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# Spiritual Development, Paradox, and Wisdom in Adult Educators' Reflections Ageing

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**Abstract:** *This paper discusses some of the longitudinal findings of a narrative study of spiritual development and emerging wisdom of women adult educators over a 10 year period.*

The quest for wisdom to deal with some of the greatest life questions of who we are, why we're here, and what gives life meaning has been with us since the dawn of time. Indeed this has been the subject of many of the world's great religions and in indigenous cultures (Smith, 1994). Surprisingly, within North American adult education circles, discussion of wisdom and how we might strive for it in our own lives, or educate adults for wisdom, has been relatively absent. It has received some limited attention in adult education circles elsewhere however (Jarvis, 2006), and was the subject of a recent ESREA (European Study of the Research and Education of Adults) Conference in Milan in 2009. The University of Chicago has established a project on defining and studying wisdom, and many educators and psychologists in the US following the work of cognitive psychologist Robert Sternberg (2003), are discussing what it means to educate for wisdom, and foster its development. It's time for US adult educators to begin to do the same.

Ten years ago I began a narrative study 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. Narrative interviews were conducted from 1998-2001. The results in regards to the first sixteen women participants were first published ten years ago (Tisdell, 2000); the results of the entire study including all 31 participants of 22 women and 9 men, have been discussed in detail elsewhere (Tisdell, 2003; 2007). Given the limited longitudinal studies on spiritual development, I am in the process of re-interviewing the participants 10 to 11 years since their first interview. Thus far I have conducted narrative interviews with 12 of the 16 initial women participants to explore how their spirituality has changed over time, how it connects to their educational work, and how it relates to the notion of wisdom. *The purpose of this paper then, is to present some of these spiritual/cultural narratives of the spiritual development of these participants now 10 years older and to consider the ways these narratives connect to wisdom.*

## Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of the study itself is grounded in the spiritual development literature (Wink, 2006), as well as those who argue for the interconnection of culture and spirituality in adult development and/or education (Dillard, 2006; English, 2006; hooks, 2000; Tisdell, 2003). An additional influence is the transformative learning literature that is grounded in cultural-spiritual perspectives (Fisher-Yoshida, Geller, & Schapiro, 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. 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.

Most of the literature exploring wisdom in the religious traditions refers to the Proverbs 24 reference from the Hebrew Bible, where Wisdom is building *her* house. Wisdom has also been the subject of philosophy; indeed, the very root of the word "philosophy" means "love of wisdom". Often cited in such discussions is an Aristotelian distinction between *Sophia*, as the highest form of wisdom (in the transcendental sense, and similar to the notion of Wisdom in the Hebrew Bible), whereas *phronesis* is practical wisdom, and *episteme* is theoretical wisdom (Osbeck & Robinson, 2005). Many authors also recount the story of Socrates, seen by his contemporaries as having knowledge and wisdom but who is rumored to have denied being knowledgeable or wise. Hence, humility is deemed a characteristic of wisdom, as the recognition that all knowledge is partial. This tension of wisdom as having knowledge but recognizing that at the same time, one does not have knowledge, connects wisdom (in the sense of *Sophia*) to the notion of paradox. Goldman (2005) discusses the "paradox of wisdom" (the paradox being that the ageing or "old" brain becomes more wise) from a neuroscience perspective, arguing that adults that age well tend to make decisions more based on pattern recognition as a result of the complex neural patterns that develop over time. These complex neural patterns allow for drawing on multiple parts of the brain at the same time, which results in a wiser way of being in the world. In essence, Goldman tries to look at wisdom from a scientific perspective in making sense of it. Other authors, such as Parker Palmer (2004) tend to look at wisdom in a more holistic way, as that which is integrational; he encourages people to pay attention to the hidden wholeness within. Many authors also discuss the cultivation of wisdom, either in the *phronesis* sense of practical wisdom or in the *Sophia* sense of the metaphysical. But across all of these discussions, there appears to be an integration quality to the notion of wisdom that allows people to negotiate tensions and opposites in a creative way that leads to more integrative thinking and being, and an ability to deal with paradox. This once again takes us back to the world's religious wisdom traditions, because many of those traditions also deal with the notion of paradox.

## **Methodology**

In this second phase of this research study I have provided participants with a transcript of their original narrative interview from 10 years ago, asked them 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 I also specifically asked them about the meaning of wisdom, and its role in their own lives. Original interviews were conducted as a shared conversation in light of the poststructural feminist notion that the multiple subjectivities of narrator and participant affected the construction of the narrative (Lather, 1991; Fine, 1998; St. Pierre, 2000). Similar assumptions were made in conducting these new narrative interviews, in light of 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. Thus far I have had phone and e-mail contact with 15 of the 16 original women participants, and so far have conducted in depth narrative interviews with 12 of them. The

youngest of them is now 51, whereas the oldest is 79. Of the 15, 4 are African American, 1 is Latina, 2 are Asian American, one is Native American, and seven are white.

## Findings

While it's more typical in narrative forms of research to present participant narratives rather than to present themes of findings, in this instance, and due to space limitations, I'll present some fragments of the narratives in the context of some of the themes.

### *A Deepening Spirituality*

For the most part, these new narrative interviews were characterized by spiraling back, settling into their lives now, and going deeper into their spirituality. In general, their spirituality didn't change profoundly over the years, as most of them had a fairly developed spiritual view of the world 10 years earlier; rather they embraced their spirituality, pondering some things more deeply as they began to make new meaning. Not surprisingly given their ages, almost all of them had experienced either a life threatening illness themselves, and/or the death of a loved one. Three of them had had breast cancer; two had experienced the death of their partners, and several had walked the journey of death with a parent. While these experiences had touched them deeply, they didn't fundamentally change their spirituality, which was already fairly well established 10 years earlier; rather such experiences deepened and affirmed their spirituality. Anna, who is now 62 spoke to this point and said about pondering spiritual questions:

I guess as I'm more conscious of my mortality, they loom a little bit bigger than they used to, but not so much as I'm going to become something that I've never ever thought about. It was interesting reading myself again and visiting those ideas... I really don't think I've changed that much, but there have been a couple things that have really kind of stirred up my spiritual self and made me think more about it.

In spite of the fact that their worldview hadn't changed significantly in the past 10 years, overall they appeared to value a spiritual perspective even more. This is not to say that they necessarily always consciously sought out a spiritual way of being at all times, the busyness of life pulled them away from it at times. Nevertheless, they did always come back to a center point that had a sense of spirituality to it. Nancy, now 61 spoke to this point, and discussed the different phases of her life, and moving in and out of times of more and less attention to spirituality. "I am going back to that place where I was ten years ago and focusing within... But I think that probably what guides my life professionally and personally...those principles and ethics and values [are] the same." Penny, who is also 60, explained that 10 years earlier when I interviewed her, she had come to new spiritual insights that were relatively new to her at the time of our interview, and stated, "When I talked to you, it was all just kind of broken open a year or two earlier, you know, and I was really swimming in it and now it's very intuited into my life." Over these past 10 years, she lived out and deepened the spiritual insights she had gained earlier. This was true for most participants: their spirituality had deepened but not changed much.

### *Making New Memory/Spiraling Into A Deepened Sense of Self*

Memory is powerful, and memory related to spirituality is even more powerful, because it seems to help people integrate a stronger and more integrated sense of self. And of course throughout our lives, we tend to revisit significant past events, particularly events that touch the core of our being that are related to our life process. Theologian and spiritual writer Frederick Buechner speaks to how this process works, and notes significant memory is more than simply

looking back on a past event, that significant memory is “a looking out into another kind of time altogether where everything that ever was continues not just to be, but to grow and change with the life that is in it still” (as cited in Wuthnow, 1999, p. 151). Many of these women talked about earlier memories that they had, but spoke specifically about how they’ve made new meaning of these memories that have “life in them still”. Shirley, an African American woman and community college professor, had talked about the significance of her grandmother and other women in organizing for civil rights in the 1950s and 1960s in her interview more than 10 years ago. In her interview in late 2009, she said that one of the things that struck her from rereading that interview, was the significance of these many women mentors: “They were great black women teachers who were into ‘lifting as we climb’, and one white woman who was also into on a similar mission. These women were important role models” and went on to discuss the significance of her grandmother in particular. She had also been present at her grandmother’s death about five years ago, had also become a doula (birth coach) since her last interview, and noted the intense similarities of birth and death, as she made further meaning of the births and deaths that she had been present for, and the fact that many people are afraid of these things and miss the powerful spiritual lessons that can be learned from them. “Lots of people are terrified of these things and are afraid of things like ghosts, and blood, and the whole issues of death, that often we can’t be open to them [spiritual experiences].”

She discussed the fact that in the 10 years since I interviewed her she went on various trips and as part of them explored “aspects of these traditional religions of the African Diaspora and Indigenous spiritualities as part of the journey” and talked about the significance of women in these spiritual traditions, with her experience of Bahia, Brazil with women in the Candomble tradition being particularly important. She said that some of these women reminded her of her grandmother and the women that raised her; memories of them have life in them still! While she embraces her African American cultural heritage, she also emphasized that her spirituality, culture, and identity is much bigger than can be “boxed”, and noted “I came to black consciousness in my 20s because of what was going on, but my sense of spirituality is bigger than that and is extremely vast. This vastness of the divine is huge.”

Most of these women discussed an expanded sense of identity, that is related to their cultural background, but is much more expansive than that. This is apparent in some of Shirley’s story above. Julia, now 58, and a Chicana who had just completed chemotherapy for breast cancer, also noted this expanded sense of her identity. She talked a lot about her Chicana identity in our 1999 interview. In our January 2010 interview she noted,

I have many cultures, and so it’s hard to—I think in terms of my ethnic culture, my family culture, it’s part of who I am, of course, or the things that I’ve learned and the ways of being that I’ve learned, but it’s not predominant in how I view myself. Because I have found that I have so many connections to other people who are different from myself, so that is not the main form, or primary form of identification, identifying with others, because it is just one of the things about me. So, in terms of my culture, my culture has embraced many different ways of being, or different cultures, and being Latino or being a person of color is just some of being a woman. There are just some aspects of it. It’s all part of who I am and, in that way, it feeds into my spirituality.

She has also now joined another cultural group that is also informing her identity: the culture of survivors of breast cancer, which also relates to her spirituality:

I’ve drawn on my spirituality to deal with my cancer and I think it’s grown. My spirituality has grown because of having cancer. ..I feel like I’m more in touch with the

sacred or not taking things for granted... I really had to slow down a lot and I think the lesson in that was that you can't take life for granted, that you have to appreciate everything: people and just everything out of blessing. And so I would go for walks, especially when I had the chemo in me. I had just gone through a bunch of chemo and I would go for walks and I would feel like I was walking slow motion but I was really focusing on each flower and people's gardens and the sky and the birds. It was really an experience, and that was like a spiritual experience, just going for a walk!

Finally, Julia did talk about aspects of her Catholic background that are important in spite of her ambivalence to many things about the Church. She referred back to reading the transcript of her interview 10 years earlier and also talked about the significance of her grandmother. "She taught me a lot of prayers in Spanish so when I started to pray the rosary, I learned and I relearned some prayers to do it all in Spanish, so I pray it in Spanish because it helps me feel connected to that part of, like say my grandmother, when she taught me how to pray in Spanish." In essence, Julia, like many of the women in this study, have continued to build on the power of memory to root themselves in a spiritual sense, but also to develop a more expanded sense of identity.

### *Definitions and Manifestations of Wisdom*

Many of the participants did discuss wisdom and what it means to them as they age, partly because I asked specifically about it. 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. Like Socrates, they appear to also have a sense of humility in that while they see themselves as having grown and developed and see their growth as intersecting with their spirituality. However, while they did give some interesting thoughts on wisdom, they were hesitant to see themselves as wise or own the label "wisdom" in regards to themselves, though most of them saw themselves as wiser than they once were. Two themes discussed here in relation wisdom are: listening to the "inner voice"; and love and interconnectedness.

*Listening to the "inner voice".* Many of the participants indicated that wisdom was the result not only of life experience, but also of listening with a more integrated sense of self and one's whole being. In general they saw themselves as better at being able to access one's internal sense of wisdom, by meditating, journaling, or cultivating some sense of spirit. Maureen for example, now 63 talked about that when she access this it sort of surprises her. "I never know quite of what to make of all this but nonetheless there it is." She explains: "I do have a kind of channeling process that happens to me in my journal writing when I contemplate something that is particularly troubling me; I will sometimes get a kind of a different inner voice that is very strong and it comes through with a lot of wisdom." The voice will say: 'no that is not what is happening; this is what is happening and this is what you need to do next.' Which in Siddha Yoga [her tradition] we would call that the 'inner guru'." Others described a meditation process that would aid them in their decisions that would be seen as more wise.

*"Love is a central factor."* Many of these women also talked about the importance of love and the recognition of the interconnectedness of everything as being part of wisdom. Anna, now 62, talked about the interconnection of love, spirituality, and wisdom:

Wisdom is a spiritual knowing. My spirituality is based on the notion that there are no separations in the universe. We are all interconnected across time and space and whatever other dimensions and matter that exists, existed. I am because we are, because everything is everything. Love is a central factor. I love my sons enough to let them find their path with me as a supporting person because I know that they have that moral center

and the trials they suffer will strengthen them in the long run. In some ways it's a gift to them to let them learn so they can add to the family [social] narrative. It is empowering to know that you are a part of the human journey, can shape it, add to it. Besides, I know I cannot control the world anyway, I am but a speck of the cosmos on a wonderful adventure for this material pulse of time, who am I to deny them the thrill of their pulse. It is so fleeting, this moment, held together and passed by the dreams and wonder of those before us. I am at peace with that.

She seemed to indicate that wisdom is also contextual; one is not “wise” in all aspects of life. She ended by saying in a somewhat humorous way: “On another note, wisdom is not all pervasive. There are some things I am not wise about. Never been really wise about men! Still something I have to learn!” Indeed, we all have things to learn.

### **Conclusion: More to the Journey**

There is more to the story than what can be explained in limited space, which has to do both with issues in doing narrative research and research across cultural borders. The process of narrating experience leads to the further development of identity. But it does so not only for the narrator/participant in doing narrative research; it can also have a similar effect in the narrative researcher, that can also lead to greater understanding, an ability to deal with the paradoxical nature of wisdom” the more we know, the more we know we don’t know. Ironically that is part of the wisdom paradox.

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