

Spiritual Transformation in a Secular Context: A Qualitative Research Study of Transformative Learning in a Higher Education Setting

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The offering of a graduate-level seminar at a major, public, North American university on the spiritual and moral dimensions of educational leadership provided the authors the unique opportunity to research the connections between higher education and spirituality, to determine the extent to which spiritual transformation might be possible within a secular institution. The study's 17 student seminar members were challenged, through reframing exercises and case studies, to enter empathetically into the inner life of colleagues, their own students, supervisors and supervisees in order to experience a shift in consciousness, from the egocentric to the compassionate. Employing participant observation, interviews and term assignment analysis the researchers were able to document and account for significant incidents of personal and spiritual transformation, lying along a continuum from the epochal to the incremental (Mezirow and Associates, 2000). The data, then, lend themselves to the conclusion that spiritual transformation might not be incompatible with higher education's traditional role of knowledge and skill transfer.

University education celebrates the life of the mind. Academic specialists teach and research in an environment that honors objectivity and rationality in the pursuit of truth. Recently, however, a significant, if still embryonic, complimentary force, in the form of transformative education, has emerged in sectors of North American higher education to challenge the dominance of the prevailing technical-rational-instrumental worldview. The alternative perspective of transformative education finds one expression in the rise of a series of courses, seminars and even programs, on topics centering on spirituality and its relationship to transformative learning (Duerr, Zajonc & Dana, 2003; Kazanjian & Laurence, 2000).

Very little systematic, empirical research, however, with few exceptions (e.g., Tisdell, 2001, 2003), has been carried out on the nature of students' encounters with the challenge of participating in a university course where spiritual insight and personal transformation, while not required nor necessarily expected, are nevertheless an implicit option, if not in the course syllabus then in the context the instructors set (Tisdell & Tolliver, 2003, pp.386-89). This article seeks to take one step towards remedying this research deficit by reporting the findings of a semester-long study of a graduate level course in the spiritual dimensions of educational leadership where the 17 enrollees were invited not only to study spiritual principles of leadership, but to translate these principles into active practice in their personal and professional lives.

Dirkx (1997) in his discussion on the nurturing of *soul* in adult education recognizes the spiritual and transformational dimensions of teaching and learning and notes that while

learning continues to be framed within a technical-rational view of knowledge, in which we learn instrumentally to adapt to the demands of our outer environment, bubbling just beneath this technical-rational surface is a continual search for meaning, a need to make sense of the changes and the empty spaces we perceive both within ourselves and our world. (p. 79)

Within any number of higher education courses, such issues and questions do bubble forth, but addressing these issues directly is rarely the overt agenda of these courses. In contrast, our interest here is emerging courses with explicit spiritual objectives, objectives that emphasize the search for meaning and that allow for the possibility of spiritual transformation in terms of transformative learning.

As we address the possibility of spiritual transformation in higher education, it will be important for us to make a clear distinction between spiritual transformation and transformative education. Transformative education and learning are a series of phenomena that can and do take place in a broad range of higher education settings (O'Sullivan, Morrell & O'Connor, 2002); while spiritual transformation is a subset of these phenomena and an area of teaching and practice that is just beginning to receive scholarly attention. Although not always recognized or the subject of systematic research, transformative learning is far from an uncommon occurrence in post-secondary education, transpiring when students experience significant shifts in perception and behavior upon encountering theories and data that diverge from previous knowledge and understanding, as, for example, when a student might move from

anthropocentrism to biocentrism in the study of ecology. Spiritual transformation takes place when students undergo a shift in consciousness in terms of beliefs and practices around their conception of ultimate meaning and right action, one manifestation, then, of transformative education and learning.

Teaching and Learning for Spiritual Transformation in Higher Education

During this past decade, the interest in spirituality has increased significantly and has been discussed and written about within various contexts such as business, (Fox, 1995) and health care (Do Rozario, 1997; Wright, 2004). Specifically, within the education setting, authors such as Jones (1995), Bohac-Clarke (2002) and Miller (1999) have begun to make connections between teaching practice and spirituality, particularly at the K-12 level. In addition there has been an increasing interest in the spiritual and transformative dimensions of adult learning (Dirkx, 1997; Hunt, 1998; Westrup, 1998; English & Gillen, 2000; Tisdell, 2000). These authors have made links between spirituality and transformative learning, spirituality and adult development, and spiritual learning processes in adult learning. Qualitative research studies that have linked adult education and spirituality have been conducted by Groen (2004) and English (2001). These studies have explored the connections between adult education within the workplace and international development respectively.

However, researchers have only just begun to investigate the connections between adult learning, spirituality and transformative learning within the higher education setting. Tisdell (2001) conducted a qualitative research study that linked spirituality and higher education together by exploring the themes of social justice, spirituality and cultural contexts for 16 women who work in higher education and community development contexts. Shahjahan (2004) brought a student perspective to the struggles and dilemmas of expressing one's spirituality in secular higher education. Then Tisdell and Tolliver (2003) shared their theoretical perspective and practical experiences on infusing a spiritual dimension into the university classroom in order to assist students to reclaim their culture identities and overcome a sense of internalized oppression.

The report by Tisdell and Tolliver (2003) and then the complete study by Tisdell (2003) on the role of spirituality in the lives of 31 post-secondary educators and community activists illustrate quite well the scope of empirical research to date on the practice of spirituality in higher education. Employing qualitative post-structuralist methodology, Tisdell and Tolliver (2003) documented the ways in which their participants

used spirituality to make sense of *internalized oppression* and the multiple identities of race, class and sexual orientation as they seek to express their own authenticity. Though not without struggle, their subjects for most part reported the efficacious nature of spiritual perspectives. But what is absent in these studies, and in the research literature to date, and what the present study seeks to remedy, is an account of the dynamic interplay between an instructor with explicit spirituality objectives and her students, who attempt to both understand and practice them.

Recently, two United States national surveys have appeared which lend credence to the contention that courses with spirituality dimensions are an emerging phenomenon in North American higher education, though as pointed out above, the courses themselves are yet to be the subjects of systematic empirical research. As part of a nation-wide survey, *The Spiritual Life of College Students* (Higher Education Research Institute, 2005a), UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) asked its members to submit course syllabi "that they considered to be distinctly spiritual in nature" (Higher Education Research Institute, 2005b). Thirty-nine syllabi were received, from disciplines as diverse as the natural sciences to business and management, with titles such as *Spirituality and Leadership*, and *Ethical and Spiritual Dimensions of Leadership*, course names not dissimilar from the seminar that is the subject of this study. Then, a survey conducted by Duerr, Zajonc & Dana, (2003) documented "academic programs and other initiatives in North American universities and colleges that incorporate transformative and spiritual elements of learning" (p. 177). In the conclusion of their review they indicate that since there was only "fragmentary evidence for such research [pedagogical efforts around transformative and spiritual learning] ... studies on the student experience of the transformative/spiritual classroom would be helpful" (p. 205). Through this qualitative research study, we have begun to address this identified need.

The Study

The research reported here took place in the Faculty of Education at the University of Calgary. This is a setting that provides a unique opportunity to examine the connections between higher education and spirituality since the Faculty in its Graduate Division of Educational Research offers seven graduate seminars on aspects of spirituality and education, such as: *Spirituality in a Post-Modern Age*; *Spirituality of Teaching Excellence*; *Spirituality of Inspired Leadership*; and *The Spiritual and Moral Dimensions of Leadership*. These courses attract primarily, though by no means exclusively, schoolteachers who are working on Master of

Education degrees in order to certify as administrators, curriculum specialists, and educational technologists, among others specializations. The spirituality-oriented courses are not required courses in any of these programs, but serve as options.

Methodology

The first author (Groen) approached Jacob (the second author) in the summer of 2003 about the possibility of becoming a participant observer in Jacob's seminar, *The Spiritual and Moral Dimensions of Leadership: Relationships and Emotions in Organizational Environments*, which was to be offered during the fall term in the Faculty of Education at the University of Calgary, where both authors are faculty members. Overall, the study applied an exploratory, qualitative approach (Glesne, 1999; Merriam & Simpson, 2001) based on content analysis of interview transcripts, assignment submissions and artifacts (such as course outline, handouts, references), and field notes taken by Groen during and after each class..

Groen, upon receiving ethical clearance, attended twelve of the thirteen meetings of the seminar over the course of the fall term. As a participant observer she was fully engaged in the small group activities designed for the 17 seminar members, while in the large-group discussions Groen primarily took on the role of observer. In Groen's role as participant observer, she entered the classroom with a desire to learn about the events, actions and interactions that were taking place each week within the classroom. In taking field notes, she focused initially upon a more holistic description of events and activities. As the participants for the in-depth interviews were chosen, she began to take additional notes on their behaviors, body language, and affective responses to the content of the course and the processes of learning that were utilized by the instructor.

By consistently attending the class for several weeks, being explicit in the very first class about her research agenda and her role as participant observer and demonstrating genuine involvement in the course material, Groen engaged in a reflexive process with the learning community and gradually established trusting relationships with the students and the instructor.

The more you appear to be like the members of this social world or the longer you stay in it, the less your presence may affect the everyday routines. In one sense, you become an integral part of the social world ... reflexivity, in this sense, is the package of reciprocal reactions between the researcher and the participants in the setting. (Rossman & Rallis, 2003, p. 50)

In addition, because of the trusting relationships that had been built and Groen's understanding and engagement with the content of the course and learning processes, she was able to appreciate and extend the conversations that emerged within the interviewing portion of the data collection.

Groen randomly selected six students (two males and four females to reflect approximately the sex ratio of 5 males to 12 females in the class) as well as the instructor for two in-depth and systematic interviews; one at the mid-term point and one at the end of the semester. Within these semi-structured interviews, the following topics served as the guide:

- Why did you choose to take/instruct a course in higher education that addresses some aspect of spirituality?
- What were the processes, critical incidents and reflections that were experienced you (by the students and the instructor, respectively), throughout the term?
- For the final interview Groen focused upon two additional topics: Looking back at the end of the course, what is your perspective on the processes and the content of this course in higher education that addresses some aspect of spirituality?
- What significant learning and teaching processes emerged from this type of learning context that might be helpful to others who endeavor to learn or teach a higher education course on some aspect of spirituality?

In addition, the core sample participants, as well as several other seminar members, voluntarily submitted their course assignments to Groen. These reflective essays that engaged both seminar readings and the students' personal experiences were particularly helpful in assessing the degree of transformative learning taking place over the course of the term.

Jacob, as the instructor and as a participant in the study, was not a party to the data gathering, and was unaware of the participants' identities until after the student evaluations for the course were completed and the students' final grades submitted. Once the seminar was officially over, Jacob became an active collaborator in the data analysis.

As collaborating researchers we first analyzed the data separately by hand and then meet to present our findings to each other. Unbeknownst to either of us, in our independent analysis of the data, each of us took a separate approach to engage in the process. Specifically Jacob utilized an inductive analysis approach where the "researcher may identify **indigenous categories** – the

emic view. Indigenous categories are those expressed by the participants; the researcher discovers them through language” (Rossman & Rallis, 2003, p. 283, emphasis in original). Groen’s approach was more “**deductive**, relying on categories she has developed through the literature or through the previous experience that are expressed in the conceptual framework” (Rossman & Rallis, 2003, p. 283, emphasis in original).

As we met to present our themes to each other, it became apparent that they were quite similar; the difference being the Groen had a conceptual framework with which to organize the indigenous categories that Jacob had developed. Working from a common framework and similar categories, we developed a coding protocol for the data, including the topics: initial attraction to the seminar, spiritual/religious background, pivotal spiritual events in biography, perceived crises/problems in present life, and enlightening thoughts/events from the seminar or their absence. Below, after we outline the backgrounds and expectations of the participants, we present the overall conceptual framework that we utilized to analyze our data: epochal and incremental spiritual transformational journeys.

Participants’ Backgrounds and Expectations

The seminar members, including the study’s six core sample participants, ranged in age from their mid-thirties to mid-fifties, and are identified here by pseudonym. They are in varying stages of completion in their graduate studies program in the University of Calgary’s Faculty of Education, with several of the students both at the beginning and end of their programs. The seminar members’ specializations included educational leadership, educational contexts (philosophy, sociology, history), teaching English as a second language (TESL), workplace and adult learning and educational technology.

In terms of initial attraction to the seminar, the core sample participants presented a diverse, yet patterned, set of motivations. *David*, a secondary school administrator, outlined the reasoning behind his enrolling in the seminar in the following way: “[To] be the best I can be in terms of who I am, find that inner peace, be able to help others and maybe if I can discover it, I can maybe pass it on to others.”

David was the only practicing administrator among the core sample participants, though others entertained administrative aspirations. *Fred*, an elementary school teacher, represents these ambitions when he said, “Well, I plan to go into, hopefully, administration one day so the leadership aspect caught my attention.” But beyond the leadership dimension of the seminar, the core sample participants were also looking for subject

matter that held intrinsic interest, and at the same time constituted a change of pace from the more technical courses of their respective specializations. *Karen*, an elementary teacher, characterized her interest in the seminar in the following words: “The most important thing for me was to take something that I felt a certain amount of passion towards ... I think what I was looking for was a place to share, a place to talk about our lives . . .” Then, *Beth*, an adult educator expressed a similar, and complimentary, attraction to the seminar by noting the course offered something she believed her specialization lacked: “I think that there are other things that we need to think about as teachers and I wasn’t getting any of that stuff in any of [my specialization] courses.”

Pam, a Christian educator, expressed the most divergent motivation of the core sample participants in terms of her decision to enroll in the seminar. She said:

I was really, really curious. When you work in a church your world tends to shrink and become very small because your life and your job are so intertwined that your bubble becomes very Christian. I was very interested in broadening my view. I want to know what people who aren’t Christian think about spirituality, so that totally intrigued me. And how are they going to teach a spirituality course that isn’t Christian-based?

Although the most overtly religious of the core sample participants, Pam exhibits a disposition common to them all: the willingness to divorce their religious beliefs, or absence of them, from the spirituality-based principles the seminar was to investigate. In addition to Pam, David and Karen, as adherents to mainstream Christianity, maintained a church-based faith – David as a *liberal* Catholic and Karen as a member of a traditional, mainline Protestant denomination. David exemplifies this willingness to separate religion and spirituality when he says:

For the most part it [spirituality] is areligious. I believe in a God or in a Supreme Being. But spirituality is about having a sense of calmness and being able to deal with life’s challenges in a calm and relaxed way.

The three other core sample participants, Fred, Beth, and *Linda* (also an adult educator) were not raised in a church-going environment, and as a consequence the separation of spirituality from religion did not carry the danger of undermining religious conviction learned as a child. Fred and Linda still remain apart from organized religion, though Beth as an adult has embarked on a spiritual and religious path outside traditional Christianity. She is a Buddhist and a

practicing meditator, with considerable experience at extended meditation retreats. Consequently, she was initially comfortable with a seminar that disassociated itself from religious tenets in order to examine the perennial wisdom (Huxley, 1990) common to the great spiritual traditions, and that drew much of its actual practice from principles of Buddhist psychology (Benoit, 1955).

The core sample participants, then, as group were anticipating a course that might assist them in their quest to improve their leadership skills and extend their graduate experience with a seminar that would provide a meaningful context for their professional practice. They saw spirituality as a vehicle for this personal renewal. In addition, they also were anticipating a spiritual approach that was not inhibited by a specific religious perspective. Even Pam, the most avowedly religious of the group, was willing to suspend her assumption of the equation of spirituality with religion in order to see “what works about it?”

Conceptual Framework

Over the course of the seminar’s 13 weeks many of the seminar members underwent significant transformational learning experiences as they engaged in the course material, assignments and class discussions. As Mezirow (2000) explained, “Transformation refers to a movement through time [in which we] transform frames of reference by becoming critically reflexive of their assumptions and aware of their context – the source, nature, and consequences of taken-for granted beliefs” (p. 19). According to Mackeracher (1996), as adult learners undergo this process, they are reworking their past model of reality for a new reality. “Adults learning focuses primarily on modifying, transforming, and reintegrating knowledge and skills, rather than on forming and accumulating them as in childhood” (p. 37). She also pointed out that as one undergoes this revision of self, the emotional aspects of learning can be tumultuous, as one is very much attached to the values and beliefs that inform the sense of self.

Transformational learning, especially when it involves subjective reframing, is often an intensely threatening emotional experience in which we have to become aware of both the assumptions undergirding our ideas and those supporting our emotional responses to the need to change. (Mezirow, 2000, pp. 6-7)

Groen anticipated that the possibility for some form of transformative learning might occur during the seminar since the explicit objective of the course was not, in the first instance, to *learn about* spiritual

precepts, but to practice them. As the course’s mission statement phrased it: “The objective of the seminar is to provide seminar members with a vocabulary and set of skills that will place them in a position to enter into ‘I-Thou’ [Buber 1984] relationships with colleagues and students in school and work settings” (Jacob, 2003, course syllabus). The course was designed explicitly to engage learners beyond an abstract or conceptual level, to challenge them to learn how to “skillfully manage one’s own emotions – one’s inner life” (Jacob, 2003, course syllabus).

More specifically, the seminar challenged the students to replace anger, resentment and frustration with understanding, forgiveness and compassion, building on the Buddhist aspiration, “May this suffering serve to awaken compassion.” This aspiration was operationalized through a series of reframing exercises exemplified by a line from the Dalai Lama’s daily prayer, “I will learn to cherish ill-natured beings and those oppressed by strong misdeeds and sufferings, as if I had found a precious treasure” (H.H. Dalai Lama, 2004). Spirituality, consequently, as employed in the seminar was an invitation to move beyond a preoccupation with the self in order to enter the inner life of another — in the words of Thoreau, “Is there a greater miracle than to see through another’s eyes, even for an instant” (cited in Brach, 2003, p. 239).

The majority of the seminar members took up the challenge to lose their self-centeredness in a literal fashion. Five of the six core sample participants reported substantive shifts, though to different degrees, in their perceptions, emotions and behaviors in regard to their professional and personal relationships. In addition, based on his reading of the students’ assignments, Jacob saw 10 of the 17 seminar members experiencing a “rotation of consciousness” (Chodron, 2002), though he believes that most students not reporting significant changes in their perspectives still gave evidence of thoughtfully considering the course content.

While shifts in perception and behavior were not uncommon occurrences across the course of the seminar, the style of the transformative learning journeys and the associated feelings the students experienced underwent varied significantly. For example, the transformational journey for some of the participants, while challenging, was a positive experience, as they felt supported and cared for within the structure of the class interaction. For others who underwent significant transformation, there was a sense, at least temporarily, of an isolated struggle without the nurturance of a supportive community.

Also discernable was the passage through several stages of transformational learning, varying from student to student. According to Mezirow (2000) this progression of transformative learning occurs in 10

distinct phases, which are typically set in motion by a disorienting dilemma—a life event or incident that a person experiences as a crisis that cannot be resolved by applying previous problem-solving strategies. As a result, the person engages in self-examination, often accompanied by unpleasant or undesirable emotions, that leads to a critical assessment of assumptions. Although this situation can be painful or uncomfortable, the individual recognizes that others have had similar experiences and have undergone a similar process. Typically, this leads the individual to consider and explore options for forming new roles, relationships, or actions, followed by a plan of action. This plan consists of acquiring knowledge and skills, trying out new roles, renegotiating relationships, and building competence and self-confidence. Finally, the reintegration process is completed when the individual fully incorporates the new learning—new attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors—into her or his life, which develops into a new, transformed perspective (Mezirow, 2000, p. 22; Moore, 2005, p. 403).

Within these of stages of transformational learning, Mezirow (2000) further distinguished between two types of transformation learning journeys; epochal transformation and incremental transformation. We utilize these two contrasting journeys of transformational learning and staged spiritual transformation within a secular context by presenting, in detail, the contrasting stories of Fred and Linda. Fred provides an example of transformational learning that was clearly *epochal*, a sudden, dramatic, reorienting insight as compared to *incremental* change, involving a progressive series of transformations (Mezirow, 2000, p. 21). Although “epochal transformation is more dramatic, they are typically more painful. Slower, accumulated transformations are more common and less austere” (Moore, 2005, p. 403).

Linda provides a contrasting example where little or no transformational learning occurred, whether incremental or epochal. In addition, we briefly profile the experiences of Pam, Beth, David, and Karen as being examples of incremental transformation. Starting with Fred, we use their own words as much as possible to reflect what this course has meant to them. Then at the conclusion of the case-study material, we draw on an inductive theoretical analysis in order to account for the variations in the transformative learning journeys the seminar members experienced.

Given this conceptual overview of the course objectives, as well as the nature of the data which will follow, one might wonder whether what one sees in practice here could just as well be labeled an *emotionally intelligent* (Goleman, 1995; Salovey, Bracket & Mayer, 2004; cf. Matthews, 2002) approach to personal transformation rather than a spiritual one. There is little question of considerable overlap between

the two approaches since the behavioral outcomes are practically identical: a movement away from destructive emotions (Goleman, 2002) in order to find equanimity in a non-reactive, non-judgmental, empathetic stance towards the intra-personal and the inter-personal dimensions of life. Contextualizing these objectives in a spiritual framework, however, holds potential advantages for both instructor and student. It allows the desired skills to be framed in systems of ultimate meaning (where the purpose of life is to develop these skills, to become *enlightened*) though the recovery of one’s essential nature. On the other hand, if some students find these spiritual assumptions problematic, they may still find the emotional competencies useful, and thus be able to disassociate them from their spiritual trappings.

Findings

Fred’s Story: A Case Study in Epochal Transformation

Fred’s point of departure for his journey on a spiritual path was a confrontation, one he admittedly provoked, between one of his students and himself. Fred (*Mr. J.*) outlined the pivotal encounter with *Bill* in dialogue form in one of his seminar assignments.

Setting: Mr. J.’s grade six classroom

Time: Approximately 30 minutes before quiet reading time.

The scene opens with the students gathered at the front of the room in preparation for listening to Mr. J. read aloud. (Mr. J. has a passion for reading carefully chosen stories and books to his students.) All the students except for one are quiet and waiting with anticipation. The story begins.

Mr. J.: “Okay kids. I’m going to read from our novel.”

Bill, stands and crosses to Mr. J., “Can I read quietly on my own while you’re reading?” Bill, muttering under his breath as he returns to his seat, “I hate this book!”

Mr. J.: “Pardon me?”

Bill: “I didn’t say anything.”

Mr. J.: After a brief pause Mr. J. states rather pointedly, “That is not the kind of attitude I expect my students to have.”

Long pause. Mr. J. is waiting for the student to

apologize for being disrespectful and rude.

They stare defiantly at one another.

An uncomfortable silence grows in the room.

Finally Mr. J. speaks.

Mr. J.: "If that is going to be your attitude, then you can go and sit in the office."

Bill gets up and starts to leave.

Mr. J. continues speaking, "You can return when you can behave like a respectful member of this class."

Bill leaves and then returns after several minutes in the office.

Reflecting in his assignment on this incident, Fred begins to question the self-justifying stories he reflexively tells himself, and then recounts a turning point in the way he frames his world.

Before [this seminar], I would have thought that I handled the situation well. The student was, in my eyes, being disrespectful. Therefore, he had to suffer the consequences — it sounds horrendous to me now, "Suffer the consequences!" I didn't yell. I maintained a calm exterior (which I thought was being a good role model for my students) and I kept the power. I remained in control of the situation. Or did I? Was I really the great role model I thought I was?

I found the answer to that question 30 minutes later [as the students were doing their silent reading] when I read the first two and a half pages in [a seminar text]. I am still amazed at how physically the revelation hit me. I was stunned and saddened. The truth of the situation may have been that Bill was demonstrating a disrespectful attitude. But the deeper truth, the one that mattered, the one that jumped up and smacked me right between the eyes was this: I was disrespectful to him. I had asserted my power as a teacher to show him who was the boss. I made an example of him in front of his classmates. I certainly did not treat him as I would have liked to have been treated. The whole event replayed through my mind . . .

As I thought about how poorly I had treated Bill, I began to sense other connections. There were other images and memories of situations that started to come to my mind. I couldn't stop them. And as

each one played in my mind, I saw the Jekyll and Hyde that was inside. It was a very depressing situation. What had happened to me?

In answering his question, Fred was able to identify patterns of domination, victimization, resentment and anger in his life, if often repressed. But before he could do very much to reconcile these destructive emotions and behaviors with the skills he was learning in the seminar, a final piece of *reality therapy* made its way into his life. His fiancé, with whom he was living, asked him to leave. This was overwhelmingly painful to Fred since he had already suffered through a divorce and the end of a long-term relationship.

Turning to the seminar material as a refuge, and after intense study of the ideas of victimization, he wrote,

I couldn't believe it. I was overcome with a sudden sense of pain and sadness. There was another sensation too, a sense of calm settled in me. Within that sense of calmness I was able to reflect more fully on my past. I was flooded with images of the past — my childish wants and self-righteous attitude when ever there was an argument. I had always thought I was the victim because of what I did. I thought that because I worked so hard that everyone should treat me right ... All the while I was building up anger and resentment that came out in ways that I couldn't even see. Now I could see, I could clearly see why she asked me to leave.

Her asking me to leave was probably the biggest single life-changing event that I have ever had. If I didn't have the guidance of this class, I'm not sure what the outcome would have been. But for now, we are working on healing our relationship.

While Fred's epochal *awakening* was his first conscious and consistent move away from an *I-It* towards an *I-Thou* mode of being, the other five members of the study's core sample had been traveling along their own spiritual paths for at least part of their adult lives. In the next section four seminar members recount how the tools and skills they acquired in the course facilitated additional (incremental) progress in their own spiritual journeys.

Fred's journey of transformative education was more than a basic awareness of his reactive self-justification and habitual sense of victimization. The seminar encouraged the practice of *responsiveness* (Warner 2001), compassion in action. Without equivocation, and without counting the costs, Fred endeavored to respond, reflexively, on a pre-conceptual level, to the needs and wants of students,

co-workers and family, treating their desires just as real as his own. This transcendence of self brought a sense of relief as personal concerns faded to the background. Though at times it nearly exhausted his physical reserves of energy, Fred found this responsive stance to life much preferable to the emotionally draining resistance to others and their needs that he had practiced for most of his life.

*Beth, David, Pam and Karen:
Brief Profiles of Their Transformational Learning
Journeys*

As she worked on the seminar assignments, Beth experienced a progressive series of *incremental* transformations that culminated in a significant turnaround in important personal relationships. As she explained, "I thought that I had put several issues [regarding personal relationships] to rest, but thanks to this course, I came to see that they hadn't been put to rest at all but in fact continued to float around, continued to shape my life in ways that I didn't want." As she elaborated:

I've done lots of meditation, I've studied lots of psychology, I thought I'd put the [the conflict] in its place, in the past with no bad feelings, no buried emotion. I've realized that it isn't so at all, that I'm still carrying some of the anger that used to rule me . . . This course has been difficult. It has made me grow. Growing is necessary, it's unavoidable, it's exhilarating, but it's not always easy. Essentially I'm still at the beginning of this spiritual path. I thought I understood a little. And I do. But don't understand as much as I thought I did and so I'm thankful for being humbled and for being able to open up a little more.

Beth reminds us that transformational learning is often not easy, but can be hard and painful work. "I am glad the course is over. I feel like I have done a lot of thinking about personal issues more than professional issues, but I know the two are linked. I feel I did the work alone, which was difficult. I feel not as bad about myself now as I have in the last few months but I am still glad the course is over."

David, who had taken several of the "spiritual courses" offered within the University of Calgary's Graduate Division of Education Research, described his learning journey during the seminar as follows:

The course has been phenomenal for me because, just the whole notion of learning about attachment and detachment. Just the terminology of attaching onto something that can be stressful, that can suck some negative energy out of you and how to detach

from that and to be able to think through something . . . So I am trying to apply this.

And the fall of 2003 and his enrollment in the spiritual and moral leadership class did present David with a classic opportunity to *apply this*. For several years David had been working through the process of healing an estranged relationship with his brother *Robert*. Just after the start of the seminar Robert invited David to attend his daughter's wedding, and David, with most of the course completed, welcomed the occasion to travel half way across the continent to take the final steps in a healing journey.

After a serious family misunderstanding David told Robert that he "did not wish to ever speak to him again." Seven years passed between David's declaration and the arrival of the wedding invitation. "I was determined to go and make an honest effort to get close to my brother and his family once and for all" was how David saw the challenge of putting into practice the spiritually intelligent skills he had been studying. During the wedding trip David made every attempt to be responsive, from running numerous errands to encountering the vitriol of former in-laws. At the end of the visit the rapprochement seemed complete, and with a deep sense of satisfaction, David summed up his experience in the following way:

I now feel really close to my brother, probably the closest that we have been in a long time . . . I have to admit that at times, my responsiveness was not "textbook Warner [2001]" in the sense that it was not completely devoid of judgment. [But] all in all, it was an excellent visit. On many occasions Robert could not thank me enough for my visit and told me repeatedly that he loved me. I also told him how much I loved him and we both talked about finding time to get together again.

The end point of incremental transformation can be just as dramatic as in an epochal case, if not more so. The series of smaller, evolutionary changes taken together can disguise the overall magnitude of transformation. Pam's experience is a case in point. She had always done her best to live an exemplary Christian life. However, as a young woman she experienced a most distressing incident, one that was to challenge her spirituality right up to the time she became a member of the spiritual and moral leadership seminar.

As a teenager she was the victim of date rape by an older male companion. Healing from the rape, however, became complicated because Pam found herself pregnant. Against her deeply held beliefs she decided on an abortion, leading to considerable anguish that was to last for years.

Before enrolling in the seminar, Pam had spent more than two decades on a healing journey. As a Christian, she believed that it was necessary to forgive *Jim*. She suffered nightmares for many years, but was nevertheless able to move beyond much of the guilt and victimization by rehearsing her story for church congregations, including all male groups. With the spiritual and moral leadership seminar, though, she found there were yet a few more steps to take in order to complete her journey. This is the way she explains the conclusion to that journey:

[I]t [the seminar] made Jim more real to me in that I had never thought of what he has suffered either in his life before he met me or what he has suffered since. For the first time ever I felt more sorry for him than for myself. I may have been the victim, but, given the option, isn't that a lot less painful than being the perpetrator? He has had to live with that part of the situation for all these years. If it was as difficult as it has been for me to heal from that event how much more difficult has it been for him? And I know what it's like to be the perpetrator—just look at what I did to my baby and isn't that a lot worse than what Jim did to me? I had never before seen the fact that he must think and feel about what happened. That was illuminating for me . . . I believe the “end” is here at last.

In contrast to the experiences of Beth, David and Pam, Karen's case is unique. While we place her in the *incrementally-transformative* cases, she very much seems to be situated towards the non-transformative end of the continuum. Unlike Linda in the following case, she was able to embrace the seminar's principles. But similar to Linda, the concrete results from their application proved elusive, though she was able to take consolation in the good things of her life, a not insignificant achievement, and, in many ways, a very spiritual one. Karen, an elementary school teacher found, in Pema Chodron's (2002) characterization, the desire for self-improvement to be an “assault on the self” (pp. 11-12). After working through an assignment in which she attempted to take on empathically the role of someone with whom she was in conflict, Karen came away marginally encouraged but ultimately defeated. As she explained:

Part of what I took away from that [assignment] was failure. I had trouble dealing with the fact that I could not be totally responsive . . . Each time I read a case from [from one of the texts] . . . I became more depressed and wondered why I was unable to see the light or make what seemed like miraculous changes. Changes that would ultimately help me become a much better person — a worthy

person. Someone who knows life as it is, accepts what is happening now and accepts it in a non-judgmental way.

Karen went on to describe how her discouragement started to lift:

Then came the unfolding revelation . . . I know in my heart that the changes I read about didn't happen overnight . . . The dissonance that I have been feeling seems to come from the intensity with which I want this change to happen. The last few weeks have forced me to accept that I am indeed a perfectionist . . . I realize that I am judging and not being responsive to myself.

At this point Karen was to back off the *assault on herself*, by both practicing self-acceptance and emphasizing the positive aspects of her life. As she explained,

What I realized is that I don't have anything to fix right now. I don't mean that in arrogant way at all . . . I started looking at what was good in my world. There are a ton of good things . . . the truth is my life is quite fabulous.

Accepting, then, that the conflict in her life was more aggravating than devastating, and focusing on the more than compensating positives, Karen was able to achieve a degree of equanimity. Moving from perfectionism to acceptance, of both oneself and others, certainly constitutes a kind of transformation, even if it does not completely match the seminar's specifications. And it does not preclude one revisiting parallel practices and behaviors at a more opportune time.

Linda: Absence of Connection

Though it appears remarkable that five of the six core sample participants experienced degrees of personal transformation during the seminar, there is certainly no guarantee, even in a spirituality class where students often self-select themselves into the course based on a likely predisposition towards self-improvement that transformation will necessarily occur. Linda is an example of a seminar member initially interested in personal transformation, but one for whom the course was unable to meet her particular expectations.

While Linda enrolled in the course in part because of a positive recommendation from a former seminar member, as well as a desire to deepen her sense of spirituality, she soon became ambivalent about the direction she would have preferred the seminar to take. On the one hand, an academic analysis of spiritual

traditions appeared to be more in harmony with what she was looking for. The following comments reflect this perspective:

We had skimmed the surface [in the seminar] most of the time. I kind of like to delve a little deeper . . . because I have read about it [self-help literature], because I was always interested in trying to understand myself, that sort of thing. I just find that maybe for a graduate level course, it is not as in depth as other graduate level courses have been for me.

The following comments also demonstrate Linda's holding on to hope that the seminar might somehow open a path to transformation for her.

As I reflect on my experiences in applying the principles in the seminar readings and discussions, I can truly say that I am disappointed with my evolution in the spiritual realm. I took the course in the hopes that I would somehow become a different person at the end of it. This has not happened — so, naturally, I ask myself why or why not? Was it unrealistic to expect that a four-month course would culminate in a new, improved me? Of course, it was. I will never be able to escape myself, and that means accepting certain traits about myself that I find most unappealing. A predisposition to impatience and intolerance have plagued me my entire life so that my mother's words ring true to me as much now as they ever have: "You're going to have to learn how to be more tolerant of other people," she would always say to me. She told me this when I was still very young and no matter how hard I try, I hear those words ring loud and clear when I know I'm not behaving *spiritually*. What I have come to realize is that my mother taught me a great deal about spirituality . . .

She concluded by saying,

I am turned off. I am definitely turned off. As an academic pursuit I don't have a very good impression. I think if I was to delve more into this for me, I would go take philosophy or something like that, I don't know, maybe that is just more where I need to go."

Seminar Dynamics: The Process of Learning

We mentioned earlier that not only did some seminar participants struggle with the course material, but that they also had a sense of working the principles through and then applying them

without the assistance of a supportive community, which in this case would mean other seminar members. This was particularly true for Beth, Karen and Linda. As Beth explained, "I feel I did the work alone, which was difficult." Karen sketched out her expectations for support, which she felt were not met during the seminar.

I really believe in the telling and hearing of stories . . . I think what I was looking for was a place to share, a place to talk about our lives . . . And I think I want other stories to rub up against . . . So, I think one of the things I was really looking for were opportunities to have those conversations in the seminar.

The seminar as a group of participants, however, was not designed to support directly its members in their spiritual journeys. Jacob, as seminar leader, in a typical session, would present a spiritual principle or skill and then divide the class into small groups for problem solving exercises in and around case studies he had constructed, often from the experiences of former seminar members. The groups of three to five students, then, discussed the material he prepared for them before each seminar meeting rather than share how they were coping in the here and now with their own *living* cases. While Jacob monitored the small groups, he did not participate in them. As the small-group discussions were coming to their natural conclusions, the seminar shifted back to large-group discussion mode. While seminar members in these discussions often shared their personal insights and frustrations in their evolution of becoming a more spiritually skillful person or leader, they rarely did so in relationship to the particulars of their own lives.

The sharing and discussion of a seminar member's life experiences came through the assignments submitted and then read exclusively by Jacob as the seminar leader. While that kind of support did not appear sufficient for some seminar members, most of the others seemed comfortable with the process. Seminar members saw Jacob as communicating his personal engagement with the course material and demonstrating he was a fellow-traveler. Pam explained, "It is easy to respond to him and not feel threatened at all — his comments, his feedback are always so positive on all the papers you get back. 'Oh, this is a good thought, or I never thought of it that way, or I needed to be reminded of that.' He makes it personal for himself."

Jacob, however, consciously wanted to avoid the seminar devolving in a series of therapy support groups. He was not sure how he might handle the

possibly volatile emotions that might result through the sharing of personal situations. His objective was to teach and discuss spiritual principles and skills around common predicaments (case studies) with which he anticipated seminar member were or could be involved. Personal problems of seminar members, which often carried a high emotional content, then, belonged on paper, and he worked through these assignments one-on-one with each student.

And yet, while the sharing of experiences and storytelling was not deliberately incorporated into the instructional design, some participants began to naturally share their experiences with the course content toward the end of the semester. Pam explained what began to happen within the small groups:

In the small groups, it has changed from situations out there, to where situations in our own lives are coming up more and being brought into the discussion a lot more. But it just seems like the last couple of weeks that has started. Probably because the relationships have built to this point in and out of class.

Naturally, these informal and unintended support group processes did not apply equally to all seminar members.

Discussion: Accounting for Transformation

The data from this study suggest that it possible that students in a secular setting, a graduate university seminar, can experience a kind of personal transformation that is not limited to intellectual insight, or even emotional renewal. Five of the six seminar members who were part of the core participant sample appeared to have a spiritual experience in the sense of losing their sense of self as they were able to enter the personal space of others, to the extent of making the needs and desires of those others just as real as their own, with reconciliation and forgiveness the spiritual by-products. Or, in the case of Karen, to reach a degree of self-acceptance or responsiveness that qualifies as a transformation experience itself. If our conclusion here is justified by the data, a natural, next question becomes one of trying to identify the prerequisites for this transformative learning. Why do some students appear to experience a form of spiritual transformation, while others seem relatively immune? Drawing from the experiences of the six seminar members who participated in the interviews and submitted their course assignments, as well as the data from the participant observation over the 13 weeks of the seminar and informal interaction with the other 11 seminar

members, we were able to identify four basic elements in this transformative learning journey. These elements are (1) need in terms of a crisis or a chronically unresolved issue that causes distress to one degree or another, (2) an openness on the part of students to new experiences or ideas, (3) course material that resonates with the students in the sense of their finding it useful for the transformative learning they seek, and (4) a supportive yet charged learning environment. Each of these apparent prerequisites, in reference to the data collected, is discussed below.

Need Manifest in Crisis or Unresolved Conflict

In reference to a crisis or unresolved issue, Linda did not give evidence in the interviews or in her assignments of any kind of serious professional, personal or family situation in her life. She was looking for self-improvement and reported that she had read a number of self-help books, but gave no indication of anything approaching a crisis. On the other hand, each of the core sample participants involved in a transformational experience, whether epochal or incremental, faced a relationship *crisis*, of one form or another. In Fred's case it was the likely end of an engagement, one that he desperately did not want to see fail, after a previous divorce and the dissolution of a long-term relationship. In the cases of both Pam and Beth, there were questions in past relationships where forgiveness issues had not been completely resolved. Intriguingly, it was the course material that resurrected dormant conflict that Pam and Beth believed had long since been resolved. In contrast, since David's conflict with his brother was very much a front-and-center issue for him, it seemed he welcomed the seminar assignments as an opportunity to handle it, as he said, "once and for all." And Karen, a self-confessed perfectionist, was able to embrace the ideals of self-acceptance, for herself and the significant others in her life, and accentuate the positives in a life she confessed was actually *fabulous*. Consequently, for the five transformative cases, a pressing need, either conscious or suppressed, appears to have been a key prerequisite in fomenting the change process.

Openness

It appeared as if most of the students within this course and more specifically the six case study participants were open to expanding their spiritual journey. They had an open, evolving and inclusive perspective about their own and others' spirituality, rather than a perspective that was limited to specific religious point of view. Even though Pam initially saw the seminar through the lens of conservative

Christianity, she did not limit herself to that perspective and used the word *curious* to explain why she was there. She was open to the potential journey that the course would offer.

This openness, though, came at a cost for those seminar members who embraced it. They had to confront the *ghosts* of their present and past lives and come to terms with them. Fred overcame a self-centered sense of victimization in order to save a relationship. Beth rediscovered the unhealed wounds from a previous relationship and has begun again the process of reconciliation. Pam, as well, thought that she had buried the pain from her past, but as she confronted it once again, she was able to move forward to find a new level of forgiveness. While David seemed to welcome the invitation the seminar offered for rapprochement with his brother, the steps toward overcoming the estrangement still involved trepidation and required considerable courage. And finally, Karen endured the struggle with emotional discomfort until she was able to accept her life as it was, rather than anticipate the still unrealized spiritual breakthrough the seminar seemed to offer.

This type of spiritual journey, then, requires an ongoing ability to be self-reflective and self-aware, qualities found in almost all of participants. The obvious exception, though, is Linda. It is tempting to conclude that, for whatever reasons, she closed down and did not give the seminar a fair chance. Such a claim, however, rests on circumstantial evidence. Perhaps the more reasonable judgment is to acknowledge simply that the course material did not resonate with her particular requirements, the issue we address in terms of all the course's students just below.

Course Material that Resonates with Student Need

The participants who experienced personal transformation all seemed to be enthusiastic about the course readings. Beth, the long-time meditator, could say that she felt the Warner (2001) text was written for her. Pam was initially put off by one of the other course texts (Katie, 2002), seeing it as a run-of-the-mill self-help work, but eventually found it a most useful resource in her journey to final forgiveness. And David, among others, found concepts like attachment and non-attachment from Buddhist psychology productive adjuncts to the change process.

Linda, on the other hand, could find very little of use in the course material. For her, the 13 weeks amounted to little more than admonitions to *be nice*, and that just about everything she encountered wasn't much different from the good advice she receives from her mother.

A Hospitable Yet Charged Environment

Palmer (1998) in his exploration of six paradoxical tensions within a teaching and learning space indicates that one of the paradoxical tensions is that "the space should be hospitable and charged" (p. 75). Specifically, when the space is hospitable it is

inviting as well as open, safe and trustworthy as well as free. The boundaries around the space offer some of that reassurance [and conversely] the space must also be charged. If students are to learn at the deepest levels, they must not feel so safe that they fall asleep; they need to feel the risks inherent in pursuing the deep things of the world or of the soul. (Palmer, 1998, p. 75)

It appeared as if this tension was held in the seminar, opening the space for risk taking and learning at the deepest levels. In addition, this space also pushed the boundaries of learning with readings, discussions and assignments that honored a more holistic learning process that went beyond cognitive learning commonly associated with a higher education context.

Two illustrative, and polar, examples of the students' reaction to the seminar in terms of its potentially hospitable and/or charged climate come from Beth and Linda. Beth found the seminar difficult, almost exhausting, and was relieved to finally see its conclusion. On the other hand, Linda seemed to see the course as almost too hospitable. She evidenced clear boredom over the last two-thirds of the seminar. Perhaps, in hindsight, she might have been challenged or provoked, having her apparently facile assumptions on the course's objectives and methods called into question. But might this kind of confrontation have undermined the seminar's hospitable environment?

Conclusion

The data collected for this study do indicate that personal transformation in terms of a change in consciousness that emphasizes compassion, through taking the role of the other and making her needs and desires just as real as one's own, can actually take place in graduate education in a university setting. Since the study examined the experience of just one seminar over the course of just one semester, its generalizability is obviously limited. Consequently, more research is needed to extend the focus beyond individual case studies towards surveys of larger groups of students, as well as extending the case studies themselves to more of the range of existing courses in spirituality and personal transformation.

As the investigation of the phenomenon continues, one likely question that will be raised in relation to both this and future research is the appropriateness of the endeavor itself — the invitation to personal transformation. Might spirituality classes, as public spaces, be moving into a private sphere usually reserved for trained therapists and their clients? Could untrained, and thus insensitive, seminar leaders be ill-equipped to handle students with emotional conditions that require clinical attention? And it is certainly likely that these kinds of students would be attracted to a course whose syllabus advertises the possibility of personal transformation.

More intense observation and research will necessarily be required to answer these questions. Conversely, while we wait the research verdict on these issues, we might also entertain a contrary hypothesis as part of the research agenda. Could transformational education through post-secondary courses with a spirituality theme constitute an efficient and relatively inexpensive alternative, or at least adjunct, to the costly and drawn out processes, with problematic outcomes, of individual therapy? Answers to this question, theoretical as well as empirical, could well contribute toward reenergizing the debate on the viability of an expanded role for higher education in a postmodern society — to include not only knowledge and skill transmission but, as well, personal transformation.

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