The Connection of Spirituality to Culturally Responsive Teaching in Higher Education

By Elizabeth J. Tisdell

I have been working in higher education for more than 20 years. Since completing my doctorate in 1992, I have been a professor of adult education teaching and conducting research that seeks to challenge systems of oppression based on race, gender, and culture in higher and adult education. My earlier years, however, were spent working as a campus minister and as a math and religion instructor of adult students returning to higher education. All my work as an adult has been informed by my own spiritual search for meaning, for justice making, and for healing and wholeness, both within myself and in others. The fact that I worked for the Catholic Church as a campus minister from 1979-1989 is only incidental to my story as an educator. For me, spirituality is far broader than the Catholicism of my youth, and goes to far greater depths of my being than either the positive aspects of ritual or the negative aspects of sexism and cultural imperialism experienced within the Catholic Church. Yet, the Catholicism of my youth, and the fact that I grew up in an Irish-American, Roman Catholic family, is an important part of my cultural story. It provides some context as to why I connect my religious background to my work in culture. When teaching about cultural issues, and when trying to examine ways of challenging race, gender, and cultural oppression (as well as other forms of oppression), I believe it is important for educators to make their own cultural story visible, and the systems of privilege as well as oppression that inform that story.

While there has always been a spiritual underpinning to my work in emancipatory education, I have only recently included my own spirituality as part of my work as a professor. I opted to do so primarily because I learned from experience that it is impossible to really teach about social transformation within systems of oppression based on race, gender, culture, sexual orientation solely through rational modes of thought, or how people "critically reflect on assumptions" (as Jack Mezirow, 1995 might suggest) despite affective dimensions to those reflections. Indeed, people have incredible emotional experiences of oppression and privilege that affect who they are and how they think. Further, many people experience recovering from and re-claiming parts of their oppressed identity as a spiritual

experience. Thus, it seems that for many, spirituality has a role to play in transformative learning, even in higher education settings, which have traditionally been the realm of rational-only modes of thought.

Researchers often study what most fascinates them, perplexes them, or gets at their underlying passion. It is because of my own fascination and the connection of spirituality to teaching for social transformation, specifically in challenging systems of oppression that I came to conduct research on how spirituality connects to cultural work. To be sure, spirituality is an important part of human experience. So is culture. In the past 20 years, there has been much discussion about dealing with culture, race, gender, class, sexual orientation in teaching for social change and greater equity in society in the higher and adult education literature, based on a variety of intersecting discourses (Sheared & Sissel, 2001), such as critical multiculturalism and culturally responsive education (Banks & Banks, 2003; Gay, 2000; Guy, 1999, Sleeter, 1996), critical feminist pedagogy (Gore, 1993; Maher & Tetreault, 1995), and engaged pedagogy (hooks, 1994, 2003) or critical pedagogy/resistance postmodernism (Giroux, 1992; Giroux & McLaren, 1994), and the literature dealing with cultural identity (Cannon, 1997; Ndura, 2004; Tatum, 1997). While each of these discourses have somewhat different but overlapping theoretical underpinnings, most are somewhat informed by the work of Brazilian activist and literacy educator, Paulo Freire (1971), a deeply spiritual man heavily influenced by the liberation theology movement of Latin America.

But thus far, the critical multicultural literature and related discourses, have given little attention to the role of spirituality in teaching. More recently, there has been a general discussion on the role of spirituality in education (Glazer, 1999), its role in teaching (Palmer, 1998), and in student development in higher education and adult learning (Astin, 2004; Bennett, 2003; Jablonski, 2001; English & Gillen, 2000; Kazanjian & Laurence, 2001; Parks, 2000). With limited exception (Tisdell, 2003; Welch, 1998), the spirituality and education literature has given little attention to the explicit connection of spirituality to culture, or to its role in culturally responsive and multicultural teaching. This is what prompted me to begin to study how spirituality informs the work of higher and adult educators who are attempting to teach for social change. Thus in what follows, I will first summarize my own research around these issues, which has been discussed with greater detail in my recent book (Tisdell, 2003). I will then briefly discuss what it means for my own practice, and how connections between spirituality and culture have informed my continued research and practice.

A research project: The role of spirituality in higher and adult educators' cultural work

I began a qualitative research project in late 1998, exploring how spirituality informs the work of higher and adult educators who are specifically teaching classes that deal with

challenging systems of oppression based on race, culture, gender, sexual orientation and/or classes that deal with adult development and learning in either higher education or community-based settings. This study was informed by the literature on spirituality and the very limited literature connecting spirituality directly to culture. Faith development theorist James Fowler's (1981) work was a significant influence upon this study by his noting that faith development is not only connected to cognitive development, but it is also a process of constructing knowledge through images, symbolism and the unconscious. Fowler's analysis, however, offered only limited discussion on the connection of spirituality to culture as it is manifest in images, symbols and unconscious processes.

In picking up on this point, U.S. Latino author, David Abalos' (1998) work served as an important theoretical underpinning to my own research. Abalos suggests that in order to deal with internalized oppression, and/or for cultural groups to initiate and sustain positive social change, it is necessary to claim and re-claim four aspects or "faces" of their cultural being: the personal face, the political face, the historical face, and the sacred face. This "sacred face" is related to the spirituality that is grounded in cultural community identity; by claiming and reclaiming images, symbols, ways of being and celebrations that are sacred to individuals and the community as a whole. Those who re-claim their sacred face and its connection to cultural identity, often re-conceptualize the work of transformation, both within themselves and their communities, as a fundamentally spiritual process. In Abalos's (1998) words, "The process of transformation takes place first of all in the individual's depths… But each of us as a person has four faces: the personal, political, historical and sacred…To cast out demons in our personal lives and in society means that we have freed our sacred face" p. 35). Most of us would probably like to "free our sacred face" in the way Abalos describes. Understanding how some higher and adult educators are attempting to do this in their own lives and with learners can offer new insight to developing culturally responsive and transformative approaches to higher and adult education.

Keeping in mind the important influences of these authors to my own work, it is important at the outset to define as clearly as possible what I mean by "spirituality". As noted elsewhere (Tisdell, 2003), based on a review of the literature and my conversations with participants in the study, my working assumptions about spirituality were the following: (1) a connection to what is discussed as the Lifeforce, God, a higher power or purpose, Great Mystery; (2) a sense of wholeness, healing, and the interconnectedness of all things; (3) meaning-making; (4) the ongoing development of one's identity (including one's cultural identity) moving toward greater authenticity; (5) how people construct knowledge through largely unconscious and symbolic processes manifested in such things as image, symbol, music which are often cultural; (6) as different, but in some cases, related to religion; and (7) spiritual experiences as surprising, formidable events in an individual's life.

There ultimately were 31 people in the study, 22 women and 9 men, including 17 people of color (6 African American, 4 Latino, 4 Asian American, 2 Native American, 1 of East Indian descent) and 14 European Americans. Criteria for participant selection were that all

participants: (1) were educators dealing with cultural issues either in higher education or as community activists; (2) have grown up and were educated in a specific religious tradition as a child; and (3) affirmed that their adult spirituality (either based on a re-appropriation of the religious tradition of their childhood, or a different spirituality) strongly motivated them to do their cultural work.

The primary means of data collection was a 1.5 to 3 hour taped interview that focused on their spiritual development over time, their cultural and individual identity development, their three most significant spiritual experiences, and their insights into how spirituality informed their educational practice. At the time of the interview, 14 of the 31 participants were tenured professors in higher education, 3 were non-tenured assistant professors, 4 were student affairs professionals, 2 were adjunct professors (as well as community activists), and 8 were community educators, trainers, and activists dealing with cultural issues. Interviews followed a shared conversation approach in order to avoid what Michelle Fine (1998) calls "othering participants". Data were analyzed according to the constant comparative method (Merriam, 1998).

Major findings of the study, while discussed in depth elsewhere (see Tisdell, 2003), focused on the role of spirituality in: (1) dealing with internalized oppression and re-claiming cultural identity; (2) mediating among multiple identities (race, gender, class, sexuality); (3) crossing cultural divides to facilitate spiritual and overall development that contributed to the creation of a more authentic identity; and (4) connecting unconscious knowledge construction processes to cultural images, symbols, rituals, and metaphors. Due to space limitations, these will be briefly summarized here.

Dealing with internalized oppression. Many of the participants discussed the role of spirituality in unlearning internalized oppression based on race or culture, sexual orientation, or gender. For example, Penny, a Jewish woman, spoke specifically about this, and noted "I felt uncomfortable around people who looked and/or behaved in ways that were "too Jewish". When told I didn't "look Jewish", I replied "Thank you"…. In brief, I had learned to internalize societal attitudes of disgust at those who were "too Jewish"; I had learned to hate who I was, and I did not even know it." She describes the process of reclaiming her Jewish heritage, her sacred face. In summing up and reflecting on how this relates to her spirituality she noted, "My spirituality is all about how I relate to my world, how I make meaning of life. From Jewish prophetic tradition and mysticism (via the Kabbalah), comes the concept of "tikkun olam" or the repair and healing of the world. This aptly expresses my core motivation in life, towards social justice, towards creating a life that is meaningful and makes a difference. I believe I get this from my Jewishness/Judaism, which for me is a blend of culture and spirituality."

Mediating among multiple identities. We are not only people of a particular race or culture. We also have a class background, a gender, sexual orientation, language, and national identity. All of us negotiate these aspects of our identity all the time, but those who are

immigrants to North America (or elsewhere) generally negotiate various aspects of their identity and their spirituality against the backdrop of a very different cultural context than that of their home countries. Aiysha is a Muslim woman of East Indian descent, born in East Africa. After living in Africa, England, and Canada, she immigrated to the U.S in her late teens. With this constant mobility, Aiysha was often forced to negotiate between the privileged status she enjoyed in some contexts and the burden of being part of an oppressed or lower status group in others. Such negotiation required her to continually shift her own identity in a constantly changing cultural context. These moves and identity shifts, along with her education and the fact that she is a professor dealing with issues of culture, forced her to reflect upon her religious and cultural identity development as an immigrant and a Muslim in the U.S. She has developed the ability to cross cultural borders and speak to many different groups, in different contexts with a fair degree of comfort at this point in her adult life, in spite of the pressure to "blend in". In reflecting on the process and on being both Muslim and East Indian: she noted, "Before it was just a matter of fact for me. Now, it's still a matter of fact, but it's also a matter of pride. I've taken the attitude 'This is WHO I AM. If you are going to know me and like me, you're going to know the whole of me, not just parts of me.'" So in a sense the dichotomization of my identity that I described at the beginning, I'm beginning to take that and create a whole from it in the way that I interact…" But she notes that this sense of "the whole" is related to her spirituality. Like nearly all the participants in the study, Aiysha has drawn on her spirituality and her growing sense of her "authentic" and more centered self to mediate among these multiple identities.

Crossing culture to facilitate spiritual development. In light of her immigrant status, Aiysha obviously crosses cultural borders as part of her daily life experience. Yet, the crossings compel her to draw upon her spirituality in all aspects of her life. Others in the study specifically crossed culture to facilitate their spiritual development. One example is David Preston, who is heavily involved in the Vedanta tradition, an East Indian tradition with roots in Hinduism. David specifically sought out an alternative religious tradition to supplement what was missing from his own Irish-Anglo Catholic background. Similarly, Maureen Abbott left her Methodist tradition and became heavily involved in the Siddha Yoga tradition. They are like many in North America who are drawing on various Eastern spiritual traditions to facilitate their own spiritual development.

Unconscious and cultural knowledge construction processes. People construct knowledge in powerful ways through unconscious processes, and ritual, music, art. Such iconography has enduring power, even when one has moved away from a childhood religious tradition intrinsically tied to culture. Anna Adams, an African American woman who has long since moved away from the African American Christian religious tradition of her childhood, spoke about Aretha Franklin and importance of her music as a spiritual symbol. Franklin's music, in many ways, represented a symbolic connection between Anna's cultural identity and her spirituality; a spirituality that has become more important to her as she has gotten older. In

reflecting further upon the connection of Aretha's music to her own cultural identity, Anna explained: "I grew up in a Black community doing and understanding and experiencing things of Black culture, so when I say Aretha takes me back, she takes me back to my childhood and the things that I understood then—things like music and dance, and the way of walking, the way of talking, the way of knowing, the interactions, the jive talk, the improvisations, you know all those things that I learned coming up — the music of the church, the choir that I sang in, all of that. And because I was raised in that community with that knowledge, her music takes me back even farther than I know, because I don't know where all of those things come from." For Anna, Aretha Franklin's music is a great source of inspiration because of its connection to her ancestors, her own spirituality, and to the implied connectedness it offers to her own cultural experience.

Implications for practice—my own and others

So what does this suggest for practice? By drawing on the connection between spirituality and culture, educators can potentially create educational experiences that are both culturally responsive and transformative. As suggested by this study, the (re-)claiming of one's "sacred face" was essential to developing a positive cultural identity for all the participants. They discussed the spiritual search for wholeness by embracing their own cultural identity, by dealing with their own internalized oppression, by crossing cultural borders, and by finding what was of spiritual value to them. They also discussed ways of drawing on the spiritual and cultural identities of adult learners in their own educational work to increase the claims of the "sacred" face, and to increase greater cross-cultural understanding.

In general, these findings offer some specific implications for practice. Many of these educators drew upon their own spirituality in order to develop culturally responsive educational practices intended to teach students how they too could "claim their sacred face". As noted elsewhere (Tisdell, 2003; Tisdell & Tolliver, 2003), some general guidelines for practice include the following seven principles or elements of a spiritually grounded, culturally responsive, and transformative pedagogy for higher education classrooms:

(1) An emphasis on authenticity of teachers and students (both spiritual and cultural)
An environment that allows for the exploration of:
• The cognitive (through readings and discussion of ideas)
• The affective and relational (through connection with other people and of ideas to life experience)
• The symbolic (through art—poetry, art, music, drama)

(2) Readings that reflect the cultures of the members of the class, and the cultural pluralism of the geographical area relevant to the course content
(3) Exploration of individual and communal dimensions of cultural identity

(4) Collaborative work that envisions and presents manifestations of multiple dimensions of learning and strategies for change

(5) Celebration of learning and provision for closure to the course

(6) Recognition of the limitations of the higher education classroom, and acknowledging that transformation is an ongoing process that takes time.

How does this play out in my own practice in an adult higher education setting working with graduate students? To begin, I believe that an important aspect of learning is creating a space that is conducive to learning in its multiple dimensions. Drawing upon the importance of image and symbol to knowledge construction processes, I incorporate the symbolic elements of the world — earth, wind, fire, and water-- in recognition of how learning takes place within the context of our life experience in the world (Dirkx, 1997; Fowler, 1981). These symbols serve as an appropriate reminder of the most fundamental aspect of spirituality: the interconnectedness of all things. By incorporating this symbology, I am also trying to create an environment whereby students will explore the meanings that underlie these symbols, so that learning through symbol, and affect can be a part of the learning environment from the very beginning.

I usually begin those classes that focus on cultural issues with an assignment that asks learners to write their own cultural story. Thus learners' first, initial assignment includes story readings, and a written assignment that requires them to analyze aspects of their own story as it relates to their cultural identity development. I also participate in this exercise and provide them with a written and spoken version of my own cultural story that includes my own understanding of what it means to be white and Irish-American. In addition to writing their story, they share a symbol specific to their own culture; one that they either create or relate to. Thus students from all different cultural backgrounds explain their own cultural backgrounds in their own terms. They get to be experts on defining and sharing their own cultural experience. Likewise, they also begin to engage their cultural imagination and to look at the meaning they map to cultural symbolism.

I rarely use the term "spirituality" in my classes. But often, students' use of art, poetry, music, and use of cultural symbols touches on the spiritual and encourages spirituality to be present in the classroom. Whether or not one experiences something as "spiritual" depends largely on the learner. Given that in higher education, reading and writing about the world of ideas is central to developing cognitive understanding, my courses always include some written analysis of culturally pluralistic perspectives related to a given topic. However, for learning to be transformative, it is necessary to incorporate the affective, and activities that touch the heart. This is why I always include story sharing (an affective component), and the activities that draw on the symbolic and unconscious domain noted above that some map to as "spiritual".

Likewise, learners are also asked to do a collaborative teaching presentation on a particular subject, using multiple modes of knowledge production in their presentations. Students often incorporate spiritual/symbolic, cultural, and affective elements into their presentations that are often reflective of their own hope for social change.

We frequently make use of these creative projects in a final, culminating activity that hints at a ritualized use of song, poetry, dance, art. These combined activities tie the theoretical and cognitive world to their affective and experiential world, and further anchors it in the symbolic world. Such linkages create a more holistic approach to learning. Given that spiritual experiences are those that get at the wholeness and interconnectedness of all things, these multiple modes of knowledge production facilitate the possibility that some participants may associate particular moments in their overall learning as "spiritual," as well as culturally relevant to their own lives.

Back to the research world as it continues to inform practice

Given the results of this study and recent discussions, both in the public domain and in medical education, on the role of spirituality and complementary and alternative medicine (CAM), I began to wonder how physicians and medical educators were teaching these modalities in medical schools. Thus, I conducted a study in 2002 and 2003 on how physicians and medical educators are teaching CAM and spirituality in medical schools. While space limitations do not give me the opportunity to discuss the findings in greater detail (discussions which are elaborated upon in Tisdell, 2004), it is estimated that 70% of U.S. medical schools now offer courses related to spirituality and medicine, and more than half offer courses related to CAM modalities.

The findings of this study and my interest in spirituality, culture, and health care have indeed further influenced my practice in significant ways. I recently completed teaching a summer class entitled "Spirituality and Culture in the Health and Education Practices" where we not only worked with different educational and/or healing modalities that students experienced as "spiritual", we also explored the politics of medical education and health care in a U.S. context; where positivism and the "scientific method" has reigned supreme and still does. Indeed, scientific and western ways of knowing are very important in health care and medical education and practice. But so too is the human and spiritual dimension in considering the multiple modes of healing. We are whole beings. And we must take into account how our wholeness—our mind, body, spirit—is involved in healing and in learning in these postmodern times where one mode of thought cannot reign supreme. It is only then that we can potentially facilitate learning that is both transformative and emancipatory.

I'm not sure where the next phase of my journey will take me along the continuous research path. One thing is sure: spirituality will always fascinate me, resonate with the core of my being, and connect me more deeply with those in my personal and professional life.

The metaphor of being "in-between" was an important spiritual metaphor to some of the participants in my initial study. Many who reported spiritual experiences discussed the experience as a moment of living "in between" the worlds. As Raul Guerrero, one participant, stated, "…to dance between, and to play between" might perhaps be postmodern. But perhaps it's also to be open to the spirit that is manifested through cultural expression, in the music that we make, in the poetry that we create, that comes out of some unknown in-between place in the depth of our souls and in the juncture of our spiritual and cultural experiences. Indeed, these out of no-where and in-between-ness experiences happen by surprise. To be sure, they are a part of a culturally responsive education that will continue to inform my practice.

Dr. Tisdell's list of references can be downloaded by clicking here.

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