

CHAPTER 6

Spirituality and Student Development

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Introduction

In recent years, college student spirituality has been the focus of student development research, with many researchers suggesting a rise in student interest in spirituality (Astin and Astin 2004; Chickering 2003; Hindman 2002; Love 2001; Mahoney, Schmalzbauer, and Youniss 2001; Parks 2000; Schwartz 2001; Stamm 2003). In particular, the spiritual development theories of Fowler (1976) and Parks (2000) are of crucial importance to the literature on student spiritual development. This chapter draws upon the work of Fowler and Parks to provide a theoretical framework for students' spiritual development and discusses ways in which spirituality acts as a tool for students to engage in religious difference so that they develop a sense of wholeness and learn to practice discovery dialogue.

Theoretical Framework

Early documents defining the student affairs profession announced the goal of developing the "whole person," including the intellectual, emotional, recreational, cultural, vocational, and *spiritual* lives of students (American Council on Education 1986). As the profession matured, spiritual development theories were grounded in two theoretical perspectives. First, the theories borrowed from the cognitive development theorist family, including the theories of Perry (1981), Kegan (1994), and Gilligan (1982). Spiritual development as a cognitive development theory requires increased cognitive complexity in the ways in which one makes meaning in the world (Love 2002). To move through each cognitive stage, students encounter challenges, dilemmas, and diverse viewpoints that provide the occasion for developing higher-level thinking skills. The cognitive stages begin with a reliance on an authority for meaning, and, as this authority is questioned, students make cognitive progress by seeing multiple perspectives that do not promote any one true answer. Fowler (1976) and Parks (2000) have both constructed a

theoretical model for student spiritual development through the lens of these student development theorists.

Second, spiritual development theories also drew from the person-environment theorists, such as Bronfenbrenner (1993), Tisdell (2003), Cross and Helms (as cited in Evans, Forney, and Guido-DiBrito 1998), because such theorists focus on a relational context necessary for meaning making. For example, Astin (1993) shows that students make meaning of their lives through their peer relationships. Thus, through peer relationships, students are engaged in meaning-of-life conversations that empower their spiritual development process. Parks (2000), in addition to using cognitive developmental theories, sees the concept of spiritual development through the person-environment lens by examining community relationships. In her study of young adults, Parks (2000) examines forms of community that influence the spiritual development of college students. Understanding that life in community enhances student faith development (Hindman 2002), Parks explores how community can best challenge and support students (Sanford as cited in Evans, Forney, and Guido-DiBrito 1998) in their spiritual development. Parks (2000) describes five forms of community, including conventional community, diffuse community, mentoring community, self-selected group, and a community open to others. The mutual shaping relationship between one's identity and his or her community results in a developmental progression not unlike the cognitive theories where students progress from a closed, like-minded community to a more open, inclusive, and diverse community.

Particularly salient to the traditional college student, Parks's (2000) mentoring community involves a peer group in which members challenge and support each other in the process of making meaning. Parks (2000) suggests the mentoring community as the primary avenue for spiritual development of traditional-aged college students. However, the peer group and campus culture must strike a delicate balance between challenge and support (Sanford as cited in Evans, Forney, and Guido-DiBrito 1998) to deal with life's complex questions (Parks 2000). When life's questions become so complex, without the necessary supports to confront the challenge of trying to understand complexity, students face the danger of feeling foreclosed to further exploration or meaning-making processes. Parks (2000) discusses this foreclosure as "shipwreck." Students feel stranded when challenges that overwhelm them require support for students to progress in their development, but that support is not available. Shipwreck is inevitable if adequate support is not available because college students ask "big questions" in search of their life vocations,

dreams, and truths (Parks 2000). However, when these big questions are asked in the mentoring community, students have the support necessary to promote spiritual development because the mutual shaping between environment and identity plays a significant role in students' spiritual development.

As with cultural identity theories described by Cross, Helms and others (Evans, Forney, and Guido-DiBrito 1998), Tisdell (2003) and Parks (2000) suggest that activities of immersion and emersion challenge and support this spiritual spiraling process. Tisdell (2003) also makes a distinct connection between spiritual development and racial identity development, and racial identity development theories have been associated with the person-environment interaction family of theories. To progress toward committed, internalized, and autonomous racial identity, students need to cross racial borders for learning and growth (Evans, Forney, and Guido-DiBrito 1998). This process is similar to the spiritual development experiences of college students. The connection between the "immersion/emersion stage" of racial identity development outlined by Cross and Helms (as cited in Evans, Forney and Guido-DiBrito 1998) and Tisdell's (2003) and Parks's (2000) notion of "encountering otherness" identify implications for spiritual development practice.

The theoretical foundations of student development theory inform the directions of student spiritual development. Spirituality acts as a tool for college students as they understand religious diversity, develop a sense of wholeness, and ultimately grow into their understanding of self, the other, the world and faith.

Spirituality as a Tool for Religious Understanding

Students are increasingly reporting multiple religious and cultural identities as they arrive on campus, and the growth of a racially diverse campus provides for a multi-faith student body, early evidence of a return to spiritual life (Cherry, DeBerg, and Porterfield 2001; Eck 2001). Parks (2000) and Tisdell (2003) suggest that student encounters with "otherness" provides a vehicle for an awareness and appreciation of identity differences, particularly around spiritual development. In her study on diversity and inter-group relations, Hurtado (2005) states, "students appear to be engaging in difficult discussions and realizing they have much to learn from their differences—and perhaps are even more confident about dealing with conflict" (605). These

friendships of “otherness” act as the primary catalyst for student spiritual development (Parks 2000; Pettigrew 1998) and ultimately as a tool for student understanding regarding religious diversity.

This friendship connection through the encounter of “otherness” enables students to be aware of differences and to understand the experiences of another. As students encounter another, they reach new levels of engagement either by challenging their development process and forming new values or confirming their values. For the impact of the “encountering other” experience to be effective, the conditions of the interaction require contact with people of different races, religions, cultures, sexual orientations, and physical abilities, to name a few. The impact of these interactions is further enhanced when supported by significant mentors who have regular contact with students in their daily lives. Student growth and development around issues of difference require encouragement of inclusive, working communities that involve meaningful friendships among their members (Allport as cited in Ben-Ari 2004). In other words, students learn from those perceived as the “other” or as “different” when in relationships with each other. This encounter of “otherness” within one’s immediate peer group provides lessons of multi-culturalism in this relational context. Students engaging in conversations of difference can learn conflict engagement and gain confidence in engaging in such conflicts (Hurtado 2005).

The peer group, to be effective, needs to expand beyond a supportive community to include discussions that question assumptions, attitudes, and beliefs, so the peer group should expand to include new members with viewpoints that challenge the group. For example, students are more likely to gain competence on religious understanding when in a friendship with members from diverse religious perspectives. Not only do students’ perceived assumptions regarding their friends’ religious traditions change, their preconceived notions of other religious traditions are expanded or changed. Friendship groups of otherness act as the primary conduit of the conversation where new insights transcend the immediate intergroup friendship to include other identity differences.

The college environment, including course material, campus events and faculty lectures, offers a wide circle of relationships that often stimulate peer conversations around meaning-of-life questions. In fact, when discussing such questions, students can refer to spirituality as the common neutral language to understand religious differences (Cady 2006). Students use spiritual language rather than religious terms to express their questions because spiri-

tual language provides a neutrality that allows students to safely engage in discussing potentially contentious issues. Religious language, on the other hand, might be judged as being harsh, disallowing dialogue. In addition, everyone has questions about the meaning-of-life, the values of love and hope, the future and our place within the world, and those common spiritual questions allow students to engage in deeper religious questions using neutral spiritual language without fear of diverse answers that could divide.

In addition to neutral language, students learn a systematic conversation strategy often resembling the following: An event such as the war in Iraq, a campus event, or engaging classroom discussion provokes a meaning-of-life question. The event encourages students to ask several valid questions and often inspires self-reflective thought about the potential consequences of their own values, beliefs, and attitudes concerning a particular issue. Students then “test out” their ideas, beliefs, and questions with a group of trusted, which often means “like-minded,” peers. As students feel more confident over their four years of college, they might further “test out” their “truth” by debating their ideas in conversation with peers of “otherness.” Conversations of religious difference particularly require the final step of engagement for students to encounter others as a way of learning and growing.

In light of the spiritual development literature (Fowler 1976; Love 2002; Parks 2000), it makes sense that students question religious authority and consider more relative ways of seeing their spiritual lives through meaning-making processes. Students then use the “divine neutral” language of spirituality as a strategy to enter cautious conversation regarding meaning-of-life questions in a multi-faith setting. The language of spirituality allows students to defer the hard questions that religious difference raises. This use of caution is reminiscent of other conversations on our campuses, particularly around issues of race and gender (Alemán 1997; 2000). As a result of this cautious conversation in the context of religion and spirituality, students see the peer group as a resource to engage in faith-based discussions that ultimately inform their values, beliefs and attitudes.

A new religious pluralism has reached the college campus, and educators would be well served to examine the role of religion in the spiritual lives of college students. Eck (2001) shares the following definition of pluralism: “the language of pluralism is the language not just of difference but of engagement, involvement, and participation. It is the language of traffic, exchange, dialogue and debate....Pluralism is the dynamic process through which we engage with one another in and through our very deepest differ-

ences” (69–70). Pluralism, in this view, is an evolving process that engages students in conversations about religious diversity that provide the conduit for student spiritual growth.

Spirituality as a Tool for Developing a Sense of “Wholeness”

Not only should students engage in conversations about religious diversity to inform their own views about religion but also the inclusion of spirituality in the consideration of a whole person identity indicates the important role of spirituality in one’s overall wellness. Developing the sense of “wholeness” that is identified with wellness is critical to students during “shipwreck” moments, and spirituality can facilitate students’ attempts to reconnect their lives after the shipwreck. As students struggle with suffering, for example, they turn to their spiritual identity for comfort, support, and answers. Students can also turn to spiritual mentors on campus through the chaplain’s office or student services for guidance in navigating the process of achieving “wholeness” again in their lives (Cady 2006).

Often, the college experience provides shipwreck moments when a campus event or encounter is challenging enough to lead students to ask meaning-of-life questions (Parks 2000). Sometimes the shipwreck moments have nothing to do with college, but rather life circumstances that humans must deal with, such as death, loss, illness, relationship break ups, poverty, etc. The peer group plays an important role during these shipwreck moments (Astin and Astin 2004; Parks 2000) by providing the most supportive environment for students to seek answers in light of their despair. Students, however, tend to avoid the peer group conversation in facing life shipwrecks for fear of appearing vulnerable (Cady 2006). Instead, students seek out “wise mentors” to explore these tough life questions.

As a result of an oncoming crisis in college or with their family, students engage in a process for understanding their spiritual journeys and development (Cady 2006). The pattern for spiritual growth often resembles the following. The shipwreck provokes a spiritual “crisis.” Much like the spiritual conversation process, the shipwreck event prompts students to internalize the potential consequences and reflect individually on the questions the event provoked. Students then realize that they can not “sit” alone with their suffering and often reach out to wise mentors—faculty, staff or upper-class students—for support. In addition to seeking wise mentors for support, students turn to religious practices, places of worship, meditation, or the contempla-

tion of nature during times of crisis. When confronting grief, students turn to scripture reading, prayer, meditation, religious services, bodies of water, or religious teachers for support (Cady 2006). Although students struggle with the utility of such religious and spiritual practices in every day life, they also realize the importance of such practices in achieving “wholeness” once again. Students often re-engage in the peer conversation as they begin to achieve spiritual “wholeness.” In this renewed conversation, students share their lessons from adversity with other peers now experiencing personal shipwrecks. Students desire to support other students through life curveballs by sharing their own personal stories of despair as an upper-class student might have done for them. Despite the limited role of the peer group in life’s shipwreck moments, students return to the peer group to find ways to support peers through other college curveballs as a method of achieving personal wholeness.

Spirituality as a Tool for Student Cognitive Development

In addition to achieving wholeness, spirituality empowers students to make meaning of life’s complexity (Parks 2000). Students, engaged in the spiritual conversation, encounter questions that enable them to understand four areas of their lives. In understanding the self, others, the world, and faith, students discover their own skills and abilities to engage in the peer conversation. Parks (2000) described these conversations of meaning as an exploration of “big questions.” It is through this process of exploring big questions that students describe a process of growth and discovery (Cady 2006). Baxter (1992), Chickering and Reisser (1993), Gilligan (1982), and Perry (1981) describe the identity and cognitive development process of college students as a progression toward autonomy and inter-dependence with less reliance on authority as sources of validation, information, and “truth.” Students utilized spiritual conversations as one tool to understand their identity. These spiritual conversations often present paradoxes in their lives and ultimately lead toward a comfort with the unknown—a stage described in cognitive development theories. Student engagement in spiritual conversations acts as the discovery tool in understanding the self, other, world, and faith during the cognitive development process.

Spiritual conversations allow students to engage in the process of self-discovery. In developing their own identity, students ask themselves questions about their identity, values, skills and vocation. While engaging in self-

exploration, students ask: Who am I? What do I believe? How do I accept the things I can not control? What has shaped me to be who I am today? And, where am I going? These questions encourage self-reflection, value clarification, and discernment. The peer conversation, centered on these questions, not only leads to the self-discovery process but also prompts further engagement to understand one another in community.

In exploring the self, students are more curious and open to hearing the stories of others and exploring the questions that cross identity boundaries. Students ask questions of their peers as a method to enhance their own self-discovery and deepen their understanding of the other. Students ask questions such as, “How do I connect my own experiences with the journeys of others?” “How do I fit in when I’m unsure about who I am and who you are?” “Will my friendships last when my world changes?” “How do the opinions of others fit into my views, beliefs and values?” The process of understanding others requires students to engage in the conversation itself in addition to the questions asked during the conversation. As students learn how to engage in conversations that seek to understand others, they develop the skills to engage in dialogue that attempts to understand the world.

Global events, particularly in a post-September 11 world, provoke students to ask a variety of meaning-of-life questions. The questions reveal the urgency in which students feel compelled to understand the world. Students explore the inevitable “why” questions. “Why do bad things happen in the world?” “Why is there inequality and suffering?” “Why are we at war?” “Why am I privileged, and what should I do with such privilege?” Students realize the complexity of these questions and feel challenged to find their role in addressing world concerns. Exploring world questions teaches students lessons of privilege that can lead to their commitment to social change and justice. Many students turn toward questions of faith to understand the world and their role in changing it.

In students’ quest to understand themselves, each other, and the world, they ask questions of their faith. At the core of this conversation, students question the role faith has in understanding “truth.” Students ask questions such as, “Do I believe in the divine?” “Does it matter if there is a transcendent realm?” “How does my spirituality shape my view of the world?” “Should faith and society interact?” “Why would a divine power allow all this suffering in the world?” Many of the questions students ask regarding faith center on making sense out of that which could not be reasonably explained and making the connection between faith and life.

Students, through these discovery conversations, come to terms with the “tension of opposites” (Fowler 1976). Students describe a series of conflicting feelings and struggle to balance these often opposing feelings in the conversation. In this conversation process, students are often presented with two opposing yet “true” values, feelings, or opinions. A series of reactionary opposites, in response to the meaning-of-life dialogue, include comfort/challenge, peace/despair, responsibility/powerlessness, gratitude/resistance, individual/community, and action/reflection. In exploring these opposites, students attempt to reconcile the many different aspects of their identity, each other, the world, and faith. Students feel conflicted, confused, and challenged to understand how two opposing parts of their lives can, in fact, co-exist. “Chaos” and “confusion” within students’ exploration for understanding create that opportunity for growth.

Students’ spiritual conversations provide a forum for change and development as students explore the variety of roles they assume on campus and in their lives. Through the discovery process facilitated by spiritual conversations, students develop conversational skills, self-confidence, openness to others, an understanding of privilege and their role as leaders in a complicated world. Exploring meaning-of-life questions enables students to make the developmental leap as they come to terms with the tension of opposing “truths.” Spirituality, as a tool for students to engage in religious difference, to develop a sense of wholeness and to develop cognitively in ways that encourage discovery dialogue, provides educators with an opportunity to engage students in new practices that promote student development and growth.

Recommendations for Practice

Higher education and particularly student affairs plays an important role in supporting students’ spiritual development and engaging students in conversation regarding religious diversity. The conversation on religious diversity is particularly salient in today’s complicated world struggling with accepting religious differences. As Hurtado (2005) asserts, “we can no longer leave intergroup relations to chance, because they play a central role in ensuring that students can function in a diverse work force and pluralistic democracy” (607). The following are five sets of recommendations for higher education in addressing the spiritual and religious developmental needs of college students to provide forums for greater cognitive growth.

First, student life staff can play a critical role in teaching spiritual practices on campus and can promote spirituality as a method of coping during difficult times. Students often rely on their religious traditions and spiritual practices most often during college “curveballs.” Often the peer conversation is not sufficient to help students cope with a curveball situation, so students turn to “wise mentors” to seek support. Student life needs to find ways to reach students who experience “shipwrecks” that do not rise to our immediate attention, particularly those students who experience challenging moments associated with some of the more everyday disappointments. However, student affairs can also provide students with coping strategies prior to the actual shipwreck event. For example, orientation programs should address spiritual wellness. Students should be made aware of various resources, including the religious and spiritual life staff. In addition, collaborative meetings between several areas of student life, including first year programs, counseling center, residential life, health center, and religious and spiritual life, should address the spiritual needs of students in addition to other aspects of wellness within crisis management.

Second, student affairs staff could develop faculty partnerships that connect the cognitive and spiritual development of students. The classroom is a central element for students in engaging in meaning-of-life questions. Faculty and student life staff could engage in discussions regarding the ways in which courses inspire meaning-making processes with students. This conversation could also uncover ways in which to engage students around issues of difference. In partnership, faculty and student life staff can approach the developmental moment of holding the tension of opposites through a language of understanding, an encouragement of questioning, and an engagement of curiosity rather than cautious conversation.

Third, student affairs staff could develop connections between multicultural and multi-faith education to engage students in conversations of difference. The literature suggests a deep connection between religious and cultural identity development, so developing competencies and learning outcomes for multi-faith and multi-cultural dialogues could enhance student engagement in difficult conversations. Such skills include asking clarifying questions, engaging in self-reflection, developing critical-thinking skills, and engaging in conversation that encourages curiosity rather than caution. In addition, as professionals continue to learn student conversation strategies, programs can be developed that use these strategies for discussions of difference.

Fourth, student life staff should partner with religious and spiritual life staff in the student spiritual development process. To have connected partnerships between these departments, chaplains would benefit in learning the language of student development theory to connect with student life staff. This language is often most helpful to students when they are engaged in the student development and growth process. The theological model could often inhibit student growth, particularly around religious diversity. In addition, student life staff could enhance their work with students when comfortable with spiritual development theory. Using the spiritual development lenses could aid student life professionals in engaging with the spiritual life conversation. Student life staff could be most helpful in the spiritual development process when ready to engage students in the big meaning-of-life questions. Students are asking themselves and each other these questions and could benefit from student life professionals ready and willing to act as “wise mentors” to them in their growth process.

Fifth, student life programs could develop intentional communities on campus that enhance the “encountering other” experience. Creating a multi-faith living and learning community within the residence halls is a great opportunity for collaboration between residential life and religious and spiritual life. Through this community, students would be encouraged to develop relationships across religious traditions, to explore spiritual questions with their neighbors, and to discover new learning through multi-faith dialogue. Student activities also could partner with religious and spiritual life staff as student religious organizations continue to form on college campuses. In addition to specific religious organizations on campus, an umbrella multi-faith organization could provide opportunities for students to discuss collaborative opportunities in spiritual life and religious diversity programming on campus.

Providing spiritual programming or services for those not involved in a particular religious tradition is also important. To reach these students, student affairs should use language that reaches those wanting to engage in meaning-of-life conversations without depending upon a religious organization to act as the catalyst of the conversation. In engaging students unconnected with a religious organization with those students connected to a religious organization, student affairs can help students truly become understanding and tolerant of the beliefs and values of others. Ultimately, student affairs staff need to develop programs, partnerships, and services that engage students in conversations of difference that enhance cognitive development.

Conclusion

Clear student interest in spiritual life and the changing religious diversity on campus urges higher education to take seriously the role of spiritual development in the life of college students. The combination of spirituality and religious diversity is today's "causal movement" of students' identity exploration on the college campus. As today's institutions of higher education search for the language to engage in spirituality and religious diversity, students are having the conversation. Students crave opportunities to share their college spiritual journey. Their journeys are often filled with hope, despair, dreams, anxiety, truth, and uncertainty during a time in our history plagued by war, terrorism, and economic insecurity. Although student stories are diverse, student experiences are grounded in a shared curiosity for life meaning, shared desire for self-understanding, and a shared hope for a better future. Spirituality acts as a catalyst for student development by providing students with a way to ask meaning-of-life questions often explored in the peer conversation. Higher education serves students well when attending to their spiritual needs by providing resources and services that enhance the learning outcomes of peer conversations.

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