

Equanimity and Spirituality

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The impetus for preparing this paper grew out of an extended series of conversations with a group of colleagues that has been discussing the concept of “spirituality,” its meaning, and its role in higher education. Recently the two of us reached a point where we agreed that one potentially useful way to approach the definitional problem would be to describe what a “spiritual” person or a person who is “highly developed spiritually” would be like. When we asked ourselves what personal qualities such a person would be likely to display, one of the first constructs that came to mind was “equanimity.”

These abstract musings have recently taken on a more concrete form in connection with a national study of college students’ spiritual development that is currently under way at UCLA’s Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) with support from the Templeton Foundation. The research team for this project elected to view the concept of spirituality in multidimensional terms. In effect, this decision assumes that spirituality is not a unitary construct, that it probably has several components, and that it can be manifest or expressed (and measured) in several different ways.

Measuring Equanimity

This multidimensional view was subsequently confirmed in a large-scale pilot survey where 3,700 college juniors were asked to respond to more than 150 short statements having to do with spirituality. Through a series of complex statistical analyses of the students’ responses to these statements, it was possible to identify 19 different subsets, each consisting of statements that cluster together. By “cluster” we mean a set of statements that students tend to answer in a similar way. Thus, if a student says that one of the statements in a cluster is an accurate self-descriptor, that student will tend to say that the other statements in that cluster are also accurate self-descriptors. Examples of the names that were assigned to these different “spiritual” dimensions or clusters included Spiritual Quest, Religious Engagement, Ecumenical Worldview, Charitable Involvement, Compassionate

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Self-concept, and so forth. A cluster called Equanimity” included six statements. Two of the six statements were preceded by the following instructions: “Since entering college, how often have you...”

- Been able to find meaning in times of hardship
- Felt at peace/centered

The other four statements were preceded by “Indicate the extent to which each of the following describes you:”

- Feeling good about the direction in which my life is headed
- Seeing each day, good or bad, as a gift
- Being thankful for all that has happened to me
- Feeling a strong connection with all humanity

The first statement, perhaps more than any of the other five, best captures the traditional dictionary meaning of equanimity, which typically refers to one’s capacity to “see the silver lining” during difficult or trying times. Many of the other statements suggest a more general sense of psychological or spiritual well-being and optimism. The last item, in particular, suggests a transcendent or “world-centric” sense of self. In spiritual or religious terms, we might describe a person who strongly endorses all six statements as one who experiences life as a “state of grace.” From still another perspective, the six “Equanimity” items appear to capture some of the qualities that the “perennial philosophy” associates with “higher” states of consciousness: calm, peacefulness, centeredness, self-transcendence, and compassion. Note that Equanimity, as defined by statements such as these, also has a substantial affective component: “felt at peace,” “feeling good,” “felt a strong connection.”

Exemplars

In trying to capture the particular qualities that characterize this conception of Equanimity (or of any other complex human trait, for that matter), it can sometimes be helpful to bring to mind actual people who in your mind personify that quality. For us one contemporary person who comes immediately to mind is the Dalai Lama, the exiled religious leader of Tibet.¹

While the Dalai Lama almost always seems to us to exhibit great wisdom, honesty, curiosity, and wit, we believe that most people who have heard this man speak or spent any time with him are immediately struck by his calmness, serenity, and seeming imperturbability. This is not to say, of course, that a person who displays such a high level of Equanimity never experiences emotional conflicts. Indeed, the Dalai Lama often speaks and writes about the anger that he has felt in the face of the invasion and occupation of his home country by the Chinese government, and of the ways in which he has attempted to channel this anger in productive ways.

Interestingly, research on long-term activists who feel “a strong connection with all humanity” indicates that channeling anger and balancing conflicting elements within oneself is central to sustaining meaningful, committed lives in the face of adversity. Not all such activists feel at peace and centered but it is clear that those who speak of spirituality as central to their lives, in fact, do. Other contemporary exemplars of equanimity that come to mind would include Aung Saan Suu Kyi,² the leader of the nonviolent opposition to one of the world’s leading regimes of repression and corruption in Burma; Nelson Mandela³ and Desmond Tutu,⁴ the dual icons of South African liberation; Jimmy Carter,⁵ the mediator of one of the most remarkable political compromises of the past 50 years, the Camp David Peace Accords; and Coretta Scott King,⁶ who has worked with singular dignity to carry on the legacy of her late husband. All of these leaders except Coretta Scott King were, like the Dalai Lama, honored with the Nobel Peace Prize, and King was clearly in deep partnership with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. when he was so honored. The biographers of such people have observed that they, like the Dalai Lama, all exude grace and wisdom under pressure and have displayed the capacity to re-channel anger and, especially, to find the silver lining of possibility where others see bleak hopelessness.

To observe the personalities of such a list of exemplars not only suggests what mature equanimity might look like, but also serves to underscore what it is not. For example, a casual reading of the six defining statements (above) from the HERI/Templeton project might tempt one to equate “feeling centered/at peace” or “seeing each day, good or bad, as a gift” with complacency, placidity, unresponsiveness, or denial in times of adversity. Our exemplars were obviously neither passive nor in denial about the adversities that motivated them to become activists. We hasten to add, however, that while equanimity can certainly be accompanied by activism, it is a very different thing. We would argue instead that it is the peace and calm that is typically associated with equanimity that allows the person to channel anger or frustration into positive action. There are, we fear, far too many would-be reformers and activists who compromise their credibility

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and effectiveness because they lack the centeredness and composure that goes with equanimity. People like Nelson Mandela and the Dalai Lama were clearly angry and frustrated with what was happening in their home countries, but it was their sense of equanimity that enabled them to act upon these powerful emotions with dignity, determination, logic, and passion.

Internal Processes

While it may be tempting to look at Equanimity in the limited framework of external behaviors such as composure and calmness, we believe that it's equally important to think about this construct in terms of the internal psychological processes involved. The biographies of our exemplars, not to mention those of countless other contemporaries known for their wisdom and courage, reveal a critical role for "making meaning." In one of the most widely read books of the past 50 years, the late psychiatrist Viktor Frankl recounts that most horrific of experiences, trying to survive in a Nazi death camp.⁷ His reflection on his own process of maintaining humanity when its qualities were most under siege led him to develop an existential therapeutic approach founded on the assumption that making meaning is what makes us human. Most of his work with his patients involved supporting them in the search for the "silver lining," the meaning they could find in their suffering that would enable them to reframe their situation and persist with their lives. This approach was never about denying or masking but always about locating the touchstone of possibility that created fresh meaning. In a sense, what Frankl discovered was that being "able to make meaning in times of hardship" provides the clearest evidence that the quest for meaning lies at the heart of the human spirit. In short, equanimity involves the capacity to frame and reframe meaning under stress while maintaining a sense of deep composure and centeredness.

Given that the current generation of students can look forward to life in a complex world which is becoming increasingly stressful, it may well be that the quality of their lives and of the contributions they are able to make to the world they live in will ultimately be determined by their capacity to make meaning in the face of ambiguity, uncertainty, and change and, in particular, in the face of dislocating challenges. One key question in this regard is how meaning making equips one to deal with markers of stress such as the fight or flight syndrome. We have already suggested that in our adult exemplars there is strong evidence of a meaning making capacity that includes pause and reframing. Pause is extremely useful in that it permits one to dwell with a challenge or problem rather than going with the first

response, which typically assumes the defensive posture of either lashing out (fight) or exiting (flight). In the case of the Dalai Lama we see someone who has determined to analyze and find solutions to the situation of Tibetan diaspora rather than taking it personally—even though the occupation has, at times, been posed in the most personal terms by the Chinese authorities. We know from his own account that the process he went through was one of pause and reframing, i.e., transcending his immediate reaction (which was more personal and visceral) and re-channeling that energy into reframing the problem in terms that take into account the partisan perceptions of his opponents.

A similar process seems to be at work in the lives of most of our other exemplars. An especially clear example is the way in which Nelson Mandela was able to reframe years of struggle (including his position as head of the African National Congress's organization of freedom fighters, the Spear of the Nation) into a collaborative strategy that led directly to the end of Apartheid and the advent of free elections in South Africa. In a profound sense, he, like the other exemplars, was able to transcend personal grievances by imagining the larger context in which his actions would be taking place. In this way, Mandela eventually moved away from the threat of violence to an explicitly nonviolent stance as the ultimate price for securing a democratic government based on equal voting rights for all South Africans.

Many people can and do reframe their understanding of things as a key aspect of meaning making, but the exercise of Equanimity involves a much more complex process of pause, reflection, and self-transcendence. The ability to rise above one's immediate emotional reactions can lead to a type of reframing that opens possibilities for constructive action that may otherwise be foreclosed if the fight or flight response carries the day. This is not to imply that one might never fight or flee—recall the Dalai Lama's departure from Tibet—but that these responses would be of a more examined and less reflexive nature than would occur without pause, reflection, and the search for meaning.

Do the items in the Equanimity scale suggest still other internal processes at work? Certainly all our exemplars display “a strong connection with all humanity” in their lives and work. And while some may be more inclined than others to be “thankful for all that has happened,” all with the exception of Mandela are associated in significant ways with religion, and Mandela's autobiography reveals a man with an extraordinarily rich interior life. It thus comes as little surprise that the ongoing empirical research in the HERI/Templeton study shows a strong association of equanimity not just with spirituality, but also with religiousness.

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While it may be difficult to imagine that our exemplars have all consistently “felt good” about the directions in which their lives have headed, all have rebounded from significant setbacks, indicating a capacity to find ways to reset their lives on courses that they could feel good about. Whether or not they “see each day, good or bad, as a gift,” each of them lives and works from a sense of calling that might best be described as “authentic” in that few people would question their sincerity. Those who have personally known our exemplars speak of their “presence,” of the sense that they are fully engaged, connecting on a deep level with all they encounter. We might see the seeds of such a sense of mature “presence” in the feeling of “seeing each day, good or bad, as a gift.”

Equanimity and Spiritual Development

We believe that the construct of Equanimity can be further understood by situating it in the larger context of stages of consciousness as set forth in the Perennial Philosophy or the Great Chain of Being. Such “stage” theories generally agree that highest stages of consciousness are “transpersonal” in nature, stages where one begins to identify oneself with a larger (“world-centric”) reality. At these higher stages, as one increasingly ceases to identify with a “separate self,” responses to life challenges naturally begin to take into account the “greater good,” in contrast to the egocentric and ethnocentric perspectives that characterize one’s typical response to stress that we expect to encounter at lower stages of consciousness. Clearly, such transpersonal perspectives are conducive to the use of pause and reflection that we have postulated as fundamental to Equanimity.

Equanimity and the College Student

Assuming that our exemplars display a highly evolved and mature equanimity, what implications might their models suggest for what is going on with equanimity among the undergraduates surveyed in the HERI/Templeton project? As it turns out, a student’s degree of Equanimity, as measured by the six-item scale described above, is related to a number of other qualities that might also characterize our exemplars. Equanimity is, for example, most strongly correlated ($r = .55$) with another cluster labeled “Spirituality,” which is basically a measure of the extent to which the student sees him/herself in spiritual terms. Other highly correlated clusters include the student’s degree of religious commitment ($r = .53$) and religious engagement ($r = .47$). The spiritual and religious inclinations of students who obtain high

scores on Equanimity are further revealed in the substantial correlations of Equanimity with several other variables: “believing in the sacredness of all life” ($r = .46$), “feeling connected to God/higher power” ($r = .53$), and “seeking opportunities to grow spiritually” ($r = .45$).

Of particular relevance to the lives of our exemplars are the substantial positive correlations of Equanimity with the student’s level of social activism ($r = .43$) and degree of charitable involvement ($r = .38$). In the same vein, students with high scores on Equanimity also tend to value “becoming a community leader” ($r = .47$), “reducing pain and suffering in the world” ($r = .39$), “becoming a more loving person” ($r = .42$), and “improving the human condition” ($r = .41$). One would certainly expect our exemplars to embrace most, if not all, of these same values. It may also be worth noting that students with high scores on Equanimity also tend to show relatively high levels of self-esteem ($r = .31$) and relatively low levels of psychological distress ($r = -.19$).

Does Equanimity relate in any way to the student’s experience in college? Remarkably, Equanimity shows a modest (but highly significant statistically) positive association with the student’s college grade-point-average ($r = .21$). And this relationship remains statistically significant even after one controls for the potentially biasing effect of the student’s secondary school grades and admissions test scores. Equanimity is also modestly related to the student’s expressed level of satisfaction with college ($r = .35$). These findings suggest that Equanimity may contribute not only to students’ academic performance but also to their level of satisfaction with the overall college experience.

Conclusion

Given that Equanimity appears to be not only of value to college graduates but also highly relevant to the lives of our adult exemplars, it clearly merits further exploration, both as a more explicit outcome of undergraduate education and as a developmental trait with significance that extends well beyond the undergraduate years. There is at least some indication that traits such as Equanimity can be learned.⁸ But important questions of approach first need to be addressed. Should we try to teach Equanimity directly? Or is it better discovered and owned by the individual student and nurtured through exercise and coaching? Given that the conversation about spirituality in higher education has been gaining momentum, the possibility of drafting Equanimity as a candidate goal for undergraduate development could drive this conversation to a new level of specificity.

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Notes

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3. N. Mandela, *The Long Walk to Freedom* (Boston: Little Brown, 1994).
4. L.D. Hulley, L. Kretzschmar and L.L. Pato, *Archbishop Tutu Prophetic Witness to South Africa* (BHB International, Inc., 1997).
5. D. Brinkley, *The Unfinished Presidency: Jimmy Carter's Journey Beyond the White House* (New York: Viking Press: 1998).
6. C.S. King, *My Life with Martin Luther King, Jr.*, revised ed. (New York: Henry Holt & Company, Inc., 1993).
7. V. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1981).
8. M. Seligman, *Learned Optimism* (New York: Pocket Books, 1998). V. Frankl, 1981.