

DEEPENING THE COMMITMENT TO SERVE:

Spiritual Reflection

IN SERVICE-LEARNING

*How important a role does spirituality play in service-learning
and what impact does it have on students' commitment to public service?*

BY KENT KOTH

ON A COLD JANUARY EVENING IN 1989, five of my Grinnell College friends and I traveled to Des Moines to assist with a Friday evening meal program at a United Methodist Church in a lower-income neighborhood of the city. Arriving at the church, we discovered that the meal coordinator really didn't need us to help serve food. Mildly disappointed but not wanting to feel useless, we started talking with the children who had come for the meal. Soon the sound of children's laughter filled the room as we began to play games and lead activities for them. At the end of the evening, the coordinator of the meal program asked if we would consider returning the following Friday—not to assist with the meal but to spend time with the children. Designed to be a one-time service project, it soon led to so much more.

Dubbing our small group the Alternative Happy Hour Program, over the subsequent months we returned to Des Moines again and again. During that time, the initial group of six college students grew to twenty, and the number of children coming to the church on Friday evenings rose from fifteen to forty. Challenged by the ethical and philosophical issues that arose from my role as a mentor and tutor in a low-income neighborhood, I began to explore service and justice issues at a deeper level. I participated in a summer service internship, took several service-related courses, and led an alternative winter break. I had become transformed. Upon my college graduation, I began to recognize the significance of this experience: working for social justice had become central to my life's meaning. I felt committed for the long haul.

Ending my story with this personal transformation would perhaps be simple, but it would also be naive. Since these experiences, my life's journey has often been difficult and at times quite messy. My commitment to service and justice has frequently been tested. In my professional endeavors, the complexity and interrelatedness of the world's many intractable social problems has weighed heavily upon my spirit. Attempting to address the root causes of injustice has forced me to confront many "truths" I had taken for granted and many assumptions I had held as true. Challenges I've faced in my personal life have called into question much of what I previously held sacred. Practical matters such as financial security have also taken on growing importance. I have come to recognize that the awakening call to serve others and work for justice might be the easy part. The true test arises from sustaining a lifelong commitment to that vision. In recent years, I have discovered that developing a strong sense of spirituality helps maintain my commitment to the work I do. Simply put, exploring the meaning of my life and other spiritual questions has made my public service actions a more intentional part of who I am.

PUBLIC SERVICE FOR THE LONG HAUL

OVER THE PAST fifteen years, a service-learning movement has arisen from college and university campuses across the United States. Hundreds of colleges and universities have initiated formal programs coupling students' service activi-

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ties with curricular and co-curricular learning opportunities. In its annual survey, Campus Compact, a national coalition of college and university presidents representing 838 campuses, reports that more than 700,000 students at member institutions participated in their communities in 2000. Additionally, in *The American Freshman*, Linda Sax, Alexander Astin, William Korn, and Kit Mahoney note that a record number of college freshman report having participated in service during their senior year in high school, signaling a rise from 62 percent in 1989 to 74 percent in 1998. Nonprofit organizations have emerged to galvanize local, state, and national support for service-learning and community engagement among college students. Federal, state, and local government agencies provide millions of dollars annually to support campus service initiatives.

What's significant is that service participation has actually been shown to make a difference in the lives of students. For example, in a *Journal of College Student Development* article, Alexander Astin and Linda Sax note that participation in service during undergraduate years substantially elevates students' academic development, life skills development, and sense of civic responsibility. And in a *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning* article, Janet Eyler, Dwight Giles, and John Braxton argue that service-learning participation is predictive of attempting to influence the political system and increasing students' beliefs in personal efficacy.

This incredible growth in service-learning on college campuses gives us reason to hope for a cultural shift toward a more caring and just society. Yet, is the rise in civic involvement just a popular campus fad, or does it truly represent changing societal values? Will these young public servants continue to serve as they leave the nurturing environment of the college campus and face the real-world responsibilities of the workplace, relationships, and family?

Connecting service experiences with a deepened sense of spirituality might be one way for students to hold on to their commitments to public service. Traditionally, spirituality has been synonymous with religion. Recently, however, broader understandings have evolved. During an online search under the word "spirituality," I found 12,085 books on diverse topics such as psychic readings, the prayers of Pope John Paul II, meditation, the art of teaching, and yoga. For the sake of this article, I define spirituality broadly as that which provides meaning in one's life and sparks one to cultivate positive relationships with all other beings. Put differently, spirituality is the exploration of one's deeper sense of purpose and the subsequent action taken to pursue this purpose.

SERVICE, SPIRITUALITY, AND COMMITMENT

SPIRITUALITY AND SERVICE have long been woven together. From Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. to Mother Theresa, there are countless examples of influential leaders who have drawn strength from their spiritual beliefs to engage in great acts of service. But what about those of us who are not in the history books? How much of a role does spirituality play in motivating us to serve?

Two studies of the motivations and philosophies of people who have demonstrated long-term commitments to service note that spirituality does play a key role in maintaining these commitments. In *Some Do Care*, developmental psychologists William Damon and Anne Colby explore the meaning of moral excellence by studying a select group of people whom they termed “moral exemplars.” Using a group of twenty-two professionals from a diverse array of perspectives, who all had some experience in considering moral issues, Damon and Colby developed a criterion for moral excellence that primarily included a sustained commitment to acting upon one’s moral ideals through service. This group subsequently helped Damon and Colby select a group of twenty-three “moral exemplars” to interview. These individuals, mostly in their sixties and from a wide variety of fields and backgrounds, talked to Damon and Colby about key moral and personal developments in their lives. Damon and Colby discovered that even though the nominating criteria did not include spirituality, 80 percent of the moral exemplars attributed their core value commitments to their spiritual beliefs.

In *Common Fire: Leading Lives of Commitment in a Complex World*, Laurent Parks Daloz, Cheryl Keen, James Keen, and Sharon Daloz Parks examined the lives of one hundred diverse public service leaders from across the nation to determine what inspires people to lead lives of commitment to the public good. Even though religion and spirituality was not one of the selection criteria, the study found that 82 percent of the leaders profiled said that religion or spirituality played an important part in their lives. Over half affiliated them-

selves with some form of religious community, and 25 percent classified themselves as unaffiliated but spiritual.

These studies offer strikingly similar results. People who have demonstrated a strong commitment to public service also appear to possess a vibrant spirituality. If spirituality plays a role in maintaining a long-term commitment to public service, how can we help students to foster a deeper sense of spirituality connected with service? To answer this question, we must examine the role that spirituality plays on contemporary college campuses.

SPIRITUAL BUT NOT RELIGIOUS

IN MY WORK on campus, I frequently have the opportunity to talk with students about their values and ideals. A conversation that begins with what classes a student is taking or whether or not she should pursue an internship during the summer often evolves into discussions about how her beliefs have changed since getting involved in service. During these interactions, I often ask students whether they are exploring their evolving beliefs through a religious tradition. Most explain that they don’t attend formal religious services but do have a curiosity about spirituality.

This “spiritual but not religious” response is not an isolated phenomenon. In his book, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America Since the 1950s*, Princeton University sociologist Robert Wuthnow drew upon over two hundred in-depth interviews as well as public opinion polls and existing research studies to explore contemporary trends in American spirituality. He concluded that in recent years, “dwelling-oriented spirituality” rooted in specific religious traditions has given way to “seeking-oriented spirituality,” which “requires individuals to negotiate their own understandings and experiences of the sacred” (p. 169). Wuthnow cites a 1994 report which noted that “growing numbers of Americans say they are spiritual but not religious, or [that] their spirituality is growing but the impact of religion on their lives is diminishing” (p. 2).

Perhaps nowhere in the United States is the trend of spiritual-seeking more pronounced than on college and university campuses. Today’s college students appear to want to make their own decisions regarding their

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spiritual beliefs and practices. In their recent book, *Religion on Campus*, Conrad Cherry, Betty DeBerg and Amanda Porterfield conducted intensive studies of four diverse institutions of higher education to assess what religion means to today's college and university students. Their conclusions focused on the popularity of exploring spirituality over traditional religious practice. They note: "the undergraduates we interviewed, as well as many of the campus professionals who helped us interpret the religion of undergraduates, preferred to use the words 'spirituality' and 'spiritual' instead of 'religion' and 'religious' when describing undergraduates' attitudes and practices" (p. 275). They conclude that "most of the undergraduates we encountered on the four campuses could be characterized as spiritual seekers rather than religious dwellers" (p. 276).

Drawing upon this research, it seems evident that although the opportunity to connect service and spirituality might exist through traditional campus religious programs, fewer and fewer students are taking advantage of it. This conclusion should not trivialize the important role that campus religious programs play in higher education. Yet, in order to energize the public service-spirituality connection, we must look for new ways to promote spiritual reflection among young people.

SERVICE-LEARNING AND SPIRITUAL REFLECTION

IN RECENT YEARS, many key service-learning educators and publications have highlighted the significant role of reflection in the connection between service and learning. Organized reflection offers a critical and intentional means for service-learning practitioners to help students grapple with the impact their service has on their communities and on themselves. Reflection also allows students to see the link between their individual acts of service and larger societal issues.

Clearly, reflection deepens the learning that students receive from their service experiences. Yet most reflective practices do not delve into the students' deeper sense of purpose and values—that is, they do not push

students to explore their spirituality. Most service-learning literature emphasizes service-learning as a means to deepen traditional academic learning and develop greater awareness of larger social issues, yet lacks any reference to spiritual reflection or development.

For example, the widely distributed publication by Janet Eyler, Dwight Giles, and Angela Schmiede, *A Practitioner's Guide to Reflection in Service Learning*, provides a foundational framework for reflection and useful tips for practitioners. Although it offers many strong examples and tools to engage students in the reflective process, the guide lacks any reference to spiritual reflection. For example, Chapter Two presents seven reasons to use reflection in service-learning yet omits spiritual development. One of these reasons, "service-learning aids personal development" could have addressed spirituality but instead focuses more on developing self-esteem and addressing prejudice.

Another highly utilized service-learning reflection publication, Suzanne Goldsmith's *Journal Reflection*, presents a strong framework for using journal writing as a reflection tool in service-learning, yet offers no mention of spirituality. The initial chapter presents eight reasons to keep a journal—to heighten observational skills, process information, explore feelings, assess progress, evaluate service projects, increase communication, increase writing skills and fluency and build citizenship. Notably absent from this list is any mention of cultivating a deeper spirituality.

This lack of reference to spirituality in service-learning reflection is a missed opportunity to foster deeper contemplative practices among students. And in turn, ignoring the connection between service-learning and spirituality cripples the potential of the service-learning movement to foster long-term commitments to public service. Combining a strong spiritual element with service-learning reflection has the capacity to explicitly help students in several ways.

Exploring Personal Meaning and Strengthening Spiritual Values. During their time on campus, many students have their values and beliefs challenged and frequently experience an awakening to search for personal meaning. Some questions that might

arise from this process include What do I believe?, How do I want to live my life?, and What is success? Creating spiritual components in service-learning reflection offers students this critical opportunity to explore questions of spiritual meaning connected with service, embrace new perspectives, and perhaps cultivate a deeper sense of spirituality.

Discovering Vocational “Calling.” In Western culture, the term “calling” traditionally has held Christian overtones. Over the past two decades, an alternative definition has arisen among career counselors, educators, and some theologians, one suggesting that we all are “called” to explore vocational meaning. Through spiritual reflection, service-learning participants have the opportunity to explore their calling, discover their passion, and ultimately live out this calling.

Strengthening the Long-Term Commitment to Serve. The repeated cycle of spiritual reflection and service involvement can lead students to stronger long-term commitments to service. Initially, college students engage in service-learning activities through academic coursework and co-curricular activities. Service-learning reflection allows them to analyze their service experiences in the context of social and academic issues. Such reflections also involve a spiritual component that steers students to intentionally examine the deeper meaning of their experiences and their lives. Thus the service experience becomes a gateway into further exploration of personal values, vocational calling, and the cultivation of a spiritual identity. Finally, students incorporate their reflection experiences into new explorations, and the cycle of spiritual reflection continues to foster a lifetime commitment to public service.

PUTTING SPIRITUAL REFLECTION INTO PRACTICE IN SERVICE-LEARNING

I RECENTLY LED a workshop for educators who were interested in exploring the role that spiritual reflection could play in service-learning activities. The initial atmosphere of great creativity and hopefulness shifted notably when I asked workshop participants what obstacles they saw in weaving spiritual reflection

into service-learning. Dozens of hands shot up. “The separation of church and state,” offered one public school teacher. “It is too difficult to get students in a classroom environment to think deeply about their values and beliefs,” said a young psychologist. “Spiritual reflection requires too much classroom time,” observed a college professor. Collectively we spent the remainder of the workshop grappling with how to address these obstacles.

We should perceive these challenges and others like them as pedagogical opportunities rather than major impediments. Specific exercises and reflection activities can address these obstacles. For example, the following exercise described by Debra Farrington in her book, *Living Faith Day by Day*, addresses the separation of church and state. Students take ten minutes to write down everything that they do to nurture their spirit. They then share excerpts from their lists with the larger group, as a facilitator records them on a marker board. Once the list has reached fifteen to twenty items, students look for common themes. They also note what is *not* listed on the board or on their personal lists. The omitted items can provide as much insight as those that are included. The exercise concludes as each person is invited to consider adopting one new practice or action to nurture his or her spirit. Beyond introducing the concept of spiritual practice, this exercise highlights what one is already doing to lead a spiritual life. The exercise can also lead to a discussion about the differences between spirituality and religion.

The following activity, described by Parker Palmer in *Let Your Life Speak*, helps students explore their vocational call. Students first write for ten minutes about (1) two recent moments of service, leadership, or activism; (2) a moment when things went so well, they knew they were born to serve, lead, or act; and (3) a moment when things went so poorly that they wished they had never been born. Next, students gather in small groups and take turns sharing their two positive stories and receiving feedback. This process helps students identify the gifts they possess that made the good moments possible—gifts that are often obscured because they are so much a part of us. Finally, participants share their story

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of struggle and difficulty. Those that listen again give feedback without offering judgment or advice.

The previous exercise responds to the challenge of creating an environment for a group of students to think deeply about their values and beliefs, while the following one addresses the issue of limited classroom time. I have found that this exercise works very well at the close of service-learning workshops, classes, and retreats. Students receive two index cards. On the first card, they write one new personal commitment they can make to create a more just and compassionate community. Students are asked to place this card in a special place where they will see it and remember to keep their commitment. On the second card, students write one wish they have for other members of the group. Students put this card in a basket and draw a new one, until all cards have been redistributed. The exercise closes as each person reads aloud the wish for the group written on the card taken from the basket. It has proven extremely helpful in honoring individual commitments and group connection. Reading the wishes out loud gives all participants a role (including the more quiet members of the group) and avoids the possibility of one person monopolizing the closing.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE? FORTIFYING THE COMMITMENT TO SERVE

THESE EXAMPLES provide a glimpse of what spiritual reflection in service-learning might look like in the classroom, the co-curricular service-learning center, and the student-led service organization. They are but a few means of using spiritual reflection in service-learning. While it is encouraging to see an increase in students who are engaging in service activities, the long-term success of the service-learning movement will not be based on the sheer numbers of students involved in service at any given

time. Rather, success will arise from how many young people continue to address challenging social and environmental issues in the decades after their college graduation. If we are serious about using service-learning as a means to transform society we must intentionally connect service-learning and spirituality to make these long-term commitments a greater possibility.

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