

## Spirituality in the Modern University

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Picture yourself in a meeting room of a college's University Center. Fifteen students are in small groups talking intently with one another. They are involved in one of a number of seminars designed to train Resident Assistants. Other seminars have included topics such as conflict management, sexual assault protocol, community building, fire safety, and numerous other subjects important to their roles as mother, father, peacekeeper, law enforcer, and counselor. So what is wrong with this picture? This particular seminar is being conducted at a state university and is entitled "Spirituality and You." It is being led by two campus ministers.

Responding to a request from the Assistant Director of the Office of Residence Life, David Hindman, the United Methodist Campus Minister, and I presented such a seminar at The College of William and Mary. This was an optional seminar presented in two identical sessions to the Resident Assistants. We also offered them the option of scheduling the seminar as a program for their residence halls.

"Spirituality and You" grew out of our conviction that, whether or not they would name it as such, spirituality is a priority for many of today's college students, but they need some direction to begin talking about spirituality in a focused manner. We felt that it was important for these college role models to consider their own spirituality and the spirituality of others as they prepare for their year as the only advisor many students will encounter.

What is spirituality anyway? In an unpublished paper, John D. Copenhaver, Jr. notes that, although spirituality has its roots in the Christian tradition, the term has become universal. He states that of the twenty-five volumes of *World Spirituality: An Encyclopedic History of the Religious Quest*, only three are devoted to Christianity, and that the series even includes a volume on nonreligious spirituality.<sup>1</sup> He notes that even among those who have studied Christian spirituality extensively there is debate over what it really means. Copenhaver quotes Carlos Eire who writes that "if claiming to

have read all that is written about spirituality makes one a braggart and a liar, then claiming to know how to define the subject makes one a fool.<sup>12</sup>

Students may not be able to define or identify the spirituality they embrace either, but it is our opinion that spirituality is a reality in their lives nevertheless, and that, by beginning to identify spirituality, and by providing a time in which there is permission to talk about it, students can begin owning the spirituality that is at the center of their lives and take some first steps toward cultivating a healthy spirituality while discussing this facet of life with their peers and other significant persons in their lives.

Obviously as Christians, our spirituality is centered in our relationship with Jesus Christ and the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives. During this seminar, David and I felt free to claim that. However, we made a conscious attempt not to build a hierarchy of spiritualities with ours at the top, for this was not an evangelistic seminar or even one with a specifically Christian focus. We did hope that any Christians present might feel empowered both to claim their spirituality as a Christian and to be free to see this as an acceptable and appropriate time to discuss its impact in their lives.

What follows is an outline of the fifty minute seminar.

**I. What to expect** - David and I began the seminar with a dialogue between the two of us to tell the students our assumptions for the seminar, what we anticipated that it would be and would not be.

**David:** This time is not going to be a sermon in which one of us tells you what we think you need to do or to be, a lot of shoulds, oughts or musts.

**Pete:** It is a time for you to consider, to explore, to think about your own spirituality.

**David:** It is not an effort at conversion or proselytizing

**Pete:** It is a safe place for you to share and talk about some of the deeper parts of yourself.

**David:** It is not explicitly Christian, even though both of us are Christians and have found in that tradition the means to define and to express our spirituality.

**Pete:** It is based on the assumption that there is an essential spiritual dimension to life which can be expressed in a variety of spiritualities.

**David:** It is not based on the assumption that every spirituality is healthy or "wholly," in the sense that it leads to wholeness; spiritualities are not value free.

**Pete:** It is an opportunity to consider what your spirituality is and how your spirituality can contribute toward your being a "whole" person. However it can also cause your life to be fragmented and conflicted as well.

**II. What is Spirit?** - To begin we felt it necessary to provide a foundation for our thoughts on spirituality. We felt a brief look at the word "spirit" would provide that foundation.

"If we are to look at spirituality we should begin by considering what spirituality is. To do so let's start with the word "spirit." In the Hebrew Scriptures "spirit" comes from the word, *ruah*, which originally meant wind or breath. The corresponding word in the New Testament, *pneuma*, has the same meaning. Thus, even as those particular Scriptures give a description of how we as persons came about, we are presented with a paradox: spirit is both within and without. In Genesis it is the wind that blows across the chaos and thus can be seen as a force of joy and exhilaration which pushes against a sail to move its boat across the water, but it can also be a wind of destruction that obliterates everything in its path. It is also named in Genesis as the life-giving breath which is breathed into the first persons, so that we can see it as something that is present within us every moment of our lives. As such, spirit is essential to life but something to which we pay no attention much of the time. Spirituality can be seen in the same ways: as life-giving, as moving us forward and as destructive."

**III. Reflection and Sharing** - Rather than just talking about the subject, we wanted students to acknowledge their own spirituality. Note cards and pencils were distributed for the next section.

"To consider one's spirituality, one must take the time and give oneself the permission to look inside oneself, to reflect on one's life. This should be a task which college encourages. But the irony is that many times there are so many demands on you that this essential task is frequently neglected. We want to move to a time in which you can begin to look inside yourselves.

As soft music is played, you will be given five minutes to record your thoughts on the following questions:

- What are your deep hungers?
- Who are you?
- What do you do?
- Who (not what) do you want to be?"

"Now we would like you to get in pairs and for ten minutes, discuss your time of reflection, using these questions:

- What did you discover?
- What did you hear that led you to see or think differently?
- What new insight or understanding did you gain?"

**IV. What Is Spirituality?** The students needed to have an idea of what we meant by spirituality. David used two sources from a paper he had written.

"Moving from the ideals that come from the concept of "spirit," let's consider what spirituality is. Paul Johnson presents the idea that spirituality is

. . .how I live at the center of who I am. I live at a center with an image of who I am, how I am embodied and is in touch with the concrete, and with work, a career, and a calling . . . I do not stand alone, but interact with others and am a part of several different communities. I feel strange toward or unfamiliar with, or am a companion with frailty and death. My spirituality is the way I live at my center and connect within myself those factors in my life.<sup>3</sup>

With this concept of spirituality one's own identity and how a person relates to himself or herself is important to his or her spirituality. One must know who one is. But spirituality is not based solely on myself, but also how I live in connection with the world.

Joan Chittister gives us the idea that "Spirituality is the way in which we express a living faith in a real world. Spirituality is the sum total of the attitudes and actions that define our life of faith."<sup>4</sup> Our spirituality then is the expression of who we are at our deepest levels, but also how we live our life out in our larger life."

We played "Any Dream Will Do" from *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* to illustrate the view that any spirituality is fine, but questioned that view. Using the example of those who were a part of the Third Reich, we noted that they had a spirituality which included the extermination of those they considered inferior. We concluded that the "spirits" that are in us and make up our spirituality may not be complementary; they can cause us to be conflicted or pulled apart. They can prevent wholeness. They need to be considered and not accepted a face value.

"We would like to hear from you now. Those of you who feel comfortable doing so, give us the benefit of your reflection and share the "spirits" that you found were present in your life and in the lives of those around you." (Their answers were recorded on butcher paper, and the group felt free to comment on them in a non-judging way). They were

#### First session

- discovered similar hungers - Who we are; how does life work?
- interconnected responses all over the place, but headed in the same direction.
  - hunger for love is a major issue - to love and to be loved.
  - what I'm working toward may not be what I truly want.
  - I want a peace about me in the busy-ness of college and life.
  - what I want to be may not be what others want.

### **Second session**

- how I think about myself and how others think about me
- tension between who and what I want to be - easy to slide into what
- draw on others as models of who I want to be.

Certainly there were no real surprises in the list and significant areas of concerns were shared. Although I was surprised at the small number of responses, I wondered if it were due to the relatively short amount of time given to reflect, a difficulty going deeply into their spirit, or a reluctance to share very personal information.

**V. Further Reflection** - Next the students were given the opportunity to name the part of life that encouraged and discouraged their spirituality.

"College is a time that encourages growth and maturing. But does it encourage your spirituality? Again with quiet music playing, reflect further on several other questions.

- What helps your deep hungers in being fed?
- What helps you to be who you truly are?
- But also, what hinders your deep hungers from being fed?
- What hinders you from being who you truly are?"

(They were again asked to share their answers in a format similar to before.) Their answers, in no particular order, were

### **First session**

- Being a woman
- Jesus Christ
- nature
- parents versus self
- self versus self
- world versus self
- society's expectations
- between persons
- treating others impacts ourselves
- being in touch with (my) spirituality
- not always available
- not an opportunity to think
- utilizing a variety of spiritualities
- time/place to be quiet and mindful (may happen in a variety of ways)
- all the things to do for a "whole life" can get in the way of wholeness.
- other people
- prayer

## Second session

- nature - what's around us
- relationships
- traditions - family, school, religious (seen as both positive and negative)
- postmodern
- materialism
- sleep deprivation
- tyranny of the present
- preoccupations - can't clear my mind
- balance - include a wide range of things
- get support from those like you ( and from those who are different)
- classes CAN help
- prayer and contemplation
- journal

I have wondered about the greater number of responses. Are students better able to identify their spiritualities' helps and hindrances because they are the same ones that affect their emotions, their relationships, their life goals?

Because of time limitations, this listing with comments marked the end of the seminar. As I have thought about the seminar in light of my ministry both to Christians and non-Christians, I have come to the conclusion that my ministry needs to be impacted in several ways.

1. Provide a similar seminar that is intentionally Christian. This would mean a spirituality with a stronger biblical basis and an in-depth discussion of the spiritualities in light of the biblical revelation. It would also be an ideal opportunity to present the traditional spiritual disciplines of Christianity.

2. Ask more questions. In many of our programs, we try very hard to provide the right answers, but in our haste we may be answering the wrong questions or questions that have never been asked. We need to ask more questions and encourage students to do the same. This was used by Jesus to force the disciples and others who approached him to consider their spirituality. We need to follow his example.

3. Encourage conversation with mature adults. Many college students have little interaction with these adults other than with a professor in a classroom setting. I have heard of one whose most significant adult relationship was with the housekeeper who cleaned his dormitory. In our programs we need to provide more opportunities for the building of relationships between college students and mature adults who can help them ask and answer the larger questions of life. Churches provide the greatest opportunity for this relationship building and many do so through student adoption programs.

4. Build more time for silence and reflection into programming. Students seldom have time for quiet and reflection. They have to go outside to

secluded places to get away from the noise. We pack retreats as full as possible with programming; we crowd worship with constant activity; we make prayer a time of all talking and no listening. Students need quiet to get in touch with the deeper side of their spirituality.

The main character in a favorite novel of mine notes that it took some time for his wife and him to discover the value in traveling on back roads where the pace is easier and the people friendlier.

"I've wondered why it took us so long to catch on. We saw it and yet we didn't see it. Or rather we were trained not to see it. Conned, perhaps, into thinking that the real action was metropolitan and all this was just boring hinterland. It was a puzzling thing. The truth knocks on the door and you say, "Go away I'm looking for the truth," and so it goes away."<sup>5</sup>

Many of our students are leading hectic lives looking for the truth but never realizing that the questions that can lead them there are inside them. Today's universities may be giving us the chance to join students in their search. At one time spirituality was at the center of the academy's reason for being. Perhaps we can be a part of returning our colleges and universities to their original purpose.

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<sup>1</sup>John D. Copenhaver, Jr., "Spirituality in the Curriculum: Danger or Opportunity?"

<sup>2</sup>Copenhaver, 3, citing Carlos M. N. Eire, "Major Problems in the Definition of Spirituality as an Academic Discipline" in *Modern Christian Spirituality: Methodological and Historical Essays*, Bradley Hanson, ed. (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990) p. 60.

<sup>3</sup>Paul Johnson, "Faith Stances, Imagination, and Campus Ministry," in *Faith Development in the Adult Life Cycle*, ed. Kenneth Stokes (New York: William H. Sadlier, Inc., 1983), 252.

<sup>4</sup>Joan Chittister, OSB, *Wisdom Distilled from the Daily: Living the Rule of St. Benedict Today* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1990), 4f.

<sup>5</sup>Robert M. Persig, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (New York: Bantam Books, 1974), 5-6.