


'LEARNING TO IGNITE'

Teaching Spirituality to College Students

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Thus, the fruit of education, whether in the university . . . or in the monastery . . . was the activation of that inmost center, that *scintilla animae*, that 'apex' or 'spark' which is . . . a self beyond all ego, a being beyond the created realm, and a consciousness that transcends all divisions, all separation . . . The purpose of various disciplines is to provide ways or paths which lead to this capacity for ignition. (Thomas Merton, 'Learning to live')¹

Introduction

 ONE OF THE BURNING ISSUES regarding the teaching of spirituality is the dynamic relationship between spiritual knowledge and spiritual conversion: how can teachers of spirituality appropriately handle the interactions between the academic study of the subject matter and the transformative potential of that material for the lives of their students? This is a hot topic indeed, over which the leading voices in the maturing discipline of spirituality studies are in heated debate.²

The critical scholarly conversation thus far, however, has largely focused on teaching spirituality at the graduate level, or in seminary settings. Only tangentially has any serious dialogue concerning the teaching of spirituality addressed the undergraduate situation where the context is very different, leaving those of us engaged at this level shy of the clarities proposed for our colleagues at the upper reaches of academe. Yet it is precisely due to our particular location in the academy and the populations whom we teach that the question of how reverently, skilfully and appropriately to play with the transformative fire of spiritual knowledge is a pressing one. This essay considers some of the challenges and opportunities posed to teachers of spirituality in undergraduate settings and how spirituality studies at this level afford what Merton calls 'a way which leads to this capacity for ignition'.

Spirituality in the collegiate setting

Spirituality as an academic field is young, and scholars debate its distinctive nature and methodology, yet some clarity has emerged even

as the discipline continues to grow.³ As an academic discipline spirituality has been fostered for the most part in Catholic or religiously identified institutions of higher learning and, like any field of study, it mirrors the culture that nourishes it. However, these religiously affiliated institutions stand in the larger, ecumenical field of modern American higher education where the prevailing ethos requires a commitment to open and free inquiry, a non-coercive orientation, a sensitivity to pluralism, and the requirement of academic rigour.

This being said, the religiously affiliated liberal arts college, particularly those in the Catholic tradition, still holds a licence to engage the transformative potential of spiritual knowledge, and retains the right, in Merton's metaphor, to play with fire. It is in these kinds of undergraduate settings that the college student is likely to encounter courses in spirituality.

The plurality of student populations served in various liberal arts institutions in the United States presents a disparate picture. Students are generally theologically illiterate, culturally, religiously and generationally diverse, and not necessarily oriented toward theological or ministerial pursuits. Their reasons for enrolling in spirituality courses are often linked to a religious studies requirement, particularly in colleges with some Catholic affiliation. Therefore, the teacher cannot always presume desire for the kind of ignition Merton says is the goal of all learning, and of spirituality studies in particular. One is as likely to hear 'it fits into my schedule' as 'I'm labouring to be reborn'. Yet, regardless of their motives, these students pose a real challenge to the teacher of spirituality because the complexity of their profiles combined with their theological *naïveté* constellate the potential for the most creative or disruptive combustion, if in fact the spiritual learning does ignite.

Merton's provocation

The subject matter of spirituality is, of its very nature, potentially catalytic of profound movements in the individual studying the matter. Perhaps more true of this discipline than of any is Merton's somewhat inflammatory remark: the study of spirituality is a path which leads to a capacity for ignition. Though a monk himself and not an academic, Merton held the ancient position that views the monastery and the university as having the same kind of function: the conversion of the human person.⁴

The Logos or Ratio of both monastery and university is pretty much the same. Both are 'schools', and they teach not so much by imparting

information as by bringing [the student] to direct contact with archetypal reality.⁵

Merton was not unaware of the controversial nature of such a statement, particularly in the American context to which it was addressed.⁶ Though the university and the monastery both aimed at 'participation' in and 'experience' of sacred archetypal realities, they arrived there by different means: 'the university by *scientia*, intellectual knowledge, and the monastery by *sapientia*, or mystical contemplation'.⁷ Yet we may be instructed by Merton's provocative tendency to play verbally where these two institutions interface: the common ground of 'conversion' where the student turns toward the deeper and transcendent potentials of his or her own life. Keeping our language and focus close to the human person as formal object of spirituality studies makes it possible to come to insight regarding the relationship between spiritual knowledge and spiritual conversion in the lives of young adults.

The subject of spirituality

Spirituality as an academic discipline studies the spiritual life of the human person precisely as experience.⁸ This is probably the most attractive and refreshing feature of the field, especially for college students, for whom 'experience' is a vital category. Therefore the focus on the spiritual life as the existential project of self-integration through self-transcendence is particularly relevant at a stage where self-definition has such developmental significance. Indeed, students are in search of those horizons of ultimacy on which to stand as they awaken more consciously and responsibly to life's ambiguities and paradoxes.

They are concerned, therefore, with more than mere descriptions of the phenomena of human spirit life, and move instinctively towards ways they may open themselves to their own sacred experience. They test the assumptions and propositions being considered with reserves of resistance left over from their teen years and exercise a more critical pragmatism now voiced in their most reliable hermeneutic: 'Is it real and does it work? What will it do for me?'

College is testing time for most young adults. This is especially true for those in a religious tradition who are growing beyond that childhood faith with which they are now covertly or openly wrestling, and who may feel caught in a confusing zone between the first and second *naïveté*. Whether or not they make it to the next sustaining level of young adult spirituality depends greatly on opportunities for the kind of experiential analysis and experimental focus regarding spirit-life which

is the very offering of our field. Making this opportunity available to students is the challenge posed to those of us who are in the process of evolving this discipline even as we teach.

In order to keep the personal subject in clear sight, the lens of the academic discipline of spirituality is bifocal, permitting the researcher and student to keep in view at once the human spirit and those horizons of ultimacy toward which it gravitates, however these are perceived in Christianity and the various world religions. Likewise, it has a wide angle, enabling the student to investigate human efforts at self-transcending integration in the various spiritual practices, methods and technologies which foster spiritual life and development. This bifocal, wide-angle approach is attractive and challenging, because such a set of lenses allows students to see more clearly and deeply that the subject of study is in fact their own more subtle, authentic and sacred selves mirrored in the manifold images and processes of human self-transcendence. Yet how to engage in this study is an issue of debate among scholars and teachers in the field who are evolving different models and methodologies within the possibilities or restrictions of their own academic circumstances.

Constructs of the discipline

The diversity and complexity of the rich phenomena of spiritual life necessitate different methodologies for research and study. These frameworks, still under construction, are as varied as they are vital to the task of retrieving the potent experiential wisdom which the discipline of spirituality studies. To date scholars identify a variety of approaches, the appropriateness of each one dependent on the material under consideration and the academic context in which it is being studied. Two predominant constructions of the field identify the ways the teaching of spirituality can be approached, given the academic location and intentions of any particular person. One may be called the objective model, emphasizing the transformative potential of intellectual understanding; the other, the formative model, advocating the formative concerns of guided practice.⁹

The first approach to spirituality studies makes an option for objectivity in relation to both students and subject matter: faith is neither assumed nor fostered. Rather the teacher is dedicated to promoting theoretical understanding of the lived experience of the spiritual life by clarifying its rich and complex phenomena and historical expression. Its aim is to understand the reality in question rather than engender conversion.

The formative approach, on the other hand, fosters personal appropriation of a tradition, or an openness to appropriate spirituality in some experiential way.¹⁰ This option accentuates 'practice', and may include among other things instruction in the prayer ways of a given tradition, liturgical celebrations, faith sharing, spiritual journalling and social outreach.¹¹ Many scholars, however, warn that in the academy, particularly for undergraduates, such practice should be optional in order to honour the canons of objectivity which pertain there, and more so, to respect the student's freedom of conscience regarding religious practice.

Whichever model is employed, and however cautious one may be regarding 'practice', the teacher is still left with the likelihood that the study of spirituality will kindle conversion dynamics in college students who really engage with its transformative wisdom, because of the productive interface between the material's potency with the student's readiness for such 'true-self' reflection.

Creative friction

My own engagement in spirituality studies for over fifteen years at Iona College, a Catholic liberal arts institution, has brought me to certain clarities regarding its teaching and the ways to honour both the canons of the academy and the power of the process which studying spirituality activates. Certainly at the undergraduate level these two models are allied, the objective approach opening to the formative, when and where appropriate, and reflexing back again. Even if the intentions of these different approaches may at times collide as the teacher tries to allow for their interplay, the friction of the encounter may generate just the right amount of energy to fuel the ignition of that spiritual self which Merton insists is the true purpose of all education, and which I suggest is the real potential of spirituality studies.

As we at Iona more clearly explicate a spirituality track in our own Religious Studies offerings, I find myself elaborating a methodology which draws from the strengths of both models, analogous to one proposed by Sandra Schneiders, one of those scholars whose writing and pedagogical praxis is giving voice and shape to the field. Because spirituality is an interdisciplinary, 'field-encompassing field', she proposes a methodology which is descriptive-critical, ecumenical, holistic and participative.¹² Describing her own approach as 'hermeneutical', Schneiders delineates a study/teaching method which endeavours *to understand* the phenomena of spiritual life as experience – not simply as formulations of abstract principles, but as human beings in their own voice and contexts: persons, works and events.¹³

Since experience is the matter to be known and understood, it is appropriate that students be drawn past a disinterested phenomenological approach into engagement by analogous experience that is, a move beyond mere theoretical study of religious experience to an experiential participation.¹⁴ To do this, Schneiders employs a complex and coherent strategy for interpretation which involves dynamic, revolving and mutually conditioning triple operations: description of phenomena, critical analysis and constructive interpretation.¹⁵

It is the constructive feature in Schneiders' interpretative process which holds particular interest for our discussion of the transformative potential of spiritual knowledge, since this element involves both teacher and student most personally and concretely with the material. Constructive interpretation is a self-implicating dynamic intended to lead the student toward appropriating whatever wisdom may be personally transformative and illuminative for ways to live the spiritual life today.¹⁶

Incendiary matter

The transformative matter in question is discovered in the wisdom literature which spirituality studies, those evocative and provocative texts descriptive of spirit life in all its complexity, richness and ambiguity. These are the narratives, histories and discourses about the spiritual life which engage students in the dynamic circle of true self-discovery as the testimonies and histories of spiritual exemplars and movements are analysed, interpreted and tested for their life-giving wisdom. This hermeneutic process of analysis and appropriation opens students to those icons and luminaries of the spiritual life which become transparencies, numinous and fascinating, revealing features of being that seem strangely familiar to the student.

Studying spirituality is, in this sense, self-implicating. As students deepen their investigation of the spiritual life they are bound to experience an influence on their own.¹⁷ Therefore genuine understanding educed by real scholarship evokes the phenomenon of conversion: that turning, opening, awakening to the more transcendent dimensions of one's own nature.

Catalytic conversion

Conversion, according to Henry James, begins when religious ideas and interests move from the periphery to the centre of consciousness and begin to constitute the habitual source of one's personal dynamic energy.¹⁸ Adolescent and young adult years are common occasions for

conversion, incidental to the passage from the small universe of childhood to the wider intellectual and spiritual life of maturity. At this level, religious conversion marks an awakening, an expansion of conscious self-encounter which challenges the college student to complete the identity formation process and embrace an ultimate concern. When asked if the awakening of such conversion dynamics were experienced during a spirituality course, a student reported this way:

Yes, slowly, almost painfully so; but I did. I felt myself becoming aware of an inner reality, an inner need for growth, and saw myself changing day by day. It was sometimes frightening, but always liberating. (Matthew, age 20)

Conversion in this sense has a noetic dimension, evoked by its Greek analogy, *metanoia* – a change of mind; and it has an affective element, suggested by its Hebrew equivalent, *shub* – a returning home.¹⁹ The homecoming of the student is to that strangely familiar, utterly mysterious zone of being, the spiritual self, recognized in potent texts which are descriptive of its complex reality, and supported by the contexts and communities in which that deeper spiritual self can be experienced and fostered.

Sapientia revisited

Teachers of spirituality, by our location and intention in the academy, have an opportunity to re-imagine a pedagogy at the service, not only of *scientia*, but of *sapientia* as well – the wisdom that opens to transcendence. What might it mean to be a sapiential teacher, and how may Merton's legacy be instructive for his colleagues in academe, particularly at the undergraduate level?

As Hindu and Christian monastics have always known, the pursuit of wisdom through the study of sacred texts is a *yoga*, a sacred transformative path. Likewise teaching spirituality is a *yoga*. Both constitute forms of spiritual practice in their own right. Like Merton, practitioners of this art embrace a scholarly ascesis which yields not just mastery of the wisdom literature, but intimacy with it. Resisting the temptation to become 'gurus' fostering disciples, teachers of spirituality nevertheless accept the task of being masters and doctors within the field, cultivating an awareness of our lineage with the mentors of every society who are entrusted with teaching sacred knowledge, and who thereby serve the spiritual evolution of the race.

Accepting Merton's challenge, sapiential teachers, therefore, keep in focus their true subject, the students. Never doctrinaire or parochial, the

wisdom teacher is, like Merton, a deep ecumenist and truly catholic, respectful of student diversity in age, gender, religious background and social location.

Pyrotechniques: teaching to ignite

In various ways, professors of spirituality practise what they teach in order to become familiar with the terrain and dynamics they describe. A sense of ease with the process-nature of the discipline enables them to guide students towards understanding, patiently allowing knowledge to evolve towards insight and, further, to inspiration. Because the subject-matter is the soul life of the human person, the sapiential teacher is also an animator, skilled in navigating the edges of experimental play which ring around the discipline, knowing when to move into guided 'practice' to garner sufficient experience for reflection, and when to move out into critical analysis again.

Structuring courses with enough time for an experiential component is central to the integrity of spirituality studies so that students can engage in the experimental forum which generates matter for discussion and analysis. If an icon is worth a thousand words, guided practice is worth a week of lectures as students move into concrete experience which can then be the stuff of reflection and discussion. Exercises in yoga, Tai Chi, sacred postures and movement, breathing meditation, chanting, vocal prayer, creative expression, visits to sacred sites, witnessing the liturgies and practices of spiritual communities, conversations with practitioners – all such opportunities prove invaluable components to ground theory in praxis and engagement. The sapiential teacher trusts the power of experience to convey spiritual knowledge in this dialectic of engagement and reflection, permitting students personally to gloss the texts in hand with insight from their own and others' sacred experiments, and thereby to enrich the discourse.

For this qualitative discourse to unfold, the teacher creates a learning environment which is safe, respectful and open. Circles seem more conducive than straight rows to the formation of such a 'holding' place. In fact, the sapiential teacher fosters a 'contemplative' environment for spiritual study, with more space, more silence, more ease than generally pertains in the academy, in order to model the contexts for more holistic and participative learning.

Vietnamese Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh models well this type of teaching in his *dharma* talks. Each session begins with several minutes of breathing meditation which centres participants and widens their field of mind. Then, every twenty minutes during the talk, 'the bell of

mindfulness' is sounded, inviting teacher and students to remember and return to their 'true self'. Three breaths are drawn, allowing for recovery of present-moment awareness, and for quiet absorption of the rich teaching that is under way. Then the discourse resumes, but with a quality of consciousness which this brief pause has refreshed and refocused. I call this practice simply 'taking a breather' and I am amazed at its power to effect a more open and grounded mind-state for receiving and engaging with the teaching, as well as the way it engenders a more contemplative environment.

This kind of pace and place for learning is also supported by certain assignments. Writing especially, as Merton so well realized, allows 'contemplative' engagement with material and a process for reflection and assimilation, since it draws one into creative solitude. Therefore wisdom teachers artfully employ this technique, not just in homework assignments which invite students to more intensive reflection, but also in those one-minute 'insight essays' in class that allow students to 'save' something of value for later.

Talking towards insight is likewise useful, and sapiential teachers are patient in allowing students to probe, ponder and wonder over the wisdom they study. Open dialogue, therefore, is enormously supportive of the learning project, as students illuminate the sacred texts for each other; paired or small group dialogue also affords opportunities for verbal expression and the clarification of thought that speaking promotes. To this end, most successful courses in spirituality evolve some form of learning *sangha*, as did Merton and friends, in which students support and witness each other's serious work with the material. To do this they need a common language, so the teacher functions as a skilled translator of a sometimes arcane lexicon, helping students discover meaning in obscurity. Empowering students with such skills and tools does more than allow access to the subject matter: it opens the way for engagement with that transformative wisdom coursing through the words, rites, symbols and stories, which is waiting to ignite.

Banking the fire

If the sparks of spiritual insight begin to fly, it will require another kind of context appropriately to stoke and bank the flame. Here vital campus ministry programmes come into play, which afford spiritual direction, engaging prayer and liturgical experience, and service opportunities. Without such support, the student is unlikely to be able to sustain the flame alone. In my own experience at Iona, spirituality studies ignited a kind of combustion that seemed to feed on its own

hunger for spiritual knowledge. Students, having completed their Religious Studies requirements, simply did not want to move on, but wished to continue the deep appropriation of spiritual wisdom begun in the formal courses. In time it was necessary to found the Iona Spirituality Institute to bank the fires of desire for spiritual knowledge and experience begun in curricular formats.

A brief excerpt from our mission statement offers some sense of our intention and the way we envision the mission of the Catholic college in particular, to service this need for spiritual knowledge which is the appropriate domain of higher learning, and which in our culture is being serviced nowhere else:

The Iona Spirituality Institute is a center for the cultivation of the spiritual life through the sacred arts of study, prayer, creative expression and service to the community of earth. As a school for spiritual studies, The Iona Spirituality Institute addresses the need to explore the nature of religious experience in a university context with all the intellectual freedom and richness such a setting affords. Further, The Iona Spirituality Institute articulates a comprehensive vision of spiritual development by accentuating the integration of personal religious experience with the cultivation of community in fellowship, worship and service, in creative expression, and in a commitment to justice and ecological healing.

More recently, Iona undergraduates who had just completed a course in spirituality decided they wanted to sustain the learning community they had formed in the class. They have just founded a society called *METANOIA* which will allow for students and faculty to engage in ongoing reflection and practice towards those transformations of mind and heart and habit which are the real stuff of conversion, and the authentic fruit of spirituality studies.

Enlightenment

No one who has ever witnessed such learning has any doubts about the combustion that can happen when college students really open to spiritual knowledge. In their own voice they give testimony:

I must say that the spiritual knowledge you shared with us in class ignited something powerful in me. This something is a strong sense of belonging and an awareness of what it means to be part of this universe. (Johnson, age 28)

Spirituality courses are particularly incendiary settings for the kind of ignition to which Merton points. Even more, the discipline of

spirituality invites the convergence of the two tracks to wisdom Merton identifies – *scientia* (knowledge) and *sapientia* (wisdom). And this seems to happen at that point where the teacher of spirituality stands, its co-ordinates noted by Joe, one of my students, “‘in each moment’ with us’. Here the gap narrows, and the academy begins to reclaim its own soul as it makes room once more for the teaching of sacred wisdom. A stunning affirmation of this possibility was voiced by one of our graduating majors, as her word of thanks to her teachers:

The classroom is a place of the mind, yes, of learning, of growth, of change, of question and challenge. More profoundly, however, for me, it is a place of the spirit, an awakening, a catching on fire, a striking of the place where passion lies dormant, waiting, and is ignited by the grand and grace-full calling of the teacher. I know this only now, from being in your classrooms. I now know that I cannot name God, and that I can not stop trying! I now know myself so much better, and I know that I do not know myself, my depth, and the endless riches of my interior. I know that I will never stop traveling inward and outward into the numinous universe.

I will search for justice, I will seek peace, I will wait with active patience, I will find my place in history, my story, and when I reflect I will remember you. You have nurtured and touched me greatly. Thank you. (Jill, age 25)

How Merton must smile to realize his prophetic challenge is being met by those students for whom spiritual knowledge has in fact become spiritual transformation. And for those of us who teach, his words still energize our hopes for learning to ignite that *scintilla animae*: ‘Education in this sense means more than learning; and for such education, one is awarded no degree. One graduates by rising from the dead.’²⁰

NOTES

1 Thomas Merton, ‘Learning to live’ in *Love and learning* (New York, 1979), pp 8–9.

2 See *Christian Spirituality Bulletin (CSB)*, the Journal of the Society for the Study of Christian Spirituality, a forum for scholarly discussion of the discipline of spirituality.

3 See opening article in this issue by Janet Ruffing, ‘What’s on offer?’, delineating the field.

4 See Jean Leclercq’s *The love of learning and the desire for God in the Middle Ages: a study of monastic culture* (New York, 1961).

5 Merton, ‘Learning to live’ (*LL*), p 6.

6 Merton’s essay ‘Learning to live’ (1967) was written for a proposed publication highlighting Columbia University’s alumni. In it he took the opportunity to deliver a prophetic challenge regarding the authentic mission of the university.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p 7.

⁸ Delineation of the field relies on the following articles by Sandra Schneiders: 'Theology and spirituality: strangers, rivals, or partners?' *Horizons* 13 (Fall 1986), pp 253–274; 'Spirituality as an academic discipline: reflections from experience', *CSB* vol 1, no 2 (Fall 1993), pp 10–15; 'A hermeneutical approach to the study of Christian spirituality', *CSB* vol 2, no 1 (Spring 1994), pp 9–14.

⁹ For a fuller explication of these models see Schneiders, *op. cit.*; see also Bernard McGinn, 'The letter and the spirit: spirituality as an academic discipline'; and Bradley Hanson, 'Theological approaches to spirituality: a Lutheran perspective' in *CSB* vol 2, no 1 (Spring 1994).

¹⁰ Schneiders, *CSB* (Spring 1994), p 14.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² McGinn, *op. cit.*, p 8.

¹³ Schneiders, *CSB* (Spring 1994), p 12.

¹⁴ Schneiders, *Horizons*, p 268.

¹⁵ Schneiders, *CSB* (Spring 1994), p 12.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp 12–13.

¹⁷ Schneiders, *CSB* (Spring 1994), p 14.

¹⁸ See Henry James, *The varieties of religious experience* (Cambridge MA, 1985).

¹⁹ Walter Conn, *Christian conversion: a developmental interpretation of autonomy and surrender* (New York, 1986), p 199.

²⁰ *LL*, p 4.