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

NEWSLETTER

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An Ethic of Connectedness

By David K. Scott

In his book "*The New American Story"* Bill Bradley speaks of an "ethic of connectedness" as crucial for our future; it would be inspiring and deeply practical in politics, instead of the fragmentation and polarization that currently dominate our culture. This connectedness is, in essence, a spiritual world-view, since a fundamental aspect of spirituality is a sense of connection to the cosmos and to all life within it, as well as a sense of transcendence. Connectedness should be important not only in politics, but also in education. However, spirituality in higher education will be, to a large extent, an exploration of new territory because the academy is accustomed to separating the inner and the outer worlds of experience, relegating spirituality to an inner experience–which is therefore largely ignored, in spite of the injunction found in many mission statements about "knowing thyself" and about attending to the development of the whole student. In most institutions, the outer life is addressed in the classroom, and the inner in the student life activities, if at all. Perhaps we are close to a tipping point where so many transformations of the curriculum are in process or being discussed, that we will relax some of the traditional constraints in order to create a more vibrant and meaningful approach to knowledge.

A story comes to mind of the parent busily working at her desk on a project while constantly being interrupted by her five-year-old son who wanted to help. Noting a copy of a magazine on the desk with a detailed map of the world, she tore it into small pieces and gave it to the child, thinking that the reassembly would occupy him for an hour or two. Much to her surprise the boy was back in 15 minutes. Incredulously, she asked how he did it. "Mom it was easy. On the back of the map was a picture of human face that was easy to assemble, and the map just came along with it!"

There is a message in this story relevant to our work on spirituality in higher education. The two sides of the page are like epistemology and ontology – a theory of knowledge that is our way of studying reality, and ontology, a theory of being and our way of conceptualizing reality itself. By assembling the human face, as a path to knowledge, the complex reality of the world map was reduced. We, too, might find simpler ways of understanding our complex world if we adopt other ways of knowing.

An example from the findings of the HERI survey on spirituality is the correlation discovered between a high-level of spiritual intelligence and the understanding of issues such as diversity, community-based learning, civic engagement, relational learning, learning communities, mentoring, advising, location and application, counseling, health, interfaith, co-curricular activities, and integrative approaches to knowledge. These are issues of interest to almost all academic institutions these days. But to some extent they are still add-ons to the curriculum, like a lumber-room where many things keep being added, but nothing is ever taken away. Perhaps if we were to address issues of spirituality in higher education more directly, all of these disparate activities might fall into a more coherent pattern, just as the map of the world fell into place through the human face. We need a new integrative structure for the curriculum and this could well emerge through a spiritual dimension of learning.

The orthodox view of reality is that life evolved by chance in an impersonal universe, and that, while the evolution of life and the evolution of the universe can be described by our theories, the two are not corrected. The separation is the result of modern science and the Western enlightenment from the 16th century onwards. But its roots extend back much further to the Axial Age centered around 500 B.C. when many of the world's religions came into being or were transformed. Prior to that time primal cultures did not separate science and spirituality, art and religion or any other area of human experience. The Axial Age occurred at a time when individualism was just emerging to define humanity, as we now know it. People participating in this great transformation, as Karen Armstrong has written, were convinced that they were on the brink of a new era and that nothing would ever be the same. They sought change in the deepest reaches of their being, looking for greater inwardness in their spiritual lives becoming one with a transcendent reality.

Unfortunately, this transformation led to the separation of spirit and matter, with spirit in the ascendant. The scientists and philosophers of the 16th century accepted the idea of separation of matter and spirit that set us on the path–unintentionally perhaps–of reversing the priority of the spirit-matter split by ascribing greater importance to matter. However, the scientists and philosophers of the time were often deeply involved in religion and mysticism in some cases. More than anyone, Descartes is responsible for creating this modern distinction between matter and mind. As Bohm observes, Descartes solved the problem of relating the two by assuming that God, who created both mind and matter, connects them by putting into the minds of human beings the clear and distinct thoughts that are needed to deal with matter as extended substance. However, Godly intervention was soon abandoned in the academy as a valid philosophical argument, leaving us with no clear idea of how the two are connected. In the middle of the 17th century, Spinoza had argued that body and mind are not two separate entities, but one continuous substance. Imagine how different our world might be today if Spinoza had prevailed!

The results of discoveries in many different fields of knowledge suggest that Spinoza's view may be closer to the truth. The universe and human beings within it, along with mind and matter, may all be connected in a holistic way. If we believe this theory, there

are ethical and moral consequences. Anything that I do, whether bad or good, has an effect on everything in the universe–including myself. Perhaps such a philosophy could lead to a more caring approach to each other and to the world, as well as to the universe as a whole. It may not be unreasonable to speculate that there is a moral order in the universe which rises to the level of ethical behavior in human beings, just as we have been long accustomed to uncovering the physical laws and order in the universe. The practical outcome of the fragmentation and separation that has prevailed is that the world is seen in a utilitarian way shaping human motivation in relation to the environment, to the persecution of anyone or anything regarded as separate. If everything is connected, we might more easily adopt a global outlook. How do we extend these ideas into education of a new generation? How do we foster an ethic of connectedness? We need to show how the new knowledge supports a search for harmonious relationship rather than furthering the exploitation of others.

Many people, of course, will object that all of these philosophical approaches to reality have little to do with everyday experience. But we must remember that the ideas of philosophers and scientists from the 16th century onwards were also very esoteric, such as the work of Descartes; but they were incorporated into an approach to the universe and to reality that spread into all areas of knowledge and into the cultural behavior of the Western world. Modern theories of the universe suggest that, instead of four dimensional space-time, perhaps there are 10, 11 or even 26 dimensions, but these additional dimensions lie beyond our experience tightly curled up and unobservable. In an analogous way, perhaps we have to recognize our own inner, furled dimensions and the new theory of unfurled dimensions awaits us. The results from the HERI study indicate that many in the academy are eager and hungry for such an awakening.

Furthermore, the separation between epistemology and ontology that we have adopted in our colleges and universities may lead to a destructive tension in the lives of people in the academy and in the workplace. It seems that college students are forced into a difficult choice. Either they have to accept that their spirituality bears little relation to their intellectual studies or, even worse, they are forced to renounce their faith completely. As Ken Wilber points out, students are trapped in an uncomfortable position. They cannot discuss the faith with professors, who are generally in the rationalist, analytical level of consciousness evolution (at least as far as their classroom activities are concerned), or with many friends who hold a fundamentalist version of religious belief. Psychographically, as Wilber notes, this is the same problem faced by terrorists; fundamentalist beliefs find no home in a rationalist, scientific world and these tensions may drive many people to fundamentalist religions and perhaps may be at the root of terrorism in the world. It is almost as if there is a sign displayed at the entrance to all our colleges and universities proclaiming: “Abandon spirituality, all ye who enter in.” Even worse, as David Whyte has often observed, we are forced to leave a large part of our lives inside the car when we slam the door in the parking lot and go to work every morning.

Several people at this Institute have noted pilot programs underway to enhance our ability to become more holistic, to be able to connect across different areas of knowledge, and to foster the development of the whole individual. A promising gateway to this integral worldview may be opening through research on meditation and contemplative practice in various fields–law, education, health care and many others. Research on long-term meditators shows that their mental training involves a temporal, integrative mechanism in the brain, as well as a heightened capacity for compassion. It appears that we have a built-in integrative capacity, which is not well developed in most of us, but which may be enhanced through contemplative practice. Great spiritual leaders have a deeper understanding of this potential, but it is latent in all of us. Imagine the transformative power of discovering that a more developed spiritual sense might enhance the integrative and caring capacities we have always sought in all of education.

Sarath quotes testimonies from students engaged in meditation at the University of Michigan that suggest a wide range of benefits, from relieving stress to listening more carefully to each other, learning to clear the mind and focusing better on doing our jobs, and to enhancing our ability to remain calm in difficult situations. There is also evidence that meditation can promote a profound connecting link between different cultures, running sharply counter to prevailing postmodern tendencies that reject such transcendent connections. Sarath goes on to say that, ironically, the academic world–due to the necessity of extricating contemplative practice from overtly religious practice–may be poised to play a leadership role in restoring to religious practice the unifying aspects of this important domain of human experience. Meditation and contemplative practice may be thought of as simply extending the continuum of what constitutes education from more quantifiable, external kinds of knowledge (often regarded as the territory of science, the intellect and, indeed, of all academic knowledge) to those that are more interior (often regarded as the territory of spirituality) and abstract, but no less important to students' overall growth. These developments suggest a new interest in the relationship between spirituality and other disciplines.

Far from denying spirituality as a force in the universe and in human experience, the best knowledge we have available now can pave the way to an expanded and integrative view of reality. The European Idealist philosophers in the 18th and 19th centuries wanted to bridge the diverging positions of empiricism and idealism, and they attempted to unite subject and object by ascribing all power to reason as the source of reality. The Idealist program may now be pursued afresh, based on theories that seem to infer that fundamentally reality is mind-like. As Schafer has pointed out, in a mind-like reality, expanding human spiritual powers seems natural to the evolution of the universe and our actions should contribute to enhancing this reality. It seems reasonable to suppose that the universal principles appearing in our thinking are reflections of a universal order. In that case, the adaptation involved in human behavior is the capacity of the mind to comprehend the significance of universal principles. In the same way that we evolved the capacity to understand universal principles in physics, we may have evolved the capacity for universal principles in ethics. The emerging nature of reality could be the basis for considerable hopes that that a life of meaning and values is not

incompatible with the scientific frame of mind. Many years ago Palmer (1997) expressed the close connection between ways of knowing and ways of being in the world when he said, “The way we know has powerful implications for the way we live…Every epistemology tends to become an ethic, and…every way of knowing becomes a way of living.”

In the history of the human evolution, we did not always separate body, mind, soul, and spirit, relegating everything in experience that was not material to an inferior status. This evolution has taken us from a unitive cosmology in primal cultures, to the dualistic fragmentation of modernism and the Enlightenment, and now to the possibility of a new level of integration–not by a return to the unexamined unitive cosmology of earlier times, but rather to a deep connection that comes from the detailed, specialized knowledge we have acquired in all of the disciplines. After the scientific revolution of the 16th century there were attempts to create a more integral approach, for example, through the Romanticism and Transcendentalism movements, which were not always successful because they often attempted to return to a pre-scientific age. That is neither desirable nor possible. We need to incorporate the best of all knowledge in spiritual traditions, scientific understanding, arts and humanities and of all ways of knowing.

It also seems that each human being individually has to make this journey. I feel that I made this journey personally, having been born in a small island in the Orkneys off the north coast of Scotland with a population of hundred people where everything was connected. But it was an unexamined connectedness. I then pursued various careers as a nuclear scientist and as an academic administrator and, whether in the organization of knowledge or in the nature of organizations themselves, I experienced the increasing fragmentation and “pain of disconnection” in Parker Palmer’s words. From the HERI survey, I suspect this experience may not be uncommon for the academy. Now I am able to see the possibility of combining these experiences into a more integral world-view. Perhaps I had to differentiate and fragment in order to integrate in a deeper way, just as our cultural evolution has also done.

I began these comments by referring to the “ethic of connectedness” that Bill Bradley believes is crucial for the future of our political system. The Nobel economist, Robert Fogel, notes in *The Fourth Awakening* that critical spiritual assets will rank in importance with the more familiar material assets in creating a vibrant future for the world; these he describes as a sense of purpose, a sense of discipline, a vision of opportunity and the struggle for self-realization, all of which need to be transferred at a young age through education. Psychologists, such as Daniel Goleman and Dana Zohar, write about spiritual and emotional intelligence as essential for healthy organizations. These ideas are also implicit in the work of organizational theorists, such as Margaret Wheatley and Peter Senge. The evolution to more integral consciousness is a recurring theme in Robert Kegan’s models of human behavior and in Ken Wilber’s philosophy, as well as in the predictions of futurist Duane Elgin. Diana Chapman-Walsh and other presidents of Universities and Colleges stress the importance of spirituality cultivating authentic leadership and compassionate action. And the HERI survey shows that about 80% of faculty and students feel they are on a spiritual quest. In short, whether in the

writings and research of poets, philosophers, psychologists, presidents, neuroscientists, scientists, spiritual leaders, organizational theorists, and many others, a movement is underway as if all the players are gathering onstage for a dramatic new transformation of society and of the world. Perhaps we may envision a new Enlightenment that combines aspects of the prior Eastern and Western Enlightenments. Given the present world turmoil, it is sometimes hard to be optimistic that this transformation is imminent. But, as Hegel said, the Owl of Minerva spreads her wings only as dusk is falling. A new order comes into being as the old order begins to fade but often with maximum activity in the old order.

The HERI survey gives us reassurance that we are not alone. It also reinforces our courage to undertake this transformation in epistemology. We may achieve a level of integral consciousness and connectivity more deeply and more rapidly than the current educational system seems to support, realizing that we are not fulfilling our full potential. The history of American higher education has shown repeatedly that, once students identify an important cause, change can come about quickly. The resistance is understandable, given the perceived connection between religion and spirituality, and the fear that we may be bringing religion back to the classroom. Yet perhaps the barriers are simpler, as the words of Robert Frost remind us: *"Something we were withholding made us weak, and then we realized it was ourselves."*

David K. Scott served as Chancellor of the University of Massachusetts Amherst for eight years, from 1993 until 2001. In this role, Scott championed the vision of an integrative University in which transdisciplinary research and holistic learning communities would overcome the fragmentation of knowledge and support the development of wiser human beings to create a better world. His administrative career was preceded by a distinguished research career in nuclear physics, highlighted by work at leading cyclotron laboratories. He is now interested in building upon these experiences to explore integrative leadership and action in organizations.