

## ***Higher Education and a Spirituality of Everyday Life*** [\(1\)](#)

***By Elizabeth A. Dreyer & John B. Bennett***

“Spirituality” is a popular term in many sectors of our society. We may initially think of religion as the primary location of the term, but in fact it is alive and well in corporate America, in medicine, in the arts, and the media. Higher education seems hesitant to adopt the term for itself, perhaps because many associate it with a particular religion or question its intellectual rigor – too “touch-feely.” To engage in an intentional spiritual life also means acknowledging that we have personal, spiritual needs that academics may not want to declare to themselves, much less to others.

There is also the issue of definition. There are hundreds from which to choose. If we cast our net broadly, the term “spirituality” embraces the search for meaning, which includes everyday life, but with an eye to ultimate significance [\(2\)](#). When all is said and done, what do I hope for in terms of my life *as a whole*? At the end, what do I want to be holding in my hand that symbolizes the life I have lived, the attitudes I have formed, the decisions I have made, the love I have offered and received? Poet Mary Oliver declares, “I don’t want to end up simply having visited this world.” [\(3\)](#)

Spirituality attends to thoughts, attitudes and dispositions. It invites us to examine and shape our internal world, to take time to reflect on who we want to be in terms of ideas and values. Does my life announce that existence is a sacred trust or do I treat others and the world only in terms of narrow self-interest? Spirituality also concerns itself with behavior—what many traditions call virtues and vices. Do I tend more toward indifference or care? Irrascibility or patience? Prevarication or truth? Arrogance or humility? Greed or simplicity of life? One hallmark of a healthy spirituality is that what is going on within is, in large measure, congruent with what is going on without. A life characterized overall by “what you see is what you get” nurtures trust and acceptance – and is likely to produce a higher level of satisfaction and joy.

We may also find it helpful to distinguish between explicit and implicit spiritualities. Explicit spirituality has to do with dispositions and actions that most people readily identify as “religious.” These might include practices such as meditation, prayer before meals or at the beginning or end of the day. It might be weekly worship or charitable activity undertaken under the auspices of a particular church, synagogue or mosque. Implicit spirituality encompasses potentially, the entire remainder of our lives. On the surface, it looks like simply work at the office, raising children, being active in the neighborhood, engaging in relationships. But for those consciously living out a spirituality, these acts provide the very “stuff” of their spiritual lives. The choice to have all aspects of our lives relate to spirituality depends on our structures of meaning.

Structures of meaning lie at the heart of a spirituality of everyday life. By this term, we mean the vision or the worldview that houses what we choose as the ultimate meaning and value of our lives. Much of this worldview is inherited from family, education, society, relationships. But as adults, we have the opportunity to name, reflect on, and shape these values in freedom. No authentic spirituality is simply a “construct” that we have mindlessly appropriated from the world around us – whether from a religion or our consumer culture. Nor is genuine spirituality coerced in any way – by forces outside of us, or by persistent voices within. Everyone has some type of spirituality, some ultimate horizon of meaning which motivates each of us to get up in the morning and shapes the way we live. The point is: Do I know what mine is? How does it operate? Do I like it? How does it affect other people and the environment? Do I have the tools to create structures of meaning that provide the opportunity for me to live a full, loving, satisfying life in terms of my ultimate values – no matter what life brings my way?

The sources available for developing spirituality are legion. Every major religion from ancient Greece and Egypt, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam offers a range of particular “ways” or spiritual paths. Millions of practitioners over millennia have asked questions, experimented, succeeded and failed, found wisdom and folly in their search for ultimate meaning -- just as we do. Then there are less well-known and newer spiritualities such as nature mysticism, Wicca, Santería, Christian Science. There is a rich humanist tradition from ancient Greece to early modern Europe that continues to shape itself to adapt to new times and situations. We are free to study, to learn, to talk to people who have chosen to walk down these various paths. We then take this learning and reflect on it in light of our personal and communal experience as citizens of the 21st century and make choices about what path is best for us.

It is easy to think of spiritualities in terms of family and personal relationships, but it is a bit more difficult in the context of the dog-eat-dog world of the marketplace or the academy(4). There are many available models suggesting ways to relate our spiritualities to our lives in the academy. We can see them as parallel tracks that we

work to keep separate. Or they may resemble a cappuccino or glass of beer, in which my “real” life is the liquid at the bottom and my academic job is the foam or the head on the top (or vice versa). Some may experience them as diametrically opposed – one being, more or less, in the way of the other. But we propose a more integrating model that envisions the joys, sorrows, and meaning of life as embedded in everything we do – including the work of the academy.

In this way of understanding spirituality, every aspect of our academic lives can be viewed from a spiritual perspective. We choose three examples from many relevant possibilities.

## **1. Community and Individualism**

It is important to shepherd the enthusiasms and generous spirit often found in new faculty members. Studies show that young academics, even though conditioned by their graduate study to work as lone-rangers, often find rewarding elements of collegiality with other students and professors during their years of graduate study. One of the most commonly registered disappointments of new faculty is the lack of collaboration and intellectual community. In spite of this void, new faculty bring creative approaches to teaching. And they are often open to working with colleagues from other disciplines and interested in linking their research with the needs of local and global communities.

Many young faculty find that they are penalized rather than rewarded for these types of initiatives. Multiply authored studies, or work that requires hours in the community are often valued less than solo books and articles in juried periodicals when it comes to tenure decisions and merit pay. How might this situation relate to spirituality?

To begin, younger faculty often nurture the creativity and generosity associated with shaping collaborative projects that respond to social needs. This type of research requires time, patience, and a lot of elbow grease. And when it does not work, or when it does work but is not relevant in tenure or merit pay decisions, it takes a great deal to resist caving in to the individualist model or opening the door to cynicism. Spirituality involves perseverance and hope – not just when everything goes well, but especially when it doesn't. Spiritualities also provide tools to help us discern what to do in a given setting. There are many different guidelines and patterns available to help us sort out what to do. Should we forge ahead and push for the project even when difficulties arise? Or would it be wiser to wait until after tenure is secured? A good decision in one case may direct us to forge ahead, while in another, the indications are to bide our time.

In this situation, senior faculty may be called to lay their own projects aside for the moment in order to respond positively to an invitation to collaborate. Spirituality involves remaining open to new learning and fresh experiences, no matter how long we have been in the academy. Being engaged in such a collaborative relationship requires the give-and-take of working with others who may have different, even conflicting, experiences -- different ways to approach the subject. Senior faculty also are called to mentor, affirm, and assist younger faculty. Despite current practice, it may be appropriate to suggest that the junior faculty member's name be listed as first author, thereby practicing humility in order to further the career of those who come after us. This should certainly be done in cases where the junior person has done the bulk of the work.

No matter the situation in which we find ourselves, we have choices. We can choose to make no connections at all between the event and our spiritualities. We can respond to the challenges and difficulties by choosing cynicism, resentment, and anger – clearly signs of an unhealthy or even destructive spirituality. Or we can assess what is happening in terms of how it might contribute to our identities as spiritual persons and how what happens can enhance, rather than interfere, with the good of others.

## **2. Language: Living in the truth and respecting others.**

Language is one of the most sacred trusts of the academy. We use language to converse, to teach, to write. We may rarely advert to its power for good or evil, to the ways in which language is implicated in our spiritual lives. On one level, academics are charged with working through the many philosophical perspectives related to what truth is and how we are accountable to it. In the pluralistic world in which we live, our linguistic comportment is important. It also is relevant to our spiritual lives. Fidelity to the process of discerning and using honest speech can be, in itself, a spiritual act. The temptation to succumb to “anything goes” or to cling to a narrow, fundamentalist understanding of truth is just that – a temptation to be resisted in favor of the rougher path of dialogue and conversation.

Most of us have a good sense of the hallmarks of genuine conversation (5). Practicing these is usually much more difficult. True conversation is an active process that engages our whole being. At times, it means seeking out an opinion that is new, different, or even threatening. It requires genuine openness, a willingness to listen as well as speak, and to change our minds when the evidence suggests a better way. Good conversations happen when both parties care about the other person and what she or he has to say. Minimally it requires good manners and a modicum of deference to the other. Sustained conversation has the potential to lower levels of distrust, build a

common vocabulary, and identify shared problems and standards. When engaged in this way, conversation can protect us from the hypocrisy of preaching an ethic of dialogue while practicing a code of silence [\(6\)](#).

An intentional spiritual life requires reflection on the kinds of language, the tone, and the context in which we interact with students or talk about students with colleagues. We may set up our classrooms so that the only one who gets significant “air time” is ourselves. Impatience with student questions that seem irrelevant results in language that diminishes, rather than encourages. We may say that we truly want students to voice their perspectives and questions, but we may engage in pedagogical strategies that minimize this possibility. Spiritual paths invite us to look deeply into the dispositions grounding our academic life and to take steps to grow in positive directions. A simple spiritual exercise may be to pick up the phone and find out how my university’s version of the office for excellence in teaching can help me improve. For some faculty, this will never happen; for others, it simply is common sense; but for still others, it can be a gesture that relates directly to their spiritualities.

In a master’s level class many years ago, I remember beginning class with a question about the readings for the day. My query was met with the “long silence.” In an instant, my conviction that this class would simply not work on an intellectual or affective level if we did not figure out how to engage each other in conversation leapt forward. In what I can only call a moment of grace, I honestly suggested that we cancel the class, since what we were supposed to be doing did not seem likely to happen. No resentment, no rancor, no blame. Simply, “this won’t work. Let’s try it again next week.” This was not a ploy or a gimmick. I simply shared with them the truth that I did not want to, nor could I, carry the class on my own with any integrity.

A second example of language use in the spiritual life involves interchanges with colleagues. We are not alone in naming some faculty meetings as among the most vituperative, mean, and hostile exchanges we have ever witnessed. Character assassination becomes a tolerated, if not acceptable, *modus loquendi*. Faculty attack administrators with a vengeance or ignore, belittle, or cut off comments by other colleagues. Anger and resentment over issues from compensation to schedules betray the loss of perspective of the larger scheme of the university, not to mention the world. We may shove the “facts” in the faces of those with whom we disagree but brush over or ignore them when it comes to our own behaviors or positions.

I remember a conversation in which a faculty member was furious with the decision of an administrator. She ranted and raved that he should never have been hired, that he was incompetent, that he had never published a single word, etc., etc. I had recently had occasion to see his dossier, noting that he had published a number of significant

articles. I tried to interject this “fact” into the conversation but got nowhere. I had the sense that even if I had placed hard copies of the articles under the nose of this faculty member, she would have been unwilling to change her tone or false accusations.

Truth matters for everyone, but in a special way for academics. Living in the truth is a particular challenge in the Western, twenty-first-century context in which we live. We are bombarded with “spin” – the government, advertising, corporate America, even science and religion have fallen prey to this erosion of language. Plagiarism has become a plague in our society and in our universities. The mass of information easily available to us poses new and demanding ethical questions. To speak and live honestly has everything to do with one’s spirituality. This kind of living offers a witness to colleagues and students, providing a model that refuses to sell out to self-interest or the lowest common denominator of mutual respect in our relationships.

### **Joy and gratitude**

Higher education receives a lot of negative press in the media. In addition, academics often labor under shrinking budgets, competition for students, and the challenges of keeping up with new information systems. In these circumstances, it is all too easy to become grumpy and to allow the unattractive seeds of entitlement to take root. Most spiritual traditions invite practitioners to learn how to nurture the virtues of gratitude and joy. Both of these virtues depend on perspective. If the horizons of our world center on our individual existence and well-being it is difficult for joy and gratitude to grow and develop. Broader horizons help us to keep an eye on the whole of humanity, viewing our suffering in light of that of sisters and brothers subject to horrendous deprivation. A brief look at global health, education and employment statistics can be a spiritual practice that helps us to view our situations in a more honest light.

Joy is to be distinguished from more superficial pleasures. Joy is the heartfelt enjoyment of the goodness in ourselves, others and the world. Like many complex and profound ideas, it may be best to consult one’s experience in order to sort out what it involves. Joy can be attached to an obvious good, but paradoxically, it can also be present in sorrow or suffering, since it transcends the surface contours of reality. It is the antithesis of greed, jealousy, or mean-spiritedness. Joy depends on paying close attention to reality and at some level, loving it. But at its heart, joy depends on love. The good fortune or beauty of children, nature, favorite hobbies or objects brings joy and leads to gratefulness.

Many spiritual writers also list gratitude as the foundation for the spiritual life. One sign of a healthy spirituality is a basic attitude that life is a gift – not because someone has told us this, but because we have discovered it in our own experience. Reflecting on moments in which we genuinely experience life as a “blessing” can help us understand the geography of the virtue of gratitude. The joy of welcoming a new child into the world; falling in love; the beauty of nature – all conspire to remind us of the utter gratuitousness of life. This virtue confronts the sense of entitlement that pervades our society. In this latter view, life “owes us” – we have a right to whatever privileges or material possessions we desire and become sad, angry or resentful when things do not work out as planned.

It is striking how infrequently those engaged in higher education express gratitude. Faculty so easily focus on what is wrong with the institution. Students, too, can contribute to a thankless atmosphere, fleeing our classrooms at the end of the hour, and rarely offering a word of thanks for efforts at the end of a term. Expressing gratitude requires that we disclose ourselves by acknowledging that we have received gifts. Maybe we are afraid of the dependence that accompanies receiving a gift - we may not be comfortable acknowledging our limitations or placing ourselves at the hands of another, incurring indebtedness, and losing control. These apprehensions apply to academic life in special ways - we fear losing control over our learning and discoveries or our future employment. We may be reluctant to acknowledge that our own knowledge depends heavily on previous learning and discovery. But the real loss is a life without “thank you’s.”

To be grateful and appreciative is to be alive and touched with wonder about existence. Why, after all, is there something rather than nothing? And why am I even here? To be indifferent to these gifts of life is to be numb. When ungrateful, we hoard our satisfactions, unable or unwilling to acknowledge them - or even share them. Or we may express a false gratitude - an obsequiousness or servility disguised as gratitude and expressed in order to advance ourselves. By contrast, how wonderful it is to express genuine thankfulness and to be moved toward greater generosity. We may even come to feel a sense of gratitude to something or someone for our very lives. It may be the communities of others that contribute to our sense of self and satisfaction. It may be the world of nature of which we are a part. More comprehensively, it may be the totality of things. It may be a transcendent Source of all being. In any case, we are aware that we did not bring ourselves into being nor do we keep ourselves in existence. We are dependent upon something more than ourselves for our existence and our continuation, and we find that it is right and good to say, “thank you.”

Spirituality involves nurturing dispositions of gratitude and joy and witnessing to them in the academy. Given the ethos of many colleges and universities, this may strike us as odd or even impossible. If the atmosphere is highly competitive and abrasive, these virtues will not be welcome. The joyful person may suffer being ignored or ridiculed. This, too, is part of the spiritual life. It is an error to think that we are living out our spiritualities only in situations of success and satisfaction. The most dramatic spiritual growth and insight often come in difficult settings that push us to the edge of our capacities. But once you have decided on what is truly important in life, then it is imperative to honor these traits and behaviors, even when there is a price to be paid.

Undertaking a spirituality of everyday life in the academy can be extremely challenging. It does not allow us to “say our prayers” or “live our private lives” divorced from living out our deepest values and beliefs in our chosen profession. Explicit religious activity, important as it is, rarely invites us to the heights of virtue and goodness demanded by loving other people well day in and day out. Respecting and caring about a cranky colleague; remaining patient and hopeful in an academic system that, at times, seems determined to dehumanize the best of us; keeping watch on our anger, resentment, and our tongues in situations of injustice and hurt – this is where the rubber hits the road in the spiritual life. This type of spirituality has the potential to be universal. It does not exclude anyone who wants to be in the driver’s seat of her or his own spiritual existence, and its rewards are legion both for the individual and for the community.

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## Endnotes

1 This essay is a continuation of the conversation begun in an essay by John B. Bennett, "Higher Education Spirituality" in the inaugural issue of this newsletter, Spirituality in Higher Education Newsletter 1/1 (April 2004): 1-6.

2 For a Christian perspective on this topic, see Elizabeth A. Dreyer, Earth Crammed With Heaven: A Spirituality of Everyday Life (New York: Paulist Press, 1994).

3 Mary Oliver. In New and Selected Poems (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 10-11.

4 Parker Palmer has written extensively about spirituality in the academy. See The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997); The Active Life: A Spirituality of Work, Creativity and Caring (New York: HarperCollins, 1990). Other resources include Sharon Parks, Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Young Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose, and Faith (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000); Arthur W. Chickering, Jon C. Dalton, and Liesa Stamm, Encouraging Authenticity and Spirituality in Higher Education (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006); V. H. Kazanjian, Jr. and P. L. Laurence, eds. Education as Transformation: Religious Pluralism, Spirituality and A New Vision for Higher Education in America (New York: Lang, 2000).

5 See John B. Bennett, "Liberal learning as conversation," in *Liberal Education* 87/2 (Spring 2001): 32-39; also Collegial Professionalism: The Academy, Individualism and the Common Good (Phoenix, Arizona: Oryx Press, 1997); Academic Life: Hospitality, Ethics and Spirituality (Bolton, Mass.: Anker Press, 2003).

6 John Ramsey, Talk of the college: Has it grown quiet? Liberal Education (Winter, 1999), 59. Cited in Bennett, "Liberal learning as conversation."