

Lessons from a Campus' Compassionate Dialogues

By Estella Gutierrez-Zamano

Nearly five thousand young adults fill a venue and eagerly anticipate what awaits them on stage. On the day that tickets were made available, every student ticket was dispensed to a lucky recipient. A rock concert? A rare chance to see a popular reality show? No. On Friday, April 16, 2004, the University of California Irvine (UCI) hosted a visit from His Holiness the XIV Dalai Lama [\(1\)](#). Students from all walks of life and all levels of the educational continuum convened to hear the Dalai Lama speak about peace, compassion, and ethical leadership [\(2\)](#).

The visit represented more than an isolated appearance at the campus. When UCI's Vice Chancellor of Student Affairs Manuel Gómez and Nawang Phutsong, a long-time colleague and friend from neighboring California State University Fullerton, submitted a proposal to the Dalai Lama inviting him to come to the UCI campus, they always had something comprehensive in mind [\(3\)](#). They wanted to acknowledge the different teaching, research, and service activities already taking place at the Irvine campus, as well as bring together students, business executives [\(4\)](#), and community members interested in the issues of ethics, compassion, and social responsibility.

“Compassion into Action”

After the Dalai Lama's visit, each of the major participants agreed that the dialogues should be ongoing and that follow-up activities should embody and extend the ideas shared by and with His Holiness [\(5\)](#). For UCI, a scholarship program bearing His Holiness' namesake was created as an honorarium [\(6\)](#). The university has other service-oriented scholarships, but what distinguishes the XIV Dalai Lama Endowed Scholarship from its predecessors is its emphasis on intellectual achievement, actual community engagement or service, and embodiment of the ideals, “honesty, integrity, fairness, and compassionate service to others.”

Although the Dalai Lama's day-long visit took place more than two years ago, I recently had an opportunity to speak with four key people at UCI who provided me with more insight into the Dalai Lama's visit and the scholarship program created in his honor. I met with Dr. Manuel Gómez, Vice Chancellor of Student Affairs, Leslie Millerd Rogers, Director of Student Affairs Communications, Lori Warmington, a community peace builder and long-time educational supporter of the Irvine campus, and Rajiv Ramdeo, a XIV Dalai Lama Endowed Scholar. My main interest in speaking to each of them was to learn more about the Dalai Lama's visit and how it was connected to the campus' inaugural 2006 XIV Dalai Lama Endowed Scholarship. My hope was to share with our newsletter readership a real-life example of how contemplative reflection and compassionate leadership are being acknowledged at a secular, research university.

Six Critical Factors

Before my visit to the UCI campus, I posed the following questions: "Why did this happen at this particular campus?" "What does this scholarship program represent?" After meeting Millerd Rogers, Vice Chancellor Gómez, Warmington, and Ramdeo, I believe that six critical factors worked in confluence to make the Dalai Lama's visit and the sense of collective momentum left in its wake possible. I do not believe that these six factors are the exclusive domain of UCI, but rather hope that sharing them can help key players at other colleges and universities to foster and acknowledge compassion and ethical leadership in their students, faculty members, staff, and educational supporters.

Dream the possible dream

Manuel Gómez, UCI's Vice Chancellor of Student Affairs, and Nawang Phutsong, C.S.U. Fullerton Education Professor, had a vision that included the Dalai Lama but did not rest solely on the Dalai Lama. Gómez and Phutsong recognized the Dalai Lama's ability to engage people in the pressing issues facing the world community. They recognized that he could galvanize a large assemblage of people to reflect and act on promoting peace and ending suffering. Thus, the proposal that Gómez and Phutsong submitted to His Holiness always situated his visit to the UCI campus within a larger framework of activities that the event sought to highlight and instigate.

While I did not have an opportunity to meet Nawang Phutsong, my meeting with Manuel Gómez confirmed that he dares to dream the *possible* dream. The Dalai Lama is a world-renowned peace activist. He is a Nobel Peace Prize winner. He has led efforts to develop meaningful interfaith dialogues and has communicated the importance of

developing a more peaceful world. He is a widely respected spiritual leader. For Gómez and Phutsong, there always existed the possibility that His Holiness respectfully would decline their invitation. However, they had enough belief in the idea of what the Dalai Lama's visit could represent and catalyze to proceed with developing and submitting a proposal. It would have been easy (and understandable) to conceive of inviting the Dalai Lama but being overcome by doubt and retracting the idea before it could crystallize. Vice Chancellor Gómez had doubt, but he decided to entertain the risk: "[W]e thought it a little bit ambitious. We thought he'd choose one [component of the day], but he said he would do all of it...Part of the attraction for the Dalai Lama was that we had some traction, some plans, and that His Holiness' visit was going to be a stimulus for activities that were already being planned and underway and so would continue."

The Dalai Lama's acceptance to speak at UCI resulted in a flurry of activities during the seven-month interim between his acceptance and actual visit. Fortunately, Vice Chancellor Gómez and Leslie Millerd Rogers, the latter of whom orchestrated the operational aspects of His Holiness' visit, discovered that the inclusion of the Dalai Lama in the event made people want to participate. What once may have seemed like a lofty, fantastical wish actually was a *possible* dream fueled by collective interest, momentum, and support.

There's a small "i" in "collegial"

It probably is hard to believe that I encountered any difficulty in the context of my visit to UCI to learn more about the Dalai Lama's appearance and the scholarship program created in his honor. After making an initial inquiry to visit the campus, I heard very quickly from Leslie Millerd Rogers, UCI's Director of Student Affairs Communications. We spoke briefly on the phone, and she made arrangements only a few days later inviting me to the campus the following week with a full itinerary of interviews.

"Where did the difficulty arise?" you might ask. Well, it was hard to determine the respective roles of the involved parties because the key facilitators of the event and scholarship were highly self-effacing. I had to discern how specific responsibilities were delegated by listening intently to the interviewees as they talked about one another. For example, Millerd Rogers was effusive about the Vice Chancellor's vision and calm leadership. She shared that Dr. Gómez was instrumental in making the Dalai Lama's appearance a reality and credited him and Nawang Phutsong with developing a well-conceived and multi-faceted proposal. In turn, Lori Warmington, a community activist and educational supporter, praised Millerd Rogers for developing and implementing the logistics for the event and later, for the scholarship program. Gómez, for his part, was

enthusiastic about Warmington's ability to enlist the support of community partners and also praised Millerd Rogers' strong organizational skills. He shared with me, "The logistics. She did those details. She was the organizer, and she did a marvelous job."

While it was refreshing to experience humility from all of them, it also was very disarming. I fully expected that everyone would speak at length about their respective roles in the Dalai Lama experience, but this was not the case during our interviews. I suspect that this stemmed from not wanting to take singular credit for an event that had such a powerful, lasting impact on so many people. However, each person was integral to the whole and took great care to acknowledge one another. They used a collegial approach to college programming and event planning that worked resoundingly well for the Dalai Lama's appearance. And, just as Gómez, Millerd Rogers, and Warmington understood the importance of a collegial framework for planning the event, they, too, understood that participation had to be collegial, hence the emphasis on student, business, and public dialogues to engage as many different audiences as possible during the Dalai Lama's visit.

Personal reflection leads to praxis

The Dalai Lama's visit to the Irvine campus and the scholarship program created in his honor were sown from reflection. Vice Chancellor Gómez invited His Holiness to the campus as an outgrowth of his personal reflections on meaning and life purpose. Throughout our conversation, he was deliberate and thoughtful. The sheer breadth of his responses reflect the importance he places on meaning and life purpose both for himself and for the students he serves as Vice Chancellor of Student Affairs. He was hesitant to describe himself as "spiritual" or "religious" because he believes that their accepted definitions include "otherworldly" connotations. However, he did acknowledge a curiosity for the world and its workings, as well as a sense of obligation to others. He explained his ruminations on life purpose in terms of fostering connections with others and finding meaningful ways to make life better for others. In his own words, he shared:

I'm very interested in the human spirit, the cultivation of wisdom, in balance and centeredness, the pursuit of peace, and the development of ethical relationships. Those are interests of mine and, in many respects, they can take the connotation of spirituality, but I try to remain grounded in the *now*, in the *here and now* and in my work. Sometimes, the word, "spirituality," and why I have a little hesitation about saying, "Yes," [to being spiritual] immediately is that it doesn't mean to me some otherworldly experience. To me, it means recognizing the dignity of all life in its complete form here and now.

In another part of our conversation, he explained his interest in nurturing students' search for greater self-understanding and sense of place in the world. While he does not believe that students' exploration of life's deepest existential questions is a new phenomenon, he does feel that students of today are more likely to express their uncertainty and quest for meaning in explicitly spiritual or religious terms. He recognizes students' interest in deeper meaning and purpose because he acknowledges his own ongoing interest in these issues and believes that asking and answering "deeper questions of identity, of role, and happiness...of global citizenship or consciousness" should start with the self.

In my conversations with Leslie Millerd Rogers and Lori Warmington, I also heard the kind of language that reflected their own long-term personal musings on issues of spirituality, role, and service to others. For Leslie, the quest to answer questions about purpose, meaning, and role are what constitute a truly "educated person." She explained that one's profession or station in life does not dictate identity, rather being "grounded in ethics and compassion" does. As for Lori Warmington, her spiritual journey began at the tender age of fourteen when she asserted to her mother, "I'm spiritual." From that moment forward, she began searching for points of confluence among great spiritual and philosophical traditions to understand how to develop a world more replete with ethics, kindness, and compassion. In short, engaging in service and the kind of work that benefits others, like bringing the Dalai Lama to campus and creating a groundbreaking scholarship program, is likely preceded by spiritual, philosophical, or ethical reflection on the part of single individuals. To do meaningful outer work with real-life consequences and benefits, one must first do some of the inner work that moves the self from reflection to engagement and finally, praxis.

Looking for common ground

The Dalai Lama's appearance in 2004 was open to people of all faiths and spiritual traditions. In fact, His Holiness XIV Dalai Lama considers it important to build peace by engaging people across different faiths and belief systems. In his book entitled Ethics for the New Millennium, he writes, "I believe that the best way to overcome ignorance and bring about understanding is through dialogue with members of other faith traditions."[\(7\)](#) The team at UCI that helped to make the Dalai Lama's visit and scholarship program possible was made up of individuals who participated in the effort with different personal motivations for doing so. Indeed, they used slightly different language in describing the experience and positioned themselves at different points along a spiritual continuum.

Lori Warmington was very comfortable describing herself and her interests as spiritual as she shared, “Over the years, the issue of peace, the issue of ethics, the issue of leadership, and the issue of spirituality have been very underlying...Out of that, I would say truly...comes a sense of fulfillment.” Leslie Millerd Rogers, on the other hand, did not explicitly use “spirituality” or “religion” in her discussions with me. She frames her participation in the Dalai Lama’s visit and scholarship program as part and parcel of developing “educated” people. She emphasized that a person should leave college, not only academically stronger, but also enriched by self-understanding, ethical reflection, and service to others. Finally, Vice Chancellor Gómez expressed reservation with describing his interests as explicitly spiritual. He instead framed his interests as a higher education practitioner and concerned citizen. He discussed the stages of student development and his belief that the daily lives of college students include pondering large, looming issues of meaning, purpose, and self-fulfillment. In his role as Vice Chancellor, he considers it a professional responsibility to provide his students with venues and programs that support spiritual and philosophical exploration. He wants students to have exposure to the pressing social issues taking place on the world stage, and he frames this interest in terms of ethical responsibility and global citizenship.

While the three have different personal frameworks of meaning for the work that they have done related to the Dalai Lama, they have managed to come together in their broad roles as practitioners and engaged citizens. It appears that they found common ground and worked hard to create meaningful programming for students and community members.

Sewing a square onto the quilt

“Compassion into action” was a guiding principle for the Dalai Lama’s visit and scholarship because it emphasizes the importance of moving from reflection to actual compassion and ethical behavior. Vice Chancellor Gómez conceived of the XIV Dalai Lama Endowed Scholarship as a way to honor the Dalai Lama’s wishes for ongoing peace building, ethical leadership, and service to others. The scholarship program recently completed its inaugural selection process and identified two scholarship recipients, Rajiv Ramdeo, a UCI senior majoring in biology and minoring in African American Studies, and Aswathi Sreedharan, a UCI junior double-majoring in biomedical engineering and international studies and minoring in conflict studies. Last fall, Ramdeo created an organization called the Association of Undergraduate Meditators [\(8\)](#), which is designed to promote awareness of meditation’s many benefits and bring together diverse people into a community of meditators. Sreedharan’s scholarship project involves planning and holding a statewide student conference on compassionate leadership and global responsibility.

The XIV Dalai Lama Endowed Scholarship was conceived from the beginning as including an endowment to give longevity to the ideals, service, and academic distinction that the scholarship is meant to acknowledge. It is the campus' hope that the endowment will grow and that larger numbers of students can be identified and supported. Eventually, the program hopes to expand to include graduate students and faculty members who also exemplify the scholarship program's ideals.

The XIV Dalai Lama Endowed Scholarship acknowledges the power in merging active reflection and service at a stage when students are about to leave the college environment for the complexities of post-college life. I liken the scholarship to a square on a large quilt of activities that promote ethical peace-building underway around the world. No single person can sew the entire quilt, but the combined efforts of people around the globe make even the smallest effort or activity worthwhile.

The “c” word, “connection,” not “competition”

If we were to play a game of word association, some of the “C” words that might arise in association with “higher education” are “colleague,” “campus,” “colloquium,” and “competition.” When I first contacted members of the UCI campus, each official with whom I spoke was warm and inviting, especially when they heard about my work with Spirituality in Higher Education at UCLA. As I mentioned before, I was provided with a half day's itinerary to meet with the key people involved in bringing the Dalai Lama to campus in 2004. I also was introduced to one of the two inaugural recipients of the XIV Dalai Lama Endowed Scholarship. Everyone was eager to talk to me and share what they could impart about their experiences and the creation of the scholarship program. I also was connected to representatives of the Dalai Lama Foundation and some of the business leaders that participated in the Dalai Lama's dialogues. In a real sense, I was invited into a community of people who collectively reflect on ethics and participate in ethical activity as engaged members of the new millennium. One of the striking aspects of being invited into this community of people was the openness and lack of competition. While a sense of competitiveness was absent in this particular higher education setting, praise for the efforts of others was abundant during my interactions with the UCI team. The sense of connectedness was truly a model for college and university interactions.

A Template for Inspiration

I have presented a portrait of a particular campus' attempts to foster students' ethical development. For UCI, a visit from the Dalai Lama, a series of dialogues, and an endowed scholarship program are examples of the university's continued efforts to engage students in ethical reflection, caring, and compassionate service to others. Depending on your college or university's configuration and missive objectives, the kinds of programs and recognitions that you develop might look quite different. I do, however, think that the best programming –the kind that leads to meaningful reflection and committed service on the part of students- is developed and implemented in a tone of humility, caring, and collegiality so as to model the ethical ideals being cultivated. A heartfelt congratulations to Rajiv Ramdeo and Aswathi Sreedharan, UCI's first XIV Dalai Lama Endowed Scholarship winners! We look forward to hearing about their developing projects and impact on the higher education community.

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Endnotes

1 Dalai Lama joins estimated 5,000 students for 'youth dialogue' on responsibility and ethics. (2004, April 16). Today@UCI [On-line]. Available: www.today.uci.edu/news

2 The Dalai Lama to visit UCI April 16. (2004, March 4). Today@UCI [On-line]. Available: www.today.uci.edu/news

3 The XIV Dalai Lama's day was divided into three distinct parts. First, the Dalai Lama participated in a morning dialogue with students that dealt with the topic of ethical leadership through compassion entitled "Ethics for a New Millennium." The Dalai Lama spoke, but students also had an opportunity to share their personal examples of compassionate leadership with their peers. The Dalai Lama then met with more than one hundred business leaders, some of whom traveled internationally, to hear ideas on the role of trade, environmentalism, sustainable development, and socially responsible decision-making. His talk to the executives was entitled "Cultivating the Heart of Leadership: Designing an Economy that Works for Everyone." This talk represented an ongoing dialogue that originally began in 1999 when the Dalai Lama met with Dutch Prime Minister Lubbers and Dutch business executives in Amsterdam. Near the day's culmination, the Dalai Lama spoke to a sold-out crowd comprised of approximately 5,000 members of the general public.

4 Spirit in Business is a partnership made up of members of the global business community, academics, and spiritual leaders. It grew out of a 1999 meeting between the Dalai Lama and business and political leaders in Amsterdam. The group seeks to understand and encourage an economic system that sustains and honors everyone. For additional information, refer to: <http://www.spiritinbusiness.org>

5 The Dalai Lama Foundation maintains a blog where students can continue the dialogue on ethical compassion and leadership [www.dalailamafoundation.org]. The Dalai Lama Foundation, a nonprofit organization, was founded in 2002 with the Dalai Lama's approval. The Foundation has an educational focus and seeks to promote and develop curricula for ethics and peace. At present, the Foundation has developed a curriculum resource/study guide for higher education audiences meant to accompany Ethics for the New Millennium, the 1999 book authored by His Holiness XIV Dalai Lama. For additional information about the Foundation and its activities, refer to: www.dalailamafoundation.org

6 For additional scholarship information, please refer to: www.ofas.uci.edu.

7 His Holiness the XIV Dalai Lama. (1999). Ethics for the New Millennium. New York: Riverhead Books, p. 222.

8 For additional information on UCI's Association of Undergraduate Meditators, please refer to the website: <http://clubs.uci.edu/AUM> or send an email to aum@uci.edu.