SPIRITUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION
A National Study of College Students' Search for Meaning and Purpose

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Why Spirituality Deserves a Central Place in Higher Education[1]

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Before explaining the assertion put forward in the title of this essay, let me first try to clarify what I mean by "spirituality". Since the term covers a lot of territory and means different things to different people, there's little point in trying to develop a precise definition. Instead, let me simply lay out the general territory and range of things that the word suggests to me.

To begin with, spirituality points to our *interiors*, by which I mean our subjective life (as contrasted to the objective domain of observable behavior and material objects that you can point to and measure directly). In other words, the spiritual domain has to do with human *consciousness*—what we experience privately in our subjective awareness. Second, spirituality involves our qualitative or *affective* experiences at least as much as it does our reasoning or logic. More specifically, spirituality has to do with the values that we hold most dear, our sense of who we are and where we come from, our beliefs about why we are here—the meaning and purpose that we see in our work and our life—and our sense of connectedness to each other and to the world around us. Spirituality can also have to do with aspects of our experience that are not easy to define or talk about, such things as intuition, inspiration, the mysterious, and the mystical. Within this very broad umbrella, virtually everyone qualifies as a spiritual being, and it's my hope that everyone—regardless of their belief systems—can find some personal value and educational relevance in the concept.

Education and Human Consciousness

One of the most remarkable things about the human consciousness is that in addition to experiencing thoughts and feelings, each of us can also *observe* our thoughts and feelings as they arise in our consciousness. Why shouldn't cultivating this ability to observe your own mind in action—becoming more self-aware or simply more "conscious"—be one of the central purposes of education?

If you stop to think about it for a minute, it's difficult to see how most of our contemporary domestic and world problems can ever be resolved without a substantial increase in our individual and collective self-awareness. Self-awareness and self-understanding, of course, are necessary prerequisites to our ability to understand others and to resolve conflicts. This basic truth—which lies at the heart of our difficulty in dealing effectively with problems of violence, poverty, crime, divorce, substance abuse, and religious and ethnic conflict that continue to plague our country and our world—was also dramatically and tragically illustrated in the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon building.

Even a cursory look at our educational system makes it clear that the relative amount of attention that we devote to the exterior and interior aspects of our lives has gotten way out of balance. Thus, while we are justifiably proud of our "outer" development in fields such as science, medicine, technology, and commerce, we have increasingly come to neglect our "inner" development—the sphere of values and beliefs, emotional maturity, moral development, spirituality, and self-understanding.

What is most ironic about all of this is that while many of the great literary and philosophical traditions that constitute the core of a liberal education are grounded in the maxim, "know thyself," the development of self-awareness receives very little attention in our schools and colleges, and almost no attention in public discourse in general or in the media in particular. This imbalance between our inner and outer development has enormous implications for the future not only of our society, but also of our world. And, as I have already suggested, self-understanding is fundamental to our capacity to understand others: our spouses, partners, parents, children, friends, coworkers, and neighbors, not to mention people of different races, religions, cultures, and nationalities. If we lack self-understanding—the capacity to see ourselves clearly and honestly and to understand why we feel and act as we do—then how can we ever expect to understand others?

Students, Curriculum, and Instruction

In exploring the connection between spirituality and higher education, a good way to start is to take a look at the interior lives of our students. If we look at how our students' *values* have been changing during recent decades[2], the good news is they have become strong supporters of both gender and racial equity and of students' rights in general, and most recently they have become much stronger supporters of gay rights. The bad news is that they have become much less engaged both academically and politically, much more focused on making a lot of money, and much less likely to concern themselves with "developing a meaningful philosophy of life." These contrasting values—the material and the existential—have literally traded places since the early 1970s, a time when developing a meaningful philosophy of life was the number one value for students. Today "being very

well off financially" is the top value, while developing a meaningful philosophy of life has dropped way down on the list. In short, a focus on the spiritual interior has been replaced by a focus on the material exterior.

It's probably safe to say that this shift in values is a reflection of changes not just in the academy, but also in the larger society. At the societal level, our research suggests that the ascendance of television during the 1950s and 1960s —with its wall-to-wall message of acquisitiveness and its near-total absence of reflectiveness—had been a major cause of these value shifts. Today, of course, we have many other kinds of electronic distractions to insure that there won't be a reversal of these changes. In higher education, our colleges and universities have become larger, more acquisitive, and increasingly impersonal, as exemplified by the rapid increase in commuting and part-time attendance, not to mention the current burgeoning market in so-called "distance" education. In the academy we've also seen the ascendance of business and natural science—with their exclusive focus on material exteriors—and the parallel demise of the humanities, the very fields whose priority is (or at least ought to be) our interiors. My own field of psychology—in its eagerness to emulate the hard sciences—long ago separated itself from philosophy and, for a period of time—during the heyday of behaviorism—argued vigorously that there was *no such thing* as the interior. Cognitive science and neuroscience have subsequently tried to acknowledge the existence of a human interior reality, but view it primarily as an epiphenomenon of physical processes. (Huston Smith[3] has correctly pointed out that this particular reductionist view about human consciousness is really metaphysics rather than science.)

Students, Curriculum, and Pedagogy

Putting more emphasis on students' interior development has enormous implications for how we approach student learning and development. In most institutions today the primary focus is on what students *do*: how well they perform on classroom exercises and examinations, whether they follow the rules and regulations, how many credits they receive, and so on. On those relatively rare occasions when we concern ourselves with the student's interior life, we tend to focus almost exclusively on the development of so-called "cognitive" functions like memorizing, quantitative reasoning, and critical thinking. And on those even rarer occasions when we venture into the so-called "affective" realm, we pretty much limit ourselves to assessing the student's level of *motivation*. Similarly, while we invest a good deal of our pedagogical effort in developing the student's cognitive, technical, and job skills, we pay little if any attention to the development of "affective" skills such as empathy, cooperation, leadership, interpersonal understanding, and self-understanding. As I have already suggested, this almost total neglect of self-understanding is ironic, given the fact that the great literature that makes up the bulk of what we have come to call a "liberal education" argues that self-understanding or self-knowledge lies at the core of human development. Whatever happened to "Know Thyself"?

This narrow focus on cognition is reflected even more clearly in the way in which psychologists have approached our interiors in their research: they focus on such things as "artificial intelligence" and "cognitive science," as if to imply that the only things about human consciousness that really matter can be summed up in words like thinking and cognition.

The problem, of course, is that this very timid approach to looking at our interiors does such violence to the rich complexity of human consciousness and the human experience that what finally gets studied bears little relationship to what you and I call consciousness. The reality of conscious awareness is not simply that we can think and reason; on the contrary, the essence of being a sentient human is that we can *feel*, that we can experience joy and contentment, frustration and excitement, curiosity and love.

Recently, in connection with a book I've just completed on human consciousness[4], I took on the somewhat daunting task of reading through every word in a medium-sized English dictionary. What I was looking for were all of the different terms that our culture has developed for labeling our affective or feelings states. I eventually came up with a list of more than a thousand different words, which only begins to do justice to the incredibly rich diversity of feeling states which can arise in the human awareness. When you contemplate the different *combinations* of these feeling states that are possible in any given moment of awareness, the numerical possibilities for varying feeling states are staggering.

What was perhaps most surprising in my search for feeling words was the discovery that there are several dozen different affective states that have to do with *thinking*. Let me share just a brief sampling of these terms, and as I run down the list, ask yourself, "Is this something about the students' interior that a classroom teacher should be concerned about? **Surprised, doubtful, focussed, reflective, skeptical, comprehending, mindful, astonished, unsure, interested, confused, amazed, curious,** and—the feeling state that most frustrates those of us who teach—**boredom**. Clearly, this list makes it hard to argue that there is any such thing as "pure" cognition that can be studied in isolation from affect; on the contrary, it would appear that our thoughts and our reasoning are almost always taking place in some kind of affective "bed" or context.

Faculty, Administrators, and Institutions

For many years now I've been interested in educational transformation and reform, and nowhere is the importance of this issue of "the inner versus the outer" more obvious than in the case of our attempts to change institutions. When we talk about educational reform in the academy, for example, we usually focus heavily on exterior "structures" such as programs, policies, curricula, requirements, resources and facilities. As a consequence, we ordinarily give little attention to the "interior" of the institution, by which I mean the

collective or shared beliefs and values of the faculty that constitute the "culture" of the institution. Our research on institutional change and transformation suggests strongly that any effort to change structures has little chance of success if it ignores our collective interiors or culture. In other words, changing our institutions and programs necessarily requires us to change the academic culture as well.

A similar imbalance can be seen in the way we approach faculty development, where we typically think in terms of external matters such as scholarly activities, teaching techniques, and service to the institution and to the community. The internal aspects of the faculty member's development – values, beliefs, hopes, fears and frustrations – get relatively little attention.

It is probably important to acknowledge that in many respects the way we conduct higher education is simply a reflection of the larger society. It is probably no exaggeration to say that the modern world, and the United States in particular, has in recent years become increasingly focused on the external aspects of society: economics, acquisitiveness, competitiveness, etc. to the point where the human condition and the quality of life is judged primarily in terms of things. Higher education similarly tends to judge itself in materialistic terms: enrollments, funding, the test scores of our students, the publication record of our faculty, and our rankings in popularity polls.

Partly as a response to this external/materialistic emphasis and to the fragmentation that it generates, I see a movement gradually emerging in higher education where many academics find themselves actively searching for meaning and trying to discover ways to make their lives and their institutions more whole. I think this movement reflects a growing concern with recovering a sense of meaning in American society more generally. What is really happening, I think, is that the growing unease about our institutions and our society has led some of us to start talking about the "S-word". The particular "spiritual" questions that give rise to these concerns encompass a broad set of issues:

- How do we achieve a greater sense of community and shared purpose in higher education?
- How can we provide greater opportunities for individual and institutional renewal?
- What are the causes of the division and fragmentation that so many academics experiences in their institutional and personal lives?
- What does it mean to be authentic, both in the classroom and in our dealings with colleagues?
- What are some of the practices and traditions that make it difficult for us to be authentic in an academic setting?
- What are some of the disconnections that higher education is experiencing in relation to the larger society? How might we better serve the public good?
- How can we help our students achieve a greater sense of meaning and purpose in their academic and personal lives?

Such questions make it clear that "spiritual" issues cover a wide range of questions, and that each person will view his or her spirituality in a unique way. For some academics, religious beliefs may indeed form the core of their spirituality; for others, such beliefs may play little or no part. *How* one defines his or her spirituality or, if you prefer, sense of meaning and purpose in life, is not the issue. The important point is that academia has for far too long encouraged us to lead fragmented and inauthentic lives, where we act either as if we are not spiritual beings, or as if our spiritual side is irrelevant to our vocation or work. Under these conditions, our work becomes divorced from our most deeply felt values and we hesitate to discuss issues of meaning, purpose, authenticity, wholeness, and fragmentation with our colleagues. At the same time, we likewise discourage our students from engaging these same issues among themselves and with us.

We need to recognize that our difficulties in achieving a greater sense of wholeness and spirituality in higher education have been exacerbated by many competing stresses: the need to secure adequate resources vs. the need to preserve institutional autonomy and academic freedom; the commitment to advance the frontiers of knowledge vs. the commitment to educate students well and to serve the community; the commitment to academic excellence vs. the commitment to educational opportunity and equity; and the quest for individual professional development and recognition vs. the desire to nurture and to sustain an intellectual community. In recent years these conflicts have been exacerbated by declining resources and public pressures for greater "accountability" and—at a more personal level—by the divisions and tensions that often emerge between the family and work. These stresses and tensions have serious implications for the academic community, not only for those of us whose lives have become increasingly fragmented and disconnected, but also for our students.

The Fetzer Dialogues

In recognition of these problems, the Fetzer Institute a few years ago convened a series of retreat meetings where a diverse group of academics was encouraged to explore issues of meaning, purpose and spirituality in the context of higher education. Although I was initially skeptical about the value of such meetings, it took only one of these sessions to convince me that we have an enormous amount to gain by engaging these issues openly with our colleagues. (As a former skeptic, all I can say is, "Try it, you'll like it!) I have been privileged to be a member of the steering group for these Fetzer dialogues, and the group—now formally known as The Initiative for Authenticity and Spirituality in Higher Education (IASHE)—has persisted in its determination to put more focus on issues of spirituality in higher education by continuing to meet and discuss these issues. To bolster these efforts IASHE recently joined with two other organizations—Education as Transformation (EasT) and The Community for Integrative Learning and Action (CILA)—to form The Consortium on Spirituality in Higher Education.

One outcome of our Fetzer dialogues was an in-depth study of faculty members from four diverse colleges and universities.[5] Personal interviews with randomly selected faculty from each institution revealed that virtually all of these faculty members were willing and able to speak openly about the role of either "spirituality" or "meaning and purpose" in their professional and personal lives. Many respondents, especially in the research universities, expressed their spirituality through their scholarly work. Other avenues of expression included teaching and working with students, community service, social activism, church activities, and child-rearing.

When it comes to the issue of authenticity, many faculty members report conflicts between their own values and those of their institutions, the most frequent being the devaluing of work with students in order to fulfill expectations for research and scholarly achievement. Other areas of inauthenticity involve performing administrative work that they see as a waste of time, sacrificing personal research interests in order to carry out studies which will receive collegial approval, not fulfilling family responsibilities in order to meet institutional expectations, and not giving colleagues honest criticism of their work.

We also found that the large majority of faculty are experiencing a considerable amount of stress on the job. Much of this stress stems from the perception that there is simply not enough time available to perform well all of the diverse tasks and meet the many responsibilities that are associated with being a faculty member. One of the difficulties with academic life, of course, is that the quantitative aspects of our job expectations are never well-defined: how much research is enough? How much teaching and mentoring of students is enough? How much university service is enough, and how much professional activity is enough? For faculty who take their responsibilities very seriously—and this would include the vast majority—this "quantitative dilemma" causes them to work long hours and to feel as if they could (and should) be "doing more."

Our clear impression from this study—that college faculty are eager to discuss issues of meaning, purpose, and spirituality—has been strongly reinforced by our experience at several national conferences where sessions have been convened to discuss these same issues.

Inspiration and Creativity

If you spend even a little bit of time in serious contemplation of what goes on in your conscious mind, it quickly becomes obvious that there must be another completely hidden part of the mind that does most of the work. Whatever you prefer to call this "other" mind—the unconscious, the nonconscious mind, the preconscious, or whatever—its capabilities and its power are nothing short of awesome. It not only serves as a repository for all of our memories, motives, concepts, and beliefs, but it is also the source of our intuition, inspiration, creativity, and sense of spirituality.

When we consider those vitally important human qualities that are implied by words like intuition, inspiration, and creativity, we are coming pretty close to what some people refer to as the "mystical" aspects of human experience. None other than Albert Einstein[6] has said:

"*The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true Art and Science*."

If we academics are really serious when we claim that our institutions are devoted to advancing the arts and sciences, shouldn't we do everything we can to nurture and cultivate that mysterious, nonconscious part of the human psyche from which all of our inspiration and creativity emerges? Although dictionary definitions of "intuition" vary somewhat, they generally agree on two points:

- Intuition involves a direct perception, apprehension, or "knowing" of some fact, truth, insight, or understanding.
- Intuitive knowing generally occurs without conscious reasoning.

This second quality is especially important, since we typically think of knowledge as something we either get directly through the senses—"I saw it happen"—or arrive at by means of logic and reason—"All the facts point to it." Intuitive knowing, on the other hand, typically occurs in the absence of relevant sensory information or logical reasoning.

Intuition is, of course, intimately connected to inspiration and creativity. While doing something creative can sometimes involve a good deal of logical thought or reasoning—a scientist, for example, who is attempting to devise a theory to explain certain observations—many people, especially those in the fine and performing arts, believe that thinking can actually interfere with creativity. Indeed, when you read personal accounts of what people experience in their waking consciousness during the creative process (see below), it becomes clear that intuition is almost always a part of that process.

Creativity is basically a process whereby we bring into existence something new or original. That "something" can be a creative product such as a painting, invention, essay, poem, sculpture, musical composition, dance routine, or theatrical production, but it can also be something less tangible such as a scientific theory, an idea for urban renewal, or a new way of teaching, mentoring, parenting, leading, collaborating, mediating, or serving those in need. Viewed in this way, creativity is (or should be) central to the goals of liberal learning. Indeed, *creativity is a fundamental part of human existence* or, as several people have observed, "your life is your own greatest work of art."

That creativity is closely connected to the mystical and the spiritual becomes obvious when we look at verbatim accounts of what people in various fields experience during the process of creating:

- [a painter/sculptor] "there's something flowing through you that's not you. To me, the feeling is tangible proof of the existence of spirit: something we can tap into that's beyond ourselves and our senses. The highest goal we can aspire to is to be transmitter of that."[7]
- [a choreographer] "This happens spontaneously. Movements are not intellectually contrived but are evoked by emotional images."[8]
- [a writer] I think creativity is spiritual…a synonym for inspiration…suddenly it comes clear to me what I need to say and how to say it. I feel awe when this happens, it's an inspiring experience…I'm tempted to say it comes from God. For me this is an experience of divine self-disclosure."[9]
- [composer Johannes Brahms] "I …feel that a higher power is working through me…It cannot be done merely by will power working through the conscious mind…I immediately feel vibrations that thrill my whole being…Those vibrations assume the forms of distinct mental images…the ideas flow in upon me, directly from God…measure by measure the finished product is revealed to me…I have to be in a semi-trance condition to get such results… the conscious mind is in temporary abeyance and the subconscious is in control, for it is through the subconscious mind…that the inspiration comes. I have to be careful, however, not to lose consciousness, otherwise the ideas fade away."[10]
- [composer Richard Struass] "When in my most inspired moods, I have definite compelling visions, involving a higher selfhood. I feel at such moments that I am tapping the source of Infinite and Eternal energy from which you and I and all things proceed. Religion calls it God."[11]

What are we to make of such accounts? Since so much of what we do in academe is based on rationality, logic, and analytical thought, what are the implications of such accounts for higher education? While some academics may be inclined to view the mystical and the spiritual as "irrational," the processes of intuition and creativity are, in fact, more *trans*rational than *ir*rational. The point here is that the mystical or spiritual aspects of our conscious experience are by no means contrary to, or otherwise opposed to, rationality; rather, they *transcend* rationality. Thus, when a composer writes a great piece of music, the inspiration that gives rise to the music is a trans- or non-rational process, but in the process of committing the new music to paper the composer does not therefore ignore all of the rational and logical rules of harmony and theory. In the same way, the painter does not ignore the rational rules of color mixing or perspective, nor does the novelist ignore the rational rules of grammar and sentence structure.

Toward a More Spiritual Academe

How, then, do we begin to give greater emphasis to these neglected aspects of our conscious experience? As it happens, there are several recent developments in higher education which suggest that we may be ready to pay more attention to our inner lives and those of our students. One of these is the movement to redirect the attention of faculty and staff away from *teaching* and more in the direction of *learning*. Another closely related trend is the shift in emphasis away from the individual teacher and learner toward learning

communities. While some of the reformers who have been promoting these changes might wonder at the suggestion that they are advocating a more "spiritual" approach to pedagogy, these innovations are certainly headed in the right direction: to shift our attention away from what we academics *do* toward a greater concern not only for the interiors of our students, but also toward seeing the entire educational process in a more holistic way. These reforms thus redirect our attention more in the direction of the human connectedness that is so basic, not just to the learning process, but also to spirituality. The people involved in these movements, it seems to me, are natural allies for those of us who would like to see spiritual issues given a more central place in our institutions.

Another promising trend is the growing popularity of "Freshman 101" courses. In this case, we are encouraging students to look at their education in a more holistic way, and to make deeper connections between their academic work and their sense of meaning and purpose in life.

One final set of potential allies are the growing numbers of academics who are involved in the field of *service learning*. Longitudinal research on students suggests that this unique kind of pedagogy comes closer than anything we've looked at in the past four decades to being a pedagogical panacea: almost all aspects of the student's academic, personal, and moral development are favorably influenced by participation in service learning, and the teachers themselves are also often transformed by teaching such courses.[12]

Two aspects of the service learning experience appear to be especially relevant to issues of spirituality. First, the entire process is built around *connectedness*, not only between the students and the service recipients but also among the students themselves. Students are also able to make important conceptual connections between the service experience and the theoretical material of the course, as well as between their own academic work and their future careers. Research shows that three of the most powerful effects of service are (a) to strengthen students' commitment to the community (b) to enhance their sense of personal empowerment, and (c) to steer them towards careers in service fields. Moreover, the pedagogical key to an effective service learning experience appears to be the use of personal *reflection*: what did the service experience mean to you, not only in terms of the academic content of the course, but also in terms of who you are, why you are a student, and what kind of life you want to lead? The most powerful service learning experiences turn out to be those that combine individual reflection—keeping journals, writing integrative essays about the service experience, etc.—with group sessions, where students collectively reflect on the meaning of their service experience.

This growing awareness of the importance of spirituality in higher education was recently underscored by the Templeton Foundation through its award of a $1.9 million grant to UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute to support a large-scale longitudinal study of spiritual development in college undergraduates. A pilot study of 3,700 students enrolled at

46 colleges and universities was initiated in Spring 2003, and a full-scale assessment of 90,000 students enrolling at 150 institutions will be initiated in fall 2004.[13]

Conclusion

Perhaps the most important thing to keep in mind about spirituality is that is touches directly on our sense of *community*. More than anything else, giving spirituality a more central place in our institutions will serve to strengthen our sense of connectedness with each other, our students, and our institutions. This enrichment of our sense of community will not only go a long way toward overcoming the sense of fragmentation and alienation that so many of us now feel, but will also help our students to lead more meaningful lives as engaged citizens, loving partners and parents, and caring neighbors.

Let me close by once again quoting Albert Einstein:

> *"A human being is a part of the whole called the 'universe,' a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings, as something separated from the rest, a kind of optical delusion of...consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in all its beauty. Nobody is able to achieve this completely but the striving for such achievement is in itself part of the liberation and a foundation for inner security."*

Portions of this talk are to appear as a part of an article to be published in Liberal Education.

Endnotes

[1]Keynote address presented at the conference, "Spirituality as a Legitimate Concern for Higher Education," November 5, 2002, SUNY-University at Buffalo. Adapted from the opening keynote address presented at the Conference, "Spirituality and Learning," San Francisco, April 18, 2002.

[2]A. W. Astin. "The changing American college student: thirty-year trends, 1966-1996." *The Review of Higher Education*, Vol. 21, No. 2, pp 115-135.

[3]H Smith. (2001) *Why Religion Matters*. San Francisco: Harper.

[4]*Mindworks: Becoming More Conscious in an Unconscious World*. Los Angeles: Unpublished Manuscript.

[5]A. W. Astin & H. S. Astin, with the assistance of A. L. Antonio, J. Astin, & C. M. Cress. *Meaning, Purpose and Spirituality in the Lives of College Faculty*. Los Angeles: Higher Education Research Institute (1999).

[6]"What I believe." *Forum*, 1930.

[7]D. Patrick Miller. "The Clear Path to Creativity: An interview with Dan Wakefield." *The Sun*, April 1997, p. 7.

[8]Ibid, p. 164.

[9]Dan Wakefield. *Creating from the Spirit: A Path to Creative Power in Art and Life*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1996, p. 212.

[10]Arthur M. Abell. *Talks with Great Composers*. New York: Philosophical Library, 1987, pp. 4-6.

[11]Ibid, p 86.

[12]A.W. Astin & L. J. Sax. "How undergraduates are affected by service participation." *Journal of College Student Development*, Vol 39, No. 3, May/June 1998; A. W. Astin, L. J. Sax. & J Avalos. Long-tern effects if volunteerism during the undergraduate years. *The Review of Higher Education*. Vol. 22, No. 2, Winter 1999, pp. 187-202; A.W. Astin, L. J. Vogelgesang, E.K. Ikeda, & J.A Yee. *How Service Learning Affects Students: Executive Summary*. Los Angeles: Higher Education Research Institute, UCLA, 2000.

[13]*For further details visit the project's website: **www.spirituality.ucla.edu***