

The Sacred Between Us: The Value of Collective Learning in Spiritual Growth, Humera Javad

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“Imagine looking at earth from the edge of the galaxy, then you would realize we are all sharing a tiny point of the universe, we are all humans and spirituality is a good way to unite”

(Participant at the SHEN Conference)

Summary:

This presentation will explore a model, “Mindful Listening,” that the Spiritual Heritage Education Network (SHEN) uses in all its learning groups including the annual conference on *Education to Globalize the Human Mind*. There are four critical processes to Mindful Listening: 1) Deep breathing, 2) Meditation, 3) Individual reflection, 4) Group reflection. By examining this process in, the presentation will allow participants to see how the practice of deep breathing calms the nerves, enables the perception of the mundane personal good, and opens up space for deep individual and spiritual engagement. The recognition of the good within self is then externalized and projected onto others, making it possible to imagine the common good. Specifically, my presentation seeks to address the main research question: how does dialogic learning in an interfaith context facilitate the individual and collective spiritual development of its participants? Supplementary research questions that I ask are: what conditions are necessary for such dialogic learning to happen and for it to be transformative? How does the learning community make the shift from dialogue to praxis? What are the possibilities and limitations that are unique to a spiritually oriented learning community? To find answers to these questions, I will examine the model of “Mindful Listening,”^[1] that the Spiritual Heritage Education Network (SHEN) uses in all its learning groups including its annual conference on *Education to Globalize the Human Mind*. I chose this case-study because this group sharing process is strategically designed by SHEN to create a micro learning community that creates multiple spaces throughout the conference for participants to centre their thoughts, share them with their co-learners in the conference, and reflect on the collective knowledge emerging from everyone's experiences. By analyzing the individual responses to the group sharing process collected over three years (through three conferences), I will demonstrate via the findings that spiritual learning is transformative when it is dialogic and relationally experienced and that the relationship between individual and collective spiritual development is deeply and intricately linked. It is my hypothesis that not only collective learning can lead to a more engaged and reflexive spirituality, but it also creates more engaged members of the larger community – communities that come together to seek

knowledge together simultaneously build their own capacity to take collective social action and mobilize around a mutual cause, or in solidarity with each other.

Introduction:

In my research, I hope to examine the connection between the individual and collective spiritual development in an interfaith / spiritual learning context. Prior to 9/11, interfaith education was primarily inspired by people interested in learning more about other faiths to expand their own horizons (Balmer, 2005). However, since then, it has become an intentionally change-oriented project with a definitive sense of urgency in understanding differences to bridge the “clash of civilizations” and to establish social order (Balmer, 2005; Puett, 2005; Sharify-Funk, 2004). As a Muslim activist-scholar, I have lived and researched experiences of Islamophobia and faced challenges in engaging with this fear of “other” that comes with my identity. I am often put in awkward positions in conversations whether it be in the classroom or on the bus and asked to explain my religion and convince others I am not the stereotype they have in mind of what a Muslim looks like, talks like, and believes in. This has led me to strategically participate in interfaith dialogue groups, such as the Interfaith Grand River and Spiritual Heritage Education Network in Kitchener-Waterloo, to engage with these fears in a space that is strategically designed to overcome them and to build my own capacity in disrupting those discourses that produce and reinforce the ‘us’ versus ‘them.’ Hence, investigating an interfaith community and the spiritual development of individual and the group is worth considering as a research topic because of my own personal and intellectual investments, but also because of the larger social and political context that brings about its need and urgency.

Methodology:

The primary source of data I used for this research was analyzing individual participant statements from small “mindful listening” groups that were facilitated as micro learning communities during the annual SHEN (Spiritual Heritage Education Network) conference, *Education to Globalize the Human Mind*. SHEN is a non-profit, charitable organization in Kitchener-Waterloo that seeks to foster education that focuses on spiritual unity among people of different practices with the goal of creating peace in the local and global community. The annual conference is a flagship event of the organization and is one of the most anticipated events among its regular participants. During the conference, participants were divided up in small groups of 8 to 10 each. Once formed, the group membership remained fairly consistent, as they met in their own quiet spaces for 35 minutes once every day (for two days) to consider and reflect on the proceedings of the day. Feedback from individual members of the group was gathered in the form of written statements as they responded to the question, “Is there anything emerging in the small group or the conference as a whole that is bigger than us, that is globalizing us? Any wisdom, idea, insight, energy, etc.?” I used these individual statements by conference participants and used them as the basis for my research. The data was collected by SHEN conference organizers, transcribed and made available with their conference proceedings on their website. I used the data from all small groups sessions that occurred during the conference (one per day) from years 2010, 2011, and 2012. There were a total of 215 statements collected over the three

years. There were two small sharing group discussions at every conference and were held at intervals to allow participants to process what they have been learning in the conference and to collectively reflect on the knowledge emerging throughout the event. I then visually mapped the data into thematic categories that held them together. To do so, I took the individual slips of paper and shuffled which meant that “some new possibilities for links poked their heads up” (Kirby & McKenna, 2006, p. 232) and placed them on chart paper in groups with consistent or connected themes. I used post-its to write ‘category titles,’ moved slips around where they fit better, changed category titles accordingly to better reflect the contents of that category. Many of the themes that emerged from this process in answering my research question were interconnected. Therefore, conceptually these categories are loosely structures for the purpose of analysis while keeping in mind the overlap and points of intersections in this rich data. While place the slips in categories, I was also mindful in how different categories related to each other. To make sense of the data, the “hurricane thinking” technique was used, which is an is an “inductive emergent research” method that allows the researcher to look at the overall research data from a bird’s eye view to see visually the patterns in how different concepts relate to each other in answering the research question (Kirby & McKenna, 2006, p. 219).

Findings & Discussion

Gratitude / Shared Spirituality:

One of the key themes that kept surfacing in participant responses was a feeling of gratitude. Sometimes, it was gratitude for the conference organizers, but it was for “God” for the blessings given and for the unity created among people. This feeling of thankfulness and appreciation for human diversity speaks to the process that helped realize that and its ability to spark a spiritual connection among individuals. Based on the contexts in which gratitude was talked about in the statements, it seems to strengthen spiritual connection and awareness at both the personal and the collective level, as one of the participants articulated very eloquently about what they felt emerging in the group, “The unity I *feel* here with everyone today” 180. These statements imply a certain type of God or spiritual consciousness that is present among the group that people could sense as if the “common good” (statement 198) that emerged was mediated through the divine energy. The idea of spiritual consciousness also emerged in other themes validating a sense of “shared spirituality” that was sense many participants in the conference.

Oneness / Unity / Diversity:

A central theme that emerged through the data was the interconnectedness among ideas of oneness, unity, and diversity, as exemplified through various key statements below:

“Unity in diversity” (13 and 63)

“Unity and diversity” (7)

“Rich variety of human being” (6)

“One god, many paths” (96)

“Many streams of a river” (86)

“Leaves of a tree” (45)

“Form and essence” (90)

Based on the responses, it is clear that participants felt that unity and diversity are not mutually exclusive. Both are important and can coexist. Mindful listening and group reflection makes it possible to reconcile differences and unity of various religious experiences simultaneously! Experiential and dialogic learning seems to be critical in enabling that, as reflection allows that to be recognized and collectively acknowledged. So despite people’s faith-based difference, focusing on the essence of various spiritual traditions as the unifying core resonates with people and allows them to see their reflection in the other and view themselves as part of a collective.

Community/ Peace / Harmony / Humanity:

This category highlights the importance of social cohesion that people noted in their various responses. These main concepts seem to be the key, as identified people, in the process peace and community-building. There were numerous references to love drawing attention to the condition of humanity and observations on the nature of what it means to be human with others. This category in relation to the previous category looking at oneness suggests that interfaith learning and dialogue holds the potential to humanize those feared. When you see the “other” as a human of equal value and worth, it is difficult to demonize them. Once you humanize the other, peace can begin.

Self:

Many people echoed the importance of the self in fostering interfaith pluralism and peace pointing to the role of the self and personal agency in pursuing a public common good. Some suggested that working on the self, the inner journey, should come first before a collective good is sought. Key statements that really jumped out to me are:

“When you have peace of mind, God is with you” (91)

“You cannot be kind to others if you’re at battle with yourself” (193)

“Globalizing the world. It has to begin with me” (200)

“Peace needs to start within before it can be shared” (207)

Others indicated through their responses the profound inner impact of the collective experience of mindful listening and sharing and dialogue in the conference (more will be discussed in the process section). One of the participants talked about what one needs to do within self to better relate to others: “Teaching to let the ego go a bit (giving the self a breather), so we can listen more carefully to ourselves and others” (124). Others spoke of kindling of hearts that brought wholism not only within but with others as well:

“The synchronization between head, heart and hands is a must for happiness. This is what I understand today” (108)

“To be here is simply to be in a world of oneness of the heart and mind” (106)

“Mind to heart. Hearing to tasting” (51)

“Unity of hearts” (36)

It seems, then, that the relationship between the self and the collective is mutual and ongoing – the development of each is interdependent. It can be said that the collective growth of the group arises from individual interactions. Hester (1994, cited in Zaver, 2003) claims that dia-logos in Greek meant a “free flowing of meaning through a group, allowing the group to discover insights not attainable individually” (p. 14). Based on the thematic discussion of the data, can it be said then that a person at peace with self is at peace with the “other”? Can we safely say that a community that stands and actively values peace is in a better position to inspire peace among its individual members and build collective capacity to sustain it? That collective knowledge is inherently more whole and more transformative than individual because of the “free flowing” and sharing and co-constructing of knowledge in the group?

Action:

Another strong theme emerging is that interfaith learning and dialogue is a start to a transformative process or journey – it is not the destination to be arrived at, but a vehicle for collective action. For many, the “call to action” (142) seemed like the logical and much needed next step to collective learning. This speaks to the idea of “diapraxis” mentioned earlier that combines dialogue and praxis as a way of walking the talk interfaith solidarity. Ramadan (2005) claims that without solidarity of action against common social problems, values of dialogue will be “socially dead.” This implies that collective social action is the next logical step of dialogic education in fostering interfaith pluralism in the long term. Can we deduce from it that interfaith learning builds collective capacity of the learning community to desire and act upon collective social change?

Hope / Imagining a Possibility:

The idea of hope/ possibility also became apparent in people’s responses. The individual hope springs from the collective energy, it seems. Through dialogue and reflection in small groups, people realized that “we are not alone [in this]” (155, 32, 158, 146, 215). There are others who are like us who share our dreams, hopes, and struggles for good in others and a good world altogether. The collective hope that emerges fuels individual spiritual questions for oneness/ unity and builds collective “courage” (151) to continue on this challenging, often daunting and pessimistic journey. Arjun Appadurai talks about imagination as a social practice. The small group mindful listening and sharing process exemplifies how a social good is collectively imagined and hoped for through this particular learning community. This is a critical component of interfaith dialogue in learning community, as Paulo Freire says, “Nor yet can dialogue exist without hope... Dialogue cannot be carried on in a climate of hopelessness. If the dialoguers expect nothing to come of their efforts, their encounter will be empty and sterile, bureaucratic and tedious” (cited in Zaver, 2013).

Process & Content:

An interesting aspect of this study was the process of mindful listening itself and peoples’ responses to it that in turn shape the content of their spiritual understanding.

By connecting the mind with the heart (as mentioned in several comments), people were given the opportunity to be their whole selves, which is important in any interfaith endeavor. As one the participant said it in a heartfelt statement, “I am most me when I am here” (50). The group process was also experienced to be “refreshing and rejuvenating” (76) and “healing” (75) bringing to light the therapeutic quality that came about from this collective engagement. Based on many comments, it seems that this process also stirred something internally for quite a few people, as they responded to other people’s comments. Particularly, the following statements come to the forefront: “Holding the sacred other and being transformed” (67), “Deep transformation” (100), and “Lucid evolution” (150). Participant pointed out towards “openness” (37), “receptivity” (33), and “awareness of the extent of horizons” (141) as contributing factors to such a transformative experience.

The shared spiritual experience or the realization of oneness in all present was a key theme that emerged *through* the process *about* the process of deep interfaith learning. The following statements speak to the presence of the spiritual at the individual level and the emergence of a divine connectedness among the participants, as exemplified by the statements below:

“Spark of divine” (156)

“Spirituality is experienced here” (211)

“Great feeling of connectedness with diverse souls” (104)

“Fire in the circle” (144)

“Advancing my spiritual journey through the life lessons of others” (168)

“Oneness is more striking when discovered in diversity” (5)

“There has been a movement from an appreciation of the interfaith dialogue to the experience that we are all one in the transcendent” (77)

“Feel that I have experienced what god is about for the first time ever” (154)

The above statements and many others that came through this process imply a *deepening* of one’s own spiritual self [for example: mentions of heightened spiritual experiences, feelings of strong spiritual responses and connections] in conjunction with a *widening* of spiritual horizons [realization of oneness with others, seeing unity in diversity, taking into one’s perspective the previously religious “other”]. Based on my own analysis and reflection, conditions that made these individual and collective emergence is possible through having a conscious effort of community building, fostering reflection, respect, reciprocity, and expression of emotions. The strong connection between individual and collective spiritual development feels very real – I can “hear” it in people’s responses. Something I would like to explore in further research is how does this shift happen? What is at stake when this shift happens?

Another important theme that emerged from the data suggested the pedagogical and community-building potential of the interactive aspect of this process. It validates the power in relational knowledge, one that is socially constructed. In the context of

interfaith learning, it is not only useful in demystifying the religious other by learning more about them and in the process about self, but it also serves as a way of unifying and building community, as illustrated by the comments below:

“Continued emphasis on process, not just content = ways of engaging people and ideas beyond just the single talk; also, discussion of “best processes” (80)

“The desire to grow and to know” (120)

“We are all having the same conversation, even if using different words” (118)

“The power of silence, a language that unifies” (31)

“Sharing from your heart reality” (110)

“Sharing individual experiences does add depth to the process of reflections” (204)

“We need each other to evolve” (87)

There really is a peace that passes understanding. (138)

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[1] This process was introduced to SHEN by Lois and Kuruvella Zachariah and tailored to the context of SHEN's work.