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

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The Undergraduate Quest for Meaning, Purpose, and Faith: An Interview with Sharon Daloz Parks

Recently, Leslie M. Schwartz interviewed Sharon Daloz Parks about the process of meaning-making in undergraduate college student development and its connection to spirituality and faith. In this interview, Parks shares current trends that impact students' quest for meaning, purpose, and faith, and emphasizes the necessity for students to have opportunities to ask big questions and to have access to worthy dreams in supportive mentoring environments within the higher education community.

Describe how you became interested in studying young adult meaning-making. What particular experiences, people, or situations related to your interest?

In my early professional life, I held several positions in Student Affairs and then as an instructor with a college faculty. Whether I was working in residential life, as a chaplain, or as a teacher, I had the opportunity to witness first-hand the story of human development in the young adult years as I had learned to understand it theoretically in my master's degree studies.

Moreover, as I was growing up, my family always placed a high value on inclusion, and this carried over into my professional life. Though I was rooted in a particular religious tradition, in our religiously variegated world, I was looking for a way of recognizing the spiritual dimension of people's lives in a way that could include everyone. "Meaning-making" is a way of understanding human development, and it is also a lens through which we can recognize the spiritual aspects of human experience that may be shared by all.

Especially while working in university and campus ministry, I began to look at meaning-making and faith from a larger perspective. I recognized that the students who we might describe as the "most faithful" underwent a considerable change in belief. I began to ask deeper questions such as, *"If people who come to college with a religious faith then develop a critical perspective on that faith, must they lose their faith? Or, are they able to recompose a more adequate and larger sense of faith?"* This line of inquiry sparked my interest in the intersection of young adult faith development and liberal arts

education, specifically as it related to the development of the capacity for critical thought.
When I began my doctoral study, I had discovered the work of James Fowler and had the opportunity to work with him as he was beginning his work in faith development. It is a great privilege to be a part of substantial and pioneering work and not only learn in the midst of it, but also be able to contribute to it. I published *The Critical Years* (1986) based on my doctoral work, and it was later rewritten as *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Young Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose, and Faith* (2000). The later book was informed not only by the earlier work I had done with undergraduates, but also my subsequent work with graduate students in six university-based professional schools. It placed a stronger emphasis on the *context* in which young adult development can flourish and describes the significance of mentoring environments to support young adult growth and development.

As I moved into faculty and professoriate positions, I developed a deep reverence for the experience of suffering (or "shipwreck") in young adult lives. I discovered that these experiences often became the context in which big questions emerged in powerful ways. I also observed in young adults an extraordinary "ripeness" for an imagination of what *could* be – the possibilities for a more just and flourishing world. Young adult students often manifested the readiness to risk something big for something good, and I began thinking more deeply about the formation of vocation and the concept of giving one's life for a cause that offered a sense of worthy purpose.

While at Harvard Business School, I also became aware of the propensity of our culture to exploit young adult lives and young adult talents – particularly in areas of advertising, media, and consulting. These industries, among others, would use up and burn out young adults and their dreams. I began to ask how we as a culture can begin to understand the tasks of the young adult "twenty-something" years more adequately so we can support the formation of a truly flourishing and contributing adulthood, rather than the exploitation that doesn't ask big enough questions about the potential and vulnerability of young adult lives. Young adulthood is the ripe time for the formation of a worthy "Dream" or what some would describe as the exploration and discovery of one's vocation or calling – but it also requires an environment or milieu that provides the right mix of support, challenge, opportunity, and inspiration.

How does meaning-making relate to spirituality and faith development?

We must first begin by recognizing that all human beings are making meaning. It is the nature of organisms to organize, and what the human being organizes is meaning. We work to discern patterns, coherence, and significance in order to understand the nature of ultimate reality, and our take on ultimate reality directly relates to what we trust and have confidence in. Thus, we act in light of how we make meaning, so meaning-making is profoundly related to our ethical assumptions and moral choices.

When we speak of "faith," we are speaking of meaning-making in its most comprehensive – ultimate and intimate – dimensions. "Faithing" can be understood as

an activity at the core of all humanity. It is the spiritual capacity of human life by which we recognize the animating essence of life itself. Meaning-making gives rise to religious traditions that hold the shared stories and practices by which we acknowledge and share our desire for authenticity, the experiences of depth and mystery, and the call to moral purpose and wholeness. We see today that many define themselves as spiritual, but not religious, which reflects that we live in a time when all our cultural traditions are under review because we live in a time of such profound change. We are currently reassessing how we have named and ritualized our experiences of meaning, faith, and spirituality.

Meaning-making provides ways of giving expression to the things we know intuitively, the dimensions of life that we hold as sacred – with tenderness and tenacity, courage and bravery, love, and commitment. These dimensions of human experience are always linked to our sense of participation in something greater than ourselves alone – a sense of participation in a vast "fabric of life," a dynamic reality that we experience, but do not control. The word "spirit" shares the same roots as words such as wind, breath, or air – a sense of power moving unseen. So when we are speaking of spirit, faith, and ultimate reality (whether expressed in religious or secular terms), we are always in a domain that is tangible and intangible, seen and unseen, known and unknown. These dimensions of experience and inquiry hold the opportunity for human beings to become more profoundly educated and to apprehend life more richly. They directly relate to the inquiry of higher education, because in order to become truly educated, we must take all of reality into account.

In your book, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams*, you discuss many challenges young adults face as they search for place and purpose while they reexamine their beliefs and assumptions and begin to ask new questions about meaning and faith. What types of questions will undergraduate college students ask on this spiritual quest?

Questions play a critical role in the formation of meaning and faith – and a viable adulthood. Questions become "big" when they serve as avenues to a larger and more significant inquiry, and they often arise in the context of everyday experience. They can take the form of questions of self: *Who am I? Who do I want to become? Am I loveable? Do I matter? How do I want to spend my time – and my life?*

Or they can manifest as explicit questions about meaning: *What is the meaning of my study? What is meaning of my parents' divorce? What is the meaning of the war we are in? What really matters?* Other questions young adults ask relate to time and place: *What will the future be like? What role will I have in society? Will my past determine my future? What/Who will I be able to trust in this complicated world?*

Questions of meaning and purpose are prompted particularly by our encounters with suffering and wonder; unless we become distracted and numb, we begin to ask questions: *Why are so many suffering? Am I complicit in the growing gap between the*

wealthy and the poor? How do I respond to the beauty of this world? Who are we among these stars?

These questions can arise in multiple contexts, such as travel, discovering one's sexuality, analyzing justice and injustice in society, considering who or what is dependable, or trying to sort out personal talents and experiences in order to determine what really matters. Any of these questions can take us down a very long road to both complex realms and larger vistas.

The metaphor of "shipwreck" can be used to describe times when young adults experience something unexpected and disappointing or engage questions that challenge the way they make meaning. Their world begins to change – even fall apart. Shipwreck can take many forms, including a family crisis, loss of relationship or identity, a health crises, the defeat of a cause, betrayal by a community or government, or intellectual inquiry that poses a challenge to an assumed faith or belief.

Yet with every shipwreck, there is also the possibility of washing up on a new shore. In my book, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams*, I describe this process of enduring shipwreck and how it can help in the development of new meaning and faith as young adults ponder big-enough questions:

> "If we do survive shipwreck – if we wash up on a new shore, perceiving more adequately how life really is – there is gladness. It is gladness that pervades one's whole being; there is a new sense of vitality, be it quiet or exuberant. Usually, however, there is more than relief in this gladness. There is transformation. We discover a new reality behind the loss…As the primal, elemental force of promise stirs again within us, we often experience it as a force acting upon us, beneath us, carrying us – sometimes in spite of our resistance – into a new meaning, new consciousness, new faith." (2000, 29).

As we look back from this new shore, we often are both glad and amazed. In this way, much of the journey of faith can be described as the experience of shipwreck, gladness, and amazement. The sense of gladness is linked to a new kind of knowing. This process is a part of an intellectual journey where one approaches a new horizon of understanding that is more adequate than earlier ways of making meaning.

"Shipwreck" experiences – intellectual or emotional – are a part of the much larger journey of developing a deeper sense of meaning, purpose, and faith in one's life. They can serve as critical, vital moments when young adults begin to challenge preconceived ideas, listen to other's experiences, and form a more complete idea of their personal faith as they continue to make meaning in their lives.

As students develop throughout college, what trends have you observed in their quest for meaning, purpose, and faith?

One pervasive trend is the emergence of new technologies into our society and into higher education. The implications of these technological advancements are vast and pose critical questions for how we relate to one another. They allow us to apprehend the dynamic complexity of our world in novel ways, and new possibilities open to us, placing us on new moral and ethical frontiers. These new technologies, however, can also become huge distractions that keep us from asking important questions and prevent us from having contemplative time. Because of our growing dependence on technology, there is always something vying for our attention – whether it's the omnipresent advertising, our addiction to text messaging, or our incessant plugging into iPods.

We need to consider the paradox of these digital devices: On one hand, they can contribute to heightened productivity and a greater connection to the global community; yet on the other, we experience an increasing sense of loneliness and isolation that leads to many mental and physical health risks that threaten our shared community and cultural forums. What happens when our experiences with others are mediated by technology? In the formative young adult years, we must consider what is being *lost* in human experience because of our seeming dependence on these new, even luminous, technologies.

Another trend that affects our present generation is the economic realties of working in a more brittle economy than in the past. It has become more complex to work out issues of vocation and purpose when there is less confidence that the economy will hold, making choices for the future of our young adults seem more stark. This manifests in asking the pivotal question: *Is there a place for me in this new economic order*? One of the tests of a culture is its capacity to receive its idealistic youth, and our culture is failing this test wherever "success" is equated with monetary reward alone.

A byproduct of this trend is the commodification of young adults who now have to learn to market themselves in order to be successful in our complex world. Young adults are encouraged to focus more on resume building and networking rather than being supported in exploring the many possibilities of who they can become. This economic trend constrains the imagination of young adults at the time when they otherwise are most able to discern and claim a worthy dream.

Young adults are exploited by the consumerism of our culture and burdened by consumer debt. Students now come to college feeling that they have to have the right "stuff" to fit in, and the amount of waste and materialism that is born on college campuses is increasing as they become hostages to life-style choices. The power of the media has an enormous effect on the shaping of life and spirit, impacting what young adults trust and what they assume about self and world. Corporations exploit young adults as a consumer market, wanting to instill brand loyalty for a lifetime, heavily investing in the young adult demographic. The young adults' desire to belong while not yet being established in an adult network renders them very vulnerable to these powerful efforts.

A third trend is living in an increasingly religiously variegated world. The young adult population is seeking a spiritual home and sense of belonging in a world that now offers a smorgasbord of choices, having both very positive and very negative consequences.

It has been said that when one has every religion, one has no religion. A part of religious life is participation in practice and discipline. If we simply cherry pick what we like or agree with and dismiss the rest, we are apt to dodge important dimensions of a faith tradition.
On the other hand, as we live in a time of profound change, we have to reexamine all religious traditions and explore the differing gifts that are now offered to the re-composing of faith and religion. The formation of a viable faith in today's world may depend upon the gift of having many religious traditions to draw upon. But young adults may wander and wonder without discovering a community of practice that has staying power over time.

Ironically, the young adult is also vulnerable to locking into a faith community that provides practice and discipline – but also provides easy answers that cannot be questioned. This kind of faith community is attractive because it offers belonging and support and reassurance in a complex world – but does not invite critical inquiry. Young adults can thus become vulnerable to various fundamentalisms (and even zealotry).

If, however, young adults have the opportunity to explore religious/spiritual traditions in ways that not only tolerate, but also welcome big questions and encourage depth of practice, a more adequate understanding and an "owned" faith can be composed.

Based on your scholarship, experiences, and observations, what suggestions would you offer to higher education administrators, faculty, and staff regarding supporting students as they continue to develop and make meaning of their experiences while in college?

It is essential to recognize higher education as a mentoring environment where young adults search for meaning, purpose, and faith during their formative college and university years. The academy may be understood as an environment where multiple mentoring communities serve the process of moving from adolescence into a significant adulthood. Mentoring communities can take many forms including: A class or course, a laboratory, athletic team, or residence hall, among other places and programs. These communities become spaces where students feel truly seen as whole persons, appropriately supported, challenged in timely and fitting ways, and inspired to embrace worthy aspirations. As students move into graduate and professional education across all sectors, mentoring environments continue to play a vital role in the ongoing development of young adult lives.

In well-crafted mentoring environments, big questions are present, there is access to worthy dreams, and young adults are invited to imagine a future that can hold significance and purpose – both for self and for the larger world. In a communal context offering the company of others, bigger questions can be engaged and shared learning can foster a higher probability of sustained commitment to worthy aspirations.

In today's world, faculty and staff need to be appropriately curious about students as whole people, not only the aspect for which they have a particular responsibility. They

need to be concerned about students who are marginalized and distinctive in their needs and potential. They need to become present in ways that inspire the best in students and in themselves, without becoming inappropriately distracted by the pressures and successes of their own careers.
They need to ask big-enough questions themselves in order to create environments where mentoring can occur in positive ways – questions such as:

> *"How do I order my own life within the college and university setting in a way that creates the optimum possibilities for the becoming of the students that are entrusted to us for a brief, but a very powerful and significant time during the formation of their adult life?"*

The answers to this question are neither obvious nor easy, but higher education is at a very fluid moment in its history, and collectively we have new opportunities to reconsider the purposes and vocation of higher education itself on behalf of a future where much is at stake for all of us.

Thank you very much, Sharon, for sharing your reflections with me and with our readers.

Dr. Sharon Daloz Parks is a member of the faculty and director of "Leadership for the New Commons," an initiative of the Whidbey Institute in Clinton, Washington. Previously, she served at the University of Redlands and Whitworth College, and for over sixteen years in faculty and research positions at Harvard University in the Schools of Divinity, Business, and Government. She is the author of Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Young Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose, and Faith, (2000); Leadership Can Be Taught: A Bold Approach for a Complex World (2005); and co-author of Common Fire: Leading Lives of Commitment in a Complex World (1996); and Can Ethics Be Taught? Perspectives, Approaches, and Challenges at Harvard Business School (1993). She teaches in the Executive Leadership and Pastoral Leadership Programs at Seattle University, and she serves nationally as a lecturer and consultant for higher education and other professional groups and organizations.