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Teaching Spiritual Synchronicity in a Business Leadership Class

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INTRODUCTION

Spirituality is a rapidly growing interest in society, including the business community. Many academic professionals are beginning to engage in related research. The growth is clearly documented by numerous books, an expanding number of articles in traditional journals, new journals devoted to this field, conference sessions and new conferences, listservs and web sites. The Academy of Management has now added an interest group: Management, Spirituality & Religion.

Textbooks are generally behind this trend. For example, many professors are still using textbooks in management and organizational behavior that discuss early models of transformational leadership by Bass and associates. These often misrepresented transformational leadership as charismatic leadership. They are often not aware that Bass has done his own transformation (Bass & Steidlemeier, 1999). He now recognizes and even emphasizes the importance of morality in transformational leadership, as did James MacGregor Burns who originated the concept. Yet, the morality of leadership is rarely discussed in management or organizational behavior textbooks.

With the increasing interest in spirituality, I began to consider the need to include this as a topic within my classes on management and leadership in the College of Business at Northern Arizona University. Our graduates are likely to be encountering this in the workplace, if they have not already. A prospective manager needs to be prepared to consider issues of reasonable accommodation, religious holidays, display of religious objects, religious practices at the workplace, and so forth. Students may also benefit from consideration of their own spiritual practices.

In order to include this topic in my classes, there were three questions that needed to be addressed: (1) how do you maintain the separation of church and state in a public university? (2) What should the spirituality content be? And (3) how should this be introduced into the course curriculum?

CHURCH AND STATE

The first question seemed relatively easy in as much as we already teach courses on several of the major religions of the world. It was a matter of not crossing the line between teaching *about* spirituality and teaching spirituality itself. On the other hand, we often teach actual skills in our business classes, not just about them. Thus, I considered which spiritual practices were sufficiently relevant to be included, but teaching them would still not cross the line. By opting for forms of practice that can be defended as "secular" in nature, I felt secure in including these without violating the separation of church and state. More "religious" versions of these practices could be introduced by teaching about them.

To date, no students, parents or administrators have expressed concerns about including spirituality in the course. My dean was very supportive and encouraged me to continue my efforts and interest in this direction.

SPIRITUALITY CONTENT

The second question was a more difficult challenge. There is only broad agreement on the definition of spirituality let alone spirituality at work (Mitroff & Denton, 1999). Most books and articles are anecdotal presentations and are not research-based. This became the beginning point of the content, i.e., the concepts of spirituality found in business literature. These include: relationships, values, ethics, wholeness, meaning, and religion.

Relationships, in this context, refers to issues of self-interest vs. other-interest, or ego vs. the common good. Relationships may also include altruism, service above self, and the servant leader. Wholeness is the desire of individuals to bring their whole selves to work, including physical, mental, social, and spiritual aspects. For many, religion is the primary source of spirituality.

To clarify the subject of spirituality it is necessary for students to understand the meaning of spirituality. They need to consider alternative definitions of spirituality being used. In addition, what are the different forms of spirituality that a future manager may encounter in the workplace? Most people differentiate between religion and spirituality (Mitroff & Denton, 1999). What are the similarities and differences?

The evidence about spirituality in business today is a fundamental reason for studying spirituality in a leadership course. Many claims have been made for spirituality in the workplace. What are those claims? What evidence is there to support them? What problems do they present?

Finally, the content needs to include exposure to actual spiritual practices. Some of these practices may be taught as skills that may be directly useful to students. In other cases, the separation of church and state necessitates limiting dialogue to conceptual descriptions.

The third question addresses the pedagogy of teaching spirituality in a leadership class. The following sections describe the texts and other resources used in the course and how the content is implemented into the course curriculum to develop students' understanding of spirituality in the workplace.

TEACHING TOOLS

For texts in this class, I originally used Margaret Wheatley's (1999) *Leadership and the New Science*, Robert Greenleaf's (1991) *The Servant as Leader* [essay], and Richard Daft and Robert Lengel's (1998) *Fusion Leadership*. Many students had difficulty understanding the science concepts Wheatley applied, and preferred the other books. The idea of the servant leader is easy for students to relate to, particularly those from a Christian background where the teachings of Jesus on love and service are quickly recognized. *Fusion Leadership* includes many stories, often from Eastern traditions (though not always identified as such). The book easily integrates with a spiritual perspective throughout, especially the chapters on mindfulness, heart, and integrity.

Based on student comments, I replaced the Wheatley book with Gilbert Fairholm's (2000) *Perspectives on Leadership—From the Science of Management to Its Spiritual Heart*. This provides a better mix and added an additional opportunity to discuss spirituality and work. Fairholm addresses spirituality in terms of the whole person, without much elaboration. Others such as Stephen Covey (1989) use physical, mental, social/emotional, and spiritual (or a similar taxonomy) to describe the whole person. Although I replaced Wheatley's book, I used two videos (*Leadership and the New Science* and *Lessons From the New Workplace*) to include some of her key concepts.

The movie *Gandhi* (Attenborough, 1982) provides an excellent case study for the theory and practice of leadership, as well as moral authority and spiritual synchronicity. I prefer to show it in segments with time to reflect and discuss how it illustrates the concepts we have studied. It has been very popular with students. They report that the principles of leadership, including elements of spirituality, come alive for them while watching the movie.

Students also select a biography to read, and then write a paper to demonstrate their understanding of leadership concepts. They also present the paper to the class. Many point to spiritual values, ethical behavior, and the higher forms of power in the lives of these leaders, as part of their presentations. In some cases, they learn that these people were far less effective than they had imagined, particularly in light of what they were learning about the process of leading.

Each student is also part of a team responsible for *leading* a community service project. The goal is to work with others to apply what they learn in class to a service project. Examples of projects include leading a group of children from the Boys & Girls Club to clean up a road, leading a group of students to paint a house for an elderly woman with no resources, and leading a youth service club in organizing a basketball tournament as a fund raiser for a local charity.

DEFINING SPIRITUALITY

When I first introduced spirituality into the classroom, I began with "values." We include these in both the introductory management class and the leadership class. Many of our values are derived from religious sources, making it easy to show the connection to religion and spirituality. Ethics provides another opportunity to discuss the implications of religious principles from a variety of perspectives. A third opportunity to integrate spirituality is looking at issues of power. French and Raven's five forms of power—legitimate, coercive, reward, expert, and

referent—do not adequately explain some forms of influence by exemplary leaders. Therefore, consideration of "moral power" (moral authority) and "spiritual power" (spiritual synchronicity) were added:

> *Moral power* (or *moral authority*)—The influence of example derived from living and leading according to universal or shared values and beliefs of right and wrong.

> *Spiritual power* (or *spiritual synchronicity*)—The energy and influence derived from living in synch with a worldview of an ultimate transcendent (non-material) reality.

Joseph Jaworski (1998) characterized synchronicity as an "inner path." Similarly, spiritual synchronicity is an inner influence on the individual leader that may indirectly influence one's followers. Authentic leaders (Pielstick, 2002) are characterized, in part, by their use of these forms of power.

While I touch upon the above and related topics throughout the course, I devote a block of time specifically to spirituality in general, and spirituality at work. Due to the varied definitions of spirituality, I use Nominal Group Technique and have students develop a list of words and phrases that they related to the concept. Though their religious diversity was very narrow, mostly secular or Christian, this technique helps demonstrate their range of thinking,

This leads to a presentation on the history of spirituality as described in an article by Sandra Schneiders (1989) and other sources. The history includes the following key points:

- The concept originated in early Judaism as *nephesh* (breath) and *ruach* (wind), the animating essence of people, trees, and so forth. God gave the breath of life and when one died it left the body. This animating essence was one's spirit.

- This became personified as Holy Spirit later in the Jewish tradition.

- St. Paul first referred to a spiritual person (I Cor 2:13-15) as a person under the influence of God.

- In the 12th century, spirituality became contrasted with materiality, i.e., nonmaterial or transcendent.

- By the 17th century, it referred to the interior life of a Christian, sometimes derogatorily.

- The 18th century saw the emergence of an elitist connotation contrasting a "life of perfection" with the ordinary life of faith.

- The concept expanded in the 20th century to other religions and even secular applications, e.g., school spirit.

Following this brief history, I provide the class with a dictionary definition, definitions from scholars and theologians, as well as my own definition:

> Oxford Desk Dictionary—The quality or condition pertaining to the nonmaterial, higher moral qualities, or the sacred.

> Mitroff & Denton (1999, p. xv)—The desire to find ultimate meaning and purpose in life, and to live an integrated life.

> King (cited in Gibbons, 2000, p. II-13)—The search for direction, meaning, inner wholeness, and connectedness to others, to non-human creation and to a transcendent.

> Schneiders (1989, p. 684)—The experience of consciously striving to integrate one's life in terms of self-transcendence toward the ultimate value one perceives.

> Pielstick—Living in synch with a worldview of an ultimate transcendent (non-material) reality, which generally includes a sense of purpose, meaning and wholeness and may include interconnectedness and self-transcendence, including absolute unitary being.

FORMS OF SPIRITUALITY

Spirituality has a variety of forms. To help students better understand these three basic models are introduced. The first model is a simplified typology of spirituality from Gibbon's dissertation (2000, p. II-15) with these three categories: religious, secular, and mystical. A handout elaborates on the beliefs, ethics, and practices for each. In a more elaborate typology, I provide an adaptation of Ken Wilber's (1984) typology as follows:

- *Magical*—Explaining the unknown in terms of the magical powers of people or animals.

- *Mythical*—Understanding and explaining reality with supernatural explanations in the form of stories of invisible gods and goddesses; sometimes understood as literally true, but more often as metaphorically true.

- *Logical*—Thinking about and explaining the world through reason and logic; the early scientific or Newtonian view of reality as the sum of its parts.
- *Systemical*—Understanding of networks of relationships: interrelatedness, interconnectedness, interdependence, and wholeness; the current scientific view of reality as a holistic integrated system in which the universe is more than the sum of its parts.
- *Transpersonal*—Transcendent insight, absorption, and cosmic communication; a view of an ineffable other beyond and/or within empirical reality.
- *Mystical*—Transcendence of subject-object (self-other) and space-time duality, a nondual view of the ultimate nature of reality as absolute unitary being.

Wilber articulated this progression as hierarchical in nature, with higher levels built upon and transcending previous levels. The logical and systemical levels are said to transcend the magical and mythical levels of earlier belief systems. The transpersonal and mystical levels then transcend these. The mystical or nondual level represents the highest level of spirituality in his system.

Conservative and fundamentalist Christians sometimes balk at this model as much of that theology best fits the "mythical" category, as it is usually interpreted with a negative connotation. Fowler's stages of faith, Piaget's cognitive stages, Kohlberg's stages of moral reasoning, and Maslow's hierarchy of needs (adding his "self-transcendence" that is usually not included in textbooks) are all supplemental models that can be used to show parallels or reinforce Wilber's construct.

In the third approach from brain-based research, Newberg et al. (2001) described a *unitary continuum* of spiritual experiences. The continuum begins with a baseline of everyday experience. Experiences progress through a sense of inspiration to awe and wonder, moments of ecstasy, hyperlucid visions, and ultimately to a nondual unity. In this state self, time and space vanish into pure awareness, a state they call Absolute Unitary Being (AUB). This corresponds to Wilber's mystical level. Mystics of all traditions have described the ultimate state as ineffable—beyond words.

Several additional sources are used to broaden student perspectives on forms of spirituality. Most students have little or no knowledge of Eastern religion or philosophy, or if they do it may be derisive. Sayings from the *Tao te Ching*[1] and John Heider's (1985) *The Tao of Leadership* provide one perspective. From Buddhism, the five precepts (ethics), the Bodhisattva ideal (altruistic lovingkindness and compassion), and some Dzogchen practices (nondual view) enrich students' understanding. The introduction to an audio version of Andrew Harvey's (1996) *The Essential Mystics* gives a broader view of mystical practices for a wide variety of traditions, including Christian. Capra's *The Tao of Physics* provides additional references to multiple traditions, as well as parallels with the current scientific perspective. Concepts from Csikszentmihalyi's (1998) *Finding Flow—The Psychology of Engagement with Everyday Life* provide an additional secular perspective that has strong parallels with some of the mystical traditions.

SPIRITUALITY VS. RELIGION

Most people differentiate between spirituality and religion. However, many individuals view spirituality and religion as synonymous. Therefore, I add an overview of the theological concepts of belief systems, and use that to differentiate religion from spirituality. Religions are characterized by their belief systems, including creeds, rules, dogma, doctrines, principles, teachings, theology, and/or philosophy. Spirituality and most mystical traditions, in contrast, are a direct, unmediated experience. Thus, spirituality and religion may or may not be mutually exclusive, depending on the belief system of the particular religion. Three general belief systems are found in the major religions:
- Transcendence—The ultimate as other (e.g., God)
  - Dualistic worldview (self-other)
  - Theism
- Immanence—The ultimate is with and within; nondual (oneness)
  - Pantheism—Material universe = God
  - Monism—Material + nonmaterial are one
- Panentheism—Both/and (God as other and within)

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[1] I particularly like Stephen Mitchell's (1988) translation.

Students discuss the relationship between these descriptions and the previously discussed definitions and typologies of spirituality.

SPIRITUALITY IN BUSINESS

The point of teaching spirituality in a leadership class is to help prepare students as future leaders who may need to work with spirituality in the workplace. Several resources are introduced to illustrate the current thinking in this emerging field and actual practices in business. Gibbons (2000) provides an extensive review of *claims* being made about spirituality at work, including:

- Spirituality is related to well being.

- Spirituality is related to individual motivation.

- Spirituality is linked to task effectiveness.

- Spirituality is a dimension of leadership.

- Spirituality is related to organizational climate.

- Spirituality at work will change the culture.

- Spirituality at work will positively affect profitability through corporate values.

- Spirituality will positively affect profitability through its effect on well-being.

- Spirituality will positively impact the ability of the organization to acquire resources.

- Spirituality at work will improve ethical conduct of organizations.

The evidence, however, is far from conclusive. Based on his investigation, Gibbons' broad conclusions were: (1) we need more study, (2) spirituality may be of practical value to individuals, and (3) spirituality may be problematic for organizations, including ethical and practical difficulties. For example, the materialism and consumerism that drive our business economics are often at odds with spirituality, which often eschews that lifestyle. There is also the potential for exploitation of workers by managers advocating spirituality to take advantage of the potential for improved profitability, rather than higher purposes toward which spirituality is directed.

In *Spirit & Work*, a book of readings, Biberman and Whitty (2000) provide an overview of spiritually related business practices. Among them:

- Burack—The H-P Way, Tom's of Maine, Ford (values, human resource management).

- Cavanagh—Ford (community service); Boeing (poetry for creativity); AT&T (self understanding, listening); Chase Manhattan Bank, DuPont, AT&T, Apple Computer ("What is our higher purpose?").

- Marcic cites a study by Toney and Oster of 200 CEOs—Those using religious principles in daily decision making had more successful companies than those that did not.

- Wagner-Marsh & Conley—Tom's of Main, Herman Miller, TDIndustries, Lancaster Labs, Wetherill Associates, Toro, Sisters of St. Joseph Health System, Med-Tronic, Townsend and Bottum, Schneider Engineering, Bank of Montreal (attempting to instill a spiritual approach to their corporate cultures).

- Milliman, et al.—Southwest Airlines (values, meaning, making a difference).

- Several cite Collins & Porras—Research on 18 "visionary" companies outperformed comparison companies by as much as 16:1 (non-economic priority and empowering culture).

On July 9, 2001, *Fortune* magazine's cover article, "Spirituality: God and Business" (Gunther, 2001), described the spiritual revival in the workplace, e.g., more ethical, humane, and fulfilling. They gave several examples of spiritual practices in businesses such as prayer groups, meditation retreats, closing on Sundays, and service to those in need.

The Society for Human Resource Management's "Religion in the Workplace Survey" (2001) described how businesses are dealing with religion in the workplace:

- There are more religions in the workforce.

- Most have religious diversity and/or harassment policies.

- Most accommodate holiday decorations.

- Many permit the display religious materials.

- Many allow time off for religious observances.

- There is an increased acceptance of religious diversity among the workforce, though one in five experienced proselytizing.

Ian Mitroff and Elizabeth Denton (1999) conducted several studies on spiritual practices and compiled their findings in *A Spiritual Audit of Corporate America*. Their respondents:

- Did not have widely varying definitions of spirituality (see definition cited above).

- Did not want to compartmentalize or fragment their lives.

- Differentiated strongly between spirituality and religion.

- Were hungry for models of practicing spirituality in the workplace without offending coworkers or causing acrimony.

- Were often afraid even to use the words "spirituality" and "soul" in the workplace.

- Showed the tendency in Western cultures to identify spirituality exclusively as an individual phenomenon.

- Did not see spirituality as a "soft phenomenon" or its softness didn't matter.

- Described peace *and* fear (settling *and* unsettling attributes) as two of the most important components of spirituality.

They concluded that "like it or not, the management of spirituality is one of the most fundamental of all management tasks" (p. xix).

Finally, in his new book, *Good to Great*, Jim Collins (2001) identifies a handful of companies that meet rigorous standards of turnaround performance over a long period of time. In identifying the reasons for their turnaround success, he describes what he calls Level 5 Leadership. While achieving company financial performance that greatly exceeds many well-known corporate leaders, these leaders were characterized by extreme humility and fierce resolve to create a great company. Yet, they are virtually unknown as individuals by the public. Humility, of course, is a common virtue stressed in many spiritual practices, but contradicts many popular leadership models advocating charisma and "strong" leadership. Collins found that *ego* of these Level 4 Leaders tends to get in the way of effective company performance.

Students are asked how the above findings about spirituality at work could affect them as potential managers and how this might make a difference in what they would do, including issues of reasonable accommodation, religious holidays, display of religious objects, religious practices in the workplace, and proselytizing.

SPIRITUAL PRACTICES

Several spiritual practices are also introduced in the class: meditating, journaling, walking, and sitting in nature. Reflective thinking, particularly in the form of journaling, is a practice used by many individuals, including leaders. Recording one's spiritual experiences can help amplify the development of those experiences. Students keep a journal during the course to reflect on what they have learned about leading and any experiences they had of leading or observing others leading during the semester.

A basic meditation practice is taught that involves relaxing, quieting the mind, and following the breath. Students count during each in-breath and each out-breath to help keep their mind from wandering. If it does, they are to recognize it as a thought, sound, etc., then return to following their breath. Initially, meditation requires sitting a while to realize the benefits, usually at least 10 minutes for a beginner. Then the "real" meditation begins. However, experienced practitioners can realize this state almost at once. I recommend (but do not require) that students continue this practice for the remainder of the semester. First thing in the morning is usually best. Last thing in the evening is okay (but a better time to journal if making a choice).

A brief meditation is also good any time during the day—lunch break, coffee break, waiting in line or in an office, walking from one place to another, and so forth. One-minute moments of meditation are also possible. One may not achieve a high level of unitary experience in such a short time, but it does enhance the level of spirituality during one's day. One may also incorporate the Buddhist practice of *mindfulness* into daily practice. Simply develop your sense of awareness of every action, word or thought. This takes practice and improves slowly over a long

period of time. The ideal is to be able to attain and maintain the state of absolute unitary being continuously, day and night. Needless to say, this necessitates a significant commitment on the part of the spiritual practitioner.

Some other variations are also introduced, as well as more advanced spiritual meditation practices, including Christian, Buddhist, and Hindu practices to help students get a sense of the range of practices.

Another practice described briefly is contemplative prayer, which has been shown to create similar effects as meditation (Newberg, et al., 2001). It may be practiced in an active or passive form. Active contemplative prayer includes repeating a short saying, scriptural verse, or sacred name as the focus of attention. One then surrenders to the experience of the presence of God. Passive contemplative prayer is a silent, wordless surrender to God. Thomas Merton (1969) describes it as "unitive knowledge of God…not a knowledge of subject and object, but a far different and transcendent kind of knowledge in which the created 'self'…seems to disappear…[and] no longer knows itself apart from God" (pp. 75-76). As with meditation, continuous contemplative prayer can be extended throughout one's daily activities.

Islam calls for prayers five times each day. One can incorporate that or an alternative practice into one's daily activities. It may necessitate closing an office door or finding an empty space. Or one may seek to practice with others during those times, which is increasingly common, even in the workplace (Society for Human Resource Management, 2001).

Ritual is also a common practice among religious traditions, and somewhat less common in secular spiritual practices. Any repetitive action, song, saying or prayer may be part of ritual practice. The greater the significance or meaning of these, the more effective the ritual will be in creating a spiritual experience. The use of candles, incense and "sacred" objects may enhance the experience for the practitioner. The practice of ritual in a group also seems to enhance the experience. Attending religious services is the most common source of community religious ritual practice. The nature and extent of ritual activities in these services vary from very elaborate and formal practices to simple and informal ones.

Some people find walking, particularly outdoors and in nature, to be an effective spiritual practice. Walking meditation is described as an alternative to traditional sitting meditation. Walking a labyrinth is an increasingly popular alternative as churches, hospitals and other organizations construct them and make them available to the public. Sitting quietly in nature is also a common practice discussed in the class.

Finally, the Jewish practice of the *Shabboth* or Sabbath, also followed by some Christians, is introduced. Following the 4th Commandment in the Hebrew Bible, one avoids work, or any activity that would cause another to work, from sundown on Friday until sundown on Saturday.[2] During Friday evening, a family may enjoy dining together, or one may choose to dine with other similarly minded persons. Scriptures may be read, candles lit, and so forth, according to your particular tradition or preferences. The next day may include religious services and/or study of scripture or other spiritual sources. It may include other spiritual practices. It is a day without work, so rare in our society—no chores, no shopping, no TV and so forth—though spiritual practices are permitted. The practice may be adapted to any particular spiritual perspective, or day of the week. Such a practice can significantly enhance one's spiritual practice.

Students learn why many employees want to bring their whole selves to work, including the spiritual dimension. They better understand how to work with these issues as a leader and a manager. Furthermore, they expand their understanding of spirituality and spiritual practices for themselves and others, whether or not they chose to pursue them.

NEXT TIME

I am planning some changes for the next semester based on my experience so far. One is to expand the meditation practice, introducing it earlier in the semester and beginning each class with a brief meditation to prepare them for learning. This provides a nice break between the rest of their lives and what we are doing in the classroom, as well as increasing the likelihood of them experiencing the benefits in actual practice. I am also considering ending the class with a brief practice.

Finally, I am looking for more case studies of extraordinary leaders, written and film, that can supplement the text material. My book, *Authentic Leading—Where the Blue Sky Hits the Road* (Pielstick, 2002), will be available to use next year as well.

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[2]   Early Christians, being Jews, also followed this practice. Later, they added "the Lord's Day" on Sunday. The Jewish Sabbath was eventually dropped as the two traditions separated and the Lord's Day became the Christian Sabbath. Still, most Christians today do not follow the prescription for a full day without any work.

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