SPIRITUALITY AND PEDAGOGY: A MODEST PROPOSAL

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ABSTRACT

The place of spirituality in higher education is increasingly becoming part of academic discourse as institutions confront the challenges and opportunities of the 21st century. Teaching and learning can be elevated to a higher plane through pedagogical practices that affirm human values and other essential elements that create a vital learning community. A vision of education as transformative and spiritually-based is particularly imperative at a time when academe struggles with fragmentation and cultural dissonance. How does a teacher create a climate of learning that transcends mere information-gathering? How does a student connect subject matter with the larger context of life? How can a university support curricular and instructional practices that nourish the spirit? All in all, the assumption is that teaching is a vocation and learning can be a bridge to wholeness.

"I teach because teaching offers something. It offers love – not only the love of learning and of books and ideas, but also the love that a teacher feels for that rare student who walks into a teacher's life and begins to breathe."

The writer of this teaching philosophy, though anonymous, articulates the ideal that elevates teaching into the realm of spirit and of "breathing lessons" which can transform a classroom into a safe and hospitable environment for exploring human issues. Based on the premise that the contract between the teacher and the student should go beyond the mere transfer of information, this concept affirms that it is possible to uphold values in higher education, particularly in a post-modern, deconstructionist period of academic history.

To this end, three books on the place of spirituality in higher education are worth noting – *The Courage to Teach* by Parker J. Palmer, *The Heart of Learning: Spirituality in Education*, edited by Steven Glazer, and *Education as Transformation*, edited by Victor H. Kazanjian, Jr. and Peter L. Laurence.[1] All three complement each other by gently insisting on the following principles: (1) The "what" and "how" of teaching should also embrace the "why" as a valuable dimension of the learning process; (2) Teachers and students have interior lives that may be in harmony or in dissonance with the culture of an academic institution; and, (3) It is possible to infuse spirituality into the structure and content of learning through effective pedagogy.

Wherever good teaching is at stake, we need to ask: What shall we teach? What methods and techniques are required to teach well? For what purpose and to what ends do we teach? And the deeper question: How do we guide students on an inner journey as we deal with subjects as large and as complex as life, humbly acknowledging that which often eludes our grasp? In other words, where is the place of spirituality as we plow through the daily demands of the classroom and trudge through the mire of administrative tasks?

To speak of spirituality in teaching is to evoke varied reactions. However, if one assumes that education is ineluctably a spiritual matter, one can address "the fundamental values to which we commit ourselves and trust to secure significance and meaning in our lives" (Bennett, 2004). This also takes into account the student's interior life and self-understanding, whether implied or overtly expressed. Also assumed is that education is more than a mere commodity transacted between an institution and its "customers," and that it can be a salvific means of developing the whole person.

"Spirituality" also implies a larger context than religion in general, but may be related to it. It points to such interlocking values as creativity, empathy, inspiration, and community, as alternatives to fragmentation, linear thinking, and individualism. It

cultivates the inner landscape of teaching that can bear fruit even in the often barren soil of academe. Above all, spirituality embraces mystery as a component of learning itself. In the words of Albert Einstein, "The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true Art and Science."

Spirituality can also be defined as a major organizing principle in one's life, a source from which we often derive meaning and informs many of our life choices. It is also one's personal relation to the sacred, an inherent part of our existence that cannot be ignored in the educational setting" (Lauzon, 2003). Ultimately, if one's work is also one's vocation (the root word of which is *voca* = "calling"), weaving one's intellectual work into holistic teaching is a means of humanizing the job description and the academic contract. Vocation at its best is "the place where the heart's deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet" (Buechner, 1993).

In addition, spirituality also points to "the reliable centers of meaning and value (Bennett, 2004) that are not optional but are part of being human. Thus, infusing the curriculum with a sense of purpose beyond the pragmatic and the quantifiable is a task worth pursuing. If spirituality is inherently present in the working environment, acknowledging it also means developing a sensitive pedagogy.

Several assumptions undergird the theory of spiritually-based teaching—that higher education can offer opportunities for developing the interior lives of students beyond cognitive skills, that the college years comprise a developmental stage among young adults engaged in issues related to their sense of self and the larger world, and that certain instructional practices can be developed to transform the classroom into an authentic place for exploring human values.

Current studies have confirmed that the college years are a life stage when students become increasingly committed to matters beyond academic concerns.[2] Between the age of 16 and 25, they move through "uncharted territory where they begin to

build a provisional life structure through choices in relationships, career orientation and work, organization of their priorities, and even through personal life style....One's spiritual quest has the potential to sustain and to preserve a sense of coherence against chaos" (Nino, 2002).

How then should institutions of higher learning respond to this opportunity and challenge?

As faculty and students gain new competencies, several questions should also arise: "What difference does my knowledge make to who I am?" " How has it challenged my view of the universe and of my existence?" "Are there moments of connection and human beauty in the learning process?" In other words, what has puzzled, stirred, provoked, intrigued, surprised, or even outraged the student in the pursuit of knowledge and competence in the subject? Is the classroom a safe place to explore questions beyond the syllabus and the grading of academic performance? In the task of teaching, is there room for the transforming power of education?

Current writings such as *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope* by bell hooks and *Finding God at Harvard* by Kelly Monroe advocate for "the transformative space of the classroom" that combines care, commitment, respect, and trust in creating a climate for teaching.[3] Instructional practices that give students permission to pursue questions beyond cognitive data often results in education that is not alienated or isolated from the larger meaning and purpose of an authentic academic experience. As a scholarly act, "teaching is a dynamic endeavor involving all the analogies, metaphors, images that build bridges between the teacher's understanding and the student's learning" (Boyer, 1990). This further involves differentiating information from wisdom and advocating for the return of imagination and mystery to education "so we are not merely educating technicians and pragmatic thinkers but are calling forth new vocations" (Halifax, 1999).

Consequently, educators can practice certain pedagogical approaches that present faculty and students with opportunities for spiritual exploration. Foremost is cultivating a space where genuine and respectful sharing can take place. This method confronts the very competitiveness of "marketplace education' (Lauzon, 2003) which often elevates competition for grades and classroom performance as the supreme goal. If the only message coming through is that the total worth of a student is solely based on how he or she excels in tests and required assignments, the classroom becomes a Darwinian setting merely for the survival of the fittest. It is not enough that students can reproduce large amounts of information on demand or that they pass examinations successfully. Neither is it enough for teachers to merely supply answers without giving students the space to ask questions or to connect the subject matter with the larger context of their lives. "The best teachers tend to embed the discipline's issues in broader concerns…and remind students how the current question relates to some larger issue that already interests them" (Bain, 2004).

The teaching environment should therefore be more open and hospitable to include "an ethic of care" (Albert, 2000) that reflects the social, emotional, and intellectual connectedness of the total learning process. This approach makes room for the student whose contribution to classroom discourse may be more reflective than informative and whose approach to the subject matter may be more holistic than linear. As one educator succinctly argues, "You do not teach a class. You teach a student" (Baker, 1997).

Encouraging and requiring students to take responsibility for their own learning is also another pedagogical means of creating meaning, purpose, and motivation. This includes the creation of "learning communities" that foster supportive relationships and offer more opportunity for personal interaction and collaborative learning beyond the traditional transfer of information from the lecturer's podium to the student's

notebook. With learning communities, power and control do not reside in the teacher or in a few selected members of the class. In contrast, the distribution of learning tools and the ownership of results is more egalitarian. Such an approach also allows for such inquiries as "What major conclusions have emerged?" "What questions remain?" "Does this make sense?" What have we learned here?"

Similarly, creating a culture of empowerment and teamwork means trusting collective effort over individual achievement. "We are, therefore I am," has a communal resonance, is less hierarchical, and connotes a more expansive worldview. When learning communities are in place, transformative learning also becomes increasingly possible. To illustrate, a class in introductory literature can approach the poetry component of the course differently. Instead of the usual graded assignment for each individual student on his or her interpretation of an assigned poem, the instructor divides the class into small groups. The shared task is to study a poem on war and to listen to the group's responses to the images evoked by the text. What results is a deeper connection among the participants, as one student, for instance, verbalizes for the first time his fear of dying and another reflects on her belief in love as a power stronger than death. These shared discussions can also be reinforced by journal writing that enables the individual student and the group to articulate their responses to the objective and subjective content of the course. As a result, this not only makes the subject matter relevant to students' lives but it also opens up the discourse to a higher level of consciousness and exploration.

In this regard, the course content, in an introductory literature course as an example, can use a holistic approach in the teaching of the humanities. Based on the premise that both wonderful and terrible things happen to human beings, the assigned readings should ideally include a balance of the

literature of hope and the literature of despair.[4] For instance, a course on the short story may include a fictional account of an obsessed young man's doomed search for pleasure and the gilded life, as a contrast to the story of an elderly woman—poor and socially marginalized—who defies obstacles so she can keep her dying grandson alive.

"Paul's Case" by Willa Cather and "A Worn Path" by Eudora Welty (Perrine, 1998) respectively dramatize the folly of self-delusion and the depths of courage that the human spirit is capable of. One without the other would merely present a lopsided view of the human condition. In this case, a balanced choice of readings guides students toward greater authenticity in their search for truth and offers more than a purely reductionist view of life.

In addition, the syllabus as a teaching tool should have some flexibility. The tendency to "cover the material" at whatever cost has to be balanced by the more creative option of using the syllabus as a guide that is responsive to the needs of students. On a highly dramatic scale, sticking to the assigned material for a class that met on September 11, 2001 would have been untenable, as terrorist attacks against the United States stunned the nation.[5] In less catastrophic settings, it is just as important to listen to the psycho-social configuration of a class in determining whether what the syllabus requires breathes life into the classroom or stifles it. In some cases, it may involve "teaching less but teaching deeply" (Weimer, 2003).

What of the educator who is committed to infusing a greater sense of well-being and wellness to the art of teaching? In academe, to what extent are faculty encouraged to integrate innovative learning strategies with traditional pedagogy? Are the spiritual dimensions of one's work congruent with teaching as vocation? Is the teacher, a key player in day-to-day classroom transactions, supported by the academic institution?

If the academy is "a place of fierce combat over small stakes" (Austin, 2004), the task of surviving in an inhospitable environment leaves little room for imaginative teaching. If only individual professional achievement is rewarded and the strong undercurrent of fierce competition is not questioned, defensiveness and lack of trust dominate the workplace. If the institution has a near-total absence of reflectiveness, teaching inevitably becomes fragmented and ultimately irrelevant.

On the other hand, if the sphere of values in an institution of higher learning includes a sense of community and caring, much can happen. Interdisciplinary programs and collaborative work among faculty and students become the norm. The quality of life in the university is no longer measured solely by its ratings in research, funding, or test scores, but also by a shared purpose and collegial integrity. Faculty development takes into account the values, beliefs, hopes, fears, and frustrations of teachers in addition to technological advancement and performance evaluation. Students, the ultimate stakeholders in higher education, subsequently benefit from an academic climate that encourages the development of the whole person.

In *The Courage to Teach,* Parker J. Palmer, one of the foremost proponents of spirituality in higher education, proclaims that "good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher...Good teachers are able to weave a complex web of connections among themselves, their subjects, and their students, so that students can learn to weave a world for themselves." The subtitle of the book: "Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life" further illustrates that identity and integrity encompass both the "shadows and limits ... the strengths and potentials" that one brings to the vocation of teaching.

William Butler Yeats, the poet, uses metaphor to describe education as "not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire." Beyond the accumulation of facts, figures, or skills, learning at its best awakens and inspires the spirit. Furthermore, teaching as an ongoing relational process poses enormous challenges for growth and transformation. Palmer's (1998) notion that "[t]echnique is what teachers use until the real teacher arrives" presumes life-long learning. That teaching requires courage is not mere hyperbole but a reference to the vulnerabilities inherent in the work of guiding and inspiring.

In conclusion, spirituality and pedagogy in higher education are worth considering in light of the nature of teaching itself. Ignoring the realm of spiritual formation in the lives of students, particularly at a time when artifice abounds in the culture, can be detrimental. In the words of Diane Chapman Walsh, president of Wellesley College, supporting students in the process of transformational growth means guiding them "in developing not only knowledge and skill but also qualities of mind and spirit that will carry them through their lives: wide-ranging curiosity, a taste for scholarship, for ideas, for intellectual challenge and exchange; a willingness to take responsibility for what they count as truth, and why; an openness to multiple viewpoints, and a commitment to self-critique."[6]

One starts with the belief that education, being more than the transfer of cognitive information, is undergirded by the human need to connect knowledge with wisdom, learning with transformation. With institutional support, the teacher then proceeds to translate this concept through curricular and instructional practices that value spirituality. What results from this partnership could, in fact, be insightful and even joyful. When both teacher and student agree to create safe spaces for creative dialogue, the craft of teaching is well-served. When an institution of higher learning gives its blessing to education that inspires and transforms, it joins a growing number of colleges and universities around the world

committed to exploring new approaches to education in the twenty-first century. In the end, teaching reclaims the heartbeat it truly deserves.

Notes

[1] These 3 books represent a growing trend in American higher education that advocates for holistic teaching. In 1998, a national gathering attended by 1000 participants from 250 educational institutions convened at Wellesley College in Massachusetts to discuss religious pluralism, spirituality, and a new vision for academic life in America.

[2] In 2001 – 2002, a survey funded by the Pew Charitable Trust at the University of California in Los Angeles tracked over 3,000 college students from 50 colleges and universities regarding the role of spirituality and religion in their academic life. Representing a variety of ethnic and religious backgrounds, the participants noted that spiritual and religious concerns affected their academic, social, and emotional well-being. See *The Journal of College Development*, Volume 44, number 6, November-December, 2003.

[3] Women writers in particular have consistently supported the concept of spirituality and pedagogy in higher education. This is strongly reinforced by Mary Rose O'Reilly in *Radical Presence, Teaching as Contemplative Practice.*

[4] I developed this theme in a Centennial lecture on "A Long Night's Journey into Day: Reclaiming the Literature of Hope" at Silliman University, Philippines, August, 2001.

[5] In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on the U.S. on September 11, 2001, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* published several articles on soul-searching in academe. Among the topics were questions asked by Ph.D. candidates on the seeming irrelevance of their research in light of global terrorism and matters of life and death.

[6] The Religious and Spiritual Life program at Wellesley College, led by a team of chaplains, advisers, and student leaders, support the spiritual, educational, and worship needs of many different faith traditions. This is seen as fundamental to the college's core educational mission.

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