

An Interview with Claire Gaudiani

Recently, noted author and former President of Connecticut College, Claire Gaudiani, shared with us her reflections on the role of spirituality in higher education leadership.

The interview was conducted by Kyle McJunkin July 9, 2004.

Dr. Gaudiani, as the former President of a college, how do you feel talking about spirituality?

Like most people, I am uncomfortable talking about spirituality. Often people in leadership positions are seen as the sum total of what they do. Sharing our spirituality would reveal who we *be* or at least who we are trying to be, not just what we do. Spirituality is different from speaking about religion. Our spirituality is much more personal, reveals our inner selves, our minds and souls. Leaders, especially college presidents are subject to criticism from many directions, so the tendency is for us to avoid sharing the depths of our personal selves. Even though it sometimes feels awkward, I have always felt it was important to share a bit about my spiritual life in the right circumstances.

Can you tell me a little bit about how spirituality affects the decisions of college presidents?

For me, my own spirituality helped me keep myself in perspective and hold myself accountable for the virtues I admire. Justice, self-discipline, and generosity hold particular importance for me as an individual and as the one leading a community. I felt I needed to embody these values and help the college become more just, more disciplined, and more generous. Of course, it is important but dangerous to have ideals and even more dangerous to reveal them. None of us is perfect, so when we fail after revealing our ideals, we enable others to be even more critical and we may discourage those who want to believe in us. Self-reflection supports people who want their spiritual lives to influence their decisions.

During my 13 years as a college president, I had a routine for the first seven or eight years where I actually put aside a 15-minute portion of each day, in which I wrote in my calendar the name "Clarence." It was the name of a Jesuit priest, who I had gone to speak with about leadership and spirituality in July 1988 just as I was beginning my presidency. He told me that one of the most important things that you'll lose when you become a leader is the time to meditate and think about yourself and God and about the spiritual qualities of your service. He was right, of course.

Eventually when this College's fundraising campaign started, I lost my Clarence time. But, I found that setting aside time had really worked for me. Spirituality supports leaders, who are so often on 'output' and have so little time to reflect.

Another way spirituality serves is to keep a leader in a larger context—a context where your major goal is not a certain sum, a particular campaign goal, or a good meeting with the trustees. Your goal is to do good and be a source of justice and peace. You are conscious, if you lead a robust spiritual life, of a larger universe, in which you and your work is a small piece. Keeping that context can go a long way in helping a leader both modulate and animate their work more appropriately. What I mean by this is that sometimes work can get so heavy that you can become 'flat' and less animated. It is easy to become worn out or worn down by people and things. This is not good because a leader is responsible to help animate and enable the people around her, but sometimes reality works against that.

Other times you can get so animated that you really become full of yourself and become almost onanistic in the energy you put into achieving goals—goals you keep saying are the goals for the institutions, but in actuality they are not community goals, but private ones. That's because you've become your own universe and your own God. This is a terrible misplacement of leadership. So, the struggle for leaders is not just to do things, but it is to be the kind of person that one hopes to be. I needed my spiritual life to keep me in a larger context so that I could see both how small the college and I were in God's universe and how important our work was in that universe. There was a balance that spirituality called me to, even when I failed to fulfill it as well as I had hoped to. It created a compass for my journey.

How do you presently nourish your spiritual life? Is the Clarence 15-minute meditation a part of your life now?

When I started the book that I came to Yale to do, I put my Clarence time back on my calendar so that the ideas of that dear Jesuit were still with me. I can't say that I do it every single day, but almost everyday I've set the time aside. I am trying to help myself pray better and reflect better—to live more deeply in my spiritual space. I begin by reading the Psalms that are said in the Divine Office. The Divine Office are the daily prayers that

Catholic priests and nuns say. The psalms are also linked to the Church's liturgical calendar and to the seasons and the celebration of the saints. The prayers are different everyday, so over the course of six weeks they present all 150 Psalms. It's a wonderful practice that has allowed me to meditate on the relationship between what is said in the Psalms and prayers and what I am doing in my life, what I am striving for, and recovering from—and where I have failed myself and others. I can embrace life on a daily basis and maybe, eventually grow in the virtues I prize.

Bringing the discussion back to spirituality and leadership, can you describe some of the research that you've been involved with in this area?

I finished my book called, *The Greater Good: How Philanthropy Drives the American Economy and Can Save Capitalism*, and now I've spent this past year speaking about the book around the country. As part of the research for that book, I did a good deal of work on the influence of spirituality on generosity. As it turns out, cultures that put a great focus on spirituality developed a strong connection to generosity as a drive to care for their fellow human beings. The teaching of the great rabbi, Maimonides, has had a major influence in modern times. The spiritual call of the Judeo-Christian testaments to love your neighbor has helped to shape our democracy.

In a wonderful book, called *Poverty and Leadership in the Later Roman Empire*, Peter Brown, the author, lays out the relationship between the late days of the Roman Empire and the influence of the early Christian bishops on the social responsibility of taking care of the poor. In short order, this responsibility became an emblem of the importance of wealthy families—not just to spend more and have better parties—but actually to be able to have themselves known as people who cared for the poor. The highest accolade was to etch into your tomb decoration the phrase "lover of the poor." This new attitude was brought about by the energy and activity of the early Roman bishops, who drew the people to a spirituality that their culture had not included in the same sort of way. This, of course, is the teaching in the Judeo-Christian tradition of "loving your neighbor as yourself"—the tradition of justice and generosity. With this theme in mind, my book was about the degree to which spiritually inspired generosity drives economic prosperity.

Do you see generosity as a product of or an aspect of spirituality?

That's a good question. I would say it is probably both. It certainly is an aspect of spirituality; not only generosity in the physical sense of giving things away in places where you feel there is a need, but also the generosity embedded in spirituality that calls you to spend yourself for others, to put yourself in a context that is not solely focused on yourself. As a leader, or as a wealthy person, you have the capacity to just rush past others and assert your self-ness. Spirituality tells us that this behavior is not appropriate and doesn't

work in the long run. So, when you are being generous at a soul level, you are making a commitment to keep yourself in a larger context where you see yourself as a servant of others rather than the one who is served.

In addition to that idea of spirituality, many religious traditions outline or model types of spiritual and religious leadership. One of these could be the selfless and generous model that you just spoke about. Are there any other examples, and if there are, are they helpful, or appropriate, in a higher education environment?

I think besides the service leadership we just spoke about, another aspect of spirituality that serves leadership is peace. One of the goals of spirituality is the achievement of inner peace and that is more associated with eastern spirituality, such as Buddhism and Confucianism and even Hindu spirituality. We, as a Western culture, have a great deal to learn from eastern spirituality.

Thomas Merton, who is one of the spiritual leaders that I most appreciate, was trying to make exactly that connection between western meditation and eastern meditation before he was killed in India. We really need to study much more carefully the spirituality of eastern faiths and ask how we can be taught to seek an inner peace that could shape even the striving in our leadership.

Do you see the college or university environment as nurturing a student or administrator's spiritual life in a way that would allow them to develop their leadership ability and style?

No. College tends not to nurture spiritual life. I think that in most secular institutions developing a spiritual life is suspected as being somehow strange or suspect. That is too bad because a spiritual life can help people work and live better. A college is a good place for people from different religious traditions, or those from no religion, to help each other deepen their spiritual lives. In fact, that is what some of us did at Connecticut College. We had a group that included everyone from the President and the VP for Development, to the janitorial staff, faculty and students. We would gather once a week in the chapel at 8:00 a.m. Each person would take a turn leading a session and distributing spiritual reading that appealed to him or her. The person would talk about the passage briefly. Then, we would sit together and meditate on its meaning. The person would then make a few concluding remarks.

It was prayerful and meditative; it was Clarence time. We found the experience very restorative, especially if someone was going through a personal ordeal of some sort. With the acknowledgement that we all lived in a larger universe that included intellect and body and soul, it was our time to share and nourish one another. I think it is possible to share this kind of experience in a community and have it be quite open. I know that our effort

made some people nervous—not any one in the group—but people not connected to what we were doing.

If you had chance to direct research in this area, or the ability to direct people to write more about the intersection of spirituality and leadership, what would you want them to focus on?

The search for emotional intelligence contributed to a deeper understanding of human intelligence and accomplishment. I believe we need to study spiritual intelligence. I think the influence of spirituality on physical, emotional and mental well-being will be found to be significant. I also suspect that the force of spirituality will be found to extend the imagination and the capacity for virtuous behavior. We need serious research to investigate these and related issues.

I would like to see the field of psychology take up spirituality and explore it in more depth. Psychology needs to conduct even more research on wellness, optimism, and positive communities. What enables the human spirit to prevail in the most awful of circumstances? How is it that people, like Elie Weisel, can emerge to write as he writes? I think a great deal of the answer depends on his being spiritual—having a relationship with the one he envisions is his God, a being who loves him, who is beyond the immediate. It would be fascinating to see the effect of spirituality on psychological development, like the working being done on the effect of spirituality on physical healing. In my own field I would be very interested in seeing research on spirituality and literature. The pioneer of this kind of teaching method was Robert Coles. In the social sciences, I think we need to see how spirituality affects economic growth and the stability of social systems, both rural and urban, for good and for ill.

Dr. Gaudiani, thank you for sharing your thoughts with me this morning.

Thank you.

*Claire L. Gaudiani is currently a Senior Research Scholar at the Yale Law School where she has completed a book entitled *The Greater Good: How Philanthropy Saves American Capitalism*. This book addresses a wide audience with stories from American history, data and survey results that illustrate the book's thesis: that Americans are not generous because we are rich, but rich because we are generous.*

Dr. Gaudiani served for 13 years as President of Connecticut College. Under her leadership from 1988-2001, Connecticut College quintupled its endowment and applications for admission rose a total of 40 percent over the last five years. Dr. Gaudiani is also the author of six books and monographs and more than 80 articles. She is a frequent speaker both nationally and internationally on topics related to education, philanthropy, ethics, and the role of colleges in civil society.