

Exploring Spiritual Capital: An Interview with Danah Zohar

By Danah Zohar

In this interview, Danah Zohar, author and internationally known speaker and author on spiritual intelligence and spiritual capital, shares how these areas are essential to develop in college students and within our campus climates. Zohar shares how encouraging service and true education of our students is critical, especially given our current global economic crisis. By asking fundamental questions and having a spirit of creativity and critical thinking, Zohar argues that educators can develop the next generation of engaged citizens.

Please share your personal journey and any significant experiences that led you to become involved in this work and bring you to where you are today.

As I reflect on the experiences I've had in my life and how they've shaped where I am today, I can identify specific moments that led to my later work on spiritual intelligence and spiritual capital, even if I didn't recognize them as this at the time.

My first crisis of meaning came at age five with the divorce of my parents when I was sent away to live with my grandparents. This transition made me question all sorts of things at a very young age. My grandparents were very devout Methodists in a small town in the Midwest, and as a child I was a passionate Christian. After my grandfather died when I was nine, I moved back to the city with my mother.

The combination of a sense that God had betrayed me in allowing my grandfather to die along with the narrow point of view expressed in the city Methodist church my mother

attended made me lose my faith in Christianity by the age of 11. But because I was always a child looking for the meaning of things and trying to make sense of my life within a broader context of understanding, I immediately began looking for things to replace the role Christianity had played in my life.

At the age of 13, I turned passionately to quantum physics. It was magical and exciting, and seemed to offer answers to the kind of big questions that adolescents ask: “Why was I born?” “Why do I have to die?” “How do I fit into the larger scheme of things?” “What is the universe made of?” This magic – the awe inspired by great science – and the conceptual approach of science that focuses on open-ended inquiry and analyzing anomalies for their significance, shaped how I made sense of the world.

As I continued to grow in my spiritual understanding, I went on a personal odyssey through the world’s great religions, lasting until I was nearly 40. I became a Unitarian in my mid-teens, and then converted to Judaism while I was at Harvard, living in Israel for four years from 1967-72. While my children were growing up, we traveled to Asia several times and became increasingly interested in Buddhism. And then the obvious questions came from my young children: “Mommy which is true?” This made me think very deeply about my own personal journey, and how best to answer my children.

That was really the beginning of my insights of bringing quantum physics and spiritual intelligence together. The open-ended questioning called for by great science, with its conviction that “there’s always more to know,” along with the conviction that asking good questions is of greater importance than trying to come up with the “right” answers, played an important role in this process and helped to shape my attitude toward education overall.

Thinking more deeply about my children’s question, I reflected on my own life experience and my encounters with the world’s great religions and faith traditions, each of which has meant something to me at some stage of my life. From the Jewish mystical tradition, we learn that God has ten “faces”. In Islam, He is believed to possess ninety-nine names. I came to the conclusion that each was a valid face, or name, of God, and that the fundamental root of true spirituality was something deeper, more underlying, and more primary than any local expression it might take within the given culture, lifestyle, or upbringing, of the people involved.

I now see spiritual intelligence as emerging from our most basic and primary need for and experience of deep meaning, essential purpose, and our most significant values and how these lead to a deeper, wiser, more questioning life and affect our decisions and experiences. My own spiritual position today is perhaps closest to Buddhism, but I feel equally at home in a mosque, synagogue, church, or a temple; I find them all sacred places to sit and contemplate and experience the energies, the longings, and the aspirations that people have taken to these places. I believe that all the world’s religions are valuable and rich and can give people significant direction in their lives as long as long as they are practiced with humility, and a mind open to the truths of each other.

Describe how you began studying spiritual intelligence and spiritual capital and how you conceptualize these constructs.

My formal work in the area of spiritual intelligence began when I was speaking at a conference in Malaysia. As we were discussing emotional intelligence and rational intelligence, I also mentioned spiritual intelligence; afterward people rushed up to me and wanted to learn more about this “spiritual intelligence.” I spent the next two hours in a long-distance phone conversation with my husband planning a book on the subject!

My return to Oxford coincided with a major neurological breakthrough that connected science and religion. A huge headline in the *London Sunday Times* read: “Scientists Find God-spot in the Brain.” Neurologists had proven that within the brain’s temporal lobes, there is an area devoted to spiritual experience – God is literally built into the brain’s hardware! This “God spot” becomes active when individuals are thinking of things of great meaning and significance, meditating on their deepest values, or while praying or sincerely practicing a religious tradition. I felt this breakthrough was quite significant and it underpinned my belief that there really is such a thing as spiritual intelligence.

I define *spiritual capital* as the wealth, the power, and the influence that we gain by acting from a deep sense of meaning, our deepest values, and a sense of higher purpose, and all of these are best expressed through a life devoted to service. Based on this definition, *spiritual intelligence* is the intelligence by which we build spiritual capital. It is by seeking meaning in our lives and acting in accordance with our deepest values that we can commit ourselves to lives of service based on the capacity that we are best suited to, whatever we choose to do personally or professionally.

I feel that service is one of the highest motivations that drives us to create spiritual capital that can empower our lives, practices, and projects. In my recent book, *Spiritual Capital*, I published a chart of eight negative and eight positive motivations. Psychologists reckon that 94% of us, most of the time, are driven by the negative motivations of fear, greed/craving, anger, and self-assertion; such negative motivations lead to negative and destructive behavior. It is the role of spiritual intelligence to raise our motivations to the higher ones of exploration, cooperation, self- and situational-mastery, creativity, and service.

I passionately believe that a motivation to serve something larger than ourselves – our families, communities, students, employees, customers, humanity, the environment, future generations, and life itself – is the highest form our spirituality can take. It is such service, offered with grace and humility that puts us in touch with what many religions call “God.” Through it, we literally become servants, or “agents” of God in this world, the spirit incarnate.

Service doesn’t have to be something done on a grand scale. We don’t have to be powerful or “important” to build spiritual capital and bring it into the world. Simple acts of kindness, expressions of compassion, offering a beautifully prepared meal for family or friends, getting up in the night for our children, are all everyday examples of service.

Turning these everyday actions into quasi-rituals or thinking of them as rituals of devotion and service builds spiritual capital. I believe very much in the importance of celebrations – from commemorating significant moments in life to observing religious festivals – these actions are tied to higher meaning and are very important to spiritual capital. Seeing the symbolic quality of the things that are around us in an everyday sense raises them to a higher level of meaning and fills our lives more with meaning.

My own work on spiritual intelligence is different from that of many others in that I argue there need be no necessary connection with religion. One might be a committed atheist, yet live according to deep values, a sense of higher purpose, and driven by a motivation of service. Unfortunately, it is also true that one can be a staunch supporter of some religion and yet be bigoted, mean-spirited, and vengeful. When practiced with tolerance, humility, and open-mindedness, religious affiliation can both nourish and express spiritual intelligence, and it can be a source of great strength; but it is not absolutely necessary to finding meaning and purpose in life, or to being a good person. It is not about being “right” or claiming to hold ultimate truth, because our conceptions of god are secondary expressions of the primal underlying spiritual intelligence that puts you in touch with the source of all meaning, values, and sense of purpose in your life.

How and why is developing spiritual capital important in the work of higher education, especially in our current global economic crisis?

Our current economic crisis has been brought about by an erosion of values and the missing notion of service in business and within our global society at large. If you ask someone “what is business about?” the majority will say “making money,” which is far too narrow and reductive. When we focus solely on material wealth and possessions, grasping for more and more money, we stoke the greed and ruthlessness that has destroyed the world’s economy. Similarly, our current higher education system is too frequently biased towards training merely to get a job, rather than educating to become a good person and an effective citizen.

I see going into business as an act of higher service. One must ask “Why am I founding this company? What can I do with this company?” Our businesses need to be serving more than just our employees and shareholders – they need to serve our communities and future generations and to generate wealth that we can live by. Research shows that companies with a sense of higher mission and service provide their employees with a greater sense of meaning. This, in turn, leads to higher productivity, less employee turnover, greater customer loyalty, and of course better profits. It’s good business to be good!

As educators, we need to encourage students to think about the broader implications of *why* and *how* they are motivated to contribute to society in substantial and ethical ways that add value to our communities. I think the purpose of education – which we have lost largely in our society today – is fully to develop human beings who are good people, good citizens, good parents, and good servants to whatever they choose to pursue.

There is a fundamental distinction between education and mere training or instruction. “Instruction” comes from the Latin word meaning “to put into” or stuffing students full with facts and values. On the other hand, “education” comes from the Latin word *educare*, meaning “to draw out.” It acts on the premise that students have within them a great deal of innate knowledge and potential, and that it is the purpose of educators to draw this out by encouraging the students to ask good questions and to become critical thinkers.

An education fostered by the principles of spiritual intelligence seeks to capitalize on the excitement and almost insatiable curiosity that students bring to their campus experience. It encourages them to question their own previous assumptions and values and to open themselves to the wealth of new experience available to them during their years at college. It *opens* their minds rather than *filling* them.

In his book *Leading Minds*, Harvard author and educator Howard Gardner (1995) points out that by the age of five, most children have formed a basic paradigm based on their early experiences that shapes their view of what life is about, how it works, and how to cope with it. He calls this “the unschooled mind.” Sadly, Gardner shares that most people never get beyond living with this mind of a 5-year old, no matter how much schooling they receive. He blames this on an educational system that instructs rather than educating.

Thomas Kuhn (1962), in his classic *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, did the ground-breaking work on the damaging effects of “paradigm paralysis” – getting our minds stuck in the boxes we create. Great science, he points out, blows these boxes open. It questions the assumptions with which they have been constructed, and gives us a fresh perspective on the data being offered to our brains. In the same way, it is the task of great education to help students break out of the boxes made by their early experiences and first assumptions, to help them grow beyond the mind of the 5-year old.

The project of getting educated is at one with the project of living life itself – to find deep meaning in life, to grow into greater understanding, and to use these wisely in service to things larger than ourselves. It’s the project of becoming a fully effective and responsible adult ever open to new experiences and opportunities.

What recommendations do you have for college educators and administrators to foster a greater sense of spiritual capital in their students?

The greatest gifts students bring to their college education are inquisitive minds and their ability to ask questions that will expand and reshape their views of the world. Education should be based more on the principles of spiritual intelligence, especially the importance of *asking fundamental questions*. We must consider the experience students have when coming to college in the first place. They have a set of values and traditions that have been handed down from their families and other experiences; and when they come to campus, suddenly everything is open and they start to question where they came from and begin to wonder what else is out there.

Focusing an education on asking these important questions and challenging their previous assumptions is critical to create open-minded, critical thinkers in our students. However, many professors are not trained to handle students' big questions and, as a result, students learn that asking questions that don't have easy answers can become a liability in their education. This may be the most harmful thing we can do as educators, especially to college students. Students' questions need to be nurtured and encouraged, not silenced or ignored.

Because it is the discipline more geared to asking big questions, I feel that it is very important to include the study of philosophy, especially the philosophy of science, in the core University curriculum. The Socratic Method is very powerful in getting students to engage in the process of questioning and digging deeper to discover what they really believe. When I was at MIT for my undergraduate education, the Dean of Students shared at induction day that "We're not going to teach you a lot of facts here because they'll be out of date by the time you graduate. So what we're going to teach you to do while you're here is to think, because that is a skill you can take with you anywhere to assimilate new facts."

We were also required to become well-grounded in philosophy and the general humanities. During my first two years at MIT, we did a "great books" course in which we started with Homer and read our way all through to Sartre. And really it was that course, by giving me so much to draw on throughout my life that has enabled me to do the work that I have done ever since. I feel that the notion of grounding students in the great books and ideas upon which our culture is built is fundamentally important to higher education. Now looking back on my undergraduate years, my experience at MIT shaped how I think and helped me not just to accept the world as I found it, but to keep asking questions and grow as a result.

Students should use their time at University to learn as much as they can, question as much as they can, create as much as they can, and change as much as they can. This is their time to grow themselves as human beings and to ask themselves big questions like "What constitutes a good life?" and "What makes a good human being?" These are deeply spiritual questions, and this is why a spiritual dimension to higher education is essential. Educators need to encourage this process. They must themselves feel excited by the great adventure that is education, and inspire their students with their own passion. Students need to understand *why* they are learning, not just *what* they are learning. And they need to appreciate that their education is about far more than simply landing a job after graduation.

Being able to excite students and open their minds to new possibilities is a great gift. In his autobiography, Henry Adams shares, "A teacher affects eternity. He can never tell where his influence stops." This is the deep meaning, the deep purpose, and the deep reward of teaching – that we are affecting eternity. To handle so great a responsibility, faculty members themselves should have some basic grounding in philosophy, and become aware themselves of their own sense of mission.

College students are idealistic. They are keen to contribute to society, they actually believe our world can be a better place and they want to make their mark on it. Faculty must encourage this nascent activism and engagement. Instead of laughing at our students, or discouraging them, we need rather to cultivate their zeal and provide them with opportunities to grow themselves and test their ideas. Students need to be involved in the University and have a voice in the structure and content of their education.

All people that are being trained to be educators – even top level administrators – need to be well-grounded in the fundamental project of education, which is to give our students a foundation to develop their philosophy of life and a broad, considered sense of what it means to be human. This produces students who become better citizens and servants, able to contribute in meaningful ways to building richer and more sustainable communities.

Helping students see that there is a way to practice their ideals – through becoming better business leaders, politicians, teachers, scientists or whatever field they are entering, is the true vocation or “calling” of educators. Students need to know that the “real world” is where they can be the real “me,” living lives of authenticity and purpose, without having to compromise their values.

When my son was five, he asked me as I was tucking him into bed one night, “Mommy, why do I have a life?” This caught me unprepared! I think he was looking for a simple answer like “to be a doctor like Daddy or a scientist like Mommy.” It took me nearly two weeks to answer him. “You have a life,” I told him, so that the world is a better place after you have lived than before you were born. So you can make a real difference.” And I still think that.

Danah Zohar was born and educated in the United States, completing her undergraduate work at MIT in Physics and Philosophy, and graduate study at Harvard in Philosophy, Psychology and Religion. She is the author of several books that wed insights from science with attempts to evolve our understanding of spirituality. Among these are *The Quantum Self*, *The Quantum Society*, *SQ: Spiritual Intelligence*, and *Spiritual Capital*. Zohar lectures internationally to educational, governmental, and business organizations and conferences, and has been on the guest faculties of several universities and business schools in the UK and Australia. She has been named by *The Financial Times* as “one of the hundred best business minds.” For the past several decades, Zohar has made her home in Oxford, England. Currently, she is writing a new book, *Total Intelligence*, about integrating our physical, emotional, rational, and spiritual intelligences.

References

- Adams, H. (1999). *The Education of Henry Adams: An Autobiography*. New York: Oxford University Press Inc.
- Gardner, H. (1995). *Leading Minds: An Anatomy of Leadership*. New York: Basic Books.
- Kuhn, T.S. (1962). *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Zohar, D. (1990). *The Quantum Self: Human Nature and Consciousness Defined by the New Physics*. New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc.
- Zohar, D. (1997). *ReWiring the Corporate Brain: Using the New Science to Rethink How We Structure and Lead Organizations*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.
- Zohar, D. (2004). *Spiritual Capital: Wealth We Can Live By*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.
- Zohar, D. & Marshall, I. (1993). *The Quantum Society: Mind, Physics, and a New Social Vision*. New York: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Zohar, D. & Marshall, I. (2000). *SQ: Connecting With Our Spiritual Intelligence*. New York: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Zohar, D. & Marshall, I. (2000). *SQ: Spiritual Intelligence, the Ultimate Intelligence*. New York: Bloomsbury Publishing.