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SERIES

Working on Our Inner Lives: Meaning-Making in Colleges and Universities—Series Part IV

It's All About *Fugu*: Discussing Spirituality & Religion on Campus

A Personal Narrative

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The Commission for Spirituality, Faith, Religion, and Meaning is pleased to offer ACPA members an opportunity to engage in reflection and meaning-making regarding issues of spirituality, faith, religion, and belief in higher education and student affairs. "Working on Our Inner Lives: Meaning-Making in Colleges and Universities" is a four-part series intended to feature research snapshots, best practices, and personal narratives of faculty, staff, and students regarding spirituality, faith, religion, meaning, and existentialism in higher education generally and particularly affecting our work with students.

"The study of the Bible is like this," said Professor Mary Ann Tolbert (personal communication, February 2, 2006) as she held aloft a yellowish-green, rubbery toy fish. It was a blowfish – more specifically, a "Death Puffer," as announced by the bright yellow tag with the skull and cross bones prominently attached to its fin.

She continued, "The Japanese delicacy fugu is a dish made from blowfish. It is a meal so nutritious and delicious that some will risk their lives for a bite." This risk stems from the unsavory fact that there is enough poison within a single blowfish to kill at least ten full-grown adults. She went on to explain that a diner's survival all depends upon preparation. Chefs offering fugu in Japan must undergo serious study and certification before being allowed to prepare and serve fugu. Such intentionality is a matter of life and death.

"And so it is with the Bible," explained Tolbert. The stories and messages found within its pages can bring life – strengthening individuals and their communities, as well as fuel social justice movements. However, the Bible can also bring death –

FROM THE EDITOR

Refresh and Re-energize with
Developments

SERIES: WORKING ON OUR INNER LIVES (PART IV)

The Spirituality of Social Justice:
Introduction and Discussion
Questions for Part IV

Now That I Have Seen

It's All About *Fugu*: Discussing
Spirituality & Religion on Campus

PERSPECTIVES

Book Review: *Multiculturalism on Campus: Theory, Models, and Practices for Understanding Diversity and Creating Inclusion*

FEATURE COLUMNS

Legal Issues: Additional Federal Guidance on Proceedings that Address Student-to-Student Sexual Harassment

Global Affairs: Students Studying Abroad—Exploring Barriers to Participation

UPDATES, NEWS, & ANNOUNCEMENTS

From One Dupont Circle: Quarter Update

From the President: ACPA's Vital Commissions Corner

2012 Next Generation Conference

2012 ACPA Governance Election

...not only justifying violence, war, and oppression in the name of God. What is crucial is the thoughtful, contextual, and critical preparation and delivery of scripture. All of us, spiritual leaders and laypersons alike, have a tremendous responsibility to critically engage the text and evaluate its ethical impact on individuals, communities, and the greater world (Tolbert, 1995).

As Tolbert concluded her explanation, I thought to myself, "This is going to be a great class!"

I was a seminary student at the Pacific School of Religion and it was the first day of a new semester. I had left my decade-long career in higher education and student affairs to pursue a Master of Divinity degree and my calling to ministry. While I had always been passionate about how students made meaning of their lives and world, I wanted to engage in this spiritual work more directly than I had been previously able in my positions within residential life, health promotion, and academic advising. I wanted to be even more explicit in creating spaces that allow individuals to bring all of themselves to their life, work, and relationships, including their religious and spiritual identities and values. Hence my return to graduate studies and an early morning encounter with a toy fish.

In this narrative, I suggest that facilitating meaningful, productive dialogue on campus regarding spirituality and religion requires an authentic engagement with the complexities present in the myriad of ways that we make meaning of our lives. It is imperative we refuse simple dualisms and easy answers and instead critically reflect upon both the gifts and challenges of our philosophies and traditions. Honest wrestling with such complexity fosters learning and growth, as well as sustains our efforts toward social justice.

The Power of Metaphor

I am an ordained Christian minister inspired and sustained in my passion for social justice by the stories and messages of scripture in my tradition. I am also a queer woman who has experienced oppression and life-threatening hostility perpetuated by homophobic and heterosexist interpretations of that same scripture. Consequently, I deeply resonate with Tolbert's metaphor of fugu, so much so that I now have my own yellowish-green blowfish, "Fugie" the fish, who sits quietly on my office shelf unless accompanying me while tabling on the quad or presenting in class. It is a playful, visual tool helping me communicate to students, staff, and faculty that, when it comes to spirituality and religion, "It's all about fugu."

I love the puzzled looks when I first introduce the concept of fugu to a person and then witness the moment when their curiosity shifts to deep recognition as they make the connection. Examples of the often contradictory messages and interpretations of faith traditions, scriptures, and communities are rampant throughout our culture. Many hear words from pulpit, bema, minbar, or radio station that preach compassionate love of neighbor in one breath and advocate injustice in another.¹ And for many, such dissonance is not only experienced intellectually or emotionally, but in our physical bodies as well through internalized oppression, isolation, or violence.

Conversations on Campus

In my experience as both a student affairs professional and spiritual leader, too often we are content to remain in the easy dualisms of “good/bad,” “right/wrong,” or “inspired/ignorant” when it comes to the complexities of spirituality and religion. Many who strongly identify as “secular academics” and/or those who have experienced harm perpetuated by religion-based bigotry often feel justified and culturally supported on campus to create a hostile climate for those who find value and worth in their religious or spiritual beliefs and traditions. By mistakenly assuming religious people and their institutions are monolithic in regard to structure, belief, and social engagement, these individuals often fail to appreciate the valuable gifts religion and spirituality offer – particularly in the struggle for social justice. Two examples of such gifts include the Jewish and Christian images that informed Martin Luther King, Jr.’s calls for justice during the Civil Rights Movement and the Buddhist teachings of interconnectedness that motivated the non-violent resistance of Thich Nhat Hanh and others during the Vietnam War.

When experiencing hostility, rejection, and ridicule on campus, religious and spiritually-affiliated students will frequently withdraw from the precise reflective learning opportunities we hope to facilitate as part of the college experience. This is particularly true for students possessing a more conservative understanding of theology and society, as their experiences of isolation and intolerance on campus often feed internal group narratives that further distance them from alternate worldviews. For example, while attending a large, public research university as an undergraduate, I was a member of a socially conservative, evangelical Christian youth group. As members’ beliefs were often ridiculed and marginalized in classroom lectures, paraprofessional trainings, and student media, the group’s overall self-conception was as a beleaguered minority oppressed for their faith. Consequently, in the absence of respectful, honest, and challenging engagement with differing viewpoints, we easily identified with the early Jesus followers oppressed by Roman rule. We never considered the tremendous social and political privilege we held as Christians living in the United States or the resulting impact of our privilege on the world.

Many students get lost in this struggle between dualisms. If unable to bring their full selves to the conversation regarding social justice, namely their religious or spiritual identities, students may miss the opportunity to consider how their personal values might sustain their individual and communal efforts toward achieving the common good. For example, a young woman shared with me her wistful longing for the Catholic prayers and rituals of her youth that were seemingly no longer available to her given her disagreement with the Church hierarchy and the socio-political positions of the parish in which she grew up. How stunned and empowered she was to learn there are many different understandings of Catholicism within her tradition and that many individuals and communities share both her passions for faith and social justice.

The Greatest Gift

THE GREATEST GIFT

I believe one of the greatest gifts I can offer students, staff, and faculty as a student affairs professional and spiritual leader is the lesson of fugu – creating opportunities for individuals to wrestle with the complexities of spirituality and religion. By supporting and challenging individuals to refrain from defensive assessments of

oneself as right and the other as clearly wrong, my hope is to empower each of us to critically evaluate all meaning-making systems for their ethical impact on individual lives, communities, and all of creation. Such is a dish I am both honored and humbled to serve.

Discussion Questions

- Have you ever encountered the dualisms of “good/bad,” “right/wrong,” or “inspired/ignorant” in conversations on campus when it comes to the complexities of spirituality and religion? If so, please describe your thoughts and feelings when such conversations have arisen. What role(s) did you play in these situations and how did you choose them (e.g., mediator, initiator, silent witness)?
- What is your personal relationship and/or experience with spirituality and religion? In light of this, how would you describe your knowledge, comfort, and ability to have conversations regarding spirituality and religion with those whose understanding or experiences are different than your own?
- According to Astin and colleagues (2010), “spirituality has to do with the values that we hold most dear, our sense of who we are and where we come from, our beliefs about why we are here – the meaning and purpose that we see in our work and our life – and our sense of connectedness to one another and to the world around us” (p. 4). In light of this understanding, how would you describe the core values that ground your life and give it meaning?
- In a 1967 address to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Martin Luther King, Jr. sought to encourage his fellow activists in the face of adversity by saying, “Let us realize the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice.” In terms of our discussion, the operative word in King’s quote is “long.” How do the core values you identified above inform and/or sustain your interest and ongoing efforts regarding social justice? Do you feel you have relationships with colleagues and/or communities that encourage you to connect these values with your activism?

Notes

¹ Pulpit, bema, and minbar are physical locations, found in Christian, Jewish, and Islamic houses of worship respectively, from which spiritual leaders read scriptures and deliver religious and moral messages to their community.

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About the Author

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[Back to Top](#)

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