

The Role of Spirituality in Leadership for Social Change

By Maiko Yasuno

Japanese Assistant Professor, Maiko Yasuno, presents a compelling argument for the role of higher education in supporting a new leadership paradigm directed toward fostering positive social change based on spiritual elements, such as interconnectedness and collaboration. Through her writing and research, Yasuno upholds Daisaku Ikeda's idea that "a great human revolution in just a single individual will help achieve a change in the destiny of a nation and, further, will cause a change in the destiny of all humankind."

The Crisis of Spiritual Deterioration and the Need for Transformation

To live a "happy" and fulfilled life is what all of us aspire to. During the past century, we saw the unprecedented development of science and technology with the expectation that humankind would find an ideal and a long-lasting happiness. While material progress has been made, environmental destruction and exhaustion of natural resources have also risen. Further, an unequal distribution of wealth and opportunity has expanded within and among countries, and the material power among nations has often led to gaining control over the military, politics, and economics. The advancement of science and technology has also led to the production of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction. These weapons have resulted in the destruction of human life and in environmental deterioration. Thus, it is not too much to say that while material progress has occurred, humanity's spiritual life has deteriorated as isolation and loneliness replace the ties between and among people and the cosmos (Ikeda, 2001).

Realizing the emergence of the divisive power of the military, political, and economic competition among nations, Makiguchi advocates for the concept of “humanitarian competition,” in which he empathizes the need for a transformation from inhumane competition – the contest to triumph over others by coercion or oppression – to cooperation and coexistence (Miyata, 2000). In Makiguchi’s words:

There is no simple formula for this humanitarianism. Rather, all activities, whether in the realm of politics or of economics, should be conducted in conformity with the principles of humanitarianism. What is important is to eschew egotistical actions, striving to protect and improve not only your own life but others’ as well. One should do things for the sake of others, for by benefiting others, we benefit ourselves. This means, in other words, to engage consciously in collective life (Miyata, 2000, pp. 17-18).

This phrase, “by benefiting others, we benefit ourselves,” represents the idea of interconnectedness. This idea is also well described by Jose Ortega y Gasset (1961): “I am myself plus my circumstance, and if I do not save it, I cannot save myself” (p. 45). Thus, if we are to secure our survival as a species on this planet, there is a need to move from a mentality of competition to one of cooperation based on the interconnectedness of all life.

This idea supports the notion of *human revolution* – “a way to change the inner nature of each human being and in this way bring about improvements in society as a whole” (Ikeda & Peccei, 1984, p. 123). They further state that:

During his modern history, man [*sic*] has been deluded into believing that the key to happiness lies in reforming exteriors. The consequence of misplaced emphasis on the exterior has been the neglect of – even total oblivion to – the inner workings of human life, the need to suppress some mental actions and encourage others. Man’s [*sic*] most pressing task today is the elevation and reformation of his inner spiritual life. This is what I call the human revolution (Ikeda & Peccei, 1984, p. 104).

In other words, changing the external world for the better requires the internal transformation of people who are willing to lead in order to bring about such changes. Mahatma Gandhi is one example of such an individual whose life was driven by an inner faith in truth, non-violence, and a life of service to others (Nair, 1994). He also believed that “all religions were manifestations of the Truth and that people of different faiths should and could live in peace and harmony” (Nair, 1994, p. 5). As a leader of social reform, Gandhi encouraged many people to commit their lives to truth and nonviolence and to act for the service of humanity. His leadership involved working with diverse groups of people with the aim of resisting injustice and exploitation and working toward the betterment of all people.

Leadership: Theoretical Perspectives and Shifts in Paradigms

Historically, however, leadership has not always taken the form of Gandhi's approach. Traditionally, many people thought that the major purpose of leadership was to acquire power and privilege (Nair, 1994). This form of leadership encouraged a handful of leaders to manipulate and control others in the attainment of their goals (Freire, 1970). Examples of such leaders include Hitler, Mussolini, and Stalin – political leaders of Gandhi's time.

In the scholarly literature, the traditional paradigm of leadership, likewise, has been one that includes hierarchical and pyramid-type structures, a personalistic focus on the leader, and a utilitarian and materialistic ethical perspective (Rost, 1991). However, with the realization that this traditional paradigm cannot solve many of the problems we confront today, a number of leadership scholars and writers have begun to emphasize the importance of values such as collaboration, the common good, and global concern as important components of leadership for the twenty-first century (Rost, 1991).

A consistent element in the emerging theories of leadership is that *leadership is a relational process* that involves “collective action grounded in the shared values of people who work together to effect positive change” (Higher Education Research Institute, 1996, p.16). Positive change refers to the betterment of others, the community, and society. A further transition in this new paradigm is that a leader is “not necessarily a person who holds some formal position of leadership or who is perceived as a leader by others,” but rather, a leader is the one who is able to effect positive change (HERI, p.16). Therefore, all people can be considered potential leaders if they are willing to work to accomplish this greater purpose.

Moreover, in recent years, educators and scholars have come to emphasize the importance of spirituality as a critical element of leadership (Bolman and Deal, 1995; Palmer, 1996). For example, Kiefer (1991) contends that “the essence of leadership stems from the soul rather than from his or her behavior” (p. 176). Likewise, Harung (1995) claims, “leadership potential is unfolded by the experience of transcending” (p. 49). Also, Astin and Astin (2000) also state that “future leaders will not only need to possess new knowledge and skills, but will also be called upon to display a high level of emotional and spiritual wisdom and maturity” (p. 1). All of these perspectives illustrate how leadership is closely related to one's spirituality through a growing awareness of self and others.

The Role of Spirituality in Social Change

It should be noted that spirituality is an elusive term, and there is no universal operational definition. For example, as Seaward (1995) argues, spirituality can be described in a variety of ways, such as “higher consciousness, transcendence, self-reliance, love, faith, enlightenment, community, self-actualization, compassion, forgiveness, mysticism, a higher power, grace and a multitude of other qualities” (p.

166). However, if we were to analyze the spiritual experience and its behavioral manifestations among individuals, it becomes evident that there are some commonalities in the essence of spirituality that affect outward behavior. With this said, in what follows, I state why I believe it is important to examine the role of spirituality in leadership for social change.

First, as hooks (2000) contends, “spiritual life is...about commitment to a way of thinking and behaving that honors principles of inter-being and interconnectedness” (p. 77). Accordingly, the more aware a person is of the sanctity of the web of life, the more prosocial the person may become. Such a person “broadens one’s concept of self, increases the role of morality and strengthens the individual sense of responsibility towards the world” (Dorn, 2002, p. 6). And this sense of responsibility is likely to move people to take action for peace and social justice. The life stories of Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., W.E.B. Du Bois, Rosa Parks, Mother Teresa, and many other peace activists are examples of how the inner cultivation of personal spirituality can lead to leadership for social change.

For example, Gandhi led India to independence as a spiritual tenant of non-violence (*ahinsa*) and through truth’s insistent call (*satyagraha*) (Dorn, 2002). Martin Luther King, Jr. led the non-violence movement with the spirit of *agape* (Radhakrishnan, 2002). And Du Bois committed his life to peace and the emancipation of African-Americans, women, the poor and the people of the Third World because he felt a “sacred obligation” towards humanity (Hopkins, 1996).

In addition to these world figures, many grassroots leaders also endorse the importance of spirituality in their activities. Studying the lives of female adult educators for social change, Tisdell (2002) found that the spiritual commitments of her study’s participants required that they actively work for social change. Lerner (2000) concluded that some activists required a balance between outer work (i.e. working for benefiting society) and inner work (i.e. practice of meditation and the experience of mystery). And Daloz et al. (1996) reported that more than eighty percent of their sample of community activists indicated that spirituality or religion “played an important role in the formation of commitment” to their activism (p. 141).

Spirituality also includes an “active life force” or “high levels of positive life energy” that affects the state of human physiology (Harung, 1999; Owen, 2000). According to Harung (1999), shifting to higher stages of psychological development (i.e. becoming more spiritual) involves improvements in the way one’s neurophysiological machinery functions. In other words, higher states of consciousness refine our nervous system. He further states that “only in this way can our full potential develop, and only with fully developed potential can one enjoy sustainable peak performance and happiness” (p. 62). Stacks (2000) also contends that this positive life energy increases one’s own creativity and gives rise to one’s compassion toward others. In this way, positive life energy enhances one’s well being and becomes a source of action for others, further fostering leadership for social change.

Moreover, spirituality includes developing higher levels of consciousness and self-transcendence (Elkins & Associates). Consciousness is “the system, context, or field within which the different aspects of the mind, the contents of consciousness, including thoughts, feelings, sensations, perceptions, images, memories, and so forth, function in patterned interrelationships” (Metzner, 1989, p. 330). Attaining a higher consciousness (i.e. *higher self*) goes beyond the ego and the more surface layers of the mind (i.e. *lower self*) (Harung, 1999).

Eastern philosophy teaches that reason and intelligent judgment can be easily swept away by impulses from self-centered egoism and distorted perception (Stacks, 2000). Since consciousness determines the quality of one’s thoughts and behaviors, the higher one’s level of consciousness, the greater one’s capacity to meet the demands of today’s world becomes (Reams, 2002). Therefore, in order to control one’s own egoism and work for the common good, leaders must develop a higher level of consciousness on moral and ethical planes. To work for social change – a battle against the immoral and unethical forces – a higher self is required.

Overall, the argument that leadership for social change requires the inner cultivation of spiritual elements is best indicated by the famous passage of the constitution of the UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization): “Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defense of peace must be constructed.” And, as I noted above, “human revolution” (i.e. inner change) is a key for the outer change. Thus, what we need is to foster as many future leaders as possible who have developed a deeper sense of spirituality through achieving this higher consciousness and interconnectedness to our global society.

Nurturing Spiritual Leaders in Higher Education

Higher education plays a major role in shaping the quality of leadership in American society (Astin & Astin, 2000). As indicated in many college and university mission statements, a primary goal or mission of education is to develop leadership skills and abilities among the students who will become the future citizen leaders, better preparing them for professional and community responsibilities. Therefore, it is not surprising that many leaders in business, industry, and government have been student leaders while in college (Astin, 1977).

Given the fact that major public and private institutions appear increasingly incapable of dealing constructively with an ever-expanding list of social and economic problems and the overall crisis of leadership in the nation, Zimmerman-Oster and Burkhardt (1991) contend that we need a new type of leadership and a new generation of leaders who can bring positive changes to local, national, and international affairs. This new type of leadership should be a spiritual type of leadership that can bring positive changes not only through knowledge and technique, but also through the leaders’ inner strength.

In my doctoral dissertation research, I conducted a qualitative study to investigate whether spirituality can help college student activists exercise leadership for social change, and whether higher education can provide an environment that can assist students in the development of their spiritual leadership potential (Yasuno, 2004). In this study, I found that most participants saw a strong connection between their spirituality and leadership. Based on this finding, I argue that participants have developed spiritual beliefs and values, such as interconnectedness and compassion, the capacity to feel another's pain and sorrow, and the ability to feel responsible toward others. These student leaders could not accept the evils that cause pain and sorrow in our world, which became a source of energy that engaged them in the fight against injustice. Thus, based on this sense of responsibility, they made a commitment to activism. The inner awareness that led to the realization of the interconnectedness and responsibility to oneself and others also became the inspiration for activist behavior with its social consequences.

Based on my research and other scholars' perspectives, it is critical that our higher education system continues to work to intentionally foster interconnectedness in students, faculty, and staff members in order to help them better appreciate the importance of harmonious coexistence, explore the meaning and purpose in life, and cultivate infinite potential in each person. If we can do this – nurturing future leaders and citizens who embrace a spiritual existence – I believe that we can ultimately change the destiny of all humankind.

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