Journal of College & Character VOLUME X, NO. 2, November 2008

Leadership, Spirituality, and the College as a Mentoring Environment

Sharon Daloz Parks, Whidbey Institute[1]

Abstract

Both leadership and spirituality have become catalytic words in the current discourse related to the purposes of higher education. It is clear that leadership and spirituality are necessarily related when one draws on distinctions between authority and leadership described by Ronald Heifetz's pioneering work at Harvard's Kennedy School. Spirituality must be broadly defined, distinguished from religion, and both subject to continual testing in the practice of critical thought. The academy in its vocation as a formative educational institution committed to the intellectual life does, by intention or default, shape spiritual/religious understanding and affect the capacity of the next generation for leadership in a time of profound cultural change.

In ways we would not have expected, both "Leadership" and "Spirituality" are being re-worked in the life of the academy. This conversation emerges from the larger reality that we are among the generations that have been asked to live in a cusp time—a threshold, axial, hinge time in history. We have unprecedented access to knowledge of our cosmos, our planet, our selves, and each other. In this context, our social-cultural covenants are being re-ordered.

We know this re-ordering *economically* as now we are dramatically swept up in global markets irrespective of our participation in local or national markets. We know this *ecumenically* as cultures are meeting, colliding, dying, and being born. We know this *ecologically* as we are learning in new ways that we are all a part of a vast tissue of life and undergoing a massive extinction of species precipitated by one particular species—our own. "The more deeply I search for the roots of the global environmental crises," reflects Al Gore, "the more I am convinced that it is an outer manifestation of an inner crises that is for lack of a better word, spiritual" (Gore, 1993, p. 12). Thomas Berry adds: "the religions are too pious, the corporations too plundering, the government too subservient. . . . The universities, however, should have the insight and the freedom to provide the guidance needed by the human community" (Berry, 1999, pp. 79-80). We live

[1]Sharon Daloz Parks is the director of "Leadership for the New Commons," an initiative of the Whidbey Institute in Clinton, WA. For over sixteen years she held faculty and research positions at Harvard University in the schools of Divinity, Business, and the Kennedy School of Government. Her most recent book is *Leadership Can Be Taught: A Bold Approach for a Complex World* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2005).

This article is based on a presentation given at the University of Richmond for the NACA National Leadership Symposium 2008: "Authenticity as a Spiritual Framework For Educating a New Generation of Leadership."

in a time when something more is now asked of us in the practice of higher education. The words leadership and spirituality are two of the catalysts in that inquiry.

Leadership

I will always remember a conversation with a young man, a graduate student in public policy, who thoughtfully reflected: "Leadership is a word that holds a lot of hungers" (Parks, 2005, p. 1). And I have always regretted that I never pursued his observation with him. So, what might those hungers be? Surely they include a simple hunger for power and agency—to make a contribution, to have an effect on the world. Moreover, every social group hungers for some form of authority—for one or ones we can count on when we need order, a way to proceed, reassurance. Particularly in times of distress, we hunger for a "leader." But now, in this cusp, axial time, we hunger for more: for leadership that can wade into complexity, facilitate significant change, and practice moral courage.

My understanding of a practice of leadership that can meet the hungers of this time is informed, in part, by the work of Ronald Heifetz and his colleagues at Harvard's Kennedy School and the Center for Public Leadership (See Heifetz & Linsky, 2002). Across more than two decades of practice and research, they have developed an approach to the understanding and practice of leadership that can be described as "adaptive leadership." I suggest that this perspective opens a window into the necessary relationship between leadership and spirituality and the relationship of both to the academy.

Adaptive leadership makes two primary and useful distinctions. The first is a distinction between *authority* and *leadership*. The function of authority is to insure stability by providing orientation, direction, norm setting, conflict resolution, and protection. The function of leadership, on the other hand, is to orchestrate sufficient de-stabilization in order to mobilize the group to address critical issues. In more stable times, these can be conflated, but when we look to authority in times of profound transformation, we may find ourselves trapped in a pattern that fails to address "conditions on the ground" adequately. Staying put is not enough, and we are invited to seek leadership which can help us move from our current ways of thinking and acting through the turbulence of change to more adequate patterns of life—in our organizations, communities, and larger world.

Similarly adaptive leadership distinguishes between two kinds of problems: *technical problems* and *adaptive challenges*. Technical problems, even if complicated, can be addressed with knowledge already available to us. Adaptive challenges, however, require innovation, new learning, loss, and grief—even on the part of those who are attempting to exercise leadership. In this threshold time, we are awash in adaptive challenges.

When we reconsider the meaning and practice of leadership in these terms, two other distinctions present themselves: first, a distinction between holding *power* and making *progress*—that is, a shift from our preoccupation with securing, holding, and wielding power to a more profound focus on mobilizing people to make progress on our

toughest challenges; second, a distinction between assuming that a capacity for leadership is determined by basic *personality* traits (having the right stuff) and a capacity for effective *presence* within a complex field of endeavor (Parks, 2005, chap.1; Heifetz & Linsky, 2002).

A Contemplative Mind

Under-girding these distinctions is the recognition that in any viable practice of leadership, we must be able to read complex patterns of activity intelligently and learn how to intervene effectively. This competence is dependent upon a contemplative mind (The Center for the Contemplative Mind, n.d.). Heifetz, therefore, calls for the cultivation of the capacity to avoid merely getting swept up in the dance and instead to be able "to get on the balcony," so that we can see what is going on from another perspective and make more adequate choices about how to re-enter the dance. In the academy we describe this as the practice of critical thought. Jesuits describe it as contemplation in action. In the practice of leadership, this capacity makes it possible to discern what is really going on—the truth of the reality at hand—and what actions may be most productive in helping the group make progress.

When we are on the balcony, we observe not only what is going on within the group but also within ourselves. We can become mindful, for example, that when we attempt to "hold a group" we are probably "conducting a good deal of electricity." We may also be able to see that there is some measure of disturbance we ourselves inevitably make when we enter any social context. Recognizing and understanding that "disturbance" can help us to be more effective if we manage it well. When we read the complex patterns we can observe from the balcony, we also learn something about humility and a sense of right proportion. That is, if things are going well, we discover it is rarely our doing alone; and if things go badly, we can recognize that we are almost always some part of the mess. Thus we can gain some purchase on both our vulnerability to defensiveness and getting blindsided, and our tendency to heroic interpretations of our role in the scheme of things. Most centrally, in learning to move from the dance floor to the balcony and back again, we can discern more adequately what is true, what is at stake and worthy of our efforts, how our deepest loyalties and purposes might be re-shaped, and what is the work that ultimately matters. Above all, whenever a person is attempting to practice adaptive leadership and must, therefore, necessarily invite people into terrain that is unknown both to the group and to "the leader," the ability both to hold steady and to move ahead depends upon a capacity for a tested trust that transcends the immediate circumstances and personalities.

These capacities for critical perception, contemplation, discernment, humility, and a larger trust are integral to the practice of leadership, and they are deeply resonant with our understanding of spiritual capacities. Indeed, they are spiritual capacities because they are predicated on the awareness of some larger, trustworthy orchestration of life of which any one of us is only a part. In the practice of leadership, we learn that in axial time our presumed or even revered authorities inevitably fail us, and we must discern and trust a locus of confidence that is both larger and more intimate.

It is in these ways that we can begin to recognize that the practice of contemplation is a spiritual practice that is also integral to the intellectual life—a necessary element in the formation of knowledge—as well as integral to an effective practice of adaptive leadership. Thus we should not be surprised that in this axial time when the wider culture may rightly look to us for leadership, both “leadership” and “spirituality” are now “up” for us.

Spirituality

Spirituality is another word “that holds a lot of hungers.” I was recently talking with a woman who has a doctorate in leadership studies who works primarily in the corporate sphere. She remarked, “I can’t use the word “spirituality” in that context, but something is missing, and for want of another word, I think it is the spiritual dimension” (Wilson, 2008).

What do we mean by this can’t-be-used word “spiritual”? The etymology of the word *spirit* directs us to such roots as “air,” “breath,” “wind”—a sense of *power moving unseen*. Spiritual consciousness acknowledges that there is more to life than we can directly see and touch, an intuition of mystery, depth, and meaning at the essence of our experience of life. A “spiritual” sensibility can be as intimate as our in-most thoughts and feelings, and at the same time it can be evoked and informed by the vastness of the universe in which we dwell.

When we speak of the human being as a spiritual being, we acknowledge an animating essence at the core of our lives—our experience of awe and wonder and our capacity to be moved, vulnerable, compassionate, loyal, tender, loving, insightful, excited, curious, engaged, and sometimes outraged. Howard Thurman, the Quaker mystic, spoke to Spelman College students in 1981 of how “there is something in every one of you that waits and listens for the sound of the genuine in yourself” (Thurman quoted in Edelman, 1992, p. 70). He might have said, we hunger, we wait, and we listen for that which is *authentic* in our self and others—for what “rings true.” While the word spirituality is too often used in ways that feel ungrounded, careless, and even deluded, we also know that there are times when we are in the presence of someone who seems deeply authentic in a way that manifests a quality we best describe as spiritual, that is, attuned to some larger knowing, some larger faith that yields a paradoxical sense of both gravitas and freedom.

A spiritual sensibility arises, in part, from the intellectual capacity to apprehend more than the immediate and the partial and to have an intuitive grasp of the whole. Spiritual sensibility evokes a sense of the whole of time, space, and possibility. James Carroll long ago remarked that “spiritual people are people who can see the connections among things” (Carroll, 1973, p. 102)—a larger wholeness. And William James wrote that at the heart of the religious impulse is the conviction that “there is an unseen order, and our supreme good consists in adjusting ourselves thereto” (James, 1902/1958, p. 58). The capacity to recognize the connectivity and the interdependence of all things (seen and unseen) and to discern fitting action within that wholeness is a part of what we mean when we speak of that which is authentically spiritual, and it is the ground of the most

profound moral and ethical commitments. Seeing life as an interdependent whole—or as Martin Luther King, Jr. described it, "a single garment of destiny"—can give rise to the courage to risk something big for something good (King, 1963, p. 79). It can give rise to a sense of "calling"—the conviction that Life asks something of us and we can respond, can be responsible.

Religion

In this time of great cultural change, we cannot settle for simply a traditional or static sense of life. Yet we hunger for more than change for change's sake. We hunger for something much more akin to transformation—which carries with it a sense of transcendence in the service of a more adequate truth. We want change, as the political mantra goes, "that we can believe in"—that is authentic, that moves us at deep levels in trustworthy ways, is fitting to the moment in which we now live, and is commensurate with our knowledge of it.

It is very difficult, however, for individuals to live, to change, or to undergo transformation entirely alone. It is also difficult to apprehend or discern what is authentic in the spiritual life if we expect to do so entirely by ourselves. A bedrock tenet of the academy is that we have only each other and our work together to correct and discipline the perils of any isolated subjectivity. We seek and require a larger discourse and a larger belonging. This is no less true and equally necessary in regard to spiritual experience. Religion can be described as the way in which we are spiritual together and test, codify, and evolve our learning. We grasp spiritual insight—our larger knowing—with metaphors, symbols, rituals, which in turn we must continually test for their adequacy. Every community and culture composes shared ways of understanding and making meaning of the whole of our experience including spiritual experience—and every community and culture does this a bit differently. Thus we dwell in a spiritually/religiously variegated world.

Whatever language we use, it is limited in its capacity to embrace the Mystery we all share. In Christian tradition, for instance, a dove is often used as a symbol for Spirit. In the Celtic experience of Christianity, however, a wild goose is often used as a symbol of Spirit. The symbols are similar, but they take us to different places. For example, a group of people was asked to think of the presence of Spirit as a dove, and then to consider how they should respond to a situation of injustice in inner-city housing. Their response tended to move in the direction of prayer and patience. Then they were asked to consider the same situation, thinking of Spirit as a wild goose. Their response then tended to move in the direction of mass protest at city hall!

"Spiritual but Not Religious" and the Role of the Academy

Religion at its best is a distillation of images, stories, and songs powerful enough to shape into one the chaos of our experience both intimate and ultimate. While some in today's world hold their traditional beliefs ever more firmly—even fiercely, it is now common for many others to remark: "I am spiritual but not religious." Both are understandable responses in the face of change and uncertainty that challenges traditional

religious experiences, beliefs, and practices. We all stand on new frontiers that are simultaneously intellectual and spiritual—new inquiries into what we have known, are discovering, and can know. Emerging knowledge in the disciplines of the academy—e.g., the new physics, chemistry, biology, anthropology, and psychology—along with world events fueled and framed in spiritual/religious terms function as primary pathways into these new frontiers. It is not too much to say that if the academy is squeamish about exploring the spiritual/religious experiences and questions that are now provoked among us, it must be recognized as a failure of intellectual nerve and a failure to respond to a call to adaptive leadership.

In the face of the tenacious persistence and power of spirituality in its manifold forms across human cultures, the "secularity" of the contemporary academy is best understood, not as an achieved end point in the history of human reason, but as the creation of a safe commons in which the full range of discourse regarding spiritual and/or religious understanding that is now required can be respected and examined (Speers 2008; Jacobsen & Jacobsen, 2008). This discourse must find its place in the ecology of the academy not only in our responsibility for the ongoing creation of knowledge and refutation of delusion, but also because we serve as a primary institution in the formation of the next generation of leadership.

We are dedicated to teaching and learning as something much more than a mere cognitive enterprise. Not only do we live at a cusp time in history, but we have the privilege of working with students who are at a cusp time in their lives (whether they are traditional or non-traditional students). Our students are ripe for initiation into critical, complex, connective thought. They come to us to learn what they will need to know for citizenship in the 21st century. And *all* of them are ripe for initiation into the art and practice of leadership—not just those who are the "leadership types." When today's students receive their bachelor degrees, they become a part of only one percent of the world's population that has that privilege. In our vast and complex world where no one is fully in charge yet everyone can have an effect, we must recognize that leadership can be practiced from "wherever you sit."

Mentoring Environments

In every time, but especially in these times, our students require mentoring environments. A mentoring environment provides vital support for a critical transformation: that is, the move from a more limited world view and capacity to make a meaningful contribution to a more adequate world view and enhanced capacity to contribute in positive ways to the ongoing evolution of life. By intention or default, every college and university is a mentoring environment—especially for students and for the younger members of the faculty and staff. The practice of mentoring includes at least three essential gifts:

1. **Recognition:** A mentor recognizes you—both as you are and as you could become, both your potential and your vulnerability.

2. **Support:** Good mentors provide varying and strategic forms of support and encouragement, honoring your vulnerability.
3. **Challenge:** Good mentors simultaneously also provide rightly timed challenge, honoring your potential.

Now many discussions of mentoring would stop right here—after all, these three gifts of mentoring—recognition, support, and challenge—can be in themselves highly significant. But let me suggest two additional dimensions of mentoring at its best:

4. **Inspiration:** Mentors inspire—inspirit. Sometimes mentors do this by what they embody—the way they live and teach; sometimes by the big questions they ask or by what they point to as an aspiration or affirm as an aspiration in others. This is the spiritual dimension of mentoring. Mentors, in their capacity to recognize, support, and challenge in ways that serve the potential of the protégé, serve a spiritual and moral function because they are integral to but never fully in charge of a transformative process that has enormous life consequences for individuals and for the wider society.
5. **Accountability:** The capacity to inspire is a sacred trust. Mentors must to be trustworthy in what they invite students to entertain and the ways in which they do that. Thus mentors must be accountable, both in the immediate moment and over time, resisting the temptation to exploit student trust and initiating them into only worthy dreams. (Parks, 2000, pp. 127-172)

While we do not typically speak this way within the academy, our deepest purposes include something far more profound than academic programs, conferring of degrees and credentials, or initiation into the disciplines and guilds of scholarship narrowly understood. We are agents of the formation of souls. A part of the work of higher education is to pose to our students Mary Oliver's big question: "Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?" (Oliver, 1990, p. 60).[2] In an evolving universe, this question is an intellectual, moral, and spiritual question. Embedded in this question is the question of the meaning, purpose, and vocation of knowledge. This is no time to duck the question—whether the question is posed to an individual student or to the academy as a whole. Such questions call the academy to our own adaptive work—our collective leadership and spiritual edge.

Leadership As Artistry

Increasingly, we must abandon our constrained notions of relevant knowledge and our heroic notions of leadership dependent upon the few and become yet more broadly

[2] *House of Light* by Mary Oliver. Copyright (c) 1990 by Mary Oliver. Reprinted by permission of Beacon Press, Boston

adept in the artistry of learning and leadership (Parks, 2005, chap. 9). Artists are willing to be haunted by what they cannot quite yet do. Artists are willing to work on the edge of the familiar and the unfamiliar. The artistry of adaptive leadership often requires us to lead with only good questions in hand. What might some of these questions be at this time for higher education?

- How do we meet our students in their spiritual/religious ideation whether they are Mainline, Evangelical, Roman Catholic Christians; Muslims; Jews; Buddhists; Hindus; or from yet other cultural expressions of spiritual life? Or, "spiritual but not religious."
- Do we encourage genuine dialogue across cultures, including religious spiritual cultures, in which each may inform and correct the other?
- What is the cost of harboring a too broad tolerance for consumerist values, video game addictions, the abuse of alcohol, and exploitive sexual practice as integral to collegiate culture?
- How can we invite all of our students to become conscious of their potential as practitioners of leadership, and why are our male students less attracted to our programs in leadership and service than our female students are?

Artists know that no matter how talented, skilled, and acclaimed they may be, their work is empty without the presence of "the muse." "The muse" is one way of speaking of that recognition that there is something that animates us, that writes through us as much as we want to write—that can drive research, the quest for understanding, and the will to teach. "The muse" is another way of speaking of spiritual consciousness—our participation in a larger mystery.

The artistry of adaptive leadership in the life of the academy and beyond is much too difficult to cultivate and practice and sustain apart from a robust awareness of the presence of the muse—the presence of spirit. In these and other ways, our times invite us to recover the recognition that leadership and spirituality are intimately woven and that both are integral to the life and work of higher education.

References

Berry, T. (1999). *The great work: Our way into the future.* New York: Bell Tower, 79-80.

Carroll, J. (1973). *A terrible beauty.* New York: Newman Press, 102.

Center for the Contemplative Mind in Society, The Academic Program, Northampton, MA, http://www.contemplativemind.org/programs/academic/ and http://www.contemplativemind.org/programs/academic/summer.html

Gore, A. (1993). *Earth in the balance: Ecology and the human spirit.* New York: Houghton Mifflin, 12.

Heifetz, R. A., & Linsky, M. (2002). *Leadership on the line: Staying alive through the dangers of leading.* Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

Jacobsen, D., & Jacobsen, R. H. (2008). *The American university in a postsecular age.* (New York: Oxford University Press).

James, W. (1958). *The varieties of religious experience: A study in human nature,* Gifford lectures, Edinburgh, 1901-1902. New York: New American Library, Mentor, 58. (Original work published 1902).

King, Jr. (1963 April 16). Letter from a Birmingham jail. In *Why we can't wait* (pp. 77-100). New York: Harper and Row.

Oliver, M. (1992). The summer day. *House of light.* Boston: Beacon Press, 1990, p. 60.

Parks, S. D. (2005). *Leadership can be taught: A bold approach for a complex world.* Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1.

Parks, S. D. (2000). *Big questions, worthy dreams: Mentoring young adults in their search for meaning, purpose, and faith* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, Inc., 127-172.

Speers, S. (2008 September). The secular thesis revisited: Religious life on the secular college campus today" *Journal of College & Character, 10*(1), 1-11.

Thurman, H. quoted in Edelman, M. W. (1992). *The measure of our success: A letter to my children and yours.* Boston: Beacon Press.

Wilson, A. (2008 July) Personal conversation. Edmonton, Alberta.