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Developing Spiritual Maturation

Cheryl A. Giles

Claiming Our Hidden Wholeness

A Panel Response to "Spiritual Maturation: A Developmental Resource for Resilience, Well-Being, and Peace"

Editor's Note: *In this article, Dr. Giles focuses on the consequences of living a "divided life." She talks about how, these days, we all "strain under the burden of more demands and less time for living and being present to our inner journey." She describes wholeness as "the courage to let go of the divided lives that we have constructed and to open our hearts to right action which is informed by our "inner teacher," as, "the consequences of living a divided life, is inner and outer chaos." Dr. Giles affirms that an authentic life, as described by spiritual leaders from Buddha to Parker Palmer and beyond, is the courage to open our hearts to others.*

Jared Kass aptly points out in his keynote address that:

...spiritual maturation is a socially-relevant learning process whose potential significance has been misunderstood and vastly under-rated by scholars in the field of human development, peace psychology and behavioral health risk prevention." (1)

Most of us strain under the burden of more demands and less time for living and being present to our inner journey. While we race to the next class or appointment we are moving through space, careening out of control. We lack the awareness of our connection to self and others that comes with spiritual practice.

Professor Kass' research and curriculum underscores the critical need for contemplative practices in our educational system, especially in grades K-12 where the joy of learning is challenged by a host of complex issues facing teachers. We are all hungry for well-being and peace!

As a clinical psychologist with a background in theology, my experience and education in theology and psychology have prepared me to help shape the intellectual and spiritual formation of students at Harvard Divinity School. My challenge as a teacher, mentor, and learner is to prepare women and men for careers in lay and ordained ministry, teaching, and advocacy.

When students begin study in theological education and ministry, they are often at a point in their lives where they have begun to develop a personal spiritual maturity based on previous learning and practice.

Many feel called to a vocation of ministry where they are drawn to help others develop spiritual maturity: the peace, freedom and inner quiet that can accompany that maturity

that enables us to be grounded in the midst of the chaos of everyday living. However, spiritual maturation is an ongoing process of learning, practice, and growth.

My work as a professor of pastoral counseling is to teach students to be effective pastoral counselors who facilitate growth and healing in faith communities that are beset with the challenge of how to support people as they struggle with doubt, brokenness, and alienation. This search for meaning often falls to the minister or pastoral counselor who has the responsibility “to hold” the counseling process by establishing trust and safety in the relationship and “to push” the client out of his/her comfort zone to grapple with their issues. Both “holding” and “pushing” have to occur at the same time to facilitate growth. At the same time, most students who are beginning pastoral counselors struggle with their own emotional issues and vulnerability as a learner.

The process of learning to become an effective pastoral counselor is far more difficult for students until they are able to grapple with their own spiritual journey and understand how their faith is shaped by their communities of origin. While students can be taught pastoral counseling skills, the process of becoming an effective pastoral counselor rests solely on their ability to engage in reflection about their own inner journey. Parker Palmer, a Quaker, well-known teacher, writer, and spiritual leader, has written extensively about spiritual development and what he calls our “hidden wholeness.”(2)

Leading by example in an age often filled with rhetoric about the path to holiness, Palmer’s own search for wholeness transparently offers the rest of us the rare opportunity to witness what it means to be fully human as he openly explores the impact of depression, divorce, and isolation in his spiritual journey and his effort to break through destructive behaviors to a place of self-acceptance and wholeness. Perhaps Palmer’s most significant work is the retreat circles where he has mentored scholars, physicians, teachers, lawyers, religious leaders, poets, and university presidents and challenged them to live out of their “true self” and create communities of learning where wholeness is consciously nurtured in relationships.

What we learn about Palmer is that he makes no distinction between life and work, teaching by example that both require attention to the inner journey to embrace wholeness. Whether teaching, writing, or organizing, this wholeness is nurtured by relationship with the self, others, and a deep abiding faith in God. He reminds us that vocation is a gift to be received and with it comes a responsibility to self and others.

Wholeness is the courage to let go of the divided lives that we have constructed and to open our hearts to right action which is informed by our “inner teacher.” The consequences of living a divided life is inner and outer chaos. We become mired in our own fear and consequently, lose connection with others. Sam Intrator, a Professor of Education at Smith College and close friend of Parker Palmer writes:

When we break faith or live in defiance of this inner voice, we live what Parker calls a divided life. The price for living a divided life is high. We feel fraudulent and uneasy, and our spirit sinks under the burden of duplicity. Our encounters with others lack genuine authenticity, which undermines our ability to form life-giving connections.” (3)

It is not an exaggeration to say that in his humanness, Palmer is among the living saints who help us to “walk the talk” and who show us what is most important about living: that the human spirit is resilient and offers us the freedom to “claim our hidden wholeness.” This knowledge requires that we start where we are and commit ourselves to the necessary inner work that must be done. Choosing to face our fear, means making a conscious decision to accept ourselves as we are right now and to value the connections that enable us to live authentic lives. Intrator reminds us that the essence of Parker Palmer’s wisdom is relational. Fear is not experienced in isolation, but in community with others:

. . . the bloodless logic of schools, universities, hospitals, and other institutions are riddled with fear in ways that shut down our capacity at work to stay connected, creative, and engaged. When we are scared to reach out to others we are diminished... be not afraid does not mean we should not have fears--- for that is an impossible dream.... We can be afraid without needing to be our fears.” (4)

It takes courage to embark upon the inner journey. As Palmer reminds us, it is never an easy journey; but without it we are left with fear, disconnection, and selfishness that have created some of the toxic environments where we live and work.(5) Palmer’s life work bears witness that the cornerstone of an authentic life is the courage to open our hearts to others. Remarkably, this same truth was professed more than 2,500 years ago by the Buddha when he said “The wise rejoice in giving and thereby gain happiness thereafter.” (Dhammapada 177).(6) This is the process of spiritual maturation: by being present to our inner work, we become grounded and this enables us to move outward to help and connect with others. Although paradoxical, the circle we make moving from our inner journey outward to engage the world is the substance of creating wholeness and spiritual maturity. This is challenge before us all, teacher and learners alike, to commit ourselves to the work of creating healthy, sustainable communities of spiritual practice where we can claim our wholeness.

End Notes

(1) Kass, Jared D. "Spiritual Maturation: A Developmental Resource for Resilience, Well-Being, and Peace." Conference Keynote Address at "Innovations in Research, Practice, and Pedagogy," Institute for Mind, Body, and Spirit, Lesley University (3/30/07).

(2) Palmer, Parker J. *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004.

(3) Intrator, Sam M. *Living The Questions: Essays Inspired By The Work and Life of Parker J. Palmer*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005, xl.

(4) Ibid, p. 2-3

(5) Palmer (2004).

(6) Dhammapada is a collection of 423 verses attributed to the Buddha that contain his essential teachings. Adapted from www.buddhanet.net on 5/1/07.