

“Professor Eleanor Ann Schuster’s Legacy: Applications of her Pedagogical Philosophy and Educational Techniques”

Partial Paper of the one presented on April 2003 at the Florida Atlantic University Ph.D. Comparative Studies and The Public Intellectual Colloquium.

Revised on July 07, 2009

As an introduction, I want to share the following statement made in 2001 by Dr. Ann Boykin dean of FAU College of Nursing about Professor Eleanor Schuster:

“Eleanor had the remarkable gift of creating learning environments in which students thrived. She was an unforgettable master teacher who nurtured and supported the uniqueness of each person. She was a model for leaving a life grounded in caring and served as an inspiration to others.”

After taking some seminars with FAU Professor Schuster’s I understood that her pedagogical philosophy, and educational techniques were creatively formative and proved influential and healing in the long term. Many other students also agreed that their learning experiences in Dr.

Schuster's classes were optimal. Apart from fulfilling the required credits for graduation, and acquiring significant knowledge, they were introduced to a better way of living that had enduring positive effects. Even though the courses were designed to fulfill nursing students' graduation requirements, any other interested college student could take them. Invariably, these courses influenced and touched their lives in profound ways. I am a teacher myself and have taught at various levels and in different settings, but I found Dr. Schuster's educational approach to be quite unique. It wasn't long before I came to the conviction that I was in the presence of a very unusual master professor whose contributions to higher education merited being studied and researched. Primarily out of my experiences as a participant of Dr. Schuster's seminars, I conceived the idea to study as much as possible the aspects of her teaching methodology, which necessarily implied an exploration of her life and personal philosophies. Her creative course design, holistic caring, environmental consciousness, and superb teaching combined to develop not only caring and humanist nurses, but also to offer them a new dimension of positive life change, and equip them with the healing tools for themselves and their patients. I believe that the application of her unique approach can lead to the betterment of higher education and teaching in general. As such it can change students' awareness of their environment and

empower them to devise and lead effective readjustments in their community and natural environment, and thus have gradual but decisive effect on the world at large.

To understand the impact of Dr. Eleanor Schuster's teachings on Florida Atlantic University, the College of Nursing, the community, and her numerous students, one needs to study and comprehend how her environmental philosophy or green consciousness were connected to her creative teaching approach. One needs to understand how she developed the use of classrooms as "learning, healing and sacred spaces." As a nurse, and moreover as a holistic nurse, she understood and viewed students in the human wholeness of mind, spirit, and body and as participants in the totality called environment. Professor Schuster was absolutely certain about the transcendent role of the environment and time; she wisely confronted our changing world and its fast economical, scientific, and technological transformations. She understood the personal and family readjustments resulting from the acceleration of communications and cybernetics, and was able to instill hope, healing, and creativity in her students. She empowered them to be able to balance their personal expectations about life, career, and health with the demands of a postmodern world of economic globalization, consumerism, uncertainty and change. From an examination of her courses'

development and syllabi, her impressive curriculum vitae, the books and articles that she published, and the relevant literature which informed her professional and educational approach, it is evident that Professor Eleanor Ann Schuster successfully embraced a vanguard educational position and its effectiveness lay on the fact that it did not adhere to a prefabricated course package but was innovative in every way. Therefore, I believe that more than ever **teachers like Prof. Schuster are indispensable.**

Professor E. A. Schuster's pedagogical goals arose from her great personality and high professional preparation. She received her Doctorate in Nursing Science, from the University of California San Francisco's Medical Center in 1973. Her numerous publications dealt with environmental issues and topics related to healing, caring, nurses as healers, holistic nursing, family planning, and hospitalization. Along with Dr. Carolyn L. Brown, she edited the book Exploring Our Environmental Connections, published in 1994. Dr. Schuster worked in numerous book reviews, and was a guest editor for Nursing clinics and Holistic Nursing Journals. She told us in one her seminaries that she had in mind to work in topics related to the classroom as Sacred Space, Holistic touch, and Approaches to Caring for Self. She was the founder of the holistic nursing program at FAU and was recognized internationally as a nurse healer, and she was the recipient of

numerous awards for teaching excellence and service. She was the first Director of the FAU Women Studies Program and the first to celebrate the Earth Day in FAU.

As a founder of the FAU holistic nursing program, Eleanor Schuster both embodied and observed the holistic philosophy. The American Holistic Nurse's Association, and the Standards of Holistic Practice explain that: "holistic nurses develop and expand their conceptual framework and overall philosophy in the art and science of the holistic nursing model, practice, teach, and conduct research in the most effective manner possible." (28) The ethics that Prof. Schuster practiced in the classroom reflected the principle of "recognizing a person's capacity for self healing and the importance of supporting the natural development of that capacity."(28) Holistic nurses "hold to a professional ethic of caring and healing that seeks to preserve wholeness and dignity of self, students, colleagues, and the person, who is receiving care in all practice settings, be it in health promotion, birthing centers, acute and chronic care facilities, end of live centers, and in homes and classrooms." (29) As a healer Prof. Schuster exemplified the role of a holistic nurse, which Janet F. Quinn described as follows: " a (holistic nurse) is a facilitator of the [healing] process, a sort of midwife, but is not the one doing the healing. Nor is the locus of the healing an isolated part of the

patient (i.e., the “mind” or the “spirit”) all healing emerges from within the totality of the unique body-mind-spirit of the patient, sometimes with the assistance of therapeutic interventions, but not because of them.” (43) In her seminaries Dr. Schuster helped to stimulate students’ inner personal health channel through which they could obtain “adequate, non-toxic, and noninvasive assistance in maintaining wellness and healing for body, mind, and spirit.” (37)

Eleanor Schuster’s strength lay on her respect for and devotion to the environment based in a profound understanding and commitment to the sacredness of nature. Along with the American Holistic Nurses’ Association she shared the belief that ‘health involves the harmonious balance of body, mind and spirit in an ever-changing environment, and that the environment involves both our immediate as well as global surroundings”.

She was aware that human beings were an important part of the environment, and that they should exist in peaceful and harmonious relationship with the local and global environment, preserving the wholeness of air, soils, and waters, starting within the communities we live in. In that way I could make the connection that we must be expanding our understanding of the environment that balance first to the surroundings close-by, and then to the environment far from us. Her educational

commitment to FAU led her to develop with other nursing faculty members, an international conference, which was a success and brought together ideas, perspectives, and contributions which were published in the book Exploring Our Environmental Connections. It is quite enlightening to find in this book, Dr. Eleanor Schuster's presentation of nature "as an endless circle or chain, "and as a project that has had no real beginning and no real end," because all its participants are part of an environment that will survive throughout other directions and dimensions. Though this book I understood the outlining idea of reaching out to one's closest environment first, and only then, exploring the regional, state and national environments. In that spirit, the book opens with the following poem dedicated to the Everglades:

For our Earth
Our love and our life
May we return to her
As it has been given us
Full measure, pressed down and running over
and
for our beautiful Florida
may her River of Grass always flow
clear and pure*

*“To this end, we commit any proceeds we may earn from this book to efforts to preserve the Everglades so it may continue to live that we all may live.”

Further more, at the end of this book Eleanor Schuster offers a personal statement about her own life’s closeness to nature in which we find hints of her future formulation of the concept of “sacred and learning spaces”:

I grew up out--of--doors, first on Florida’s eastern shores, embraced by sun, surf, and sand; then in the West, mainly in Arizona, where I learned to hear “the sound of silence.” In my mind’s eye, I can still stand in the company of the monument rock sentinels and sacred mesas of Navajo and Hopi country. My friends and playmates were the trees, plants, shells, and animals, as well as other children. Within the past decade or so, I have realized with increasing clarity that the only thing we humans have, as a gift in return, is the ways we live our lives. Every thing else has been given us – our being, our gifts and talents, material goods, food shelter, friendships, and more. Our challenge as humans is to learn to reciprocate the giving. Our path is to dance, sing, and celebrate the cosmos and, when we leave, hope that the echo of our songs remains.” (344)

Prof. Schuster was known by her green consciousness and her commitment to principles dealing with environmental justice. Fundamental to her green philosophy was the re-establishment of the spiritual sacredness of Mother Earth, the respect and celebration of every culture's beliefs about the natural world and the interdependence between healing ourselves and healing the environment. Without doubt she was an environmental activist, whose everyday behavior meticulously reflected her respect for the environment. Whenever she worked with the community to address critical problems, she made sure before any action was to be performed, that it would not endanger or harm the environment.

Besides providing intellectual information, her courses encouraged students to think creatively, critically, and cooperatively. Prof. Schuster developed courses, which could be taken by students regardless of their mayor, college, race, creed, age, or gender and which fostered their intellectual growth, and commitment to excellence. The courses adhered to FAU' guidelines for the components and design of the curriculum, but they inclined towards an experimental approach, that allowed Prof. Schuster to apply instructional and alternative teaching techniques that contributed to effective learning, healing, and creativity in the classroom. The Professor

Schuster's seminaries that I attended were three and I would like to discuss them now:

A 4000-level course entitled "Women, Witches and Healing" which considered the nature of wholeness, health, and healing from philosophical, historical, cultural, ecological, and feminist perspectives. The role of healer was specifically present in relation to contemporary and future professional nursing, and past and current conceptions were identified and studied.

Her Teaching Methods for this course included: Small and large groups discussions, reports analysis, journaling, lectures, group presentations, interaction with guests, interviews, field trips, silent times, and anything else that would further our work and understanding. Students had to sign a contract at the beginning of the semester and follow it.

"Caring for Self" was an experimental 6000-level nursing course in which students and faculty worked together to address the nature of personal connectedness between mind, body, and spirit and its importance in healing and health. Caring was introduced as a central value and each student was encouraged to think of themselves as their own "laboratories" experiencing and learning how to make choices supportive of personal well being.

Students were assisted in making this self-awareness relevant to the well being of others. Her teaching methods included: "Demonstration, discovery,

experiencing, small groups discussions, guest speakers, evaluating, exploring, inventing, partnering, journaling, performing and any other approach supporting the course objectives.” During one class session, on September 11, 1999 at 9:30 AM to be precise, Dr. Schuster explained as follows the reasoning and motivation behind the topics explored and work performed in the class:

“This work is based on the assumption that our lives are grounded in our creative selves. Our creative selves need consistent honest acknowledgement, respect and nurturing. When we relinquish attention to our creative foundation, imbalance occurs and we are unhappy at our deepest levels (dis-ease). Any choice we make either supports or diminishes our creative selves. The creative self is always there, we cannot lose it, but we can ignore or abandon it, to our peril as whole persons. There are no short cuts. There are no “excused absences; we either do the work or not. We have the choice.)

Paradoxically, our creative selves respond only to light, playful, loving attention and not to a taskmaster ‘have to’ approach. It is our inner child (but far from “childish”) . . . honest, available, noisy, curious, risk taking, loyal, beautiful . . . When we are a life artist, we bring that artistry to all our roles, and we create new roles to

accommodate our artistry. The life artist blends and balances the roles of teacher, healer, leader and visionary. Our technologies, which we respect, come from without- “how to do”, our artist comes from within – “how to be.” Our lifetime is in paying attention to our doing and our being; the artistry is in maintaining the balance. We are doing important work – discovering and rediscovering our inherent strength and beauty. From this unshakable foundation, we nourish ourselves as we reach out to others from our authentic selves.”

“Creating Healing Environments” was another experimental 6000-level nursing course that illuminated the “physical context” in which human caring occurs, devoting special attention to nursing’s accountability towards a sustainable future. Emphasis was placed on the interrelationships between environment and health based on the legacy of Florence Nightingale and other theorists. Integral to this course was a basic preparation in conflict resolution skills. Her teaching methods included: “Discussion, lecture, guest presentations, focused community contacts, interviews, small and large group activities, debate, critique, and any other modality supporting course objectives. At the conclusion of this course the student were expected to:

- 1-Identify and describe covert and overt forces leading to current environmental degradation.
- 2- Identify and discuss “environmental sustainability in relation to health care generally and in nursing specifically.
- 3-Develop and implement strategies for understanding and addressing major health threats in relation to the integrity of air, soil, water and energy sources.
- 4-Identify and critique specific select resources including organizations, institutions, literature and media.
- 5- Demonstrate basic understanding of, and skills in conflict resolution.”

These three courses shared the characteristic of being experimental, enabling the teacher, in this case Dr. Eleanor Schuster, to conduct teaching as something more than a mere transfer of information, which can sometimes happen in courses with a fixed program syllabus. Generally it is understandable that knowledge gathered by previous generations needs to be passed on to a new generation of students. However if an element of dynamic updating is absent from this approach, it can in some cases reinforce oppressive and non-creative ways of living. I find that Dr. Schuster was able to both teach creativity to her students and encourage them to find their own paths to healing.

In Dr. Schuster classes we were also introduced to Julia Cameron's writings, such as The Artist's Way: A Spiritual Path to Higher Creativity, which empowered students with the means to attain recovery through creativity. As Cameron writes, "creativity is the natural order of life. Life is energy: pure creative energy . . . when we open ourselves to exploring our creativity, we open ourselves to God: good orderly direction."(3) Dr. Schuster also made us keep a journal following Cameron's guidelines in "The Vein of Gold: A Journey to your Creative Heart, which helped us develop caring and creativity. The educational value of these exercises in personal self-discovery and creativity should not be underestimated since they help students establish who they are and what their goals in life are, the kind of knowledge which precedes and informs any other type of knowledge. This is particularly vital in the fast-paced and uncertain world of modern times where education does not develop at the same pace as the economy; that is why Universities produce graduates who do not achieve professional realization because their expectations about work and life were unrealistic.

Another characteristic of her course was the extremely detail oriented organization of the class environment resulting in a clean, neat, **distribution of the space**. The seats were arranged in a circular fashion so that every

member of class could meet and make eye contact with each other. In the center there was a colorful Native American blanket that included the four elements of the Earth: a plant represented the Earth, a burning candle represented fire, a feather represented the air, a ceramic cup with water represented water; to the side there was an instrument like a rain-stick. In a corner of the class a blanket was spread and acted as repository of students' papers or projects. The ambiance in the big class was distinguished by a natural fragrance like pine. The blackboard contained the agenda of the day. On one corner of the class there was a display of all-ongoing activities that might interest students as well as a stack of books related to the course she was teaching. Professor Schuster offered to lend these books to any student, requiring only that they sign their name and state a return date. By the entrance there were badges in which we wrote our names and wore during class so everyone could be addressed by first names. At the start of each class, Dr. Schuster explained the rules of participation and delimited the times for silence. She told everybody to begin breathing in order to clear all tension. Then she invited those that accepted her invocation to do it with her. Those who disagreed with the invocation were asked to remain respectfully in silence. Dr. Schuster endeavored to preserve order at all times so that the classroom could act as a "sacred space" where healing, and learning could

take place. She was not fond of loud arguments and recommended that we keep our voices down. Nevertheless the presentation of issues was powerful enough, particularly when it concerned the environment. She alerted us to the latest developments in the use of pesticides and chemical substances in water, the potential contamination of food, the effects of biological engineering on seeds, etc. In addition she outlined the steps we could take ourselves to help prevent the ecological disaster of our planet. Finally she reminded us that by avoiding outside toxics and wastes we were also helping to protect our emotional body from toxic emotions and behavior.

The sacred space in the class was the first step in acknowledging the outer space of Florida and of the World. In every class meeting, the concept of sacred space was linked to the sacred inner space within every one of us, the emotional, physical and mental aspects of our body. Awareness of the sacredness of the classroom, the environment, and other human spaces, prepared us wonderfully for the consciousness of our own potential to restore balance to our health. We were presented with the possibility that any ailment can begin healing when the harmony between human wholeness and the environment is restored. But the start of that healing required the sacred space to be acknowledged.

The transformation of negative emotions into positive ones was also explored. Anxiety, stress, and any other disorder could be channeled into a healthier mind state by making the connection between the space of our outside environment and a person's inner space.

The most interesting antecedent of the concept of sacred ground is mentioned by Mary Elizabeth O'Brien in her book Spirituality in Nursing, where she notes that nurses attending a patient are in holy ground: "If we can take off our shoes we will be able to realize that the place where we stand is holy ground, (and) we would respond to our patients as we would wish to respond to God in the burning bush." (7) This is a reference to the Bible's book of Exodus, chapter 3, verses 5-6 which recounts the episode of Moses standing before the burning bush in Mount Sinai and hearing God's command to remove his shoes because the ground where he is standing is sacred and holy. The removal of shoes was perhaps more than an act of reverence; it also established a connection between nature and Moses' body, which attuned him to hear the voice of God. A similar principle informs traditional meditation where one practices with bare feet placed together on the ground; that stance connects the person with the inner force of the Earth, readying one for cleansing through relaxation and controlled breathing.

Harmony between the human body and the surrounding space facilitates connectedness with the total environment. The ideal setting for healing and learning to occur requires acknowledging the relationship between the human whole or totality and the environment. The sacredness of the ground for Moses, and the sacredness of space for Dr. Schuster emphasize the important relationship between ourselves and our immediate surroundings and the world at large, that is to say, between the micro and macrocosms.

Dr. Schuster conducted class in an atmosphere free of any negativity. She was careful to address some important points about the nature of her class, her approach to teaching, and even her own life. Among her more memorable and unique statements were: “I live alone by choice,” “I am aware of my age, and don’t care about my wrinkles, they are part of life,” “This class is not about male bashing, or the bashing of any other human being.” With these comments she put an end to any concern or questions about her age, state, and personal approach to feminist currents. Dr. Schuster never spoke badly about others, and her inner peace helped foster an environment free from toxic relations or toxic behavior against others. She herself was free of toxic emotions and helped us be the same. Discord and toxicity never had a place in any of her classes.

Blessing: Every class began with a blessing. **Only when the blessing was performed was the class transformed into a sacred space**, available and ready as a laboratory for learning, and healing.

According to Dr. Schuster, a sacred space could be any class, any place, which was acknowledged to be a blessed place. Dr. Schuster's leadership and presence in class and the students' acknowledgment of the class as a sacred space during the blessing and breathing exercises established a connection with nature, and the environment. A **sacred space** could be any other place besides a classroom as long as it was honored and respected and kept clean and orderly. Any space transformed in this manner could be ready for teaching, caring, creating and learning.

The students in Dr. Schuster's classes varied in their interests, but most of them were to become nurses; a number of them, including myself were not. The traditional blessing performed by Prof. Eleanor Schuster reflected a sensitivity for the diversity of her students and had universal appeal and meaning. Dr. Schuster was aware of this but she would still say, "If you find that you do not agree, with this portion of the activities, please remain respectful and in silence, that is all I ask." Her courage and strength to extend her blessing, a blessing that could hardly be objectionable to anyone, without imposing it on anybody, impressed me with her wisdom

and humanness. Later on I found this approach explained by Ayn Rand in her book The New Intellectual: “no advocate of reason can claim the right to force his [her] ideas on others. No advocate of the free mind can claim the right to force the minds of others.” (57) This awareness of other people’s personal autonomy was also apparent in Dr. Schuster’s invaluable comments about dying and the role of the human person who is close by: “Sometimes the best we can do, when a person is dying, is to remain close but keep silence and be just present, and let the person know that you are with him/her but you respect the intimacy of the moment by remaining respectfully close but in silence.” Dr. Schuster mentioned that nurses are professionals who deal with caring, and that they are privileged to be able to receive new life and witness its conclusion.

The concept of the sacred space was related to her insistence on the value of life and creation. Life and creation were explored in the students’ final project. Some of these were art project, which tended to draw inspiration from prehistoric art such as that of the cave-dwelling Cro-Magnons. Other projects were related to healing. The creation of art is a very human endeavor, which calls upon the exertion of the finest elements of our inner being. These exercises in creativity served to prepare everybody for healing.

Professor Schuster was an authority in holistic nursing, healing touch, nutrition, and environmental issues. Her capacity for caring and her generosity of spirit revealed the greatness of her personality. Often she preferred to hold back, rather offering guidance and allowing students to empower themselves and grow. She was a great facilitator directing the learning process without over speaking. Even though she was a respected authority, she was so elevated that she remained humble and silent in order to allow students to find their own voice, directing them, as Peggy L. Chinn observes in her book Peace & Power, “to grow in their personal strength, power, and ability to enact one’s will to love for oneself in the context of love and respect for others.”

Indeed the most important features of Dr. Schuster’s courses were the notion of a sacred space and the emphasis on caring. Dr. Schuster’s herself was recognized by everyone for her enormous capacity for caring. Ann Boykin, and Savina O. Schoenhofer elucidate the meaning of caring in their book Nursing as Caring, by explaining, “All persons are caring. Caring is an essential feature and expression of being human . . . Caring is a process. Each person throughout his or her life grows in the capacity to express caring.”(1) In addition, Dr. Marilyn E. Parker highlights this important characteristic by saying: “Caring is an essential value in the personal and

professional lives of nurses.” Moreover, in her book Human Act of Caring Sister Simone Roach notes: “caring is essential, not only to the development of the human being, but also to the development of the caring of the human being.” (3) Dr. Schuster embodied all the aspects of caring which led to her dedication to nursing and teaching, two very influential activities. As a nurse, she contributed to the field of holistic care, and as a master teacher, she devised a definite pedagogical concept and reality. The transformation of the classroom into a Sacred Space provided the medium for teaching, healing, caring and exploring a most profound vision of a better world and environment.

Exactly ten years later, today July 7th 2009, I remember a very special conversation that I had with the late Prof. Eleanor Schuster, I know now that I had witnessed in action and first hand a master in teaching, a holistic nurse, a healer and an outstanding university professor full of humanism, virtue, wisdom and teaching charisma, and free from careerism, envy, rivalry, hermetic discourse, and self-promotion.

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