

Academic Spirituality

By John B. Bennett

'Spirituality' is a notoriously slippery word and educators are often uncertain about its legitimacy or usefulness. Some within the academy consider it a hopelessly confused concept, an unwelcome and mischievous invitation to relax intellectual and critical rigor. They associate it with New Age phenomena such as crystals, channeling, and psychics. Others, however, hold that such attitudes simply demonstrate how the academy is once again behind the times, this time by refusing to acknowledge what large portions of the business, health, and entertainment worlds—indeed large portions of our general culture—already treat seriously, embracing spirituality despite its ambiguousness.

I am in the latter group. In what follows I argue that in order for the academy to be true to its calling, it needs to engage spirituality at a variety of levels. Not only should the academy evaluate the various meanings now attached to the term, but it also ought to consider its own relationship to spirituality. In order for this to occur, I suggest that we expand our customary terminology and understand "spirituality" in a more inclusive fashion—as involving the fundamental values to which we commit ourselves and that we trust to secure significance and meaning in our lives.

I develop four points. One is that there are multiple forms of spirituality. Each of us possesses his or her own brand, whether or not we or others deem it constructive or attractive. The second is that we often uncover our real spirituality by viewing ourselves through the eyes of others as well as by reflecting on our own experiences of hope and darkness. The third point is that our institutions also have their own spiritualities. Some of these various spiritualities are quite common, though far from admirable. The final point is that education is ineluctably a spiritual matter, however much we may ignore or deny it. Learning requires that individuals and institutions practice radical openness to the other—whether the other be a person, a text, or a novel experience. Unless we commit to living in this fashion, education becomes but mere credentialing, and teaching, but propagandizing.

Most contemporary discussions of spirituality assign it a humanizing dimension and role. We consider it to imply positive, constructive understandings, behaviors, and values. From this common perspective we might say that attending to spiritual issues is desirable, as is working to achieve a more spiritual life. Rarely, though, do we speak of spiritualities that constrict and dehumanize. Yet each of us already has a spirituality that is very likely to contain both positive and negative elements. Having a spirituality is not something optional. It is part of being a human person and is basic to our identity. Each of us has a spirituality because we invest ourselves in something ultimate that we trust to provide enduring meaning and significance to our lives. Our spirituality is our faith that these ends in which we place our confidence and to which we are loyal are reliable centers of meaning and value, fully worthy of our trust.

When we examine the multiple forms of academic spirituality, we can distinguish two broad, opposing types. Some of these spiritualities illustrate what I call aggressive or insistent individualism. They are destructive of basic human values—these include spiritualities that elevate self-preoccupation, even egoism and selfishness; that encourage us to listen to others hoping to hear weakness rather than novelty or strength; that construe intellectual inquiry as attack and counterattack; that emphasize hierarchy and consider education as only a commodity; or that separate public and private selves, or compartmentalize believing and living. Most of these spiritualities elevate autonomy as the spiritual value, understanding it as intellectual self-sufficiency in an academic context where individual self-promotion and self-protection are central.

More often than not, these kinds of insistent individualistic spiritualities produce either the insufferable egotism of those successful in their self-promotion, or the damaged self-esteem and wounded narcissism of the unsuccessful. The one excels in the kind of self-display that the other cannot and thus fiercely resents. Too much of this and the academy becomes argumentative and agonistic, creating the public sense of the academy as a place of fierce combat over small stakes. We who are on the sidelines say we regret the spectacle, but seem unable to change it.

In our own moments of insistent individualism, we aim to be autonomous and self-regulating, counting on our strengths and shrewdness to protect us and secure the self-serving meanings to which we are loyal. We understand relationality as consisting in carefully constructed arrangements with selected others, and we commit to them so long as the collective actions advance our own narrow interests and personal gratification. We seek the kind of power that controls, however much it alienates us from colleagues and from the inclusive reality in which we live.

Alternatively, we may cherish a broader community and look to it to help provide the enduring importance we seek. We sense that we can possess true autonomy only by acknowledging and celebrating our interdependence with others. It is by attending to

them—and inviting reciprocities of interest and exchange—that we learn who we truly are and can still become. Through sharing *and* receiving, we become beneficiaries as well as benefactors. Practicing openness to a plurality of perspectives upon the world—a plurality of ideas, values, and concepts of truth, beauty, and goodness—enables us to grow personally and professionally. We experience transformation. These moments of self-discovery yield self-assessment that in turn promotes self-enlargement. We strive to integrate our personal and professional lives—our self-understanding and our actions.

Our communities include our colleagues, families and close friends. They may involve political and religious causes or groups to which we attach great value. They may extend to all of humanity, all of nature, or even to a transcendent ground who embraces and supports all creation—and to whom we belong. However partial and incomplete our efforts, we seek to understand and care for others. We have a sense of participating in a mystery that includes but extends beyond us. So there are many forms of academic spirituality that we can embrace—ones that humanize and ones that do not.

Our own individual goals and our educational objectives may shift when we understand spirituality in this more inclusive sense. We start to think of spirituality as a common human characteristic—however differently possessed—rather than as an elusive personal goal. Spiritual growth is not something external or foreign to what we are. Taking the 'spiritual turn' is not committing to some fashionable novelty, but attending to something already there. Rather than attempting to help our students or colleagues cultivate spiritual awareness, our concern becomes whether they know who they already are and whether they choose to accept or to change their basic identity.

Rooted in the values to which we are ultimately loyal and which we trust for our fulfillment, our spiritualities are reflected in our attitudes and behaviors. They are evident in what we say and do. But we may have only a vague sense of our own ultimate dispositions. We may be confused about our fundamental identity and commitments. For instance, we may actually—though unknowingly—embrace spiritualities that we repudiate publicly. We may commend life styles and commitments that we in fact refuse to honor ourselves. Our behaviors in the academy may be disconnected from our credo that pursuit of knowledge for its own sake will liberate. Thus, we may think we consistently practice openness to others, whereas we actually excel in manipulative and controlling behaviors. We may be unaware of our penchant for individualistic self-preoccupation, innuendo, or exaggerated claims, and suspiciousness of others.

Often others are more aware of our individual spiritualities than are we. In various ways, our friends and colleagues—our fellow workers, classmates, relatives, and teachers—can help us attend more closely to issues of our spirituality and fundamental personal identity. We need others who will challenge the routines and conceits we love, as well as affirm the talents we may be afraid to claim. Our spiritual practices of discernment and self-

examination are enriched when colleagues share honest assessments about whether we—and they—are in fact continuing to learn and to flourish. Because of others we may know ourselves to be the recipients of wonderful gifts, especially gifts of attention and care that nourish and sustain us. Or we may feel isolated and abandoned, perhaps even betrayed, and wonder why.

In addition to colleagues, changes in our fortunes or in things we take for granted may compel us to attend to our basic values and our fundamental identity—as well as to the conditions we judge necessary for fulfillment. Horrific events like the terrorist attacks of 9/11 shatter our frameworks, placing in doubt our treasured values. Individual events also turn our worlds upside down—being denied tenure or promotion, having our marriages disintegrate, or watching our children lose their way. These are times when hope can retreat or seem altogether gone and unrecoverable—when darkness descends and obscures all. We find ourselves pitted against powerful external forces or those we ourselves have unleashed. We know loss, defeat, and humiliation—unbidden and unwanted catastrophes that seem to leave to our choice only how to deal with them. Facing these sad and barren times, some of us lash out in anger and resentment, while others give up in bitterness—satisfied to be less than their gifts call them to be. However, we may decide to endure and, with the help of others, we may succeed and be changed by our perseverance.

We may shift our focus from external matters such as our work or other daily preoccupations to the character of our inner lives—seeking to clarify who we really are and want to be, to liberate ourselves from illusions, and to find the courage and strength to go on with integrity. We may call this kind of close attention to our inner selves an exercise in self-examination or the pursuit of authenticity. Others might call it a form of contemplation or discernment. Whatever we name it, this attention has a critical, reflective, philosophical dimension. It involves a careful and open examination of what we hold to so tightly for security and identity.

We ask whether what we find out about ourselves is what we really want, and whether it is consistent with our other beliefs about reality. We examine whether the goods to which we are loyal are themselves trustworthy and capable of fulfilling us. We consider whether they generate gratitude and bring us joy, since we cannot contribute to the betterment of others—or ourselves—if we regularly feel beleaguered or angry, mistreated or bitter. We help create the world in which we dwell by the spirit of hope—as well as by the cynicism—we project on it.

Authentic self-examination means practicing hospitality to ourselves, being open to who we most fundamentally are—and deciding to embrace or to change what we find. Practicing this kind of openness means being honest and seeking integrity. It is rarely easy, at least at the outset. But with effort, we may soon recognize more clearly in

ourselves, and not just in others, acts of contrived collegiality and bandwagon thinking. Because our teaching and scholarship make us vulnerable, we may glimpse how we try to compensate with bluster and autocratic behaviors—as though we could be educators of integrity without modeling what it means to search and to share. We may catch ourselves being sullen and defensive rather than grateful for the good fortune we enjoy because we are involved in education.

If we attend to ourselves and practice self-care with authenticity, we are good stewards, not self-serving egoists. Indeed, this kind of spiritual reflection is funded when we practice hospitality to others as well as to ourselves. We are likely to find that self and other are intertwined, indeed inseparably connected. We begin to see the value of allowing others to disclose themselves to us, rather than our defining who they are. We find the richness that true difference can bring—the perspectives and insights about experience and reality that others may provide, thereby correcting our limited vision. As I will argue further below, we may then see the spiritual foundation of education.

Issues of spirituality do not apply only to discrete individuals. Spiritualities that are atomistic present at least two problems. The first is that as individuals we are always embedded in relationships with others. Indeed relationality is such a primary dimension of our existence that we are forced to recognize that the self is at core relational in character. Who we are is a function of what others have contributed to our being and how we have chosen to receive their contributions. We, in turn, contribute in a similar way to the internal reality of others.

The academy often obscures this relational self. Our traditions emphasize and value individuality in atomistic rather than relational terms. We are rewarded for individual, not collective, accomplishments. We may talk about the value of collaboration but there is a strong undercurrent of competition and agonism in the academy. We are easily pulled toward insistently individualistic forms of spirituality. When this happens we see rivals and enemies everywhere. Some of us develop habits of being on guard against others' encroachments. If we don't look after our own interests, we think, who will?

But we cannot really care for ourselves apart from caring for others. When we try, the educational result is that we pursue autonomy for ourselves and our students in ways that isolate rather than liberate. Obviously we are individuals, but we can live out our individuality only in relationship with others. Of course we must be careful. Ironically, the relationships we cultivate can create a broader insistent individualism. This seems to happen with special interest or identity groups that are based on religion, gender, race and ethnicity, sexual orientation, etc. They simply magnify our fragmentation and weaken efforts to promote a common good.

The *second* problem with atomism follows from the first. Atomistic philosophies and spiritualities overlook the influence our institutions have on us. Of course influence goes in both directions. Institutions are constituted in part by influence from their individual members and the various groupings these members create and reflect. But institutions also exert influence. Indeed, each institution has a substantial reality of its own, we might say, even though that reality is sustained and mediated only through its members. Its reality is more than the sum of its members. As a result, we can speak of institutions as having their own personalities and spiritualities.

For instance, institutions as well as individuals can value and promote openness—or they can withhold information and model secrecy and indifference to others. They can present themselves honestly to others, warts and all, or they can issue misleading or even false data or doctored photographs. They can dwell in the charisms of their founders and seek to be true to their mission statements—or they can chase the latest educational fad or consumer interest. They can attend to the educational interests and needs of the students they have—as opposed to those they might desire—or they can treat them simply as consumers and count them as "bodies." They can recognize the impact they have on the broader communities in which they dwell, and attend to hardships they create—or they can take these social structures for granted.

Like individuals, institutions can neglect self examination and fail to regenerate themselves. Instead, they create vast entertainment enterprises or special for-profit subsidiaries and consider themselves primarily as businesses. They can focus on snatching enrollments, prestige, and funding from competing institutions. They can be obsessed with endowments, physical plants, new programs, and faculty credentials and grants. They may forget that colleges and universities are underwritten by society to be special places where conversation, learning, and growth are given priority. What is wrong when our institutions consider students as 'customers' is not the notion of individuals interested in our goods and services, individuals to whom we are professionally accountable. What is wrong is the suggestion that our customers are means to an end for us—a means to profit. Then our institutions teach that education is only a matter of credentialing, and spirituality one of looking out for oneself.

Higher education presents splendid opportunities to pursue questions of spirituality. I am arguing that we grow into authentic autonomy only when we recognize, acknowledge, and celebrate our interdependence with others. Only through attending to others and what they have to tell us do we fully come into our human inheritance—possession of the human enterprise in its heights and depths. Only through conversations with others do we learn who we really are and could still become. This is risky; openness makes us vulnerable. But the alternative is singularly unattractive.

Healthy spiritualities are not independent of the specific subject matter we study. As faculty and students we always have before us the question of what it means that we now possess new competencies. We should ask, What difference does my knowledge make to who I am? What should I now do differently? Unless I address these questions, it is not really my learning. Too often, though, systematic efforts to answer these questions are marginalized, confined to isolated individuals or departments. Institutions do not support or enable this kind of self-examination. As a result, we are often alienated from our own learning. We separate our personal and professional lives.

But when individuals and institutions commit to practicing hospitality, fragmentation and isolation are left behind. The procedural openness to others with which we start is transformed into an openness of being. As we grow in our humanity, we grow in relationship to the good and to responsibility for the good of others. When this happens, we extend our horizons and move from practicing personal openness to embracing the connectivity of the world. Indeed, we move into the fundamental trust that the ultimate nature of reality is itself hospitable—that it provides the primordial model for how we are to live. This involves trusting that our sharing and receiving reflects our deepest reality as individuals and communities. We may come to conclude that the context for all our dreams and deeds is characterized by a relationality beyond our ken—a relationality that underwrites our desire to integrate our lives and transform them. In this quite wonderful way, education can help to redeem and sanctify our lives.

*John B. Bennett is Provost Emeritus and University Scholar at Quinnipiac University in Hamden, CT (john.bennett@quinnipiac.edu). His most recent book is *Academic Life: Hospitality, Ethics, and Spirituality* (Bolton, MA: Anker Publishing, 2003). The material in this essay reflects themes in a new book manuscript, tentatively entitled *Mapping Meaning and Purpose in Academic Life: A Spiritual Primer*.*