

Dialogue of the Soul: The Phenomenon of Intrapersonal Peace and the Adult Experience of Protestant Religious Education

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Abstract

The results of this year long qualitative study of church participants' experiences of spirit and their relationship to participant perceptions of peace suggest the importance of spirituality as an intrapersonal dialogical process extending the conceptual framework for understanding peacemaking while identifying important pedagogical implications for the practice of adult education in parish settings.

Introduction

We live in a time when adults increasingly recognize the importance of the spiritual experience for their lives (Tisdell, 2003; Dirkx, 1997; Spencer, 1992). Spirit has long been identified in human experience as a powerful, deeply felt, ineffable force of energy. Spiritual growth is a type of adult learning experience that occurs when a person becomes conscious of, reflects on, remembers and acts upon those "private experiences that contain, in some form, a contact with a realm that is greater than the self" (Spencer, 1992, p. 4). Spiritual growth is often associated with significant experiences of transformation, termed variously as conversion experiences, enlightenment, peak experiences, transformations of consciousness, or transcendent experiences.

Ours is also a time when violence and warfare threaten the survival of the planet, and structural and cultural forms of violence are virtually universal in their effects. The experience of spirit has long been associated with the experience of peace. Writing from a spiritual perspective, some scholars focus on the intrapersonal dimensions of peace advocating such practices as prayer and meditation (Dear, 2001; Foster, 1998). Others focus on the interpersonal dimensions of peace focusing on therapy, spiritual guidance, dialogue, and worship (Peck, 1987; Forest, 1988). Still others view the spiritual aspects of peace as foundational to various non-violent political approaches to peace making, such as conscientization, non-violent confrontation and civil disobedience, and collaboration (Cobban, 2000; Zinn, 2002). World religions advocate peace as a goal and some type of spiritual encounter as the foundation of religious experience and practice (Nipkow, 2003). Much is written about adult religious education practices and spiritual growth techniques such as meditation, prayer, dialogue, and various spiritual disciplines, yet little is known about the phenomenon of the spiritual encounter, considered foundational for adult religious education, and its relationship to perceptions of peace, also a goal of the religious life.

Peace education is defined variously as "commitment to resolving conflicts nonviolently, building cultures of justice, human and earth rights, gender and racial equality and equity, and

respect for indigenous peoples' rights" (Turay, 465). In North America, there has been a focus on conflict resolution, human-rights education, citizenship education and development education (Reardon 1997). Brock-Utne (1985) also underscores the importance of inter-religious dialogue. From a variety of perspectives authors affirm that "the universal primary purpose of peace education is to transform all forms of violence, including physical, emotional, psychological and structural, and build sustainable cultures of peace at the local and global levels" (Turay 466).

Turay (2000, 2005) notes that the theoretical frameworks utilized in peace education are not holistic. Reardon (1997) and Brock-Utne (1985) also echo this concern noting a tendency in the peace literature to focus on specific problems and concerns rather than the larger picture. As Turay (2005) notes: "The literature is silent on the role of spirituality in peace education. A critical awareness of the role of spirituality in peace education has the potential of enabling the adult learner and educator to rediscover and value the good in them, other people and their non human environment" (p. 466). A better understanding of the human experience of spirit and its implications for peace could assist in the development of religious education practices that might be more effective in addressing increasing levels of violence and conflict experienced today. The purpose of the study was to better understand how adult church members experience the phenomenon of spirit in their lives and the implications of their experience for peacemaking as a form of religious education.

Methodology

Building on a subjective, interpretivist, and postmodern conceptual framework, this paper reports the results of a yearlong qualitative research study involving twelve adult members of a large Protestant congregation. Twelve adult volunteers, eight women and four men, ranging in age from 25-65 years of age, participated by documenting their experiences of spiritual growth over a year through journal writing, reflection, and individual and group interviews. Participants described their spiritual experiences in written journals, interviews and focus groups. Data were transcribed and analyzed using QSR NVivo software by constant comparison of data across subjects and sources in order to determine themes and identify key elements describing participants' experiences. Qualitative research methods were used because they were consistent with the conceptual model of this study as well as the topic. Member checking was also used to help clarify the findings and ensure that the written interpretation corresponded to the participants' experiences.

Findings

Participant experiences of spirit resulted in the transformation of perspective, lifestyle, belief, assumption and attitude in both sudden and cumulative ways. Findings underscore the importance of discernment, non-verbal and non-rational expression, contextual learning, and reflection (Cranton & Roy, 2003). Participants found themselves affected by the experience. In their encounters with spirit, participants reported changes that seemed to involve an ontological shift where traditional subject/object boundaries were transcended and the encounter led to a different consciousness or sense of self. The story of one participant is illustrative:

I was living in Pensacola in 1985. I was probably in my 20s. I'm 42 now, and it was specific. It happened in church. I was singing a hymn. Suddenly I was overwhelmed by feelings of sadness. Perhaps I felt that way because I was overwhelmed by my responsibilities as a mom and a wife in a brand new town away from old friends and family. As I was singing the words, the words just seemed to jump off the page and into my heart. They were addressing the innermost thoughts and feelings. Speaking directly to me as if a person was talking to me. It's kind of hard to explain, but I believe that God spoke those words of compassion and love and understanding to me in that place. His presence was so strong that I sat down and didn't hear another word. I went home, and I told my husband that I was going to join the church. Since then I have been a different person.

This experience resulted in changes that included a report of a lessening of resentment toward a family member, the ability to forgive a wrong, and a greater ability to see the value of other very different perspectives. The participant reflected on her experience, saying, "It's like I could feel God. I just knew God was with me, and that was the first time in my whole life that I had ever felt that way. An incredible peace seemed to settle on me."

Other participants reported encounters with the Spirit in different contexts. One woman who was present when her husband died unexpectedly related her experience:

When Bill died, there was this big light around him. I could feel the presence of a power much greater than me. That was the biggest single thing that's ever happened to me. That was the only time I've ever heard a voice, well maybe not actually a voice, but boy it grabbed me and something passed between us.

Whatever it was, it gave me a sense of peace and calm that got me through it [that experience].

This story illustrates a common finding: participants often described their experiences of spirit in conversational terms. Although many participants described their experiences of spirit as conversational, in virtually all cases the conversation was non-linguistic. One participant related an experience that occurred shortly after the death of a family member:

It was just so—I don't want to say bizarre, but it was like that. Very curious. I was particularly close to my grandmother and we had a special relationship. It was three days after she passed away. I was struggling to understand and deal with her death. I woke up in the middle of the night wide-awake. More awake than I ever remember being before. I went downstairs and there was an odd...it was as if there was an awareness of something. I don't know if it was a dream or my imagination or what. I had this feeling, a kind of strange and comforting feeling both disturbing and peaceful all at the same time. It was frightening in some ways and yet eerie in some ways. It was a calmer sort of peacefulness or presence, a special experience. I didn't quite know what to make of it. It wasn't life changing, but it helped me. It was like something or someone was counseling me saying, "It's okay; it's going to be okay. And in a strange kind of way, it was. I've never forgotten"

Will, a male participant, described a numinous experience characterized by a sense of a supernatural spiritual presence – a communication without words that led to a change in perspective.

Although no two experiences were the same, many shared common elements: a sense of new awareness of a greater power that participants attributed to an experience of God's Spirit, given in the middle of life experiences and often during times of challenge that resulted in changes that participants associated with peace. Participants often described their experiences in conversational terms, but then quickly pointed out that the experience was not like a normal interpersonal conversation. Participants associated these experiences with times of new insight, experiences of forgiveness, and changes in relationships and activities.

Discussion of Findings

Three key themes emerged from the data describing the phenomenon of participant experiences of spirit and the relationship of those experiences to peace education: depth in the encounter with spirit, soul as the locus of spiritual growth, and dialogue as the language of spiritual communication. For participants the combination of these factors was often associated with experiences of peace and described as transformative.

Depth in the Encounter with Spirit

The phenomenon of spirit has been described variously in the literature. Some authors view spiritual growth as transpersonal; that is, including but extending beyond the person and normal consciousness, focusing on "those deeper or higher aspects of human experience that transcend the ordinary and the average" (Scotton, 1996, p. xviii). Participants in this study used the metaphor "deep" to describe their experiences of spiritual growth. As a metaphor, deep was not intended to imply a specific location, but rather as a way to map the complex reality of the spiritual encounter and tease out dimensions of meaning that may not be readily apparent (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Reported experiences of spirit were associated with the process of "going deeper": a deeper experience of reflection, of asking "deep questions" or "thinking deeply" about something, becoming aware of "a deep mystery," or encountering "deep feelings and emotions." Sometimes participants spoke of a depth of meaning. Several spoke of the experience as one of "baring your soul," noting that "the process of going deeper is itself spiritual." Educators who write of spiritual dimensions of the learning experience also refer to depth as a part of the process. Depth is viewed as an intra-psychic phenomenon. Dirkx (1997) for example speaks of "nurturing soul in adult learning" through a process of "looking deeper into one's life experience" (p 81).

For participants in this study a part of going deeper was to engage in reflection, to pause, and be open to discovery. As one participant said, "Most of my spiritual growth comes when I pause to think. I don't realize I'm growing or recognize that I'm growing because my life is so busy. So, spiritual growth for me occurs when I'm quiet." In spiritual growth as reported by participants in this study, participants clearly attributed their experience to spirit, even when they found it almost impossible to describe the experience, echoing James (1920) description of the encounter with spirit as "a conversation with the unseen" (p. 420). Participants identified two dimensions to depth that are useful in describing the human encounter with spirit: the soul as the locus of spiritual growth and conversation or dialogue as the language of spiritual growth.

Soul as the Locus of Spiritual Growth

Participants connected the metaphor of depth to the word soul. For example, one participant described her soul as that “the deepest part of me that I have to be true to.” For others spiritual growth involves a process of “opening up your heart and your soul.” Prayer was described by one as adding “rhythm to my soul,” and “the place I feel closest to God.” For participants, soul was important in describing that part of the human being most closely associated with the spirit. The word soul was used metaphorically to describe the locus or place of spiritual growth for participants. Educators refer to soul as a part of the learning process. As Scott (1997) says, “Engagement with the depth is at the soul level. It is when one dwells in the interior with the soul and goes down into the body (heart) that fundamental transformation occurs” (p. 49). Dirx (1997) writes of “learning through soul” (p. 80). Classically the term soul has been used to describe spiritual growth in both Western and Eastern traditions (Miller, 2000). Many authors speak of the difficulty in defining soul (Cousineau, 1994). In this study soul refers to the deeper aspects of human life. One participant, herself a musician, likened spiritual growth to the experience of playing music, saying, “If you keep at it long enough, the music comes again. You begin to hear it in your soul, and then you can play it and live it.” Soul describes the core unity of the personal and spiritual dimensions of the person, which in Western religious terms is rooted in a relationship with the divine. Today one might say the soul is where the spirit is reflected in a person’s life and is seen in a person’s emotions, senses, gestures, instincts and activities as well as ideas, thoughts and ideals. As Lauzon (1998) says, “The soul embodies all that makes us human” (p. 322). The soul is the spiritual self, the subjective essence of the individual, or “the most enduring and intimate part of the self” (James, 1950/1890, p. 296).

Dialogue as the Language of Spiritual Growth

If soul represents the locus of spiritual growth, conversation or dialogue is the process that best describes the language of the encounter between one’s soul and the spirit. Although study participants rarely used the word dialogue, the type of conversation they described was very similar to descriptions of dialogue in the literature. Spiritual forms of dialogue had both an interpersonal and intrapersonal dimension.

Dialogue as interpersonal communication was often associated with the experience of spirit by participants. Spiritual growth is fundamentally concerned with communication. One participant said, “Communication is the key to spiritual growth... God touches me through other people.” “Spiritual growth is like a conversation,” another said, a “deep spirit-filled conversation.” As Jackson (1998) said, “Soul reveals itself not in the deep recesses of the psyche nor in the extra-personal world of history and culture, but in forms of encounter, interaction, exchange and dialogue in everyday life” (p. 207). In the literature, dialogue is often viewed as a way to build interpersonal understanding. This study extends the meaning of dialogue to include spirit and suggests that the spiritual encounter has important dialogical elements that can be transformative in a person’s life. Dialogue is an activity “directed toward discovery and new understanding, which stands to improve the knowledge, insight or sensitivity of its participants” (Burbules, 1993, p. xii). Sidorkin (1999) characterizes the dialogical experience as one involving “mutuality, directness, presentness, intensity and ineffability” (p. 19). *Mutuality* was also an important part of participant descriptions of spiritual growth. As one participant said, “The more intimate my relationship with God is, the deeper my spiritual growth.” *Directness* or honesty was

also noted as important. For participants spiritual growth is associated with “telling it like it is,” and being authentic: “You have to be honest.” *Presentness* or focus was identified by study participants as important. As one participant said, “I’ve got to pay attention, wake up and notice what God is trying to tell me.” Participants described spiritual growth as occurring when a person slows down and listens, as one said, “...when I turn my thoughts off and become more aware of God.” Encounters with spirit were often described as *intense and emotional*. As one participant reported, “I was overwhelmed by the experience. When it happened I just broke down and cried.” An experience of *ineffability* was common as participants struggled to describe the unknown dimensions of the encounter with spirit as “a mystery” that is “beyond words.”

In this study dialogue is more than a communication tool, and involved more than human interaction. Participants also reported intrapersonal conversation with spirit that was suggestive of a deeper understanding of the dialogical process, times “when the Lord is interacting with me,” as one participant said. These experiences involved deep sharing and inquiry. One participant said: “To go deeper spiritually you have to bare your soul.” Another described her conversation with God as a time when she “just shared what was on my heart honestly and openly and then just listened. Sometimes it was deep.” Participants also suggested that dialogue could involve a communion with nature, inanimate objects, and spiritual realities in ways similar to Bohm (1996). Although the importance of language was widely noted by participants in this study, they underscored that the language of soul includes more than words. “Speech, music, art, all gestures, singing, dancing, laughing, crying, painting and sculpture are considered language” (Clark, 1997, p. 17). Images such as a cross or sunset, or purely physical activity were the context for an encounter with spirit that communicated in ways that were difficult to describe. Dialogue, like spiritual growth as described by participants, can occur between people and also in silence within a single mind, “between perspectives and modalities within a single awareness” (Grudin, 1996, p. ix). Participants spoke paradoxically of spiritual growth as being intensely individual yet highly relational, an experience of profound insight, yet “beyond words.” Spiritual encounters often point toward an “unseen aspect of human life” that “does not have a material location.” In a sense this spiritual dialogue is neither “within nor without an individual,” rather it is “between” self and other (Sidorkin, 1999, p. 16).

Dialogue is not simply an exchange of information, but rather an engagement that enacts meaning and has an effect on those participating. Buber (1987/1958) asserts that when a person, an “I,” meets another with authenticity and compassion, they encounter a “Thou” and “every particular Thou is a glimpse through to the eternal Thou” (p. 6). Participants reported that at times when they encountered another person, issue, place or thing with respect and understanding, they also encountered spirit, and it was the encounter with spirit that was fundamental to their transformative experiences. This spiritual dimension is known by various names. Participants in this study commonly used terms God, Jesus or spirit. Whatever form this unseen spiritual reality took for study participants, it represented the ground of their being, or as one participant said, “the center of my life.” Such an encounter often led to a profound experience of change.

Third Space

A key factor in the change that participants identified in this study was a phenomenon that bears significant similarities to the concept of “third space” (Bhabha, 1994). Third space is that place where there is a shared space, and an interconnection and flow between different

spaces (Todd, 1997). Third space refers to the place where identity is not a given, but negotiated in the context of difference. It is a place of hybridity and liminality; a place of change and transformation. It is the concept of third that suggests new and different possibilities extending beyond present reality or the common polarities of either / or. In this study participants reported experiences of Spirit as a phenomenon of “third space,” present in their lives in unexpected ways, mediating and forming their identity and extending their perspectives in unexpected ways. The concept of third space in the Spiritual encounter provided a distinct perspective often mediated through nonverbal communication that was a catalyst in the formation of different perspectives and decisions to change behaviors. Peace making in this study includes a dialogical awareness of and encounter with spirit as a third party that results in changes in perspectives, relationships, and behaviors often associated with a sense of greater inclusivity, more appreciation of difference, and a decrease in combative attitudes and actions. Participants viewed the intrapersonal dialogical spiritual dimension of peace as foundational in dealing with interpersonal and intrapersonal conflict as well as their contextual experiences of structural violence. Perception was critical in this awareness.

Perception of Spirit

Perception was foundational to the spiritual encounter. The phenomenon of spiritual encounter was powerful and formative for participants in this study. If this phenomenon is so important, why is it seldom recognized as an integral part of adult religious education and education for peace? Cranton (1994) suggests that learning is dependent on perception. James (1950/1890) was even more emphatic, “The only things which we commonly see are those which we perceive” (James, 1950/1890, Vol. 1, p. 444). Perception is a foundational concept in psychology (Casey, 1991). According to May (1982), willingness is an important part of the spiritual growth experience. May suggests that our over emphasis on willful control often excludes the possibility for perceiving the spiritual. Worldview and basic scientific assumptions often block the perception of spiritual growth. Merleau-Ponty (1962 / 1945) linked spiritual growth with perception, saying that, “We are unaware of it only because scientific knowledge shifts the center of gravity of experience, so that we have unlearned how we see, hear, and generally speaking, feel” (p. 229). Focused on sensing only a limited spectrum of data, we simply do not see the spiritual realities before us. As Blake (1986) wrote, “If the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear to man [sic] as it is, infinite. For man [sic] has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro’ narrow chinks of his cavern” (p. 101). Perception in this study was often viewed as a gift given in mysterious ways and associated with considerable efforts in reflection and activity.

Implications for Adult Religious Education

Findings from this study suggest that spiritual encounter, as a form of adult learning, is a context for change in perspective and modifications in behavior in ways that are more inclusive and less combative. Because most adult religious education is focused on formal learning experiences, and participants’ experiences of spirit in this study most often occur in informal and non formal ways and are often reported to be powerful and formative, this study suggests the need for more attention to the informal and non formal ways adults learn faith. This study also underscores the importance of heuristic learning in spiritual formation and adult religious education.

Conclusion

Even within the sample represented by this study, limited in number and cultural diversity, findings suggest a wide variety of spiritual learning experiences many associated with an experience of peace. Intrapersonal peacemaking was mediated through a dialogical process associated with common life experiences. A number of participant experiences of spirit resulted in the transformation of perspective, lifestyle, belief, and attitude in both sudden and cumulative ways. These were often associated with experiences described as peaceful, more inclusive, appreciative of difference, and less violent. Results of this study suggest the importance of an expanded conceptual framework for peacemaking that would more effectively address issues of spirituality. This framework extends common notions of the culture of peace and has implications for the pedagogy of adult religious education especially in the parish. In an age of increasing religious violence and contested educational practice, transformational dimensions of the experience of spirit offer opportunity for a more inclusive vision for life for individuals, groups, and congregations, and hold promise for making an important contribution to the reduction of violence in the world.

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