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## MOVING TOWARDS FAITH: AN INQUIRY INTO SPIRITUALITY IN ADULT EDUCATION

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*This study examined how eight adult education practitioners understand spirituality. The investigation defined and grounded the notion of spirituality within a specific religious/theological tradition, Christianity broadly defined. Data were collected via informal, conversational, taped interviews, and several themes emerged. The study used these results to interrogate the discourse of spirituality and found several serious problems including: the nondefinition and misuse by the discourse of the term spirituality, the hazards of individualized spirituality caused by imprecise definitions of the term, a failure to address issues of faith substantively, and the separation in the discourse of religion from spirituality. The study concluded that by couching discussions in spiritual terminology, the discourse creates the illusion of confronting or dealing with issues of faith in a substantive manner. In reality, the difficult issues are avoided. The study proposes to move the discussion from issues framed in terms of spirituality towards a discourse of faith.*

Outside the field of adult religious education, discussion of spirituality within the general field of adult education had been nonexistent for quite some time. Recently, however, things have begun to change. The field is starting to recognize that "... to omit the spiritual dimension [in adult education] is to ignore the importance of a holistic approach to adult learning as well as the complexity of the adult learner" (English & Gillen, 2000, p. 2). Because this interest in spirituality is a relatively recent phenomenon, the discourse surrounding spirituality and adult education is still somewhat narrow and limited in focus. Specifically, there is a paucity of literature in the discourse that substantively addresses definitional, religious, theological, or etymological understandings of spirituality.

This work is an attempt to add to the literature by phenomenologically investigating how eight adult education practitioners—who hold to a notion of spirituality grounded

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in a religious/theological tradition (Christianity)—understand that notion embedded in their daily lives. The primary research question that framed this investigation was: How do selected adult educators describe spirituality?

In this study, spirituality is conceived as being grounded in a religious/theological context, being grounded in faith. Furthermore, my own assumptions about what constitutes spirituality are framed and strongly influenced by the premises, teachings, and ideals of one of the primary lens through which I view the world. That lens is Judeo-Christianity, and more specifically, evangelical Christianity. I recognize that a Christian understanding of spirituality is one among many; and that other notions of the construct grounded in a variety of religious and faith traditions exist that are equally as important and worthy of exploration. However, due to its prominence in the United States and my extensive background and training in the Christian tradition, this study defines and locates spirituality within that understanding of the term.

The study begins by briefly reviewing the literature within adult education that addresses spirituality. Then, following an introduction of the participants, the findings (phenomenological descriptions of spirituality) are presented. Subsequently, the study uses the findings to point out four hazards that exist within the spirituality discourse in adult education and concludes by suggesting a move by the field away from discussions framed in terms of spirituality towards a discourse of faith.

A review of the spirituality discourse within adult education reveals that the term *spirituality* is often dismissed as an “elusive term and an elusive concept” (Tisdell, 2000, p. 333) that is “hard to define” (English & Gillen, 2000, p. 87). Subsequently, the construct is often left undefined or, perhaps even worse, defined in a vague, imprecise manner.

For example, according to Groen (2002, p. 139), “Spirituality and how adult educators address the spiritual dimensions of the workplace are elusive concepts, where definitive answers are not readily available.” For English, Fenwick, and Parsons (2003, p. 6), “One’s definition [of spirituality] should be as inclusive as possible.” Vogel (2000, p. 17) agrees, arguing that “defining spirituality is a nebulous task; there is no commonly agreed-upon definition.” Seemingly ignored in these renderings is the rich historical, theological, and etymological heritage of the term, a

heritage that locates the construct in the realm of the theological and metaphysical, where spiritual is equated with “the transcendent and the immanent” (Cully, 1990, p. 608).

Etymologically, the term spirituality first surfaced in the English language between 1375 and 1425 (Webster’s, 2001, p. 1840) as a translation of the Greek word, *pneumatikos*. According to Greek word scholars (Schweizer, 1968; Vine, 1966), *spirituality* and the closely related words *spiritual* and *spiritually* come from the same root word for *spirit* (Greek *pneuma*) and “always connote the idea of invisibility and of power” (Vine, 1966, p. 64). Later, the word came to refer to things of the spirit and was synonymous with the invisible, immaterial, and metaphysical (Vine, 1966, p. 62). As such, it is intrinsically distinct—yet at the same time indivisible—from and antithetical to that which is physical, secular, and material.

Webster’s Encyclopedia, Unabridged Dictionary (2001, p. 1840) reflects these etymological moorings, defining *spirituality* as “the quality or fact of being spiritual; incorporeal immaterial nature; predominately spiritual character as shown in thought, life, etc.; spiritual tendency or tone; pertain[ing] to the spirit or soul, as distinguished from the physical nature.” Grounding discussions of spirituality in substantive definitions such as these are important because, as Beringer (2000, pp. 157–158) observes, key terms that lack theoretical-conceptual definition are “subject to increasing speculations regarding [their] nature.”

However, instead of endeavoring to ground the term, the trend in the spirituality literature within adult education appears to be to construct a vague notion of spirituality designed to be more palatable to a wider readership (e.g., English, 2000; English & Gillen, 2000; McDonald, 2001, 2002; Tisdell, 2000, 2003; Vella, 2000; Vogel, 2000). For example, English and Gillen (2000, p. 1) describe spirituality as “an awareness of something greater than ourselves, a sense that we are connected to all human beings and to all of creation.” Vella (2000, p. 7) fares no better, vaguely asserting, “spiritual dimensions of adult education [are] the human dimensions, and attention to these dimensions makes for excellent, effective adult learning.” Then too, McDonald’s (2001, 2002) research employs Kovel’s five mediations on spirit as an analytic framework to study the spirituality of 18 environmental activists. But again, it is a spirituality vaguely defined as “the way

in which people bring spirit into their lives" (McDonald, 2002, p. 269) and "the making of spirit" (McDonald, 2002, p. 272).

Tisdell (2000, 2003; Tisdell, Tolliver, Charaniya, Walsh, Hill, & Baptiste, 2002; Tisdell, Tolliver, & Villa, 2001; Toliver & Tisdell, 2002), one of the more prolific authors addressing the topic of spirituality in adult education, began her research by investigating how spirituality influences the motivations and practices of a multicultural group of women adult educators (Tisdell, 2000). More recently, her work has expanded to include an examination of the connection between spirituality, culture, and higher education (Tisdell, 2003). However, Tisdell's studies also use somewhat vague, religiously/theologically ungrounded descriptions of spirituality.

This type of decontextualization of religion, which fails to understand notions of the sacred implicit in the term (see Beringer, 2000, p. 159), may make the concept of spirituality more acceptable, but it also serves to evacuate the term, leaving it with no real meaning. More importantly, it also makes it much easier for the term to be co-opted, commodified, and misused (e.g., Bolman & Deal, 2001; Conger, 1994; Covey, 1989; Cox & Liesse, 1996; Peters, 1992).

The misuses of the term are particularly (but not exclusively) prevalent in the human resource development (HRD) literature. As used here, *misuse* refers to the way in which concepts such as *soul*, *spirit*, and *spirituality* have been co-opted and commodified by authors on an as-needed basis to further economic goals and to serve the interests of the marketplace (Cox, 1999; Frank, 2000).

Fenwick and Lange (1998) were among the first adult educators to identify this trend in the business literature. More recently, Milacci and Howell (2002) attempted to build upon and extend Fenwick and Lange's (1998) foundational analysis of the way spiritual concepts have been co-opted and commodified to serve the interests of the marketplace by exploring the socioeconomic implications that enable broader and subtler means of worker control.

As this review indicates, in an apparent attempt to be all things to all people, the spirituality discourse within adult education is characterized by vague, almost nondescript definitions of the term *spirituality*. Though well-intentioned, in so doing the

discourse fails to ground discussions of the construct and its etymological, historical, theological/religious roots, which indirectly contributes to the misuse of the term. This study begins to address this issue by investigating how select adult education practitioners describe spirituality, as grounded in a specific religious/theological tradition (Christianity).

### **Method**

Phenomenologists agree that a rich, full understanding of any human phenomenon requires a deep, probing examination of people's lived experiences (Heidegger, 1972; Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 1990). Given that the intent of this study was to gain a richer, fuller understanding of the phenomenon of spirituality and the fact that qualitative research in general and phenomenology in particular are concerned with describing and interpreting human phenomena from the perspective of those who have experienced them (Heidegger, 1972; Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 1990), phenomenological inquiry was deemed most appropriate.

Consistent with phenomenological inquiry, the primary means of data collection was informal, conversational, taped interviews (Giorgi, 1985; Moustakas, 1994; Ray, 1994; van Manen, 1990). All interviews lasted from 90 minutes to just over 2 hours in length and began by asking participants to describe themselves, their job/work, their life or a typical day outside of work, and so forth, in an attempt to get them to share their own stories and experiences. Moreover, I continually asked participants to think of specific instances, situations, or events in an effort to "explore the whole experience to the fullest" (van Manen, 1990, p. 67).

The collected data was then approached in terms of "meaning units, structures of meaning, or themes" (van Manen, 1990, p. 78), a process identified as "theme analysis" (van Manen, 1990, p. 78). For this study, three levels of theme analysis were conducted. To ensure credibility and trustworthiness, member checking (Janesick, 2000), periodic peer reviews of the data (Creswell, 1998), and triangulation (Creswell, 1998; Howell, 2000) were conducted.

*The Participants*

Criteria for participation included individuals who were (a) self-identified adult educators with at least two years of practice in the field, (b) formally trained in the academic discipline of adult education at the graduate level, and (c) identified and confirmed by reputation and works as holding a notion of spirituality grounded in a Christian tradition, broadly defined. Limiting participation to Christian notions of spirituality speaks directly to grounding discussions in a specific religious and theological context. Additionally, "Christian" is how I as the researcher am oriented to the phenomenon, spirituality; and as van Manen (1990, p. 40) suggests, "to orient oneself to a phenomenon always implies a particular interest, station, or vantage point in life."

Using a method that follows a type of purposeful sampling (Patton, 1990), I selected eight participants—Sue, Jodi, Frank, Matt, Bob, Martin, Chloe, and Sara (pseudonyms). This selection process provided diversity in gender, age, race/ethnicity, occupation, and both psychological and social roles (Darkenwald & Merriam, 1982). There was also great ideological and political diversity among participants, ranging from self-described radical, evangelical Christian to critical, poststructural feminist Christian.

The participants shared some noteworthy commonalities not specific to the criteria used for selection. For example, all were either working towards or had earned their doctorate in adult education and currently live and practice adult education in North America. Sue and Sara are employed as university professors in different institutions, Jodi directs a student aid office, Chloe works as a counselor and academic advisor for inner-city, undergraduates, and Frank directs a Protestant undergraduate student group. Though currently employed as a minister of youth, at the time of his interview, Matt also served in a university as an assistant director of the office of fellowships and awards. Bob works outside of academe, directing a private, nonprofit workforce investment agency, as does Martin, who serves as director of prevention and intervention programs for a private, nonprofit drug, alcohol, and mental health organization.

Additionally, all participants mentioned being raised in a religious environment—within the Christian tradition broadly defined—by parents who had some notion of and commitment

to faith. Furthermore, though the degree their parents' faith was manifested varied, all affirmed that their religious/faith upbringing directly impacted both their own faith development and their present understanding of spirituality.

Finally, and perhaps most significantly, all expressed the centrality of authentic spirituality in their lives. As Matt, for example, declared,

As time goes on, I'm becoming more concerned with being an authentic, genuine human being than I am with being a success. And that, I think springs from my faith. . . . I guess as I feel my mortality, I'm becoming more concerned with being authentic, in reconciling my actions with what I say I believe.

This sense of spiritual authenticity was said to be connected to a belief system lived out before the participants in their childhood. In fact, two interviewees spoke explicitly and glowingly of the consistency of their parents' faith on a daily basis. This element of consistency in turn profoundly influenced their present understanding of faith, as well as how they themselves currently live out their faith. As Matt again so succinctly remarked, "faith that isn't lived, isn't faith."

### **Findings: Phenomenological Descriptions of Spirituality**

In an attempt to get at the "thick, rich descriptions" desired in qualitative research, I deliberately avoided asking participants to define or describe spirituality directly until later in the interview. Instead I probed their understandings of faith, asking them to describe the journey or process that brought them to those understandings, a clear reflection of my own understanding of the term. The following themes emerged: questions of spirituality and faith, the problematic nature of individualized spirituality, problems associated with definitions of spirituality, and tales from the "dark side."

#### *Questions of spirituality and faith*

Five participants saw the terms *faith* and *spirituality* as closely related but not always synonymous. Chloe, for example, spoke

explicitly about spirituality as something “closely related to faith.” Jodi equated spirituality with her “basic belief system.” Sue also saw the two terms closely connected, evidenced in her statement, “I think we have to push people to want to stand up and talk about spirituality, to talk about what they really believe.”

Additionally, Sue often used spirituality and faith interchangeably. For example, when queried about her faith journey, Sue responded, “In my mid-twenties, I had sort of a crisis of faith . . . [finding] some writers . . . in spirituality [who] have been helpful, . . . and [out] of that I came to a new sense of what faith was for me and for my work.” Matt also used faith and spirituality interchangeably: “[I] read a book several years ago where [the author] has these two different forms of faith. One is what he calls a spirituality of dwelling and the other’s a spirituality of seeking.”

Sara, however, was uncomfortable with the indiscriminate swapping of these terms. For her, spirituality and faith are more distinct concepts that may be hard to define but separate from one another; as such, they should be differentiated. “It’s a distinction that sometimes I make and sometimes I don’t, but if we’re going to be really clear, then I would say . . . yeah . . . I think of faith . . . being tied to a religious tradition.” Sara went on to state that, though she often used the term *spirituality*, she was somewhat uncomfortable doing so.

I’m not that wild about the term, but I use it. I’m more comfortable with it . . . than I am with religion, because I’m not talking about a specific religious tradition, and I’m not talking about people that necessarily identify with a specific religious tradition.

Other interviewees took Sara’s discomfort with the term *spirituality* a step further, expressing how they intentionally chose to avoid using the word altogether. They opted for more palatable constructs such as faith, transcendence, spirit, tradition, or even religion. Frank, for example, declared emphatically,

I don’t use it. I try not to use the word *spirituality*. In fact, every time I say it, I kind of go like that [he shivers]; you know I get chills up my spine. And I use the word *spirit*, or I use the word *passion*, or I use the word *energy*, or *transcendence*.

Later he added,

A lot of folks in the university setting want to use the word *spirituality* and *spiritual* as an acceptable term to encompass all groups we deal with. I prefer to use the word *tradition*. It’s not spirituality; it’s tradition, because

you're engaging a tradition whenever you're accepting a certain set of beliefs.

Martin was most forceful in expressing his avoidance of the word, choosing instead to use the word *religion*: "Honestly, as bad a word as *religion* is, I prefer it [to *spirituality*]." The reason behind this choice was rooted in Martin's belief that "*religion* calls you into an active spirituality within the context of your community." Spirituality, on the other hand, "is a farce, really. It's a farce to propagate all kinds of things upon us and to avoid the responsibility of our commitment to the brotherhood of humanity or to the human condition. So I have maintained the use of *religion* or *faith*."

#### *The Problematic Nature of Individualized Spirituality*

Discomfort with and deliberately avoiding use of the term was not the only issue participants had with current discussions of spirituality. All but one decried what they perceived to be an emphasis in the discourse that bordered on privileging, of individualized spirituality. As Frank stated,

Part of the newer spirituality is that you don't need other people, you don't need this church, you don't this congregation, or synagogue, or mosque; you don't need to have other people. I think that's part of commodifying, that's part and parcel of anything that gets commodified is making it sale-able to the individual, pulling it out of the social network that in fact created it in the first place.

Sue agreed with Frank's assessment, stating, "Some people want to keep spirituality as this sort of fluffy feel good sort of thing, self centered, that whole celebration of self. . . . I have a problem with that." Sue also thought that emphasizing individual spirituality came at the cost of excluding collective spirituality, a cost she believed is too high: "We have the whole issue of individualist spirituality almost uprising and pushing aside collective spirituality, collective expression of worship, and I think these are serious questions."

Sara referred to this emphasis on individualism in the discourse as a decontextualized spirituality:

I'm not wild about this spirituality in the workplace, these individualist notions of spirituality . . . it does seem kind of decontextualized to me, and too individualist in its orientation and not much sense of what's for the common good, it's just what's good for me in that organization, but not necessarily what's good for the world.

Chloe described spirituality in terms of the community or group, the antithesis to such individualistic notions. In her words, the essence of spirituality "is treating your neighbor right and looking out for the whole [community]." Martin also had strong opinions regarding what he saw as the problems and inherent flaws in the individualistic, typically U.S. notion of spirituality dominating the discourse:

Spirituality is another form of individualism, so it's like you could be in your little house and be spiritual. You can light your candle and play music over there in your little hole and be spiritual, you can stand upside down on your head, or swing from a rope, or line, or bed of nails, or sit on the ground or under water, and be spiritual. . . . It just means that you have an option to say that you could do something by yourself. . . . It says nothing about how you live in the world. It says more about how you are in the world as some kind of individualistic person.

These statements by Frank, Sue, Sara, Chloe, and Martin parallel remarks made by Matt and Jodi. In fact, except for Bob, all participants had a strong reaction to the individualistic notions of spirituality touted in academic adult education.

#### *Problems Associated with Definitions of Spirituality*

Beyond the problem of individualistic spirituality, seven participants also expressed varying levels of dissatisfaction with how spirituality is currently being defined and discussed in the discourse. What they found particularly dissatisfying and disturbing were the nebulous, vague understandings that purport to be a "one-size-fits-all" type of spirituality.

Frank again was quite vocal in his criticism of the imprecise, ill-defined notion of the current, pop spirituality dominating academe. To him, the vagueness of the term "makes it so convenient for advertising, for people to make money out of it. The

more general and vague and empty you can make a term, the more marketable it becomes.”

For Jodi, imprecise, vague definitions of spirituality can lead to the co-opting and commodification of spiritual concepts to further economic goals and serve the interests of the market:

I think that when we talk about spirituality in the workplace, or soul, or spirit, or whatever, people tie that directly to their religion. . . . That's where it gets [mis]used, and that's where I say if you don't link that back to those beliefs, then we are subject to that being [mis]used.

Sue took exception to the claim of neutrality implicit in vague, imprecise notions of spirituality. In her words, “When you are trying to be all things to everyone, particularly when a lot of this is actually foundationalist in its own way, it's just a different kind of foundationalist, worship yourself, light a few candles, and feel good. I have a problem with [that].”

Martin's dissatisfaction with the term led him to intentionally avoid using the word *spirituality* altogether. As he stated,

It's a nothing word. It's a word that means nothing. It just means that you have an option to say that you could do something by yourself, or have some kind of internal feng shui or something going on; but it's a word that actually means nothing or says nothing.

Precisely because spirituality, in its present form, is a word that is devoid of meaning, Martin chose instead to use constructs others avoid, such as religion and faith; constructs he saw imbued with meaning:

It's clear what religion is; it involves active participation in the world of lived experiences. So for me, I prefer to talk about religion . . . I'll start there, and then somebody says, there's so much crap perpetrated because of religion; and I say that, that is true. Lots of bad things have been done in the name of religion; lots of good things have been done in the name of religion. But *nothing* good or bad has been done in the name of spirituality (laughs) . . . it's just a, a buzz, man, it's just a buzz, you know? So I will fight for true religion, a true religion that expresses itself in a relationship with God and a love for humanity and an active participation in the redemption of human experience as opposed to spirituality, which is sort of an internal access to some sort of godness in your life which could be *any* possible thing. [emphasis in the original]

For Matt, even more troubling than the vagueness of the term was the inherent, assumed superiority of these vague constructions of current spirituality over those grounded in history, religion, theology, and context:

[Spirituality] is absolutely vague and meaningless, it has no historical grounding; it is the psychic friends hotline, it is whatever you want it to be. . . . What irritates me about this discussion of spirituality is that it is privileged to discussions of faith grounded in history and context; that I find insulting. That it is somehow intellectually greater, that people who are still talking about this in terms of Christianity, or Islam or Hinduism are somehow not getting it . . . and I find that insulting.

Later, he added,

When I read this stuff on spirituality, the way it dances around context and history . . . the way it appropriates the language of faith while at the same time looking back disparagingly on faith that is grounded in faith and history and sacred Scripture and tradition as being somehow parochial and not well thought out, it's just an incredible insult.

These unambiguous expressions of dissatisfaction with current, vague definitions of spirituality in academic adult education by Frank, Sue, Jodi, Martin, and Matt reflect more tacit remarks made by Sara and Chloe. If Bob was dissatisfied with current definitions of spirituality, he did not express it.

#### *Tales from the Dark Side*

Participants' concerns over the potential misuse of spiritual concepts inherent in vague, ungrounded notions of spirituality mentioned in the previous section reflect the concerns of others (e.g. Beringer, 2000; Fenwick & Lange, 1998; Lerner, 2000; Milacci & Howell, 2002; Nouwen, 1981; Wallis, 2000; Wilber, 1998). As Beringer's (2000, pp. 157–158) remarks illustrate, "spirituality lacking precise theoretical-conceptual definition and being subject to increasing speculations regarding its nature has unfavorable implications."

One such "unfavorable implication" is ignoring darker spiritual constructs such as sin, struggle, evil, deception, greed, and death in favor of a "sunny, feel-good idealism [which] provides

little help in working through life's complexity" (Fenwick, 2001). Ignoring this "dark side" of spirituality is problematic because "most faith traditions acknowledge and accept human struggle with death, desire, misfortune, and evil as important parts of life to be embraced, not avoided. Questioning, doubting, and dark introspection are not seen as a loss of faith, but accepted as part of the spiritual journey" (Fenwick, 2001).

Consistent with these conclusions, the participants in this study described their encounters with, and acceptance of, the "dark side" of spirituality. In Sue's experience, the "dark side" included a time "in my mid-twenties [when] I had sort of a crisis of faith that persisted . . . a number of years and I began puddling around in theology, asking a lot of questions . . . and it shook down to a reaffirmation of my faith." Matt went through a similar "dark" period of skepticism and rejection of the faith he had grown up with. However, in Matt's case this cynicism was precipitated by an intense disenchantment with Christians he met and perceived as inconsistent, as people who did not "live their faith."

Frank also encountered hypocrisy in the church in the form of intense criticism directed at a very close member of his family. This incident triggered in him a desire to turn from formal religion and things of faith for a period of time as well. In his words, it "just didn't make any sense to me. In fact I hated [the hypocrites] because of it . . . and I thought that every Christian was a hypocrite." Eventually, however both Matt and Frank came through their "dark side" experience, emerging more spiritual and stronger in faith. As Matt's remarks illustrated,

I realized that [hypocrisy] isn't a rationale for not believing, or for not participating . . . when people say I'm not going to the church, it's all full of hypocrites, my response now is yeah, and there's always room for one more.

Bob spoke frankly and extensively about his faith struggle, a struggle markedly different from that experienced by Sue, Matt, and Frank in that it was one of dark introspection. Specifically Bob struggled with how his faith has changed, how he is currently "in flux" spiritually speaking, and how this state of spiritual transition impacted his life and relationship to the organized church. Bob admitted that this was an uncomfortable subject for him, one he "really [doesn't] talk about too much." Still, he stated,

I'm convinced that the organizational church has some big issues, and I have some big issues with the organizational church. A lot of those revolve around the issue of being an ordained clergy person, and what that means in terms of leadership and . . . things that that does to laypeople, in terms of disempowering them . . . I've been reinventing or rethinking all of the theological concepts and . . . I look at God differently, I think I look at Jesus' role differently. I understand the history of the church, but I'm concerned about where it's going. . . . The church must reinvent itself or it's going to die.

Though perhaps not as intense as Bob's, both Sara and Jodi did speak of their struggle with formal religion in general, and the religious tradition of their youth in particular. As Jodi stated, "I have to say I have a real problem at this point with organized religion; whereas going to church every Sunday used to be what you did, it isn't what I do [now]." Sara spoke of how for her religion was a "mixed bag" of both wonderful things and negative things that contributed to her current "ambivalence towards the Catholic Church."

Chloe's description of her encounter with the "dark side" of spirituality centered on the constant struggles or tests of faith she experienced in life. In spite of a lifetime of tremendous adversity, Chloe remained undaunted:

I believe if you do the right thing and you praise God constantly and expect miracles, those [road] blocks, those mountains, they're not removed, but you get the strength to climb over them or the insight to see them. [For example] for African Americans, it was their faith that one day it's going to be over and the children will not have to suffer like they did that got our people through slavery. The stories that my grandparents tell about being a sharecropper, I couldn't have ever gone through that; I would have just killed myself or just gone to jail. But it was their faith [that] got us [through].

However, there was not unanimous agreement on the issue of the "dark side" among the participants. For Martin, "God is in charge of this whole operation and he is a good God and has my best interest at heart," leading him to conclude, "I have not really come across any reason to doubt and to despair within my life. I mean I've had friends who are Christians and have gone through real serious times of doubt and you know, sort of almost losing everything, and then just sort of back up [to faith]; but I've not really gone through that."

This is not to say that Martin viewed life unrealistically, with blind optimism, or that he experienced a trouble-free existence.

Rather, Martin's faith framed his life in such a way that it provided him with "a knowledge to realize that there really is no bad thing that can happen to me." Martin attributed his unique outlook on the "dark side" to a "special gift of faith" in which *special* was defined as "hav[ing] a capacity to entertain this concept [faith] at a higher degree than average people."

These stories suggest that the "dark side" is a bona fide, significant, and accepted part of the spiritual life of the participants. To ignore this aspect of spirituality in favor of a "sunny, feel-good naïveté" (Fenwick, 2001) is to present an inaccurate, shortsighted, unbalanced view of spirituality that is inconsistent with most faith traditions and disregards an important dimension of the spiritual experience of many, if not most, people of faith.

### **Conclusions: Hazards of the Discourse of Spirituality**

The findings of this study point out four hazards that appear in the spirituality discourse within the field of adult education. These hazards—the nondefinition and misuse of spirituality, individualistic spirituality, the failure to address faith, and the separation of spirituality and religion—are discussed in the following section.

#### *The Hazard of Nondefinition and Misuse of Spirituality*

A recurring theme is the failure of the field to commit to substantive definitions of the term, *spirituality*. By substantive definitions, I refer to definitions grounded in historical, theological, and etymological underpinnings of the construct (see Cully, 1990; Schweizer, 1968; Vine, 1966). Instead, the discourse has chosen to use vague, imprecise, and noncommittal terms in their definitions in an apparent attempt to appear permissive, welcoming, and as Sue observed, make spirituality "be all things to everyone."

However, by striving to make spirituality palatable, the discourse has emptied the term of any meaning. On this, the majority of participants were particularly vocal. Martin, for example, mentioned how spirituality is "a nothing word; a word that means nothing." Matt agreed, stating spirituality is "absolutely vague and meaningless, it has no historical grounding . . . it is whatever you want it to be." Therein lies a major hazard: a spirituality emptied of meaning is highly susceptible to co-optation, commodification,

and misuse for purposes that are anything but spiritual (see Beringer, 2002; Fenwick & Lange, 1998; Milacci & Howell, 2002).

One example of this misuse is found in some of the HRD literature. As shown, there spirituality is misused as a tool for economic and marketing purposes (e.g., Bolman & Deal 2001; Conger, 1994; Covey, 1989; Cox & Liesse, 1996; Peters, 1992), a problem both Jodi and Frank made direct reference to. In that literature, the principles and terminology of spirituality are misused to divert individuals' focus inward toward self-development, wants, and needs, so they will be oblivious to the fact that they are being pushed to lend their expertise to continually boost the business bottom line. In this way, words that mean one thing within the context of one's spiritual life are turned into a commodity for misuse in the marketplace (see Fenwick & Lange, 1998; Milacci & Howell, 2002).

It would be easy to summarily dismiss these kinds of misuses solely as evidence of the propensity of a capitalistic society to commodify anything and everything. But in fact, some of the blame falls squarely on the shoulders of the spirituality discourse within adult education. Failing to commit to substantive definitions of spirituality and in effect making the term meaningless implicates the discourse as facilitating and cooperating in this kind of marketization, cooptation, and commodification of the spiritual. The fact that we as a field participate in these misuses indirectly or unintentionally neither excuses nor exonerates us from blame.

#### *The Hazard of an Individualistic Spirituality*

Beyond contributing to the co-optation and commodification of the spiritual, vague definitions of spirituality in the discourse contribute to a second hazard: promoting an individualistic spirituality. As Sue stated, "Some people want to keep spirituality as sort of . . . self-centered, that whole celebration of self. . . I have a problem with that." Frank agreed adding, "Part of the newer spirituality is that you don't need other people, you don't need this church, you don't need this congregation, or synagogue, or mosque; you don't need other people."

A spirituality focused on the individual is hazardous, precisely because it is intrinsically self-centered and self-serving. Then too,

individualized spirituality ignores the fact that people do not live in isolation but are individuals who exist as part of a community. Accordingly, an individually focused spirituality promotes egocentric ideals such as self-fulfillment, personal happiness, meaning making, and meeting individual needs, while at the same time snubbing personal responsibility to community and society.

These assumptions underpinning individualistic spirituality place it in diametric opposition to Christian—and probably other religions’—notions of the construct where, according to the writings of Christian religious and theological scholars, community plays a central role (e.g. Ritchey, 2000; Wallis, 2000). Furthermore, realizing that all participants in this study viewed the world from a Christian frame, these assumptions help explain why they had such strong reactions to the tacit but very real imposition of individualistic spirituality within the discourse.

Finally, the individualistic spirituality that lurks implicitly within the discourse of adult education is hazardous because it effectively excludes substantive discussions of how faith affects practice, how a person of faith should “live in world.” As Martin remarked, individualistic spirituality “means that you have an option to say that you could do something by yourself. . . . It says nothing about how you live in the world. It says more about how you are in the world as some kind of individualistic person.”

It seems ironic that the field of adult education, a field that prides itself as historically being concerned with the greater good of society at large, has so indiscriminately bought into and adopted as part of its own discourse a spirituality that, intentionally or unintentionally, makes the good of society subservient to the needs and concerns of the individual. Until and unless the discourse moves beyond the imprecise definitions of spirituality it currently privileges, the hazards associated with this trend of implicitly promoting individualistic spirituality will continue.

### *The Hazard of Failing to Address Issues of Faith*

A third hazard is the failure of the field to address serious, substantive issues of faith. These issues include, but are not limited to, how belief affects practice and how a person of faith is “live” in the world. However, as this study pointed out, perhaps the most

blatant illustration of this hazard is the discourse's failure to tackle issues related to the "dark side."

As discussed, the "dark side" is a term used to describe the struggles, questions, doubts, fears, and evils experienced by people of faith—and also recognized by most faith traditions—as an inevitable, legitimate, and important part of the spiritual journey. Participants described numerous encounters with the "dark side" which include experiencing a crisis of faith, feelings of skepticism towards and rejection of religion, struggling with the hypocrisy and inconsistency of religious people, and constant difficulties, trials, and tribulations as a means of testing one's faith.

However, these participant descriptions of spirituality were markedly different from those found in the discourse within adult education. There, the emphasis is on promoting the "sunny, feel good" side of spirituality alone, leaving the "dark side" all but ignored. So much so, in fact, that the silence of the discourse on issues related to the "dark side" is almost deafening.

By couching its discussions in spiritual terminology, the mainstream discourse creates the illusion of confronting and dealing with issues of faith in a substantive manner. But as the silence with regards to the "dark side" indicates, in reality the difficult issues are avoided. Therefore, space needs to be made where real issues of faith, such as how belief affects practice, and "the dark side," can be legitimately and substantively discussed.

### *The Hazard of Separating Spirituality and Religion*

An additional hazard is found in the attempt within the field to divorce religion and spirituality. As the findings indicate, this is a forced and subsequently hazardous separation rooted in a false assumption about religion.

According to its proponents, spirituality is "not the same as religion; religion is an organized community of faith that has written codes of regulatory behavior, whereas spirituality is more about one's personal belief and experience of a higher power or higher purpose" (Tisdell, 2000, p. 309). However, for all but one of the participants of this study, religion is more than a system of worship, regulatory codes, or a community of faith. For them, much like spirituality and faith, central to religion are foundations, fundamentals, and foundational and core beliefs.

Furthermore, although the terms *spirituality* and *religion* are not identical, they are closely connected, evidenced by the fact that five participants frequently used the two terms interchangeably. In fact, four preferred to use *religion* and *faith* over *spirituality*. Understood in this way, religion and spirituality should not be divorced.

By pushing to keep religion and spirituality separate, the discourse is in effect asking the adult educator who is a person of faith to find some way to extricate their foundational beliefs and close off who they are at the very core of their being. This, however, is impossible. As Matt so powerfully expressed,

The[ir] rules can't take [my faith] away. It's like this whole prayer in the schools thing. I don't know how you can stop people from praying in school, or praying in their work, or praying in their car, or praying wherever they want to pray. I mean you can't stop me, because it has nothing to do with being legitimized, or being given chunking out time for me to do it. I do it whenever I want anyway.

This points to the primary hazard in attempting to keep spirituality and religion separate. Realizing that they cannot do the impossible and simply shut off their core beliefs, the person of faith is faced with, as one participant summarized, "feeling fraudulent" or risk "being dismissed as a total flake" by colleagues in the field. Instead of forcing people of faith to choose between attempting the impossible and doing the undesirable, the onus should fall on the discourse within adult education itself to recognize that for many within the field, spirituality and religion are intrinsically connected.

Any hazards or risks resulting from linking spirituality and religion should be assumed by and entertained in the literature, not by a specific group of adult education practitioners. To be sure, when entering the quagmire of discussing religion and foundational beliefs, risks are inevitable, not the least of which is that of being exposed to the emotional messiness and heated debates that are sure to erupt when core beliefs collide. But these are risks worth taking, especially in light of the alternative.

Finally, this is the *raison d'être* of discourse in the first place: to take risks, to generate discussion and substantive debate. As Matt stated, "When [someone] set[s] out to write about ...

adult education and spirituality, I'd like to at least read they're either feeling intensely angry or intensely interested. But to leave [reading] it feeling indifferent is just really very sad."

### **Implications: Moving from Spirituality towards Faith**

The findings of this study suggest that because these four hazards mentioned above are tied, both directly and indirectly, to problems associated with the term *spirituality*, they can be avoided. However, avoiding these hazards requires a bold move by the field away from current discussions conveniently couched in undefined, nonoffensive notions of spirituality towards a discourse framed explicitly and unapologetically in terms of faith.

Underpinning this proposed move from spirituality to faith is an assumption concerning a fundamental difference in how the two constructs are defined. Unlike spirituality with its ungrounded, nebulous, imprecise, and vague definitions, the term *faith* comes loaded with meaning; meaning that is grounded in historical, theological, and etymological contexts. Inherent in faith are notions and understandings related to foundations, fundamentals, and foundational or core beliefs. Thus, while the object of faith may differ between and among individuals and traditions, the substance or definition associated with the construct remains rooted in core beliefs.

Because it is grounded in the historical, theological, and etymological, the term *faith* is less likely to be co-opted, commodified, and misused for purposes that are anything but spiritual. As Frank observed, "The more general and vague and empty you can make a term, the more marketable it becomes." By moving towards discussions of faith, the discourse reduces its susceptibility to the hazards of misuse associated with the type of spirituality devoid of meaning currently in vogue.

Furthermore, a deliberate move from the term *spirituality* to the term *faith* would avoid the hazard of failing to address serious and difficult issues of faith, such as the "dark side." Instead, the discourse would be compelled to engage its discussions on a deeper, more substantive level. Because *spirituality*, as Martin remarked, is "a nothing word," dialogue on these type of issues is easily and conveniently skirted. However, the term *faith* is imbued with meaning and by its very nature provokes discussion and

debate about foundations, core beliefs, and how those beliefs frame or underpin practice. Thus, moving the focus of the discourse from spirituality to faith increases the likelihood that substantive issues will be addressed.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, framing the discourse in terms of faith would avoid the hazard of asking adult educators who are people of faith to shut off their core beliefs or risk “feeling fraudulent and/or being dismissed as a total flake.” Instead, core beliefs would become an accepted and substantive part of the discourse by virtue of their affiliation with faith. This would in turn bring to the fore discussions of substantive issues, such as how a person of faith should “live in the world” and how faith affects practice.

I recognize that implementing this proposed move from spirituality to faith is not without risks of its own. Discussions focused on issues of faith and foundational beliefs strike at the very core of who we are as human beings. Furthermore, when those beliefs are called into question or argued against, tempers flare, the debate heats up, and attitudes have the potential of becoming combative. Nevertheless, if the discourse is to move beyond its present lethargic, impotent condition, a healthy dose of lively debate generated by such a bold move may be exactly what is needed.

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