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A Step Towards Faith: A Phenomenological Inquiry Into Spirituality

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Abstract: This phenomenological investigation examined how eight select adult education practitioners understand spirituality.

Purpose and Theoretical Framework of the Study

Recently, the discourse surrounding spirituality and adult education has developed at an explosive rate. However, there is a paucity of literature that even attempts to address definitional, religious, theological, or etymological foundations of spirituality. Instead of endeavoring to ground the term, the trend appears to be to construct a notion of spirituality that may be more palatable to a wider readership, but does so at the risk of stripping the term of any real meaning (e.g. English & Gillen, 2000; Tisdell, 2003; Vella, 2000; Vogel, 2000). This investigation begins to address the gaps in the literature by phenomenologically examining how eight adult education practitioners holding a notion of spirituality grounded in a Christian tradition, broadly defined, describe the concept of spirituality embedded in their daily lives.

This study utilizes the perspectives of a variety of critical/religious scholars from multiple religious traditions (e.g. Lerner, 2000; Wallis, 2000; Wilber, 1998) to analyze the spirituality discourse in adult education. These authors argue that an ungrounded definition of spirituality contributes to the term being stripped of any real meaning, making it easier for the term to be co-opted, commodified, and misused. Additionally, this study grounds spirituality in a Christian understanding of the term, broadly defined, an understanding that situates the construct as (Cully, 1990; Schweizer, 1968; Vine, 1966).

Research Design

Given that phenomenology is concerned with describing and interpreting human phenomena from the perspective of those who have experienced them, phenomenological inquiry was most appropriate for this research. The primary means of data collection was informal, conversational, taped interviews lasting from 90 minutes to just over two hours in length. The collected data was approached in terms of “meaning units, structures of meaning, or themes” (van Manen, 1990, p. 78), or theme analysis. For this study, three levels of theme analysis were conducted. To ensure credibility and trustworthiness, member checking, periodic peer reviews of the data, and triangulation were conducted.

Criteria for participation included individuals who were (a) self-identified adult educators with at least 2 years of practice in the field, (b) formally trained in the academic discipline of adult education at the graduate level, and (c) identified and confirmed by reputation and works as holding a notion of spirituality grounded in a Christian tradition, broadly defined. Limiting participation to Christian notions of spirituality speaks directly to the issue of grounding discussions in a specific, religious, and theological context. Using a method that follows a type of purposeful sampling, eight participants were selected. The selection process provided diversity in gender, age, race/ethnicity, and occupation, along with great ideological and political diversity that ranged from self-described radical, evangelical Christian to critical, poststructural feminist Christian.

Findings: Phenomenological Descriptions of Spirituality

In an attempt to get at the “thick, rich descriptions” desired in qualitative research, I deliberately avoided asking participants to define or describe spirituality directly until the latter part of the interview. Instead I probed their understandings of faith, asking them to describe the journey or process that brought them to those understandings and four themes emerged.

Questions of Spirituality and Faith

Three participants saw the terms “faith” and “spirituality” as closely related but not always synonymous, equating spirituality with a “basic belief system.” Five participants frequently used spirituality and faith interchangeably. Another interviewee, however, was uncomfortable with the indiscriminate swapping of these terms, viewing spirituality and faith as more distinct concepts that may be hard to define but are indeed separate from one another. Other interviewees took this discomfort with the term spirituality a step further, expressing how they intentionally chose to avoid using the word altogether. They instead opted for more palatable constructs such as faith, transcendence, spirit, tradition, or even religion. One, for example, declared, “I don’t use it. I try not to use the word ‘spirituality.’ In fact, every time I say it, I kind of go like that [he shivers]; you know I get chills up my spine.” Still another participant was most forceful in expressing his avoidance of the word, choosing instead to use the word religion: “Honestly, as bad a word as religion is, I prefer it [to spirituality because] religion calls you into an active spirituality within the context of your community.” Spirituality, on the other hand, “is a farce, really. It’s a farce to propagate all kinds of things upon us and to avoid the responsibility of our commitment to the brotherhood of humanity or to the human condition. So I have maintained the use of religion or faith.”

The Problematic Nature of Individualized Spirituality

The participants also decried what they saw as an emphasis in the discourse that bordered on privileging individualized spirituality. As one stated, “Part of the newer spirituality is that you don’t need other people, you don’t need this church, you don’t this congregation, or synagogue, or mosque; you know you don’t need to have other people.” A second referred to this emphasis on individualism as a decontextualized spirituality. A third described spirituality in terms of the community or group, the antithesis to such individualistic notions, stating “[spirituality] is treating your neighbor right and looking out for the whole [community].” A fourth pointed to the problems and inherent flaws in the individualistic, “American” notion of spirituality: Spirituality is another form of individualism, so it’s like you could be in your little house and be spiritual. You can light your candle and play music over there in your little hole and be spiritual . . . it just means that you have an option to say that you could do something by yourself . . . it says nothing about how you live in the world. In fact, with one exception, all participants had strong, visceral reactions to the individualistic notions of spirituality touted in the current discourse within academic adult education.

Problems Associated with Definitions of Spirituality

Seven of the participants expressed varying levels of dissatisfaction with how spirituality is currently being defined and discussed in the discourse. Particularly dissatisfying were the nebulous, vague understandings that purport to be a “one-size-fits-all” type of spirituality. For one, the vagueness of the term “makes it so convenient for advertising, for people to make money out of it. The more general and vague and empty you can make a term, the more marketable it becomes.” For another, the imprecise, vague definitions of spirituality can lead to the co-opting and commodification of spiritual concepts to further economic goals and serve the interests of the market: “I think that when we talk about spirituality in the workplace, or soul, or spirit, or whatever, people tie that directly to their religion . . . that’s where it gets [mis]used.”

Another took exception to the claim of neutrality implicit in vague, imprecise, notions of spirituality: “When you are trying to be all things to everyone, particularly when a lot of this is actually foundationalist in its own way, it’s just a different kind of foundationalist, worship yourself, light a few candles, and feel good. I have a problem with [that].” Still another’s

dissatisfaction led him to intentionally avoid using the word spirituality altogether, stating, “It’s a nothing word. It’s a word that means nothing. It just means that you have an option to say that you could do something by yourself.” Because he saw spirituality as a word devoid of meaning, he chose instead to use constructs imbued with meaning such as religion and faith:

[Religion] involves active participation in the world of lived experiences . . . then somebody says, there’s so much crap perpetrated because of religion; and I say that, that is true. Lots of bad things have been done in the name of religion; lots of good things have been done in the name of religion. But nothing good or bad has been done in the name of spirituality (laughs) . . . it’s just a, a buzz, man, it’s just a buzz, you know?

For one, even more troubling than the vagueness of the term was the inherent, assumed superiority of these vague constructions over those grounded in history, religion, and context: What irritates me about this [current] discussion of spirituality is that it is privileged to discussions of faith grounded in history and context; [that] people who are still talking about this in terms of Christianity, or Islam, or Hinduism are somehow not getting it . . . I find that insulting.

Tales from the Dark Side

Finally, seven participants described their encounters with the “dark side” of spirituality, a term used to describe the struggles, questions, doubts, fears, etc., experienced by people of faith—and also recognized by most faith traditions—as an important part of the spiritual journey. For one interviewee, the “dark” period was a time of skepticism and rejection of the faith of his youth, precipitated by an intense disenchantment with Christians he perceived as people who did not “live their faith”. A second encountered hypocrisy in the church in the form of intense criticism directed at a very close member of his family, triggering in him a desire to turn from formal religion and things of faith for a period of time. As he stated, it “just didn’t make any sense to me. I hated [the hypocrites] because of it . . . and I thought that every Christian was a hypocrite.” Eventually, both came through their “dark side” experience, decidedly more spiritual and stronger in faith, realizing that, as one expressed, hypocrisy “isn’t a rationale for not believing, or for not participating . . . [so] when people say I’m not going to the church, it’s all full of hypocrites, my response now is yeah, and there’s always room for one more.”

For yet another, the “dark side” described his struggle with how his faith had changed, how he is currently “in flux” spiritually speaking, and how this state of spiritual transition impacted his life and relationship to the organized church. For him, the organized church has some big issues; subsequently he has “some big issues with the organizational church [such as] the issue of being an ordained clergy person, and what that means in terms of leadership and . . . [what] that does to laypeople, in terms of disempowering them.” Two other participants spoke of their struggle with formal religion in general, and the religious tradition of their youth in particular. As one stated, “I have to say I have a real problem at this point with organized religion; whereas going to church every Sunday used to be what you did, it isn’t what I do [now].” The other spoke of how religion was a “mixed bag” of both wonderful things and negative things that contributed to a current “ambivalence towards the Church.” A seventh participant described an encounter with the “dark side” of spirituality in terms of the constant struggles or tests of faith experienced in life. However, there was not unanimous agreement on the issue of the “dark side” among participants. As one interviewee stated, “I have not really come across any reason to doubt and to despair within my life. I mean I’ve had friends who are Christians and have gone through real serious times of doubt and you know, sort of almost losing everything, and then just sort of back up [to faith]; but I’ve not really gone through that.”

Collectively, these stories suggest that the “dark side” is a bona fide, significant, and accepted part of the spiritual life of the participants. To ignore this aspect of spirituality in favor of a “sunny, feel good naïveté” (Fenwick, 2001)—as does the current discourse within the field of adult education—is to present an inaccurate, unbalanced view of spirituality that disregards an important dimension of the spiritual experience of many, if not most people of faith.

Discussion: Four Hazards of Spirituality

The findings point out four hazards in the spirituality discourse within the field of adult education: the non-definition and misuse of spirituality, individualistic spirituality, the failure to address faith, and the separation of spirituality and religion.

Non-Definition and Misuse of Spirituality

A recurring theme is the failure of the field to commit to substantive definitions of the term, spirituality. By substantive definitions, I refer to definitions grounded in historical, theological, and etymological underpinnings of the construct (see Cully, 1990; Schweizer, 1968; Vine, 1966). Instead, the discourse has chosen to use vague, imprecise, and noncommittal terms in their definitions, describing spirituality as nebulous, elusive, and hard to define in an apparent attempt to appear permissive, welcoming, and as one participant observed, make spirituality “be all things to everyone.” However, by striving to make spirituality palatable, the discourse has evacuated the term of any meaning. On this, the majority of participants were particularly vocal. Therein lies a major hazard, because a spirituality emptied of meaning is highly susceptible to co-optation, commodification, and misuse (Fenwick & Lange, 1998).

Individualistic Spirituality

A second hazard created by vague definitions of spirituality is that of promoting an individualistic spirituality. A spirituality focused on the individual is hazardous, precisely because it is intrinsically self-centered and self-serving. Then too, individualized spirituality ignores the fact that people do not live in isolation but are individuals who exist as part of a community. Accordingly, an individually focused spirituality promotes egocentric ideals such as self-fulfillment, personal happiness, meaning making, and meeting individual needs while at the same time snubbing personal responsibility to community and society. It seems ironic that the field of adult education, a field that prides itself as historically being concerned with the greater good of society at large, has so indiscriminately bought into and adopted as part of its own discourse a spirituality that, intentionally or unintentionally, makes the good of society subservient to the needs and concerns of the individual. Until and unless the discourse moves beyond the imprecise definitions of spirituality it currently privileges, the hazards associated with this trend of implicitly promoting individualistic spirituality will continue.

Failure to Address Faith

A third hazard is the failure of the field to address serious, substantive, issues of faith, such as the “dark side” of spirituality. Participants in this study described numerous encounters with the “dark side” which include experiencing a crisis of faith, feelings of skepticism towards and rejection of religion, struggling with hypocrisy of “religious” people, and the testing of one’s faith. These participant descriptions were markedly different from those found within adult education where the emphasis is on promoting the “sunny, feel good” side of spirituality alone, leaving the “dark side” ignored. So much so, in fact, that the silence of the field on issues related to the “dark side” is almost deafening. By couching discussions in spiritual terminology, the mainstream discourse creates the illusion of confronting issues of faith in a substantive manner, in reality the difficult issues are avoided. Space needs to be made where real issues of faith, such as how belief affects practice and “the dark side,” can be legitimately/substantively discussed.

Separation of Spirituality and Religion

A final hazard is found in the attempt within the field to divorce religion and spirituality. For all but one participant, religion is more than a system of worship, regulatory codes, or a community of faith. For them, much like spirituality and faith, central to religion are foundations, fundamentals, and core beliefs. Furthermore, although the terms spirituality and religion are not identical, they are very closely connected, evidenced by the fact that five participants frequently used the two terms interchangeably. Understood in this way, religion and spirituality should not be divorced. By pushing to keep religion and spirituality separate, the discourse is in effect asking the adult educator who is a person of faith to find some way to extricate their foundational beliefs and close off who they are at the very core of their being.

This points to the primary hazard in attempting to keep spirituality and religion separate. Realizing that they cannot do the impossible and simply shut off their core beliefs, the person of faith is faced with, as one participant summarized, “feeling fraudulent” or risk “being dismissed as a total flake” by colleagues in the field. Instead of forcing people of faith to choose between attempting the impossible and doing the undesirable, the onus should fall on the discourse within adult education itself to recognize that for many within the field, spirituality and religion are intrinsically connected. Any hazards or risks resulting from linking spirituality and religion should be assumed by and entertained in the literature, not by a specific group of adult education practitioners. To be sure, when entering the quagmire of discussing religion and foundational beliefs, risks are inevitable, not the least of which is the risk of being exposed the emotional messiness and heated debates that are sure to erupt when core beliefs collide. But these are risks worth taking especially in light of the alternative. Finally, this is the *raison d'être* of “discourse” in the first place: to take risks, to generate discussion and substantive debate.

Implications: Moving Towards Faith

The findings suggest that because these four hazards are tied to problems associated with the term spirituality, they can be avoided. However, to do so requires a bold move by the field away from current discussions conveniently couched in undefined, non-offensive notions of spirituality towards a discourse framed explicitly and unapologetically in terms of faith. Underpinning this proposed move is an assumption that, unlike spirituality, the term faith comes loaded with meaning; meaning that is grounded in historical, theological, and etymological contexts. Inherent in faith are understandings related to core beliefs. Thus, while the object of faith may differ, the definition associated with the construct remains rooted in core beliefs.

Because it is grounded in the historical, theological, and etymological, the term faith is less likely to be co-opted, commodified, and misused (see Fenwick & Lange, 1998). Furthermore, moving towards faith would avoid failing to address serious and difficult issues of faith, such as “the dark side.” Finally, framing the discourse in terms of faith would avoid the problem associated with the current attempt to divorce spirituality from religion and faith. Specifically, it would avoid asking adult educators who are people of faith to shut off their core beliefs or risk “feeling fraudulent and/or being dismissed as a total flake.” Instead, core beliefs would become an accepted and substantive part of the discourse by virtue of their affiliation with faith. Implementing this proposed move is not without risks of its own; discussions focused on issues of faith and foundational beliefs strike at the very core of who we are as human beings. Furthermore, when those beliefs are called into question or argued against, tempers flare, the debate heats up, and things have the potential of becoming combative. Nevertheless, if the discourse is to move beyond its present lethargic, impotent condition, a healthy dose of lively debate generated by such a bold move may be exactly what is needed.

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