

## ***Spirituality and Service-Learning: Parallel Frameworks for Understanding Students' Spiritual Development***

**By Marshall Welch and Kent Koth**

*Through their collective experience working in service learning and civic education, Welch and Koth present a scholarly approach to examining the parallels between spiritual formation and service learning as it relates to college student development. Through the connections they draw, Welch and Koth provide an academic framework to propose that service learning and civic engagement work can be viewed as a spiritual practice that produces positive transformation in students' lives.*

Over the course of the past decade, the popularity of spirituality in American society has reached a fever pitch. Walk into any bookstore and you will likely encounter a whole table of literature exploring all matters of the spirit. Google "spirituality" and you will literally see millions of websites addressing issues of spirituality from the commonplace to the esoteric. It should, therefore, come as no surprise that spirituality has become a hot topic on college campuses.

Dozens of recent conferences and convenings sponsored by organizations such as NASPA, Campus Compact, and the EDUCATION as Transformation Project have engaged faculty, staff, students, and others in discussions on the role of spirituality on campus. Moreover, recent books by Nash (2002), Tisdell (2003), and Chickering, Dalton, and Stamm (2006) have helped expand the conversation to all parts of the campus and to multiple institutions. Additionally, UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute's longitudinal research study on spirituality in higher education has demonstrated the importance of spirituality in the lives of today's college students and has made a significant empirical contribution to field.

Yet, as spirituality grows in popularity, higher education faces a host of challenges. One challenge is fully understanding what is meant by spirituality. This is confounded by a continuing critique that spirituality in higher education is anti-intellectual and only engages students in a personal process of self-exploration that has little connection to their academic studies or intellectual development. The most vociferous critics perceive spirituality in higher education as nothing more than a passing fad, with little substance and lots of emotional fluff. While this critique may have merit in some isolated contexts, to turn away from the potential power of a spiritually infused education would be a mistake. As David Tacey (2004) notes:

To release the spiritual side of the student is not to release only warm and fuzzy feelings that seek ecstasy and quietude, but to release deep sources of inspiration that quicken the mind and restore excitement and personal motivation to learning. To teach through the spirit is to bring to life the inner core of the person and to relate that core to the intellectual material that is being discussed (p. 105).

Once we have an intellectual and theoretical understanding of spirituality, the second challenge is to realize ways in which it can be fully utilized and integrated within the academic experience. There is an unspoken assumption that spirituality and spiritual development should only occur within academic departments like Religious Studies or student life offices such as Campus Ministry.

In this article, we propose that spirituality and spiritual formation can be, and perhaps inadvertently has been, incorporated in many disciplines through service-learning within higher education. Initially, we explore several characteristics of spirituality and a five-phase model of spiritual formation. We then present a parallel developmental model of service-learning to illustrate how this form of engaged pedagogy can be an appropriate tool to nurture students' spiritual development.

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We begin with an unusual, yet simple exercise intended to illustrate the key connection between spirituality and service-learning. To begin, please find a comfortable place to sit when reading the next few passages. Once settled, simply take a normal breath and hold it for as long as possible. This doesn't require gasping deeply as if blowing out birthday candles. Simply breathe in deeply through the nose, filling the lungs and feeling the diaphragm in the lower abdomen expand. Hold it for a few seconds. Do it now.

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Now, take inventory, either mentally or physically on a piece of paper of what was discovered in those few seconds. The instructions we present are purposefully vague since we do not want to predispose or influence the process. Once more, take a few moments and think about this.

We have conducted this exercise a number of times with groups of college students in classrooms and other adults in various settings, including retreats for religious leaders from various denominations as well as faculty members from a diverse array of institutions of higher education. In a group situation, participants have shared their discoveries that came from the exercise. Eventually, one brave and often somewhat reluctant individual states the embarrassingly obvious, “*I had to exhale.*” Most individuals miss this point because it is so evident.

This simple exercise focusing on our breath and the importance of inhaling *and* exhaling provides a metaphor of how spirituality and service-learning are interconnected. The Latin root of spirituality is *spirae*, meaning breath. As we inhale we find inspiration, we nurture our spirit, and we search for meaning; yet none of us can survive by merely inhaling. Likewise, we cannot survive by focusing solely on our own spiritual journey as we risk moving into a pattern of self-absorption and narcissism.

In short, we cannot be just *inspired*. To survive, we must also exhale, we must engage the world. In exhaling we connect with others. At our best, in exhaling we find ways to serve and learn from others. Just as we are physiologically and biologically wired to inhale and exhale, we are also naturally inclined to connect our spirituality with our desire to unite with others. While the illustrative exercise is a minimalist overview of a complex process, it succinctly reflects the inherent role that spirituality plays in our lives and the potential role that service-learning can play as a spiritual practice.

## **SPIRITUALITY AND SPIRITUAL FORMATION**

Spirituality is complex and multiple definitions abound. Burton (2002) describes spirituality as an experience that includes – yet transcends – the self to generate a sense of unity or connection with something outside our self. Likewise, Hamilton and Jackson (1998) argue spirituality has three main themes: the further development of self-awareness; a sense of interconnectedness of all things; and a relationship with a “higher power” or a “higher purpose.” This third theme does not necessarily imply or mean a deity, although it certainly can. A higher purpose might also be to serve a local neighborhood or the global community. All in all, spirituality refers connecting to something bigger than one’s self.

## **RELATIONAL PHASES OF SPIRITUAL FORMATION**

As illustrated in the opening exercise and in the characteristics described above, a fundamental aspect of spirituality is a relationship between the self and something outside or beyond the self. Yet this relationship is not fixed; rather, it often involves moving through a series of more and more complex and interactive experiences. Drawing upon the basic constructs of developmental models described by Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986), Kegan (1994), Perry (1970), as well as Yates and Youness (1997), we believe that spiritual formation occurs in five formative phases: unknown, awareness, connection, radicalization, and integration.

The first is a static or perquisite phase of the **unknown**. In other words, an individual does not “know” who *they* are, let alone who or what something or someone is. At this stage, the individual is not cognizant or is unsure of her own identity, values, or purpose. Similarly, the individual is unaware or lacks an understanding of “the other” outside the self. In this case “the other” is not meant to be something inferior or foreign, but rather a person and, in some cases, a geographical space that forces the student to leave her comfort zone and encounter new knowledge about the self and her role in the world (Cousins, 2006). The individual is caught up in her own world, unaware of what it is comprised of and unaware of the bigger world outside this existence.

Eventually, the individual moves into a second phase of **awareness** of both her sense of self and being cognizant of the presence of something or someone outside her own existence; in this place, both the self and the “other” co-exist, but do not interact. This awareness phase can be illustrated using the image of two sports teams warming up on their respective halves of the playing area. Each team moves through drills on their own without acknowledging what the other team is doing.

The next phase occurs when there is a **connection** between the self and the “other.” Continuing the sport team metaphor, the connection occurs when the two teams actually compete against each other. As the competition ensues each team begins to see the meaning of their involvement in the game. This active process of making meaning often involves reflection. In the sports context, reflection occurs when the teams huddle to ponder: What just occurred? How does it impact me and how (if at all) should I adjust my behaviors or thoughts?

This reflective experience transforms each individual as new insights arise. Frequently, these new insights lead to transformation as the “me” now recognizes that it is connected to something or someone else, representing a change from “me-ness” to “we-ness.” At this stage, the individual still has a personal identity, but it has now been transformed. The transformation may include a change in or even a challenge of attitudes, values, or beliefs. It may also involve a change in perspective and awareness of the “other.”

The individual no longer just lives to pursue his/her own needs but now has a sense of greater purpose that connects to the well-being others. For example, a college student may shift from a narrow perception and identity as “consumer” to recognizing her role as a “global citizen,” suddenly becoming aware of the impact her purchases has on others or the environment. This realization is often accompanied with a degree of confusion and even angst as personal assumptions and meaning have been challenged or even altered. Poet Rainer Maria Rilke captures this sense:

Moments when something new has entered into us, something unknown; our feelings grow mute in shy perplexity, everything in us withdraws, a stillness comes, and the new which no one knows, stands in the midst of it and is silent....I believe that almost all of our sadness are moments of tension that we find paralyzing because we no longer hear our surprised feelings living. Because we are alone with the alien thing that has entered our self; because everything intimate and accustomed is for an instant taken away; because we stand in the middle of a transition where we cannot remain standing (p. 64).

The meaning drawn from the encounter leads to the next phase of **radicalization**, which is manifested by a change in behavior. Radicalization moves a person beyond their previous habits of living to now embrace and participate in life in new ways, such as reaching out to others in need and advocating for a greater good. Using the example above, an individual who recognizes her role as a global citizen may refrain from buying certain products because of the negative impact they may have, shifting to alternative products that are more socially or environmentally benign, which indirectly serves others and the greater good. In this phase, one leaves their comfort zone, a long-held mindset or assumption, to take on or become something new. To be radicalized is to be more fervent, passionate, and committed.

The final phase is **integration** where the self now envelops the other by sacrificing some aspects of individuality in order to become part of something bigger than it can be on its own. Returning to the sports metaphor, the individual athlete is now an integrated part of the team. The self still exists, but now is a part of something else. With time, and depending on the circumstances, an individual may eventually transcend their own needs and wants to strive toward meeting the needs and well-being of others.

Within these stages of spiritual development, the degree of transcendence can vary. Extreme examples of transcendence are documented by what Joseph Campbell (1991) referred to as the Hero's Journey. The Buddha is one example of this transcendent journey in which the young prince, Siddhartha, has been cloistered into the protective confines of the palace. Here, the hardships of life are unknown to him. It is when he escapes the palace that he first becomes aware of an existence and circumstances outside his own. Then, he struggles to understand what he encounters through a period of aestheticism and is transformed as he is "awakened," which is the meaning of the word "Buddha." As a result, he transcends his own needs to attend to the needs and lives of others.

The Buddha is not the only example of transcendent behavior. Contemporary society is filled with everyday examples of individuals who commit themselves to a cause. Another present-day and less dramatic example of the Hero's Journey is illustrated in the film, "The Visitor." The main character is a bored, disenfranchised professor who accidentally befriends a young couple who are illegal immigrants. The professor's apathy is dispelled as he gets to know, understand, and appreciate them as individuals, their culture, and the difficult circumstances they encounter when the man is suddenly detained by government officials. The professor becomes emotional energized through radicalization and involved in their plight. In doing so, he rediscovers himself and new meaning for his own life as he attempts to help others.

## **SERVICE-LEARNING**

Profound moments and experiences such as the story in this film often move individuals to give of themselves unselfishly in the interest of others, which is a type of spiritual experience. These moments can and often do take place within the context and experience of service-learning. Over the past 25 years, the prevalence of service-learning on college and university campuses has grown exponentially. Initially

conceived in the 1980s as a means to engage what was perceived to be a self absorbed “me generation” of college students in service to society, service-learning has now become a tool to address a host of learning outcomes, including critical thinking skills, career exploration, moral development, the ability to engage in a diverse world, and an understanding of one’s spiritual and/or religious identity (Eyler, Giles, Stenson, and Gray 2003).

Additionally, Jacoby (1996) defined service-learning as:

A form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs together with structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote student learning and development. Reflection and reciprocity are key concepts of service-learning (p. 5).

From this definition, one can see that, like spirituality, service-learning includes the key characteristic of being relational by responding to human and community needs. In fact, engaging in relationships with “the other” may be the core element of the service-learning process.

For example, through a service-learning assignment in an Economics course, a student from an upper income family is asked to research and recommend strategies for low-income people to get better access to affordable and fresh fruits and vegetables. As a part of the project, the student conducts interviews with low-income residents of a public housing facility, which leads him to encounter the “otherness” of those who are struggling to make ends meet. This experience leads the student to clarify his own relationship to wealth as well as his understanding of the shadow-side of a capitalist economy. While this example is related to a distinct course within a specific disciplinary tradition, its experiential and service-oriented nature leads to a common outcome of fostering stronger relationships between the students and others.

When thoughtfully facilitated by faculty and other educators, service-learning experiences like the one described above frequently catalyze students to pursue additional personal, intellectual and spiritual learning. These experiences often move them further into an intensive exploration of values and personal meaning. Drawing upon foundational developmental theories (e.g. Gilligan, 1982; Kohlberg, 1975; Perry, 1970), Delve, Mintz, and Stewart (1990) describe a five-phase model of student engagement in service learning that closely relates to spirituality.

In the initial **exploration** phase students are generally eager to get involved and explore new service opportunities. Yet, these students also are yet to connect psychologically or emotionally with any group in the community. In short, they possess an enthusiasm to engage, but they have not yet to begun to encounter “the other.”

In the second **clarification** phase, the students get involved in many different activities in order to decide how best to focus their future service involvement. Through what is often called “the salad bar approach,” students seek to clarify what is important to them. During the third phase of **realization**, students frequently begin to see connections

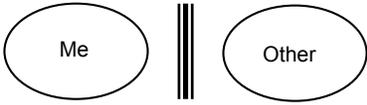
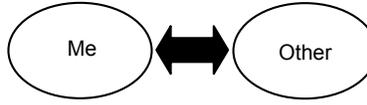
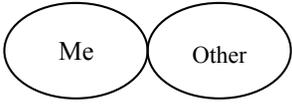
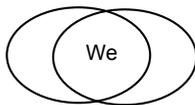
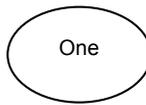
between their many varied experiences with service and community engagement. During this phase, students often experience “aha” moments of great transformation and also become more focused on particular community issues or populations.

During the fourth phase of **activation**, students begin to develop a strong sense of solidarity with the population they are serving as they start to fully engage complex issues of racism, sexism, classism and other forms of injustice. As students begin to realize that they give more than they receive, they develop a full awareness of the process of reciprocity. Finally, the handful of students who reach the fifth phase of **internalization** have fully integrated service-learning experiences into their lives to the point where they make lifestyle and career decisions based upon the internalized values of justice and compassion.

### SERVICE-LEARNING AS A SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

Delve, Mintz and Stewart’s (1990) five-phase model of student engagement in service-learning closely parallels students’ spiritual development process. In fact, as evidenced by the diagram below, when positioned side-by-side the similarities are quite striking.

DIAGRAM 1: Parallel Frameworks of Spiritual Development and Service Learning

<i>Phase</i>	<i>Phases of Spiritual Development</i>	<i>Service-Learning</i>	<i>Illustration</i>
1	Unknown	Exploration	
2	Discovery	Clarification	
3	Reflection	Realization	
4	Radicalization	Activation	
5	Integration	Internalization	

Both teachers and students typically venture into service-learning as a pedagogical experience. However, keeping in mind the potential transformation that can occur as part of the phases of spiritual formation in parallel with the five phases of service-learning, it is possible for students to move beyond radicalization to a more transcendental and altruistic lifestyle. Many students exit service-learning experiences with a better sense of their role and place in the world. Consequently, they are willing and eager to transcend their own learning experience and needs by giving of themselves to the betterment of others. Hopefully, this transformation will be generalized into their career and lifestyle choices.

With this in mind, we do not have to think of spiritual development in higher education as yet another separate curriculum or something that is the jurisdiction of only certain departments or offices. Rather, the process and practice of service-learning in an academic classroom or co-curricular setting becomes a powerful tool to engage students in rigorous intellectual and spiritual formation. And in doing so, we are able to educate the whole student, which leads to an integrative learning process of great power.

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