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Spiritual Pilgrimage as Metaphor and Movement in Adult Learning: The Transformative Journey Toward Wisdom

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Keywords: spiritual pilgrimage, transformative journey, wisdom

Abstract: This paper explores the notion of spiritual pilgrimage in the lives of a multicultural group of adult educators who have been participants in a longitudinal study of their spiritual development, and to some extent how it connects to our own stories as educators and researchers

Most of us probably see life as a journey. Further, most of us hope that as the journey unfolds, we experience transformative learning moments that lead to wisdom. The research literature indicates that many who experience such transformative moments leading to wisdom often see such moments as facilitating their spiritual development (Wink & Helson, 1997). Within the field of adult education, until a recently published sourcebook (Tisdell & Swartz, 2011), there's been little consideration of wisdom specifically in the field. While there has been much discussion of spirituality or spiritual development in the past 10 years, summarized recently by English and Tisdell (2010), there's been little consideration of its connection to wisdom. Prior research in the field indicates that many adult educators who value a sense of spirituality attempt to cultivate their spiritual development by engaging in various spiritual practices, such as meditation; some also reclaim their cultural heritage by understanding the way their ancestors embraced cultural and spiritual ritual, while others cross cultural borders to attempt to facilitate their own spiritual development (Tisdell & Tolliver, 2003; Dillard, 2006). Numerous writers have described spirituality as a journey toward wholeness (Cook, 2004) or a journey toward wisdom using the idea of journey in its more metaphorical sense. But Kottler (1998) suggests that many adults also attempt to facilitate their own transformation through travel, while others do so by going on a spiritual pilgrimage. A spiritual pilgrimage can be either a metaphorical spiritual journey or actual travel to sacred sites, and in anthropology, Morinis (1992) discusses different types of pilgrimage, all of which involve a journey and a goal, where a part of the goal is movement along the journey itself from the familiar to something other, until this new other becomes integrated. A pilgrimage taken with this in mind can be as Cousineau (1998) says "poetry in motion, a winding road" (p. 29) that leads to new meaning. The ultimate goal of the pilgrim is a sense of transformation/transcendence into the ideal. Just as there has been limited consideration of wisdom in the field, with some exception (Davis, 2007; Johnson, Swartz, & Tisdell, 2010) there has only been limited consideration of the notion of spiritual pilgrimage in relation to adult development and learning. *The purpose of this paper is to explore the notion of spiritual pilgrimage in the lives of a multicultural group of adult educators who have been participants in a longitudinal study of their spiritual development, and to explore its connection to wisdom, and to some extent how it connects to our own stories as educators and researchers.*

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of the *study itself* is grounded in the spiritual development literature (Fowler, 1982; Wink & Dillon, 2002), as well as those who argue for the

interconnection of culture and spirituality in adult development and/or education (Dillard, 2006; English & Tisdell, 2010). An additional influence is the transformative learning literature that is grounded in cultural-spiritual perspectives (Fisher-Yoshida, Geller, & Schapiro, 2009; Taylor, 2008) as opposed to those grounded in the individualist-rationalist perspective of Mezirow. Such literature highlights how spirituality intersects with culture, and tends to characterize spirituality as a journey toward wholeness, which ties nicely to the notion of pilgrimage. Experiences seen as “spiritual” are those transformative moments that facilitate the journey toward wholeness; understanding and reclaiming cultural identity is part of that journey. This particular *paper* is grounded in how such frames can also be informed by the literature on wisdom, how it develops over time and connects to spiritual development, drawing on Wink and Dillon’s (2002) research which specifically explores the interconnection of spiritual development and wisdom. It is also grounded in the literature on spiritual pilgrimage, where pilgrimage is associated either with reclaiming a sense of identity and internal sense of power (O’Brien, 1999), a high that blends physical endurance with sacred journey (Johnson et al, 2010), all in the search of greater wisdom and connection with a higher sense of self (Morinis, 1992).

Background and Methodology

As background, one of us (Tisdell) conducted interviews for a narrative study from 1998-2000 where the purpose was to examine the spiritual development of 31 North American adult educators of different cultural groups who were teaching for social justice and were motivated to do so because of their spiritual commitments; the results have been published elsewhere (Tisdell, 2003; Tisdell & Tolliver, 2003). Given the limited longitudinal studies on spiritual development, several participants (19 thus far) have been re-interviewed using a narrative approach exploring how their spirituality has changed over time and connects to their educational work, and how it relates to the notion of wisdom. In this second phase of this study, participants were provided with a transcript of their original narrative interview from 10 years ago, and were asked to share their reflections on the original interview as they look back, to describe significant spiritual experiences they have had since then, and how these relate to their understanding of their own culture and religious background, as well as the current multicultural social context in which they do their work as adult educators. In addition they were asked specifically about the meaning of wisdom, and its role in their lives. Original interviews were conducted as a shared conversation in light of the poststructural feminist underpinnings (St. Pierre, 2000), and Dhunpath’s (2000) discussion of life history methodology as “narradigm” (p. 543): that narrators share a kaleidoscope of memories, dreams, and reflections that affects both researcher and participant; indeed this is part of how cultural/spiritual wisdom unfolds in the social context of the research dyad, and to some degree is part of making sense of the spiritual journey itself, both for the participant and the researcher(s). While only one of us (Tisdell) conducted the interviews, both of us have worked on the analysis of data in regard to the spiritual pilgrimage components. It has forced us to reflect on and analyze both the participants’ and our own spiritual development and various metaphorical and literal travels as spiritual pilgrimage. We present a brief summary of the findings overall, then two participant’s narratives, and close with how their narratives help us reflect on our own experience of spiritual pilgrimage.

Main Findings and Specific Narratives

The 19 participants that have been re-interviewed so far discuss the power of memory in

both reading their narrative of 10 years ago and their spiritual experiences since then. We first offer a summary of the findings thus far, and then offer more detailed narratives of two participants.

Summary of Findings

There have been three specific interrelated themes that have emerged, in relation to the data overall. First, spiraling back, and settling into their lives now characterized these new narrative interviews. Second, participants highlighted the new ways they attend to the intersection of culture, religion, and spirituality in their own lives, and the greater appreciation of what they learned from their childhood religious traditions than was the case 10 years ago. Third, they reported the specific ways they have grown in their spirituality in finding a rhythmic balance between inner reflection and outer action as a key component of ageing well. More specifically, they also (when asked) discussed the role of wisdom in the pursuit of that process, and indicated wisdom involves: a) listening to and acting on “the inner voice” that comes from “multiple dimensions of being”; b) realizing that “love is a central factor”; c) mentoring others on “finding integrative patterns” of knowledge that comes from experience; d) results from learning to deal creatively with loss and limitations.

In regards to the issue of spiritual pilgrimage, nearly all of the participants referred to the journey metaphor in describing their spiritual development, and discussed ways they tried to facilitate their spiritual development through meditation, mindfulness, in combination with some pursuits of social justice work. For example, Julia, a Chicana, who at the time of our second interview in 2010 was dealing with breast cancer, noted dealing with cancer as a journey related to her spirituality. Such reference to journey as metaphor was present in all the interviews.

Several participants did talk specifically about the notion of travel for their spiritual development. Some had done this in their initial interview; Derise, for example, an African American professor, talked about the spiritual significance of going to the slave dungeons in Cape Coast in Ghana, and the spirituality of the Akan people of Ghana as part of reclaiming her cultural heritage as a spiritual experience, and now 10 years later she leads trips to Ghana and other parts of Africa as both an international course and spiritual pilgrimage. Jason, a white professor, also now leads international trips to Asia through his university. While the trips are not advertised as spiritual pilgrimage, he noted that many participants experience them as such and he does himself. Other participants discussed the notion of spiritual pilgrimage paired with doing something quite physically challenging. Beverly, a 65 year old Alaska native woman, for example, had traveled to Africa and climbed Mt. Kilimanjaro, and talked a lot about the spiritual significance of that journey. Some specifically embark on what is intended to be a trip for other purposes, such as to do research, but discover something of spiritual significance in the process. Others engage in travel for specific purposes of spiritual development or spiritual pilgrimage. Next, we offer summaries and snippets from two narratives. Shirley specifically went on spiritual pilgrimage trips for those purposes; Tito, on the other hand went back and forth to Cuba to pursue education and spiritual direction related to his spiritual journey.

Shirley’s Narrative: A summary

Shirley is an African American woman, now in her early 60s who was first interviewed in 1999. At that time she discussed how her spirituality as it intersected with social justice had developed over time from growing up Baptist in a community and family that was heavily

involved in the Civil Rights Movement. Her spirituality took many forms over the years but remained an important grounding place.

In our interview at the end of 2009, she discussed how she traveled to different places including Mexico, Ghana, Cuba, and Bahia, Brazil in essence as spiritual pilgrimage. She explained that these were all places where people of the African Diaspora lived and left their spirituality as an inheritance to be discovered by those that seek wisdom within indigenous ways of knowing and experiencing spirituality. In Brazil, she was introduced to a high priestess in the Candomble tradition that gave her access to the Indigenous culture and spirituality; this trip was a particularly important spiritual pilgrimage. She also talked about other significant spiritual experiences in the 10 years since we had been together. Some of these included being in the slave dungeons in Ghana and feeling surrounded by the presence of their spirits; of being present with her grandmother as she transitioned from life to death; and her experiences as a Doula—ushering newness into the world.

In essence, Shirley sees her life as pilgrimage. She aspires to gather wisdom—and says she does so with her quiet time and self-reflection. She explains that she tries to approach everything she does and everyone she encounters with a sense of spirit—of love. Her physical journeys to other lands of people that are part of the African Diaspora are ways that have helped her understand her own spiritual roots, and gather in wisdom that is part of these Indigenous cultures; this contributes to life as pilgrimage.

Tito's Narrative: A Summary

Tito lives in Chicago. He grew up both in Puerto Rico and in Chicago, in a fairly constant migration pattern between the two places as a child. In our initial interview in 2000, he described the importance in high school and beyond, of “the sacred stories of my ancestors” in his search for wholeness. During that interview Tito explained that his family was Catholic but that they were involved in *Espiritismo*, which is a common religion/religious practice in Puerto Rico. In our interview 10 years later he described the process of becoming a priest in the Santareia tradition (which has some roots in the African Yoruba tradition), which took him back and forth to Cuba for his education, and initiation, and spiritual direction. “There was a Santeria community nearby but I wasn’t connected with them. My inner spiritual guides were telling me, “that’s not for you”. I know that Santeria is connected to the *Espiritismo* belief system but it wasn’t until 2002 that I connected with Santeria”. He explained aspects of his process in going back and forth to Cuba. Some of Tito’s narrative is here in italics:

So I went through my ceremonies called Yoboraje and spent a whole year in white. I was an Iwayo ... and was in the process of purity. It was also a year without shaking hands. I couldn't shake hands because there is a lot of energy that can be shared through shaking hands that would affect my cleansing and purification process. So I was doing a lot of hugging. When asked about being in all white and not shaking hands I would tell people that I was doing una promesa...a promise to a saint or to God...it's a promise that I'm carrying. And on December 24, 2005 I became a high priest of Ifa and I wore Orunmila which means “one who serves Oruluia”. The idea behind being an oracle is not to get people involved in Santeria or in Ifa but to actually say that you need to pursue the spirituality of your ancestors—so that they can become aligned with their own destiny.... I did my Ocha ceremony in the United States but I went to Cuba to become a high priest, a Babalao. And ever since then I go over there to learn.

There is no question that there is a significant element of transformation in Tito's story. Tito did not discuss going to Cuba in and of itself as spiritual pilgrimage in the same way that Shirley did about her trip to Bahia, Brazil, as a spiritual pilgrimage; nevertheless, his ongoing back and forth to Cuba as part of his ongoing spiritual study and experience of Santeria is part of his life as spiritual pilgrimage.

How the Research Changes Us: Our Own Reflections on Spiritual Pilgrimage

If one attempts to live one's life as spiritual pilgrimage (at least in theory), and one does research on spirituality, wisdom, and pilgrimage, one can't help but being changed by the research process as Dhunpath (2000) suggests. So here we each briefly explain how.

Perdeta L. Bush

My journey to Africa began as a child sitting on the floor at my grandparent's home reading about the Middle Passage and looking at pictures of children, resembling myself, being sold as slaves on the auction block. But it was through the narratives of the research participants that helped me understand my journey as one of spiritual pilgrimage. In line with the literature on spiritual pilgrimage, my journey to Tanzania held multiple goals— to understand more about myself through the lives of my ancestors and to make a contribution of service by educating those who some would refer to as “the least of these”. Like, Shirley I too, was consumed by the history, culture, and spiritual presence of my ancestors; like Tito my spiritual identity was clearly defined and shaped as my experiences in Tanzania served as powerful triggers that revealed deep spiritual insights as I took up the role of teacher, student, and minister. I can now see where my mind was renewed and lens from which I saw the world was transformed. The wisdom that found me and that I found along my journey taught me that it is the Spirit and not achievements generated from my efforts that determines my destiny and establishes my purpose.

Libby Tisdell

I have been doing this research on spirituality for a long time. It is from interviewing the participants that I initially became interested in both the notions of wisdom and of spiritual pilgrimage. It is from meeting and knowing people like Tito and Shirley that I opted in 2009 to go on my own spiritual journey and did the famous Croagh Patrick journey in Ireland, that involved a 22 mile climb on the last Sunday of July, on a sacred mountain and what is considered by both my Roman Catholic and Irish Celtic ancestors to be a sacred time of year. I discussed the significance of this as spiritual pilgrimage at AERC 2010 (see Johnson et al., 2010), not only because the literal journey of doing something that was very physically difficult, but it also came at a time when my father was quite ill and was coming to the end of his life. The spiritual pilgrimage of Croagh Patrick intersected with the time when I walked the journey toward death with my 89 year old father. (He died a couple of months later). The two became one in my own transformation process. But it is the participants in this study along with those that I meet that tell me stories of their own experiences of life and death, and that they see all of life as spiritual pilgrimage that inspire me on the journey – on the literal pilgrimage to sacred places, but also to the metaphorical pilgrimage of life itself.

Conclusions

The findings of the study indicate, as Morinis (1992) suggests in his discussion of pilgrimage, that many of the participants in this study did experience a sense of transformation/transcendence as they integrated their pilgrimage experiences. Many of their

stories where they had moments of transformation at sacred places reminded us of the story in Exodus 3 of the Hebrew Bible of Moses' spiritual pilgrimage up Mt. Horeb where he sees the burning bush, and in his encounter with what he perceives as God he is told that he is to take off his shoes because he is standing on. "Holy Ground." Steinmetz (1993) characterizes Moses' experience as a transformation of epoch proportions that has transformed his identity. Cousineau (1998) suggests that pilgrimage is partly about understanding the sacredness of space and land as well as all of life – in essence the discovering all ground, all land is "Holy Ground," and all of the life journey can be lived as sacred. Living this and integrating this in the midst of daily life is the beginning of wisdom.

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