

## **Student Affairs Should Exemplify Education as a Spiritual Journey.**

College student affairs practitioners have the joyous burden of supporting the whole student, both inside, and outside the classroom. Our span of influence touches every single aspect of our students' collegiate journeys. We must guide our minds with our hearts in order to be open ourselves and to then expose our students to the encompassing enrichment that spiritual knowing can provide. Student services personnel need to act less like a "dispenser of information" (Harris, 2001, p. 22) and more like a partner, acknowledging our place as a fellow student, continually expanding our own horizons along with our students. Our mission is to facilitate our students' travels into the unknown, to encourage their curiosity and validate all their attempts, successful or not, to continue to seek a true understanding of themselves and their reason for being, their potential to contribute to society and their connection with creation. A collegiate experience void of a spiritual component does not fully serve the student, the institution or humankind.

The focus and ultimate outcome of higher education in the United States has shifted dramatically during the last 200 years. Almost gone are the days when folks discussed science, philosophy and theology for the journey, not the destination. Spirituality has been wrung out of the collegiate process. In our zeal to be the first to discover new facts, our quest for truth has fallen by the wayside. Unfortunately, the ancient art of education yielding communal wisdom has been replaced by the process of preparing the individual for a self-serving career. Education as a gentle pursuit for truth has been usurped by the immediate desire for the personal power that modern day teaching can provide. Palmer refers to this inability to include the heart's vision in education as a one-eyed view, as he believes that we are blinded to potential knowledge by seeing only with our minds. The selfish mindset of 'me first' needs to be replaced with the

reminder that ‘united we stand, divided we fall’. In these competitive times, we must refocus on taking care of our community first, as a healthy society takes care of its own. To return to a more spiritual experience in education, we must be encouraged to think with our hearts and to feel with our minds. Educators should strive to kindle curiosity and to provide the tools required to launch each student into their life-long adventure in exploring knowledge and seeking truth.

Most modern teaching calls for objectivity, an unquestioning acceptance of presented facts, creating a gross separation between the knower and the known. This creates a paradox. As a whole, people believe what their cultural community believes. One becomes an outcast without the validation of one’s ideas or behavior from their peers, so one cannot be simultaneously truly communal and totally objective. The knower and the known must have an intimate relationship. Truth, perceived spiritually, requires an awareness of the interconnection of all things behind the limited visions we allow ourselves to see. Spiritual knowing demands accountability, infuses our thinking with compassion, and takes us beyond the boundaries that have been built in our minds. Spiritual knowing calls for our use of atomic energy for nuclear medicine, objective knowing, gained in the search for supremacy, allows for nuclear war. Knowledge born out of the quest for power is frequently destructive, knowledge gained through honest curiosity, commonly heals.

An ancient Japanese proverb states that unless we change direction, we’re likely to end up where we’re going. To Know as We are Known: Education as a Spiritual Journey suggests ways that eternity can be saved from modern education by changing direction, so that we do not end up where we are currently going. College administrators, counselors, advisors, mentors, coaches and residential supervisors need to work together to provide an environment in which young adults can thrive. As spiritual knowers, we need to help students push aside the cobwebs

of preconception and to look clearly beyond what they think they can see. Student services personnel need to embrace and promote a greater definition of education than is currently standard in our institutions. We need to share our optimism and acceptance of the unknown with our colleagues, faculty and students, and to create spaces where investigating new ways of thinking and learning are welcomed, not shunned.

Student affairs practitioners need to help the faculty embrace the concept of spiritual knowledge, to transform modern-day class sessions into communal and contemplative opportunities for personal and academic growth. The word hospitality, used in monastic terms, means to encompass and welcome the whole person (Palmer 1993), warts and all. In this sense, contemporary colleges need to be hospitable, welcoming students' souls, as well as their minds. Education as a spiritual journey requires the teacher to step aside as the middleman between the knower and the known, removing the barricade of their own perception, as that deliberately or inadvertently, clouds the student's interaction with truth. The teacher should be seen as a temporary guardian of students' potential, their role not to mold the student, but to help the student break free of their preconceived mold. Palmer (1993) refers to various conditions for creating the space required for spiritual knowing. He suggests that students need a physical and mental place, free from external and internal distraction, in which to learn. Classrooms need to be safe places where feelings, doubts, questions and criticisms are welcomed and probed, creating a potential for student growth in all facets of their self.

Students also need to be introduced to the power of introspection. Knowledge ultimately comes from within, but we look almost everywhere else before finding it inside. Student affairs programs need to provide nooks and crannies, chapels and gardens, beanbag chairs and safe park benches, along with the comfortable solitude they conjure, to assist students in their search for

meaning. Meditation is a spiritual experience, a process, not a destination. Meditation provides time for thoughts to find the thinker. Only after we can see ourselves as we are seen by others, can we begin to see beyond ourselves. Solitude can invite an avalanche of feelings from boredom to anger, of loneliness and fear, but in peeling back these layers one discovers a wealth within, self-acceptance, compassion, love and truth. It is far easier to view ourselves superficially than to delve into the murky interior of our souls. We need to make our campuses places where genuine emotion can be expressed, discussed, accepted, as readily as facts can be presented, refuted and believed. I frequently advise students to try the yoga and other eastern-arts classes available on campus, as the core concept in many of these disciplines is to seek an inner balance between the physical and spiritual, looking within for understanding, a connection lacking in many lives. We need to help our students tune into the power of their inner silence.

The practice of college student affairs should be a spiritual journey for both the practitioner and the students. We must know ourselves spiritually, through a two-eyed view (Palmer, 1993) to best facilitate the learning process for each and every individual student. We are the pupil, as well as the docent, on these ever-evolving sojourns we embark upon with our students. We must be open to the unknown, and be prepared to open the unknown to others. As an academic advisor, I frequently counsel students experiencing academic difficulty. My favorite query to a student who has just reported doing miserably on an exam is ‘but what did you learn?’ The answers vary, but most often reveal insight into the students’ personal choices, not the academic topic of the test. We must seize these teachable moments on every occasion, opening a window for new thoughts, comfortable or not. Time for reflection and contemplation should be built into collegiate scheduling. Students need to learn to look inside themselves, as well as inside their textbooks, to make sense of their world. They need to remember that the

bigger issues of world peace, human rights and social justice also need their attention. If only facts represented truth, and knowledge did not have a heart, our future would be doomed.

Both Parker Palmer and Patrick Love remind us that our profession provides multiple avenues for personal satisfaction and a daily sense of accomplishment. Most student affairs staff knowingly trade material compensation for a career infused with spiritual joy. We have the opportunity to be a part of reconnecting students with education as a life-long journey, not just as a stepping-stone to a career. McGreevy and Copley (1998/1999) add that we are nourished by our interactions with students and by facilitating hopeful educational experiences for our students; our own sense of hope is also renewed. My passion to return to work each day is refreshed by the goodness I see in students. Many of these young adults are eager to embrace a spiritual way of knowing, wanting to contribute to society but lack direction. Community service and campus ministries provide opportunities to nurture the student on campus and in the community.

Curious collegians are seeking enlightenment, guidance and questioning spirituality, as they conceptualize it, in increasing numbers (Time Magazine 2004, S.B. News-Press, 2004, Love 2001, personal observation). Contemporary students struggle from an odd dichotomy of feeling smugly secure about their personal futures, anticipating high-paying careers, while suppressing fears of nuclear holocaust, and the global ravages over-population and ecological negligence on our fragile planet (Love 2001, S.B. News-Press, 2004, personal observation). We need to bridge this divide, helping to open the minds of our current scholars to the freedom of spiritual knowing, allowing them to see that it is not the competition for the highest paid job, but the opportunity to make a difference in humankind, that provides the greatest rewards in life. Many students have identified a void in their lives and unknowingly seek material possessions, not

spiritual wealth, to compensate and provide temporarily appeasement. We need to help students to learn to value themselves.

I have always rejoiced in making a difference in people's lives. I was raised in a family that was blessed with spiritual knowing. My parents showed us that it was better to give than to receive, and I learned the art of selflessness by example. I observed that one should judge another by their actions, not by their appearance, and was taught to try to see beyond the superficial, to look for the unseen and the unexplained. I was told to compete against myself, not others, in order to experience the real joy of winning. We were expected to contribute to society, for the intrinsic rewards, not for public accolades. In my neighborhood, school and church communities, those that had, gave gladly. But these personal benefits are dwarfed by my new understanding of the grandness of true spiritual knowing; a journey that knows no end. An education in truth begins at birth and continues forever. This voyage requires one to be indiscriminately and unconditionally open to experiences beyond their current understanding and to know them with their heart as well as their mind. What better gift for students to perpetually open? Spiritual knowing seeks the essence behind the elements, it accepts beyond what is commonly acknowledged, and through uncompromised truth, guides us without prejudice. Spiritual knowing allows student affairs practitioners the opportunity to make a positive difference in someone's life, every day, with every encounter.

“We must embody our beliefs. We must be the change we want to see in the world”

◆◆Mahatma Gandhi

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