bulk of the planning so that they would take ownership of the event, rather than having it imposed upon them. Somewhere between the inspiration and perspiration it almost fell apart. We found students to be too busy. They were less and less reliable in attending planning meetings so that on occasion all that would be present were four adults and one student. Their enthusiasm waned as they found it harder and harder to motivate their peers. In some cases, an initially positive attitude actually did a 180-degree turnaround.

What kept us going? Sheer determination, the knowledge that we were breaking new ground and the hope that the process and finished product would be of value to the community. Often we felt as if we were laboring in the trenches, bereft of appreciation or recognition.

At first, presenting an idea for an artistic event that was new and foreign while being created in the midst of so many other school obligations was a challenge, for sure. When energy began to wane, students from the different school clubs were re-connected to a Student Council meeting. New interest was developed and students came forward with new enthusiasm.

The following are excerpts from the choral reading of The Jewish Student Organization (JSO):

In time of darkness, our ancestors had the courage to struggle for freedom: freedom to be themselves, freedom to worship in their own way. Theirs was a victory of the weak over the strong, the few over the many, and the righteous over the arrogant. It was a victory for all ages and all peoples.

Blessed is the match consumed in kindling flames.
Blessed is the flame that burns in the heart’s secret places.
The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.
Though I fall, I shall rise; though I sit in darkness, the Lord shall be a light to me.
For you light my lamp; the Lord makes bright my darkness.
Light dawns in the darkness for the upright; for the one who is gracious, compassionate and just.

Other individual students stepped forward with individual as well as group ideas. We also realized that the first time such an experiment would be developed it would be important for the Performing Arts Faculty to take significant artistic leadership.
The Theatre Director directed a very appropriate, powerful radio play, “The Power of Light,” and produced it with his Theatre 3 class. The Dance Director engaged two dancers who had already developed pieces that he felt would work in this program. The Gospel Choir Director conducted, “Give Me One Star.” The following is the chorus:

Give me one star to fill the distance all the way.
Give me one star to light the world in darker days.
Give me one star, just one simple light.
And I’ll walk alone any night.

and at the end of the program she conducted, “This Little Light of Mine.”

An East Indian teacher created an important learning piece about the Hindu Divali Festival of Light. Rituals and traditions that were less familiar to the community were particularly important to seek out and foster.

The Indian teacher was able to obtain Unesco slides and a booklet of all the different Festivals of Light around the world. This information aided the Thai students who used the booklet’s directions for making a paper model of a lotus for their ritual. These art symbols were created, painted and shared with big smiles manifesting beautiful cultural pride.

The Director of Multicultural Enrollment and Services, Precious Smith, said, “Perhaps next year the different cultural groups of new students might be told that participation in this event and perhaps others is an expectation, from the beginning, a kind of Concord Academy cultural norm.”

At a student council meeting to which I was invited, I openly expressed my concern that we did not have any of Umojaa’s African American representatives and Alianza Latino’s representatives. African American students came forward with a piece about darkness, which evolved beautifully from the chorus’s choral opening of Creation by Haydn performed in the dark. Sensitive to the multiple meaning of dark and light, the African American students expanded the view of “darkness” from something negative and something to avoid toward something to acknowledge and that must not be forgotten but rather included as a part of life. Two Latino students then volunteered to do poetry or songs. One student’s process of translating Puesta Del Sol was very moving. Because he was always doubting his ability to do it right, to do it justice, we continued to assure him and encourage him. And when another Latino student read his translation, as this student read the poem in Spanish, the latent young man visibly knew he had triumphed. The darkness of his doubt cleared away when he saw the light of understanding the meaning of the poem shine on the faces of those who speak only English. Moments like these made the whole program radiate joy.

The following is an excerpt, two verses, from his translation:

Sun weaves life
From delicate roses,
And from the flowery pattern
Of a butterfly’s wing.

Sun drinks from fountains
With his gold lips,
Splendidly rhyming
And sonorously singing.

The four Thai students presented their ritual of light with a song and dance. In the rehearsal, they were shy and very hard to hear. As they were directed to create a larger presence, they struggled with it as it went against their culture’s value. But they understood the request and asked to go off on their own to work on it. They returned and were five times as large in their presentation. They laughed, clearly loving to surprise us and show us that they could do it. We all applauded. Their presence greatly expanded the sense of community that the program hoped to create.

Phase Three: Performance

The Music Director commented on the opening choral piece and procession:

As Music Director of the event, I came up with the idea of opening the Festival with the first choral passage from Haydn’s Creation. Others suggested that we begin in our chapel to reflect the sacred nature of the music. A further refinement led us to memorize the music so that we could sing it in the dark up to the point where the text says “And there was light,” at which point we all turned on our electric candles (real ones aren’t allowed in our chapel). This combination of profound music and effective theatrical staging launched the Festival immediately into the correct feeling of spirituality. A solo saxophone, improvising plaintive jazz, then led us to The Performing Arts Center, where the rest of the Festival unfolded. Again, this music seemed somehow appropriate to the nature of a procession and to the changing of spaces. One
of our colleagues had placed paper lanterns
along the pathway, and the quiet music and
shimmering lights had a profound effect on the
“audience,” who processed (led by the chorus).
In silence and reverence, many of them with
smiles of joy on their faces. We had created the
spirituality we had hoped for.

The music that the Music Director conducted,
along with the singing that the part-time Gospel Choir
Director conducted, was deeply moving. When the
two choruses came together at the end with “This
Little Light Of Mine,” everyone was encouraged to
join in singing.

This Little Light of Mine (Traditional Spiritual)

(three times): This little light of mine
I’m going to let it shine.
(chorus): Let it shine,
Let it shine,
Let it shine.

(three times): Everything we do,
I’m gonna let it shine.
(chorus)

(three times): All through our lives
I’m gonna let it shine.
(chorus)

(three times): All through (name of high school)
I’m gonna let it shine.
(chorus)

The audience began spontaneously to dance in the
aisles. It was a transformational expression of unity
from which emerged a better understanding of the
diversity of the community through the shared expe-
rience. The performances, in combination with the
communal dinner and dessert reception afterward,
helped to create a warm joyous evening for students,
parents, faculty and administration. This shared expe-
rience of “inner and outer light” among cultures,
generations, religions as well as between different
levels of staff in the school truly created community.

As we were engaged in last-minute preparations
before the production, I had the thought that I person-
ally had not been able to take the time to create an
ambiance in the cafeteria for the dessert reception.
When I walked in there I was moved by the elegant
decorations of glass trays, candles and stars so beau-
tifully arranged. One of the school staff, who had also
sent out “light filled” postcard invitations, was
joined by the always helpful and positive administra-
tor in the Admissions Office, in creating this beautiful
setting, another sacred temenos in our “theater of light.”

There were many other students, faculty, staff and
parents who contributed in other ways. It was quite
magical to witness a major shift of energy. It seemed
that a little over a week before the celebration, any
blocked energy seemed to break through and transper-
sonal magnetic energy powerfully emerged. It was as
though spirit took over and everyone felt it, embraced
it and allowed it to be expressed through them—
students, faculty, staff and parents, truly working to-
gether for a common ideal, which seemed to have a
life of its own (see Program).

One contributing adult responded: “When we fin-
ished The Festival Of Light—indeed, long before it
was over—we all knew why we did what we did. This
event galvanized our school and generated the warmth
of spirit that started our winter term off on the right
foot. We will do it again.”

We were told again and again how surprised ev-
eyone was that so many parents showed up for the
event. It was really extraordinary in relation to past
attendance results for school events, especially at that
time of year.

This process and creative happening is offered as a
model for other schools and centers where there is
ethnic diversity. It is suggested that the evocation of
the transpersonal in a diversity awareness and appre-
ciation arts process can expand the power of the arts
to transform the participants to experience a deeper
understanding and core bonding with those around
them. Building a creative arts community around the
richness of the diverse backgrounds of people can be
very inspiring, educational, moving and transforming.

The Associate Head of the school, Sharon Lloyd
Clark, made this statement some time after the pro-
gram:

School communities which are diverse, experi-
ence at different times profound moments of
tension which emanate from their efforts to pro-
mote significant dialogue. The Festival of Light
at Concord Academy presented a powerful op-
portunity for the school to push away that ten-
sion and embrace with greater understanding
the diverse cultures present. It was a moving
event.

During the reception, I heard more than one person
say, “This feels like the beginning of a tradition.”
PROGRAM: FESTIVAL OF LIGHT

In The Chapel: It is dark through throughout the performance of the opening piece.

The Chorus .......................................................... Choral Opening from "The Creation" by Franz Josef Haydn
Conductor: Keith Daniel; Accompanist: Carol Rand

Procession Outdoors: Audience is invited to please follow the Chorus in a Candlelight Procession to The Performing Arts Center .............................................. Sam Posner, alto saxophone

Invocation: Ethan Bair ........................................ "Together we invoke the all encompassing nature of light in bringing together the cultures and religions of the world and in our own community. Toward the One."

Dance Solo: Mia Haber .......Etude from "Rainbow 'Round my Shoulder" choreographed by Donald McKayle

Umoja: A Reading .............................................. Valerie Antoine, Georgie Chevry, Amelia Cutting,
Adam Geer, Janelle Gilchrist, Tanya Laguere, Rahim Muhammad, Micah Spooner-Wyman .............. "No Apology" by Andrew McCarter

Gospel Choir .......................................................... "Give Me One Star," traditional spiritual
Conductor: Janice Allen

Latina Reading: Evan Gatica ........................................ "Ode to Enchanted Light" by Pablo Neruda

CA Theatre Company: A Radio Play: ........................................ "The Power of Light" by Isaac Bashevis Singer
Director: David Sinaiko

Hispanic Poetry Reading: Jose Roman and Camden Bahamon .......................................................... "Puesta Del Sol" by Antonio Nicolas Blanco, translated by Jose Roman

Dance Solo: Janelle Gilchrist ...... "Uptown Ruby" to music by Danilo Perez, choreographed by dancer and Richard Colton, Dance Director

Thai Ritual of Light: Pong Abhakara, Tom Achavanuntakul, Pun Soontra, le Uttayarat ....... "Loy Krathong"

Indian Hindu Diwali Festival:
Read by Nigel Sequeira .................................................. "A Diwali Story"

Gospel Choir and Chorus: .............................................. "This Little Light of Mine,", traditional spiritual
(With audience participation)
Conductor: Janice Allen

Coordinator: Roddy O'Connor, Performing Arts Coordinator

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References
Pellowski, A., Project Consultant. (1983). Festivals of light around the world, Information Center on Children's Cultures, a service of the U.S. Committee for UNICEF. (There is a listing of books and other materials about Festivals of Light, available by writing the U.S. Committee for UNICEF, 331 East 38th St, N.Y. N.Y. 10016).