

The Center for Spirituality and Health at the University of Florida

By Allen H. Neims, Monika Ardelt, Shaya R. Isenberg, and Louis A. Ritz

Four motivated faculty from the University of Florida share how their initial conversations about the connection between spirituality and health developed into the Center for Spirituality and Health (CSH). CSH Executive and Advisory Committee members describe the history of this process as well as various workshops, retreats, classes, and research currently sponsored through the Center. The development of the CSH serves as an institutional model for how to create similar efforts to integrate spirituality within higher education.

Introducing the Center for Spirituality and Health

What was to become the Center for Spirituality and Health (CSH) at the University of Florida in Gainesville began in 1998 when an interdisciplinary group of ten faculty members convened to discuss ways in which we might convert our work environment from one that was toxic to one that supported our spirit, health, and creativity. To this day, the main purpose of the Center is to nurture the spirit in the University, the community, and ourselves.

The current mission of the Center for Spirituality and Health is to pursue research and provide curriculum at the interface of spirituality and the health sciences. It is designed to promote within UF the rigorous, interdisciplinary study of the human experience of faith, belief and spiritual knowledge in relation to health at the individual, community and global levels. The Center fosters free and creative communication about these issues. We are also committed to the academic exploration of the wider contexts of spirituality, religion and sciences as a whole, using the interface of spirituality and health sciences to bring Humanities, Natural and Social Sciences into relationship.

What follows is a brief discussion of the history of the events that led to creation of the Center, a description of various programs and research that the Center currently sponsors, as well as opportunities and challenges that are on the horizon.

History and Development of the Center for Spirituality and Health

The initial gathering of faculty in 1998 was prompted by a young Assistant Professor of Religion, Dr. Tanya Storch, who told her departmental Chair, Shaya Isenberg, that Harvard had begun a program in spirituality and health, and pushed us to do the same. Shaya Isenberg contacted Allen Neims, a friend of his, who had recently completed a term as Dean of the College of Medicine and had returned to the Departments of Pharmacology and Pediatrics. Each of them, in turn, invited some colleagues of like-mind from several different colleges and disciplines to participate.

This original group met regularly for nearly six months, in part to map out a plan, but more to rekindle our spirits as people, teachers, researchers, and/or clinicians. The group shared a deep connection to the awesome nature of being alive and to nature itself, as well as a strong belief in some sort of Higher Reality. Members of the group were of very diverse religious convictions and rituals, and most meditated in one way or another. The group, which intentionally has not created stringent criteria for “membership,” quickly grew to about 25 by adding faculty, a few graduate students, and interested members of the community.

Within a year of inception, we felt the need to share our process with students, staff, other faculty and the larger Gainesville community, primarily by developing a number of programs and courses. Individually and collectively, we believe that higher education is more than the acquisition of new knowledge and it should be a transformative experience for students. This “expansion” of the effort required money, which we did not have; it did not require dedicated space, which we still neither have nor seek. A deeply spiritual local philanthropist, who requests anonymity, generously provided base funding with the comment, “the University doesn’t embrace spirituality, but I guess if anyone can change that, it’s you people.”

We anticipated many challenges as our visibility in the University increased. We live in an area rich in religious fundamentalists and rich in staunch defenders of the separation of church and state (UF is a large, research-intensive, Land Grant member of the AAU), so inadvertently stepping on powerful toes is easy! Furthermore, no matter what the focus of our courses, we were certain to tread on someone’s jealously guarded academic turf. At a highly specialized and technological Health Science Center, many would see us as touchy-feely romantics at best and quacks at worst. We were certain to be viewed by some as a bunch of romantic old professors, regardless of rank or chronological age.

Nevertheless, we had several advantages as well, the most important of which was our shared passion that emphasized the importance of the human spirit and mystery in the curriculum of a modern University. We did not ask for money or space, and we intended to pay departments for faculty release time to teach these newly designed courses. Also, departmental approval was sought for each of the for-credit courses we developed. Importantly, several of us had substantial leadership/administrative experience within the University, and virtually all of us had earned some degree of peer

respect as teachers, researchers, investigators, and/or clinicians. Finally, we chose to remain an informal group rather than a formal Center during these early years because informal groups are harder to attack.

In March, 2000, we held a very important weekend retreat facilitated by three external accomplished scholars to clarify our purpose and strategy. Their probing questions and extensive experience proved invaluable. As our local credibility emerged, we applied for and became a formal interdisciplinary Center at the University in April 2001.

The most recent version of our Statement of Purpose reads, "Institutions of higher education can create space where human experience, faith, and belief can be discussed and examined along with the notion of rigorous scientific evidence and methods in broadly interdisciplinary and scholarly fashion. Our Center seeks to help create this space by promoting the process of individual and collective self-discovery, thereby fostering human qualities often called wisdom, consciousness, noble purpose, awe, mystery, wholeness, harmony, connectedness, tolerance and/or awareness."

Programs at the Center for Spirituality and Health

Currently, the Center sponsors various programs that fall into five overlapping categories: 1) A speaker series; 2) retreats and workshops; 3) communal self-care; 4) academic courses offered to undergraduate, graduate and professional students, and 5) research.

Speaker Series

For each of the past several years, we have hosted visiting scholars, artists and/or authors who work in the general area of spirituality and health. The typical visit is two days long and includes a well-publicized public lecture, a more academic lecture if appropriate, separate meetings with Center faculty and students, participation in one or two of our ongoing courses, and meetings with people from our Community. Some visitors also conduct a public workshop or retreat. The attendance at the evening public lectures ranges between 100 to 1,200, and these lectures have done much to endear CSH to the larger Gainesville Community. Although the speakers share a deep appreciation of the principles of spirituality, they are quite diverse (e.g. Huston Smith, Ram Dass, Father Thomas Keating, Alex Gray, Jon Kabat-Zinn, Joan Borysenko, Jean Watson, Harold Koenig, Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, Alan Coombs, Marilyn Schlitz, Jeff Levin, Bo Lozoff, Saki Santorelli, Sandra Bertman, Coleman Barks, Sylvia Boorstein and Thomas Moore, among others). For complete list of speakers, please visit the Center's website at the following address: <http://www.spiritualityandhealth.ufl.edu/events>.

Retreats and Workshops

These activities fall mainly into one of two categories, retreats or workshops open to the larger regional community (see above) and those involving students. Student retreats are for the most part student-initiated and organized. The Center provides financial and logistical support, as well as faculty oversight and facilitation. Student participation is voluntary, and most of the retreats have involved medical students and have attracted from 10 to 40% of each class. The retreats have been intense and successful in creating safe spaces for students to reflect and share inner exploration. In addition, CSH and the University of Florida have served for several years as agents to “academically accredit” and teach in four-week long reflective retreats for graduating medical students from any college in North America. Finally, non-Health Center students, usually after taking our courses, have formed Student Affiliate Groups of CSH.

Communal Self-Care

The CSH members try to convene for three hours monthly. After a short business meeting and dinner, we share personal reflections (sort of a Faculty Group akin to the more traditional Men’s Groups or Women’s Groups), and one person shares and/or leads us in his or her meditative practice or ritual or journey. These meetings are of critical importance to the cohesiveness and stability of the group.

Academic Courses

The Center has sponsored 8-12 courses per year over past several years. Courses are developed by Center member(s) and approved by the Center’s Executive Committee. The underlying themes for the courses include intense self-reflection within the framework of traditional academic pursuits, appreciation of diverse beliefs, the nature of consciousness, wholeness and healing, and integral philosophy. Most are three-credit courses that are listed formally by one or more traditional academic department(s), especially those in the Colleges of Liberal Arts and Science, Medicine, Health and Human Performance, Nursing, Education, and Veterinary Medicine. Members of the Center have also been invited to present aspects of the courses’ approaches in offered courses in the Colleges of Engineering, Journalism, and Agriculture.

The courses we sponsor are used by students to satisfy requirements of their major and/or minor or as part of their graduate or professional studies. Students who successfully complete a set of these courses can receive a “Certificate” from CSH in Spirituality and Health. Although some of the courses, by their nature, are taken by students within the same major, most by design bring together students of vastly different interests and academic backgrounds. Class size is generally limited to facilitate vigorous discussion. Many courses have waiting lists, and virtually all have

been evaluated very positively by students. Student grades are based on participation, journals, service learning, and/or essays in which academic considerations must be integrated with self-reflection. About half of the courses are co-taught by two Center members from very different disciplines, with both faculty members team-teaching. We emphasize the need to create a safe place for discussion by emphasizing confidentiality beyond the classroom. Almost all classes begin with a centering exercise/meditation, often student-led.

Some examples of courses sponsored through the Center include:

Spirituality and Health explores current theory and knowledge about the intersection of human spirituality and health. It is intended for health educators and other health professionals and addresses such questions as: What is spirituality? What is health? How are they related? How do different traditions deal with spirituality as a part of health? How is spirituality currently being integrated into primary health care?

Mindful Living: A Course on Spirituality for Everyday Life is intended mainly for students in the mental health professions and deals with the value of attention to the spiritual dimension in whole health. Spirituality and creativity in everyday life are explored. Rather than seeking extraordinary, or peak, experiences, what it means to be mindful of the sacredness in 'ordinary' life events is considered. The class has been designed to allow one to reflect upon one's journey in life and the role that spirituality plays in optimal well-being.

Spirituality and Creativity in Healthcare is for undergraduate and graduate students in nursing, art, and other disciplines. It examines the strong relationships among art, spirituality and healing, and includes study of the use of art, writing, music and dance to heal. Stories of and by patients and artists, as well as a creative art project, provide exciting opportunities for personal growth and healing.

Contemplative Psychology/Psychotherapy explores the interface of Western psychology and the world's contemplative traditions. We explore how contemplative practices can enhance well-being and the practice of psychotherapy. Since contemplation requires being still and quieting the mind, the course is highly experiential. Students learn mindfulness meditation. The class is open to graduate students who are training to be counselor/psychotherapists as well as to others who have a deep interest in this topic.

For a complete list of courses sponsored through the Center and related descriptions, please visit our website at <http://www.spiritualityandhealth.ufl.edu/ufcourses>.

Research

The Center provides modest amounts of seed money for research in our members' areas of interest. Much of this research deals with studies of the educational impact of the Center's courses. A current research study conducted by Monika Ardelt examined how certain CSH courses promoted "psychological growth," defined as increases in wisdom, spirituality, orientation toward personal growth, self-acceptance, purpose in life, and mastery, in comparison to other undergraduate courses. Results can be obtained by contacting Dr. Ardelt directly at Ardelt@soc.ufl.edu.

Current Opportunities and Challenges

This is time of opportunity and risk for CSH. The influx of some highly committed new and/or young faculty members promises to provide the Center with continued energy and innovation. Strong partnerships have evolved with other University Centers, including ones that focus on religion and ecology, narrative medicine, creative writing, and arts in medicine. The Center is also being asked to take an important role in end-of-life/palliative care courses, and promising connections with the Colleges of Law, Business and Journalism will hopefully flourish as well.

A few of the University's development officers are enthusiastically supportive of our mission. Dr. Ardelt's recent research promises to attract much attention, at least locally, in that not only did it reveal increased "psychological growth" associated with taking a CSH-type courses, but also surprisingly a decrease in this outcome measure as a result of taking some of the University's more standard courses in the same academic disciplines.

Despite these opportunities, various challenges are also on the horizon regarding continued leadership and funding sources. Center leadership is in transition with about half of the Center's original ten faculty at or nearing retirement. Lou Ritz is our new Center Director. Our Center depends in large measure on faculty volunteerism, and we feel the challenge of ever-increasing pressure on faculty time and the rather narrow yardsticks (in our opinion) for measuring faculty productivity.

The Center's base funding is not endowed, and it is unrealistic to consider the annual philanthropy upon which we depend to be perpetual. We have obtained modest funding for specific projects from various Foundations, but the base funding for courses and the speaker series, both critical endeavors, needs to be firmed up. Fortunately, the University has accepted two of our courses into mainstream funding and we are actively trying to expand that number. In addition, the Health Center has provided funding to the Center to develop a Health Center-wide interdisciplinary course on End of Life/Palliative Care. Nonetheless, the condition of the economy and the State of Florida's budgetary situation raise flags of danger.

The passion of CSH members for our mission remains steadfast, and the incredibly positive reinforcement we receive from past and current students provides a strong incentive. We trust that strong student advocacy for the Center's courses, coupled with rigorous studies of the educational impact of these courses will be of great assistance to the sustainability and success of the Center's efforts.

For additional information about UF's Center for Spirituality and Health, please visit their website at www.spiritualityandhealth.ufl.edu.

Allen H. Neims, M.D., Ph.D. is Professor of Pharmacology and of Pediatrics at the UF College of Medicine. He served as Director of the Center for Spirituality and Health until 2006 and has been Chair of Pharmacology (1978-89) and Dean of the College of Medicine (1989-1996) at UF. Before Florida, he held academic appointments at McGill University and at Johns Hopkins, from which he received his M.D., Ph.D. and Pediatric Residency. He received his undergraduate education at the University of Chicago. He is a member of the Hopkins Society of Scholars and received the Presidential Medal from UF. His academic interests include the relationships among spirituality, science and health, drugs and the developing human being, and the importance of awe and inspiration in higher education.

Monika Ardelt, Ph.D., is Associate Professor of Sociology and the 2008 Colonel Allan R. and Margaret G. Crow Term Professor at the University of Florida. She is also a 1999 Brookdale National Fellow and a 2005 Positive Psychology Templeton Senior Fellow. She is a Founding Faculty Member and Member of the Advisory Committee of the Center for Spirituality and Health at the University of Florida. Dr. Ardelt received her Diploma (M.A.) in Sociology from the Johann Wolfgang Goethe-University of Frankfurt/Main in Germany and her Ph.D. in Sociology from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Her research focuses on successful human development across the life course with particular emphasis on the relations between wisdom, religion, spirituality, aging well, and dying well.

Shaya R. Isenberg, Associate Professor of Religion, received his B.A. at Columbia University and his M.A. and Ph.D. at Harvard University. He served as Chair of Religion at UF for several years and is Associate Director of the UF Center for Spirituality and Health. Rabbi Isenberg is associated with ALEPH and the Jewish Renewal movement. He teaches and writes on Jewish mysticism, comparative mysticism, aging and Judaism, and Jewish thought. He is also Senior Faculty Emeritus of the Spiritual Eldering Institute where and his wife, Bahira, designed and implemented its leadership training program. They are currently co-directing, with Lynn Iser, the ALEPH Sage-ing™ Project.

Louis A. Ritz, Ph.D. is the Director of UF's Center for Spirituality and Health. As a Department of Neuroscience faculty within the College of Medicine, Lou is course director for Medical Neuroscience, taken by first year medical students, and a member of the College's Society of Teaching Scholars. His research interests have investigated new procedures and techniques that hold promise in helping to alleviate the devastating consequences of injury to the spinal cord. As part of the Center for Spirituality and Health, he directs a class in spirituality and health for Honors undergraduate students. In addition, he has had a long-time interest in the role of the nervous system in meditation and in mystical experiences, and has developed an Honors course entitled Neurotheology.

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