

Religious Practices and Spiritual Formation:
A Key Strategy for Understanding the Inner Lives of Teachers

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Little is known about the ways that the daily practices of teachers, like the practices of a worshiper in a religious community, can contribute the development of the teacher's pedagogical soul. This paper attempts to test the parallel elements of both communities of practitioners in an effort to better articulate ways of blunting the rate at which early career teachers leave the profession by drawing connections between the work of spiritual formation in religion and the development of the inner-lives of teachers. Teacher attrition in American schools is at a crisis point. In 2008, the modal teacher had two years or less of experience in the classroom; compare this to 1988 when the modal teacher had 15 years of craft knowledge (Ingersoll & Merrill, 2012). It is widely reported that 50% of teachers leave the profession within 5 years of starting and the attrition rate climbs to 50% in three years in under resourced and underserved schools (Headden, 2012). In a recent study by The New Teachers Project (2012), school districts in their sample lost 13% to 27% of their teachers in one year. In some districts the statistics are even starker, 40% of teachers leave the profession within their first two years of teaching (Weiss, 1999). In addition to the loss of human capital the financial costs of attrition are 7 billion dollars (Carroll, 2007). Teacher attrition is little understood and a deeply complex phenomena that needs attention.

The reasons for teacher attrition vary but the lack of social-emotional and collegial support by colleagues and building leaders tops the list of teacher complaints. In the language of religious communities it can be argued that early career teachers are leaving because they

experience limited access to a community of believers committed to fostering their inner-life and spiritual formation. Instead, the lived experiences of early career teachers follows a pattern that starts in August with “anticipation”, bottom outs in December with “disillusionment” and in July the emotional state of many teachers rises to “anticipation” again but now at a lower starting point. Spread between the cycle of anticipation-disillusionment-anticipation are the potent emotional stages of “survival, rejuvenation, and reflection” (Moir, 1990). Teaching as viewed through this lens is nothing short of an intense emotional rollercoaster with little attention to emotional safety and the protection of the passenger.

The early symptoms of attrition take many forms including the feeling of being isolated from colleagues, scant feedback on performance, poor professional development, and insufficient emotional validation by administrators. These symptoms are particularly acute for teachers who are highly effective and who hold themselves to high standards of professional development. Quite simply, as Headden (2014) points out, “Teachers don’t think the people they work for care about them or their efforts to improve” (p. 5). With such low levels of “relational trust” (Bryk and Schnieder, 2005), or the capacity to foster a community of practitioners who are equally committed to improving their teaching, often through critical instructional discourse, there seems to be little reason to stick around and teach. A similar narrative of lost trust and little attention to spiritual formation is the root cause for the exodus of worshipers from many Christian churches. Members of a congregation, like teachers, simply don’t think anyone in the wider community, especially church leadership, cares about them as individuals seeking deeper relationships with God (Bass, 2006).

The outer lives of teachers

Most models of teacher preparation and professional development are based on technical and procedural aspects of teaching geared toward state and national standards, accountability and teacher performance metrics, and prescribed curriculum (Goldstein, 2014). Because of the external demands of accountability and standards (Goldstein, 2014; Strong, 2007) there is little room in many teacher education programs for building resiliency, courage, and the capacity to weather through the emotional challenges of an early career teacher (Gordon & Maxey, 2000). As noted by Greene, Kim, & Korthagen (2012), “With prominent national standards in many countries around the world emphasizing content, pedagogy, and test scores, rarely do we see any recognition of the importance for a teacher to understand herself, to engage and expand her awareness and sense of being in the world, and to teach from her soul so she can touch and know the souls of her students” (p. 4). The dominant role of testing, accountability, and assessment has left teachers wondering what happened to the profession they cared for and if there will ever again be room in the conversation on teacher effectiveness for the love of teaching and deep heart-to-heart pedagogical relationships with students (Rodgers and Raider-Roth, 2006).

The inner lives of teachers

The teacher’s outer life and forms of instruction is only one element in the process of learning to teach. There exist in the teaching literature the writings of scholars exploring the inner lives of teachers, the formation of their pedagogical souls, as a pathway toward teacher effectiveness. For instance, Parker Palmer (1998) has written extensively about the presence and importance of inner qualities including: heart, true self, integrity and authenticity. Other researchers bear witness to additional qualities such as: calling (Hansen, 1995), love (Liston, 2000), heart (Alston, 2008; Ayers, 2010), complementary curriculum (Moroye, 2009), self-

reflection (Korthagen, 2012; Steiner, 1995), presence, (Rodgers & Raider-Roth, 2006), and trust (Bryk & Schneider, 2005; Forsyth, Adams & Hoy, 2011).

What is needed now is taking the conversation beyond a broad definition of the inner life to concrete ways to define, measure and coach teachers on ways to enhance the formation of their inner life. One can find curriculum to support the spiritual life of students (Kessler, 2000; Glazer, 1999; and Lantieri, 2001) but little material exists to foster and sustain the spiritual formation of teachers. One reason for the lack of professional development supporting the spiritual formation of teachers is the dominance of scientific thinking as a way of describing and making sense of the world. Hogan (2009) describes the ill effects of an overreliance on science to human thinking: “With the birth of science, reasoning became grounded in observation and description of functional relations in the concrete world. The world of spirits and Gods started to crumble, but it never fell apart completely. Logos sought to replace mythos: imagination and feeling had no place in the new world order—intuition and subjectivity had to be replaced by rationality, objectivity, and systematic thinking” (p. 140). Although intended to describe the impact of scientific thinking on spiritual formation, Hogan’s observations fit the deleterious effects of policy and standards-based thinking in teaching. Connections to the mythos or mysterious elements of teaching are dismissed or at best relegated to background status or instructional curiosities by the logos of scientific thinking. The net effect of a purely scientific focus on teaching is separation from inner life-giving features of teaching as noted by a teacher: “All the joy has been tested and legislated away. All that is left is sand and dust” (personal communication).

Another and perhaps more significant challenge for educators interested in describing the spirituality of teaching and working to foster their spiritual formation of teachers is the ineffable

nature of the pedagogical inner-life of teachers. Unlike the technical domain of teaching which is more readily observed and catalogued, the inner terrain is more elusive and difficult to see, almost hidden from the eye of an observer. Abraham Heschel's (1955) refers to similar qualities in the study of religion as the ineffable nature of God. He defines ineffable as: "...that aspect of reality which by its very nature lies beyond our comprehension, and is acknowledged by our mind to be beyond the scope of the mind" (p. 104). However, just because it has elements that are incomprehensible to the mind does not mean the ineffable is unknowable: "The ineffable, then, is a synonym for hidden meaning rather than for the absence of meaning" (p. 105). For Heschel, the tangible (outer core) and ineffable (inner core) are different ways of understanding and describing the lived-world. So for classroom teachers as well as worshipers there is a tangible and knowable sense of something greater than oneself, calling for instance in teaching, that is real yet thwarts attempts to grasp the practice in concrete tangible forms.

It is important to pursue a more complex description of the inner life of teachers and ways to sustain their instructional formation for the following reason. If spiritual formation in religious communities is tied to practice, and teaching is a practice-rich profession, and teachers exhibit an inner life when teaching then it makes sense to pursue a more robust description of the types of pedagogical practices that connect with and enliven the inner lives of teachers. Additionally, one way to understand the problem of teacher attrition is that the exodus of early career teachers is primarily a spiritual and meaning making problem not a technical challenge to be resolved with more skill-based professional development or increased levels of teacher accountability.

Classrooms if understood as a type of sacred space, perhaps equivalent to a hermitage, can be ideal settings for teachers to encounter the ineffable qualities of their craft. Karen

Armstrong (2002) makes a claim about the potency and importance of sacred spaces to influence the lived experience of worshipers when she argues that Jerusalem, as a sacred place, has become the central ground where worshipers of three different faith traditions experience the divine “not merely a transcendent entity ‘out there’, it is also a presence in the depths of the self” (p. 191). Any teacher who witnesses an intellectual or emotional aha moment with a student knows that something personally awe-inspiring and transcendent occurred in the classroom that went beyond the typical mixture of content, pedagogy, teaching and learning. From that moment forward the student is no longer the same person in a deeply personal and intellectual sense. And the teacher who acted as a conduit for learning is often transformed by the experience of encountering the transcendent nature of content knowledge as something greater than the individual presence of the teacher or the student. Classrooms viewed as sacred spaces embody elements of transcendence and connection to something greater than individual ego.

The role of practice in spiritual formation

The question now becomes in what ways do practices in religious communities foster the spiritual formation of individual members of that community? And then by extension can this understanding be applied to teaching and the pedagogical formation of teachers? One answer to the question begins with an even simpler question; why practices? What is it about the practices of religious communities that is a necessary element when it comes to developing a deeper relationship with the divine? A secular lens on this question is advanced by the observations and research of Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (1991) in their book; *Situated Learning Theory: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*. By legitimate peripheral participation they mean the ways that novices move toward the role of master through successive forms of participation in practices that are scripted and sanctioned by the community. Taken in their totality, these

communal actions make up the curriculum and pedagogy of learning for the purpose of personal transformation and inclusion in the life-forces of the community: “Learning thus implies becoming a different person with respect to the possibilities enabled by these systems of relations” (p. 53).

Karen Armstrong (2009) in her book *The Case for God* provides an historical look at the development of a religiously-organized community of practice. She believes that there is a distinct human propensity, across time and cultures, toward religion and religious practices. She argues that since the earliest records of human history archived on cave walls and sacred places the message is that we “Homo religiosus” are hardwired to connect with something bigger and more inclusive than the individual self; a universal sense of being that reaches beyond the purely rational that exists “out there.” By “being” she means not a single entity or thing but an all-inclusive presence that enervates the world. For early humans (Homo religiosus) rituals or practices were the tools of conscious choice to connect with “being” by disrupting “...the normal and allow for access to inner resources resulting in identity transformation” (p. 7). Furthermore, these closely scripted practices and rituals lead to a discovery of a transcendent dimension of life not simply “out there” but ultimately “in here” at the deepest level of our being” (p. xviii). In this way the search for a transcendent experience lead back to the human soul and insights on how to make sense of the normal world of day to day action.

In religious communities the end goal of “becoming a different person” for the purpose of being more fully human is clearly articulated in the “system of relations” that defines the parameters of a particular religious community or worship tradition. Hence we can talk about the process of becoming Jewish, Christian, Muslim or Buddhist as distinct trajectories made plain to an outsider by contrasting practices or forms of worship. For simplicity and personal

familiarity I will stay within the Christian tradition as I move deeper and deeper into the role of practice and spiritual formation for both worshipers and teachers. In Christianity, the Bible offers many justifications and good reason giving for paying attention to one's practice. Take for instance the practice of prayer. In Romans I, Paul writes about serving God through preaching and that he connects with the wider church of fellow believers through regular prayer. And 1 Thessalonians 5:17 states quite simply to "pray continually".

Religious practices like prayer are the life blood of spiritual formation and connection to the unknowable mysteries, particularly when those practices remain fresh and vibrant. When practices become reified and overly systematic they lose their capacity to foster relationships between the individual and the divine. The break occurs when the practices no longer foster a sense of transcendence because they have become separated from the actual world of human need out of which the rituals initially sprouted (Armstrong, 2009).

Worship, a form of practice, can become "increasingly a matter of the head (beliefs about God) rather than the heart (experiences of God)" (Bass, 2006, p. 177). And once the divine becomes reified and quantified, just like prescribed curriculum for teachers, the ineffable evaporates and the wisdom of the spirit is no longer present for guidance on how to act with integrity in the world of normal human action. The negative impact of the practices of testing and accountability can be described in this way when they become too disconnected from the mystery of teaching as they move increasingly toward the concrete and technical. For both worshipers and teachers, it is a short step from soulless worship and spiritless teaching to walking out the door and never returning.

The role of practice in spiritual formation

Key to making sense of the critical nature of practice in religion is the understanding that to be fully human means the integration of two aspects of the self; an inner self and an outer self or as the Greeks believed *mythos* and *logos* (Armstrong, 2009). Gerrit Immink (2014) speaks of “an inner space, a conscious “I” as the center” of actions to be examined in the form of “lived religion.” And it is in “the human self and ordinary life are seen as the places where God is at work” (p. 132). When thinking of this inner space in both secular and religious communities two words come to mind, soul and spirit. Gonzalez (2005) writes that for Christians the soul is proof that God resides within each believer and that it is through participation in worship that the soul can be in relationship with the divine.

James (2011) makes it clear that for Christians this process of spiritual formation and identity transformation is not about the external ego but rather a deeper sense of being in relationship with something greater than personal identity or professional role: “Following the Master, it means embracing a new way of life, with a new sense of identity, not as a program but as a life-task. What is basic, is knowing the source of our identity is not in self making, professionally or functionally in what we “do,” but relationally in “being” in Jesus Christ alone” (p. 132). Parker Palmer (1998), the educator and activists makes a similar claim when he argues that real teaching and learning is grounded in a subject-centered curriculum where “...we interact with nonhuman forms of being that are as important and powerful as the human and sometimes even more so” (p. 106). For Palmer content knowledge can and should be treated as a “great thing” that both teachers and students can interact with as something greater than the teacher or the student.

A vivid portrait of the ways that living practice supports spiritual formation is captured by Vaught (2009) when he lifts up the actions of the 17th-century French monk Brother Lawrence “who learned to practice the presence of God at all times and in all things”. By which he means that the soul is always in search of God in all things and all times, thus even the mundane day-to-day experiences of life (worship or teaching) could hold the capacity to connect the person with the infinite presence of God.

Implications and possibilities for teaching

If it is true that practice in a religious community is the gateway to building and sustaining a relationship with the divine spark within the soul of each worshiper; what might this suggest about the role of practice in teaching as a way to connect with the inner core of the teacher? The first task is to determine if there is a teaching equivalent of the “soul” for teachers. Within the community of educators, calling can be considered as a sort of professional-soul. As argued by David Hansen (1995) the “Latin root of vocation, *vocare*, means ‘to call.’ It denotes summons or bidding to service” (p. 1). In religious communities the call is to serve God; in teaching the call is to facilitate learning by serving something greater than the ego-self (content knowledge or disciplinary knowing). Calling is the inner-fire that illuminates and pulls a teacher through the challenges that are common in the practices of teaching. It is the final place of meaning when her instructional world collapses to the core of what it means to teach.

For Linda Alston (2008), a career teacher in urban schools, the essence of calling is contained in the question: “Would you say you chose the teaching profession or do you think it chose you?” (p. 97). How a teacher answers this question will likely become a key factor in whether or not she stays in the profession for three-years or thirty-years. As Alston argues throughout her book, her answer is clear: teaching chose her. In validation of this claim she tells

the story of losing hope and becoming exasperated with teaching so she left the profession, only to come back to the life of the classroom a short time later, “there is no escaping my divine calling. Teaching had me” (p. 90). As Alston ponders the reason why she continues to return to the classroom day-after-day and year-after-year despite the personal and professional challenges, she acknowledges a pull to the classroom that goes beyond professional fulfillment. She experiences a relationship with something that is greater than her isolated self: “We must return because the call resonates in a place deep within us, and we must answer, “Yes” (p. 96).

In more secular language, Macy and Johnstone (2012) describe professional calling as the “inner compass” powered by enthusiasm and passion that points toward a professional identity that is both fulfilling and sustaining. Calling as a passion is deep and enduring, derived from values, personality, and identity that “yield[s] social value to others” and also provides “enduring personal fulfillment” (Hansen, 1995, p. xiii).

Conclusion

Teacher attrition is a problem operating mostly behind the scenes but with monumental consequences on teacher/student relationships, the achievement gap, school financing and collegial relationships in schools. One way to thwart the cycle of attrition is attending more forcefully to social-emotional needs of teachers through a more robust professional development response to the inner life of teachers. Just as healthy and vibrant religious communities attend to the spiritual formation of worshipers for the purpose of inviting them deeper and deeper into the life of the community, so too should teacher formation be intentionally focused on the inner life of teachers for the purpose of improving their practice through long-term collegial relationships. It is in the conscious examination of practice that transcend the normal classroom experiences that teachers are likely to feel affirmed in their personal capacities to teach and therefore less

likely to leave the profession prematurely. In this paper I have attempted to make a strong case for the parallels between the rituals and practices of religion and teaching that lead to transcendence and a deep sense of personal renewal. The inner life of teachers is geared to the purpose of fulfilling the need for connection and relationship with something bigger than self which is an important feature of a community that nurtures and sustains novices and guides them toward full participation (skill-mastery) in the community. The next task is to empirically determine the daily practices of teaching that enhance the relationship between calling, pedagogical formation, and increased instructional effectiveness.

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