Learning to Connect: Spirituality and Leadership

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In this chapter we will take a look at ourselves as spiritual individuals and our place in the institutions we serve. We will look at those for whom we have supervisory responsibility and strategies to foster staff spiritual development. We will consider how to create within our colleges and universities an environment more conducive to spiritual growth and how to create influence our institutions to take more leadership in the communities they are a part of. We will also look at higher education and challenge it to play a larger role in the global community.

In the process we look at some western ways of understanding spirituality and leadership and also some eastern ways. Our goal is to chart a course for the individuals inside these complex institutions of higher learning that will be both fulfilling and meaningful for them and to challenge ourselves to contribute to higher education institutions to take up leadership roles on complex social issues.

Where to Begin

The starting point for enhancing the spiritual development of ourselves, our staff and our organizations is our own deep soul work, reflection on our own lives and what gives them meaning. What is it that matters? What are the values that guide our lives? Are there significant experiences that have made us into the people we have become? How have those experiences formed our relationships with others in our immediate family and in the workplace? How have we identified our talents and what we have to offer to the world of higher education? What are our reasons for choosing to work in colleges and universities and what are our own personal missions? We begin with examining our lives.

We suggest that getting in touch with our selves and what we believe in is the beginning point for working with staff on spiritual development and the beginning point for a course toward effective leadership. The Bhagavad Gita says, "the mind is like the wind" and more difficult to control than wild horses. The Katha Upanisad describes the person who does not operate from a spiritual core as "scattered as the rain that falls in craggy places, loses itself and becomes dispersed throughout the mountains. [1] In today's fast paced world with the rate of change increasing exponentially, ancient wisdom cautions us that we need an anchor and a place to stand that will provide some stability and direction.

What are the elements of a spiritual life? Certainly one element is what we value. One way to help us identify what we value in a global community is being provided by the Institute for Global Ethics[2]. They have undertaken a project to identify the values most

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[1] Bhagavad Gita translation by R.C. Zaehner and Katha Upanisad 4.14.

[2] Shared Values for a Troubled World: Conversations with Men and Women of Conscience by Rush Worth M. Kidder, Jo Spiller (Illustrator), 1994.

commonly held in the world today across cultural boundaries. Through a series of interviews with individuals from a variety of nations, traditions and perspectives they asked about their most essential beliefs and values. Here is what they identified as the most commonly held "values for humanity":

- Fairness
- Freedom
- Unity
- Tolerance
- Responsibility
- Respect for Life
- Love

One could ask- are these my values? What would I add or subtract from this list? The purpose for asking these questions could be to get us in touch with who we are and what gives us our uniqueness. It allows us to find our voices and to speak about what we think matters most.

Speaking in the first person and from our own experiences may be another element of a spiritual life as it fosters honesty, integrity and authenticity in relationships with others. Michael Meade, author of Men and the Water of Life, has traveled the world in search of universal myths to use in drumming workshops with men.[3] He has recently focused his work on youth in gangs and attempting to invent new rituals of initiation. "I would not last a minute in this work if I did not speak in the first person and from my heart", says Meade. "Authenticity is the litmus test with these young people and if you don't pass that test you don't stand a chance". The importance he places on integrity can be a model for work with staff and student in colleges.

We have found that when working with staff they are very willing to talk about their own spiritual journeys and what gives their lives meaning. We have yet to work with a group of student development professionals that was not on some level eager to share what was most important to them. We have found that one key is to speak of such matters in the first person and to be as autobiographical as possible. For example, staff are welcome to participate in spirituality groups which offer opportunities for faith sharing through written first person autobiography of the key events in their lives.

Whether thinking of colleagues, students or ourselves the way we view student and staff development is that spiritual development is at the center. Physical, intellectual, emotional, social and occupational development are intimately linked to ones spiritual development and linked by this central spiritual focus. We might go, as far as to say that growth on a spiritual dimension is the key to the most significant development in these other areas of a person's life. Pursuing a passion, following your heart or doing what you love stimulates new ways of thinking, feeling and acting. You can teach those you work with by appealing to their intellect, but you inspire those you work with by wining their

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[3] Men and the Water of Life: Initiation and the Tempering of Men, Harper San Francisco, 1993.

hearts. Yet, the spiritual development of the people we work with often receives the least attention at our professional conferences and in our publications.

You might say that a staff or an organization is made up of many individuals with spiritual centers and that the spiritual center of the organization is in large part the sum total of those individual cores. To develop a staff or an organization it is therefore wise to take into account the spiritual journey of the individuals in that organization. You might say that an effective leader has the ability to tap into the core values of the people in the college or university or can reach or inspire those coworkers to pull an organization in the direction they themselves believe in going.

One further perspective from Hindu Philosophy is that there are many spiritual paths. They have been categorized as the paths of knowledge, works and devotion. Any institution of higher education will have an abundance of faculty or staff committed to a path of knowledge where the intellectual pursuit of truth and the life of the mind are central to who they are. Likewise, many others, are on a path of duty or works or just getting done what needs to be done and they find their meaning in that. Others, perhaps student development staff are abundant in this category, are on a more passionate path, one of emotion and feeling and faith and belief in the goodness of human nature.

The point is that diverse sacred journeys of all those in our colleges and universities are necessary in order to create real community. However this soul work is challenging in most of our institutions. Often the culture of our organizations and within student affairs works against these efforts. Naming these inhibitors is a necessary part of the process of enhancing the spirituality of our staff and our institutions.

The Current Inhibitors to Soul Work in Student Affairs

Remember the Hippodrome ride at amusement parks? The ride consisted of a round structure. When we enter, we cluster towards the center of a large cylinder. As the ride begins, the cylinder starts to spin. The spinning increases until one by one we are pulled away from the center to the outer edge of the walls. At its peak speed, the floor drops out from under us, and we stay plastered against the outer wall.

This image is an analogy of the kind of work-life that most of us experience in Student Affairs. We spin faster and faster and eventually we can no longer hold onto the center. Over time, we are pulled apart from one another as the speed of "to dos" increase. Eventually the floor drops out from beneath us. Needless to say, it is difficult to live an examined live, if one is worried about the floor dropping out from beneath.

Spiritual principles flow from the belief that we are all connected. This connectivity recognizes that we have an interdependent relationship with each other, and all of nature. Juxtapose this idea with the fragmentation of our work lives. Despite the larger trend to blur boundaries, silos are still alive and well in higher education. Our language is one indicator of the boundaries we maintain. We use names like departments and divisions to mark our territory. We have informal rules of behavior that state we should mind our

own business. For example, "I won't interfere in your work, if you don't tell me what to do." There are also subtle forms of power that keep us in our own space, and don't support individuals that try to work across boundaries. For example, how many of us have seen or created a job description that is impossible for one person to accomplish? Or how many of us have a job that is bigger than a 40-hour workweek? The pressure to perform, please, and complete our job quickly keeps us out of living in the present. We put our heads down and plow through, which causes us not to be present to our selves and our students or develop the relationships necessary for facilitating collaboration and connection.

Finally, the pace of our work doesn't allow for reflection. The action bias is strong in student affairs. We often define our worth on the speed within which we solve problems, or our ability to make problems go away. This creates a treadmill effect that works against reflective questions and complex covenant relationships.

Another cultural artifact of student affairs is the need for approval. This works against our own spiritual process. When we seek approval, we need to control those below us in order to create the conditions under which our boss will approve of us. These behaviors work to diminish others and create fear in our organizations. When we are fearful, we can not bring our authenticity to our organization. In this way, fear and control diminishes the spiritual development of others and our own as well.

In student affairs, we not only have silos; we also have legal standards. The fear of being sued can cause us to be cautious and reduce out relationships to a transactional level. An example of a transactional relationship is based in the principle of "you scratch my back and I will scratch yours." It shows up when we choose to act on the letter of the law but not the spirit. Spiritual relationships are formed in a covenant between people. A covenant relationship extends beyond the legal minimum requirements. When we hold back or relate based on legal standards, we also limit the quality of and potential impact of our relationships. We learn to protect our organizations, and ourselves which eventually diminishes the service and care of our students and ourselves.

How does an individual's soul work affect the community?

Our behavior impacts those around us – especially if we are in a position of leadership. When we hold a management position, we are metaphorically in the spotlight to our employees. Others watch us more closely and use our actions as justification for their own behaviors. Here are some examples of how a leader's behavior elicits responses in others and effects the organization's environment. If a person chose to do their soul work, their modeling would have this effect on others and their organization.

Implications between behavior, its impact on others and the organization's culture

Individual leader's	Impact on others	Impact on the

behavior		organization's culture
Integrity and authenticity in one's actions. Committed to their journey - does not need to be perfect; living one's story	Gives permission to others to be authentic as well. Allows others to be fallible human beings.	A leader's modeling of this creates a climate of authenticity within the organization.
Being trusting and trustworthy	Invites others to trust them in return	Allows people to talk frankly with each other (which in turn helps authenticity and integrity to develop).
Being present	Gives a feeling of appreciation to others	Slows people down so they can live in the present (shifts from past and future as primary focus)
Humor and enjoyment - can see the humor in situations by changing their perspective	Allows individuals to see humor in their own behaviors and not take themselves so seriously. Laughter opens up people to the positive and facilitates personal change	Expresses joy and humor. It opens up people to work with each other in positive ways and diminishes judgement.
Not driven by self interest - "their hearts are in the right place"	Gives permission to individuals to contribute to the larger community without need for self-protection and defense.	Contributes to the development of a culture that has integrative power. Integrative power exists when people are predisposed to trust, care, collaborate with one another and hold altruistic beliefs.[4]
Nature of relationships is based within a covenant framework.	People feel valued and safe.	The organization models care of employees and enables a community within a workplace to form.
Pursuit of knowledge and ideas related to spirituality	Increases shared knowledge in others and staff	Inspires the organization to create deeper meaning for their work.

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[4] Bela H. Banathy *The Cognitive Mapping of Societal Systems: Implications for Education*, in the Evolution of Cognitive Maps: New Paradigms for the Twenty-First Century. Edited by E. Laszlo, and I. Masulli, with R. Artigiani and V. Csanyi. Published by Gordon and Breach, Switzerland in conjunction with The World futures General Evolution Studies. Banathy introduces a new kind of power in this chapter. Integrative power is defined as power that brings people together and creates a predisposition toward collaboration and altruistic beliefs and values. Traditional forms of power usually divide people, integrative power reinforces the covenant relationships between people and allows organizations to work in vastly different ways.

Creating an organization that supports spiritual work.

Strategies for shaping an organizational culture that reflect spiritual principles and encourage the soul work of employees.

In our first two sections, we have described the elements of a spiritual life, the challenges of student affairs and its culture that hinder the development of our staffs' spiritual lives, as well as how an individual can impact others and the organization's culture. If we were to create a living community that supports spiritual practice and development we would need to shift our culture from one of a "fragmented, doing / treadmill" to one that encourages reflection, caring, community and integration. Here are some concepts or strategies that would help develop a culture in student affairs that would support a living community.

- **An environment of safety.** If people don't feel safe at work, they don't reveal themselves. Over time, this diminishes their spiritual development, authenticity, and integrity. Russ Moxely, in his book, *Leadership and Spirituality*, discusses the role of collusion and its negative impact on an individual's spiritual development.[i] He believes that control-based hierarchies actually arise from the unexamined emotional issues of positional managers. If managers are driven by approval, fear, insecurity, or anger they are more controlling of people who report to them. For example, if a SSAO were worried about gaining the approval of the president, he or she would need to control the outcomes and behaviors of their staff in order to deliver what the president wants. The impact of this behavior would trigger another dynamic between staff and the SSAO. If they didn't feel it was safe to disagree, they would need to choose between collusion and commitment. If they collude, they would say yes when they really wanted to say no, or remain silent when they want to speak their minds. When staff members choose collusion over commitment to their own authenticity and the institution's mission, their spirits are diminished. Therefore, it is important to create a culture of safety within student affairs, and influence the larger institution to do the same.
- **Spiritual norms.** The social norming strategy that alcohol programs have discovered can apply to spiritual development as well. Often our perception of reality and the actual reality of staffs' behavior and values are different. For example, if we reward and talk about staff members who are at their desks 70 hours a week and dedicate their lives to busy-ness, new staff members can conclude that their value to the organization will be measured by their long hours and hard work. However, if the majority of staff actually take time to reflect, live balanced lives, and live an examined life, the reality and the perception will not match. If a SSAO wanted to encourage a culture that supported spiritual development, they would highlight the reality of the number of staff members who engage in their own spiritual development.

- **Shift the criteria of for recognition.** Often we recognize the very behavior that works against the spiritual development of our staff. For example, how many of our organizations applaud the over-worked or the always-working individual? Or perhaps we create informal status for those who are at work late at night or on weekends. We may also subtlety look down on the person who asks reflective questions, or takes time to live a more balanced life. Sometimes the informal criteria we use to recognize our staff is different from the formal criteria. Insuring congruence between the formal and informal criteria is important. If the organization's criteria for recognition supported spiritual development of staff, it would reward people who were authentic, present to others, treated colleagues with respect and care, were reflective, and balanced doing with being.
- **Treat others as sacred.** What would happen if we treated each other as if we are worthy of reverence and respect and were willing to show appreciation and consideration to others? How would this change what we talk about, how we interact, and what we believe about each other? Today, the lean and mean paradigm of organizations leaves little room for treating each other as sacred. However, if we chose to set a new standard of sacredness for our relationships, we would be creating a culture that supports the spiritual development of our staff. Something wonderful happens when we recognize the strengths and unique gifts in each other. We begin to reveal ourselves instead of protect ourselves. Our ego may then take a back seat, and we become more open and receptive to change, ideas, suggestions, and appreciation.
- **Amplify meaning making.** Spirituality is a search for meaning. When we are busy doing things in our organizations, linking these task to something larger than ourselves is ignored. When we don't create meaning, we also miss an opportunity to practice spirituality in the workplace. Amplifying the importance of meaning making is a way of enhancing our work. Using meaning as a form of cohesion in an organization builds on the spiritual need in all of us to work towards a higher purpose.
- **Become aware of the power of symbolic presence.** People watch what we do and are influenced by our behavior. People in positions of leadership can use their visibility to heighten spiritual values that support an internal journey. For example, if we are authentic and have covenant relationships, the power of our position lends a symbolic importance to our actions. What we model can shape the nature of an organization's culture. Other symbols can also be used to reinforce and remind our staff of key values. For example a physical touchstone or a saying can help remind staff members of their commitment to each other and the ideals that they would like to live up to.

Strategies for staff development

Shaping organizational culture can be enhanced through staff development. It is the leader's role to facilitate opportunities for staff development and change the paradigm of staff development. Below are some ways an individual can help facilitate spiritual development of their staff.

- **Centering before staff meetings.** Often we come into staff meetings with the thoughts and tasks we have left behind. This foreground keeps us from focusing on the present, each other, and the larger topics that form the connections between us. Centering is a technique that helps people let go of their foreground and focus on the meeting. In some ways, it allows our various molecules to catch up with our rapid movement from our individual offices to the staff meeting. Centering can come in the form of quiet, a reading, a prayer, or storytelling.
- **Reading groups.** Informal reading groups using spiritual books and articles can give staff members the opportunity to delve deeper into their own spiritual journey. Reading groups bring people who are exploring together with a structured reading. They chose the amount of reading required for each time and left time to discuss their individual insights, questions, or different reactions. Groups often meet over a meal, such as lunch or breakfast.
- **Busy person's retreat.** This is an individually structured week where a staff member agrees to take three 30-minute breaks each day for meditation, spiritual guidance, and quiet. The length of the retreat can vary, but usually a one-week time frame is used. The concept of using retreats to further spiritual growth is found in various monastic traditions. The breaks in a week enable you to slow down, take time to reflect on your life, and be nurtured in your own spiritual journey. This can be life changing. For example one student affairs staff development program used the busy person's retreat annually each January. The campus ministry office, in cooperation with a local monastery organized the program. Each person spent 30 minutes in meditation or prayer (their choice which). The next 30 minutes was spent sharing prayers with the sisters, and the third 30 minute time block was spent talking with a spiritual guide / director. The staff members who experienced this program said that it gave them a new perspective on their jobs and their lives. They were also able to be more present to their students and colleagues.
- **Telling your story.** One foundation for our spiritual development is our ability to act and be authentic. Often we withhold the fullness of ourselves in our work environment, which results in knowing only fragments of our colleagues and revealing only parts of ourselves. When we invite our staff to share their stories with each other, we come to know them better which, in turn, allows gives us permission to be more authentic with each other. One staff used story telling at the beginning of each staff meeting. Each individual, on a rotating basis, was invited to share what was going on in their lives. This sharing had an additional effect of developing empathy as well as a holistic perspective of each other. The following statement can be used as a framework for this storytelling "Share one thing with your colleagues that if others knew about it, would help them understand you better."
- **Celebrations.** Celebrations and rituals have a long tradition in religious traditions. As student affairs practitioners, we are often in the role of maintaining or initiating celebrations for students. However, we don't always see ourselves as one of the constituents we should plan celebrations for. Celebrations provide a breathing space to enjoy the present and focus on our strengths. They often give us hope and strength against challenging times ahead.

Influencing upward and outward

If the soul work that we began with becomes contagious we can overcome the factors that inhibit spiritual growth and create an organization that supports spiritual growth. That organization might then be not only fostering the spiritual journeys of those that work there but also be propelled toward its own greater institutional mission by the energy this process generates. No doubt skilled leaders are there creating the conditions for this growth to occur like so many skillful gardeners providing the right amounts of water and nutrients at the right times.

Where does that growth take us? What is the end result? Greater enrollments, greater endowments, notoriety, pay increases? We would argue that the outcome of this process on a local level might make be to make our student affairs role more value driven and influential and our institutions better citizens. These outcomes would enhance the connection between us on an institutional and global level. Is there an American institution of higher education that does not have at its core the role of graduating students as better citizens and students who will contribute to society? In the process of becoming better communities within our institutions, we in turn would become institutions who are connected to their communities and the world.

When student affairs practitioners have done their soul work it frees them up to influence their institutions in powerful ways. The prevailing metaphor for student development is one of fragmentation and alienation from the heart of the institution. When we do our soul work we realize that we are connected to each other and to a common ground. Therefore being a part or a fragment is no longer sufficient. This calls us to act and influence in a different way. We no longer can accept fragmentation as sufficient or an accurate reflection of reality. We call our institutions to the common good.

Examples of the power of connections include the learning community movement. This learning methodology is founded in the values of connection, community and the fundamental principles of student affairs. Using new and neutral language faculty and student affairs staff are drawn to a new idea of creating communities across normal institutional boundaries. What attracts individuals from different departments is a belief in and commitment to something-larger tapping into their own soul work. This causes individuals in the institution to see themselves in relationship to each other that in turn changes their identity from an isolated individual or department to an integrated part of the community. This is an effect of how spiritual development can positively effect how we work together. Spirituality is fundamentally about connecting to something large than oneself. Any initiative that recognizes our interdependence would be an example of spiritual principles in practice.

Another example is occurring at Morehouse College in the heart of Atlanta, Georgia in the midst of one of the fastest growing urban areas in the country. Their mission, while not blatantly religious in nature, is guided by the values from a previous religious affiliation. Their challenge is to educate black males at a time in history when there are more college age black men in jail than in college. Walter Massey, the President, was

given a grant to dedicate to any topic he thought would be worthwhile. He chose to dedicate it not only toward addressing the declining enrollments of African American men in the country but also to the declining percentage of men of all races and classes graduating from college. This President is transcending a traditional orientation of focusing only on what is pertinent to his institution to something, which is beneficial to the whole of society.

These are examples of what it looks like to bring soul work upward and outward through an organizational and to transform an institution. As we influence our institutions we create an opportunity for our institutions to transform themselves and in turn transform their relationship and connection to the world. Dr. David Martin of Oxford University is one educator now making a plea for colleges and universities to assume their place not only on the local level as leaders on issues of crime or affordable housing or public transportation. He calls us to play a role in the new global community. "We don't have global governmental institutions to take the lead on global issues," he says, "there is a crying need for higher education institutions to tackle the most difficult global issues". [5]

How then does an institution play a greater leadership role in the global community on complex global issues? We are back to the beginning. It will take individuals, departments, divisions and institutions who have done their soul work and are on a spiritual journey finding within themselves the passion and the commitment to lead the way.

Theodore Hesburgh, the former president of Notre Dame, has written about the lack of presidential leadership on national issues today. In his article "Where are College Presidents' Voices on Important Public Issues?"[6] he laments that college presidents today seem to be less involved in public debate than in the past. In the 60's and 70's college presidents found themselves in the midst of "acrimonious and sometimes violent clashes not only on civil rights and the Vietnam War but other societal concerns" says Hesburgh. Issues he sites as needing attention today are affirmative action, developing educational programs that seek to improve the status of women, and harnessing technology for the common good. His charge to his colleagues it that: "We cannot urge students to have the courage to speak out unless we are willing to do so ourselves".

In Indian philosophy the metaphor is often of an isolated drop of water falling to the earth as a raindrop or a snowflake and living a solitary or fragmented existence. The journey of that drop is toward the whole where it no longer exists as a separate entity but has flowed into the ocean through a river or a glacier. For student affairs individuals or divisions our journey is to move from the isolated, marginalized status to a part of the larger whole.

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[5] Comments made at the Oxford Roundtable for Residential Colleges in July 2000.
[6] "Where are College Presidents' Voices on Important Public Issues?", The Chronicle Review, Section 2 of The Chronicle of Higher Education, Feb. 2, 2001.