

A Review of *The Way of the Teacher: A Path for Personal Growth and Professional Fulfillment* by Sandra Finney and Jane Thurgood Sagal

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For Sandra Finney and Jane Thurgood Sagal the core message of their book, *Way of the Teacher: A Path for Personal Growth and Professional Fulfillment*, “is that the more we invest time, energy, and thought into personal growth, the more rewards we will reap in our life as a teacher” (p. 190). I enthusiastically commend Finney and Thurgood Sagal for their thoughtful, hopeful, and inspiring book, which ought to be adopted as a core text in all Bachelor of Education programs as well as professional development plans for teachers. New teacher candidates need to be invited to think about their emerging identities as teachers in the holistic ways that Finney and Thurgood Sagal propose. Moreover, experienced teachers will be encouraged and challenged by the concepts and practices that comprise “the way of the teacher.” This is the kind of book that parents would also find enlightening. In the preface to the book, Finney and Thurgood Sagal express their conviction that “who teachers are on the inside—the personal qualities they bring to the classroom—make the most difference in fostering the academic and personal growth of their students” (p. xi). This focus on the wholeness of the teacher is the heart of Finney and Thurgood Sagal’s hopeful book. Their concern is that teacher education programs and professional development do not focus sufficiently on the personal development of teachers. They regard personal development as “the foundation of all other facets of professional growth” (p. xii). I have been a student, teacher, and professor of education for 60 years. I have devoted my whole life to learning and teaching, and to supporting the learning and teaching of others. I share Finney and Thurgood Sagal’s commitment to attending to the wholeness of teachers and learners.

In an age of consumerism, corporatism, terrorism, sexism, racism, and fundamentalism, we desperately need to focus on the inner life of teachers. In the early 1920s, Evelyn Underhill (1999), a noted writer on mysticism and the first woman to lecture on theology at Oxford University, presented three lectures that were subsequently published as *Concerning the Inner Life*. Underhill reminds me to ask, “What do teachers need in order to nurture and sustain a healthy inner life?” As teachers we need to attend to our spirits, our hearts, our inner lives, our imaginations, our emotions, our bodies, and our minds. Teachers live such demanding and challenging lives that it is very difficult to maintain the time and location for nurturing the inner life. We need a healthy inner life if we are going to help others develop healthy inner lives. Underwood recommends that “the important thing is to discover what nourishes *you*, best expands and harmonizes *your* spirit, now, at the present stage of your growth” (p. 60). Almost one hundred years after Underhill’s lectures, Finney and Thurgood Sagal remind us that “whether recognized or not, our teaching flows from the quality of our inner life” (p. 8).

Finney and Thurgood Sagal are integral voices in a long, long tradition of education research and practice that promotes the inner life, holistic approaches to education, and the significance of spirituality in human being and becoming. It is often difficult to discuss spirituality without getting into arguments about specific spiritual and religious practices. So much public education is constructed around the notion that the state and the religious institution must remain separate. Out of the desire to keep the schools separated from churches,

synagogues, temples, and mosques, we often create a bifurcation of personality. In their book Finney and Thurgood Sagal use “*heart, spirit, and soul*” in order “to refer to the core of our being—that which integrates our feelings, thoughts, and highest values, gives life more meaning, and leads to a greater sense of connection to all of life” (p. xiv). In their commitment Finney and Thurgood Sagal resonate with scholars and educators like Parker Palmer, John P. Miller, Thomas Moore, and Jon Kabat-Zinn.

The intention of *Way of the Teacher: A Path for Personal Growth and Professional Fulfillment* is to recognize how important the early years of a teacher’s life are. Finney and Thurgood Sagal ask, “How can we draw on our memory of childhood and learn to be more fully present in our everyday life?” (p. 21) As an educator who is devoted to life writing as a way to attend to the stories that have shaped the adult, I heartily agree with Finney and Thurgood Sagal that we need to remember childhood, and we need to remember childhood so we can better understand where we have come from and who we are, but also so we can understand the children we teach. In addition to remembering, we need to reflect or ruminate on our experiences and practices so we can continue to grow from both challenges and successes. For Finney and Thurgood Sagal, “reflexive practice is a strong way to increase our awareness of our values, our habits, and our interactions” (p. 45). The effective teacher will always be engaged in reflexive practice. This kind of remembering and reflecting requires resilience, and this is likely my favourite word in *The Way of the Teacher*. Finney and Thurgood Sagal understand that “resilience is the ability to readily recover from a variety of challenges (p. 63). Teaching is a constantly challenging profession, and teachers must learn how to be resilient in experiencing challenges. Finney and Thurgood Sagal promote “an integrated mind, body, heart, and spirit ethos” (p. 36) as they remind us that attentiveness, flexibility, creativity, and courage are all essential in a teacher’s life. They are convinced that teachers will “become stronger and more tender-hearted” (p. 31) by practicing compassion because “compassion involves a kind of deep listening and seeing” as well as “gentleness and stillness” (p. 40). They promote the need for open hearts and open minds, hearts and minds that are attentively receptive to awe, wonder, hope, mystery, and love. Ultimately this way of living is the way of creativity. Because “we all share the creative nature of the universe” (p. 119), we are all creative. I especially admire Finney and Thurgood Sagal’s proposal that “the creative process...involves finding the heart’s voice” (p. 119). As we find our hearts’ voices, and as we live with creativity, we learn that “creating a caring learning community in the classroom is, perhaps, the most important and valuable work a teacher does” (p. 159).

In *The Way of the Teacher: A Path for Personal Growth and Professional Fulfillment* Finney and Thurgood Sagal present ancient wisdom, engaging questions, timely practices, and provocative thoughts for creative and critical reflection. Their book is a gift that has been composed with the heart’s generous vocation, calling out to readers to follow the path that leads to transformation and wholeness.

References

- Finney, S., & Thurgood Sagal, J. (2017). *The way of the teacher: A path for personal growth and professional fulfillment*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Underhill, E. (1999). *Concerning the inner life*. Oxford, England: Oneworld.