

VOLUME 5, ISSUE 1

FEBRUARY 2009

“What Would Parker Palmer Do?”: Confessions of a New Practitioner

By Abigail Nathanson

Through personal reflection, Nathanson introduces Stanford’s Spirituality, Service and Social Change (SSSC) Fellowship Program as a model for how to integrate spirituality and civic education into curricular and co-curricular experiences. She describes her experience co-facilitating the SSSC seminar and working with college students engaged in service learning in order to foster a deeper spiritual understanding and motivate students toward social change in their communities through their service work.

It was mid-way through a lively class discussion when Sally asked, “How do we separate our beliefs from stereotypes in working towards social justice?” The students looked at me with their pens steady. Sally had been struggling with feeling unsafe on her morning walk through San Francisco’s Tenderloin district to her summer public service fellowship at Planned Parenthood for the past couple weeks. I tried to conjure up all the student development theories I learned in graduate school, but my mind was blank. Maybe Rev. McLennan would say something? But when I looked over at him, he was also eagerly awaiting my response. Pens started tapping. After a few moments of silence in the classroom, I managed to squeak, “That’s a great question, Sally. Many of us experience a similar tension. Would anyone like to comment?” Pens dropped. Someone yawned. I counted the minutes until I could run to my office, thumb through my bookshelves and ask myself once again, “What Would Parker Palmer Do?”

It has now been two years since that awkward classroom silence, but the memory follows me into subsequent sessions of the Spirituality, Service and Social Change (SSSC) Fellowship seminar offered through the Haas Center for Public Service at Stanford University. As a Hebrew school drop out, occasional yogi, and twenty-something child of aspiring New Age Midwesterners, my path to co-facilitating this service-learning seminar alongside the Deans from the Office for Religious Life and United Campus Christian Ministry has often been unclear. Despite having a Masters degree in Student Development, I’m still grappling with many of the same life questions as my students. So what do I know about promoting college student spiritual development and social justice? I ask myself this question often, and find comfort in the discovery that my role is more about

creating what Parker Palmer (2004) calls “spaces that are safe for the soul,” than about having all the answers (p. 52). By providing many different examples of spirituality, service, and social change throughout the SSSC seminar, I have learned that the role of facilitator is to witness student responses, while challenging and supporting them to trust in their ability to find their own answers to life’s biggest questions.

ABOUT THE SPIRITUALITY, SERVICE & SOCIAL CHANGE FELLOWSHIP PROGRAM

The SSSC Fellowship is a collaboration among nonprofits, professionals, students, administrators, philanthropists, religious representatives, and community leaders, in which all are both teachers and learners. The Haas Center for Public Service and Office for Religious Life at Stanford, United Campus Christian Ministries, Shinnyo-en Foundation, the H. Michael Stevens Family, and various nonprofits in the San Francisco Bay Area provide multidimensional support of the Fellowships Program and the SSSC seminar. Established nearly two decades ago for students considering careers in the ministry, the fellowship was reorganized in 1997 to attract students from diverse religious and spiritual backgrounds.

Undergraduate students apply to the SSSC Fellowship through the Fellowships Program at the Haas Center, and, if selected, up to 6 students a year receive a stipend to work full-time with nonprofits in the Bay Area over the summer. Students from all backgrounds are encouraged to apply to the program, including those who do not claim any particular spiritual beliefs. Similarly, students apply with many different service and social change agendas in mind and have the opportunity to work with organizations on various issues including education, LGBTQ rights, homelessness, and peace work, among others. As one way of maximizing awareness, students divide their time between direct service work and policy or advocacy work and often work in two different sites over the summer to meet this expectation.

At their placement sites, students’ work varies and usually includes teaching, community organizing, site visits, and administrative work, depending on organization needs. In some cases, partnering organizations play many different roles within the program. For example, the Shinnyo-en Foundation, located in the Financial District in San Francisco, helps fund the Fellowship and also hosts students to work in their office over the summer. This is a unique partnership because students learn about the role of philanthropy in public service and observe the grant-making process by working directly with donors and grantees throughout the summer.

As part of their award, students are required to participate in a weekly two-hour seminar at the Haas Center throughout the duration of their summer fellowship. The purpose of the seminar is to foster reflection and understanding about spirituality, community service and social change by learning about and discussing the many perspectives that define these topics. With such an array of backgrounds and interests among students and facilitators, we look for common ground and identify differences through questions like “What makes meaning in your life and how does this motivate you towards service and social change? How do your values and beliefs sustain you in service and social change work? How do other people answer these questions?” Ultimately, as a class, we aim to embrace our

commonality and difference through careful, thoughtful, and respectful dialogue. Our goal is to help students find alignment with their own personal perspectives, while appreciating the perspectives of others as a way of mobilizing work towards social change.

SSSC facilitators harvest perspectives through shared leadership, rituals, journeys, readings, and reflection. Reflection is a mainstay of students' spiritual development and service-learning work, and, thus, a major part of the SSSC seminar. I have learned that sometimes reflection is the pill you hide in peanut butter for students' benefit: it is easier to digest through the many flavors of experiential learning.

Below are some highlights of the syllabus that have been student-tested and approved:

Leaders: For many years, the Deans from the Office for Religious Life (Rev. Scotty McLennan, Rabbi Patricia Karlin-Neumann, and Rev. Joanne Saunders) have shaped the SSSC seminar. Throughout the summer, the ORL Deans rotate through the seminar each for three weeks so that the students experience different facilitation styles and hear about various approaches to spirituality and service. The campus minister from the United Campus Christian Ministries, Rev. Geoff Browning, is another important part of the class. Geoff divides his time between work with Stanford students and work in the surrounding community of Palo Alto. In the past, community partners have led discussions about their work in nonprofits and talked about their personal motivations for the work they do. And of course, there is me: representing the service-learning perspective and a patchwork of motivations for my work. My first summer co-facilitating this seminar, I couldn't help but wonder: Do I belong here? But I quickly came to realize that representation of our stories helps personify the many access and connection points in spirituality, service, and social change. In my role as the least experienced of the facilitators, I help de-mystify struggle by expressing uncertainty and model asking for support if I need it. Students relate to each of the facilitators to some degree, and piece together their own spirituality toolkits through the spotlight on many kinds of stories.

Rituals: Sharing sacred objects is a long held tradition in the SSSC seminar. Students and facilitators bring in a representation of their values and beliefs and pass this object around for others to hold. Every year, students bring in an assortment of objects and it is powerful to see the many interpretations of the word "sacred." Journals, cell phones, Bibles, and family photos are usually among the objects dotting the table on sacred object day in class. Inevitably, as facilitators we also ask about the sacred spaces or objects in the students' placements. We try to find connections between student sacred objects and those of the people receiving services at their host organization. What are the commonalities and differences? What is the importance of these things in service to organizations?

Places: Site visits are another important part of the seminar experience. Students often work in placements scattered throughout the Bay Area over the summer and only get to hear about the work that their classmates do. In an effort to build awareness about many images of service and social change, we all pile into a van and visit one or two of the organizations hosting students for the summer. In preparation for one site visit last summer, I asked students to look at the values of the organization and notice any

overlap or difference in interpretation with the five personal values that they had selected for themselves in class the week before. Students make connections with their spiritual building blocks and those of fellow students, and sometimes find points of alignment with an organization where they serve over the summer. When I ask, “How do you turn your values into action?” students are better able to visualize their service work as an extension of self through civic engagement.

Another aspect of the site visit is the opportunity to listen to community voices to learn about the nuances of need throughout each community. Nonprofit staff dispel assumptions about homelessness or poverty and educate students about the realities of social change work. Students learn that values like “hope, patience, and humility” sustain some community members in lifelong work towards much needed change in their communities. At a retreat hosted in part by the Shinnyo-en Foundation, students interact with youth service workers from across the country, and hear about the challenges and growth in these organizations. In this, community partners are empowered as co-educators and collaborators in the seminar, rather than mere recipients of student service.

Readings and Classroom Discussion: Students also really seem to love the “Reading on You” assignment, where they select 3-4 pages worth of readings that represent their values and beliefs. Although they appreciate readings from many different political and spiritual leaders represented through selections in Paul Loeb’s *The Impossible Will Take a Little While* and Bill Moyer’s *Doing Democracy*, there is a certain excitement around the submission of the reading that they select about themselves. Some students choose verses from the Bible, others gather abstract poems, and a few students copy snippets of writings on advocacy work and social change. Through appreciative inquiry, we unpack the importance of these readings to each of us. We also talk about how these works might motivate and sustain us in challenging service and social change work. This, along with the sacred object exercise, helps students identify a more dynamic personal spiritual toolkit.

Spiritual Reflection: Finally, at the end of the summer, students write their Spiritual Autobiography – a final self-report and synthesis of the discoveries about their motivations to serve. They are given a few possible prompts, but it is mostly a free write exercise. Although students write a weekly response to guided reflection questions and share their musings during our check-in at each class, tying together their thoughts in a cohesive paper allows them to assess any personal change or growth over their summer. Through this assignment, they navigate personal and group lessons learned and together define what it means to be an ethical and effective public servant.

These highlights represent the breadth and depth necessary to provide students many angles on dealing with challenging personal and social issues. Overall, the SSSC Fellowship experience encourages students to explore their approach to issues and navigate complex situations where the personal becomes social and the social becomes personal. Students are given the space to describe their uncertainty and frustration and joy in relation to social justice work and analyze these feelings through the lens of core values and beliefs. This process supports students to practice living with integrity and find

motivation to keep going even when things are tough or unfair. Through their service experience, students gain a more nuanced understanding of working with others and find ways to compromise when there are many different opinions. Ultimately, students learn to articulate their beliefs in the context of a diverse world and become more engaged citizens in the process.

PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

Back to Sally's question. You may have noticed that the students didn't seem to like all that space I allowed for their souls in the class discussion two years ago. They wanted answers. Admittedly, it has been challenging at times to convince students of my role in the class as more of a "co-learner" than "expert." I confess, the awkward silences have not entirely disappeared. However, I am now beginning to recognize student resistance to answering their own questions as a powerful pedagogical tool. This tension stimulates growth and can help students move from dualistic thinking to stronger critical thinking about knowledge creation. When students can hold multiple perspectives about the world while listening to what Palmer calls their "inner teacher," there is more space for the soul to serve with authenticity (p. 53). As my own inner teacher knows, crafting a place for students to discover this truth for themselves is the way I can best serve their development, while fostering the next generation of spiritually attuned, engaged citizen leaders.

Abigail Nathanson, M.A., received her Masters in Student Development from the University of the Pacific in 2006. Her thesis examined the connection between service-learning and moral development of college students. Nathanson is currently the Public Service Fellowships Program Coordinator at the Haas Center for Public Service at Stanford University. Her areas of interest within service learning include diversity and peace education, and she participates in Nonviolent Communication (NVC) training and UNtraining in the Bay Area. Nathanson hopes to participate in a workshop with Parker Palmer at the Center for Courage and Renewal in Washington in the near future.

References

Loeb, P. (2004). *The Impossible Will Take A Little While*. New York: Basic Books.

Moyer, B., McAllister, J., Finley, M.L., Soifer, S. (2001). *Doing Democracy*. Gabriola Island, BC, Canada: New Society Publishers.

Palmer, P. (2004). *A Hidden Wholeness*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.