

I Do and I Understand: The Self Knowledge Symposium Model of Transformational Education

By SKS Founder, August Turakt

*I hear and I forget.
I see and I believe.
I do and I understand.
- Confucius*

Fr. Francis Kline, besides being one of the most impressive spiritual leaders I have ever met, also happens to be a Julliard trained organist who, much to the disappointment of the New York Times, at the age of twenty-one gave up a lucrative recording contract and certain stardom to enter a Trappist monastery. I was thrilled and grateful that the Self Knowledge Symposium (SKS) enticed him into leaving the cloister and making the trip from Mepkin Abbey, South Carolina, for one of his exceedingly rare organ recitals. But as I walked him toward the main entrance to The Duke Chapel, neither of us was prepared for what we saw.

It was the kind of mob scene usually reserved for rock concerts and basketball games. Hundreds of people--students and non-students alike – crowded toward the doors, anxious to get in. Amazed and a trifle alarmed, I lowered my shoulder and pushed into the Chapel. As Fr. Francis made his way to the organ loft, William Willimon, the Dean of the Duke Chapel, made his way to my side. "I have never seen anything like it," he said. "I told the SKS students not to get their hopes up. I told them that if they got a hundred folks for a *free* organ recital they'd be doing great. This place holds eighteen hundred without the sanctuary and we'll be lucky if we get them all in standing room only. And at \$15 bucks a head?" Then he added with a grin, "I guess I'll never live it down with the kids."

I nodded as he introduced me to the Chapel's organist, who pumped my hand and said with real excitement, "We've never been able to pull a crowd for an organ recital before. I guess this just shows what a little advertising will do!"

Even at that tense moment, I knew better. I knew that no money whatsoever had been spent on advertising. I knew that I was witnessing a grass roots effort by a tireless bunch of students and a handful of adults who had volunteered their help and expertise. Over the last two months I had watched in awe as meeting after meeting convened and adjourned, leaving the attendees loaded down with the kind of organizational responsibilities that would make paid employees blanch. Press releases appeared in almost every newspaper in North Carolina, fliers were handed out at local churches, tables were manned all over Duke by eager student ticket sellers, advertising in the program was sold to local merchants, and television crews were enticed to report on the event. Many students and adults had stepped up and bought twenty or twenty-five tickets with a "sell 'em or eat 'em" attitude. I was looking at so much more than "a little advertising."

Catching my breath, I looked around at the brimming tide of humanity and was finally able to notice ten or twelve student ushers taking it all in stride: young college men in jackets and ties, young college women in dresses. Each one was armed with a walkie-talkie, knowing his job and quietly doing it. And then I saw Meredith Parker, the Duke SKS student president and the focal point for all this activity. I watched her coolly and calmly directing everything from her walkie-talkie. Eventually she caught my eye and gave me a reassuring smile that said: "Relax, why don't you? We got it." And I relaxed.

When the recital started, over two thousand people were in the Chapel, and *almost* all had seats. Fr. Francis received two standing ovations and rave reviews in the local papers. Br. Joshua, a monk at Mepkin Abbey, told me later that Francis had said of the event, "A packed house, an incredible organ . . . all I can say is I gave the best I have to give. I played my heart out." He certainly did – and so did the students of the SKS.

This one story very naturally provokes two of the most commonly asked questions about the SKS. First: in a time when it has become painfully fashionable to bemoan the cynicism, materialism, "slackerism," and over-cooked individualism of Generation X and their younger brothers and sisters, how do you motivate students to work on an organ concert like they are climbing Mount Everest? Second, and even more fundamental: what does an organ concert have to do with self-knowledge?

The Gen-X/Gen-Y dilemma

Like many of our peers on college campuses across the country, the SKS is groping toward a model that avoids the pitfalls of two different extremes. One is the "anything goes" philosophy of the so-called New Age, in which emotion is emphasized and rigorous thinking takes a back seat. As one SKSer put it: "The New Age is open-minded all right, but that's not much to build a religion on." The other is the heavy up-front commitment to dogma, ritual, and someone else's exclusive take on The Truth that many religions require.

The Self Knowledge Symposium does not claim to have The Answer, the perfect alternative to these two. Nor is the SKS a new religion or in conflict with traditional religious practice. Instead, the SKS is a pragmatic work in progress, which students report is waking them up to not only the deeper issues of life but to the prospect of deeper meaning as well. Perhaps the paradoxical nature of the SKS mission is best illustrated by the fact that the Buddha said, "work out your own salvation," and yet this did not stop him from vigorously presenting his Eight Fold Path as the means by which salvation might be won.

The process of process

I believe the Buddha was telling us to focus more on *process*, and to be less hung up on *content*. I like to use science to illustrate this key difference. Scientific "content" includes a list of all the species of birds, or the details of the Big Bang, or all the numbers on the periodic table of the elements. Scientific "process" is the Scientific Method itself.

No card-carrying scientist would claim that the current state of the table of elements is sacrosanct. The *content* of the atomic table might change at any time through new discoveries. Yet, this same scientist will be downright dogmatic when it comes to the *process* of the Scientific Method itself--the repeatability of experiments, for example. So it would seem that science has been able to transcend the apparent contradiction of dogma vs. open mindedness. Science is rigorously consistent *and* is constantly evolving.

Analogously, the SKS is more concerned with spiritual discovery than with the specific discoveries to be made. "Seek and ye shall find," not "Seek and ye shall find that God lives on Mt. Olympus." Our goal is to be open to change and new ideas while insisting on a rigorous, disciplined, even scientific, approach to self-transcendence.

And at that level--the broad methodology of spiritual questioning, independent of the specific answers--the SKS core beliefs are so simple that they are almost trite:

Self-Knowledge. The inscription "Know Yourself and all the Gods and Heavens will be known to you as well" greeted the ancient pilgrim to the Oracle at Delphi – or, as Meister Eckhart said with the hint of a pun, "The eye with which I see God is the same eye by which He sees me." By concentrating on self-knowledge, we build on a formula that is not only self-evidently important, but is also consistent with all religious traditions, requires nothing any more dogmatic than curiosity, lends itself to a scientific approach, and appeals to students in the same way that Cosmo's little quizzes appeal to its readers.

Community. The process of finding out who you are is facilitated by working in a real community of other people trying to do the same. Besides acting as a support group and a reminder, fellow seekers act as mirrors that can abridge years of work by simply pointing out what they see through compassionate confrontation.

Character. We cannot hope to be constantly inspired. Like putting on an organ recital, self-transformation often requires just plain hard work. A student must *become* a person who can make a commitment and act on it in a consistent way over a long period of time if necessary--even when real self-sacrifice is required.

The desire for self-transcendence. Call it grace if you like. Whatever you call it, all true spiritual methodologies nurture the instinct to transcendence, simultaneously exposing the ultimate futility of all attempts that are rooted in selfishness and ego affirmation.

Engaging Students

Of course, none of that is original. Nor will a set of abstract principles move a group of students to work tirelessly for three months to fill the Duke Chapel with two thousand people for an organ concert. So what is it about the SKS that inspires a few brave students to throw themselves into the organizational and spiritual work of the SKS? One word: leadership. The SKS is the result of a group of adults and SKS student officers who are actively and obviously "living the life" themselves. SKS students see for themselves the inconveniences and sacrifices being made by both adults and student officers and are openly invited to judge whether these sacrifices are really leading to better people and a better way to live.

While getting down into the trenches with a "no secrets" approach can be very demanding (and occasionally embarrassing!), it fosters a key aspect of spirituality that students desperately want and respond to: personal intimacy. More than anything else, they want a place and time where the B.S. is left at the door, and for an hour or two everyone speaks directly from their hearts. They want a place where the truth is valued simply because it is the truth. And to accomplish this, the leadership has to be ready to go first and lead through example. Their willingness to take on this intense pressure (and, yes, it *is* intense pressure) gives the SKS an edginess that students respond to.

So tell me again what organ concerts have to do with self-knowledge?

In my twenties I was privileged to have as a mentor Louis R. Mobley who, in 1956, founded and became the first director of the IBM Executive School. As his protege, I actually moved into Lou's house, where I spent mornings in Lou's study learning one-on-one and afternoons hustling contracts for his consulting business. Lou discovered that turning managers into leaders was a transformational experience that was typically an *unlearning* process. As he said: "We found out that talking *at* people was worse than useless. We were looking at an insurrection because the IBM executives wouldn't stand for a bunch of Wharton Business School types lecturing at them like kids. It wasn't until the IBM Executive School went to an eight-week completely experiential curriculum that we began to see the results and transformations we were looking for. Only through *doing* do

people actually learn. And what they initially learn is everything they *thought*, they knew was wrong. Only then are they ready to change."

The SKS uses this same approach of unlearning as the route to real self-knowledge. We read a *lot* in the SKS, but the accent is on intimacy, action, and experiential learning. The uniquely SKS approach is akin to what a business associate of mine never tires of repeating to his employees: "Don't *figure*, it out, get off your butt and *find* out."

In our case, "action" primarily means organizational activities in and around building the SKS community. While traditional community service activities play a key role in the SKS curricula, organizational activities in and around building the SKS community provide the essential arena where the SKS emphasis on action takes place. A number of elements in SKS organizational activities turn an organ concert into a spiritual practice for the students putting it on:

Service and Selflessness. Richard Rose, the Zen Master and West Virginia hillbilly who introduced me to the spiritual life, never accepted any money for his tireless efforts. When asked how he could be repaid, he inevitably served up the following mantra: "Pass it on, just pass it on. If this stuff has done something for you, make it available to others." One of the most profound mysteries of the spiritual path is that the road to finding one's true self is to forget oneself in the service of others. The SKS organizational activities simply "pass it on."

Community Building. The SKS community, while open to all, requires a sense of trust and intimacy that can only be found through commitment to the spiritual life. While there have recently been some encouraging signs that things may be changing, America is still a profoundly materialistic culture. Those who set out to dedicate even a fair proportion of time to the spiritual life must be prepared to find themselves swimming against the tide most of the time. Through working together on various projects, students see that they are truly not alone in their aspirations.

Leadership. Even covering a campus with posters cannot be done alone. SKS students use these organizational exercises to learn about themselves by learning about others, and to do this in a conscious deliberate fashion where something is on the line. This experience of successfully working together for common goals fosters trust and intimacy that can, in the blink of an eye, turn an SKS class into a profoundly moving event for all involved. When a shy and fumbling Freshman finds himself or herself a competent and compelling Senior leader, there is no doubt in anyone's mind that a "transformation" has taken place.

Character Building. Performing to the SKS mark means performing under pressure. And pressure is perhaps the only thing that cuts through who we would like to *think* we are and

shows us (and others) who we *really* are. Armchair introspection, whatever its merits, rarely accomplishes this. With high expectations and group commitments, we don't just *think about* ourselves and others – we encounter ourselves and others. The result of all this is that, through SKS organizational activities, spirituality becomes relevant to the students. One of Richard Rose's axioms was that much of spiritual work is just hard thinking. Not difficult thinking. Intense thinking. The challenges of working together, of real success, of real failure, expose students to real-life problems that, by definition, stir up the type of hard thinking Rose was talking about. As a result, class discussion can be maintained at a gut level rather than at an abstract theoretical one.

The Miraculous

Behind all the posters, events, journals, and organ concerts, there is something truly magical about the SKS. In many an SKS meeting, students are moved, often profoundly. Without this element, all I have written so far might be a template for a well-run encounter group, leadership training, or even a successful business, but it would not be spiritual. This miraculous, even esoteric, quality is the essence of the SKS experience – yet students often report that this is what they find most difficult to explain to their peers and parents. For myself, I do not try to understand it too much, lest it go away. As Jesus says in the Bible, "When two or more are gathered in my name I am in their midst." It is grace. Instead of speculating further, I will share the following letter from a Duke student, describing her experience in SKS classes.

When the SKS classes first began, I must admit I did not take it seriously. I observed it, like a child examining a curious new toy. I did not expect to get caught up in the game. However, I am truly impressed with the heat that the class has produced, the pressure that it subjects upon itself. Perhaps I still seem to be an unattached observer, but it is no longer true. I have walked home from this class with tears streaming down my cheeks, touched.

Last year, I tried to pop amaranth, an ancient Aztec grain at my friend's house. I had suggested it in a manner of jest, but we tried it anyway. Amaranth are the tiniest little dark grains, and we poured them into the popcorn popper. It was so incredible to hear the first few kernels popping, and then to watch them bounce wildly all over the kitchen counter. We laughed so hard, it was so beautifully unexpected. Anyway, a couple of weeks ago the memory came to me, and I realized that it was the same feeling that I had towards my SKS class. It is so incredible to watch people turn inside out, revealing their rippled white core, breaking out of shells. So the question I must ask myself is, have I popped? Or am I a lone kernel, left at the bottom, unsuccessful and unpopped?

Conclusion

Transformation by its very nature is an adventure. That is its allure to students. And like any adventure, it has its risks. It cannot be embarked upon with the precondition: "I'll try, God, but only if you promise me that in six months, I'll be much happier than I am now." All too often this is what we are looking for, whether we are willing to admit it or not. But the evidence of the sages weighs in with a contrary point of view. There may be, and probably will be, many a "dark night of the soul." Like the ancient Israelites lost in the desert, we will long nostalgically for the good old days in Egypt. No true exponent of the spiritual life should purport to be able to spare the student any of this. On the contrary, in many cases good teaching may be like Carl Jung's notion of the psychologist who, as gently as possible, pulls the legs of untruth out from under the student. All that can be promised, a promise born out by the teachers of every tradition and our own experience, is that if the student has the courage to see it through, he or she may one day experience, as Carter said at King Tut's tomb, "wonderful things." Things that leave us in a profound state of awe, speechlessness, and above all, inexpressible gratitude.

August Turak is a lifetime spiritual seeker and businessman who has studied with teachers like Richard Rose, an American Zen master, Lou Mobley, founder of the IBM Executive School, and Father Christian Carr, OCSO, of Mepkin Abbey. He has also worked as an executive with MTV, the Arts and Entertainment network and other major corporations. He recently retired after selling Raleigh Group International, one of the two software companies he founded in Raleigh, NC, which was rated 8th Fastest Growing in the Triangle by KPMG Pete Marwick. Turak is now pursuing graduate studies in Theology while continuing to work with the Self Knowledge Symposium, the non-profit organization he founded to help college students and adults with vocational discernment, leadership and ethical development, and rigorous spiritual seeking.

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