

## **Constructing A Spirituality of Teaching: A Personal Perspective**

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“There is a place where we are always alone with our own mortality, where we must simply have something greater than ourselves to hold onto – God or history or politics or literature or a belief in the healing power of love, or even righteous anger. Sometimes I think they are all the same. A reason to believe, a way to take the world by the throat and insist that there is more to this life than we have ever imagined.”

Dorothy Allison, *Skin: Talking About Sex, Class, and Literature*, 1999

### *The Professor of Education As Spiritual Seeker*

In the early 1980s, during a long-awaited sabbatical, I, a tenured full professor at a so-called “public ivy,” returned to graduate school to earn a degree in applied ethics and religious studies. In the late 1980s, I took time off to earn still another graduate degree, this one in moral theology. Why, I asked myself, would a person who for so long claimed to be temperamentally indisposed to matters of the spirit spend so much money and energy pursuing further studies in religiously-oriented disciplines? Was this my way of having something “greater than myself to hold onto,” of seizing the “world by the throat” in order to find more to life than I could ever have imagined? At least on the face of it, these degrees had no palpable payoff for my work as a teacher educator. In fact, to this day, I do not even bother to mention them on my Curriculum Vitae for fear of appearing impractical, or worse, intellectually self-indulgent, to colleagues in my professional school.

In retrospect, I now understand that while I may never have been comfortable as a conventional religious practitioner, or even as a believer, I have always been an eager student of religion and spirituality. I have been fascinated throughout my intellectual life with issues of meaning and emptiness, faith and doubt, transcendence and immanence, the secular and the sacred, the ineffable and the expressible. I now accept the fact that in all the professional courses I teach – applied ethics, philosophy of education, moral education, and others – I am actually a spiritual seeker and proud of

## 2 *Religion & Education*

it. I am a spiritual seeker because, although the world of material phenomena (science and technology) is important to me (after all, I do work in a college of education that is concerned with the prosaic, but no less real, problems of teachers, administrators, and students) the world of the intangible is important to me as well. This world of the intangible evokes questions of being, first principles, intuition, the origin and validity of knowledge and morality, and, most important, the meaning and purpose of the educator's existence.

As a spiritual seeker, I love to ponder the imponderable. And, maddeningly, I invite my students to ponder these imponderables right along with me. I nag them to wonder, to speculate, to ask the truly difficult, often unanswerable questions, the questions that end up exasperating most of us, because they threaten our deep-down, secure, and certain places. Examples of these questions are:

In the larger scheme of things, if there is one, why does what I do really matter?

Why, as a professional, do I experience those sudden, uninvited moments when I regret the vanishing of a past I have barely lived and can only faintly recall; a present that continues to slip away from me until it, too, becomes a rueful reminder of possibilities forever lost; and a future that looms as being more ominous than hopeful?

Is there something more to life, to my life, that gives it purpose and rationale?

Why is it so difficult for me to believe in the existence of something greater than the here-and-now?

Why do I find myself, at the most inopportune times, looking for something more in my life?

Why am I so restless?

Why do I cling to the elusive hope that wisdom is ultimately attainable, that it is possible to live a life with genuine dignity and integrity, that somewhere, somehow, I can find a sustaining meaning in it all?

Why am I alive anyway?

Seekers tend to ask "why" rather than "how" or "what." Staying at the "how" and "what" levels of everyday existence in teaching a professional seminar is a significant piece of my job, I readily admit. But after many

years, it has become the least satisfying piece for me, and, I am convinced, for many of my students as well. You see, my heart, and theirs, does not reside in the sphere of “hows” and “whats.” I am a fish out of water, and my students know it. I resist their understandable attempts to push me into the role of an expert, a know-it-all problem-solver, in spite of the fact that I have not stepped into a public school classroom in over 30 years. As a teacher, I want to lead with my strength. As a philosopher of education, I would much rather entice students to ask the above types of questions, because these are the inquiries that I believe deliver a much-needed sense of proportion to their professional existence. They add a sense of depth, perspective, and distance. They have the potential of profoundly touching, and changing, teachers’ inner and outer lives. When asked authentically and engaged honestly, these questions run the risk of surfacing professional frustrations and doubts, it is true. But, more important, they possess the power to revive buried hopes and activate faded dreams.

#### *A Spiritual Perspective*

In a word, this is a spiritual perspective. It is unsettling in the academy, because it refuses to be silenced or contained by the quotidian routines and practical demands of teaching. It enlarges; it does not constrict. It strives to disturb teachers’ everyday workworld, rather than simply conform them to it. It encourages them to formulate a vision, to nurture a passion, to forge a commitment. I, for one, refuse to spend my days being dishonest by supplying facile answers to technical professional questions that, in truth, I rarely ask myself. Despite their importance, they too often seem trivial and beside the point. In my experience with students, what often starts out as a simple question about teaching method or curricular content frequently ends up in a vivifying conversation about the questions that truly matter to them, and to me as well. And during those rare and precious moments when we manage, however feebly, to shelve our many ideological differences and to meet each other in genuine “why” dialogue, something inexpressible happens that transforms our lives, if only for the moment. We listen carefully, respectfully, non-defensively to each other. And when we do, we find that we reside in the land of the “holy.”

I must confess, though. This asking of “why” questions does not always thrill my students. At least initially, many do not want to live in the land of the “holy,” especially my “holy.” And why should they? Most of them rightfully come to my courses seeking practical answers to clear-cut professional questions about moral and character education, philosophy and history of education, and ethical decision-making. But what they end up

getting is spiritual tribulation. Here I am, urging them to consider the influence of their early religious upbringing on their subsequent ethical development; insisting that they reflect for a time on the roles that faith, mystery, and doubt might possibly play in the work they do as professional educators; and occasionally forcing them to delve into complex cosmological and ontological questions like the astonishing one that the philosophers Leibniz, Schelling, Schopenhauer, and Heidegger continually imposed on their own students: “Why is there something rather than nothing?”

At first, many of my students react with extreme dismay that a professional course of study would emphasize such apparent irrelevancies. A few wonder who they might see with their complaints, someone in charge (a dean or chairperson perhaps?) who might be able to admonish this professorial imposter. Gradually, however, most come around to my spiritual goading, even if somewhat reluctantly. Like Moliere’s character who suddenly realized one morning that he had actually been speaking prose his whole life, most students, in their own manner, become aware that, like it or not, they have actually been grappling with philosophical and religious issues without really identifying them in that way. They understand, for example, that the profession (the duty to profess a belief in something) of teaching cries out for a way of tying together the tag-ends of their often chaotic professional practices.

As one student, trying to put the best spin on our activities in a philosophy of education seminar, blurted out in class: “The quest for an educational vision, for something passionate in the work I do, is really a quest for God, isn’t it?” To which another student promptly confessed: “But why is it the deeper I go, the further away I get? In the end, doesn’t it seem like an exercise in futility attempting to explain the inexplicable?” Perhaps. But what I do know for sure is that, after awhile, most students are unable to resist the invitation to spend some time digging into the deeper things of life, into the larger spiritual reality that some of them believe encompasses us all.

I intentionally combine the two words “religion” and “spirituality” in my teaching because, in spite of students’ widespread popular disdain for the former and their near unanimous approval of the latter, I believe the two terms actually represent two closely related perspectives – the institutional and the personal – on the same phenomenon, transcendence. In my usage, religion is what we do with others, spirituality is what we do within our selves; the former is public faith, the latter is private faith. Religion is head, spirituality is heart. Religio-spiritual language is my awkward way of attempting to reunite what too many students have torn apart, what they too

glibly discard as an irreconcilable dualism.

For me, a belief in transcendence assumes that there is always something more, something larger and greater, in our lives than what we can directly experience or perceive, something that will forever remain a mystery, an object of awe, something that will always manage to surpass our human understanding. In the face of this mystery, and in the pursuit of transcendent meaning, most students are willing to place their trust only in a private spirituality rather than in a publicly professed religious faith. Few are willing even to consider the truth that the fullest experience of transcendence will sometimes require both self and others, the individual and the community, the private life and the public life, head and heart, religion and spirituality.

*Finding Faith in Honest Doubt: A Spirituality of Teaching*

Some skeptics in my classes, of course, get no further than to agree with Freud that religion is nothing more than a universal obsessional neurosis; or with Marx that religion is an opiate; or with Feuerbach that religion is simply a projection of human qualities onto an object of worship. Others less cynical come to appreciate the opportunity in a professional course to search for ultimate meaning on the chance that they might discover some irrefutable, all-embracing value underlying everything. Only a few students, I find, are content to ponder the words of Alfred Lord Tennyson, words that have long guided my own interior life and directed much of my teaching in recent years: "There is more faith in honest doubt than in all the religious creeds of the world."<sup>1</sup> Sadly, more students, rather than less, agree with Augustine when he said: "I would not have faith...if the authority of the Church did not compel me."<sup>2</sup>

In this late stage of my career, I have been trying to create a pedagogy I call a "spirituality of teaching." In all the classroom work that I do as a college professor, I am driven by Tennyson's aphorism, by the unwavering conviction that, for me, a genuine faith must somehow find a way to wrestle with the demons of honest doubt. The objective is not to overcome the doubt, because this is neither possible nor desirable, but to fully incorporate it into any final declaration of belief and call to action. For me, honest doubt is a believer's intuitive sense that no ecclesiastical leader, or dogma, or doctrine, or sacred book, or teaching, or ritual can ever capture the fullness of life's ultimate mysteries. It is the humble understanding that, when everything is said and done, one's frail and wavering faith is all that is left to fill the interval between saying too much and saying too little about what is essentially incommunicable.

Here is Peter L. Berger on the perils of dogmatic certainty:

It may well be that the quest for certainty is a deeply rooted trait of human nature. If, in the course of a lifetime, we attain this or that certitude, we should gratefully accept it as a gift of grace. But we should not feign to certainties that are, in fact, the result of strenuous and never-ending efforts at faith. By and large, the modern quest for certainty has had both intellectually and morally deleterious consequences. They are all, to use again Erich Fromm's apt phrase, "escapes from freedom."<sup>3</sup>

Spirituality, as I conceive it, has little to do with dogma, certainty, or "escapes from freedom." Neither is it directly related to Christian or Jewish understandings of such terms as ruach, pneuma, and spirit. Nor is my notion of spirituality something that is God-bestowed, incarnational, or even coming to a vivid awareness of some supernatural presence. And it most definitely has nothing in common with New Age occultism. Instead, for me, a spirituality of teaching simply calls for the student, and the teacher, to undertake, in trust, an inward journey together whose ultimate destination is to fashion a deeper, personal response to the mystery of existence. (Parker Palmer, in his *The Courage To Teach*,<sup>4</sup> shares many of my assumptions about constructing a spirituality of teaching. I have been inspired by his writing, particularly his earlier *To Know as We are Known: A Spirituality of Teaching*.<sup>5</sup> But, unlike mine, Palmer's spiritual interests are more on consciousness-raising and personal transformation than on an explicit engagement with the religio-spiritual narratives that I describe later in this essay.)

A spirituality of teaching, regardless of the subject matter, puts the central emphasis on the student's (and the teacher's) continuing quest for a richly textured interior life. It recognizes the pivotal communal nature of this activity whenever it is undertaken in an educational setting. It encourages, at all times, the development of a richer, more complete spirituality on the part of individuals, one that reaches for a meaning far beyond the mere professional mastery of the newest data, the freshest techniques, and the latest technology. Most of all, a spirituality of teaching recognizes, in Fenton Johnson's words, that

faith is first among the cardinal virtues because everything proceeds from it including and especially love. Faith is the leap into the unknown – the entering into an action or a person knowing only that you will emerge changed, with no preconceptions of what that

change will be. Its antonym is fear.<sup>6</sup>

A spirituality of teaching, among other things, attempts to elicit candid, first-person accounts of the larger meaning of students' lived experience, whenever these meanings are appropriate to the subject matter at hand. And it attempts always to exemplify such qualities as truthfulness, courage, and integrity. I consider these to be the cardinal spiritual virtues not only of teaching and learning, but of living an excellent life as well. I predicate my spirituality of teaching on the well-tested assumption that, given an ethos of mutual support and caring in the classroom, my students will not hesitate to talk with one another about how their deepest beliefs, ideals, hopes, fears, doubts, and, yes, religious faith (or lack of it) influence the work they do as educators.

They are eager to do this, I believe, because they live during a time when it seems that more and more people are talking about topics which seem less and less important. So much talk in America today is wasted in vapid chitchat (e.g. e-mail and on-line chat rooms), in angry name-calling (radio and television talk shows), in academic one-upsmanship and textual nitpicking (college seminars), and in an endless cycle of media-generated, self-serving political "spin." Sadly, the kind of religio-spiritual talk I am encouraging in the college classroom rarely occurs anywhere else in America – not in the family, not on the therapist's couch or even in the priest's confessional, and certainly not in the teacher's room, superintendent's office, or college president's suite.

At times in the classroom, this type of talk will take me and my students on a trip through the great monotheistic religions of the world. At other times, it will take an Eastern direction. And often it will settle for non-theistic forms of religio-spiritual commitment as found in nature, loving relationships, philosophy, literature, art, and music. I am growing more and more convinced that the subject matter in a professional course that deals with spiritual meaning can surprisingly make students better teachers, even if they never overtly mention the words "religion" or "God" in their own classrooms and other educational venues. I have a strong belief that absent the opportunity to travel this inward journey – without the challenge of creating a personal spirituality of teaching – the outward life of the educator threatens to become desiccated and burned out.

### *Coming Out of the Spiritual Closet: Religion As Narrative*

And so one day it was bound to happen. Thirty years into my university teaching career, I enthusiastically, but cautiously, accepted the challenge of

a very wise, former student who remarked:

“Robert, when are you going to come out of the spiritual closet? Why don’t you offer a special course to educators that deals exclusively with religious content, instead of sneaking this stuff in through the back door of all your other courses?”

And so I did. I created a course – “Religion and Spirituality in Education” – that I now offer twice a year, with long waiting lists. I describe this course in some detail in a book that I wrote called *Faith, Hype, and Clarity: Teaching About Religion in American Schools and Colleges*.<sup>7</sup>

While the book has received much critical acclaim (named a Critic’s Choice Final Selection by the American Educational Studies Association, a Choice Magazine book of the year, and a nominee for the 1999 Grawemeyer Prize), I am most pleased with the fact that it touched a responsive chord among many audiences outside the religious-studies field, including teacher education, public schools, and higher education administration. While I cannot truthfully say that because of the course or the book my own inner life (or anyone else’s) has been radically changed, I can say this: I am learning that, as a professional, my work as a teacher educator is, in large part, framing how I think and feel about religious and spiritual issues.

That is, my own spirituality of teaching is a variation of the postmodern assertion that, at some level, all theory is autobiography. I believe that teaching, like religion, is really autobiography, a highly personal narrative that the believer creates in order to elicit, and to answer, the most confounding existential questions, the ones that defy easy scientific, political, or technological answers. Whenever I read Andrew M. Greeley,<sup>8</sup> I realize why my own childhood Catholicism continues to have such a strong hold on me even today, long after I have formally abandoned it. When I was a child, it totally captured my imagination, not with its authoritative dogmas and doctrines, its magisterium and moral teachings, but with its compelling and memorable stories. These include stories about Mary and Jesus, life, death, and resurrection, the saints and the popes, martyrs and heretics, the local church pastor and the ladies sodality, the Jesuits and the Sisters of Mercy, the Catholic elementary school and Notre Dame University, and, of course, the Catholics and the Protestants, the Irish and the English.

These stories inspired and edified me. The official church teachings only served to induce guilt, boredom, and rebellion. For religion to work well, at least in my case, and, I suspect, for the majority of my students, it must first be born in narrative before it grows into creed, rite, and institution. It must be profoundly autobiographical and appeal to the narrative imagination, long before it can convince the discursive intellect.

The most captivating religious narratives – e.g. Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity, Islam – feature unforgettable characters, momentous events, and luminous ideals. And their languages are often sonorous and seductive. At its best, religion as narrative, as a powerful storytelling device, reaches out and captures our imaginations, because the vitality of its message and the vividness of its language are potentially life-transforming. We are moved to fresher understandings of the deeper, previously concealed, meaning of our lives. The lesson here for teachers is surely not an original one, but of the utmost importance, nevertheless. A spirituality of teaching ought to recognize that good teaching, like good religion, is all about storytelling, and that the best pedagogy aims first at the heart and soul before it can ever find its way to the mind.

During a recent sabbatical leave, I developed this notion of teaching as storytelling into a book called *Religious Pluralism in the Academy: Opening the Dialogue*.<sup>9</sup> In this book, I make the case that we are more likely to get college students from a variety of religio-spiritual backgrounds to open up publicly about their guiding beliefs when we de-emphasize the revelational, doctrinal, and corporate elements of religion in the classroom in favor of the aesthetic and the poetic, the philosophical and the literary. I argue that we ought to approach discussions of religion as a series of compelling and useful narratives that people have constructed for thousands of years in order to explain life's tragic anomalies as well as its unexpected gifts of grace. I acknowledge in this book that, as a teacher, I know of no better way to mine the richness of an escalating religio-spiritual pluralism on secular college campuses throughout the United States than to get students to exchange their religious stories with each other in a non-doctrinal, mutually respectful manner.

In fact, I would argue that the brilliance of all the religions and spiritualities the world has ever known lies in their peculiar narrative power. If, as I contend, religion is basically a story devised by people to give meaning to their lives in a particular place and time, then one must continually ask whether the narrative still speaks to people's needs today. In Neil Postman's words,

Does it provide [them] with a sense of personal identity, a sense of community life, a basis for moral conduct, explanations of that which cannot be known?<sup>10</sup>

This question, in my opinion, ought to be the engine that fuels to-and-fro, robust, campus-wide discussions about religion and spirituality.

As each week passes during the term in which I offer my new course, I come to realize that, for me, my own teaching narrative is deeply spiritual.

It is about helping students to name their doubts about themselves and their work with honesty and integrity. At the same time it encourages them to create and nurture a faith in themselves, their students, and their work that is honest and integral. Whether we are talking about religion or education, my students and I struggle throughout the semester to create individual professional narratives that combine the qualities of faith, doubt, honesty, and integrity in such a way as to deepen our understandings of ourselves and our teaching. We are trying to create a sense of vocation – seeing our professional work as a calling, as a leap of faith without guarantee, as a risky response to the summons deep within us to minister to others wisely and compassionately.

### *Breaking Stereotypes*

Thus far, my new course has attracted a richly diverse group of students. It has included several African-Americans, Native Americans, and Asians; students ranging in age from their late teens to their early 80s; “out” gays, lesbians, and bi-sexuals; Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, Christian Fundamentalists, Evangelicals, and Pentecostals; atheists and agnostics; and professionals representing at least 20 fields, from classroom teachers, to principals, to social service workers, to allied health caregivers, to higher education administrators. Most of the students in these classes appear to fit the profile that Wade Clark Roof characterizes as baby-boomer “seekers,” although their dramatic departures from this stereotype are instructive and what finally make them and the course such a vital experience. Roof’s deservedly acclaimed studies, *A Generation of Seekers*,<sup>11</sup> and *Spiritual Marketplace*,<sup>12</sup> focus mainly on conventional and post-conventional Christian believers, New Agers, and what he calls “seekers.” These are people who have questioned, and even, in some cases, abandoned, their parents’ religions, ethnic heritages, politics, and nationalities in order to discover for themselves a more compelling religio-spiritual basis on which to build their lives. My own experiences with those students who represent pre-boomer, boomer, generation-X, and millennialist time periods confirm some of Roof’s findings, to be sure, but also go far beyond his depictions. Roof, at times, oversimplifies the complexity and richness of individuals’ religio-spiritual journeys by collapsing all of his respondents into one huge, un-nuanced designation he calls “seekers.”

In my three-decade experience in teaching college students of all ages, I can assert confidently that there are simply no prototypical “seekers.” In fact, there are many different types of seekers, including myself, because nobody ever pursues religio-spiritual meaning outside of a particular

perspective or personal narrative. Each of us, I submit, is an intellectually-situated (as well as a culturally-situated) being. Our search for meaning in a fractured American culture will always originate in a set of distinct preconceptions that we hold about religion and spirituality. Unlike Roof, I am wary of generalizing about all seekers that they “value experience over beliefs, distrust institutions and leaders, stress personal fulfillment yet yearn for community, and are fluid in their allegiances.”<sup>13</sup> To this I can only say – “Well, yes, some do, but some don’t.”

Another highly respected sociologist, Alan Wolfe, makes similar kinds of generalizations in his well-received study of middle-class Americans, *One Nation After All*. He claims that a “capacious individualism” characterizes the religious faith of the middle-class. According to Wolfe, middle-class Americans are not deeply devout, they have lost a sense of the tragic, they experience no wonder, and they mourn the erosion of “necessary constraints on hedonism.”<sup>14</sup> Wolfe believes that middle-class Americans operate from a “rational-choice” theory. They are “free-agent” churchgoers who calculatingly choose and switch their denominational allegiances according to what they believe will make them happiest. Wolfe concludes that, among the middle-class, personal religious belief will always be more important than institutional affiliation.

While it is definitely true that some of my own middle-class students express a strong commitment to Wolfe’s brand of religious individualism, many do not. Some, wary of privatizing their faith and hoping to influence public policy, organize social-justice groups in their churches and temples, and even in their schools. Others, tired of their spiritual isolation, join bible-study and mutual-support groups in order to create richer, more intimate forms of community life. Some students are deeply devout believers, others are deeply devout church-going skeptics, some are proud non-believers, and others mostly keep their beliefs to themselves. Unlike Wolfe, I can not honestly identify one student in my courses who is without a sense of wonder, or who fails to recognize the tragic and comic elements in human life. For all his remarkable sociological insight, Wolfe utterly fails to realize that a growing percentage of middle-class Americans is becoming intensely involved with Eastern and New Age religious teachings.

Many of these religions, such as Buddhism and Hinduism, understand all too well the significance of wonder and the omnipresence of tragedy in human affairs and the need for compassion in the face of suffering. In order to get a sense of the allure of alternative religions for some middle-class Americans, Wolfe might consider reading the popular Vietnamese Buddhist and pacifist, Thich Nhat Hanh, whose *Living Buddha, Living Christ*<sup>15</sup> has become a runaway bestseller in this country. One student in a

recent religion and education course of mine, “Jonathan” – a self-designated “recovering Christian” – continually pointed to this book throughout the semester as having transformed him from being a “dead Christian” to a “live Buddhist-post-denominational Christian.” Jonathan, a high-school English teacher, has begun to use Hanh’s book in his Advanced Placement class. He claims that, after reading the book, many of his high-school students are able to find new ways to revitalize their Christian and Jewish faiths.

Hanh speaks vividly to people of all religious faiths, particularly disgruntled Christians like Jonathan, about the importance of understanding God, not as an abstract concept, but as a living reality. So too does the Dalai Lama, author of an immensely popular book – *Ethics for the New Millennium*<sup>16</sup> – that I have used with my students during the last two years. Hundreds of thousands of middle-class readers appear to resonate to both authors’ observations that, in the past, Christian triumphalism has frequently prevented authentic inter-faith dialogue and fostered a disrespect for religious pluralism of all kinds.

What Hanh and the Dalai Lama do for American, bourgeois believers like Jonathan and other students like him is to remind them of the significance of the deeply reflective life, and what they call the practice of “mindfulness” – the capacity to attend to everything that happens in the present moment. This is the beginning of enlightenment, and something that contemporary Western faith stories either ignore or dismiss, even though Christianity and Judaism have a rich and lengthy tradition of contemplative spiritual practices.<sup>17</sup> Many teachers in my small, rural state have become devoted followers of Hanh, mindful meditators who “seek refuge” in the Buddha (the one who shows the way), the Dharma (the way of understanding and love), and the Sangha (the community that lives in harmony and awareness). During a recent public appearance in my state, Hanh drew thousands of his followers to a college lecture and subsequent series of workshops on such spiritual topics as mindfulness, pacifism, meditation, and holiness. Several of my students attended these events.

### *Eight Types of Religious Stories that College Students Tell*

Not all of my students find Buddhism to be an attractive spiritual alternative, however, although many do. In this section, I will sketch eight miniature portraits of the dominant spiritual narratives that I find in classes at my university, and throughout the country, whenever I visit other places to speak. I have constructed eight religious stories that I hope are capacious, diverse, and fluid, in order to avoid the stereotyping that bothers me in the work of such authors as Roof and Wolfe, whom I mentioned earlier.

I have found these religio-spiritual narratives to be represented among every age-, gender-, racial-, ethnic-, and socio-economic group in my work with students. No single narrative exists as a pure type, of course, and, at least in theory, none need be mutually exclusive. I personally find something appealing in all of them, although a few obviously speak to me, an honest doubter, in a very special way. I also find that most students only need a little encouragement, the right questions, and a supportive dialogue space to tell their stories to each other and to me. Because of space limitations, I can only outline these stories briefly in the sketches that follow (but in far greater depth in my two, aforementioned books):

· The *Orthodox Believers* come in all religious and philosophical stripes. With only a few disturbing exceptions, they usually remain humble but unyielding in their claims to be in possession of an absolute, revealed truth that most of their classmates and I obviously lack. Their confident, sometimes gentle, sense of certainty attracts more than repels many of us throughout the semester. In class, a small coterie of anti-orthodox skeptics, however, always manages to remain unconvinced, and they often have great difficulty concealing their disdain for any expression of uncompromising, orthodox belief. The core leitmotif for the Orthodoxy story is this: *There is a Truth that is unimpeachable, immutable, and final, and it can only be found in a particular book, institution, prophet, or movement. The mission of the Orthodox Believer is to deliver this Truth to others as an act of love and generosity.*

· The *Mainline Believers* constitute a very large group of college students. These students are neither excessively conservative or avant-garde. They dislike authoritarianism in religion as much as they dislike faddism. They prefer a life of traditional worship that balances traditions, standards, self-discipline, and moral conscience with a degree of personal freedom, biblical latitude, and the *joie de vivre* of close community life. Often they remain in the Catholic and Protestant churches (and temples) of their parents and grandparents. They are the proud holdouts against postmodernity and the religious experimentation and deconstruction that so often accompany it. The controlling theme in the Mainline narrative is this: *People need an organized, sacred space, one that provides clear boundaries between the sacred and the profane, a stable support community, a sense of order, and a moral bulwark against the excesses of secularism.* Although Mainline religion appears to be alive and well in America, some of us, nevertheless, ask Mainliners two complementary questions. When does the

need for religious stability and rootedness turn into a denial of those changes that any denomination needs in order to remain vital, responsive, and pastoral? But, also, is it possible for the mainline denominations to make reasoned compromises with the world without the cooptations and dilutions that too often accompany those compromises?

· The *Wounded Believers* include those students who define their religious experience mainly as a reaction to the physical and mental abuse (often perpetuated in the name of religion) that they have suffered at the hands of hypocritical, over-zealous clergy, lovers, parents, relatives, and friends. Their self-disclosing narratives of suffering, denial, reconciliation in some cases, and eventual healing always win our attention, believer and non-believer alike. Sometimes Wounded Believers embarrass us, sometimes they inspire us, but they never fail to captivate us. The thematic thread that winds throughout all Wounded Belief narratives is this question: *If there is a good, all-loving God, why has there been so much unbearable pain in my life?*

· The *Mystics* remind us continually that more often than not a genuine faith requires a discerning silence on the part of the believer, instead of a learned, theological disquisition. Some turn to the East, some to alternative American religions, some to folk religions, and some to private forms of spirituality. Most express a love for mystery, stillness, and attunement that eludes those of us who too easily fit the stereotype of the fitful, ambitious, hard-driving Westerner. At the heart of the Mysticism narrative is this motif: *The transcendent is best experienced, not through idle chatter or abstract concepts, but by way of meditation, mindfulness, and, above all, a pervasive calmness.* The rest of us listen, learn, and wonder how on earth we can ever find the mystical “stillness” that is said to inhabit the center of all our frenetic activity. Some students, however, reject the Mysticism narrative outright as too quiescent and self-absorbed.

· The *Social Justice Activists* urge us throughout the semester to consider the possibility that believers must be responsible for building the Kingdom of God in the here-and-now, rather than waiting for some distant paradise to come. They advocate an activist faith dedicated to the liberation of oppressed peoples, equal rights and social justice for all, and radical social transformation marked by full democratic participation in decision-making. For them, religious leaders are judged to be effective only according to their commitment to bring about massive social reform in behalf of the least among us. The

common theme in the Activism narrative is this: *Religion makes the most sense whenever it tells a story of human rights and social transformation; whenever it invites believers to criticize existing structures of power and privilege such as the wealthy, white, male hierarchies in the churches, universities, businesses, media, and government.* While many students are drawn to the transformative elements of the Activism narrative, others dismiss it as merely partisan liberal politics with a religious gloss.

· The *Existential Humanists* help us to understand that all too often believers turn to the supernatural in order to escape from the difficult responsibilities of individual freedom. For them, a humanistic, “self-centered” ethic can stand on its own as a defensible way of a person’s being in the world and living an authentic human life. What is necessary is that all of us confront the inescapable fact of our human finitude, and make a conscious choice to create ourselves through our daily projects, that is through our courageous strivings to make meaning in an absurd universe. The recurring idea in the Existential Humanism story is this: *The stark truth is that God has forever disappeared – if He ever existed in the first place – and now it is up to us to get on with our lives.* After listening to the Existential Humanists, some of us begin to understand, for the first time, the significance of Jean Paul Sartre’s assertion that we are all unique selves “condemned to freedom,” and Paul Tillich’s postulation of a “Ground of Being” as a viable substitute for a personal God, the traditional God of theism. We proceed to look for constructive, alternative ways to cope with the loss of absolutes. Others find the story too bleak and individualistic.

· The *Postmodern Sceptics* are also deeply suspicious of any and all religious claims to absolute truth. But unlike the Existential Humanists, they reject the existence of an unsituated, context-free self or soul. As committed moral relativists, they openly challenge our religious and moral certitudes, our ethical universals, and our grand spiritual narratives. They frequently encourage the rest of us to accentuate rather than integrate our many differences, to recognize our cultural situatedness as a critical fact of life, and to put our faith, not in metaphysical doctrines or dogmas, but in the awareness that we are all social constructors of our own religio-spiritual realities. The leading theme in the Postmodern Scepticism narrative is this: *An informed sense of contingency, irony, and doubt, and a willingness to repudiate religiously-grounded, patriarchal systems of social domination, are what make us truly human and our lives truly worth living.* In reaction to the Sceptics, some of us confess a gnawing pessimism over life’s ultimate

prospects. A few, fearing the onset of a corrosive cynicism and nihilism, refuse to take these people seriously.

· The *Scientific Empiricists*, while genuinely open to the possible existence of a cosmological God who created the universe, nevertheless argue that the evidence of astrophysics, organic evolution, biology, and the brain sciences effectively contravenes this hypothesis. No empirical evidence is able to establish incontrovertible proof of a supernatural power greater than nature or ourselves. But neither can the alleged existence of a transcendental power be controverted scientifically. The core of the Scientific Empiricism story is this: *We are utterly alone in the universe, beyond final Divine revelations, and left to our own human devices, accompanied by the findings of science, to create a better world for everyone.* In response, some of us express the hope that religion and science can indeed be compatible. Others, however, can never get beyond what they think is the fundamental irreconcilability of faith and reason.

Individual representatives of each of these types always have a powerful religio-spiritual story to tell throughout the term. I try to honor their narratives as respectfully as I can in every class that I teach. I feel privileged that I am able to spend 15 intense weeks each semester with such stimulating people. Each of these seekers demonstrates in every class meeting that the search for a spirituality of teaching and living is never-ending and persistent, even though at times it might exist just below the surface. This search for meaning also shows that it is virtually impossible for any analyst, whether Roof, Wolfe, or myself, to adequately capture the complexities and nuances of the distinct religio-spiritual narratives in any easy, catch-all way. Thus, it is my double intention in offering my course to try to maintain the wonderful distinctiveness of teachers' religio-spiritual views (and to encourage them to recognize the uniqueness of religious views of their own students), while at the same time to provide them (and, by implication, their own students) with accurate and helpful narrative classifications by which to investigate the rich variety of religious experiences among a number of middle-class and working-class Americans today.

#### *Why Should Spirituality Matter To Teachers?*

The truth is that religion and spirituality matter a great deal in America today. In fact, I would argue that besides sex, politics, the stock market, and sports, nothing else matters as much. In the field of lower and higher education, a spate of recent publications (e.g. *Educational Leadership*,<sup>18</sup>

Kazanjian and Laurence,<sup>19</sup> Kessler,<sup>20</sup> Marsden,<sup>21</sup> Noddings,<sup>22</sup> Nord,<sup>23</sup> and Nord & Haynes<sup>24</sup>) has argued, that, in the name of liberal education, fairness, and multiculturalism, the study (not the practice) of religion must find a permanent place in school and college curricula. This must happen especially in secular institutions, where a timid intellectual neutrality has effectively neutered or totally ignored the topic.

At the college level, there has been nearly a 50% increase in enrollment of undergraduate majors in religious studies during the last ten years. According to one author, Tom Beaudoin,<sup>25</sup> Generation X, the “first generation born without God,” represents the most spiritually hungry generation this country has ever known. In *Virtual Faith*, Beaudoin describes the many ways that Generation X has taken religion into its own hands, by using the tools of popular culture and computer technology to rejuvenate Christianity. From another angle, Howe and Strauss<sup>26</sup> come to the same conclusion regarding what they call the “next great generation,” the “millennials.”

According to current opinion polls, three of the most admired people in the world today are the Pope, Mother Teresa, and the Dalai Lama. Not just PBS, but the three major television networks and the cable channels frequently air serious religious specials during prime time. Bill Moyers became a household religious guru because of his widely-watched five-week PBS series, “The Wisdom of Faith.” Through his famous television interviews with Joseph Campbell, he brought the four-volume work, *The Masks of God*,<sup>27</sup> to the attention of a massive American audience. And faith-friendly popular television series such as “Touched by an Angel,” “Highway to Heaven,” and “Promised Land” draw increasingly large viewing audiences, even in re-runs.

Many biologists, physicists, and astronomers are getting into the religious act by writing bestselling books with such titles as Davies’ *The Mind of God*,<sup>28</sup> Polkinghorne’s *Belief in God in an Age of Science*,<sup>29</sup> and Sagan’s *The Demon-Haunted World*.<sup>30</sup> And the Religion, Spirituality, and Self-Help sections of the nation’s largest bookstores have become the most popular attractions for browsers and buyers alike, thereby guaranteeing record sales. It is no coincidence that Mitch Albom’s hugely popular *Tuesdays with Morrie*,<sup>31</sup> a moving account of the author’s spiritual reawakening through a weekly encounter with his dying former professor, has remained on top of the *New York Times* bestseller list for over three years.

Finally, the Internet has fast established itself as the site for the most interactive form of religious conversation in this country. The *Christianity Today* site received nearly one-million hits in April 1996 alone. And the Gospel Communications Network logged 4.7 million visitors to its chat rooms and web sites during the same period. A Gallup study in May 1996 uncovered

the staggering fact that 56,000 electronic places use the word “God” in their descriptions, and over 45,000 sites refer to other types of deities. By the year 2000, this list had doubled. The website [www.beliefnet.org](http://www.beliefnet.org) receives upward of 500,000 hits a day. Phyllis Tickle, in her *God-Talk in America*,<sup>32</sup> estimates that, by 2010, over 20 percent of all adult Americans will worship, pray, and receive spiritual instruction exclusively over the Internet. For these Americans, churches, synagogues, mosques, and temples will soon become quaint anachronisms.

One of the main reasons I created my religion and spirituality course for educators was to respond to hundreds of my students in recent years who have wondered openly why the schools and colleges have not caught up to the culture at large on religio-spiritual matters. Religion matters deeply to them, even when they are attacking it, and to me as well. Among our concerns is our need to know if the existing churches are really in trouble, particularly if believers become disenchanted with conventional forms of theism, or, perhaps, become less willing to stay with one faith tradition. From another point of view, we are also curious about the millennial possibility that maybe one cosmic belief system will someday fit all, and whether the birth and spread of this new spiritual consciousness are even desirable.

But most of all we want, indeed we insist on, the existence of structured educational opportunities at all levels of schooling, in the company of others, to examine our own spiritual impulses. We want to create a personal and professional spirituality that satisfies our struggling, imperfect longing for meaning and purpose. We want to understand, as best we can, the mystery that lies at the center of the universe’s greatest riddles. And we need to put the failures and successes of humanity’s perennial religio-spiritual project into some kind of realistic, yet compassionate, perspective. I believe strongly that the opportunity for professional educators (and their students as well) to confront the spiritual dimension of their lives in a formal classroom setting is an idea whose time has finally come in teacher education programs.

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