

## **Spirituality in Mainstream Academia: Three Transformative Activities**

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Today's college students have "high expectations for the role their institutions will play in their emotional and spiritual development" according to recent results from the UCLA Higher Education Research Institute in a survey of 112,232 freshman students at 236 colleges across the United States (HERI, 2004). In an informal poll of undergraduates at the University of Florida by the authors, comments indicated a desire to have more meaning in the classroom and outside of it, e.g., "There is no real interaction with other classmates no meaningful conversations . . . ." (Anonymous author, December 2005). Other comments told to faculty by graduating seniors have also reflected a desire for meaning in their college years. Seniors have expressed that they rarely have anyone discuss their quality of life, or whole selves, particularly as it applies to their path after graduation, e.g., "There is a lack of connection between academia and career" (anonymous author, December 2005). As one student put it, in a large university and even considering life beyond college, "It's easy to get lost in the cracks" (anonymous author, December 2005). Thus, the first author developed a Spirituality course in a mainstream academic department to allow upper level undergraduates to explore meaning and their whole self before graduating. In this case, the course was part of a Communication department and offered as a three credit elective called "Spirituality and Communication." By taking the course for credit in a mainstream department, students are encouraged to view spirituality as a topic as valuable for study as other academic areas.

The objective of the class is to emphasize universal themes of spirituality such as meaning and connection. In addition, texts and activities are selected to encourage inner development and exploration among students. Class size is capped at 25 students to ensure an interactive format. A key part of this course is the focus on students as opposed to bringing in outside speakers, or experts. By focusing on students, the professor is able to empower students to realize their own spirituality and wholeness as opposed to having them view spirituality as a quality that others have and they should strive towards. Since this particular class is part of a communication's department, spirituality is explored in terms of how one's own spirituality impacts

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communication, as well as how society's language relating to spiritual themes impacts them. However, a course in spirituality could be adapted to a variety of academic disciplines. After teaching seven classes on spirituality for credit (in two different disciplines: communication and counseling), the professor has found that three, key activities have emerged as the foundations to facilitating student exploration and inner development. The three activities include: 1) use of a circle and talking stick, 2) a list serve for the class including alumni, and 3) a sand tray activity. The activities are transformative in that their design encourages spiritual qualities within the classroom, and the activities allow for the discussion of spiritual themes as they relate to the "real" world beyond the classroom.

The first activity, the circle, is not so much an activity as it is a ritual that is a foundation of every class. The wisdom circle was adapted from a book called *Calling the Circle* by Christina Baldwin (1994). The students sit in a circle during every class period. The circle sets up a communication environment conducive to a shared experience. All participants have eye contact with each other as opposed to facing the front of a room. Further, the professor is part of the shared experience and becomes part of the learning as opposed to the expert at the front of the room. Then a talking stick is introduced. The rule of the talking stick is that students are only allowed to speak when they have the talking stick in-hand. The stick is passed around the circle in order; however, students can choose to pass (not speak on their turn), or students can request the stick again after it has made it all the way around the circle. They can motion for it to be passed to them; however, they cannot speak until it is in hand. Once the guidelines of communication are in place, themes of spirituality can be presented by the professor, and then questions for further exploration can be posed to the circle. Possible questions could be "describe a spiritual person in your life"; "tell about how graduation will be like a death/birth", or "describe a time you saw someone forgive." The use of the talking stick within the circle allows for students to speak without interruption. In communication, we often see and study how frequently others interrupt our stories with irrelevant questions, or change the focus to them before the speaker gets a chance to finish their story. Further, all students learn that often their urge to ask a question out of personal curiosity is sometimes a barrier to communication because it can prevent someone from telling their story their way. Another advantage of the talking stick is that even the more quiet students get the space and opportunity to speak.

One key spiritual quality that emerges from the circle is oneness. The disclosure of one student catalyzes disclosure by others. Students realize that their fears, concerns, and hopes are similar to their fellow peers. By the very nature of our society, students learn to compete and to distinguish themselves. While they can be motivated by others to excel, they also can feel separate and alone in their concerns. Over 11 years of teaching, the professor has heard students say that they feel like everyone else has a job and is excited about graduating, while they feel like the only people with no idea what they want to do. Through the circle, students get a chance to hear that, below the surface, others are much like them. The circle brings a first-hand experience of oneness in the classroom. Experiencing oneness is different than just reading about it. Students reflect upon what others are going through and how paths can go in separate directions, but the emotions and spirit are fundamentally a thread that ties people together.

Two specific examples from class can illustrate exactly how the use of the circle can prompt deeper discussions and oneness that might not be possible in a traditional classroom. First, one student disclosed how her father had only a month or so to live after a long struggle with cancer. After this student shared her story, another student told of how her grandmother's death had affected her. Then another student told of his father's death when he was 11 years old and the questions he was left with. Over half of the class had experienced a loss of a significant family member and they found solace in their common questions and grief about this mysterious part of life. They saw that they were not alone. A second example involves a conversation during one

class about graduation. In contrast to the common linear conversations about graduation (where there is more telling than listening) in the circle, students were able to get past surface discussions and explore common concerns about this transition in their lives. They found that even those with jobs had their own concerns or obstacles to face. The unique factor of the circle is the uninterrupted time that builds trust and validation, which, in turn, leads to deeper sharing. Once students get to that level of sharing, they find more commonalities than differences. Professors must learn to be patient with the pace of the conversation. It is different than other classes -- particularly lecture classes. Students need a chance to be heard. They need the space to explore their own wisdom. The emphasis on the students and the use of experiential activities help students to realize that spirituality is not something they have to go out and get; it is inside of them and can be nurtured. One student once said, "You talk less than any professor I know, but I have learned more than in any other class here at the university." They learn from each other.

A second key spiritual quality that emerges from the circle is a broadened perspective, or an ability to transcend the tunnel vision that can easily creep into college life. During another day of the circle, music was used as a catalyst for discussion. Each student brought in a song to share that spoke to him or her in some way. The music itself was certainly an avenue for the students to express their creative soul, but the circle added to this by allowing stories to be told. The circle encourages stories because students are able to speak without interruption. In communication, expressing oneself through stories is often called 'using one's narrative self,' or 'becoming the autobiographer for one's life' (Trenholm & Jensen, 2004). The narratives are rich with characters from outside the room and their journeys. On the day of music, one student shared a story of how her family navigated the loss of her one week-old nephew. She brought in the song "I Can Only Imagine" by Mercy Me. As the song played, the student brought to the circle the story of knowing a new life in this world so briefly, but loving and honoring the memory long after his death. The circle fostered the space for this student to share and be truly heard. In turn, the class members were transported from the daily hassles that they had with them coming into class, and they opened up to a broader perspective on what is happening beyond the walls of these buildings. The richer moments of life pervaded the room, and the circle allowed all members of the class to respond in their own way to feeling connected to this student and her family. After the class, many students commented that they felt a greater sense of connectedness to all people as they realized that so many awe-inspiring moments are occurring at any given time, and it is easy to value and appreciate the wonder of what is truly meaningful and important.

The second transformative activity, the list serve, is actually a graded portion of the class. While the circle provides a venue for oneness and connectedness inside of the classroom, the list serve provides that same quality outside of the classroom. Each student is subscribed to a list serve created for the class at the beginning of the semester. Students are graded upon posting to the list serve twice a week (grades are based upon completion and not content). Requiring students to post twice a week serves to increase their mindfulness of spirituality outside of the classroom. Ellen Langer (as in Trenholm & Jensen, 2004) used the term *mindfulness* in the communication literature to refer to the process of being able to be fully in the here-and-now—to be fully awake rather than on autopilot. Often, other students will respond to a topic that is introduced with their own ponderings or validation of that concept. One rule of the list serve, as with most mailing lists online, is that students cannot flame others or sit in judgment. A step that is added for the purpose of spirituality is that students try to refrain from agreeing or disagreeing. Instead, students are encouraged to be open and curious in the same way that they are asked to be open in the circle within the classroom. Sitting down in-between classes, in the comfort of one's apartment, creates an ideal setting where students can be open to hearing their hearts and reflecting upon spirituality. Another advantage of the list serve is that it allows those students who are more reticent to participate in class to pose thoughts or questions to their classmates.

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Thus, the list serve creates a circle outside of class. In order to answer to the need for students to tie what is happening in class to their everyday lives, the list serve was chosen so that students could consider spirituality as a part of everything that they live and do. Often spirituality is associated with retreats or church, but when faced with the pace and challenges of everyday life, people can find it difficult to retrieve that part of themselves.

Through the list serve, students are able to discuss applications of spiritual themes as they observe them outside of the classroom. Students have grappled with spiritual themes such as finding one's authentic voice amidst other's expectations and pressures: "But sometimes its difficult because in my mind, I have other people's views influencing me, and these views can distract me from deeper introspection"; "I hate being asked what I am going to do after graduation. I have no clue. The more people ask and poke and prod for information, the more overwhelming it feels, and the more annoying they seem." The students often find their own answers to their questions as they explore on the list serve. In this way, the assignment not only fosters inner development, but it also allows students to practice using spiritual concepts, like authenticity, in their own lives, e.g. "But sometimes it's difficult because in my mind, I have other people's views influencing me, and these views can distract me from deeper introspection." Other themes have included fearlessness, handling ambiguity, gratitude, and intuition. One student said, "I propose that we all have this intuition. The thing that stops us from really listening to it is fear; fear we will be wrong, fear we will be right, fear of the thought . . . etc." (anonymous author). As illustrated by this last comment, students typically do as much teaching and role modeling of spirituality as the professor. However, it is often more profound when they put it in their own language and environment.

A unique aspect of this list serve is that alumni from prior spirituality classes are invited to participate. Over the years, this has resulted in alumni from all over the country to share how their observations and journeys with spirituality have evolved. The reflections that come from alumni are a model for insight and honesty for new students. On the topic of having masks that keep us from being authentic, one alumnus wrote "Oh...the wonderful topic, realization—and admittance—to masks. Do we try to portray to others what we would LIKE to be? I realized this one very recently . . . the mask that I was wearing . . . was actually hiding me from ME. That was a scary one to admit" (anonymous author, September 2005). On the topic of duality, another student said, "At 27, I feel like both a young man and an old man. The thinking of the list serve shows me where I was; full of so much uncertainty, both curious and scared at the same time" (anonymous author, November 2005). These comments show how students that have already taken the course can help to serve as leaders on how to apply spiritual concepts in the real world. Another value of the alumni is that they show how important it is to be compassionate and gentle with oneself as opposed to the tendency of new students to beat themselves up over not being "spiritual enough". Further, having alumni write in from across the country expands the sense of connectedness that students have with others. For instance, after 9/11, one alumnus wrote in who was across from the World Trade Center towers, and another was working as a flight attendant. In their posts they shared insight into the way that New York City was pulling together. Although, not all alumni can manage the number of posts to their e-mail, most welcome the opportunity to have a place to talk about spirituality and wholeness again.

The third, final transformative activity of the class is the Sand Tray Activity. The sand tray fosters creative expression and inner awareness. This activity is based upon the sand tray tool used by Rachel Naomi Remen in her work at Commonweal (see: <http://www.commonwealishi.org>). Remen has used this activity with medical doctors to explore the impact that their roles can have on their wholeness over time. The activity starts with the professor collecting a group of small toys that symbolize various aspects of life (e.g., bridges, roadblocks, yield signs, people, nature, comfort, villains, etc.). Then students are instructed to

bring a box of sand in to class (about the size of a wide shoe box). At the beginning of class, students are given a broad theme (e.g., your spiritual path: obstacles and strengths) and about five minutes of quiet to consider that theme. Then, with that theme in mind, students are given about 15 minutes of silence during which they go around the room and collect toys, and begin to build a scene in their box. At the end of the 15 minutes, students pair up and practice asking each other open-ended questions about their scenes. The students can move pieces in the sand, as desired, to explore how they could change the future part of their path to maximize their strengths and spirituality. The design of this activity facilitates both interpersonal and intrapersonal communication skills. In describing the value of the sand tray, one student said it corrected a common problem in mainstream academia: “In most classes, you passively receive the lecture and are told what is important in order to be successful on the test. Consequently, there is not a lot of encouragement to think for yourself or to examine your inner life—skills that are essential to embarking upon the world beyond college”. Through the creation of a scene about their spiritual lives and the interpretation of that picture, students were able to explore what was unique and meaningful to them.

Two key spiritual themes that emerged from the sand tray activity were values and meaning. For instance, one student created two separate paths in her box. One was dictated by society with a road, a controlling wizard, and demanding people. This path was not appealing to the student, but was the most direct path to the person representing the student in the box. The other path depicted what she wanted to do. The second path was not a straight one and she described it as not easy. Further, it was blocked off by a roadblock that was described by the student as an indication that this path would be hard to take because it was not the typical high-earning career after college. When the student started moving the toys around, she removed the roadblock and decided that she would need faith and courage to move that roadblock in her real life. Another student reflected upon her sandbox image and described how her athletic pursuits had become meaningful only for her parents, but not for herself. Thus, students were able to step back from their paths and play an active role in building the values and meaning they wanted into their lives now and beyond college.

The three activities for this class were significant in examining the topic of spirituality in a mainstream context. As noted earlier, students want more from their college experience. They are calling for classes that create more meaningful interactions among students and connections with their lives outside of the classroom (and beyond college). The activities described for this spirituality class respond to that call. They each place the roles of teacher and learner into the hands of the students. The activities also create an environment that connects spirituality to the “real world.” By taking active roles in discovery of their own sense of meaning and connection, students integrate this mainstream academic course into a lifelong lesson. At the end of the class, students have reflected upon the difference that this class made in terms of their entire college education:

“I’ve learned the most about the person I want to be on a personal level . . . it’s made me see what path I would like my life to take.”

“I believe that more of my intimate relationships with loved ones have become more personal.”

“You guys know when they say that sometimes you learn more about life outside of the classroom, well for me, this class was structured in such a way that I felt like it was a part of outside life, of true life.”.

These comments indicate how much an experiential spirituality class can add to mainstream academia.

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