

Defining And Nurturing Spirituality
At The National Outdoor Leadership School
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Spirituality refers to the tacit knowledge that makes a person feel more spirited. This includes an insightful relationship with yourself and others, a strong personal value system, and meaningful purpose in your life. There are character traits associated with spiritual well-being, like self-esteem, self-efficacy, self-comfort, and self-reliance. A spiritually strong person feels more power to influence the universe and can think and act in a calmer state of mind.

The movement to include spirituality in mainstream education is connected to the whole "emotional intelligence" field of the 90's¹. Emotional intelligence goes beyond the traditional 3R's (reading, 'riting and 'rithmetic) and looks at emotional skills as valuable parts of our education. By cultivating these aspects of humanity, we not only help students perform better in school, we help them perform better in life.

Some people may react defensively to the term "spirituality", assuming we are talking about organized religion: that's a natural response but that discussion is history in the business and education fields, in North America and Europe. This spirituality in education movement isn't a sneaky way to get religious dogma and practices into people's lives; it is about everyday events that provide (non-religious) spirituality for people. Most public educators and business people don't even include the adjective "non-religious" in most spirituality discussions any more, because it can be safely assumed. A few experts in the field skirt the religious line by addressing meditative practices in a way that borders on religious practice, but most of today's spirituality experts in education and business carefully avoid anything that even sounds like religion. **Religious dogma and practices do not belong in public schools.** But **spirituality is an important part of education** and the only question now is how to effectively include it. NOLS expeditions provide the setting and climate for spiritually uplifting experiences. But an important question is whether NOLS students have more spiritual experiences when they happen "by accident" or if we would benefit from more intent in this area.

We already provide profound spiritual growth, without spirituality being an overt part of our program. That's OK that it isn't overt. NOLS' strengths are that we immerse people in the grandeur of nature, we provide real leadership lessons, we insist on a high level of self-discipline, we run expeditions that are long enough to accomplish great things, and we provide good coaching. While our ability to teach succinctly is quite valuable in this realm, we need to be sure we don't tip the scales and make the NOLS experience too academic and abstract. It is not an academic explanation of the human experience that provides spiritual growth. **It is the deep human experience that provides spiritual growth.**

On the other side of the coin, Dr. David Cumes² states that his 1993 NOLS NOEP course was too rushed and lacked the "non-directed time" to provide the reflection he needed to support the level of spirituality he looks for in a wilderness journey. He said his NOLS instruction clearly provided him with the skills and confidence to find more spirituality in all future wilderness ventures, but that he didn't find powerful spirituality during his NOLS course. But Dr. Cumes travels to the wilderness specifically looking for spirituality and "healing". Still, Cumes' comment is sage advice for us that powerful spiritual experiences need reflective time to utilize the potential of the wilderness experience.

¹ Goleman, Daniel. Emotional Intelligence. 1995. Howard Gardner pioneered EI, but this is an excellent book for educators on the topic. For a summary of Goleman's text, see Christine Lichtenfels' 2 p. synopsis in the '98 NOLS Leadership Education Toolbox.

² Cumes, David, MD. Inner Passages, Outer Journeys. 1998.

A recent project in England³ looked at what specific aspects of a program offered opportunities for spiritual development. I've paraphrased, respelled and clumped their list a little to Americanize it. This was just a survey of staff ideas, so it reflects their staff's current cultural biases. They collectively decided that these aspects of an outdoor adventure program promote spiritual development:

- New surroundings that contrast with home
- Opportunities for quiet and solitude
- Opportunities to model positive values and behaviors
- Opportunities to be confronted with oneself
- Opportunities for closeness with other people in cooperative endeavors
- Opportunities to observe and initiate positive gender role models
- Opportunities for creative personal involvement and ownership of the group process and outcomes
- Encounters with predictability and uncertainty
- Opportunity to experience nature: something bigger than oneself
- Comparing and contrasting preset experience with past experiences
- Staff promoting the program as spiritual (and defining what that means)

Dr. Judith Neal⁴ also has great advice for teachers who want to provide more spiritual opportunities for students. She says not to worry about how to teach spirituality as a topic, but work at practicing it while teaching. She says to:

- Know thyself
- Act with authenticity and congruency
- Respect and honor the beliefs of others
- Be as trusting as you can be
- Maintain a spiritual practice.

She says "The most frequently mentioned spiritual practice is spending time in nature. Examples of other practices are meditation, prayer, reading inspirational literature, hatha yoga, shamanistic practices, writing in a journal, and walking a labyrinth. These people report that it is very important for them to consistently commit to whatever individual spiritual practice they have chosen. The regular involvement in a chosen practice appears to be the best way to deepen one's spirituality...I find that when I faithfully commit to my particular spiritual practice, I am calmer, more creative, more in tune with students, and more compassionate. When I let the multiple demands of a teaching job interfere with my practice, I feel more stressed out and off-center, I get involved in more conflict, and I feel less effective in the classroom." Note that Dr. Neal accommodates individual religious practices in her viewpoint, but doesn't present an individual practice as an integral part of spirituality.

NOLS instructor John Abel is convinced that physical tasks are a critical part of the spiritual experience. Others agree that hands-on work toward a goal is key. John Taylor Gatto defines an approach to spiritual development in his article "Education and The Western Spiritual Tradition" in the book The Heart Of Learning:

"Work is the only avenue to genuine self-respect. **Work develops independence, self-reliance, resourcefulness,** and a host of other valuable things....Until you can acknowledge that the factual contents of your mind upon which you base decisions have been inserted there by others whose motives you cannot fully understand, you will never come to appreciate the neglected genius of Western spirituality, which teaches that you are the center of the universe and that the most important things worth knowing are innate in you already. They cannot be learned through schooling. They are self-taught through the burdens of having to work, having to sort out right from wrong, having to find a way to check your appetites, and having to age and die....Western spirituality granted every single individual a purpose for being alive.... In Western spirituality, everyone counts.... **What constitutes a meaningful life is clearly spelled out: self-knowledge,**

³ McGowan, ML,PhD. The Think Tank On Outdoor Adventure Education & Spiritual Development. Horizons (UK) Spring 2000, p15-19.

⁴ Neal, Judith A. "Spirituality in management education". J Mgmt Educ, Feb '97. See also <http://www.spiritatwork.com>

duty, responsibility, acceptance of aging and loss, preparation for death. In the neglected genius of the West, no teacher or guru does the work for you; you must do it for your self."

In summary, Gatto says:

The tasks that help develop the spiritual person are:

- purposeful work to achieve self-knowledge and self-respect
- genuine independent decisions where you have to choose right from wrong
- tasks where you have to practice self-discipline
- practicing tasks meaningful to society where you develop a sense of duty

Spirituality is as much about our relationship with our self, and with nature, as it is about our relationship with other people. As Racheal Kessler says (and quotes) in her book The Soul Of Education⁵: "...authentic expression can emerge only in a climate of safety, caring and respect. It is in close, ongoing, meaningful groups when students are likely to feel spiritual connections to others." Being an integral part of a group can be referred to as oneness.

Oneness

This catch word refers to someone feeling they are part of a system. Being one with a group means you aren't looking at it as an outsider, or even as an isolated insider: you are an integral part of the group. Your actions influence the group. The group influences you. While you retain your identity, you don't think of the group in any way except with you as part of it. Being one with the Earth works the same way. You are an integral part of it. It is part of you. Just like Chief Seattle says.

This sense of belonging is instrumental in developing **compassion**. Compassion, for people or the planet, isn't something you learn. It is something that grows with the **sense of belonging**, but it needs more. You also need to feel you have an **important role in the system** you are one with. You need to feel that your actions are necessary for the oneness to remain healthy. With a group this means you need to see how your behavior is important for the group. For the Earth, it means you need to see how your chosen actions are important for the global ecosystem.

Individual development of oneness with a group and with the environment are well-established patterns at NOLS. Students see and feel a model of expedition performance and leadership that will forever set the hurdle higher for them. This is why it is so important that each and every student feels like they are part of the group, not only to help them individually achieve higher levels of performance, but to help the group achieve higher levels of performance. Stephen Kellert's study⁶ says NOLS courses have a profound impact on our students' lives. Using the above definitions provided by the education and business fields, I would say that it is the spiritual side of education that adds the profound power to a NOLS experience.

Spirituality at NOLS seems to be both innate and accidental. I believe it is well developed in our leadership curriculum, but we are trying to develop it more purposefully in our environmental studies curriculum. Adding spirituality to any part of our curriculum is a risky move: err on the side of being too academic or forceful and spirituality becomes shallow and cheesy; but if we focus on adding the personal experiences that foster individual spirituality, our courses can be more consistently powerful, forever.

⁵Kessler, Racheal. The Soul Of Education. ASCD, 2000. p23.

⁶ Kellert, Stephen. A National Study Of Outdoor Wilderness Experience. Yale School Of Forestry. 1998.