

A Comparison: The Wisdom of Fethullah Gulen and the Truth of Parker Palmer “Enlightened Education as the Key to Global Transformation”

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Introduction

Most of the organizations and institutions that propose to work for peace and economic stability have come to the common conclusion that education is the solution to strife and poverty. No longer is political prowess or religious devotion perceived as entirely successful or even necessarily helpful to resolving the very real human dilemmas that beleaguer the planet today. While social action is not without merit and political negotiations remain imperative to ceasefire possibilities, long range hope and help lies in the importance of educating our youth to a future where solutions do not reside in the practice of violence. It could be appropriately stated that the best environment for transformation resides in the realm of education.

Two particular educators provide provocative contemporary models with the potential to inspire transformation for our very uncertain future. Fethullah Gulen, Turkish thinker and spiritual teacher, is the source of one of the world’s more creative educational movements occurring today. Parker Palmer, American educator and spiritual provocateur, offers one of the more inspiring models of education in America. These two intellectual and spiritual leaders bring a vigorous challenge and surprising hope to the discourse on what must be done to create a world where human life is more than an exercise in survival. This paper will compare the models of Gulen and Palmer, illustrating where they make contact and where they differ. The paper will conclude with a discussion of the wellspring they share in common, providing a touchstone for future experiments in education along with a transparent vision of transformation for the human family. This paper offers a critique of both educational models since any endeavor to provide a perfect model for human enlightenment will inevitably be limited.

CONFERENCE: Islam in the Contemporary World: The Fethullah Gülen Movement in Thought and Practice, November 4-5, 2006, University of Oklahoma, Norman, OK

Gulen's Educational Model

The Gulen model of education is spreading somewhat like a wildfire around the world, with schools opening with astonishing frequency in Turkey, Africa, South America, Albania, Philippines islands, Central Asia and elsewhere. These schools are founded on what Gulen considers "universal principles" which he believes are at the heart of Islam, although Islam is not directly taught in the schools. Children of any race or creed or religion may be the recipients of the education in these schools while "the teachers are pious Muslims with a firmly Islamic national identity serving as the basis for their tolerance." (Agai, p. 65) (While currently there are teachers in these schools who are not Muslim, the dominate persuasion of the teachers is Islamic.)

As one who has visited several of the Gulen schools in Turkey, it is clear to me that a high ethical standard for the teachers and the classroom setting is of paramount importance. A superior education is the intended goal. The education in the Gulen schools is modern (scientific). This extraordinarily excellent, and ethically focused education is couched in a milieu of what is called by Gulen "universal values", such that students depart from the system as rather extraordinary human beings, committed to such values as hard work, honesty, humility, tolerance, compassion and service to the global community.

The success of the Gulen schools depends upon the man whose vision for planetary harmony guides this academic enterprise. Fethullah Gulen, who could easily be labeled a "socially conscious Sufi," holds that education is first a mode of 'self reform' that leads secondly to reforming or transforming one's social and cultural contexts. What makes the Gulen model unique and therefore gives it the potency to actually foment social and global change is the commitment to an "interior formation". In an article written about the Gulen schools, Thomas Michel interprets Gulen as believing that "an educator is one who has the ability to assist in the emergence of the students' personalities, who fosters thought and reflection, who builds character and enables students to [interiorize] qualities of self discipline, tolerance and a sense of mission. (Michel, p. 75) Thus, if this were translated into Gulen's thinking on education, it could be said that the Gulen model is one of interior (or spiritual) organization for the purpose of exterior (or ethical) manifestation in the modern setting. It is the task of the teacher to nurture the student in such a way as to encourage said student to graduate from an internal mode of learning to an external mode of serving in the world. Not only does this explanation fit soundly with Sufi ideals, as a mystical form of Islam, it also represents the lifelong work that Gulen himself has done to challenge a traditional interpretation and perhaps inchoate image of Islam to the demands of living in a modern and now postmodern world.

With most intellectuals, each one has a lexicon that infiltrates their thoughts, writings and verbal expressions. Gulen is no different than any other in this pattern. His writings and speeches are laced with the use of key words that reveal what drives his thought, and therefore what shapes and forms the schools inspired by his teachings. Gulen's passionate language uses words like: compassion, tolerance,

CONFERENCE: Islam in the Contemporary World: The Fethullah Gülen Movement in Thought and Practice, November 4-5, 2006, University of Oklahoma, Norman, OK

faith, peace—and the ubiquitous word “love” that is generously sprinkled through all of his teachings. From these critical terms one could derive the idea that Gulen is concerned with how the interior life reveals itself in the teacher and the student. One is to be quintessentially compassionate and tolerant of others. Compassion and tolerance originate essentially from within one’s faith. The manifestation of this faith in the world is peace, which, of course, derives from compassion and tolerance. These four words form the cornerstone of Gulen’s educational worldview. (His views on love will follow later in this paper.)

Central to Gulen’s view of education is the idea that a teacher is to be more than a lecturer or imparter of information. Rather, the teacher is an educator, one who reveals through his or her own self presence who the student is to become. While the lesson is critical, the “presence” of the one offering the lesson is much more vital to the outcome. Gulen’s work states,

“Teachers should know how to find a way to the student’s heart and be able to leave indelible imprints upon his or her mind. They should test the information to be passed on to students by refining their own minds and the prisms of their hearts. A good lesson is one that does more than provide pupils with useful information or skills; it should elevate them into the presence of the unknown.” (Gulen, p. 209)

The language of this statement is classical Gulen, but quite unusual to the ordinary world of the classroom, at least in first world countries. The notion that a teacher is to instruct through the development of his own journey inward, making use of the heart as well as the mind, is almost anathema to modern education where the goal is to urge students toward career and economic advancement, regardless of inner turmoil or convictions. The belief that education is a matter of the heart along with intense instruction in the sciences is an anomalous concept to the educational world with which most of us, at least in America, are familiar. Yet, this seems to be the “secret”, if there is one, to the Gulen schools. Perhaps it boils down to one statement in particular attributed to Gulen: “In essence, a school is a kind of place of worship; the “holy leaders” are the teachers.” (Gulen, p. 208)

Criticism of the Gulen movement ranges from charging him with working to make Islam the door through which education must pass to be authentic, to the particular accusation that he wishes to overthrow the secular Turkish government and establish a state religion. Proponents of Gulen ardently deny these charges levied against their spiritual guru, but suspicion remains high, especially in the intelligentsia of the secular population.* Proof of intentions and motives will come only through the passage of time and the infusion of young scholars, business men and professional women into the world of dialogue necessary to mark the Gulen movement as authentic. Since the Gulen movement is not by nature centralized, the product of the Gulen schools—the students themselves will necessarily be the leaven in the broader, global process of transformation sought by this movement. It is still too soon to tell.

CONFERENCE: Islam in the Contemporary World: The Fethullah Gülen Movement in Thought and Practice, November 4-5, 2006, University of Oklahoma, Norman, OK

What does seem to be the case, despite the lack of evidence for success at this stage of the process, is that those who have been exposed to these astonishing schools do seem to offer a rather similar report: these schools produce unusual students. I remember quite clearly visiting a Gulen school in Istanbul where the children middle school age—gathered around me to ply me with questions, in English no less. They were lively, noisy, bright, friendly students, anxious to show me their classrooms, demonstrate their skills in my language and share with me the awards their school had won. I felt no sense of furtiveness among them or their teachers; rather a healthy inquisitiveness toward the visitor in their midst. Females equaled males in numbers, both in staff and students. Classrooms were adorned with the latest equipment and the schools were impeccably clean. The overall atmosphere was one of enthusiasm, academic rigor and moral excellence.

When I met with a principal of one of the schools later in the week at a dinner with sponsors* of the schools, I asked him point blank, “Why are the students and teachers in these schools such amazing people? Do you teach ethics in the classroom?” His response was, at first, a slow deep smile. Then he responded quietly, “We do not teach ethics; our teachers are what they teach—humble, tolerant, compassionate, intelligent.” In this simple answer was born this paper: the Gulen schools select teachers who themselves are pious, devoted, spiritual, intelligent, humble human beings who impart their self wisdom to their students through the way they are, rather than what they say. As the students are nurtured in this environment of compassion and tolerance, they become aware, global citizens, capable of impacting their environment and their future. A statement from Gulen describes it best, “The permanence of a nation depends upon the education of its people, upon their lives being guided to spiritual perfection. If nations have not been able to bring up well rounded generations to whom they can entrust the future, then their future will be dark.” (Gulen, 56)

One insight into the Gulen schools that would, in America, be considered a critique, while in Turkey might be considered dangerous is the communal nature of the schools and the movement. While the Gulen movement itself is not rigidly centralized, because it is grounded in Islam and the Turkish Ottoman tradition, it is, by its very nature, communal. Some might even argue that the Gulen movement is collectivist. In other words, the students are urged to think communally or collectively because they are encouraged through Islamic principles toward cooperative service to humankind. Gulen’s Sufism is, by default, oriented to humanitarian service with all of one’s life resources.

The movement has embedded within its very structure the idea that once you have been served as a student, you move into the world to serve others. Thus, the movement creates a form of “communitarianism” by its intrinsic Islamic commitments and global orientation. Gulen says, “Now that we live in a global village, education is the best way to serve humanity and to establish a dialogue with other civilizations.” (Gulen, p.198). In other words, Gulen himself understands that the outcome of education is to serve others, not just to serve self interests. It follows, therefore, that

CONFERENCE: Islam in the Contemporary World: The Fethullah Gülen Movement in Thought and Practice, November 4-5, 2006, University of Oklahoma, Norman, OK

the premise on which the teachers are hired and the students are taught is that a spiritual orientation is the first order of business. In order to serve others, one must have a spiritual orientation that offers a link to humanity. Islamic spirituality undergirds the Gulen model of education that is made explicit through the teaching of the sciences and a concrete ethical education to serve civic life and manifest peace in the world. The Gulen schools educate in order to create a better world for everyone; not just for the benefit of the student alone. This goal is intentional and visible.

Palmer's Model of Education

Comparing the Gulen model to the model of education offered by Parker Palmer is not an easy task. While there are quite distinct differences, these two educators may have more in common than noticed at first glance. Palmer's model of education has risen from his years as a classroom teacher himself. His failures and his successes with students have honed his understanding of the unique and particular relationships between teacher and student, knowledge and classroom setting. Palmer's educational theory is shaped profoundly by American or western culture, just as Gulen's model of education is shaped by the eastern culture of Turkey and the impact of Islam. Palmer's idea of education is heavily influenced by a model of individual growth and a spirit of truth seeking, which is the underbelly of the American ethos. The context for each of these educational models cannot be separated from the cultures and social structures in which they arose.

Just as the Gulen educational movement is influenced by Sufism, so Palmer's educational theory is shaped by Christianity. Although Palmer clearly separates explicit Christian religion from his educational theories, he does not hide the importance of Christian spirituality in his work. His book "To Know As We Are Known" comes close to being a 'confession' of the role of Christianity within the educational arena, from the use of sacred texts, to prayer, to silence, to perceiving education as a form of spiritual development. At this level, he and Gulen are probably not too far apart in their conviction that the spiritual influence of one's personal faith is intrinsic to the way in which they believe students should be taught, teachers should be trained and classrooms should be managed.

The difference between these two spiritual gurus is this: Gulen's model originates with what lies inside the teacher that can be translated to the interior spiritual self of the student.

The teacher is a model for the self, so to speak. Thus, the teacher is the focal point of the Gulen model. This method produces better humans, so says Gulen, and helps to create a more humane world. In a different fashion, Palmer's model focuses on what lies in the educational environment, or external setting, that creates an urge in the student to go forth and serve humanity. Palmer states that the sacred texts of the past, in particular the Christian sacred texts, are critical to understanding what tradition has to offer in the classroom. Palmer's model also includes the importance of treating school texts as though they are 'sacred texts' because these books imprint students with images of the self and world.

CONFERENCE: Islam in the Contemporary World: The Fethullah Gülen Movement in Thought and Practice, November 4-5, 2006, University of Oklahoma, Norman, OK

Likewise, Palmer's model for education includes the influence and importance of prayer as a way to help students "see through and beyond the appearance of things, to penetrate the surface and touch that which lies beneath." (Palmer, p. 19) This educator does not see prayer as belonging only to the spiritual or religious institution, but also as a practical resource available within secular education. He is not advocating formal prayer rituals, from Christianity, or any other religious tradition. This would be absurd in the American setting of separation of church and state. But he does believe that the classroom is a place where a prayerful attitude carefully constructed by the teacher can help students not only to learn, but to thrive. In Palmer's words,

"To go beyond appearances, education relies on fact and reason, on the capacity of science to dissect the world into its component parts. Prayer and analysis do not end up at the same point; where analysis aims at breaking the world into its elements, prayer aims at seeing beyond the elements into their underlying relatedness. But both prayer and analysis seek to make the world transparent." (Palmer, 19)

In other words, Palmer believes that a sound education includes all the spiritual tools available to the teacher from his or her faith, in his case Christian tools, along with the contributions of science or analysis. The heart and mind must both be engaged in the discipline of education. A prayerful attitude creates the context for learning; analysis is the purpose for the educational encounter.

The distinction between Palmer and Gulen at this point is that the Gulen schools are careful not to propose much less employ either overt or covert religious practices in the classroom. Palmer, on the other hand, makes no apology for utilizing spiritual tools in the classroom setting in order to be a better teacher. He, like Chris Anderson, author of "Teaching as Believing," understands that the foundation of the university system in the west was religious, and in particular, Christian. Thus, his method for interaction with the student begins with the appropriation of external influences that directly confront the student, calling for change in the student's self perception. Palmer's methodology also demands that the teacher reconfigure her own self perception of what it means to be a teacher: one who is guide, mentor and friend. This model boldly challenges the objectivist form of education that sets up the teacher to be the authority figure and life coach.

Like Gulen, Parker Palmer has a lexicon that is quite visible in his writings. Words like truth, obedience, openness, and hospitality permeate his works. And also like Gulen, the word 'love' is so fundamental to his writings that it is nearly impossible to create an index on the word. For Palmer the word 'truth' is one of the weightbearing words in his theory. Since his background for the concept of his search for 'truth' is Christian, one should not be surprised at this choice of elemental words. Christianity has long been plagued by its incessant urgency to locate the ultimate and final truth. For Palmer, however, the search for truth does not dwell in what the teacher

CONFERENCE: Islam in the Contemporary World: The Fethullah Gülen Movement in Thought and Practice, November 4-5, 2006, University of Oklahoma, Norman, OK

inherently knows, what the student might learn or even what mysteries might reside within the 'sacred texts' that are available for study. Rather, for Palmer at the center of the "community of truth," as he names the classroom, is the subject matter to be studied. This subject matter, however, is not an objectified topic to be dissected and memorized. Instead, this community of truth gathers—much like a spiritual community might around that which holds the group together—the Otherness within the classroom: the 'Other' that causes both student and teacher to be learners, namely, the Unknown. For students to understand the importance of this "other" does rely on the effectiveness of the teacher. "The students must know why the teacher values the subject, how the subject has transformed the teacher's life." (Palmer, p. 104) The teacher in this model, however, is not the focus of the exercise of education, but likewise a participant with the students in the discovery of truth.

According to Palmer, when the classroom becomes the place where the focus is neither on the student or the teacher, but rather upon that which binds them together—the mutual search for truth—an authentic education is underway. This, for Palmer, is a spiritual tool that truly reforms learning and humanity. The first place the student experiences the value of shared learning and mutual respect is in the classroom. This translates to the world, Palmer believes, in service to others. "Truth is between us, in relationship, to be found in the dialogue of the knowers and the knowns who are understood as independent but accountable selves." (Palmer, p. 55) While this method has the same validity in its own context as does Gulen's model in Turkey, Palmer's model is quite different. The educational "secret" is found in the spiritual resources which initiate the classroom learning environment and nurture the individual self. Classroom relationships become the context for creating an air of hospitality, which, in turn, manifests a humane framework for education. Students and teachers are on the adventure of growth together, not hierarchically, and the result is transformation within the individual which is at the heart of western culture.

Palmer's educational model leads to the same outcome as Gulen's: a global awareness of the need to serve humanity and think of others. Palmer states, "Education is more than teaching the facts and learning the lessons in order to manipulate life toward our preferred ends. It means being drawn into personal responsiveness and accountability to each other and the world of which we are a part." (Palmer, p. 15) Like Gulen, he does not believe that education is meant to benefit only the students. Rather, Palmer's view is that an education conceived in a community of relationship, and truth will lead its recipients toward a worldview that seeks connection and transformation. In the following provocative statement, he puts forth some of his most profound thoughts about his understanding of education:

At this crucial moment we have an opportunity to revision education as a communal enterprise...in such an education, intellect and spirit would be one, teachers and learners and subjects would be in vital community with one another, and a world in need of healing would be well served. (Palmer, p. xix)

The Point of Contact

CONFERENCE: Islam in the Contemporary World: The Fethullah Gülen Movement in Thought and Practice, November 4-5, 2006, University of Oklahoma, Norman, OK

It is important to note that what these two men have most closely in common in terms of their commitment to education is an ideal that must surely seem an uncomfortable fit in the conventional learning arena. Both of these scholars promote the idea that love is central to human life and thus critical to education. While love may be an unusual concept to discuss in light of innovative educational models, it is, nonetheless, the foundation upon which both Gulen and Palmer build their educational theories. Neither educator uses the word as a romantic or sentimental form of emotion. Palmer links love to knowledge when he says, "A knowledge that springs from love will implicate us in the web of life; it will wrap the knower and the known in compassion; it will call us to involvement, mutuality, accountability. (Palmer, p. 9) For Palmer, knowing is an act of love. To know and be known leads to compassion, which, in turn, plants seeds for community and global connectedness. From within his spiritual tradition of Christianity, Palmer understands the origin of knowledge to be love. For Palmer, one must recognize that his educational model thrives on a heart that is "known by the love and truth in which it was first formed." (Palmer, p. 108) In other words, his spiritual understanding of creation and the origins of truth and love set the stage for the educational experience.

In his book, "Toward a Global Civilization of Love and Tolerance" Gulen is rhapsodic about love. He says,

Love is an elixir; a human lives with love, is made happy by love and makes those around him or her happy with love. In the vocabulary of humanity, love is life; we feel and sense each other with love. God Almighty has not created a stronger relation than love, this chain that binds humans one to another...We have become so intertwined with love that our lives become purely dependent on love; and we dedicate our souls to it. When we live, we live with love, and when we die, we die with love. In every breath, we feel it with our whole existence; it is our warmth in the cold, and our oasis in the heat. (Gulen, p. 4)

Gulen's view of love infiltrates every lesson he teaches his students and his followers. And having met the man myself, I am aware that he is one of those rare humans whose presence is a form of embodied love. In a conversation with him over dinner, I asked him specifically about love, explaining the four modes of love promoted by the teacher Jesus. Gulen responded quite positively to my question stating that love is at the vortex of human life while the teachings of love in our different faiths, his Islam, mine Christian, are what guide our understanding and actions. In other words, love, to Gulen, is not a psychological category, but rather a spiritual path. One author who writes on Sufi altruism illustrates perhaps the source of Gulen's palpable sense of love when he says, "To worship God sincerely with undivided attention, one must give up love of all else." (Homerin, p. 80) Thus, for all the assessments of the Gulen educational model that can be made, both negative and positive, the movement cannot be understood unless one recognizes the ingredient of love that serves as the unbreakable bond holding it together.

CONFERENCE: Islam in the Contemporary World: The Fethullah Gülen Movement in Thought and Practice, November 4-5, 2006, University of Oklahoma, Norman, OK

For both of these teachers, a spiritual depth is the bedrock of the model of education they offer the world. This is the case because only through spiritual depth does love arise. No teacher can be considered an educator without spiritual and global consciousness. Global transformation, in the eyes of these educational leaders, depends upon this proposition.

Conclusion

In conclusion, from studying and reading these two teachers I believe I can offer the following critiques:

Gulen's Educational Model

1) While the Gulen educational model is exceptional, and has the potential to profoundly influence both eastern and western cultures, I do not believe that it will take hold in the west in any significant way until the issue of the individual is resolved. The Gulen model focuses on the communal aspect of education, deriving its ethics and practices from Islam. The Gulen movement is highly communal, both in structure and intent. Thus, while the Gulen model offers a much needed critique of the methodology of education in America by simply serving as a superior communal model, it also seems to deny or neglect the importance of the individual. Since the psyche of the west is intrinsically organized around the freedom of the individual, this must be taken into account if the goal is to share this model of education with the west in any way that has social impact.

2) From a western vantage point, one could also offer as a critique of the Gulen model that there is a surreptitious intention to implant Islamic ideals and values into the classrooms of all the schools, regardless of what country houses them.* Gulen's argument is that the values and ethics of Islam are universal, but were he to argue this point with a Jew or a Christian he might find that while these Abrahamic faiths could perhaps agree on the idea of universal values, there could easily be disagreement over what these values are. For example, Gulen's emphasis on tolerance as a positive value among Turkish Muslims, has come close to being a negative term within western culture, especially in the discussion of pluralistic society. From the pluralistic point of view, to be tolerant is to hold minimal and almost indifferent regard for the other.

3) The Gulen model of education requires a voluminous and magnanimous machine of donors and supporters behind the scenes to makes this educational enterprise viable. Again, the means by which economic structures work in the JudeoChristian west is not commensurate with the Gulen model of financing the schools. This, once again, is a communal model, while the west harbors a distinctive individualistic way of giving and using money. While the JudeoChristian culture is intrinsically generous like the Islamic

CONFERENCE: Islam in the Contemporary World: The Fethullah Gülen Movement in Thought and Practice, November 4-5, 2006, University of Oklahoma, Norman, OK

*For instance, in one school we visited in Turkey, during a class music lesson, the students were singing a song about Muhammad.

culture, private schools are financed either by corporations or religious organizations, not by religious individuals en mass. In order for the Gulen schools to propagate in America without unnecessary suspicion in the climate of the 9/11 fiasco will require careful attention to the means by which funds are raised and dispersed to build and maintain these schools.

Palmer's Educational Model

1) Palmer's educational model, although at odds even with the American educational system due to its spiritual rather than secular nature, could not thrive in Turkey at all. The use of religious and spiritual practices, however disguised, would be anathema in the Turkish public school system. His model would not likely work in the Turkish Gulen schools either, due to the emphasis on the individual over the community. (Because there are no "Palmer schools" since his ideas are a philosophy of education and not a movement, it is difficult to study precisely what would happen were Palmer to build schools based on his model. Thus, no measurable comparison can be made between these two educational models that can give us information about the effectiveness of one set of schools versus the other.)

2) Palmer's model can be critiqued, when compared to Gulen's, for its specific lack of attention to globalization. While Palmer's model is focused on community, it does not extrapolate his model to as extensive a global venue as the Gulen approach is wont to do. Therefore, while Palmer is clearly committed to the communal nature of education, he does not attend closely the importance of his model to its global impact or potential.

3) Likewise, Palmer's model of education can be critiqued for its heavy emphasis on the use of Christian spiritual tools. He makes somewhat the same mistake as the Gulen model, by assuming that Christian spiritual tools can be made universal. For a Buddhist student, Palmer's use of prayer or sacred texts, however disguised, might be perceived as proselytizing. Therefore, it might be wise for Palmer to broaden his understanding of what spiritual tools from the world's religions could effectively be used in a classroom and be considered inclusive.

4) Finally, the Palmer model of education centers on several uses of the word 'truth.' He has a deep belief that education concerns the search for truth and thus he believes that education can provide at least some access to truth. This truth, when found, is usually personal although the person is then to apply the truth to the communal setting. The danger in implementing personal truths derived from education is obvious. Therefore, Palmer could benefit from the more communal nature of learning universal truths from the Gulen model, just as the Gulen model could benefit from more individual truthmaking possibility of the Palmer model.

CONFERENCE: Islam in the Contemporary World: The Fethullah Gülen Movement in Thought and Practice, November 4-5, 2006, University of Oklahoma, Norman, OK

In the end, both of these thinkers and educators are critical to the dialogue on education for the future because they do bring to the table, however limited, an attempt to vision education that will create and support transformation of the human spirit on a global level. This is no small task, and thus they are to be commended for their visionary attempts at improving education and through it, the human family.

Notes

*While this is anecdotal evidence, I had a rather extensive conversation with Turkish Nobel Prize Winner, Orhan Pamuk, about the Gulen movement and he indicated a rather severe negative reaction to the movement. I have likewise spoken with several persons from Turkey who reside here in the United States and who find themselves opposed to Gulen and his movement.

*Sponsors are those persons who affirm the building of schools and who support the Gulen movement with their financial resources and professional efforts.

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CONFERENCE: Islam in the Contemporary World: The Fethullah Gülen Movement in Thought and Practice, November 4-5, 2006, University of Oklahoma, Norman, OK