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Thrown From the Train: Experiences that Contribute to the Spiritual Growth of Males in Mid-life

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Abstract: This study of the spiritual experiences of an internationally and culturally diverse sample of eleven men identified a diverse expression of masculine spiritual experience involving transformations in awareness where the self moves from the role of subject to a growing sense of inter-subjectivity intimately related to the awareness of spirit.

Introduction

Interest in the human experience of spirit is exploding in popular and scholarly literature (Lerner, 2000; Tickle, 1995; O Murchu, 1998). Literature of world religions has long attested the importance of spirit. An increasingly wide variety of interdisciplinary fields ranging from business to social work are regularly reporting on spirituality. Many today are seeking to understand the spiritual dimensions of life outside the frameworks of traditional religious institutions (O Murchu, 1998). These “seekers” (Wuthnow, 1998) often look to understand their experiences through both formal and informal adult learning opportunities (English, Fenwick & Parsons, 2003), a phenomenon offering both opportunity and challenge to adult educators.

The study of spirituality is a relatively new occurrence in adult education; adult educators such as Dirkx, (1997), English & Gillen (2000), Tisdell (1999), and MacKeracher (1996) have written about spirituality. Few address the phenomenon by attempting to understand the nature and meaning of the experience and most research has focused on women (English, 1999; 2000; 2002; Tisdell, 1999; 2000a; 2000b; Walters & Manicom, 1996) or mixed groups (Tisdell, 2003). Although English, Fenwick & Parsons (2003) suggest that the incorporation of “spirituality into learning is helpful to both men and women” (p. 93), almost no research has been done on male experiences of spirituality, especially from a multi-cultural perspective. The purpose of this study was to better understand the spiritual experiences of men in the middle years of life. The middle years of life are a critical time in male growth and development (Levinson, 1978) as well as spiritual transformation (Brewi & Brennan, 1982; Jung, 1961). Although addressed in popular literature (Sheehy, 1995; 1998; Biddulph, 2000; Moore & Gillette, 1990; Bly, 1992), research on male experiences of spirit in midlife is rare. In a highly diverse, global, multi-cultural environment where spirituality has become increasingly visible and is experienced in very diverse ways that affect relationships, this is a critical lacuna.

Method

Consistent with the purpose of the study, qualitative research methods were used to understand experiences that contribute to spiritual growth “from the point of view of those acting” (Brookfield, 1990, p. 2). Qualitative methods supported the heuristic dimension of the study as participants sought to make sense of a complex experiential phenomenon. Use of these methods allowed theory to emerge from the data.

An internationally and culturally diverse convenience sample of eleven adult male volunteers from African, European and North American countries participated in this study. The study consisted of extended semi-structured interviews where participants were asked to describe their personal experiences of spirit. Interviews were audiotaped, transcribed, and data were entered into the QSR NVivo data analysis software program. The QSR NVivo software program facilitated the constant comparison of data across subjects (Strauss and Corbin, 1990), allowing codes to be updated and the coding scheme to emerge from the data. Limitations of the study

include the nature of the sample itself, which although internationally and culturally diverse, had a high level of educational achievement. Although participants came from a Christian background, there was significant diversity in their religious background, and current belief and practice.

In this study, the experience of spirit involves “contact with a realm that is greater than the self” (Spencer, 1992, p. 4), and includes “feelings, acts and experiences” of individuals “so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine” (James, 1994/1902, p. 42). Perceptions and experiences of the person are viewed as primary without favouring, *a priori*, a more general understanding (Astell, 1994). At the same time the individual’s experience is viewed as always affected by its context (Elias & Merriam, 1994). Masculinity refers to “the expectations and ideals of behavior and modes of being societies believe to be appropriate to men” (Muesse, 2002, p.4). It was at the juncture where individual awareness and cultural context meet that the men in this study reported many of their encounters with spirit.

Findings and Discussion

Findings underscore similarities among male spiritual experiences reported by participants as well as differences. Participants’ experiences of spirit were often associated with the following common elements: an initiating experience often functioning like a trigger event and accompanied by emotion, a time of reflection, an experience of letting go of prior assumptions, a heightened sense of awareness, a desire to make a connection between the spiritual experience and other elements of life, and changes in perception and behavior, all occurring in different sequences and intensities over varying periods of time. These elements are illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1.



Participants characterized their lives as being in transition. As one said, “This is a time of profound change for me. I am learning and growing in ways I would never have imagined even a few years ago.” Many also reported a profound sense of mystery and awe associated with various elements in their experiences. Reflection, a common element in the adult learning experience (Brookfield, 2000), was a universal aspect of reported experiences of spirit. As one participant said, “It took a long time to make sense of it [the experience]. I just had to think, to pray, to mull it over, play it out, try to understand what it meant.” Although occurring in different ways, the men in this study reported a significant change in awareness (Davis, 2003) that other authors have described as perception (Cranton, 1994), wide-awakeness (Greene, 1995), or consciousness (Jung, 1933). This transformation in awareness moved the self from the role of subject or agent to a growing sense of inter-subjectivity. As Jackson (1998) states: “Intersubjectivity is the

interplay of subject and object.... Singular selves are simultaneously part of community, sole but also several, not only islands but part of the main” (p. 6).

For the men in this study, experiences of spirit displaced the conscious self as primary subject or agent as they became aware of another spiritual reality they termed God, spirit, or their higher power. Participants spoke of this displacement as a perceived loss of control through experiences such as job loss or illness, often accompanied by involuntary emotional expressions of grief. They spoke of this de-centering as involving a move from a strong sense of autonomy and independence to deep relationship with spouse, family or significant other. Spiritual experiences often included an increased sense of affinity with and connection to other humans, and powerful, non-rational experiences of intuition, both generally associated with female approaches to meaning making (Bergman & Surrey, 1997; Taylor, 1999). For the male participants in this study relationships and connectedness, items often associated with women’s psychosocial development (Ross-Gordon, 1999) were especially emphasized as important elements in their spiritual experience. Participants reported struggling to make sense of their experience, often encountering the reality of spirit as unexpected, nurturing, supportive, challenging, and awesome. This displacement of self was associated with perceived involuntary loss of control, as well as a subsequent more intentional and conscious act of letting go previously held life assumptions. One participant described his experience using imagery from the movie Gandhi:

“I am reminded of Gandhi... when he was thrown from the train. That made a huge impact on him because from that point he reflected on his life... he looked at things... and that started him into his life... an extremely spiritual experience.”

The process was reported as happening both quickly as well as over an extended period of time.

Male experiences of spirituality represent a form of adult experiential learning (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999) that is both intra-psychic and also a part of men’s cultural experience. Experiences of spirit were situated (Hansman, 2001), occurring at the boundary of the psyche and cultural experience (Jackson, 1998) in ways that are embedded in socio-cultural structures (Geertz, 1970) while at the same time radically transcending them. The experience of spirit was fundamentally an encounter, often with transformative dimensions. As one man said: “It was like I met God... it sounds crazy... but it was a power, a presence, an encounter that changed me. My life is not the same as it used to be.” As a result of their experiences participants described a deepening awareness of the power of spirit in their lives and a relationship with spirit filled with awe, mystery, peace and energy.

In ways similar to Levinson, *et al* (1990) participants often described changes resulting from crisis events such as loss of loved ones, work experiences, changes in employment and career, and illness. Vocation was associated with spiritual experiences; at times the vocational experience served as a type of trigger event with the understanding of the experience occurring at a later time. The encounter with spirit was reported as an intra-psychic experience transcending cultural dimensions. As one participant said, “Although my life was chaos, for the first time I felt at peace.” Other major contexts for reported encounters with spirit included times of illness, relationship changes, the death of loved one, a life threatening experience, and a travel situation involving extended experiences of silence. Church was an important life context for a number of participants, often providing space for reflection that was sometimes associated with instances of spiritual encounter. Participants described spiritual experiences as occurring both in the context of the rituals of the church, and in relationships that were a part of specific church activities, such as mission trips. These findings question the assumption that spiritual experiences are distinct

from religious or other contexts (Scotton, 1996) and point to complexities involved in understanding and addressing spiritual differences in adult education settings.

Findings from this study reflect a diversity of masculine spiritualities extending well beyond cultural masculine stereotypes characterized as rational, cognitive, emotionally inexpressive, controlling, competitive, strong and autonomous (Muesse, 2002; Moore & Gillette, 1990). Repeatedly the men in this study cited their experiences of spirit as a time of challenge and opportunity to express emotion, connect with people, relinquish control, and move beyond the rational. These findings are contrary to those in the women's adult development literature suggesting that connectedness and relatedness are more associated with women's development (Ross-Gordon, 1999). This study also suggests the importance of a Jungian sense of compensation or balance as an element in men's growth and development (Brewi & Brennan, 1982; Jung, 1933). Findings also support the notion that the category of gender is itself multicultural. Men are different in spiritual approaches, practices and values. There is no common script for masculine spirituality. There are multiple masculine spiritualities as well as a broad spectrum of individual spiritual experience, affected by such factors as family of origin and regional culture.

Conclusion

Spirituality was as powerful in the lives of the men in this study as it was challenging to understand. Although further study is needed to explore the nature of the male phenomena of spiritual encounter, findings from this study suggest that male spirituality is actually a constellation of masculine experiences of spirit situated in a myriad of cultural phenomena. Although quite different, all involve a de-centering of self and an increasing awareness of spirit often described as transformative. Male experiences of spirit describe a form of inter-subjectivity intimately related to the awareness of spirit. If the intention of adult education is to address the entire human experience of adult learning, then an increased understanding of male perspectives on spiritual growth represents a voice that is distinctive and valuable.

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ⁱ This phenomenon has been documented throughout Latin America. (See for example, Alvarez, 1990; Chinchilla, 1992; Gaviola, Largo, & Palestro, 1994; Jaquette, 1989; Jelin, 1990; Miller, 1991; Schild, 1994; Valdés & Weinstein, 1993; Waylen, 1992)

ⁱⁱ Less than a hundred women were the mainstay of the women's movement during the dictatorship years in Arica. I interviewed over half of them.

ⁱⁱⁱ While it may be considered overly simplistic, to pursue a definitive analytical path (especially in the shadow of postmodernism), I was convinced from the outset that the account of this meeting cried out to be analyzed from the perspective of praxis. However, I do not for a moment believe that this could be the only/defining factor or the sole interpretation of the significance of this meeting. Indeed, there are multiple factors for any process or outcome in every situation that interact in complex and imprecise ways. I focus here on this interpretation because of its centrality to radical adult education and its potential to contribute to a better understanding of the meaning of praxis in social movements.

^{iv} This inadvertent "feminist curriculum" is described by Valdés and Weinstein (1993), Chuchryk, (1984) and Schild (1994) among others.

^v Ibid.

^{vi} Gramsci used the euphemism, "philosophy of praxis," to signify Marxist philosophy.

^{vii} With very few exceptions, these women were raised, educated and committed to socialism or communism through their families, communities and political parties.

^{viii} It is now well known that U.S. political interference established Chile as the "neoliberal laboratory" for economic reform (see for example, Chavkin, 1985).

^{ix} The women claim that theirs is not a democracy, but a dictatorship of a different sort – an economic one ("a dictatorship in suit and tie"). They are highly critical of the Chilean political, economic and social situation.