

Spirituality and Adult Education: An Emergent Perspective

by Al Lauzon¹

Introduction

In the context of modernity spirituality and religion are often used synonymously. To be spiritual was to be religious and to be religious was to be spiritual. Yet we now have a different understanding of spirituality, and why one can be both religious and spiritual, to be religious is not necessarily to be spiritual and to be spiritual does not necessarily mean you are religious. In fact, much of contemporary spirituality draws on many religious traditions, it draws on an ecumenical belief that spiritual truth can be known and articulated in a variety of different ways. I believe what I have termed an emergent spirituality is a response to the alienation and anomie we have experienced as a consequence of modernity. Thus contemporary spirituality is grounded in an attempt to make sense of the world, to create meaning in order to escape our alienated condition. Benjamin and Looby (1998: 92) point to this search for meaning when they quote Myers (1990: 11), stating spirituality is a “continuing search for meaning and purpose in life; an appreciation for the depth of life, the expanse of the universe, and natural forces which operate; a personal belief system.” They continue that spirituality requires a striving for a “balance between their inner and outer selves.” English (2001: 2) describes this form of spirituality as a public spirituality that “is worked out in the everyday world of human existence... This is a spirituality of living and being, which is broad enough to be inclusive of all practices and beliefs; its focus is on the living of relationship and the development of meaning-making as adults.” Thus contemporary spirituality is not something simply to be learned about, it is experiential; we know the creation and make meaning by engaging the creation. For many the first glimpse into this world is through peak experiences, those moments that Maslow (1964) described as an experiential reckoning whereby we acknowledge and feel in a very concrete and real way, that we are simply part of the whole; the creation is one and we are part of that oneness. He further describes this experience as being characterized by a “non-evaluating, non-judging, or non-comparing cognition (1964:60).” For me, Charlene Spretnak (1991) captures the essence of this emergent spirituality when she wrote that we are inextricably linked at the molecular level to every other level of the great unfolding. We are the descendants of the fireball, the pilgrims of the earth glimpsing the oneness of the sacred whole and in glimpsing the oneness we come to know Gaia and grace. When we experience our connection with others and the larger universe, recognizing that we are part of the whole, there is nothing left to compare, judge, or evaluate for the “we” is really an “I”.

In this paper I propose to present my vision of a spiritually inspired adult education. However, to do this I believe I need to situate myself spiritually, explaining, if only briefly, my own spiritual journey. This I will do in the next section. This is then followed by a brief history of Canadian adult education and its relationship to the notion of spirituality. In the following section I will briefly discuss spirituality as an emergent property of the evolution of human consciousness followed by the implications for a spiritually inspired adult education and conclusions.

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Situating Myself Spiritually

In order to examine the implications of this emergent spirituality for the practice of adult education, I believe it is necessary to situate my self spiritually. My personal awakening to a more spiritual existence is one that has emerged over the course of my life. As a child I was raised in the traditions of both the Catholic and Baptist churches. However, like many of my generation I left the church, unable to tolerate or understand what I perceived to be the hypocrisy of the “Sunday Christian”. In fact, religion and spirituality did not play a meaningful part in my life until I was in my 20s.

Having led a fairly traditional adolescence of the time, I had traveled some, hitchhiking my way across North America which was part of the youth experience of the time, experimented with drugs, and coming from a good working class background settled down into adult life, marrying and then starting a family in my early 20s. It was during this period that I had a first glimmer of a new reality as I began to experience a series of peak experiences, those moments in time when one feels at one with the universe. These experiences seemed to open me up to the world and as I opened up to the world, I also opened up to my own pain. Perhaps the most seminal experience during these years was living the grief of my father’s death who had died when I was four. I had never properly grieved that loss and then found myself in my 29th year experiencing the grief of a four year old. As I washed away the pain I came to realize how much this event had shaped my interactions with the world. It was the basis of my own personal belief system, a belief system premised on events that had taken on mythic proportions in my own life, laying the foundation for my way of being-in-the-world. As these underlying assumptions were challenged, and eventually dismissed, I experienced a sense of exhilaration and liberation. As this happened I perceived and engaged the world in a very different way than I had in the past. Over time peak experiences became more intense and more frequent. As the world opened up to me I found myself drawn to spiritually inspired writing, in particular Aldous Huxley’s *The Perennial Philosophy* and the various mystical traditions of the main religions. This led me to exploring various spiritual traditions and I eventually found myself drawn to Buddhism and it is in this tradition that I currently feel most at home. As I moved into my 40s I found that I had many questions, fundamental questions about the meaning of life, the reason for our existence, and in particular the reason for my existence. As I moved into my late 40s I found a new personal world view solidifying whereby my spirituality emerged as a central conscious component of my identity and was intrinsically tied to the landscape of Southwestern Ontario. As Zapf (2005) reminds us, spirituality does not separate person from place and I felt connected in a very real and fundamental way to this landscape. The connection to this landscape is as vital to my spiritual health and well-being as air and water are to my physical health and well-being. The passage below captures this connection between my identity and in particular my spiritual identity, and the landscape I have come to call home.

I have returned to the shores of lake, the empty beaches of October, my place, a place that gives life. The water roars as the lake unleashes its rage, a majestic rage whose power gently laps at my feet, the sand shifting as the rage recedes, leaving my imprint upon the landscape only to be washed away in the next surge. It is here in the presence of my kindred

spirit, the lake, that I take refuge. It is here where the gods first spoke to me in their cryptic tongue, swaddled in the gentle breeze and rocked in the cradle of oneness, swaying to the rhythm, entranced by the colours that illuminate the mind's eye. It is here, in the presence of oneness that I find safety, my safe place. It is here where I find my self, a self that is the centre of my being, the self that is the source of my power. It is here where I understand the majesty and beauty of life and death -- a death that nourishes life. It is here where the secrets of oneness were first gently whispered in my ear. It is here where I find God and spirit within me.

As I approach my fiftieth year I feel like I am being called home. It is time to take what I have learned over the last 25 to 30 years and integrate it in meaningful ways into my daily existence, and into my work as an educator and as a researcher. It is from this position that I now write this paper.

A Short History of Adult Education

Adult education, as a field of practice, has a long and well established history and tradition in working for social justice in the Canadian context. Canadian adult education drew much of its philosophical inspiration prior to World War II from the Social Democracy and Social Gospel Movements and this resulted in such programs and institutions as the Antigonish Movement, Frontier College and the Farm Radio Forum. Gordon Hawkins, a former Associate Director of the Canadian Association for Adult Education wrote that Canadian adult education

...stems from a deep concern with the processes of democracy - with how the individual and the group and the community work, as much as with what they set out to achieve. Hence the emphasis in their scheme of things, on group work, community organization, discussion methods and techniques, leadership courses and so on ...(quoted in Selman and Dampier , 1991: 46).

Father Jimmy Thompkins of the Antigonish movement captures the essence of early Canadian adult education when he stated

Our experience in the Antigonish Movement is that there is more real Adult Education at the pit heads, down in the mines, out among the fishermen's shacks, along the wharves, and wherever farmers gather to sit and talk in the evenings, than you can get from one hundred thousand dollars' worth of fossilized formal courses. It springs from the heart and pains of people (quoted in Welton, 2001: 115).

And while adult educators did not deal with spirituality as we currently understand it, their pedagogy and practice was spiritually inspired in a vision of democracy and social justice.

The onset of World War II marks a turning point in adult education in Canada. Subsequent to WWII, the 1950s and into the early 1960s adult education was

professionalized with an increased emphasis on adult educators acquiring the necessary technical skills with little consideration as to how those skills would be used. In many ways, during this period, adult education is separated from its historical social mission and is replaced by an ethos that is dominated by the psychology of learning and the adult learner. Furthermore, in an attempt to legitimize their existence, adult educators argued that practice must be based upon an empirical research base grounded in a positivist epistemology. It is by attempting to become scientific that they attempted to legitimize the profession and their expertise. Practice was to be guided by science and adult educators were to become “experts” with knowledge in the science of teaching adults. Increasingly the focus became the individual and individual change with a particular emphasis on education, employment and the economy, or in other words human capital formation. Spirituality and spiritually inspired education was increasingly marginalized as the separation between state and church began in earnest under the auspices of professionalization, leading to the secularization of Canadian adult education.

While the above changes continued to influence the field and practice of adult education, the rise of the feminist movement, the anti-war movement and the civil rights movement in the 1960s challenged the underlying assumptions of the professional world of adult education. In particular, the work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire and the publication of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) began to shift the practice of adult education and provides the foundations for the rise in the 1980s of critical pedagogy, a pedagogy that once again embodied a belief that adult education could be a vehicle for social transformation, particularly for those who exist on the margins of society. Increasingly, these changes served as a challenge to the dominant orthodoxy of adult education and laid the ground work for spirituality to be reclaimed by adult educators. However, spirituality as it emerged in the 1990s, as explained previously, was rooted in the individual’s direct experience of the divine. Thus spirituality, like adult education, began with the idea that an emergent spirituality required learners engage their experience and to name it for them selves. This perspective very much parallels the political views of Freire who worked with peasants and the marginalized in Brazil and Africa, assisting them to name their world for them selves and to act upon the world in order to change it. In doing this they escape their oppression and work toward creating a more just world. In this sense, the emergent spirituality we see in the adult education literature is inextricably bound up with the tradition of adult education for social transformation and justice. Clearly Freire’s work, which drew from both Marxism and liberation theology and tied the spiritual life to political liberation, finds expression in the contemporary literature in adult education. For example, Tisdell (2000: 328) in interviews with adult educators who self identified as being spiritual and having a spiritually inspired practice, reported that they “saw their spirituality and their social justice efforts as an integrated way of life and as a way of thinking and being in the world.” Thus for many, spirituality and work for social justice are inextricably intertwined and cannot be separated. The difference between this stage of adult education and the pre-World War II adult education is that prior to WWII spirituality and religion informed the social mission of adult education, embodied often in the *Good News*, while now spirituality is not only a means to informing adult education, it is part and parcel of identity, the learning process and knowledge construction and is congruent with social

action for social transformation. Its origins are not doctrine but are constructed out the individual's and collective's experience.

Spirituality as an Emergent Property of Human Consciousness

It has become almost cliché these days to talk of “changing times”. Yet we are, I believe, engaged in a fundamental shift in human consciousness and this is expressed in how we make sense of the world (epistemology), how we organize socially and what it means to be human (Lauzon, 1998^a; Lauzon, 1998^b). In an earlier work I looked at trends across theological writing to determine if there was a common pattern to shifts in theological, religious or spiritual writing. Specifically I examined liberation theology, creation theology and women's spirituality. Out of this review I identified five common themes (Lauzon, 1995). First, in the words of eco-theologian Thomas Berry, all three literatures talked about the need for a new story. The emergent spirituality that I refer to in this paper is part of that new story. Second, this new story and its emergent spirituality are grounded in personal experience and not doctrine; it constitutes the spiritualization of experience and spirituality is experienced rather than learned about. Third, all three perspectives described the need for healing. Modernity, with its fragmented world view, has left us in a disassociated state (Wilbur, 1996) whereby we are estranged from the larger environment, others and ourselves (Lauzon, 1995). Fourth, there is a need for liberation, particularly for those who are, in the words of Freire, oppressed. Liberation is part of the process of healing whereby individuals and collectives come to name the world for themselves based upon their experiences and the meaning attributed to those experiences. Fifth, dialogue is an instrumental process to constructing a common reality that leads to social and political action, and a shared spirituality. This is not to negate differences but does acknowledge and provide a space for identifying commonalities. These shifts collectively constitute a fundamental shift from a linear logical model of knowledge premised on formal operations to a meta-logic that can acknowledge, account and integrate competing logics in a particular historical moment and temporal context based upon post formal operations and a dialectical logic (Lauzon, 1998^a). This is known as vision-logic (Wilbur, 1996; Lauzon, 1998^a). Furthermore, there is a corresponding shift in social organization with movement from hierarchical social organization characterized by bureaucracies toward more fluid networked forms of social organization (Lauzon, 1998^a). From a religious perspective, this leads toward a more ecumenical approach to organized spirituality whereby other traditions are acknowledged as legitimate and complementary, and on the individual level, there is an acknowledgement of the experiential basis of spiritual life. Thus spiritual life is not embedded within hierarchal and patriarchal institutions of religion, but is embedded in the fabric of the individual's everyday life, what English (2001) called a “public spirituality.”

I now turn to the implications for adult education.

A Spiritually Inspired Adult Education

Adult education has until recently, ignored spirituality as a dimension of human life, human learning and education. However, in the last ten to fifteen years there has been a new interest in spirituality and the role it plays in both the learning of children and adults. In this section I will outline my conceptualization of a spiritually inspired adult education.

First, let me begin by stating that there is nothing definitive that can be said about addressing spirituality in the context of adult education. Spirituality ebbs and flows in ways that we do not fully comprehend. Needs, a foundational concept in the field of adult education are not necessarily definitive and arise in the space between the social world and the inner personal world. In other words, needs arise in the space between the objective and subjective. Thus we must recognize that spirituality is not static nor it is a state; it is not a destiny but a journey. Our spirituality evolves and changes, as do our needs, in light of our experiences, our changing understanding of our experiences, and our changing relationship to self, others and the larger environment. It is these relationships, I believe, that are central to spirituality and it is through these relationships that we experience what I would call the divine and others may call a higher power. Thus central to spirituality within the context of education is relationship.

Given the above point, what then is the purpose of adult education? While there are many laudable goals that have been attributed to the field of adult education including social change/transformation, personal development and skill development for vocational reasons, the fundamental purpose of a spiritually inspired adult education is an education that creates opportunities for autonomy and choice. It is only in having choice that individuals can name the world for themselves, and in naming the world for themselves they create opportunities to create meaning – that which is at the very heart of a spiritually inspired adult education. Also, autonomy and choice is a prerequisite for relationships of interdependence rather than dependence. It is only from a position of autonomy and independence that an individual can enter into an interdependent relationship.

Second, a spiritually inspired adult education must address the issue of oppression and focus its energy on social change through the transformation of structural power relationships. It is only in transforming oppressive structures that we create opportunities for people to engage the world on their own terms. However, this necessitates that we respect and accept diversity as a starting point; there are many ways of viewing and knowing the world as we seek “truth”. From a spiritual perspective, this is captured by Maher and Hunt (1993: 27) who state that “People may start life’s trek at a variety of trail heads, climb at difference paces, and confront terrain that is both inviting and discouraging. Yet as the peak draws near, the realization surfaces that everyone was headed in the same direction all along.” In others words, the human race is characterized by differences but we also need to recognize the commonalities among us. This, from my perspective, addresses the spiritual dimension of life. However, commonality, or common understanding, is built through a process of dialogue whereby we move beyond difference and through conflict. A spiritually inspired education that recognizes and respects difference, and attempts to build commonality through difference, must be open to conflict. Thus conflict is not a sign of ill health, but a sign of health. As we seek to build this commonality we need to engage a variety of ways knowing that respect difference and differences. Education, while often the domain of *logos*, should also create space for *eros*. We must strive to engage learners in their fullness, recognizing the importance of body, mind, feeling and spirit as complementary ways of knowing the world and others. We must also come to embrace narrative and story as a way of articulating our truths, for it is through story that humans can identify with “other”. We see in them a mirror that reflects back to us part of our own essence, our own experience

and that provides a “connection” to begin to build a “bridge” across difference. We learn to understand their truth through our truth as all human stories reflect some aspect of human existence that we can identify with. We must acknowledge that knowledge is not linear and abstract, but textured and imbued with meaning from a variety of locations, all illuminating part of our reality. Through sharing our own truths – be those individual truths or collective/cultural truths – we come to a greater understanding of reality. Thus knowledge is always, by definition, constructed in context and is local. And this returns us to the notion of relationship. All knowledge construction in this context arises through engagement characterized by intimate relationship – relationship with self, others and the larger environment.

As an educator, I must strive to create safer spaces, spaces that are respectful and attentive to the needs of individuals, the collective and the environment. I need to create opportunities to engage autobiography for it is through engaging autobiography that we name our world and develop our agency. We share our stories and build a common understanding. As an educator, I must also embrace Freire’s notion of learner-teacher and teacher-learner. We are all learners in this context. This is not to deny my power or responsibility in this context, but to recognize that I can share and participate; I can participate with others in the construction of local knowledge despite my role and status as “teacher”. This requires that I am not merely a facilitator, but I engage others through taking risks and sharing my own stories. They too can contribute to our collective understanding if they are offered in the spirit of collective knowledge construction. As I share my stories I must also help create and support a dialogical space where others can share their stories, and where the question of what does this mean can be posed. This means that I must strive to foster an ethic of care for we are not only responsible for ourselves; we are responsible for and to others, to their learning and to their care. Much of what I do as a teacher is to provide support and encouragement, to help individuals and collectives reach deep within and find the courage to name the world for themselves rather than accept the names of others. My final responsibility as a teacher is to bear witness to the journey of the learners, to honor and celebrate their journey.

As an educator this means that I must be willing to make myself vulnerable, that I am willing to take risks and in taking risks I am willing to fail (only so that I may learn). I must also strive for congruence. I must strive to “walk my talk” always, for if I do not learners will see into this and this creates mistrust and they will be afraid to take chances; they will resort to conventions and use the names others have constructed for the world to ensure their safety for at a deep emotional and spiritual level they experience an incoherence, or incongruence, in the world. And while they may not be able to name what the problem is, they will be aware that there is a problem and this undermines the intimacy – always constructed in the context of honesty – that is required for true learning and knowledge construction to take place. It requires that I honor my integrity, that I always speak my truth, and that my truth is always embodied in appropriate action. And while it is hard to argue against a spiritually inspired practice, it is challenging for the dominant culture does not support this perspective on education, learning and knowledge. To date, the dominant paradigm of education remains what Freire called the “banking approach” to education whereby the experts “pour” the appropriate information into the empty vessels known as students, people I prefer to call learners, and in doing so squash the human spirit.

Conclusion

A spiritually inspired education is an emergent education and is indicative of more fundamental changes that are currently taking place across the globe. Our interest in spirituality and our commitment to spiritual practice is an outgrowth, I believe, of the evolution of human consciousness. This requires we promote agency while creating spaces for dialogue across difference as we aspire to view the world from the peak where the “view”, regardless of the path traveled, is the same. All true spiritual paths lead to that which unites us in our humanity. What has been written here is my perspective written out of my experience at this moment in time and space.

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