

Education as Transformation: History of a Movement

By Peter Laurence

Early development

"I came here because I knew that a movement was starting," declared Cheryl Keen of Antioch College at the first national gathering sponsored by Education as Transformation in 1998. According to Victor Kazanjian, Dean of Religious and Spiritual Life at Wellesley College, "This movement is about awakening the desire for wholeness that lies deep in every human heart." And Diana Chapman Walsh, president of Wellesley College, announced that "Our task is to envision a whole new place for spirituality in education." This is the story of that movement, a partial history at best.

This particular stream of history began in late 1996, when a survey was sent to approximately 650 chaplains and campus ministers throughout the United States to determine whether or not religious diversity among students in higher education was on the rise. Seventy-four percent of the respondents said that it was, and many indicated that programs to address that diversity, where they did exist, were less than adequate.

As a result, a few interested individuals came together to develop a project that might help colleges and universities better address the needs of a religiously diverse student population. The first project team included representatives from such august institutions as Brown University, Dartmouth College, Harvard University, Princeton University, Wellesley College, and Yale University. During the team's first year of activity, an interesting concept became a recurrent theme in the deliberations. A significant number of students identified themselves as "not religious but spiritual," having little or no connection with a religious tradition but wanting to explore spirituality outside of the traditional religious institutions. Consequently, it was determined that the project would address both religious pluralism and spirituality. As plans developed, a consultation was scheduled at Brown University to generate specific activities for the project. Seventy-eight representatives from 27 different colleges, universities and related organizations came together to discuss four focusing questions:

- (1) Should educational institutions address the increasing religious diversity on campuses today?
- (2) What obstacles lie in the way of developing new models and strategies to support religious diversity on campuses nationwide?
- (3) Should colleges and universities articulate a spiritual component in the mission of their educational institution? And, do the potentials of religious pluralism insist that we ask this question in new ways?
- (4) Is spirituality a web that interconnects educational initiatives such as college student values, moral and ethical development, experiential education, health and wellness, and community service?

The consultation developed a long list of recommendations, the foremost of which was to hold a national event focused on the issues of religious pluralism and spirituality in higher education, and so *Education as Transformation: Religious Pluralism, Spirituality and Higher Education* was born.

The national gathering, held at Wellesley College in September 1998, drew over 800 participants from more than 250 institutions, including 28 college and university presidents, 210 faculty, 170 administrators, 205 students, 112 religious life professionals, and 83 alumni/ae, trustees and representatives of related organizations. As people entered the large tent on the Wellesley campus for the first time they expressed one common reaction, "I had no idea that so many people were interested in this topic!"

Emergence of activities

Interest grew in the next few years as the Education as Transformation project developed its activities. Colleges, universities and independent secondary schools began to invite the project's staff to provide consulting services related to their institution's particular programmatic interests and needs. The Peter Lang Publishing company offered to publish the proceedings of the national gathering in a book that was released in 2000 as a series of essays under the title, *Education as Transformation: Religious Pluralism, Spirituality, and a New Vision for Higher Education in America*. Interest in that book prompted the publisher to create an entire new series called "Studies in Education and Spirituality," which currently has four books in print and five more in preparation.

Over the years, project staff and associates have provided keynote addresses and workshops on religious pluralism and spirituality in higher education at conferences of national professional associations. Those associations have gradually begun to incorporate elements of the topic into their conference agendas. The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) has created a new focus on religious pluralism as part of their diversity initiatives. The American Association for Higher Education (AAHE) developed a track in its conferences on Faculty Roles and Rewards called "Toward Greater Connectedness and New Meanings" in which Education as

Transformation has presented a series of workshops on "Scholarship and Spirituality." Since April, 2003, the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) has partnered with the California Institute of Integral Studies (CIIS) to produce a series of three conferences on education and spirituality. Earlier this year the Center for the Study of Values in College Student Development at Florida State University sponsored its 14th annual Institute on College Student Values, this time on the topic, "Soul Searching: Trends and Patterns in College Student Spirituality."

In the meantime Education as Transformation has co-sponsored its own series of biennial conferences. In 2000 it collaborated with the Isenberg School of Management at the University of Massachusetts Amherst to produce a conference on "Going Public with Spirituality in Work and Higher Education." In 2002, it worked with the Self Knowledge Symposium to hold "Inward Bound," at North Carolina State University, its first conference intended primarily for students. In August 2004 it will co-sponsor its first international conference, "Creating New Visions for Education," with Blue Sky Associates, the Guerrand-Hermes Foundation for Peace, and Peaceful Schools International. Hosted by the Pearson Peacekeeping Centre in Nova Scotia, this conference is again intended primarily for students, this time from around the world.

Parallel Tracks

No one organization is completely responsible for a movement. While a growing number of individuals and organizations are involved in this phenomenon, two are notable. At about the same time that Education as Transformation was forming, the Fetzer Institute was beginning to host a series of discussions on "Sustaining Authenticity, Wholeness, and Self Renewal in Higher Education." A distinguished group of educators gathered over the years at the Institute to explore this topic, and eventually became an independent entity as the Initiative for Authenticity and Spirituality in Higher Education (IASHE), announcing its formation at the AAC&U/NASPA/CIIS conference on "Spirituality and Learning: Redefining Meaning, Value, and Inclusion" in April, 2003. At that same conference, another related organization was introduced as the Community for Integrative Learning and Action (CILA) by David K. Scott, former chancellor of the University of Massachusetts Amherst.

Since one of the qualities of spirituality most commonly accepted is a sense of connectedness, or an overcoming of fragmentation, the members of these three distinct organizations have agreed to work together to achieve the following purposes:

- (1) To explore, identify and develop concepts, models and strategies that can move higher education toward becoming a more authentic, integrative and transformational enterprise.
- (2) To explore ways and means that can address the fragmentation both of knowledge and of institutions in higher education.
- (3) To explore how spirituality and contemplative practices can:

- a. Inform and enrich learning, discovery and effective action;
 - b. Foster activities that promote the values of justice, wisdom and compassion;
and
 - c. Address the needs of the whole student, the academic community, and society at large
- (4) To encourage the development of a network of individuals and organizations nationally and internationally that are engaged in the exploration of spirituality in higher education.

Future Directions

A significant turning point in the movement has been the release of preliminary findings by the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA for their study of "Spirituality in Higher Education." Not only have these findings begun to validate the work that all of us have been doing in these early stages, but they have greatly enlarged the scope of that work. Based on this and other research, future directions for Education as Transformation include:

- Continued collaboration with IASHE and CILA, and other members of the spirituality in higher education network
- Collaboration with the Forge Institute to prepare a course for colleges and universities on *Spiritual Development in a Diverse Society: Theory and Practice*.
- A new program emphasis on religious activities that affect student life
- A project on developing student leadership around issues of religion and spirituality
- The development of faculty conversations on topics of meaning, purpose and connection

We look forward to continually meeting new colleagues and partners in the work. For additional information about Education as Transformation, please see our website at www.educationastransformation.org.