

Reviews/Recensions

SPIRITUALITY OF ADULT EDUCATION AND TRAINING

Leona M. English, Tara J. Fenwick and Jim Parsons (2003). Krieger Publishing, Malabar FL, 196 pages.

Recent debates regarding educational policy and practice have again made prominent questions regarding the purpose and value of adult education and training. For the most part, these debates stress technical issues at the expense of political, social, and moral concerns, narrowing the perspective of adult education and training to vocational preparation and economic needs. Such a focus to our policy debates reflects a “trivialization and vulgarization of educational discourse” ((Purpel & McLauren 19) and deflects attention away from the critical need to reconnect educational issues with spirituality and matters of ultimate concern.

Spirituality of Adult Education and Training redirects our attention and the debate back to matters of the spiritual and the moral, “spirituality is the greatest issue facing us, and it commands our attention and that of our learners” (3). The authors urge us to attend to the spiritual matrix in which our practices are embedded. At the core of their argument is what they refer to as a “secular or public spirituality” (6), a deepening of the meaning and quality of our lives, a yearning to connect with that which is beyond one’s self. Building on a rich religious and spiritual heritage in adult education, they argue that this inner energy moves one outward to others and the world, to matters of social justice and change. Such spirituality is most effectively fostered by attending to the ethical and moral dimensions of our practices.

The authors develop their perspective by using eight dimensions of spirituality that cut across and include multiple practices and faith traditions [what are they?]. By using these dimensions, a comprehensive and theoretically well-grounded understanding of spirituality is developed. While they readily recognize the inevitable differences and even contradictions that such an approach invites, they nonetheless stay well anchored in an overarching interest to describe an inclusive, “big-tent” view of spirituality that involves movement, relationship, and mystery.

While some attention is given to incorporating spiritual approaches to teaching and learning, the primary emphasis of this text is on nurturing the

practitioner's journey. In particular, Chapter Three provides a summary of different methods that can be used to cultivate our spirituality, from confronting our fears to journaling and reading inspirational texts. Readers are encouraged, through the text and the use of carefully placed reflective questions, to think about what spirituality means to them, the ways in which they practice spirituality, and the challenges they confront in this practice. The text encourages us to ask some of the big questions about our work and practice, questions that we seldom see discussed in our research or practice literature.

The idea of work – our work as educational practitioners – as a location for the spiritual is woven throughout this text, but receives particular attention in Chapter Five. The authors discuss how we might integrate a personal emphasis on spirituality into the workplace. *For what purpose*, they ask, *is spirituality being promoted in the workplace?* They recommend we address this question by attending to the development of our own spirituality as educators, inviting reflection and discussion of the congruence between our actions and our spiritual values, and continuing to question our practice intentions and actions as they relate to the spiritual. In elaborating their perspective on a spirituality of work, the authors help clarify the relationship between action and contemplation, and also explore the darker potential for oppression, manipulation, and exclusion in workplace spirituality.

As a theoretical argument, however, the authors do not clearly make a case for considering spirituality in one's practice. They seem to have written a book for those already on a quest. It is not apparent how an adult literacy educator stretched for time and resources and always attending to rates of participation, persistence, and completion, will be convinced to reflect on the spiritual dimensions of her teaching. Although, such teachers would greatly benefit from a spiritual focus on their work and from the book's ideas, they may, however, not see such a connection in this text. Perhaps, the use of more case material from concrete practice settings would help us connect more realistically to the ways in which the spiritual manifests itself within our educational practices.

One of the ideas that I hope will provoke additional inquiry and discussion is the authors' notion of a secular spirituality. In developing their argument, the authors seem to suggest that spirituality is a kind of option for those with a particular bent. Others, however, such as Ronald Rolheiser (1999), suggest that it is not a matter of whether we do or do not have spirituality. Rather, the question is whether we are fostering a spirituality that is either a life-giving one or a destructive one. Such a focus makes a more

compelling case for the need to attend to the spiritual. My sense is that this deep connection between desire and spirituality is, rather than totally absent, more muted in the book. The result is a text that is perhaps more palatable to the general practitioner or graduate student with an interest in matters of wholeness and mental health. This book will be useful in graduate coursework and workshops that focus on helping practitioners connect with and foster the spiritual dimensions of their work. However, it does tend to gloss over some immense complexities in fostering the spiritual in our lives, such as the dark night of the soul, eros and the impersonality of existence that “throbs with the reality of this dream we call life” (Hampl 201). These are matters that seem to be the starting point of the spiritual life (Rolheiser).

Nonetheless, this book warrants reading and use by all concerned about the increasingly narrow and technical focus of adult education and training. It represents a solid introduction to a complex and highly contested idea, and provides a solid foundation and framework to deepen the understanding and commitment of current educators - a very helpful addition to the night stand and the office, a book to be read and pondered.

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