When Faith Fails: Why Nurturing Purpose and Meaning Are So Critical to Student Learning and Development in College

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Abstract

To learn and grow in college, students must be able to question their convictions, explore new pathways, and cope with crisis without disconnecting from a deep ballast of faith that these challenges have purpose and meaning. An attitude of faith has an important influence on student welfare and success in college because it provides a critical psychological and spiritual ballast that is needed to respond to the intellectual and emotional upheavals that college life usually brings. This article examines the role of colleges and universities in nurturing students’ search for meaning and purpose in college.

Underneath a sailboat, far below the waterline, invisible to the eye, and at the deepest point of the boat, is the ship’s keel, a heavy concentrated weight that provides ballast and a counterforce to the winds above. Without a keel a sailboat is helpless to move ahead or to maintain stability. Faith, a deeply centered attitude of firmness and unshakability, is the keel of human life, the unseen inner ballast that gives us balance and the capacity to move ahead despite the turbulent winds and waves that life inevitably throws at us. Faith provides the capacity to sustain purpose and meaning in the midst of conflict and change. Faith is especially important during the college years when students experience so much upheaval of beliefs, values, and understanding. Without the anchoring influence of faith, students are likely to struggle, sometimes dangerously, with the adjustments and challenges of learning and developing in college.

When Faith Fails

When faith fails, when students lose their inner mooring that provides a stabilizing sense of purpose and meaning, they may find themselves hopelessly adrift. This uncertainty causes some college students to persevere silently with their fears and others to try and cope by turning to alcohol, drugs, or other forms of release. The failure of faith is more than the shaking of cherished beliefs and values and the disappointments that are normal occurrences in college life. The failure of faith is deeper and more profound; it is the loss of sustaining purpose and meaning that keep hope alive and make it possible for one to weather the hardest of times. Student suicides represent the ultimate failure of faith, and it is a problem with which almost every college and university continues to struggle. Suicide is the second leading cause of death

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for college students after car accidents, and the primary cause of student suicides is untreated depression related to feeling lost, lonely, confused, anxious, hopeless, and stressed ("College Student Suicide," n.d.). The devastating impact of suicides on the campus community can be seen in the case of Cornell University where there were three apparent student suicides in spring 2010, two on successive days. The student deaths shook the entire campus, and Cornell administrators struggled to understand the causes of the student suicides and to put in place a comprehensive response plan ("After 3 Suspected Suicides . . . ," Gabriel, 2010).

**College as the Crucible of Faith**

Sharon Parks (2000) wrote that college is a crucible of faith. For most young adults today, college is perhaps the most important time and place when the challenge of clarifying and reaffirming meaning and purpose in one’s life is a central concern. An imposing threat that confronts many young adults in college is what Parks describes as “shipwreck,” that is, experiences that collide with and call into question previously held beliefs or values (p. 28). Some typical “shipwreck” college experiences include academic failure, loss of love and friendship, religious doubt, medical crisis, and family troubles. These types of experiences threaten to disorient young people and leave them adrift. Faith is the steadying inner keel that keeps students from running aground in the tempest of shipwreck experiences.

The college years can be a time of great threat and hopelessness for students when purpose and meaning are threatened or lost. Many observers of young adulthood (Baxter Magolda & Hall, 2009; Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Erikson, 1950; Parks, 2000; Perry, 1970) have noted that this period of life often brings a powerful shift in self-understanding and identity. This developmental transition or passage is often prompted by a psychological disequilibrium that encourages growth but also creates uncertainty and sometimes threat and crisis. To learn and grow, students must be able to question their convictions, explore new pathways, and cope with crisis, without disconnecting from their deep ballast of faith that these challenges, difficult as they may be, are worthy and have purpose and meaning.

Like a ship’s keel, it is difficult to observe the inner life of students where faith operates. Students do not easily reveal the deep purposes and meaning that motivate their lives. We note from research (Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2007) that college students are eager to talk about their inner lives and that they benefit from opportunities to connect what they are learning to their deepest convictions. Despite the lack of attention to spirituality on most college campuses, students reported that spirituality, that is, the search for purpose and meaning, played an important role in their lives and, moreover, they valued opportunities in college to explore and discuss these issues (Astin et al., 2007). One of the important implications of this research is that by fostering conditions that nurture spirituality and by providing opportunities that give students opportunities to reflect upon and discuss purpose and meaning in their lives, faith can be nurtured and strengthened. When this deep domain of students’ lives is ignored, students are left much more vulnerable to the “shipwrecks” of college life.

A crucial benefit to students associated with spiritual exploration and growth is equanimity, a deep sense of peace and abiding calmness especially in the face of conflict. The term *equanimity* is derived from Latin and is translated as “evenness of mind” (Webster’s Unabridged Dictionary). Equanimity is one of the positive consequences of the search for purpose and meaning; it is a habit of mind that is particularly useful in controlling emotions and providing steadiness under strain. Equanimity is also associated with other positive behavioral characteristics such as moderate alcohol and drug use, fewer problems with depression, and higher reported levels of satisfaction with college (Astin & Keen, 2006). Thus, the nurturing of faith
and equanimity in students’ lives may help to insulate them against some psychological and behavioral problems and to moderate some responses that might otherwise lead to negative consequences in college. It is this palliative aspect of faith that makes it such a valuable asset for students as they grapple with the challenges of college life and the adjustments of young adulthood. The power of the inner life to guide and insulate students against “shipwrecks” in college makes spirituality an important aspect of student development for college educators to encourage and promote.

What Faith Is and Is Not

A n attitude of faith has an important influence on student learning and development in college because it provides a critical psychological and spiritual ballast that is needed to respond to the intellectual and emotional upheavals that college life usually brings. Harvey Cox (2009) described faith as a “deep seated confidence” (p. 3) about the things that matter most to an individual. Cox argued that “we cannot live without some degree of confidence in whatever lends coherence and purpose to our lives” (p. 28). So many aspects of college life, for example, academic achievement, social relationships, career decisions, freedom, and independence, depend upon a sufficient inner confidence that the efforts students are called upon to make in college really matter and that they are experienced as purposeful and meaningful. An attitude of faith helps to give meaning and direction to what students do every day. When a student’s faith is weak or confused, institutional efforts to teach and motivate the student to cope with the challenges he/she faces will likely be limited in influence.

Faith, in the sense that we use it, is different than religion. Eric Fromm (1942) described faith as a character trait and distinguished it from belief motivated by emotional submission to authority. He described faith as an inner attitude of certitude and unshakability that grows out of genuine intellectual and emotional development. Faith is “an essentially basic attitude within the person towards life, a character trait which pervades all his experiences” (p. 1). Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1979) described faith as a person’s “orientation” to self, to one’s fellow human being and to the world; a way of viewing that transcends the “mundane” (p. 12). For Smith, the “locus of faith” is individuals and communities, and its quality is manifest in the many “dimensions” of “personhood” (p. 168). “To have faith,” Smith maintained, “is to be human in the highest, truest sense” (p. 138).

Cox noted a distinction between “faith” and “belief” and argued that faith is the more fundamental. “Belief” is the affirmation of particular truths, values, and practices. Belief, in religious usage, is usually understood as adherence to the particular beliefs and practices of an organized religion. Religiously based beliefs no doubt provide a powerful source of purpose and meaning for many college students, but this type of conviction is also vulnerable to great change in college when students’ religious beliefs and practices are often challenged and changed. Faith, on the other hand, is more deep seated and personal than belief according to Cox. “Faith” is the personal conviction that undergirds commitment; it sustains beliefs and values and provides motivation to persevere, especially in difficult times.

Smith (1979) argued that the opposite of faith is a grim powerlessness to see the meaning in one’s life with “an almost total dependence upon immediate events coupled with a sense that immediate events cannot really or for long be depended upon; a sense of lostness” (p. 13). Its hopelessness is caused from thinking that “nothing is worthwhile” (p. 133). What is left are only isolated elements that have “no coherence,” while fellow individuals “appear as things,” and “community is dissolved into structures,” leaving one without an object of faith as well as “order, meaning, and purpose” (p. 133). As a consequence, belief can be more
easily shaken and called into question than faith; faith is more fundamental and enduring. Challenging students’ beliefs can be disruptive, but challenging students’ deep keel of faith can shake both their psychological and spiritual foundations.

**Do Superficial Comforts and Conveniences Dull the Spirit?**

So much of contemporary college life is structured by institutions to make students comfortable, to entertain them, but not to nurture the deep fulfillment of faith. The move to a “customer service” orientation in higher education over the past several decades has placed great institutional emphasis upon providing amenities, services, and diversions designed to make college life pleasant and comfortable for students. This demand for consumer satisfaction has been driven in part by escalating college costs and the resulting expectations by students and their families that a high college sticker price should also include high end customer services and amenities for students. Demand for conveniences is also a by-product of a millennial generation that has grown accustomed to a very strong sense of entitlement to attention and convenience. William Damon (1995) argued that children who are brought up with a sense of entitlement and privilege often come to believe that little is demanded of them beyond an enjoyment of life (p. 14). Youth who feel privileged have difficulty developing commitments to anything beyond their immediate concerns (p. 17).

Much of contemporary college life has been designed primarily to afford superficial entertainment and conveniences but does little to nurture the deeper spiritual needs of students to find meaning and purpose in college. Fitness centers, campus entertainment, sports, the latest technology, upscale campus housing, and ubiquitous customer services no doubt serve to keep young people occupied and content, but they can also dull the spirit to unwitting students by minimizing opportunities for solitude, reflection, and soul-searching by students. Such programs and services may help students to feel a superficial satisfaction with college life, but they neither cultivate nor satisfy their deeper concerns about finding meaning and purpose in their lives. Smith (1979) explained that if individuals form habits that merely “content” themselves with “superficialities,” they are in danger of losing their “human calling,” for they become merely “organisms reacting to ... mundane environments” (p. 138). Instead of creating engaging environments that invite students to ask big questions and to explore their own inner lives, colleges too often promote mundane environments of superficial satisfaction.

**From Self to Others**

One danger of an over-emphasis on comfort, accommodation, and entitlement is self-centeredness. Damon (1995) suggested that parents and educators may place excessive emphasis upon the importance of self-esteem and feeling good about one’s self so that youth come to place themselves first in importance and become less considerate of the needs of others. A common complaint one hears from student affairs staff today about the millennial cohort is students’ strong sense of entitlement and self-indulgence. The emphasis on “pleasing the customer” by colleges and universities today may serve to enhance the attributes of self-centeredness and materialism and, in doing so, encourage educational and developmental outcomes that run counter to core educational values such as empathy, self-discipline, appreciation of differences, citizenship, and service.

In general, college educators and administrators recognize and plan for the most serious shipwrecks that some students encounter in the process of learning and growing in college.
Colleges and universities usually provide a variety of crisis intervention services. In addition, institutions provide counseling, advising, stress management, and crisis centers and promote a wide range of intervention programs to identify and support students who may be encountering serious emotional difficulties. Colleges and universities are, however, less effective in providing resources and creating environments that support students in their inward journeys. The objectivist secular ethos that is so pervasive in much of higher education makes it difficult for students to explore openly their deep concerns about spirituality, meaning, and purpose. Jedidiah Purdy (1999) suggests that youth are often silent on matters of deep meaning because they feel they will be subjected to ridicule and trivializing if they express them openly in classroom or campus settings. The fear of a “chilly” if not hostile campus environment for discussion of meaning, purpose, beliefs, and values is confirmed in the findings of the Project on Spirituality (Astin et al., 2007).

**How Can Faith be Nurtured in College?**

The college years can be one of the best times for exploring meaning and purpose in life and for deepening personal faith. Institutions that create supportive campus environments for faith development not only enhance students’ personal growth and development, but probably also enrich their academic and intellectual development. Campuses that create environments that are open, friendly, and supportive and that provide mentoring and feedback encourage student learning and development through more active engagement of students. These educationally enriching conditions help students to connect their inner lives to the intellectual and social challenges of college life and to facilitate spiritual quest.

The following are a few recommendations that may be helpful in educational efforts to nurture faith in college:

1. Take a stronger role in advocating for the place of spirituality in the mission and culture of higher education and as an essential aspect of holistic student learning.
2. Invite students to engage in discussions of “big questions” that help to clarify and nurture meaning and purpose.
3. Provide space on campus for individual meditation, prayer, and reflection and create environments (including rituals, symbols, and traditions) that cultivate spiritual reflection and development.
4. Incorporate spirituality as a component of student health and wellness programs.
5. Provide opportunities for students to connect purpose and meaning with academic work.
6. Encourage mentoring opportunities for students with faculty and staff.
7. Publicize, especially to new students, the spiritual resources and activities of the campus (Chickering, Dalton, & Stamm, 2006).

**References**


