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

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Role-Modeling Authenticity in Higher Education

By Judy L. Rogers

The increased interest in spirituality among college students pushes all of us affiliated with higher education to rethink our roles and relationships with students and each other. We are being asked to bring heart and soul into our academic lives. I experienced this push firsthand when teaching a graduate seminar on spirituality and leadership and when including sessions on spirituality in other required courses in my department's graduate curriculum. I learned much by engaging students in conversations about religion and spirituality. One of the primary lessons is that for students to truly share their inner selves, they have to feel part of an authentic dialogue, not only with their peers, but with me, their teacher, as well. One student's reflections at the end of a spirituality course captured these sentiments: "It was so important in this course that the instructor participate in this journey with us. I never got the sense that she was sort of leading from afar, or orchestrating some kind of predetermined scheme with us as the spirituality-seeking guinea pigs." Students want to know that, like them, we also struggle with "big questions." They want to know how we make sense of life's ethical dilemmas as they face their own.

I believe there is hope for students in hearing that others have walked a similar path and, not only survived, but gained self-understanding and resilience. Through my experiences teaching about spirituality, I have learned that a primary way for me to impact my students' search for meaning, purpose and values is by role-modeling authenticity. This is a daunting task, for certain, and a lifelong work-in-progress, but it is a challenge I take more seriously each day since I first initiated a dialogue on religion and spirituality with my graduate students.

Recent research parallels my own observations. In a national study, college and university presidents were asked to identify factors that supported an ethical campus climate and students' character development (Dalton, Goodwin & Chen, 2004). The presidents most often ranked "being a personal role model" as the most important

factor. Stamm (2006) similarly shares testimonials from several university presidents about how they role model authenticity and create climates for ethical behavior. One president of a small liberal arts college believes colleges should foster a climate wherein "moral conversation" can occur. Another president of a Big Ten institution defines his role as "humanizing the university and promoting character, conscience, civility and social responsibility" (Stamm, 2006, p. 259). He accomplishes this primarily through public espousal of his beliefs, but he also institutes policies that nurture spiritual development on campus. For the president of a historically black, women's college, role modeling means honoring and building connections among diverse persons and encouraging people to take the perspective of others. She endorses curricular and co-curricular activities that entail sharing personal narratives and weaves her personal story into professional communications. Each of these college presidents illustrates that "personal role modeling" requires one to be transparent and to operate from clear apprehension of deeply held values.

In a study of faculty in College Student Personnel (CSP) preparation programs (Rogers and Love, in press), Patrick Love and I discovered that these faculty also see role modeling as a primary way to connect to their students' quest for meaning. We interviewed twelve faculty members in three different CSP programs. A majority believed that faculty who want students to be open about exploring questions of meaning must share their own personal quests with students. One faculty member in the study noted that students "need to know that we did not arrive fully formed." CSP faculty members were found to role model their values in several key respects:

- By creating safer spaces in the classroom for marginalized voices;
- By acknowledging that they, too, are on a search for purpose in their lives;
- By sharing that the search for meaning can be a tumultuous, lifelong process.

Once faculty made a commitment to being open, they had to decide how much they were willing to share with students. They did not want to divert attention away from students or become the sole focus of conversation. Faculty struggled with a basic issue: balancing their desire to be whole and authentic when teaching and interacting with students with concerns about being perceived as student counselors and spiritual guides. Deciding how much to disclose to students as they model their own search for meaning caused faculty members great consternation.

In two additional studies of student affairs professionals, administrators recognized students' hunger to explore spiritual questions but shared faculty concerns about the appropriateness of disclosing their own spiritual searching (Dalton, 2003; Moran, 2003). In fact, the student affairs professionals in Moran's study believed that a "hands-off approach was best when dealing with delicate concerns of a spiritual or religious nature"

(p. 53). Dalton observed that student affairs administrators are concerned that their spiritual openness might be misconstrued with spiritual or religious proselytizing. And yet, Dalton argues that the holistic development of students, including spiritual growth, has been a core philosophy of the student affairs profession since its inception as a field. The disconnect between the profession's espoused values and its practices, as well as the complexities inherent in being spiritually open while not infringing on students' spiritual or religious freedom, are issues that those in student affairs need to examine.

So, while recognizing the significant role of authenticity, meaning, and purpose in higher education, many of us are unsure how to engage these issues in the academy. It is new territory for us; hence, it is uncomfortable, challenging, and risky. Perhaps the first place to begin is on a personal level, in our hearts and souls. How can we become more open to students and colleagues and authentically role model our own quest for meaning and purpose?

In his research on the psychology of ultimate concerns, Emmons (l999) offers a few potential answers. He identifies capacities that can enhance our spiritual growth and assist us in being authentic and transparent in our relationships with students and colleagues. I share two of these capacities as defined by Emmons and one from Parker Palmer (Rittenhouse, 2001). Then I offer reflective questions for you to consider regarding your own development:

1) The capacity to be virtuous (i.e. to be humble, to show forgiveness, to express gratitude, to display compassion, etc. (Emmons, 1999, p.164) Emmons (1999) writes, "Humility is the realistic appraisal of one's strengths and weaknesses – neither overestimating nor underestimating them. To be humble is not to have a low opinion of oneself. It is to have an accurate opinion of oneself" (p. 171). Humility is the ability to keep your achievements and gifts in perspective, to be comfortable with who you are, to understand your faults, and to be free from arrogance and low self-esteem (Clark, l992).

Reflections on your capacity to be virtuous…

- How well and in what contexts are you able to operate on an "accurate appraisal" of your strengths and weaknesses?
- How consistently are you able to feel the emotion of gratitude across situations and time?
- How easy is it for you to forgive those who have betrayed or demeaned you? In these situations how likely is it that you will retaliate or hold a grudge?
- What is your capacity for compassion? How is compassion manifested in your work with students and in interactions with colleagues?

2) The ability to sanctify everyday experience (Emmons, 1999, p.164) When the ultimate concerns in a person's life are imbued with a sense of the sacred, these goals take on a significance and power not found in secular strivings (Emmons, Cheung & Tehrani, 1998).

Reflections on your capacity to sanctify everyday experience…

- How often do you practice "mindfulness," the act of being fully present in the moment and experiencing the worth of whatever task you are doing?
- How often do you view your work as a calling?
- As a teacher, administrator, and/or colleague how often do you consider your role a sacred responsibility? What is different about your responsibilities when you imbue them with a sacred quality?

3) Developing integrity and authenticity Parker Palmer advocates eloquently for developing our "inner lives' so that we bring our best selves into our teaching and leadership roles (Rittenhouse, 2001). "Leading from the heart," in Palmer's view, means that we operate from that center of the self where "will and intellect and values and feelings and intuition and vision all converge" (p. 27). This is the source of integrity, when who you are inside matches your public self.

Reflections on developing integrity and authenticity…

- Reflect on your own journey to achieving congruence between who you are on the inside and who you are on the outside in your university life. Think about situations or circumstances in your professional life (i.e. teaching, supervising staff, collaborating with peers, reporting to your supervisor, making policy decisions) when you are able to be congruent – where who you are on the inside is the same as who you present externally.
- Next, identify situations or circumstances where you feel incongruent i.e., challenged to behave in a manner that does not correspond to your inner beliefs.
- Finally, given your response to the last question, how might you overcome challenges to being congruent? How can you address some of your fears and develop the courage to put "your own identity and integrity into the public arena" (p. 27)?
- Developing the capacities described above requires that we honor ourselves and devote time to personal contemplation and meditation. We have to take this inner work seriously.

My objective in this essay was to reinforce what Palmer (l998, 2000), Chickering, Dalton & Stamm (2006), and others passionately argue – that attending to our inner lives and bringing our authentic selves into the academy is important work. It is how we can prepare our students to grapple with life's deepest and most richly uncertain questions. I wonder whether our anxiety and fear about what to say to students, how to say it, and

whether we should say anything at all are, in fact, early signs of soul searching already occurring in the academy. The critical lesson is that if (and only if) we come from a place of congruence will we successfully role model what students seek from us –lived examples that illuminate the bumpy, but meaningful search for authenticity, meaning and wholeness.

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