

Exploring Spirituality and Culture in Adult and Higher Education

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Elizabeth J. Tisdell

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Published by Jossey-Bass

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Tisdell, Elizabeth J., 1955-

Exploring spirituality and culture in adult and higher education / Elizabeth J. Tisdell.

p. cm. — (The Jossey-Bass higher and adult education series)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-7879-5723-2 (alk. paper)

1. Teaching—Religious aspects. 2. Spiritual life. 3. Educational anthropology. 4. Adult education—Philosophy. 5. Education, Higher—Philosophy. I. Title. II. Series.

LB1027.2 .T57 2005

78.1'2—dc13 2002152871

Printed in the United States of America

FIRST EDITION

HB Printing 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

The Jossey-Bass
Higher and Adult Education Series

*This book is dedicated to the memory
of my mother,
Mary Donohue Tisdell
(April 29, 1921–March 24, 1999),
an educator herself,
whose memory and spirit continue
teaching me about the connection
of spirituality to culture.*

Contents

Preface	ix
About the Author	xix
<i>Part I: Breaking the Silence: Spirituality and Culture in Adult Meaning-Making and Education</i>	1
1. Introduction: Culture, Spirituality, and Adult Learning	3
2. Breaking the Silence: Defining Spirituality in a Culturally Relevant Educational Context	25
3. Spirituality, Religion, and Culture in Lived Experience: Overlaps and Separations	45
4. Between the Cultural and the Universal: Themes and Variations of Spiritual Experience	67
<i>Part II: Claiming a Sacred Face: Identity and Spiritual Development</i>	89
5. The Great Spiral: Spiritual Development as a Process of Moving Forward and Spiraling Back	93
6. Gender, Culture, and Spiritual Identity in Midlife Integration	117
7. The Role of Spiritual Experience in Developing a Positive Cultural Identity	139

8. Searching for Wholeness: Crossing Culture, White Identity, and Spiritual Development	163
Part III: Spirituality in a Culturally Relevant and Transformative Teaching Practice	183
9. Approaching Transformative Teaching Grounded in Spirituality and Cultural Relevance	187
10. A Theory-in-Progress of a Spiritually Grounded, Culturally Relevant Pedagogy: Philosophical Underpinnings and New Directions	203
11. Stories from the Field: Spirituality and Culture in Adult Higher Education Classrooms	219
12. The Possibilities and Challenges of Spiritually Grounded, Culturally Relevant Teaching	235
Epilogue: Final Reflections	259
Appendix: Research Methodology	263
References	271
Index	285

Preface

Spirituality is an important part of human experience. So is culture. In the last decade, there has been much discussion of the cultural dimension of human experience, and the importance of attending to it in higher and adult education. More recently, there has been some consideration of the role of spirituality in teaching and learning as well. For the most part, however, there has been little discussion of the connection between culture and spirituality—the cultural dimension of spirituality and the spiritual dimension of culture—and the importance of their connection to adult and higher education. Thus, the purpose of this book is to explicitly connect spirituality and culture and to focus specifically on the potential role of spirituality in teaching for cultural relevance with multicultural populations in higher and adult education.

If one wants to understand the processes of teaching and learning, it is important to pay attention to how people understand new knowledge, and ultimately, to how they construct knowledge. Indeed, learning takes place in many contexts. Typically higher education has focused on knowing through rationality. But learning and constructing knowledge is also embedded in people's growth, development, and new experiences. Further, learning and constructing knowledge are rooted in, but not limited to, people's culture of origin. Knowledge construction takes place in the workplace, in relationships, in

therapeutic contexts, and in somatic learning contexts such as Tai Chi, exercise programs, or yoga. Knowledge construction is present in creative work in music, visual art, storytelling, dance, writing, and it is present in people's spiritual lives as well. All of these and other indicators of learning are manifested through cultural expression—in language, in symbol, in art, in gesture, in all forms of communication. A part of teaching for cultural relevance is to understand this—that knowledge will ultimately be expressed through culture. Therefore, learning will be better anchored if teaching is approached in a way that is culturally relevant to learners' lives.

What is the role of spirituality in this process? Faith development theorist James Fowler (1981), in discussing how people construct knowledge, noted that Piaget and Kohlberg contributed greatly to our understanding of how people come to know and learn. However, Fowler also noted “their restrictive understanding of the role of imagination in knowing, their neglect of symbolic processes generally and the related lack of attention to unconscious structuring processes other than those constituting reasoning” (p. 103). While Fowler brought spiritual knowing to the fore, he didn't pay attention to “symbolic processes” that are often deeply cultural.

Why is it beneficial for higher and adult educators to pay attention to spirituality in teaching for cultural relevance? After all, higher education has been primarily about “intellectual” knowledge—the rational world of theory and ideas. Furthermore, in North America, we have argued for and founded our education system based on “the separation of Church and State,” except of course in the case of religiously affiliated institutions. Perhaps it's appropriate to deal with spirituality in some adult education contexts, but how could it possibly be appropriate in higher education? The answer to this is grounded in how *spirituality* is defined in this book and what my underlying assumptions of it are.

Assumptions About Spirituality and Culture

Spirituality is an elusive topic; it seems to defy definition, or at the very least, all definitions of it seem to be inadequate. Although Chapter Two will discuss what is meant by the terms *spirituality* and *culture* and the way that they are used for the purposes of this book, a brief definition of each is useful here. First, *spirituality* is not *about pushing a religious agenda*. Drawing on spirituality in higher education does not suggest in any way that one should abandon the analytical and critical reading and writing work that is part of higher education. But if one wants to educate, it is incumbent upon educators to examine the variety of ways in which people construct knowledge. With that said, there are seven assumptions that I am making about the nature of spirituality: (1) spirituality and religion are not the same, but for many people they are interrelated; (2) spirituality is an awareness and honoring of wholeness and the interconnectedness of all things through the mystery of what many refer to as the Life-force, God, higher power, higher self, cosmic energy, Buddha nature, or Great Spirit; (3) spirituality is fundamentally about meaning making; (4) spirituality is always present (though often unacknowledged) in the learning environment; (5) spiritual development constitutes moving toward greater authenticity or to a more authentic self; (6) spirituality is about how people construct knowledge through largely unconscious and symbolic processes, often made more concrete in art forms such as music, image, symbol, and ritual, all of which are manifested culturally; (7) spiritual experiences most often happen by surprise.

There are probably as many definitions of culture as there are of spirituality, a point that is also taken up in Chapter Two. But as it is meant here, *culture* is the shared beliefs, values, behaviors, language, and ways of communicating and making meaning among a particular social group. In order to develop culturally relevant approaches to education, it is important to have some understanding

of what the beliefs, values, language, and behaviors are of that cultural group. It is also important to become more conscious of one's *own* culture and what the assumptions are of making meaning in that culture. Often times white people, for example, have little sense of their culture. But it is important for all educators to have a sense of their culture if they are attempting to conduct culturally relevant education.

How This Book Came to Be

This book has emerged in a context. It is, in essence, a response to the complexity of education in a multicultural society and arises from a deep concern for spirituality as a way of making sense of one's life experience. For more than ten years, I have been attempting to teach in a way that is culturally relevant to adult students from a variety of cultural backgrounds. Part of my motivation to do so is my concern for cultural and social justice issues that is rooted in some of my own spiritual commitments, though I rarely discuss spirituality in my classes.

Teaching classes that are culturally relevant and that attempt to work for greater equity in adult and higher education in regard to race, culture, national origin, gender, sexual orientation, and dis/ability can at times be controversial and emotional. But over the years, I found that occasionally conducting activities that draw on image, symbol, music, or an art form, which to me are grounded in spirituality, seems to help groups to move beyond conflict to some degree. While the term *spirituality* is rarely used, learners are better able to focus on what is connecting and similar in our human experience, as well as what is quite different based on our culture, gender, or national origin. Such activities are often led by students in presentations or teaching demonstrations based on the books and readings that are a required part of their work in higher education. Further, students are able to see the multiple ways in which people construct knowledge: through the rational or cognitive in analyti-

cal reading and discussion; through the affective and relational in connecting ideas with their emotions, life experience, and relationships with others; and through the symbolic and artistic, or the spiritual.

This book has also emerged out of discussions and a concern that education be not only culturally relevant but also transformative. There have been a number of discussions about transformative learning, though few focus on the significance of spirituality in the process. But if education is going to be culturally relevant and transformative on the individual or social level, it must engage learners on a variety of levels: the cognitive or rational, the affective, the sociocultural, and the symbolic or spiritual level. While there is greater freedom to do this in some adult education settings, the issue for me at the beginning of this journey was how to educate by engaging learners on all these levels, particularly in adult higher education settings where I work.

Because of my own strong interest in understanding more about the connection between spirituality and culture, I began by conducting a qualitative study of a multicultural group of women adult educators who were teaching or working with cultural issues in higher education or as community activists. In addition all were motivated to teach partly because of their spiritual commitments. The study was so fascinating to me that I continued the study to include men as well as women. Interviews focused on how participants' spirituality changed over time, how it related to their childhood religious traditions, their culture, and their gender, and how it informed their teaching. Participants also discussed their definition of spirituality and three of their most significant spiritual experiences. In the appendix, I explain the details of the methodology.

This book emerged out of this study and is primarily intended for those in higher and adult education settings, as well as those who work with adult learners in any setting in which issues of spirituality and culture intersect, including in one-on-one settings in counseling or advising and in group settings such as classrooms and

community groups. Given that my own teaching is in the context of higher education, the suggestions for practice are especially related to higher education settings. Since the ideas in this book were based on a sample of adult and higher educators of different cultural backgrounds who directly challenge systems of power and privilege in their classes and community work, social activists may find this work useful. But the book is especially intended for those attempting to teach for cultural relevance grounded in a sense of spirituality, and attempts to develop a theory-in-progress of a spiritually grounded and culturally relevant pedagogy for transformation.

Chapter Overview

This book is divided into three parts, each of which is made up of four chapters. All parts of this book feature the stories and experiences of real people, especially those I interviewed for this study. Stories touch our hearts and put a human face on the world of ideas. Further, they provide examples and a way to illustrate a concept or idea. Throughout the book I have tried to keep the focus partially on what the themes of each chapter suggest for educational practice. Thus, even though practice is dealt with in depth in Part Three, throughout the text I have offered brief implications for practice.

Part One provides a framework for breaking the silence about spirituality in adult and higher education, and more particularly the connection of spirituality to culture. Chapter One serves as an introduction and draws on the stories of four educators who work in adult and higher education settings to illustrate how spirituality connects to culture and informs educational work. I also share some of my own story to provide background context as an educator doing cultural work and as a human being on a journey with others in the world. Chapter Two provides an overview of the way spirituality has been dealt with in academia and then defines what I mean by the terms *spirituality* and *culture* as I use them throughout

the book, particularly in developing culturally relevant approaches to higher and adult education. Chapter Three emphasizes that spirituality and religion are not the same and considers the convergences and divergences among spirituality, religion, and culture. It also examines how spiritual and cultural knowledge is constructed through image, symbol, ritual, art form, and music. Chapter Four deals with the themes and variations of spiritual experience itself through the use of story and example.

Part Two focuses on identity issues related to spiritual development as *change over time*. Chapter Five focuses on overall spiritual development as a spiral process of moving forward and spiraling back, rather than as a linear process, and examines the way educators can further their spiritual development and stay spiritually grounded through a balance process of inner reflection and outer action. Chapter Six takes a more narrative perspective on development and deals with the intersection of gender and culture in relationship to spiritual development, particularly as manifested during midlife integration. The focus of Chapter Seven is on the process of “claiming a sacred face” and the role of spirituality in claiming a positive cultural identity in light of some of the cultural and race and ethnic identity models of development. Chapter Eight deals with the experience of crossing culture in spiritual development, with the role of spirituality in dealing with the complexity of intersecting identities, and with White identity.

Part Three deals with issues related to the practice and further development of a theory-in-progress of a spiritually grounded and culturally relevant pedagogy. Chapter Nine focuses on ways of approaching transformative teaching that are spiritually grounded and culturally relevant in the different contexts of adult and community education and in higher education. Chapter Ten presents the multiple theoretical influences on and then the theory-in-progress of a spiritually grounded and culturally relevant pedagogy particularly related to adult higher education settings. Chapter Eleven provides stories and examples of how this theory-in-progress has been

applied in practice. Chapter Twelve discusses the possibilities and challenges of spiritually grounded and culturally relevant teaching. Finally, the epilogue is a final reflection about the role of spirituality in education for individual and social transformation as we move into the future. I hope you enjoy the journey as we forge that future together.

Acknowledgments

The construction of knowledge is always a collaborative process. Even though I have been the scribe that has put these ideas to paper, these ideas have been constructed in dialogue with many people over the years. Here I would like to acknowledge and thank several of them. Certainly my parents and family provided a foundation for me to understand spirituality and culture. My colleagues and students over the years have taught me a lot, often inadvertently, about the importance of the connection of spirituality and culture; many have also been important cultural mentors for me, but there are several that have been especially important.

This book came to be somewhat by accident. I had been doing research related to spirituality and culture, though I didn't intend to write a book. Then I received notification that the then Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at National-Louis University, Dr. Richard Roughton, had given me course release time to "write my book." I found this surprising since I hadn't requested course release time to write a book but rather to do research. I took it as a sign that perhaps I should write a book. Thus, I would like to thank the late Dr. Richard Roughton, who passed away in August 2002, not only for his generosity but also for reading and commenting on several chapters of the manuscript along the way. May you rest in peace, Richard!

I would also like to thank Dr. Scipio A. J. Colin, III, the chair of the Department of Adult and Continuing Education at National-Louis University, who not only agreed to release time but also pro-

vided much support and thoughtful dialogue on the topic of this work—in hallway conversations or over dinner at Bennigans. My other colleagues on the faculty at National-Louis University where I wrote most of this book, Gabriele Strohschen, Randee Lawrence, and Stephen Brookfield, also provided either thoughtful conversation or comments on the manuscript. I would especially like to thank Tom Heaney for his careful read and comments on much of this manuscript and for the quick feedback that he has always been known for.

I thank my colleagues across the country who have read some or all of this manuscript, particularly Tal Guy, Ed Taylor, Sharan Merriam, Larry Daloz, Juanita Johnson-Bailey, Carolyn Clark, Marvin Garcia, Pam Hays, Tito Rodriguez, Silvia Villa, and Alvaro Alcazar—all have been equally supportive. In addition, I would also like to thank those who have been important cultural mentors and teaching partners with me. In addition to those mentioned above are Viviana Aguilar, Nadira Charaniya, Clarice Perry Ford, Ming-Yeh Lee, Robert Guerrero, Mary Stone Hanley, and Jane West Walsh to name a few. The participants in this study have also taught me the most about spirituality and cultural relevance, and while most are known only through a pseudonym, their participation and insight have made this book possible. A special thanks goes to my good friend, colleague, cultural mentor, co-teacher and presenter, Dr. Derise Tolliver, whom I initially met as a participant in this study. Our endless conversations on this topic and our projects together since the time of our initial meeting have strongly informed aspects of this work, as noted throughout the text. Another special thanks goes to my editor and friend at Jossey-Bass, David Brightman, for his excellent suggestions, very important feedback, and unfailing moral support, and to Melissa Kirk for attending to the details of the editorial process.

Books only come to be with the support of important friends who nurture you, cook with you, take care of you in a variety of ways, and have fun with you. Special thanks go to Teri Bernstein,

Laura Etchen, Debra Daspit, Ruth Largay, David Tisdell, Betsy Rich, Ellen McMahon, and Carol Melnick. Finally, important thanks go to Terry Miles, my partner and friend, who provided many meals, fun conversation about his world travels flying airplanes, and continued personal and spiritual support to help see this project through to completion.

October, 2002
Harrisburg, Pennsylvania

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About the Author

ELIZABETH J. TISDELL joined the faculty at Pennsylvania State University-Harrisburg as associate professor of adult education in August of 2002. She received an Ed.D. degree in adult education from the University of Georgia in 1992, an M.A. degree in religion and religious education from Fordham University in 1979, and a B.A. degree in mathematics from the University of Maine in 1977.

Prior to joining the faculty at Pennsylvania State University, Dr. Tisdell was associate professor of adult and continuing education at National-Louis University in Chicago and was on the faculty at Antioch University, Seattle. She worked as a campus minister for the Catholic Church from 1979–1989 at Central Michigan University and Loyola University, New Orleans.

Her research interests include spirituality and culture in adult development and adult learning, critical and feminist pedagogy, and multicultural issues in adult education. Her work has appeared in the *Adult Education Quarterly*, the *Journal of Adult Development*, many edited books on adult education, including the 2000 edition of the *Handbook of Adult and Continuing Education*. She is also author of the monograph *Creating Inclusive Adult Learning Environments* (1995) and the coeditor with Dr. Mary Jane Eisen and contributing author to *Team Teaching and Learning*. She considers this book *Exploring Spirituality and Culture in Adult and Higher Education* the work of her soul and part of an ongoing life work.

Part I

Breaking the Silence *Spirituality and Culture in Adult Meaning-Making and Education*

The spiritual awakening that is slowly taking place counterculturally will become more of a daily norm as we all willingly break mainstream cultural taboos that silence or erase our passion for spiritual practice.

bell hooks (2000, p. 82)

Introduction

Culture, Spirituality, and Adult Learning

We live in a culturally pluralistic society and a culturally complex world. Trying to teach adult learners in a way that is culturally relevant to their own lives in a culturally pluralistic teaching context is a challenge. Many who do this work do so precisely because they are absolutely passionate about it. It is their vocation, the work of their very souls, often grounded in their spiritual commitment, as well as in their own cultural background and concern for cultural issues. At least, this was the case for the many adult and higher educators that I interviewed in the past two years who are doing this work. Most of them rarely speak publicly about the role of their spirituality relative to this work, however; as hooks (2000) suggests in the opening quote to Part One, there have been mainstream cultural taboos that have kept them silent about their spirituality, especially if they are teaching in higher education. Still, spirituality is a major organizing principle in their lives, and perhaps in the lives of many who are trying to attend to cultural issues in learners' lives in adult and higher education. The following are a few examples.

Four Stories

Julia Gutierrez is forty-eight years old, a Chicana, who was raised Catholic in the barrio of Southern California in a Mexican-American family. Spanish was the primary language spoken at home as a child,

and Catholicism, with an especially strong devotion to La Virgen de Guadalupe, was very important in her family. Although Julia no longer practices her Catholicism with any regularity, her spirituality is very important to her work in adult education with teachers focusing on the creation of culturally relevant curricula for schools and community groups both in the United States and in the Pacific Islands. In reflecting on the place of her spirituality in the educational consulting group with whom she works, she notes:

I find there is a dimension of spirituality in the way we relate to each other and in the way we collectively approach the work of social change. Because we are each from a different cultural background, we express our spirituality in different ways—Hawaiian chants, prayers to the four directions, Christian prayer. The interesting thing though, as I think more about it, I suspect that there are also atheists among the group, yet we somehow seem to delve into spirit. It might be striving to be human, I don't know. But we all believe in the goodness of people and the possibility of change, while trying to live a life of community.

Marcus Washington is an African American education professor in his early fifties who grew up in the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church. Aside from a period in his twenties when he pursued other interests, he has spent his life involved in African American churches as an activist and adult educator, in addition to his work as a professor. His current spirituality, with its emphasis on working for social justice, is informed by the church of his youth, the work of African American liberation theologians (Cone, 1990), and to some extent the economic class analysis of Marxism (but not its antireligious aspects). In reflecting back to his spiritual foundation nurtured through his church, juxtaposed with the Marxist idea that religion is the opiate of the people, Marcus notes:

Growing up, in terms of equal rights, civil rights, and justice for black folks, religion was not an opiate! It was something that animated us!

He adds, in speaking about the role of spirituality, justice, and community,

I always saw the church as being, in the black community at any rate, sort of a vanguard.

It was a vanguard that provided inspiration to continue to do civil rights and other social justice work. It is for this reason that he continues to be involved with church: it feeds his spirituality, is rooted in his own cultural tradition, and nurtures his willingness to teach for social change, both in higher education and in community-based settings.

Lisa Riddle is a forty-two-year-old white woman, a singer-songwriter and community educator who was raised in Alaska. She describes her spiritual formation and spirituality as mostly related to the wilderness surrounding her as she grew up.

I was raised in the temple of the great outdoors. . . . It wasn't like my parents were engaging in some kind of spiritual instruction; we just lived in the lap of God! Let's face it, it's hard to miss the spirit when you are surrounded by wilderness! Wilderness is a spiritual source for me, which usually links to indigenous nature and indigenous cultures, not because that was my training, but that was my exposure. My folks did get us out to some major hikes where we are out there with whatever bear might happen to come your way, and to me that's a spiritual experience!

It is this wilderness spirituality that connects her to the environment, the indigenous people of Alaska, and larger concerns about

culture overall that inspires her work as a singer-songwriter and educator in dealing with environmental, antiracist, and cross-cultural education programs.

Aiysha Ali is a thirty-five-year-old professor of education, a Muslim woman of East Indian descent, born in Africa, who immigrated to North America from Africa and England as an adolescent. She notes that her commitment as an educator is rooted in her belief that the purpose of education is “the improvement of the human condition through both individual and social change.” Further, she notes, “It is my interpretation of the Qur’anic and prophetic injunctions regarding human responsibility that lead me to hold this belief.” Her commitment as an educator around individual achievement, multicultural and language issues, and educational policy studies is rooted in her understanding of the Qur’an and Islam in general, which require the nurturing of one’s intellect, as well as working for social responsibility. Her educational work is strongly informed by her spirituality and religious identity, and more recently she has chosen to be a bit more overt in claiming her Muslim identity. She resonates strongly with the literature on education as transformation; however, in explaining how she recently wrote her philosophy of education, she noted:

It is not that I do not find resonant voices in this arena, but rather I chose to highlight the voice from within. I can no longer continue to separate my American and professional self from my religious self; I can no longer see myself as an educator first and a Muslim second. I am a Muslim who has chosen to become an educator and to use education as my contribution to the improvement of life for all in society—regardless of race, religion, creed, and nationality.

Four stories—four educators, with vastly different cultural backgrounds, are teaching adults in higher education or community-based settings and are trying to do so by attending to cultural issues in a

culturally pluralistic society. Spirituality is an important underpinning to the work they do, although it is manifested in different ways for each of them. Like many people in North America, the spirituality of Marcus Washington and Aiysha Ali is very much rooted in their respective religious traditions, which also connects with their cultural and ethnic identity. But like many others in North America, Julia Gutierrez and Lisa Riddle prefer to describe themselves as “spiritual but not religious.” Julia has moved away from the Catholicism of her upbringing. She has no affiliation with any organized religion and has developed a more eclectic spirituality, but one related to Chicana culture with elements of Catholicism that she still finds life-affirming and relevant to her cultural background. Lisa, however, was raised in no particular religious tradition, but her spirituality, rooted in the wilderness, is very much a part of the culture of Alaska where she grew up. While spirituality as a concept is more thoroughly explored in Chapter Two, it is already clear that the spirituality of all four of these educators is connected to their own cultural backgrounds and histories. Their view of spirituality also has to do with making meaning and with a sense of interconnectedness and wholeness.

Julia Gutierrez, Marcus Washington, Lisa Riddle, Aiysha Ali (all pseudonyms), and many of the people whom I have interviewed, rarely speak about their spirituality in any kind of public forum unless explicitly asked about it. However, they do recognize the importance of the spiritual dimension in their own lives and in the lives of those they teach. They also recognize that in trying to teach to honor the cultures and multiple dimensions of learners’ lives, they must find ways to acknowledge the important ways people construct knowledge and find meaning in their own spirituality and traditions. Although they rarely use the term *spirituality* in their educational work unless learners bring it up, they are gradually beginning to take more risks in some places in talking about its importance. They are perhaps like many in higher and adult education whose spirituality is important but who may be tentative about

discussing it; yet slowly they are beginning to give voice to that which is such a central motivating force in their lives. So there seems to be a place for attending to a sense of spirituality that focuses on wholeness and the interconnectedness of all things in dealing with the complexity of communicating across cultural differences.

In this book I look at how spirituality relates to teaching for cultural relevance in adult and higher education in a culturally pluralistic context in an increasingly complex world and explore the place of spirituality in the lives of educators and learners. Because I always want to know how an author came to be interested in a subject, most of the remainder of this chapter gives some background to how I became interested in the topic personally and professionally, and uses some of my own story to explore how culture and spirituality intersect. After providing a general discussion on why it is important in this new millennium to consider the connection between spirituality and culture in higher and adult education, I will provide a brief overview on the organization and content of the book.

Background Context

My own thinking about spirituality and its connection to culturally relevant education has emerged over time. It has a lot to do with my commitments and what I see as part of my life's purpose. But it emerged in dilemmas I have faced in trying to live out what I understand as part of that life's purpose, in particular, to create greater access and equity to education for adults who have been marginalized because of their race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, or ableness. This does not mean simply opening up access to a canon of knowledge created and dominated by white people. It is also about hearing the voices of members of different cultural, class, and gender communities, recognizing the knowledge that is present in those communities, and including it in the curriculum. It means attending to what is culturally relevant to those community members and honoring what is sacred for them in terms of academic

knowledge, narrative writing, art, poetry, symbols, and ways of interacting. It also means, as Guy (1999) suggests, that as an instructor, I need to try to increase my awareness and understanding of my own cultural background. There are often occasions in our day-to-day life experience that invite reflection on our own cultural backgrounds. I begin with one experience that caused me to revisit my own cultural history and consider what it has to do with who I am now.

Revisiting My Own Cultural Background: A Time Warp

It was in the spring of 2000 that I first saw the interactive play *Late Nite Catechism*, created by Vicki Quade and Maripat Donovan in 1993. My eighty-year-old father had come to visit me in Chicago, and I always look for something that we can do together that I think he can relate to and enjoy, something that builds on our common father-daughter history but adds to our shared experiences. So during this visit on a spring Sunday afternoon, we opted to see *Late Nite Catechism*, the off-Broadway comedy that is extremely reminiscent of the version of Catholicism in which my parents raised me, back in my predominantly Jewish and ethnic-Catholic hometown in the northern suburbs of Boston where I grew up. I was sure my father and I would find this entertaining.

The setting as described in the playbill was “an adult catechism class, Chicago, 2000.” The participatory audience was the “class,” and instantly it seemed as though we had entered a time machine that brought us back to 1963, as “Sister” (she had no “last name”), dressed in full habit, retaught us “the facts” of the Catholicism of our youth. There were some minor differences between this and the setting of our childhood, of course: this was 2000, not 1963; we were adults, not children; and this was Chicago, not suburban Boston. But here I was. Here we were. All adults looking backward with a lot of laughter, and looking inward with a little longing. Such is the power of cultural memory.

There is a note from the director in the playbill that says: “Catholics (and yes, that includes you lapsed ones) do *share a strong*