Spiritual Development of Student Affairs Staff

Introduction

Why we are writing this

How it fits in with the other chapters

Definition of terms like the difference between religiosity (which we are not writing about because it is related to religious organizational affiliation) and spirituality which is more personal

Outline of what we will say
1. Where to Begin
2. The Culture of Student
3. Spiritual Development of Student Affairs Staff
4. Strategies for working with staff
5. Linking spiritual development with students and other colleagues

Where to Begin

The starting point for enhancing the spiritual development of your staff is your own deep soul work, reflection on your own life and what gives it meaning. What is it that matters to you? What are the values that guide your life? Are there significant experiences you have had that have made you into the person you have become? Identify for yourself those things that would make you feel a bit vulnerable if you shared them. Describe for yourself the direction of your own spiritual growth. Getting in touch with your center and what you believe is what we suggest as a beginning point for a process of working with your staff on spiritual development.

There is a verse in the Katha Upanisad that describes the person who does not operate from a spiritual core as dispersed, scattered "as the rain that falls in craggy places, loses itself, dispersed throughout the mountains" (KU 4.14). In today's fast paced world with the rate of change increasing exponentially you need an anchor and a place to stand that will provide some stability and direction for your staff. Speaking in the first person and from your own experiences is authentic and has integrity. Being vulnerable and sharing some of you opens the door for them to do the same.

One way to ask your self what your values are is to compare yourself to some of the work done by the Institute for Global Ethics. They have undertaken a project to identify the values most commonly held in the worked 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

Ask yourself if these are your values. What would you add to the list or subtract? The purpose is to get in touch with what is essentially you and what gives you your uniqueness.

Michael Mead is a student of archetypes and an author who has gathered mythology from around the world. He too has a global perspective and is attempting to synthesize what is universal in our belief systems. He uses these universal myths and dilemma tales in his work with inner city gang members. He is fond of saying that he doesn't stand a chance working with young people if they suspect that he is disingenuous. "I just show them who I am and try to be genuine", he says, which in his case means playing an African Drum as he recites his stories. The authenticity of his approach can be a model of how we work in our institutions and how we work with our staff and students.

We have found that in working with staff that 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. At our institutions, 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.

It is vital, however, to create a safe and confidential environment where being vulnerable is possible and there is trust. We would elevate such respect for the sacred journey of all individuals as one of the values for humanity. We would therefore suggest when attempting to enhance your own spiritual development and the spiritual development of colleagues it is best approached with a commitment by all those involved to respecting the sacred journey of every person.

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 lined 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. Yet this is the area often receiving the least attention at our national conferences and in our national publications.

The Current Culture of Student Affairs

Remember the Hippodrome? It used to be [maybe still is] a ride at amusement parks. It was a round structure and as we got in, we all clustered around the middle of this big cylinder. When the ride began, the entire cylinder began to spin. The spinning increased in speed and one by one, the centrifugal force pulled us away from the center to the outer edge of the cylinder. One by one, we all ended up plastered up against the outer wall spinning faster and faster. At its peak speed, the floor dropped out, and we stayed stuck on the outer wall.

This image is an analogy of the kind of work life that most of us have. We spin faster and faster and eventually we can no longer hold onto the center, each to be pulled apart to watch the floor drop out from beneath us. Needless to say, it is difficult to live an examined life, if you are worried about the floor dropping out from under you.

Spiritual principles flow from the belief that we are all connected. This connectivity is recognition 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. We use names like departments and divisions to set our boundaries from each other. We have informal rules of behavior that state we should mind our own business, or I won't interfere in your work, if you don't in mine. There are so many 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 job descriptions that are impossible for one person to do? In fact, how many of us have a job that is bigger than a typical 40-hour week? The pressure to perform, please, and complete our job, works to keep our heads down, not be present to our students, and be disinclined to collaborate with others.

Another legacy of student affairs is the search for approval. This works against our own spiritual process. When we seek approval, we often control those below us in the effort to be liked by our boss, or be seen as effective in the larger institution. When we control others, we diminish the spirit of others and ourselves..... Moxley's book.

In student affairs, we not only have silos, but we also have legal standards that are applied to our work. The fear of being sued causes us to be cautious and reduce our relationships to a transactional level.   [needs an example] We learn to protect ourselves, and control those around us, so we can stay in the safe zone of relationships.

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.

A living community

In our first two sections, we have described the elements of a spiritual life and some of the challenges of student affairs and its culture that hinder the development of our staffs' spiritual lives. If we were to strengthen our student affairs organization by supporting their spiritual 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.

A living community would have the following cornerstones. Flexibility, support, education, solitude, and safety and simplicity.[1] **??? would these be the cornerstones or something else???**

- **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.[ii] He believes that control-based hierarchies are actually based in 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 mind. When staff members choose collusion over commitment to their own authenticity and the institution's mission, their spirit is diminished. Therefore, it is important to create a culture of safety within student affairs, and influence the larger institution to do the same.
- **Design reasonable jobs.** One our favorite occupations in student affairs are to design job descriptions that are impossible for one person to do. This aspect of the student affairs culture occurred before the "lean and mean" organizational language existed in the literature. However, overloading a job description has negative implications for spiritual development of staff members. From a staff member's perspective, having a job no one individual can complete adds to the frenetic doing-ness behavior of our work lives. Spiritual development needs time for reflection and being-ness not just action. A good place to start is with job descriptions that are "do-able" and have expectations for reflection built-in to it.
- **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.

- **Be intentional in what you pay attention to.**
- **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.
- **Develop spiritual "smoke alarms" as early warning systems for burnout.** What are the signs of early burnout? Can we recognize them in each other and the organization? What would a spiritual smoke alarm look like? When we have stretched our capacity to the limit, we have nothing left to nurture ourselves. Organizations, who use up people and discard them, do not treat each other as sacred. If we chose to value healthy people who lead balanced lives, we would develop ways to recognize and intervene when early warning signals of burnout would appear. For example, a director's staff group decided to become a support vehicle for each other by watching for early signs of over work and sharing their perceptions with each other along with encouragement to shift behavior. This practice help the group identify a pattern, the person who was close to burnout was usually the last one to see the behavior. Student affairs practitioners also need to examine their metaphors for work. One dean of students thought September was the start of a marathon that didn't end until graduation the following spring. Our metaphors can shape our own expectations what work is supposed to be like, and often they can conflict with the spiritual journey we are engaged with.
- **Treat others as sacred.** What would happen if we treated each other as if we are worthy of reverence and respect - willing to show appreciation and consideration? How would this change what we talk about, how we interact, and what be believe about each other? In today's society, the lean and mean paradigm of organizations leaves little room for treating each other as sacred. However, if we chose to set this standard for our relationships, we would be creating a culture that supports the spiritual development of our staff. Something wonderful happens when we seek the strengths and unique gifts in each other. We begin to reveal ourselves instead of protect ourselves. As our natural self comes to the organization, our ego takes a back seat and we become more open and receptive to change, ideas, suggestions, and appreciation.
- **Shift criteria for performance appraisals.** Many of our performance reviews ask us to identify what we have accomplished, the assumption behind the form is that the more you can list, the higher you will be rated. Shifting the criteria we use for evaluations can be a leveraged way to change your organization's culture. By using

criteria that assesses personal development, facing your fears, developing reflective capacity and authenticity would be examples of criteria that would support spiritual development in staff.

- **Amplify meaning making.** Spirituality is a search for meaning. Using meaning as a form of cohesion in your organization builds on the spiritual need in all of us to work towards a higher purpose.
- **Become aware of the power of symbolism.** 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. Also, having a physical touchstone for the staff can help remind them of their commitment to each other and the ideals that they would like to live up to.

Strategies for staff development

- **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 to help people let go of their individual foreground and give us time to refocus on the meeting - in some ways, it allows our various molecules to catch up with our rapid movement from our individual offices and 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. One staff group met over lunch. They chose the amount of reading required for each time and left time to discuss their individual insights, questions, or disagreements.
- **Busy person's retreat.** This is an individually structured week where each staff member who signs up agrees to take three 30-minute breaks in the day for meditation, spiritual guidance, and quiet. The length of the retreat can vary, but usually a one-week time frame is used. This concept of using retreats to further one's own spiritual growth comes from various monastic traditions. Given the speed of our lives, having a week to slow down, take time to reflect on your life, and be nurtured in your own spiritual journey can be life changing. For example one student affairs staff development program used the busy person's retreat annually. They selected a week during January term where staff members could sign up. 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 second 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 job 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."

- **Sabbaticals.** Most spiritual traditions have a practice of going on a journey or pilgrimage to deepen faith development. In higher education we have the practice of sabbaticals for faculty and sometimes for administrative staff. For those institutions that have sabbaticals for staff, providing permission for these times to play the same role as a pilgrimage or "time away" from the busyness of our work lives is an important vehicle for spiritual development.

- **Retreats.** Many student affairs organizations have retreats for all of some part of their staff. Often our retreats are just another form of meeting - just longer. We fill up our retreats with packed agendas and feel accomplished when we have downloaded all our information or decided lots of things. However, retreats can also be a powerful vehicle in the support of spiritual development. If we used retreats for this purpose, we would insure that reflection time, fun, and celebration would be part of them.

- **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 in the student population. 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.

- **Reflection times.** Creating opportunities for reflection can support the "being-ness" of a person instead of the "doing-ness." In student affairs, our cultural bias is one of action and we are often judged institutionally [as well as justify our valued] based on how much we do. Therefore, giving permission and creating spaces for reflection can make a counter-culture statement that the organization values being as well as doing. One organization has a reflection room in their student center where staff, faculty, and students can go to be quiet. Another organization created interruption free time zones (IFTZ) of two hours per week for all staff. During these times, staff members could not schedule meetings, take calls, or answer emails. They used the time to visit, think, reflect, and spontaneous visit and build relationships with each other. IFTZ create a small patch of slow time where internal stimulation and integration can be supported and achieved.

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i Kim McMillen, (1993) "The workplace as a Spiritual Haven" in Whe*n the Canary Stops Singing: Women's Perspectives on Transforming Business.* Editor Pat Barrentine and published by Berrett-Koehler, San Francisco, CA.

ii Russel Moxely Leadership and Spirituality.