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

NEWSLETTER

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Teaching, Learning, & Spirituality

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> *We seek to envision a whole new place – and space and role – for spirituality in higher education, not as an isolated enterprise on the margins of the academy, not as a new form of institutional repression and social control, but as an essential element of the larger task of reorienting our institutions to respond more adequately to the challenges the world presents us now: challenges to our teaching, to our learning, to our leading, to our lives.*[1]

On September 27, 1998 those words were spoken by Diana Chapman Walsh, president of Wellesley College, at the national gathering entitled "Education as Transformation: Religious Pluralism, Spirituality and Higher Education" held on the Wellesley College campus. One of the many outcomes of that gathering was an offer from Peter Lang Publishing to produce a book series, "Studies in Education and Spirituality" to be co-edited by Victor Kazanjian and Peter Laurence, the conference's primary organizers. The series was intended to present education professionals with the most recent thinking about the role of religion and spirituality in higher education from people who have thought deeply about the topic.

Following the initial volume, *Education as Transformation, Religious Pluralism, Spirituality, & a New Vision for Higher Education in America*, there are now seven additional books available through the series, and two more due to be released this year. This article briefly captures some of the insights of our authors as they have struggled with the topic and, in many cases, worked to implement its potentials in their classes and their institutions.

Spirituality as an Antidote to Objectivism

> Objectivism insists that we can know the world only by distancing ourselves from it, by separating our inner lives from the external objects we want to know. According to objectivist doctrine, we must safeguard those so-called objects from what this epistemology perceives as the extreme danger of subjectivity – a

subjectivity that, if unleashed, will slop over into the objects in question and render our knowledge of them inaccurate, impure.

At the heart of all our spiritual traditions is the conviction that knowledge of reality is a pearl of great price because with that knowledge we come closer to the source of all that is real. The spiritual traditions do not disavow or dishonor knowledge: they treasure it. By taking those traditions as seriously as we take the mission of higher education, we have a chance to challenge the ways in which the academy at its worst has dishonored the depths and demands of true knowing, a chance to call ourselves and our institutions back to the highest educational purposes.[2]

Spirituality as a Way of Adding a Dimension to Knowledge

In higher education, issues of meaning and purpose in living are intentionally separated from the pursuit of knowledge. While public and focused conversations about the purpose of education come and go in cycles and revolutions, qualities such as love, empathy, wisdom, intimacy with life, mindfulness, appreciation, reverence, and the emergence of human wholeness are often not considered in educational reform and organizational change efforts. What can it mean, then, to transform education or the workplace through a reemergence of meaning, values, and spirituality? Does it mean an appeal to irrationality? Does it propose replacing science with religion? Does it imply that there is one set of values that all students should be indoctrinated to believe?

The call to wholeness is life-based, not limited to any particular faith or religious tradition. The purpose … is not to promulgate a particular sectarian viewpoint, but to create a space for reflection on how we come to understand the world, how that in turn determines the way we act, and how our actions impact the world. It is a space for reflecting on whether the world we are creating is the one in which we want to live and the one we want to pass on to the generations to follow.[3]

Spirituality as a Way of Transforming Campus Life

Transforming campus life, from our perspective, is not about turning the campus into a temple or church, mosque or ashram. It is not about retreating to the premodern university controlled by denominational orthodoxy. But it is about challenging the academic orthodoxies that dismiss religious identity and religious insight as extraneous to learning and community life. It is about challenging conventional patterns of organization in higher education that

maintain fragmentation, disconnection, competition, and ecological irresponsibility. It is about creating new patterns, new models, and new conversations that illuminate the horizon of possibility. It is about trusting that our deep desires for celebration, companionship, service, self-understanding, and justice are worthy, viable, and within reach, once we learn to reach out to each other.[4]

The competitive nature of academic life functions as a major barrier to both spirituality and civility. Spirituality can be understood as the ability to experience connections and to create meaning in one's life. One makes meaning by connecting parts to the whole. The whole may be understood as "a vision of transcendent value and power, one's ultimate concern." To the degree that people perceive others as their competitors, the logical goal is to try to dominate them, because their own self-interests exclude the interests of others or of the whole community. In order to maintain day-to-day civil relationships, people in college communities must avoid situations that set members of the community at odds with each other, including our tendency to zero-sum thinking.[5]

Spirituality as a Search for Meaning

Teaching students to encounter ultimate questions and mysteries provides a qualitative dimension to whatever subject or course students have signed up for. Engaging students in the great mysteries of human experience and of the physical world will enlarge the context for any particular class or academic discipline. For example, recent studies of the Big Bang theory have forced scientists not only to ask how the Big Bang occurred but *why*, and, therefore, why we are here. The new success of cosmologists in exploring the depth and history of the universe makes unavoidable the questions of where we come from and where we are going – and the purpose of human existence.[6]

Whether one is spiritual or religious, theistic or apatheistic, we are all engaged in a journey to discover and/or create a meaning that transcends the self and the tribe. This is a meaning that motivates us to give our hearts and minds to something larger than ourselves, to some mystery far beyond our secular range of vision. It is a meaning that fulfills the longing we have for the living presence that lies beyond or within all of creation. It is a meaning that combines seeking, practice, place, and community while, at the same time, it requires discipline, sacrifice, and attention. It is a meaning that nourishes our moral growth, and gives rise to the compassion and love which will allow us to live rightly with others*. Students ought to have an opportunity, if they wish, to discuss the personal meaning*

of this journey openly and publicly on college campuses, including both its benefits and its risks, its opportunities and its dangers, and its joys and its sorrows.[7]

Teaching as a Spiritual Practice

Think and talk about your teaching as a spiritual practice. Language and communication are everything! The language – the metaphors and images – you use to conceptualize and express your teaching to yourself and to others matters tremendously. Changing your teaching language and communication is a necessary step to teaching from the heart. This can be as simple as talking to colleagues about the "heart" of teaching or reflecting openly with others about what the "heart" of teaching really is. It also means self-reflection on the spiritual dimensions of teaching and learning. Start a journal in which you actively describe and interpret your teaching experience in spiritual terms. Ask yourself how your heart is touched by your everyday experiences in the classroom. Ask yourself what effect the organizational climate in your school is having on your spirit. Reflect on new policy initiatives in terms of what their spiritual impact will be on students, teachers, administrators, and other stakeholders.[8]

I am seeking a space for exploration and learning in which the not-yet-known can arise, where students will experience their thought growing in complexity and depth as they listen in deeply to the multiplicity of viewpoints present in their classroom. I feel the sweetness of satisfaction when I see their sadness at parting from each other, when they reflect on the profound gifts they have received from each other in the course of our learning together. I also feel joy as a teacher when, at the end of the three years of course work in our program, those initially silent, perhaps uncertain about their capacity for thought and expression, have found the area of study and practice they feel called to and have discovered how to lend their voice to it through being carefully listened into expression. I am thrilled to see how those students initially subtly devalued by others have become seen as teachers themselves and exhibit a glow from having their experience, thought, being, and calling recognized and valued. How do we begin to prepare the space for this? [9]

Endnotes

[1] Diana Chapman Walsh, "Transforming Education: An Overview" in Victor H. Kazanjian and Peter L. Laurence (eds.) *Education as Transformation:*

Religious Pluralism, Spirituality, & a New Vision for Higher Education in America. (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2000, 2002). p.1.

[2] Parker J. Palmer, "A Vision of Education as Transformation" in Victor H. Kazanjian and Peter L. Laurence (eds.) *Education as Transformation: Religious Pluralism, Spirituality, & a New Vision for Higher Education in America.* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2000, 2002). pp. 17-18, 22.

[3] Susan M. Aubrey, Diane Dana, Vachel M. Miller, Phyllis Robinson, Merle M. Ryan, and David K. Scott, "Introduction: A Call to Wholeness" in David K. Scott (ed.) *Integrative Learning and Action: A Call to Wholeness.* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., forthcoming).

[4] Vachel W. Miller and Merle M. Ryan, "Introduction" in Vachel W. Miller and Merle M. Ryan *Transforming Campus Life: Reflections on Spirituality and Religious Pluralism.* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2001). p.1.

[5] Jane Fried, "Civility and Spirituality" in Vachel W. Miller and Merle M. Ryan *Transforming Campus Life: Reflections on Spirituality and Religious Pluralism*. (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2001). p.268.

[6] Robert Hostetter, "From the Heart of the Heart of Learning" in Diana Denton and Will Ashton (eds.) *Spirituality, Action, & Pedagogy: Teaching from the Heart*. (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc. 2004) p.33.

[7] Robert J. Nash, *Religious Pluralism in the Academy: Opening the Dialogue*. (Peter Lang Publishing, Inc. 2001) p.18.

[8] Will Ashton, "Tale of a Sorcerer's Apprentice" in Diana Denton and Will Ashton (eds.) *Spirituality, Action, & Pedagogy: Teaching from the Heart*. (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc. 2004) pp.57-58.

[9] Mary Watkins, "Liberating Soul Sparks: Psyche, Classroom, and Community" in Anne Dalke and Barbara Dixson (eds.) *Minding the Light: Essays in Friendly Pedagogy*. (Peter Lang Publishing, Inc. 2004). p.27.

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