

An Interview with Diana Chapman Walsh

We are very aware that you have been on your own spiritual journey. Can you tell us what prompted this search and how you experience your own spirituality?

I suppose every life is, in its own way, a “spiritual journey,” if we take that, as I understand it, to mean a lifelong search for meaning, an evolving process of discovery and growth. While the search for meaning has always been an organizing feature of my life, I didn’t really begin something I would have identified as a “spiritual journey” until I was in my forties. It was then that a three-year national leadership fellowship from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation put me in contact with forty other people selected from around the country for their work as change agents and emerging leaders in their fields. At the opening retreat organized by the Kellogg Foundation, a small group went off to discuss “spirituality.” I heard about it after the fact, and remember thinking to myself, “well that’s odd...whatever they’re doing is not what I’m about”. But as I came to know these people and developed a deeper sense of what they were doing, I became intrigued and captivated. I came to recognize that this “spirituality” talk was about the inner work (what we might call the “self-leadership”) that I consider an essential complement to trustworthy leadership in any organization, or setting, or role. And it was as I came to understand “spiritual work” in these terms that it began to resonate with me.

To give you some background, I grew up in the Quaker tradition; my mother’s side of the family has deep roots in the Religious Society of Friends in Philadelphia. So as a child on “first days” I would sit in silent meeting for worship and discover that this was a place in which I felt centered, calm, collected and connected to a caring community. But it was the Kellogg experience, and a small group of fellows with whom I participated in a number of weekend retreats over that three-year period from 1988 to 1990, that helped me to embark upon the deeper, more intimate journey to which you refer.

That was the point in my life, also, when I met Parker Palmer. The connection with Parker has been particularly important to me. He has become a spiritual teacher for me, as he has for so many others, including a great many educators. For my part, Parker and I had a number of commonalities that drew me to him from the outset. He came out of the Quaker tradition, and awakened my

childhood memories of disciplines and practices I had largely abandoned. He was trained as an academic sociologist, as was I, so we had that disciplinary orientation in common. In addition, we both treasure language and word play, and poetry, and I love his dry sense of humor. I have learned a tremendous amount through my ongoing interactions with Parker, as well as by writing here and there about those interactions and what they have meant to me as I have been evolving my own leadership.

The one additional point I would make is that in the rather demanding leadership role I have been playing at Wellesley these past dozen years, I face challenges every day that call on all the resources I can muster. And to meet those challenges I've been rather purposeful in my efforts to define and practice a form of leadership that suits my own personal style and strengths and involves attending to the question of the inner work of leadership – of how a leader can lead him or herself before presuming to lead others. And one way to view that question is as a spiritual one. How does the leader maintain her connection to inspiration and to the larger meaning of the work she is attempting to lead? Parker wrote brilliantly about this challenge in an influential essay entitled “Leading From Within.” So these spiritual questions function as a touchstone for me to come back to when issues on the job become convoluted, entangled or difficult. That's been an exciting and interesting part of my journey of leadership. And I was lucky to arrive on the scene at Wellesley College when there was a nascent effort already underway to redefine for the college the role of spirituality in an excellent education. I did not anticipate the extent to which my presidency would become associated with these efforts and questions.

You also have been an advocate and supporter of creating opportunities for students at Wellesley to be in dialogue with each other about issues of faith. Could you tell us the story behind these efforts?

When I arrived as president, Wellesley College had a new Dean of Religious and Spiritual Life, Victor K. Kazanjian, who had been on the job for just a year. The title was new, the role was new and the thinking behind it had come out of a year-long planning process initiated by my predecessor, Nan Keohane. Among several architects of this new model was Peter Gomes, who was a Wellesley trustee. Dr. Gomes is the chaplain of Harvard University and the Christopher Plummer Professor of Christian Morals there. At President Keohane's request, he and others undertook a thoughtful exploration for Wellesley to discover how a non-sectarian institution that was nevertheless built upon a Christian foundation might think about a chaplaincy program in this new age of increasing student diversity. A number of institutions were answering that question by backing away from any kind of organized religious program for fear that it would alienate students who were coming to college from an increasingly wide range of religious and faith traditions.

This group did not see backing away as an option. Rather, they began to design a new model that could welcome all religions and faith traditions. A key structural element of this model was the new role of the Dean of Religious and Spiritual Life, who would report both to the President and to the Dean of Students. The reporting structure was created to signify that the dean's responsibilities included a pastoral, spiritual, ethical, and moral responsibility to the college as a whole (not only to the student body) and a consulting role to the whole institution, through the President. Further, this position would not operate in a typical chaplaincy role for any particular religious group; although our current dean happens to be an ordained Episcopal minister. We have a separate chaplain for Protestant ministry, a chaplain for the Catholic community, and so on. The dean would serve in an advocacy, administrative, and leadership role to bring all the religious and faith traditions together.

Victor Kazanjian is a remarkable man and soon after I arrived, he and I developed a strong working relationship that has deepened over the years. The success of this partnership has been among the joys of my presidency. An important symbolic moment –early on -- was the evening before my inauguration. Victor organized and led a multi-faith service in the chapel for all the trustees and my invited guests, family, and friends and members of the college community. It was a beautiful service welcoming a new president to the college and a lovely preview of the meaning that the multifaith model would have in my presidency.

Can you describe for us in some detail the kinds of efforts/initiatives that have been designed to assist students in their spiritual development?

Under the Dean of Religious and Spiritual Life, we have six chaplains who constitute a multi-faith team of professionals. This multi-faith team reports to the dean, works with her/his own congregation, and contributes to the work of bringing the traditions together on our campus. The professional team of chaplains works with a multi-faith student council representing thirteen different faith traditions in total. The student council has two representatives from each of the thirteen religious/faith traditions (more like the U.S. Senate than the House of Representatives in the sense that representation isn't proportional to the size of the faith community on the campus). This structure allows the multi-faith council to come together to iron out differences and plan thoughtful multi-faith programs on campus throughout the year.

Among the critical principles that guide this council is the structure of opportunity it offers every student who wants to come to college and explore her own evolving religious and spiritual beliefs and commitments. Given that one of the important projects of late adolescence is the completion of identity formation and making meaning of one's life, intellectually as well as emotionally and spiritually, it was important that we create opportunities for any student seeking to explore her own faith tradition in a deeper way. Working with members of the multi-faith team, there are all kinds of programs and projects that, for example, the

Protestants engage in with the Protestant Chaplain or the Jewish students with the Hillel Director and so on. All these events are very lively and active and are designed to enable students to take the initiative in creating their own opportunities to explore in greater detail their individual commitments to their respective faith traditions.

In addition, there is an expectation that students will share in a commitment to understanding in greater detail the perspectives of other religious and faith traditions. This serves as an opportunity to combine efforts and create greater unity across traditions. So each group has an obligation to reach out and explore differences between groups in the hopes of gaining a more nuanced understanding of commonalities and differences.

The multi-faith team, with the multifaith council, plan and are a visible presence at all of the public religious events for the campus community, celebratory moments, sacred moments, and gatherings at which we grieve together, or support one another at times of crisis or need. These have become extraordinary opportunities to join the campus together in spiritual connection. Every fall for example, on the second Sunday after classes have begun, we have “Flower Sunday.” This is the oldest tradition of the college – it began in 1876 I think, the year after the college was founded. It has evolved from a Christian service to one that speaks to the great diversity of traditions that now make up the Wellesley community. Students bring flowers to their “little sisters,” and accompany them to the chapel where we all gather and enjoy a service that reminds us of both our particularity and our commonality. The chapel is filled to overflowing; it’s a highlight of the year.

The council also comes together at moments of crisis, or tragedy, or conflict and organizes a multifaith gathering to create productive ways in which to address the issues at hand. They’ve developed a number of other educational programs as well. One is entitled, “Beyond Tolerance.” It is a theatrical piece in which the student members of the multifaith council enact the encounters between religious and faith traditions, the concrete differences between traditions, the stereotypes that tend to divide them and the deeper sources of connection. It’s really quite a beautiful theatrical piece that they’ve written and taken on the road in order to open conversations about the possibilities for religious pluralism that goes beyond grudging or willed “tolerance” to a true and appreciative encounter with the underlying beauty of that which is other.

In a previous conversation with Cheryl Keene (Dean of Community Learning at Antioch College) she spoke about how we, as a society, used to place greater emphasis on coming together as a community, particularly around tragedy or divisive issues. As a reflection of our larger social context, colleges and universities have since shifted away from this practice. In speaking on this issue, she posed an interesting question: Where do we find the “spiritual backbone”, if you will, for campuses to

come together at those difficult moments when community is needed most? It seems that the Wellesley multi-faith council serves that purpose.

It's an intriguing question. I have been struck during my presidency by the unusual ability college and university campuses have to come together in mutual support and collective questioning at times of crisis or tragedy. On September 11, 2001, faced with an unprecedented crisis for which none of us could possibly have been prepared, all of us instinctively mobilized in similar ways -- with candlelight vigils and prayer services and many extra support services in the days immediately following the attack. For many months following 9/11, our campus held all sorts of educational programs and discussions seeking to make sense of something that made no sense to any of us. It is easier to find that "spiritual backbone" to which Cheryl refers when we are responding to attacks from without, as was clearly the case on 9/11, than when we are dealing with the internal conflicts prevalent in our culture and on our campuses as the nation becomes increasingly more polarized.

Students need to develop the skills to navigate these waters. This winter I spoke at the annual meeting at Florida State University's Center for Student Values. In preparation for that talk, I decided to meet with a group of Wellesley's student leaders, figuring that I ought to speak to the real experts before I went off to Florida representing myself as one. I spent about an hour with these students and had them talk about their leadership and the values that they felt they were seeking to enact and foster on the campus. Half of the group were members of the college student government and the other half I invited were members of the multi-faith council. And it was fascinating to see the differences in how they were thinking about leadership and how intrigued the student government leaders were as they listened to the multi-faith council leaders. All of the student leaders were intent on building community; this was the greatest challenge they saw and the deepest motivation for their work. But the multi-faith leaders seemed clearer and more articulate about the sources of their commitments and about the structure of the value systems within which they were operating. I found myself backing away and watching and listening, as the students engaged each other in what turned out to be a fascinating interaction that I suspect continued long beyond our hour together.

I should also mention that Wellesley College hosted a national conference some years ago, which Victor Kazanjian organized. It was a remarkable gathering that drew several hundred participants -- far more than we anticipated -- and what we discovered was that there was a yearning among many in the academy that hadn't found a place to settle. So when we extended our invitation, we received acceptances from chaplains, and student life professionals, and other administrators, and faculty and deans and even some presidents who were eager to come and talk about the idea of "education as transformation" (the title of the conference, and the subsequent book, and the ongoing organization that grew out of the conference). In my travels, even now, I frequently encounter

people for whom the “Wellesley conference” was the beginning of a conversation that has continued to this day.

What have been some of the challenges to creating these opportunities for students to grow spiritually?

The greatest challenge has been to hold open a space for honest and probing dialogue through the waves of fear and conflict that inevitably arise from the encounters we create by encouraging diverse perspectives. For us, these have been hard, painful, sometimes angry struggles and can take a huge amount of time—my time as President as well as Victor’s time and that of other members of the student life team. Sometimes the conflicts arise within a group, and sometimes between groups. Often, issues of identity formation create the tensions. The struggle that centers on what I would call an assumption of scarcity -- the notion that we live in a finite, competitive world and if your group gets more than my group has than I’m going to feel disadvantaged in some way. So, moving out of that world of scarcity and into a world of abundance is always a difficult challenge, and yet is an essential step if we are going to learn from our differences.

While conflict often centers on resources, it can also result from a simple need to feel appreciated. To cite a recent example, Victor organized a very thoughtful series of conversations when the film, “The Passion of Christ,” was first released. He was able to get out ahead of the national conversation that ensued shortly after the film opened. He enlisted members of our faculty who could bring relevant expertise to an exceptionally thoughtful analysis of the issues raised by the film. This effort brought together the intellectual work found daily within our classrooms with the often quite separate domain of students’ active extracurricular lives. In effect, Victor took advantage of a national controversy over a major film to encourage students and faculty to bridge the “divide” that often challenges us within the academy—how you bring those two worlds of intellectual growth and spiritual growth together. So that is an example of a potential intragroup conflict.

At other times, a conflict arises through controversies between groups. These situations are frequently an epiphenomenon or an echo of something that has erupted out in the world. And if we make the commitment to engage these differences when they arise they almost always present remarkable opportunities for learning and growth. It can be messy, and we don’t shy away from that, and the resolution is not always immediate, but we assume nothing is ultimately a failure so long as we stay in relationship and continue seeking opportunities to confront who we are, what is real, and how to bridge our differences in the most honest and thoughtful way. Occasionally, a student will graduate carrying a grudge or a disappointment, which is always discouraging. But far more often, seniors look back on the moments of conflict and struggle and marvel at how much they have learned and matured as a consequence of having brought their

passionate commitment to the difficult work of entering a different worldview empathetically.

Can you talk about some of the benefits for students, faculty, and the institution as a whole as it relates to the opportunities for spiritual growth found at Wellesley?

This opportunity to engage in difference and the learning that comes from that offers us a chance to more fully understand the common ground and the humanity of all religions and faith traditions. Likewise, every faith tradition represents a taproot into our own meaning and purpose and hopefulness. When we engage these differences we can get beyond tolerance and begin to appreciate the degree to which we are all interdependent. There are obvious implications of this work – extensions of it – into the work of bridging cultures and ethnic and racial differences as well.

Just this spring we had a beautiful example. Last year, a group of African-American students had invited a controversial speaker to campus and a serious conflict ensued between the Black and the Jewish communities on campus. Both groups had worked hard through this year to rebuild relationships that had been tested by the conflict the year before. Towards the end of the academic year, student Hillel leaders planned an important event – a dedication of a new prayer book in honor of an alumna who had died. Completely on their own, with no prompting from the chaplains or advisors, the Hillel students arranged a multifaith, multicultural dedication service that included students from every religious, racial, and ethnic background. It turned out to be one of the most moving and beautiful events of the year, a chance for students to come together to reconcile after a prior conflict. Importantly, it was organized entirely by the students. The adults who were in attendance were completely surprised, and enormously gratified, to see the students taking charge so effectively.

What are some of your thoughts about higher education's responsibility to provide opportunities for students' growth and development in the spiritual domain?

What I can speak for, more than higher education generally, is liberal education. A fundamental goal of liberal education is to enable students to develop and employ not only their intellectual capacities, but also their physical, emotional, and spiritual capacities as a foundation for a fuller, more meaningful life—an examined life, a life rooted in critical thinking and dedicated to continual learning. And a liberally educated person should be prepared to encounter life both with a critical eye, a respect for evidence, and with a sense of hope, meaning, purpose and a belief that his or her actions can make a difference in the world. In this era, where anti-intellectualism is routinely combined with irony and skepticism, critical thinking and moral engagement seem both rare and essential.

My hope is that students who take advantage of the opportunities we offer them to explore the spiritual domain while they are in college will develop the ability to collaborate and communicate with fluency across a wide range of cultures, races, religions, and socioeconomic groups. I hope they will learn to appreciate and skillfully use conflict as a creative intellectual force for mining what they know from their disagreements and differences. I hope they will develop the grace and the generosity of spirit to design and sustain communities of meaning and hope, communities that will offer all their members opportunities to learn and grow, to make contributions and to be seen and recognized for who they are and what they bring. These are the qualities of mind and character, it seems to me, that we are going to need as we work our way through some dangerous challenges in the years immediately ahead.

Diana Chapman Walsh is President of Wellesley College in Wellesley, MA. Prior to assuming her position as Wellesley President, Dr. Walsh was the Florence Sprague Norman and Laura Smart Norman Professor at the Harvard School of Public Health. She is the author of fourteen books and numerous articles, including several noted pieces on issues of spirituality and leadership. Dr. Walsh is currently a member of the National Advisory Board for the Higher Education Research Institute's "Spirituality in Higher Education Project".