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## Spiritual and moral friendships: How campuses can encourage a search for meaning and purpose

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## Spiritual and Moral Friendships: How Campuses Can Encourage a Search for Meaning and Purpose

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### Abstract

Helping students understand and cultivate moral and spiritual friends is perhaps one of the most important gifts a college or university can give a student. Having meaningful relationships contributes significant energy to students' inner lives—their values, moral commitments, and self-understandings. The topic of friendship, and all that it entails, offers educators a powerful tool to engage students in the discovery of meaning and purpose. Individuals should not fear the word “spiritual” at public universities, nor be convinced that faith-based institutions do spiritual well. This article invites colleges and universities to explore friendship as a learning outcome for all students.

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A few years ago, I published an article, “Learning Friendship: The Indispensable Basis of a Good Society” (Shushok, 2008). I had been emboldened to do so after reading a study in the *American Sociological Review* (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Brahears, 2006), which replicated a 1985 study about Americans and friendship. The researchers discovered that Americans who participated in the study had reported having only two close friends, down from three close friends in an earlier study. Even more daunting was their finding that the number of people who reported that they had no one with whom to discuss important matters had doubled to one in four during the same time period. Simultaneously, I was co-teaching a Great Texts course that introduced me to Aristotle's (2004) *The Nicomachean Ethics*. Aristotle's discussion of friendship pushed me into contemplation about friendship and its role, purpose, and mechanics. Ultimately, I found myself convinced that colleges and universities must do more to help students discover transformative kinds of friendship.

The crux of my article was a call for colleges and universities to be more intentional in helping students learn friendship, especially the kind that is captured by Aristotle's (2004) notion of “perfect friendship.” Friendship from his perspective is fundamentally undergirded by a mutual commitment to another and a mutual desire to pursue goodness and virtue earnestly. My essay was written with hope for students—an aspiration that they would not find themselves as graduates among the number of Americans who traverse life largely alone. Friendship, I argued, is perhaps one of the most important gifts a human being can possess throughout life, and although some are fortunate enough to find it by chance or blessing, far too many are surrounded by familiar faces but overcome by loneliness. As my journey continued, I became more convinced that the pursuit of meaningful friendships is something that can be learned and that administrators and faculty in colleges and universities should be devoted to teaching friendship—especially if we are hopeful that college experiences will ultimately cultivate a more just, civil, and humane world. Friendship, I believe, has an amplifying effect. The better we learn and teach friendship, the stronger our learning

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environments become. The stronger our learning environments become, the better our graduates are prepared to transform their communities and pursue virtuous and meaningful lives with friends.

Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, and Tipton (2007) also expressed concern about the loss of meaningful friendship in their book, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*. Although Americans involved in civic activities value relationships, Bellah and his colleagues found that few Americans understand the moral meaning once attributed to such friendships. For these researchers, relationships embedded in moral commitment can be a catalyst for offsetting the growing American inclination toward individualism. The risks associated with the declining culture of friendship, they assert, extend beyond individual happiness and into destructive societal consequences.

The conversations that ensued after the publication of my article pushed me to keep reflecting on the topic of friendship. A poignant realization was that the kind of friendship I was asking college and university leaders to help students pursue is actually spiritual in nature, because spiritual friendship recognizes that relationships are the most important influences on the human spirit. Having meaningful relationships contributes significant energy to students' inner lives—their values, moral commitments, and self-understandings. Persons who have friendships of these sorts pursue the same big questions in life that Astin, Astin, and Lindholm (2011) suggested are spiritual:

Who am I? What are my most deeply felt values? Do I have a mission or purpose in my life? Why am I in college? What kind of person do I want to become? What sort of world do I want to help create? (p. 1)

Although spirituality is the realm in which these big questions are asked, spiritual friendship demands that they are not asked in isolation. Instead two human beings, side-by-side, commit to living life well, in pursuit of goodness, and with a hope of new revelations about the meaning and purpose of life. Friendships of this order are characterized by the pursuit of agreed-upon virtues that serve as a relationship compass that individuals consult for cheering on one another toward admirable ideals. The crucial thing is that complete friendship is based on a mutual and steadfast commitment to human excellence or virtue. The highest form of friendship lasts because it is pursued out of a shared commitment to something that is higher, nobler, and better than the private interests of the two friends. We are, in short, friends for the sake of the cause of what is right and good—and because the right and the good endure, so also will our friendship.

The resurgence of interest in higher education related to nurturing the spiritual lives of college students has been an inspiring trend. Colleges and universities, and American education in general, had fearfully trod away from one of the most important outcomes of the learning endeavor—developing better human beings. It is difficult to accomplish this tall order without serious attention to the spiritual character of students. The Spirituality in Higher Education project at UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute has reminded us just how important spirituality is to students, regardless of institutional type. In fact, four in five students communicate an "interest in spirituality" and "believe in the sacredness of life" (Astin et al., 2011).

If the importance of this shift needs to be underscored, consider Seligman's (2011) work on well-being, a term he associated with helping students develop positive relationships and discover meaning and purpose. Seligman reminded us that many studies suggest that depression in America is roughly 10 times more common than it was 50 years ago—and that this increasing erosion of mental health is not simply an artifact of greater awareness and reporting of the illness. If one believes that well-being is associated with positive and healthy community, Seligman reminded readers of the paradox that this growth in depression runs parallel to incredible gains in the quality of American life. He wrote:

We now have about three times more actual purchasing power in the United States. The average house has doubled in size from 1,200 square feet to 2,500 square feet. In 1950

there was one car for every two drivers; now there are more cars than licensed drivers . . . . Progress has not been limited to material: There is more music, more women's rights, less racism, more entertainment, and more books. (p. 79)

Putnam (2001) shared this sentiment in his aptly named book *Bowling Alone* and concluded that social bonds are the most powerful predictor of life satisfaction. Economist Lane (2001) concurred and presented compelling evidence that humans have a genetically programmed need for camaraderie and companionship. Friendship, therefore, is essential for our physiological and psychological well-being. A contemporary cultural norm that may contribute to isolation and perhaps dilute the opportunity to build authentic meaningful friendships is technology. Access to an on-line world may encourage students to substitute electronic communication for face-to-face encounters that are difficult to substitute for personal presence. In fact, Ito and colleagues (2009) have summarized emerging research from the Digital Youth Project that suggests depression and the use of social media may have an unexpected correlation. When lonely teens look at pictures and updates of peers depicting much happier lives than their own, perceptions about the lives of others may trigger greater loneliness and, ultimately, depression.

Colleges and universities have come to accept that learning is a process and spans experience both in and out of the classroom. However, when I ask my students, "What are you learning?" responses typically include a list of courses, texts, theories, or ideas that have been presented in the formal curriculum. Smith (1999) categorized this kind of learning as "learning-conscious or formalized learning" because students are more aware that they are engaged in an experience in which the purpose of the activity is to learn. By making learning more conscious, the idea goes, it is often enhanced.

As educators, our initial inclination is to suggest that learning about friendship occurs most frequently through daily tasks—something Smith (1999) delineated as "task-conscious or acquisition learning." Students are involved in hundreds of tasks—eating a meal, shopping at a bookstore, playing a video game, talking to a roommate in a residence hall, or attending a meeting of a student organization. If they are asked to reflect on these kinds of experiences, students more readily make connections between participation in these activities and their learning. Without facilitated opportunities for reflection, however, students frequently fail to mark these experiences as moments when learning takes place. In contrast, students immediately respond with a myriad of topics, theories, or ideas they are learning while enrolled in a course.

What would happen if we learned about friendship differently—more thoughtfully and intentionally? What if students were informed that an institution aspired to use classroom and out-of-classroom experiences to assist them in learning about, finding, and sustaining friendship while undergraduates and beyond? If the notion of adopting a friendship learning outcome seems compelling, the following section offers practical possibilities for inviting students to begin the process. All of these suggestions embrace what I describe as a prepare–engage–reflect (PER) model that reminds educators to prepare students, ask them to engage in daily activities with peers, and complete the cycle by reflecting on what they are learning.

### **Teaching and Learning Moral and Spiritual Friendship: Practical Recommendations for Nurturing Meaningful Relationships on Campus**

#### **As an Educator, Pursue, Reflect Upon, and Share Spiritual Friendship**

The biggest surprise from the publication of my 2008 article was how much it resonated with colleagues in higher education. Although many echoed my call to help students learn friendship, a

large number of responses I received reflected on the reality that many of us are among those who have yet to cultivate the kinds of friendships of Aristotle's (2004) highest order. Perhaps the most authentic feedback resulted from my admission that as a senior administrator and faculty member, I had just begun the process of seriously considering my own ideas about friendship—and whether or not my life included friendship in the vein of Aristotle's perfect friendship—or what I am now describing as spiritual friendship. Helping students pursue spiritual friends will require that we ourselves have them. One of the most powerful practices educators can employ is discussing with students their own friendships, sustained for long periods of time, and especially those wrapped around the big questions. Discourse about the spiritual dimensions of friendship in general and ways our relationships have encouraged spiritual growth is also important.

### **Recognize and Understand the Relationship Between Development Capacities and Spiritual Friendship**

Educators should recognize that students' developmental capacities underlie their ability to pursue genuinely mutual relationships and thus approach conversations with students from this perspective. Kegan (1994) noted that late adolescents are often focused on self-interest. When self-interest is the guiding force in a relationship, both parties desire good for the other when it translates into good for the self. Once students develop the capacity to subordinate their own interest on behalf of a great loyalty to friendship, they are ready to consider good for the other person. Unfortunately, students often initially orient themselves so much to another's needs that they define themselves through the relationship, losing themselves in the interest of acquiring the other's approval. The powerful effect of peer pressure on college campuses can be largely attributed to this concern for peer approval. Thus, it is not until students develop the capacity to define their identity internally that they are able to enter mutual relationships akin to Aristotle's (2004) perfect friendship. Helping students develop this capacity is crucial, because typical notions of friendship do not support the kind of intellectual reflection and risk taking that meaningful learning requires. It is for this reason that my campus, Virginia Tech, is endeavoring to help students "pursue self-understanding and integrity" as a learning outcome (Virginia Tech, 2011).

Especially in the early college years, students' self-reflection about the values and principles of their families, their communities, and themselves become the building blocks for conversations and meaningful friendships as students' developmental capacities grow. As students better understand themselves, such as their strengths and interests, and align their values with purposeful decision making, they can adopt an integrated set of principles that provides the foundation for spiritual friendships. Fowler (1981) asserted that faith is universal and that humans are born with nascent capacities for it. The key, Fowler argued, is that "how these capacities are activated and grow depends to a large extent on how we are welcomed into the world and what kinds of environments we grow in" (p. xiii). Similarly, how we activate the spiritual lives of students matters. Will colleges and universities create space for faith and spirituality development too?

### **Embrace the Spiritual Nature of Human Beings and Acknowledge the Capacity of Students to Pursue Big Questions**

Nash and Murray's (2010) text, *Helping College Students Find Purpose: The Campus Guide to Meaning-Making*, combined with Parks's (2002) text, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Young Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose, and Faith*, can help to inspire thinking about ways to engage students in the exploration of life's important questions. In response to Nash and Murray's recollection of conversations with skeptics about whether or not students are mature enough to engage meaning making seriously or whether meaning making pedagogy belongs

on the college campus, I answer a resounding “yes.” And, some thinkers have argued that the need to explore spiritual meaning is sought by everyone. As Nash and Murray wrote,

Whether Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist or Hindu, or whether theist, agnostic, atheist, or polytheist, students come to college with all shapes and sizes of spirituality. By spirituality, we mean the following: a penchant, probably hard-wired into all humans to ponder the imponderable, to ask the unanswerable questions about the meaning of life, especially omnipresent, unavoidable pain, suffering, and death—conditions that paradoxically coexist with life’s unalloyed joys, pleasures and satisfactions. (p. 54)

Chasing these questions without another can be lonely. Chasing these questions within the context of ongoing relationship is spiritual friendship. Let us help students find others with whom they do not just coexist, but with whom they will share the most important thing we have to do—live.

### **Establish “Friendship” (of Aristotle’s Perfect Variety—or Spiritual Friendship) as a Learning Outcome and Build a Curriculum to Cultivate It**

Tagg (2003) advocated a notion of a curriculum as an intentionally created series of experiences that pull students toward achieving a particular learning outcome. As suggested previously (Shushok, 2008), the manner in which colleges and universities prepare students for friendship development will no doubt vary from institution to institution. However, some practical approaches to nurturing a campus culture of friendship might include educating new students about sociological trends related to friendship during highly symbolic beginning moments such as orientation; providing students with opportunities to consider models of friendship through literature, popular culture, and coursework; insisting that students seek friendship in their daily life on campus, and encouraging students to commit to seeking friendships that have the potential to transcend the boundaries of their college experience; convening faculty and staff to discuss with students their friendships; and offering students the opportunity to celebrate friendships, especially during their senior year and to which students can attribute their moral development.

It is commonly understood that colleges and universities are linked to the future of education, of economics, and of human welfare. It is also true that colleges and universities will shape the next generation of relationships. Will these be the variety of friendships that explore the big questions in life—relationships that help clarify meaning, purpose, and moral grounding? If so, these friendship forerunners will create a new moral norm, an axis of self-sacrifice, and focus on others upon which a better world will turn. And, the loneliness that appears to be growing in our culture will be turned back.

### **Fear Not the Word “Spiritual” at Public Institutions, Nor Be Convinced Your Faith-Based Institution Does It Well**

Far too many colleagues at public universities dismiss the word spiritual as something outside the mission of their institutions. The term “spirituality” as something not synonymous with religion may be new for many colleagues and can create discomfort as a result. It is important to remember that spirituality, as broadly defined in higher education, represents the pursuit of life’s big questions, meaning, purpose, and moral development in such a way that the human spirit is altered, reshaped, and transformed. As Astin et al. (2011) conveyed: “In many respects, the secular institution is the ideal place for students to explore their spiritual side because, unlike many sectarian institutions, there is no official perspective or dogma when it comes to spiritual values and beliefs” (p. 6). Yet, although faculty and staff at public universities may have discomfort with the concept of spirituality, the current generation of students express interest in, and venues for, exploring the

meaning and purpose of life. And, the topic of friendship is perhaps one of the most nonthreatening topics for both faculty and students to provide an entre into spiritual life.

For readers at faith-based institutions, at which I have served as well, it is too easy to confuse communication about religion and denominational traditions and practices with engaging students in the complex process of exploring meaning and purpose. If we want students to have spiritual friendships, educators at faith-based institutions will have to be as intentional in cultivating them as are colleagues at public institutions. In fact, the trappings of “religion” may require an even more robust intentionality. And, if the aspiration of faith-based institutions is for students to have a rich and abiding faith, the hard work of asking the big questions remains a prerequisite for a faith that is not simply adopted but owned for oneself and demonstrated in one’s day-to-day life.

### **An Example of Spiritual Friendship: What Students Can Teach Us**

Over the past two years, I have observed closely a group of five students who epitomized the kind of friendship I have advocated in this essay. These students have been especially intriguing because of the unusual commitment they have to one another while being diverse in ways such as political disposition, demographic background, as well as race and sexual orientation. Moreover, while I am focusing on the relationship these students have with one another, they are uncharacteristically open to extending friendship to others beyond the bounds of the group. They embody a quality of “true friendship” that Lewis (1988) suggested is rarely jealous. He wrote: “Two friends delight to be joined by a third, and three by a fourth, if only the newcomer is qualified to become a real friend” (p. 61). The qualification for friendship that Lewis described seems connected to these students’ collective sense of purpose, although exercised differently given their unique senses of vocational calling. All recently graduated; one hopes to work in politics, two in academia, and two in corporate America. Yet all seem relentless in their collective pursuit of asking and answering the questions: What is the purpose of life? How can I use my life to make the world kinder? How can I help my friends do the same?

In this example, two friends became three, then four, then five. Along the way, this small group of friends established a movement on campus widely known at Virginia Tech as “Actively Caring for People” with a mission “to change the world with small intentional acts of kindness” (Actively caring for people, 2011). The movement did not create the friendship. The friendship created the movement—and has become both a vehicle and expression of their ongoing exploration of life’s biggest questions. In preparation for this essay, I decided to send these five students a note to request their reflection about their friendship with one another. I asked: What happened early in your relationship that formed the foundation for such a meaningful relationship? What happened as your relationship developed that solidified the commitment you now have to one another? In thinking about how you learned to be a friend, do any particular moments during college stand out to you? In reading their responses, several themes emerged.

These students each pointed to the influence of a particular student who had the courage to set a tone that invited intimacy through asking meaningful questions. Having someone model the art of meaningful question asking and listening was important. These conversations ultimately led to a shared commitment to a set of values or virtues these students sought to develop for themselves and for one another. One student expressed it this way:

I think a hallmark of our friendship is that we share congruent values and beliefs. Whether these manifest themselves as our future aspirations, our passion for “Actively Caring,” or just our daily habits, we align with one another. I’m a firm believer that the company you keep is indicative of your character.”

It is important to note that these students emphasized that such alignment did not mean sameness—but instead a commitment to higher order values or meaning. This commitment is conveyed best when a student wrote:

I was welcomed by people who I couldn't have imagined I would be. My friend, a conservative Republican from a town of 5,000, and I had countless conversations about what it is like to be gay. Not conversations of judgment or debate, but opportunities to learn from one another. I would share my experiences with homophobia and racism and in turn we would discuss what this meant for us as friends and people.

Another important theme represented a moment in time when espoused values were confronted with behavior that was incongruent. An example of what a student defined as a “pivotal moment” was expressed in this way:

We were sitting in his room working on a project when an off-color joke was made. At first I brushed it off, but as I prepared to leave that night it left me feeling unsettled. I returned to the room, started to tear up as I shared how the comment made me feel. This moment showed me that true friendship means honesty, openness, and vulnerability, and we successfully managed that incident.

Finally, I was struck by the use of words and phrases such as “commitment,” “life-long relationships,” “accountability,” and “friends for life.” These students had collectively developed a shared understanding of the term friendship and the qualities that come with these sorts of relationships.

It is difficult to argue that close interpersonal connectedness and strong perfect friendships as described by Aristotle (2004) do not provide lasting benefits, positively impacting satisfaction and quality of life over time and offering opportunities for exploration of and support for self and others through the joys and challenges of our life experiences. The nature of human beings is to share the journey, even though we are often ill-equipped to do so. Having students within our influence as college and university educators, we have the privilege to model and help to teach that those with spiritual friendships live the most fulfilling lives, full of meaning and purpose.

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