

ALEXANDER W. ASTIN

# Why Spirituality Deserves a

BEFORE EXPLAINING the assertion put forward in the title of this essay, let me first try to clarify what I mean by “spirituality.” Since the term covers a lot of territory and means different things to different people, there’s little point in trying to develop a precise definition. Instead, let me simply lay out the general territory and range of things that the word suggests to me.

To begin with, spirituality points to our *interiors*, by which I mean our subjective life, as contrasted to the objective domain of observable behavior and material objects that you can point to and measure directly. In other words, the spiritual domain has to do with human *consciousness*—what we experience privately in our subjective awareness. Second, spirituality involves our qualitative or *affective* experiences at least as much as it does our reasoning or logic. More specifically, spirituality has to do with the values that we hold most dear, our sense of who we are and where we come from, our beliefs about why we are here—the meaning and purpose that we see in our work and our life—and our sense of connectedness to each other and to the world around us. Spirituality can also have to do with aspects of our experience that are not easy to define or talk about, such things as intuition, inspiration, the mysterious, and the mystical. Within this very broad umbrella, virtually everyone qualifies as a spiritual being, and it’s my hope that everyone—regardless of their belief systems—can find some personal value and educational relevance in the concept.

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Education and human consciousness  
One of the most remarkable things about the human consciousness is that each of us has the capacity to *observe* our thoughts and feelings as they arise in our consciousness. Why shouldn’t cultivating this ability to observe one’s own mind in action—becoming more self-aware or simply more “conscious”—be one of the central purposes of education?

It’s difficult to see how most of our contemporary domestic and world problems can ever be resolved without a substantial increase in our individual and collective self-awareness. Self-awareness and self-understanding, of course, are necessary prerequisites to our ability to understand others and to resolve conflicts. This basic truth lies at the heart of our difficulty in dealing effectively with problems of violence, poverty, crime, divorce, substance abuse, and religious and ethnic conflict that continue to plague our country and our world.

Even a cursory look at our educational system makes it clear that the relative amount of attention that higher education devotes to the exterior and interior aspects of our lives has gotten way out of balance. Thus, while we are justifiably proud of our “outer” development in fields such as science, medicine, technology, and commerce, we have increasingly come to neglect our “inner” development—the sphere of values and beliefs, emotional maturity, moral development, spirituality, and self-understanding.

What is most ironic about all of this is that while many of the great literary and philosophical traditions that constitute the core of a liberal education are grounded in the maxim, “know thyself,” the development of self-awareness receives very little attention in our schools and colleges, and almost no attention in public discourse in general or in the media in particular. If we lack self-understanding—the capacity to see ourselves clearly and

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# Central Place in Liberal Education



Annual Meeting



honestly and to understand why we feel and act as we do—then how can we ever expect to understand others?

Students, curriculum, and instruction  
In exploring the connection between spirituality and higher education, a good way to start is to take a look at the interior lives of our students. If we look at how our students' *values* have been changing during recent decades (Astin 1998), the good news is they have become strong supporters of both gender and racial equity and of students' rights in general, and most recently they have become much stronger supporters of gay rights. The bad news is that they have become much less engaged both academically and politically, much more focused on making a lot of money, and much less likely to concern themselves with "developing a meaningful philosophy of life." These contrasting values—the material and the existential—have literally traded places since the early 1970s, a time when developing a meaningful philosophy of life was the number one value for students. In other words, a focus on the spiritual interior has been replaced by a focus on the material exterior.

Putting more emphasis on students' interior development has enormous implications for how we approach student learning and development. In most institutions today the primary focus is on what students *do*: how well they perform on classroom exercises and examinations, whether they follow the rules and regulations, how many credits they receive, and so on. And while we invest a good deal of our pedagogical effort in developing the student's cognitive, technical, and job skills, we pay little if any attention to the development of "affective" skills such as empathy, cooperation, leadership, interpersonal understanding, and self-understanding. The reality of human consciousness, of course, is not simply that we can think and reason; on the contrary, the essence of being a sentient human is that we can *feel*, that we can experience joy and contentment, frustration and excitement, curiosity and love.

Recently, in connection with a book I've just completed on human consciousness (Astin 2003), I took on the somewhat daunting task of reading through every word in a medium-sized English dictionary. What I was looking for were all of the different terms that our culture has developed for labeling our affective or feeling



states. I eventually came up with a list of more than a thousand different words, which only begins to do justice to the incredibly rich diversity of feeling states that can arise in the human awareness. When you contemplate the different *combinations* of these feeling states that are possible in any given moment of awareness, the numerical possibilities for varying feeling states are staggering.

What was perhaps most surprising in my search for feeling words was the discovery that there are several dozen different affective states that have to do with *thinking*. Let me share just a brief sampling of these terms, and as I run down the list, ask yourself, “Is this something about the students’ interior that a classroom teacher should be concerned about?” Surprised, doubtful, focussed, reflective, skeptical, comprehending, mindful, astonished, unsure, interested, confused, amazed, curious, and—the feeling state that most frustrates those of us who teach—boredom. Clearly, this list makes it hard to argue that there is any such thing as “pure” cognition that can be studied in isolation from affect; on the contrary, it would appear that our thoughts and our reasoning are almost always taking place in some kind of affective “bed” or context.

Faculty, administrators, and institutions  
For many years now I’ve been interested in educational transformation and reform, and nowhere is the importance of this issue of “the inner versus the outer” more obvious than in the case of our attempts to change institutions. When we talk about educational reform in the academy, for example, we usually focus heavily on exterior “structures” such as programs, policies, curricula, requirements, resources, and facilities. As a consequence, we ordinarily give little attention to the “interior” of the institution, by which I mean the *collective* or *shared* beliefs and values of the faculty that constitute the “culture” of the institution. Our research on institutional change and transformation suggests strongly that any effort to change structures has little chance of success if it ignores our collective interiors or culture. In other words, changing our institutions and programs necessarily requires us to change the academic culture as well.

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A similar imbalance can be seen in the way we approach faculty development, where we typically think in terms of external matters such as scholarly activities, teaching techniques, and service to the institution and to the community.

The internal aspects of the faculty member’s development—values, beliefs, hopes, fears, and frustrations—get relatively little attention.

It is probably important to acknowledge at this point that in many respects the way we conduct higher education is simply a reflection of the larger society. It is probably no exaggeration to say that the modern world, and the United States in particular, has in recent years become increasingly focused on the external aspects of society: economics, acquisitiveness, competitiveness, etc., to the point where the human condition and the quality of life is judged primarily in terms of *things*. Higher education similarly tends to judge itself in materialistic terms: enrollments, funding, the test scores of our students, the publication record of our faculty, and our rankings in popularity polls.

Partly as a response to this external/materialistic emphasis and to the fragmentation that it generates, I see a movement gradually emerging in higher education where many academics find themselves actively searching for meaning and trying to discover ways to make their lives and their institutions more whole. I think this movement reflects a growing concern with recovering a sense of meaning in American society more generally. The particular “spiritual” questions that give rise to these concerns encompass a broad set of issues:

- How do we achieve a greater sense of community and shared purpose in higher education?
- How can we provide greater opportunities for individual and institutional renewal?
- What are the causes of the division and fragmentation that so many academics experience in their institutional and personal lives?
- What does it mean to be authentic, both in the classroom and in our dealings with colleagues?
- What are some of the practices and traditions that make it difficult for us to be authentic in an academic setting?



## Changing our institutions and programs necessarily requires us to change the academic culture as well

- What are some of the disconnections that higher education is experiencing in relation to the larger society? How might we better serve the public good?
- How can we help our students achieve a greater sense of meaning and purpose in their academic and personal lives?

Such questions make it clear that “spiritual” issues cover a wide range of questions, and that each person will view his or her spirituality in a unique way. For some academics, religious beliefs may indeed form the core of their spirituality; for others, such beliefs may play little or no part. *How* one defines his or her spirituality or, if you prefer, sense of meaning and purpose in life, is not the issue. The important point is that academia has for far too

long encouraged us to lead fragmented and inauthentic lives, where we act either as if we are not spiritual beings, or as if our spiritual side is irrelevant to our vocation or work. Under these conditions, our work becomes divorced from

our most deeply felt values and we hesitate to discuss issues of meaning, purpose, authenticity, wholeness, and fragmentation with our colleagues. At the same time, we likewise discourage our students from engaging these same issues among themselves and with us.

### The Fetzer dialogues

In recognition of these problems, the Fetzer Institute a few years ago convened a series of retreat meetings where a diverse group of academics was encouraged to explore issues of meaning, purpose, and spirituality in the context of higher education. The steering group for these dialogues—now formally known as The Initiative for Authenticity and Spirituality in Higher Education (IASHE)—recently joined with two other organizations—Education as Transformation (EasT) and The Community for Integrative Learning and Action (CILA)—to form The Consortium on Spirituality in Higher Education.

One outcome of our Fetzer dialogues was an in-depth study where we conducted personal interviews with seventy faculty members from four diverse colleges and universities (Astin and Astin 1999). Our major finding from this study—that college faculty are eager to discuss issues of meaning, purpose, and spirituality—has been strongly reinforced by our experience at several national conferences where sessions have been convened to discuss these same issues.

### Inspiration and creativity

If one spends even a little bit of time in serious contemplation of what goes on in one’s conscious mind, it quickly becomes obvious that there must be another completely hidden part of the mind that does most of the work. Whatever one prefers to call this “other” mind—the unconscious, the nonconscious mind, the preconscious—its capabilities and its power are nothing short of awesome. It not only serves as a repository for all of our memories, motives, concepts, and beliefs, but it is

#### STUDENTS AND SPIRITUALITY

A spring 2003 survey of 1,680 college juniors enrolled at forty-six diverse institutions reveals a strong interest in spiritual matters.

- Over half of all students (58 percent) place a high value on “integrating spirituality into my life,” and more than two-thirds report that they have had a spiritual experience.
- Three-fourths of the students (77 percent) believe that “we are all spiritual beings.”

Significant numbers of students are experiencing challenges and struggles in their spiritual and religious development.

- Two-thirds (65 percent) report that they question their religious/spiritual beliefs at least occasionally (18 percent frequently), and a similar number (68 percent) say that they are “feeling unsettled about spiritual and religious matters” at least “to some extent.”
- Three-fourths (76 percent) of the students have “struggled to understand evil, suffering, and death” at least occasionally (21 percent frequently), and nearly half (46 percent) have at least occasionally “felt angry with God” (6 percent frequently).
- One-third (38 percent) of the students report feeling “disillusioned with my religious upbringing,” at least “to some extent.”





also the source of our intuition, inspiration, creativity, and spirituality.

When we consider those vitally important human qualities that are implied by words like intuition, inspiration, and creativity, we are coming pretty close to what some people refer to as the “mystical” aspects of human experience. None other than Albert Einstein (2000) has said, “The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true Art and Science.”

If we academics are really serious when we claim that our institutions are devoted to advancing the arts and sciences, shouldn't we do everything we can to nurture and cultivate that mysterious, nonconscious part of the human psyche from which all of our inspiration and creativity emerges? Intuition is, of course, intimately connected to inspiration and creativity. While doing something creative can sometimes involve a good deal of logical thought or reasoning—a scientist, for example, who is attempting to devise a theory to explain certain observations—many people, especially those in the fine and performing arts, believe that thinking can actually *interfere* with creativity. Indeed, when you read personal accounts of what people experience in their waking consciousness during the creative process (see below), it becomes clear that intuition is almost always a part of that process.

Creativity is basically a process whereby we bring into existence something *new* or *original*. That “something” can be a creative product

such as a painting, invention, essay, poem, sculpture, musical composition, dance routine, or theatrical production, but it can also be something less tangible such as a scientific theory, an idea for urban renewal, or a new way of teaching, mentoring, parenting, leading, collaborating, mediating, or serving those in need. Viewed in this way, *creativity is (or should be) central to the goals of liberal learning*. Indeed, *creativity is a fundamental part of human existence* or, as several people have observed, “your life is your own greatest work of art.”

That creativity is closely connected to the mystical and the spiritual becomes obvious when we look at verbatim accounts of what people in various fields experience during the process of creating:

- **a painter/sculptor:** “There’s something flowing through you that’s not you. To me, the feeling is tangible proof of the existence of spirit: something we can tap into that’s beyond ourselves and our senses. The highest goal we can aspire to is to be transmitter of that” (Miller 1997).
- **a writer:** “I think creativity is spiritual...a synonym for inspiration...suddenly it comes clear to me what I need to say and how to say it. I feel awe when this happens, it’s an inspiring experience... I’m tempted to say it comes from God. For me this is an experience of divine self-disclosure” (Wakefield 1996).
- **composer Johannes Brahms:** “I ... feel that a higher power is working through me.... It cannot be done merely by will power working through the conscious mind...I immediately feel vibrations that thrill my whole being... Those vibrations assume the forms of distinct mental images... the ideas flow in upon me, directly from God... measure by measure the finished product is revealed to me... the conscious mind is in temporary abeyance and the subconscious is in control, for it is through the subconscious mind ... that the inspiration comes. I have to be careful, however, not to lose consciousness, otherwise the ideas fade away” (Abell 1987).
- **composer Richard Strauss:** “When in my most inspired moods, I have definite compelling visions, involving a higher selfhood. I feel at such moments that I am tapping the source of Infinite and Eternal energy from which you and I and all things proceed. Religion calls it God” (Abell 1987).

# 1915

## Ninety Years in Print

Lines from AAC's Bulletin,  
November 1930

- Arthur E. Morgan, president of Antioch College: "To live in a very small section of time is as provincial as to live in a restricted locality."
- Robert L. Kelly, executive secretary of AAC: Radio "has brought us all into earshot of all the rest."
- Robert L. Kelly: "The liberal college [aims] to persevere in the colossal effort to build a new civilization on spiritual and intellectual foundations."

What are we to make of such accounts? What are the implications of such accounts for higher education? While some academics may be inclined to view the mystical and the spiritual as "irrational," the processes of intuition and creativity are, in fact, more *transrational* than *irrational*. The point here is that the mystical or spiritual aspects of our conscious experience are by no means contrary to, or otherwise opposed to, rationality; rather, they *transcend* rationality. Thus, when a composer writes a great piece of music, the inspiration that gives rise to the music is a trans- or non-rational process, but in the process of committing the new music to paper the composer does not therefore ignore all of the rational and logical rules of harmony and theory. In the same way, the painter does not ignore the rational rules of color mixing or perspective, nor does the novelist ignore the rational rules of grammar and sentence structure.

Toward a more spiritual academe  
How, then, do we begin to give greater emphasis to these neglected aspects of our conscious experience? As it happens, there are several recent developments in higher education that suggest that we may be ready to pay

more attention to our inner lives and those of our students. One of these is the movement to redirect the attention of faculty and staff away from teaching and more in the direction of *learning*. Another closely related trend is the shift in emphasis away from the individual teacher and learner toward learning *communities*. While some of the reformers who have been promoting these changes might wonder at the suggestion that they are advocating a more "spiritual" approach to pedagogy, these innovations are certainly headed in the right direction: to shift our attention away from what we academics do toward a greater concern not only for the interiors of our students, but also toward seeing the entire educational process in a more holistic way. These reforms thus redirect our attention more in the direction of the human *connectedness* that is so basic, not just to the learning process, but also to spirituality. The people involved in these movements are natural allies for those of us who would like to see spiritual issues given a more central place in our institutions.

Another promising trend is the growing popularity of "Freshman 101" courses. In this case, we are encouraging students to look at their education in a more holistic way, and to make deeper connections between their academic work and their sense of meaning and purpose in life.

One final set of potential allies is the growing numbers of academics who are involved in the field of *service learning*. Longitudinal research on students suggests that this unique kind of pedagogy comes closer than anything we've looked at in the past four decades to being a pedagogical panacea: Almost all aspects of the student's academic, personal, and moral development are favorably influenced by participation in service learning, and the teachers themselves are also often transformed by teaching such courses (Astin and Sax 1998; Astin, Sax, and Avalos 1999; Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, and Yee 2000).

Two aspects of the service learning experience appear to be especially relevant to issues of spirituality. First, the entire process is built around *connectedness*, not only between the students and the service recipients but also among the students themselves. Moreover, the pedagogical key to an effective service learning experience appears to be the use of personal *reflection*: What did the service experience



mean to you, not only in terms of the academic content of the course, but also in terms of who you are, why you are a student, and what kind of life you want to lead? The most powerful service learning experiences turn out to be those that combine individual reflection—keeping journals, writing integrative essays about the service experience, etc.—with group sessions, where students collectively reflect on the meaning of their service experience.

This growing awareness of the importance of spirituality in higher education was recently underscored by the Templeton Foundation through its award of a \$1.9 million grant to UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute to support a large-scale longitudinal study of spiritual development in college undergraduates. A pilot study of 3,700 students enrolled at forty-six colleges and universities was initiated in spring 2003, and a full-scale assessment of 90,000 students enrolling at 150 institutions will be initiated in fall 2004. (See [www.spirituality.ucla.edu](http://www.spirituality.ucla.edu)).

#### Conclusion

Perhaps the most important thing to keep in mind about spirituality is that it touches directly on our sense of *community*. More than anything else, giving spirituality a central place in our institutions will serve to strengthen our sense of connectedness with each other, our students, and our institutions. This enrichment of our sense of community will not only go a long way toward overcoming the sense of fragmentation and alienation that so many of us now feel, but will also help

our students to lead more meaningful lives as engaged citizens, loving partners and parents, and caring neighbors. □

*Survey results were presented in a talk at the Annual Meeting.*

*To respond to this article, e-mail [liberaled@aacu.org](mailto:liberaled@aacu.org), with the author's name in the subject line.*

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