

## Lifelong Learning, Well-Being and Personal Development

### 150th Anniversary of Vaughan College/SCUTREA Pre-Conference

John Foster Hall, University of Leicester, 3 July 2012

#### Packaging positive thinking or returning to roots? Adult education and spirituality

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*Adult education and training began with leaders who believed their very work was, in itself, spiritual. Our historical mentors did not separate their spiritual sides from their work. In fact, their spirituality animated their work and their educational practice lent direction and focus to their spirituality. Somewhere in the past fifty years adult education and training have become more about teaching techniques and learning styles than about inspiration, aspiration and consecration. Separating the spiritual from the educational might be a safer approach to practice, but it is short-sighted in terms of human need and innate human understanding.*

(English, Fenwick and Parsons, 2003: 18-19)

*Spirituality has ... become a commodity purchasable on the market, a product that allegedly promises self-development, prosperity or whatever the individual desires.*

(Hornborg, 2012: 252)

#### Introduction

I feel very privileged to have been invited to join the celebration of the 150th anniversary of Vaughan College and this pre-conference to SCUTREA 2012. I also feel somewhat daunted. When Clive asked last November whether I would be interested in participating it seemed like a good idea, and also a long way off (the two things were undoubtedly connected!).

The theme of this event certainly resonated with me. I have spent most of my professional life in adult and community education (beginning long before it morphed into lifelong learning), albeit latterly working on professional doctoral programmes and courses for new university lecturers. In these more recent contexts, I have tried to hold on to the values of adult education, and been driven by what I see as a real need to create reflective spaces within which educators and other professionals can heed the Delphic/Socratic injunction to 'Know Thyself' through processes of personal and professional development. I have also been an active member of SCUTREA for nearly twenty years and have pursued interests in spirituality for almost that long. Last year I became founder-editor of the new *Journal for the Study of Spirituality*. So far so good: I can lay claim to at least some credentials to be speaking at a conference on Lifelong Learning, Well-Being and Personal Development.

But now to the more daunting aspects - which are not *just* about following on from a lecture by John Field or talking to a room full of international experts in adult education! As I sat at a blank computer screen last month thinking about what I might be able to offer as discussion points, I noticed that my shoulders were hunched and there were aches and pains afflicting various parts of my anatomy. I know that the comedian, Billy Connolly, says that when one reaches a certain age, every movement is accompanied by a groan (and I have almost certainly reached that age!) but I realised that this sad state of affairs was probably not just age-related.

I should probably reassure you at this point that I am not planning to turn this morning into a version of the Oprah Winfrey show! Nevertheless, there is some significance in the fact that my personal situation has changed considerably over the past year or so. First, apart from continuing supervision of several postgraduate students, I have effectively retired from my post at the university. This was

not entirely by choice but followed a difficult period of institutional re-structuring and re-focussing of departmental priorities (the kinds of events associated with so-called 'new managerialism' with which many of you will undoubtedly be familiar): it has left me with some sense of bitterness and 'unfinished business'; not the sort of feeling with which I had anticipated ending the contractual part of my working life. Second, a dear friend and mentor died last year and I sorely miss the reflective spaces she always created for me: they were often challenging but always lined with the cushioning of her wisdom and unconditional support. Finally, my mother died just a couple of months ago after a long and painful illness and we are now in the process of selling her bungalow: it feels as though a major 'still point' in my life is in free-fall. In this alien world of loss and change I think I have been trying to hold onto the past, not entirely metaphorically, by freeze-framing my body into a defensive position. And during this time I have certainly not consciously engaged with my own processes of lifelong learning, well-being or personal development. So - by what right am talking to you about these very processes?

I wondered at length about that and about whether or not I should share these concerns and details with you. Eventually, I realised that disengagement from these processes has actually caused me to question them; and that a personal introduction to them *is* appropriate - on the grounds that I have long advocated forms of reflective practice in which mind-body-spirit connections can be explored; and (not always successfully in an academic context) I have developed and argued for styles of working and writing that, to use Stenhouse's (1981) terms, allow the 'systematic inquiry' of reflective practice to be 'made public'. Thus, had I launched straight away into my topic for this morning, 'Packaging positive thinking or returning to roots? Adult education and spirituality', as though it is simply about something fairly abstract and 'out there', it would have felt rather dishonest since it is not easy to disentangle what I want to talk about from my own experiences. I hope you will bear with me as that becomes evident this morning - and that you will feel encouraged in discussion later to share your own experiences and observations.

I am going to start with the second part of my title, adult education and spirituality, as I hope it will go some way towards answering the question in the first part.

### **Adult education and spirituality**

The quotation from English, Fenwick and Parsons (2003) that I have used to introduce this presentation summarises much of what I want to offer as a basis for discussion: adult education and spirituality were once closely entwined but they have largely become separated in an era driven by new managerialist principles and a focus on outcomes, accountability and accreditation. Oddly, however, almost in parallel with this, interest in spirituality has effectively exploded in popular literature and as a key dimension of practice within a number of different professions. I will say more about that in conclusion but for now I want to stay with adult/education.

It is well-documented that the work of 'our historical mentors' - in the guise of many of the early adult educators - had strong religious and spiritual roots. It was generally connected with social justice and reform movements and informed predominantly by Christian values and ethics. We are linked directly to it this morning in that David James Vaughan was the vicar of St Martin's Church in Leicester and I understand that what is now Vaughan College began its life in the form of a reading room which he opened for his parishioners. From the development of similar adult schools in the nineteenth century<sup>1</sup> with their focus on developing reading skills, especially through Bible study, Christian influences on adult education can be traced through the 1920s and '30s in the work of, among others, Eduard Lindeman<sup>2</sup> and Moses Coady<sup>3</sup> in North America, and Basil Yeaxlee<sup>4</sup> in the UK, to Paulo Freire's<sup>5</sup> seminal work, in Brazil in the last half of the twentieth century, which was deeply influenced by liberation theology. Indeed, Jarvis and Walters (1993) claim, in an edited book entitled *Adult Education and Theological Interpretations*, that these two fields are closely allied because both

are concerned with understanding human experience and finding meaning in life, personally and collectively.

Meaning-making is certainly a key element in what Zohar and Marshall (2000) call 'spiritual intelligence'. They note that 'Human beings are essentially spiritual creatures because we are driven by a need to ask "fundamental" or "ultimate" questions"' (p.4). I think this leaves out an important dimension of spirituality which is to do with the lived experience of awe and wonder - but there is no doubt that exploration of who we are, and how we express it, is an educational process. I am particularly drawn, as I know are many others, to Parker Palmer's summary of the questions that educators may ask of themselves. He says:

The question we most commonly ask is the 'what' question – what subjects shall we teach?

When the conversation goes a bit deeper, we ask the 'how' question – what methods and techniques are required to teach well?

Occasionally, when it goes deeper still, we ask the 'why' question – for what purposes and to what ends do we teach?

But seldom, if ever, do we ask the 'who' question – who is the self that teaches? How does the quality of my selfhood form – or deform – the way I relate to my students, my subject, my colleagues, my world? How can educational institutions sustain and deepen the selfhood from which good teaching comes? (Palmer, 1998: 4)

With the 'who question' in mind, I have argued elsewhere (Hunt 2009) that there is a need for an 'integrative approach' to personal/professional development through reflective practice which allows practitioners to move beyond the more common aims of 'efficiency', 'self-development' and 'empowerment' to a position where they can integrate 'inner and outer' experiences, including those that might be called spiritual, in ways that can inform their practices both within and outside the workplace. The integrative approach takes on board Palmer's belief about the nature of teaching:

Teaching, like any truly human activity, emerges from one's inwardness, for better or worse. As I teach, I project the condition of my soul onto my students, my subject, and our way of being together.... When I do not know myself, I cannot know who my students are. I will see them through a glass darkly, in the shadows of my unexamined life – and when I cannot see them clearly, I cannot teach them well. When I do not know myself, I cannot know my subject – not at the deepest levels of embodied, personal meaning. I will know it only abstractly, from a distance, a congeries of concepts as far removed from the world as I am from personal truth. (Palmer, 1998: 2)

Sullivan (with no reference to Palmer) says about knowing one's subject:

While the nature of the material one studies and the reliability of the methods one uses are crucial, what determines the effectiveness of scholarship are the 'inner tools', the personal qualities, moral and spiritual, of the scholar. (Sullivan, 2003: 127)

It is probably no coincidence that both Parker and Sullivan write from a Christian perspective: their message would have been clearly understood by the pioneers of adult education. Nevertheless, as English, Fenwick and Parsons observe, in the latter half of the twentieth century, explicit references to spiritual aims and values in adult education theory and practice, and especially links to Christianity, largely gave way (at least in the UK and North America) to what seemed to be more pressing technical and outcomes-driven concerns. As I indicated earlier, I think the processes of adult education/lifelong learning now need to be considered in the context of the rapidly-expanding contemporary spirituality movement. Before I say more about that I am going to draw first on a model that has helped me to 'name' various aspects not only of my personal understanding but of



I had definitely struggled to put my 'sense of connectedness' into words but I felt that *Gaia* symbolized it well. *Gaia* is the name of the ancient Earth goddess and was invoked in 1979 by Jim Lovelock who proposed the '*Gaia hypothesis*' - which suggests that the planet is a self-regulating entity. At that time the idea was highly contentious scientifically but it caught the public imagination and has now come to represent an increasingly important alternative 'reality' to that of the Newtonian 'clockwork universe'. Where the latter assumes things to be separate, replaceable and largely under human control, like the widgets inside a clock, the reality of *Gaia* is of the interconnectedness of all things and of humanity as a small part of a larger whole.

### *Significance*

The significance of this in the context of Heron's 'ways of knowing' is that *sensing* something is the most basic form of knowing (*experiential knowing*). I think it was the Grandad of psychology, William James, who said that we are born into a 'booming, buzzing confusion' and spend the rest of our lives trying to make sense of it! Heron's model suggests that we first 'make sense' of our embodied sense of beingness through imagery. This can ultimately be shared with others in the form of, for example, art, music, dance, poetry and metaphor (*presentational knowing*). Such shared images can be extremely powerful. In his seminal text *Images of Organization*, which examines the impact of underpinning metaphors on organizational life, Morgan (1997: 377) points out that 'We are not passive observers interpreting and responding to the events and situations that we see. We play an important role in shaping those interpretations, hence the way events unfold'.

Thus, the key underpinning images held by individuals and societies can/do quite literally give shape to the 'reality' of their existence; to the myths that help them to articulate their own lives (through the words and concepts of *propositional knowing*) and to the actions that define their daily lives (*practical knowing*). In consequence, if one's underpinning image is of a clockwork universe then running an organization that assumes people are widgets that can be discarded or replaced with no effect on them or their colleagues is unproblematic. Similarly, sanctioning actions which plunder the planet in the service of its human inhabitants, or which treat some of those inhabitants unfairly or oppressively, seems acceptable. However, if one's underpinning image is of Gaian interconnectedness then the discourses in which one engages and the actions that follow will be somewhat different. (Tisdell [2003] explores further the implications of cultural images and assumptions for both spirituality and teaching.)

In the diagram, I have located spirituality at the level of experiential knowing because I understand both as a sense of being and of relationship. I have indicated two 'types' of spirituality because, for some people, it incorporates a sense of relationship which extends *beyond the boundaries* of the known and knowable universe (what I have called '*transcendental spirituality*'). For other people, spirituality is experienced as a sense of relationship with others and with the cosmos that is contained entirely *within* the known and knowable universe ('*transpersonal spirituality*').

It may be somewhat contentious but I have placed 'Religions' at the level of presentational knowing because I think spirituality - as an embodied sense of being - *precedes* religious belief. Religions weave their own imagery and myths around our 'beingness' and thereby generate different rituals and practices in the everyday living of individuals and communities (in the same way that underpinning images of *Gaia* or of a clockwork universe result in different practices). I will leave that on one side for possible discussion later because I want to come back now to adult education and the theme of this pre-conference.

### *Terms*

As we know, adult education began as an enterprise to help people to live 'better' lives, often beginning with the reading skills that would enable them to access the propositional knowledge of written texts that had hitherto only been available through the oral interpretations of others. It subsequently enabled them not only to learn other practical skills that would enhance their

employment prospects but also to begin to engage with the nature of society and their place within it.

My own life as an adult educator was heavily influenced by the notion of 'education for participation' in the 1970s and by involvement in the 'awareness raising' of the women's movement. Both were predicated upon assisting people to understand how and why things were as they were, and how they might begin to effect change. To some extent these movements dipped into presentational knowing through their encouragement to 're-vision' one's life and (to return to Palmer's terminology) they addressed the 'why' question: 'for what purposes and to what ends do we teach?'. The answer was clear - 'to bring about individual and social change'.

Much of the work in which I was involved for over 20 years was linked to what had once been a University Extra-Mural Department. Over that time, as political and institutional priorities changed, it morphed from a Division of Continuing Education, into a Centre for Continuing Vocational Education, a Department of Adult Continuing Education and, finally, an Institute for Lifelong Learning. It is reminiscent of an old cartoon relating to the fickleness of the business world in which a bemused-looking employee says 'I've sat at this same desk for 4 years and worked for 3 different companies'. (Nowadays we would probably say s/he was lucky still to have a job!) The point I want to make, going back to the Heron model, is that the words we use to describe the work that we do emerge from a sense of who we are that is saturated in imagery and filtered through associated discourses.

I well remember the SCUTREA Conference in 2001 being exercised over the implications of the 'journey' from adult education to lifelong learning and whether it was good or bad news for adult education and educators. Many participants believed that lifelong learning had become too closely associated with government concerns about economic growth, employability and employer needs. Others pointed out that some policy documents actually went way beyond these concerns: the Fryer Report (DfEE 1997), for example, had commented on the significance of learning for spiritual as well as democratic health; and the Green Paper, *The Learning Age: A renaissance for a new Britain* (DfEE, 1998) had specifically mentioned the need for creativity and imagination as well as for the development of knowledge and skills.

Debates over terminology are not 'simply' intellectual, their roots lie deep in the images that shape our identities and in the 'who [am I] question' that is at the heart of our existence. In terms of the theme of this conference, I am not sure I really know what the difference is between 'lifelong learning' and 'personal development' but I want to suggest that lifelong learning is about acquiring experience, knowledge and understanding that equips us to live to our full potential in the social world. (I think adult educators have a key role to play in ensuring that learning equips people, including themselves, to live as wisely and compassionately as possible.) Personal development concerns a more 'inward turn' and exploration of the modalities of our knowing; exploration of *how* we know what we know. 'Well-being' seems to me to be a state that is achieved when there is positive alignment between these modalities; when our actions are embedded in discourses that are shaped by images that comfortably re-present to us who we are and why we are here. (Perhaps it is no coincidence that those who profess a strong faith usually score well on measures of well-being.)

I said at the beginning that over the past few months I have been disengaged from the processes of my own lifelong learning, well-being and personal development and that this seemed to be linked, and manifested physically, in an attempt to 'freeze' the past; to deny change and not to think about the future. It has been painful but interesting to have been considering this talk at a time when my sense of well-being has been virtually non-existent. This is not least because the 'world-view' represented by the Heron diagram, and which has helped me to make meaning in my own life for many years, has been seriously challenged by witnessing the physical realities of dying and death and by my lost identity as a daughter. In particular, I now question the notion of a spiritual 'essence' that contains and sustains the known and knowable universe and to which everything in that

universe returns. No longer feeling confident about either that or my identity brings my 'beingness' into question and, in consequence, there is presently no positive alignment between my 'ways of knowing'.

I do not want to dwell on the personal aspects of all this but simply to use it as an 'up close' illustration of a similar 'malaise of misalignment' that seems to be widespread in Western societies and to which the so-called contemporary spirituality movement may be a response. I will say just a little about that, in conclusion.

### Contemporary spirituality

There is now considerable evidence of what Houtman and Aupers (2007: 305) describe as a 'spiritual turn' in Western societies: drawing on data from the World Values Survey (1981-2000), they suggest that 'a weakening of the grip of tradition on individual selves stimulates a spiritual turn to the deeper layers of the self'. In an editorial to *The Edge*, a journal published by the UK's Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), Smith (2006: 22) pointed to a range of on-going research suggesting that 'While conventional religions are in decline, the search for "spirituality" is on the rise'.

Heron (1998: 2) and King (2001) both argue that large numbers of people have begun to use the world's religions and wisdom traditions eclectically as *resources* rather than identifying exclusively with one tradition as the only *source* of their spirituality. Forman (2004) in the USA and Tacy (2004) in Australia each provide empirical evidence of a rapidly-growing 'grassroots' spirituality movement. Google produced more than 52,000,000 references to spirituality the last time I looked. And most High Street bookshops now feature prominent displays labelled 'Mind, Body and Spirit'. (In one North American store alone, English, Fenwick and Parsons [2003: 5] counted 38 different categories for 'spiritual'. When I first became interested in the topic, back in the 1980s, the few books relating to it were usually on a dusty shelf at the back of the shop, labelled 'Occult!').

A key reason for this continuing trend seems to be a collective 'malaise of misalignment'. We are living through a period of *morphogenesis* - of challenge to, and relatively rapid change in, the myths and images that have traditionally shaped and bounded our communal lives. Old beliefs and certainties are being disrupted and replaced in ways that make it ever more difficult to experience the sense of well-being that I have suggested comes from positive alignment between our 'ways of knowing' - the images, discourses and actions that determine our lives. In consequence, 'selling spirituality' as a panacea for all ills has become big business. As the quotation from Hornborg that I used to introduce this presentation indicates:

Spirituality has ... become a commodity purchasable on the market, a product that allegedly promises self-development, prosperity or whatever the individual desires. (Hornborg, 2012: 252)

Hornborg describes how, in her native Sweden, spirituality is often packaged as a form of positive thinking which puts individuals in touch with their 'inner potential'. She quotes (p.254) from *The Journey*, a neo-spiritual therapy offered in Europe and the USA, which is fairly typical of the genre:

Deep inside a huge potential beckons, waiting to open us to the infinite wisdom, freedom and love within. This presence is calling you home *right now*, longing to set you free ... to live your life at your highest potential, as a full expression of your *true* self. (Bays, 1999 [2008]: v, original italics)

Bought at face value and without the means to understand fully the powerful processes on which 'solutions' like this to personal and career problems often draw, such packages can be potentially quite dangerous. I said just now that I think adult educators have an important role to play in ensuring that learning equips people to live as wisely and compassionately as possible. I wonder to

what extent we now need a new 'awareness raising' movement that enables people to address and understand not just the personal but the social complexities of such issues?

The need to address spiritual matters is recognised in many other professional contexts. In England there has long been a statutory requirement on schools to 'promote pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development' (DfEE/QCA, 1999: 11); the *Standards of Proficiency* of the Nursing and Midwifery Council explicitly require nurses to have skills to meet the 'spiritual needs' of patients (NMC, 2004: 5); there is a growing body of literature relating to spirituality in, for example, social work (Holloway and Moss, 2010), counselling (Moore and Purton, 2006) and healthcare practices (Cobb, Puchalski and Rumbold, 2012, forthcoming); and the uses and abuses of workplace spirituality have been documented for some time (e.g. Fenwick and Lange, 1998).

Dearey points out that:

The study of spirituality as a dimension of professional practice ... has emerged since the mid-1980's. The challenges vary from fundamental questions of how to think about and study spiritualities, to more practical problems of how to identify and provide for the spiritual needs of service users. (Dearey, 2006, online)

One consequence is that a number of universities now host 'Spirituality Centres' and some are offering postgraduate courses focussing on spirituality. However, until relatively recently there were few opportunities for academics and professionals to come together across their respective disciplinary, professional and international boundaries to explore spirituality, either in person or in print (much of the writing in the field has been published in discipline-specific journals and texts). This lack of joined-up thinking across traditional boundaries has meant that the concept of spirituality (in both religious and secular forms) and its application in practice has been inadequately theorised. Thus, as McSherry (2006) points out in relation to nursing and health care, there is a danger of spirituality becoming secularised within a number of separate professional discourses and, as a result, not only of failing to engage directly with the perspectives, values and needs of either service users or providers, but also of being redefined as a yet another 'thing' to be managed and assessed.

The British Association for the Study of Spirituality (BASS) was launched in 2010 to try to address these matters, in part through (and here comes the commercial!) the new *Journal for the Study of Spirituality* which was first published last year. I end this talk with reference to it because, for me personally, it represents a significant point on a journey that began in adult education and which, often in the context of SCUTREA conferences, has involved me in exploration of the reflective spaces of personal and professional development, and of their relationship with spirituality.

In sharing some aspects of that journey with you this morning, I hope I have not veered too much towards Oprah Winfrey territory! I have tried to illustrate how contemporary spirituality is being experienced, studied and, yes, 'packaged' in different ways. But also to show that, although the spirituality of 'our historical mentors' may have been shaped by very specific Christian imagery - and that of contemporary spirituality/spiritualities may not be quite the same - engaging with spirituality and its implications for well-being remains an ever-pressing task for adult educators and students alike. It may not be precisely about returning to roots, but to ask the 'who question' - 'who is the self that teaches[and learns]?' - is to seek answers in a place that the pioneers of adult education would undoubtedly have recognised. I suspect that David Vaughan might have approved of the enterprise!



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<sup>1</sup> See: Smith, M.K. (2004) 'Adult schools and the making of adult education', *The Encyclopedia of Informal Education*, [http://www.infed.org/lifelonglearning/adult\\_schools.htm](http://www.infed.org/lifelonglearning/adult_schools.htm).

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