



## A School that Inspires

The Young Spirit school is opening in September 2010 with a class of ninth grade students. Over the next four years the school will offer a challenging, integrative high school program, preparing students for college and life. The school has a unique approach based on the practice of philosophy and the development of human identity.

### **Mission**

The Young Spirit school cultivates awareness of ourselves and our world.

The mission of the Young Spirit school is to draw young people toward an awareness of themselves as engaged participants in a fascinating and dynamic universe. In our community we value beauty, embrace challenge, and pursue happiness. We seek meaning and purpose, ask philosophical questions, make our own observations, and act responsively. We learn in relationships, through personal experience and through heartfelt engagement. We strive for knowledge of our own identity, in contemplation, service, dialogue, and practice.

The **Core Principles** of Young Spirit are meaning, relationship, and self-awareness.

**Meaning** refers to the depth and richness of understanding a student achieves through study.

**Relationship** describes the intricate web of connections among us and the things we learn.

**Self-awareness** gives us the wisdom to lead moral, enriching lives in the world.

Our curriculum approach uses the following modes of learning:

|               |                    |
|---------------|--------------------|
| dialogue      | active experience  |
| reflection    | self-determination |
| textual study | healthy living     |
| integration   | social engagement  |

The **Personal Journey Program** is a set of projects that integrate academic disciplines, personal reflection, and service, representing 30-70% of a student's work in our school.

The **Wisdom Program** is an opportunity to learn how ancient and modern philosophical traditions have addressed the basic existential questions of life. Our students experience these traditions through their scriptures, ceremonies, stories, music, and art, through the lives of diverse leaders, and through direct contact with practitioners.

The **Human Life Studies Program** is the chance to develop a healthy and balanced way of life. The curriculum is exploratory in nature, following the events in students' lives and in the community. Students investigate topics such as human development, social communication, financial management, and media influences.

Our evaluation and assessment process asks how much a student is able to express meaning, relationship, and self-awareness. It also include self-assessment to make students more aware of their learning goals and habits. We prepare students for lives of dedication to a better world.



## Advisory Board

Anne Adams, Ph.D. - Adams Consulting Services  
Ann Idzik, Ed.D. - Educational Consultant  
Barbara Rabin - Living Wisdom School  
Barbara Stern - Bank Street College of Education  
Bruce Novak, Ph.D. - Foundation for Ethics and Meaning  
Colette Rabin, Ph.D. - San Jose State University  
John Creger - American High School  
Joseph Kilegevce - Shem Center for Interfaith Spirituality  
Lisa M. Ling - Motivate Canada  
Michael Nagler - Metta Center  
Sara Nesson - Bay Area Jewish Service Learning  
Sarah Talcott - United Religions Initiative  
Rabbi Sheldon Lewis - Kol Emeth  
Teah Strozer - Zen Center of San Francisco  
Unni Narayanan, Ph.D. - Primary Global Research  
Yasmeen Husain - Granada Islamic School



## Mission

The Young Spirit school cultivates awareness of ourselves and our world.

The mission of the Young Spirit school is to draw young people toward an awareness of themselves as engaged participants in a fascinating and dynamic universe.

We value beauty, embrace challenge, and pursue happiness.

We seek meaning and purpose, ask philosophical questions, make our own observations, and act responsively.

We learn in relationships, through personal experience and through heartfelt engagement.

We strive for knowledge of our own identity, in

contemplation, service, dialogue, and practice.

In these ways we will bring about the transformations our world needs in the future.

Awareness requires service. We become truly aware when we have felt the other's feelings and thought the other's thoughts. Awareness requires dedication and commitment to change.

Awareness creates choice. We have a basic choice in our lives; to accept the world as it is presented to us, or to change it. We have the capacity to think, to question, to dream, and to design a better way. How will we use that capacity?

## Core Principles

meaning — relationship — self-awareness

These principles are at the heart of an educational program that seeks to connect us in a fundamental way with the universe around us. “Meaning” refers to the realities behind what we observe, and behind the information we receive. Everything has meaning, but we do not always perceive that meaning. The same fact can hold widely different meanings for different people because of their own reference point.

This diversity of meanings brings us to the principle of relationship. We cannot get any meaning from the world unless we enter into relationship with it. The broader and deeper our

relationships, the richer and more varied our perception of meaning can be. As we truly engage with education, it becomes less a way to echo and imitate the world, and more a way to discover and understand ourselves.

That process is our third principle, self-awareness. Relationship leads to self-awareness because in our relationships we notice our own reactions, feelings, and thoughts. We come to identify more with what we experience and empathize with those close to us. The better we understand something, the more we feel it is intrinsically a part of our identity.

## Goals for a Student

**To know** myself as an individual,  
conscious of my ethical understanding,  
aware of my impact on others,  
responsible for my own actions,  
and flexible in the face of challenge

**To understand** that happiness is a choice within myself,  
requiring work, commitment, concentration, and willingness,  
the achievement of difficult tasks,  
and respect for all living beings

**To embrace** multiple perspectives,  
with appreciation for the learning and wisdom of others,  
both past and present

**To live** with peace and compassion,  
dedicating myself to service  
and love for the world

## Curriculum Approach

The Young Spirit curriculum requires a flexible and responsive understanding of the student. There are many ways to learn. The same material presented to twenty different people will result in twenty different learning outcomes. Instead of trying to control this diversity of experiences, we encourage it. We believe that a diverse learning community enriches every participant.

“Core knowledge” refers to the skills and information an educated person is expected to have. In a time when business, media, science, and the arts are becoming increasingly global in their reach, the content of core knowledge is both harder and easier to define. It is harder to define because of its multicultural nature. It is easier to define because this very diversity is changing our expectations of what our neighbors and colleagues should know.

Because of these changes, we are substituting a different concept for core knowledge, which we call “core awareness.” In an age where information is so widely and immediately available, asking students to create large personal hoards of it is impractical and unwise. We should instead be giving them tools of discovery, analysis, judgement, and understanding, with which they can make sense of the information presented to them. Students will then develop a core awareness of the patterns and trends witnessed in history, literature, science, and the arts. We use information to exercise that core awareness.

We believe in the high importance of a thoughtful, perceptive mind. We also believe that such a mind is most valuable when combined with intuition, empathy, self-awareness, creativity, and inner strength. To this end, we often use academic approaches that go beyond direct instruction and practice.

Students employ **dialogue** as a way of understanding other views and other interpretations.

They engage in **reflection** in order to draw meaningful connections among their experiences and their own choices.

They follow **textual study** for the quality and depth of previous work people have done.

They seek **integration** of different kinds of knowledge, to understand how the same phenomenon may have widely different meanings when seen through different lenses.

They pursue **active experience** in the field, to ground their learning in real-life practice.

They create **self-determined goals** for learning in order to discover inspiration within themselves.

They practice **skills of healthy living**, so that their developing core awareness can gain full expression in their careers.

They consider the **social influences** upon their choices and how those influences cultivate a sense of personal value.

Through these various modes of learning, we can draw students toward personally meaningful experiences in school, which will in turn guide them to greater success and achievement in whatever they choose to undertake. In a wider sense, we are creating a true learning community, in which everyone has the opportunity to discover and grow.

## The Personal Journey

A journey is a movement from one place to another. It usually takes place over a long period of time. The word comes from the middle English “journee,” meaning a day. In the journey of a day, the sun seems to travel from one end of the sky to the other. The day begins with light emerging from the darkness and ends as the light fades away. This darkness is like an unanswered question, inviting us to explore both the roots of our beginning and the implications of our destiny.

So while a journey may seem initially like the marking of time, it really signifies the experience of time. It is much more than a way to get somewhere. If all you need to do in life is to arrive at the end, you might as well crawl immediately into your deathbed and save a lot of trouble. You know that life is more than that. You understand that getting to the end will not satisfy you unless you pass through something transformative along the way.

The same principle applies to education. How do you know that you have learned something worthwhile? How do you know as you leave an experience that it was meaningful, or that it will truly serve you later? Sometimes you do not know; these are the journeys that you might have wished to avoid! Sometimes you only discover after years of further experience what learning you have actually gained. Sometimes, tragically, you regret the journeys that you did not take, out of fear or ignorance or willful refusal, or even out of the narrow expectations of the world around you.

In education, the journey begins with questions that really matter. Our own questions matter. They can be more than intellectual and can lie beyond words. A child can be fascinated by the flow of water. A baby can wonder at the sound of a passing train. The real questions begin less with words and more with a stirring of the heart.

In education, the journey begins with questions that really matter... the real questions begin less with words and more with a stirring of the heart.

Since the heart is best heard in quiet and stillness, the journey also begins alone. Every student must eventually confront the fact that no growth and no learning can happen through the efforts of other people. Children learn to read because they decide to try, and they come back repeatedly to the task. We may have plenty of company in the learning process, but it happens in our own minds, with our own strides forward. The more we can listen to ourselves, the more of our journey we can understand.

While the journey begins alone, it continues in relationship with others. We have so much to learn, and so many willing teachers around us, in our friends and family, in our world community, in nature, and in our schools. When the spark of desire ignites, nothing can stop the flame, and it will burn on until its fuel is exhausted. As each journey comes to an end, we have a sorting and remembering process to undertake. What has happened since that first stirring of the heart? Where has it taken us? How will this experience inform the next? As the sun of travel descends, we return to the comfort of our own wondering, imagining the possibilities for our next quest.

## The Program

As a school, we encourage that spirit of the journey. We define knowledge as any discovery that has changed us. Such knowledge is sometimes hard to achieve. Students can have difficulty finding their own spark of inspiration, whether because of their temperament, or because of a life that has denied them opportunities. For all students we provide a framework to guide them in designing their own personal journeys.

The Journeys program represents 30-70% of a student's work in our school. This range depends on each student's goals and choices. We believe in the value of this program for all students, as it encourages them to become self-directed learners. We aim to give each student the skills and habits needed to learn

throughout their lives.

Every journey contains five components: planning, study, acting, reflecting, and sharing. In the planning segment, the student and advisor make direct contact with the necessary people and create an outline for the activity. The study segment involves a multidisciplinary research project that gives this journey a context. A study on forest preservation, for example, might include research on tree biology, naturalist literature, local history, and logging economics. The acting segment means some physical engagement with the world beyond the school's walls, either in partnership with another organization or through a project that the student designs. The reflecting segment asks the student to form and describe ideas about this experience, in writing and in other media. The sharing segment involves a presentation of one's accomplishments and discoveries to a school audience. This part of the journey calls the student back into the school community so that others can learn from the experience; it makes the individual growth a matter of community growth.

We encourage most journeys to blend work in both the sciences and the humanities. Some examples follow to show how this is done. The entire process is first modeled for students by prepared journeys like these, courses of integrated study with all the components we expect.

Two examples of predesigned personal journeys follow here.

## Personal Journey - The Transmission of Life

Questions: How does life perpetuate itself? What are its basic functions? What is the relationship between an organism and the environment?

Disciplines:

history — discoveries in cellular biology

science — cell reproduction, genetic inheritance

social — the learning of cultural behavior, the ideal of selfhood

literature — *Lives of a Cell*, *Dragonsong*, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Hamlet*, *Go and Come Back*

art — *Lovers in Art*, Bach fugues, symphonic themes

personal — attitudes toward hygiene and disease, inheritance of traits and abilities

One of the distinctions of living organisms is their ability to recreate themselves. In this Journey, students explore the idea of self-creation in various ways. Cell reproduction is a cornerstone of study in biology - how cells replicate in both sustainable and unsustainable ways. We study the history of cellular biology as it grew through technological improvements and theoretical revisions - the idea that life cannot arise spontaneously, for example. We examine the pivotal discoveries and how they transformed society's awareness of health, medicine, and hygiene. We consider also our own personal attitudes and behaviors around these issues, trying to identify the assumptions we make when talking about disease, cleanliness, and microbes in our bodies.

We observe cell mitosis in lab experiments, and we participate in volunteer support at a cancer research lab. In the field of genetic inheritance, we duplicate some of Mendel's famous experiments, tracing the path of genetic succession. We look at modern research into genetic predictors of behavior and intelligence and consider the ethical implications of such knowledge. We use reflective journaling to examine the traits, behaviors, and attitudes that we may have inherited or absorbed from our biological roots. We formulate a personal philosophy about the relationship between our nature, our environment, and our sense of self.

Our readings include the work of the acclaimed Lewis Thomas, who applies microbiology knowledge to organized systems and human behavior. This leads us to the idea of social and cultural reproduction: how groups tend to replicate their own codes of behavior and response, and what motivates that process. We consider ethnographic research into the transmission of cultural values (specifically the ideal of selfhood). We read diverse works on social learning, in fantasy (*Dragonsong*) and social fiction (*To Kill a*

*Mockingbird*).

We also turn to the study of the self as a dynamic organism, dividing and renewing itself in response to outside demands. Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* gives us the image of a person divided from herself by racism and emotional trauma, and the strategies of survival that she learns to employ. Shakespeare's *Hamlet* depicts a character divided by fear and ambivalence, and tragically unable to move toward renewal.

In the arts we look at depictions of love and human connection, seeing both the unity and the division implied by these relationships. We ask ourselves what happens to the psyche when we give love to others in a way that leads to the formation of family. How is the self both preserved and transformed? In music we consider the aspect of theme and replication, studying Western works such as Bach fugues and the symphonic tradition, and studying Eastern styles with corresponding elements. At the end of this rich journey we try to articulate or represent what wisdom we have gained about self-creation and the perpetuation of life.

## Personal Journey - The Formation of Alliances

Questions: How is a unified group created from individuals? What are the human tendencies supporting and disrupting this process? What are the ways in which communication and decision making are managed?

Disciplines:

history – the United Nations

science – physiology of human contact, body language, neurology of communication

social – psychology of group behavior, mass intelligence, unified government in various cultures

literature – (the group, communicating) *The Chosen*, *The Chocolate War*, *The Crucible*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Persepolis*

art – propaganda art, individual vs. group in art

personal – friendships, conflict, marriage, harmonious and challenging social situations

We live in a social world. Our long history is a continuous exploration of the ways in which people can interact, learn from each other, influence each other, join together in agreement, and divide in conflict. In this Journey, we examine the forces and tendencies that hold people together and that drive them apart. We spend time volunteering in conflict resolution, mediation, or collaborative initiatives, or international cooperation. Our historical topic is the evolution of the United Nations as an international body trying to represent all the peoples of the world. We consider the specific motivations and obstacles behind this process, noting the role that massive war played in helping people understand the value of such an institution. We look for other examples of unified governments in various cultures. We also pay attention to the role of technology in international communication.

This history leads us in a general way to the psychology of group behavior. How do people act differently as individuals and as groups? How do they use language, visual imagery, metaphor, symbolism, story, and gesture to communicate? We study the physiology of human contact and body language. We look at the neurology of communication – how the physical organism changes in response to the presence and behavior of other people.

We use literature to deepen our sense of the issues involved in communication and group dynamics. We read *The Chosen* for its commentary on silence, friendship across boundaries, and charismatic leadership. We read *The Chocolate War* to reflect on authority and dissent, manipulation, conformity, social fears, and group intelligence. Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* raises similar issues, with the added elements of supernatural concerns, religious justification, and moral integrity. Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* helps us think about the raw, irrational nature of human emotions and how they affect social experience. But before dismissing groups as inherently stupid, we also read *The Wisdom of Crowds* with its analysis of how groups can display greater intelligence than their individual members.

Our study of art and music shows how art can be used to motivate, inspire, frighten, or comfort people. We look at groups portrayed in art and group experiences of art. Music, especially, contains a deeply harmonizing influence. In journal writing, we think about the ways in which art modifies our social experience. Throughout this study, we draw connections to our personal experiences of relationships. Our friendships tell us about the ways people form empathic bonds. Both the harmonious and challenging situations in our lives can help us to understand global dynamics. We also think about the implications for marriage and family life. We ask ourselves what needs we have for a sense of personal space, and how our culture informs them. Our own interactions as a group can become a source of conversation. At the end of the Journey, we create a presentation on the relationship we perceive between personal human dynamics and the formation of cooperative political organizations.

## Human Life Studies

While education is often seen as preparation for a public career, we see it also as the chance to develop a healthy and balanced understanding of life. A successful career is worthless without the habits and skills needed to enjoy it. How should we maintain our bodies for a constant flow of energy? How should we acquire, save, and spend money? What creates a happy marriage? What qualities will help us attract friendship and support wherever we go?

These questions are addressed in both a subjective and objective way, through an ongoing series of discussions, studies, and experiences. The curriculum is exploratory in nature, following the events in students' lives and in the community. Students are invited to examine and develop their own personal choices,

and to support each other in those conscious choices. Students watch films, conduct interviews, and design their own experiments to discover what lessons life has for them.

These are the major topics investigated:

- human development
- physical health and diet
- social communication and sexuality
- mind-altering substances
- media and advertising
- financial management
- career paths
- marriage and family
- alternative lifestyles
- research on happiness and fulfillment

## The Wisdom Journey

Our school strives for religious and cultural diversity. We believe that learning happens when people meet the unfamiliar and make it more familiar. Through reflective contact with other people, we can revise our perceptions of them and broaden our sense of how the world can appear. We can also look more closely at what we believe and hold dear, understanding that the reality around us is truly mysterious, and unfit for simple categories. We can come to love difference among people and ideas, as much as we might admire different kinds of flowers in a garden.

The wisdom journey is an opportunity to gain awareness of how some ancient traditions have addressed the basic existential questions of life.

Who are we, and why are we here? What should we do with the consciousness and power given to us? What purpose can we find for our lives? Faith is not a substitute for intellectual understanding. It is a necessary part of one's commitment to life, and a foundation for inner peace and fulfillment. We cannot determine through objective analysis what purpose lies behind the universe; we can only reach toward a sense of purpose through intuition and deep listening.

There exist five major religious traditions in wide practice around the world: Hinduism, Judaism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam. These five categories contain many variants.

Other wisdom traditions have grown alongside them: tribal philosophies, denominations, charismatic groups, and integrative movements. One of our first discoveries in the field of religion is that it is always evolving and redefining itself in response to changes in the world.

Our students experience the wisdom traditions through their scriptures, ceremonies, stories, music, and art. We also look to the lives of spiritual leaders to give us a personal connection to the movements they represent. A multifaith holiday calendar gives us many opportunities to connect our knowledge with events in the community, and we gain some practical experience through visits by various guests and trips to nearby congregations.

**The wisdom journey is an opportunity to gain awareness of how some ancient traditions have addressed the basic existential questions of life.**

The school's philosophy is based on its three principles of meaning, relationship, and self-awareness, and it could be stated this way:

“Meaningful understanding of the world is reached

through conscious relationships and purposeful self-inquiry.” We neither accept nor reject any particular doctrine of faith, maintaining instead that the truth lies beyond all definition. We have faith in the human capacity to question and in the possibility of realizations beyond all our previous experience. We are a community where all are welcomed, and those who are prepared to spend their lives in the quest for wisdom will find an especially suitable home with us.

## Evaluation of the Journey

Any system of authentic assessment should be based on the actual intended goals of the curriculum. In other words, we should assess students for their ability to understand and demonstrate the values of our school. Any other assessment will distract our students from what we actually want them to learn.

Our school philosophy is based on three concepts: meaning, relationship, and self-knowledge. These are rich ideas with many layers, not reducible to formulas or simple judgements. These are the core capacities that we aim for our students to

achieve. A person discovers *meaning* by seeing beyond the immediate and observable to the deeper implications. She can then find parallels, metaphors, or echoes of one situation in another situation. One demonstrates a grasp of meaning by sustained inquiry and analysis, pursuing the same idea further and further until it seems to touch everything else in one's experience. The skills of writing, verbal expression, visual representation, listening, logical analysis, organization, persistence, and subtle perception are all central to the practice of meaning.

*Relationship* requires the willingness to relate to the unfamiliar in order that it become familiar. A student establishes relationship by reaching in his mind toward other people and other realms of knowledge. He does not leave a book, an experiment, or an idea to stand on its own, but seeks constantly to connect it with other books, other experiments, and other ideas. He sees knowledge as a network of experiences, held together by the social fabric of the world. In relationship we practice skills of communication, empathy, experiment, leadership, cooperation, and imagination.

The pursuit of *self-awareness* results in a set of meanings and relationships that transform one's own life. We form self-awareness by looking for what really matters to us. We apply what we learn to ourselves and the choices we make. We do not distance ourselves from the world, but see the world as a mirror for our own abilities, desires, and weaknesses. We also learn to distinguish between our perception of things and the things themselves. To develop self-awareness requires the skills of reflection, patience, self-control, humor, acceptance, stillness, and courage.

Our school philosophy is based on three concepts: meaning, relationship, and self-awareness. These are rich ideas with many layers, not reducible to formulas or simple judgements. These are the core capacities that we aim for our students to achieve.

Every activity is an opportunity to apply these concepts. Upon the completion of a significant piece of work (a course, a Personal Journey, a semester of study), we ask students to rate their own development and performance of all three principles. We use a scale of 0 to 3, in which 1 means satisfactory growth, 2 means exemplary growth, and 3 means

extraordinary growth. Alongside these scores are a detailed explanation of the factors involved in choosing them. The teacher/advisor also assesses the student independently. We aim for student and teacher assessments to coincide most of the time; when they do not, we investigate why. Both of these assessments become part of the student's transcript.

Over time, these scores can be averaged to create a combined measure of development in each area of meaning, relationship, and self-knowledge. We discourage the over-emphasis on any simple scale, which conceals the colorful windings of human life, and we also recognize the need for clear evaluation of a student's work, for the benefit of school and student alike.