

THE LAST STRING: THE INCLUSION OF SPIRITUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION COURSES

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Ginny Griffin used the metaphor ‘playing a guitar’ to advocate for the inclusion of spirituality in adult learning. “Playing a guitar with just one string would soon become monotonous, and the music limited in scope ... most of us have been trained by our schooling to play one string – our rational mind” (2001, p. 108). While she advocated for six capabilities - emotional, physical, relational, intellectual, intuitive and spiritual - in helping adults learn, I believe it is this final string, our spiritual capability, that has been played the most tentatively in higher education courses.

As I explore the importance of including spirituality within higher education courses I draw from the perspective offered by Shahjahan (2009) to situate myself: “[spirituality] refers to a way of being in the world where one is connected to one’s cultural knowledge and/or other beings (e.g. one’s community, transcendental beings, and other parts of creation) and allows one to move inward to outward action” (p. 122). As well, I position myself as an associate professor in adult learning who has taught a graduate course entitled *Spirituality within the Workplace* annually in the Faculty of Education at the University of Calgary over the past eight years. Indeed I appreciate being located in a faculty where the inclusion of courses that overtly explore the connection between spirituality and education has been evident through the several offerings such as *Spirituality in a Postmodern Era* and *Spirituality of Inspired Leadership*. Looking across the content of these courses, two common themes emerge: the first theme has students “look inward to reflect upon and cultivate their own spirituality and the second focus moves outward to consider implications of spirituality within their practice” (Groen, 2009, p. 230). As well, I note the inclusionary nature of these courses fosters multiple ways of acknowledging our spiritual practice and heritage.

I became curious if there were other university courses that had such an explicit connection to spirituality and surveyed (Groen, 2009) the professional faculties of education, social work and business across Canadian universities to document these courses only to find that such offerings are slim, thus, reinforcing Shahjahan’s (2009) observation that the “main challenge for spiritually-minded scholars has been to center it in legitimate academic spaces, such as academic journals and classrooms” (p. 122). And yet this runs counter to just published research by Astin, Astin and Lindholm (2011) who argued our students want to be taught as spiritual beings who are struggling with the meaning and purpose within their lives and wish to learn in ways that move beyond the rational, objective and cognitive ways of relating to the subject(s) at hand.

Evidence of student hunger for a more holistic way of being in the academy is reinforced every time one of our ‘spirit courses’ is offered. The registration portal

opens for the next term and within the hour all spaces in a course are typically taken up and others are hoping the professor will accept additional students. The following are very brief excerpts from interviews with several graduate students (part of a larger research project; see Groen & Jacob, 2006), who had taken at least one 'spirit course' as they explain their significance within their coursework.

It is broader than that. It is more a sense, how do I phrase this right, more a sense of an entire way of viewing all your relationships with your peers, your family, your employees, yourself, your God, whatever that might be, so I think that is more encompassing than just the leadership course.

Our work as educators is also getting to be more and more complex; there are more demands on us. For our own sanity, and peace and mind, and our relationship with our loved ones, and our students, and our colleagues we need to be also to find some oasis of peace within us.

These courses are there because they are critical in terms of helping people think about that other dimension that is so important when you are teaching. I think it is too easy to walk into a classroom and push your own agenda, or push the agenda of an administration, or of North American society or whatever agenda may be working through you, I think it is all part of the critical, reflective process that everybody has to go through.

It is about a relationship with yourself, understanding, self-awareness; an understanding of your place in the world and whether you believe in a higher power or not that whole other side of yourself that makes you up of who you are. Growing into that an understanding of that will improve your understanding of other people and how you can better relate to those people.

Taking a course in spirituality is less committed to a certain belief or dogma it is something outside of that. I think we need that as a counterbalance to a world that is getting more and more consumer oriented, more materialistic, more technological, more complex; we need that counterweight on the other side to ground us in who we are and help us navigate through that..

In closing, while I acknowledge that the desire to separate spirituality from higher education is partly driven by the fear that its inclusion within our courses might condone a particular set of religious beliefs (Estanek, 2006), I believe the bigger threat and fear is that it challenges the over-riding higher education epistemology of empirical rationality (Chickering, Dalton & Stamm, 2006). Indeed its inclusion within higher education courses will allow us to play that one last string of the guitar to create a rich and resonating chord.

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