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Spiritual Formation Training in the George Fox University Graduate Department of Clinical Psychology

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Spiritual formation training in the George Fox University Graduate Department of Clinical Psychology is described. An evangelical Quaker institution, the ethos of George Fox University is intended to foster experiential spiritual development and reflective self-awareness. In a 2008 curriculum revision the faculty attempted to strengthen the experiential dimensions of spiritual formation training even at the risk of reducing training in more academic dimensions of theology and integration. A 2013 program evaluation solicited student and alumni perspectives on the effectiveness of the spiritual formation training they received. Results of the program evaluation suggest areas for future development.

Doctoral training in clinical psychology is a rewarding and arduous task. In half a decade's time, students move from learning basic Rogerian skills of empathy in their first year to delivering specialized evidence-based interventions at the end of training. In the first year most don't know how to compute a standard error of measurement. By the end of training they routinely interpret psychological assessment results with a sophisticated understanding of the psychometric basis of testing. At the beginning of training a dissertation seems like a monumental task—a huge mountain that must be climbed. By the end they have climbed the mountain and may have engaged in other research projects as well. During an intensive five years, students move from being novices in the field of psychology to being experts deserving of a doctoral degree.

But all this professional formation comes at a cost. Throughout training students often experience fatigue, frustration, and struggle. A demanding training environment can have implications for personal relationships, including relationships with God (Fisk et al., 2013). Some find their spiritual life and identity to change quite dramatically amidst the rigor of doctoral training. The risk is that professional acumen comes at the cost of spiritual vitality.

The Importance of Spiritual Formation

Whereas spiritual formation and particular prayer practices may be useful to anyone in any vocational context, the rigor and demands on emerging psychologists make it especially important for doctoral students to consider their spiritual well-being and related issues of formation. Spiritual formation generally encompasses both educational endeavors as well as the more in depth process of spiritual direction. This combination of education and experiential practices is intended to deepen faith and spiritual growth (May, 1982). Focusing on the spiritual health of the developing psychologist is not only an important aspect of training, but it may also allow for increased self-awareness that helps eliminate bias toward others and therefore enables the practice of psychology in an ethical manner (American Psychological Association, 2010).

Spiritual Formation in an Evangelical Quaker Context

George Fox University is affiliated with the Northwest Yearly Meeting, a group of Christians who meet and worship in the tradition of Friends (Quakers). That said, the school attracts faculty and students from a variety of Christian denominations and traditions, and the Graduate Department of Clinical Psychology (GDCP) attempts to train students to understand a broad range of religious and spiritual perspectives (McMinn et al., in press). Still, the evangelical

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Quaker influence remains a prevalent part of the campus community as well as the semi-rural town of Newberg where the GDCP resides.

Quaker spirituality is deeply experiential, with an emphasis on finding Christ in the present moment and in present circumstances. Quakers have long avoided distinctions between sacred and secular, instead emphasizing God's presence everywhere, in every moment, and in every person (Bill, 2005). One of the great human challenges then is to be attuned to the presence of God amidst whatever circumstances one may experience. The fundamental tasks of spiritual formation are to pay attention, to see God in unlikely places, and to grow in relationship with God as we observe God's presence and work in our midst.

Richard Foster, also an evangelical Quaker, began his classic book, *Celebration of Discipline*, these words: "Superficiality is the curse of our age... The desperate need today is not for a greater number of intelligent people, or gifted people, but for deep people" (Foster, 1988, p. 1). Because we have a strong applicant pool and selective admission into the GDCP, we find this to be a community of intelligent and gifted people. Nevertheless, can we also be a community of deep people, attuned to one another and to the ways of God? We have attempted to do so through the curricular and extra-curricular methods described in the first part of this article. However, as will be seen later in the article, we have not been entirely successful in our spiritual formation efforts. Spiritual formation training in the GDCP is very much a work in progress.

Faculty Plan for Spiritual Formation

The GDCP existed at a seminary prior to transitioning to George Fox University in 1990. The training model at the seminary assumed that students would be trained in graduate level knowledge in both theology and psychology. Over time this expectation seemed increasingly unrealistic and undesirable, especially as students expressed both exhaustion with the rigor of training and more interest in learning psychology than theology. In 2008, the GDCP implemented an extensive revision of the integration curriculum that had two primary goals. First, we attempted to increase integrative dialogue between religious scholars and psychologists in the classroom by having most of the integration classes team-taught. In order to do this, we lowered the expectation of

graduate level knowledge in biblical, historical, and systematic theology. Rather than content-oriented lecture courses, we opted for dialogical instruction that modeled and encouraged interdisciplinary engagement over mastery of content. Second, we enhanced the spiritual formation component of our integration training.

Prior to the 2008 curriculum revision, students took only one course in spiritual formation—a two-hour introduction during the first semester of their first year. As a result of the revision, students now take three courses. In their first year they still take a two-hour introduction to spiritual formation and spiritual disciplines. This is primarily focused on the intrapersonal nature of spiritual formation. The course is designed to offer a variety of exposures to spiritual practices so that students can find what best fits them in their spiritual journey. The course encompasses a one-day retreat, which focuses on prayer practices with an ecumenical breadth in hopes that students might find resonance with one or two that they could then own. These prayer practices are offered generally in a participatory fashion as well as paired with a visit to a Trappist monastery, where a monk speaks about the contemplative tradition. This praxis part of the course is designed to provide additional tools to cope with the stress of graduate training and promote spiritual health.

The course is also intended to be hospitable to students coming from various Christian traditions and backgrounds and therefore draws on ecumenical resources. The syllabus includes readings dating as far back as the early desert tradition of the Christian faith paired with contemporary treatments of desert prayer by Thomas Merton (1970) and Henri Nouwen (1981). Given the Quaker heritage and cultural context of the university, there are readings and various discussions from Richard Foster's (1988) *Celebration of Discipline*. Students write a short spiritual autobiography, in which they examine their spiritual journey as it intertwines with life and their desire to become a psychologist. Students also write an exploratory essay in which they first identify and then examine a particular historical figure, prayer practice, or topic related to psychology and spirituality. From these papers, students generate 15-minute individual presentations to the class. The class is divided up into small groups and each week there is a topic to discuss within this same small group. The aim is to develop a sense of community in

the midst of the larger GDCP. The movement of the course is to go from solitude to prayer to community, thus focusing on one's spiritual health before being able to reach out to others.

In their second year they take a course structured as series of two one-day community retreats. The focus of the second year experience is the interpersonal and community dimensions of spiritual formation. During their third year of training students participate in a service project and meet to discuss spiritual formation as reaching out to a hurting world.

In addition to these curricular strategies for promoting spiritual formation, faculty attempt to make the GDCP a community where faith is supported and encouraged. We meet together for community worship on a monthly basis, professors often begin class with devotional thoughts or prayer, and both clinical- and research-mentoring teams provide opportunities for transformative relationships to develop.

After five years of implementing the revised integration curriculum, including the enhanced spiritual formation training plan, the faculty recognized that more changes are needed. In 2013, a team of students led by one faculty member conducted a consultation project to evaluate the effectiveness of spiritual formation training in the GDCP. The team's findings give some reason for hope while also suggesting that the current plan falls short of its intent.

Student and Alumni Perspectives on Spiritual Formation Training

Each year students in the third-year consultation course complete an applied project to assist a local organization. On occasion the organization they choose is the GDCP, making it an internal consultation. One of the 2013 consultation projects involved evaluating student and alumni perspectives on spiritual formation training in the GDCP and then providing feedback to the faculty. The primary data collection involved an electronically administered questionnaire consisting of both qualitative comments and quantitative rating items, completed by 38 alumni and 50 current students.

In the consultation course students learn to distinguish traditional research design and methods, which they learn in other courses, from focused program evaluation. With program evaluation the primary emphasis is to understand an organization and provide targeted feedback and recommendations based on a particular question that

has been defined by the organization. The question identified for the 2013 consultation was, "How is the current curriculum accomplishing the overarching goal of facilitating students' spiritual formation?" Rather than presenting findings as would be typical in methods and results sections of a research-oriented journal article, our focus here is to highlight the main themes emerging from the particular consultation question.

Students and Alumni Value Spiritual Formation

Alumni and students at every level of training affirmed that spiritual formation is important to them personally, and that they are eager for spiritual formation to be part of their professional development. Presumably, this desire for spiritual formation is one of the factors drawing students to an explicitly-Christian doctoral program in psychology. On one hand, this suggests a good match between students and faculty goals. Students come to the GDCP with high expectations for how they will be formed spiritually, and it is a high priority for faculty to provide formation opportunities for students. On the other hand, high expectations can easily cause frustration and disappointment when they are not met.

Modest U-Shaped Satisfaction Ratings

The overall satisfaction ratings with spiritual formation in the current curriculum were modest, hovering around the midpoint of the rating scale provided. This suggests that high student expectations and faculty goals are not being fully translated into the formation opportunities that everyone seems to be hoping for.

It is noteworthy that satisfaction ratings tend to have a U-shaped distribution with first-year students, fourth-year students, interns, and alumni reporting greater satisfaction with their spiritual formation training than students in the second and third years of training. Still, satisfaction ratings across the board are lower than we would like to see. In previous program evaluations of research training (Hill & McMinn, 2004) and clinical training (McMinn & Hill, 2011) in explicitly-Christian doctoral programs, students have tended to rate their training experiences lower than faculty and alumni. Ratings of spiritual formation training at George Fox University seem to fall into a similar pattern. It seems that the stress of graduate school, especially as students slog through the middle phases of training, lends itself to feelings of frustration and disappointment.

Nonetheless, it is important to consider students' perspectives in training, even if those perspectives are tainted to some extent by the stress of graduate school. Later we describe some new strategies we are now implementing that should help address some of the concerns raised by students in this program evaluation.

Blurred Distinction between Integration and Spiritual Formation

With the 2008 curriculum revision the faculty attempted to distinguish between spiritual formation courses and integration classes. Spiritual formation courses were to emphasize personal growth, cohort cohesion, and service to the underserved, all of which would fit within Bouma-Prediger's (1990) categories of faith-praxis and experiential integration. Integration classes were to focus more on interdisciplinary and intradisciplinary integration (Bouma-Prediger, 1990), helping students think through the connections between psychology and theology and apply them in clinical settings.

Though this distinction between spiritual formation training and other integration training seems compelling to the faculty as well as the team of students conducting the 2013 program evaluation, student and alumni comments on the questionnaire make it evident that the distinction is less clear to them. They tended to respond to questions about spiritual formation training by referring to all aspects of training that involve integrating faith and psychology. The distinction between spiritual formation and other integration classes is important to communicate given that spiritual formation training and integration classes have significantly different goals, even if not mutually exclusive. Finding that students tend to conflate the two has caused us to consider the importance of both a clear spiritual formation mission statement and effective ways of communicating that mission.

Religious Involvement across Cohorts

The consultation project did not involve collecting longitudinal data, so care should be taken in interpreting the data obtained. It is striking, though, to see that whereas 96% of respondents reported regularly attending church prior to training, 81% of students and 69% of interns and graduates reported currently attending church. These data, taken together with the multisite data reported elsewhere in this special issue (Fisk et al., 2013), suggest the need for more detailed research on the nature of what appears

to be declining religious involvement throughout graduate training at explicitly-Christian training programs. Fisk et al. (2013) pose various explanations for this, including the possibilities that students' faith is eroded by the ideological tensions between psychology and Christianity, that students rearrange their faith such that formal religious involvement becomes less important to them, that students gain more confidence in their own abilities and as a result end up relying less on God, or that students are simply depleted by the overwhelming demands of graduate school and end up attending church less as a result. Clearly, more research is needed to better understand what happens to religious involvement during graduate training in explicitly-Christian doctoral programs in clinical psychology.

Flexible Pathways for Formation

Among the various qualitative comments offered on the questionnaire, students expressed appreciation for portions of the curriculum that were tailored to their personal lives and provided flexibility to engage in spiritual formation on their own terms. They noted that spiritual formation is intensely personal, and they appreciated when assignments allowed enough flexibility to maximize the experience. Assignments that provided room for personalization, experiential practice, and space for open discussion and growth were highly valued. Some students expressed a desire to take the individual aspects of spiritual formation further, suggesting that providing one-on-one spiritual guidance, possibly through spiritual directors, would be valuable to the curriculum.

Whose Responsibility is Spiritual Formation?

Other students expressed concern that spiritual formation sometimes felt forced, citing credit costs, time demands, and workloads as interferences to participating in the process of spiritual formation. Students wrestled with the notion that spiritual formation was being prescribed through coursework rather than being sought out by individuals within their own religious tradition. Some students stated that coursework assignments often felt like busywork to be completed for a grade rather than work that was spiritually forming. Others questioned whether spiritual formation should be the responsibility of the program at all.

Students with this perspective raise some interesting questions for ongoing conversation. The academic classroom has historically been an

efficient way to educate groups of people and provide this with professional skills and expertise, but perhaps some types of formation do not lend themselves well to classroom learning, academic credit, tuition, and so on. This is reminiscent of the perhaps prophetic words of Nouwen (1972) several decades ago:

But here we must be aware of the great temptation that will face the Christian minister of the future. Everywhere Christian leaders, men and women alike, have become increasingly aware of the need for more specific training and formation. This need is realistic, and the desire for more professionalism in the ministry is understandable. But the danger is that instead of becoming free to let the spirit grow, the future minister may entangle himself *[sic]* the complications of his own assumed competence and use his specialism as an excuse to avoid the much more difficult task of being compassionate. The task of the Christian leader is to bring out the best in man *[sic]* to lead him forward to a more human community; the danger is that his skillful diagnostic eye will become more an eye for distant and detailed analysis than the eye of a compassionate partner. (p. 42)

The role of the academy in spiritual formation seems an important topic to discuss and consider in the GDCP community in the months and years ahead. Whatever comes of these conversations, it seems important to still find ways to encourage and foster spiritual formation in Christian graduate programs, even if the means of accomplishing this formation is less dependent on curriculum than it currently is.

Future Directions

The frankness of this article may be disarming to some readers. We began by describing the faculty's noble intentions for how we do spiritual formation training in the George Fox University GDCP, which was to be expected. But then we reported the candid and not-too-flattering impressions of students and alumni who recently participated in a program evaluation. Though the program evaluation results are not dismal, they are disappointing. We include the program

evaluation results in this article for several reasons. First, the topic of this special issue is spiritual formation training in explicitly-Christian doctoral programs in psychology. This, it appears, is a difficult task. The difficulty of this work ought to be considered and discussed, both within doctoral programs and in forums where faculty and students from various programs gather together. Perhaps this article will foster helpful conversation. Second, we train psychologists to believe in systematic appraisal and to boldly speak of the results they find, however unsettling they may be. Having recently completed this program evaluation, it would be disingenuous to mask it when writing this article describing spiritual formation training at George Fox. Third, Quaker spirituality calls for simplicity, and part of simplicity is speaking the truth clearly (Matthew 5:37), so we desire to be forthright about our process and outcomes in this article. Finally, we see the potential outcome of honest appraisal to be growth. In their text on program evaluation, Posavac and Carey (2003) suggest that, "there is only one overall purpose for program evaluation activities: contributing to the provision of quality services to people in need" (p. 13). Accordingly, we are seeking ways to grow amidst the concerns students expressed in the 2013 program evaluation.

Currently, we are making changes related to the concerns raised by students and alumni in the program evaluation. First, beginning in the 2013-14 academic year we are requiring a year of individual spiritual direction for all doctoral students, and encouraging a second year of direction. By spiritual direction, we mean a monthly meeting with a qualified spiritual director who has both academic preparation and the personal insight and wisdom necessary to help doctoral students from a variety of theological and religious backgrounds to explore the faith dimensions of their personal development. The spiritual directors students will be working with have been vetted through a knowledgeable seminary professor who educates spiritual directors and is herself a credentialed spiritual director. Though we will retain the academic infrastructure for parts of the experience (i.e., required course with tuition charge, passing the course contingent on attending meetings with the spiritual director), the content of the students' meetings with the spiritual directors will be completely private. Our hope is that meeting with a qualified spiritual director under these

circumstances will serve several purposes: help students clarify their expectations, set personally meaningful goals, process their training experience, and promote growth and well-being. It goes without saying that spiritual direction will be collaborative and inclusive, allowing students to develop their spiritual lives in ways that fit their religious traditions.

Second, we are striving for ways to better distinguish the experiential process of spiritual formation from the more cognitive processes of interdisciplinary and intradisciplinary integration (Bouma-Prediger, 1990). To this end we have assembled a team of students and faculty to articulate and communicate a mission for our monthly community worship meetings. Faculty readily discuss research results regarding spiritual formation among graduate students (e.g., Fisk et al., 2013) and encourage students early in training to carefully consider their own spiritual trajectory. We now have an integration orientation meeting for new students where we distinguish between experiential and cognitive forms of integration and discuss the importance of both. All of our spiritual formation courses are being reconsidered and adjusted accordingly.

Third, the 2013 evaluation has increased our awareness of how important it is to help students maintain their spiritual well-being. Whereas most of our students begin training with a desire to keep an active spiritual life, the rigors and strains of doctoral training in clinical psychology and the periodic sense of exhaustion associated with it can lead to depleted motivation for spiritual development. Rather than taking the commitment to spiritual formation as a given, it will be important to be more intentional about communicating the intent and rationale of spiritual formation frequently and to connect it with students' everyday learning experiences.

Fourth, spiritual formation, though intensely personal, also takes place in the context of a community. A trait that the GDGP seems to foster well, perhaps because of its Quaker heritage, is an open and listening community. With an eye toward personalization, the GDGP needs to continue fostering an atmosphere of respect for diverse voices. At times this may feel too open for some students, especially those coming from relatively conservative Christian traditions, so we need to continue our efforts to balance an emphasis on personal spiritual development with a community ethos of acceptance and kindness

toward one another, and a recognition that there may be multiple pathways of spiritual growth (Foster, 1998).

Finally, we are reminded of the importance of taking into account the diverse spiritual roots of our students. Making room for a variety of perspectives can be accomplished by featuring potential role models from various Christian traditions as guest speakers, asking them to expound on how they integrate their professional and spiritual identities. Another facet of rootedness is the connection to a local church. We are increasingly aware of how being connected to a church or spiritual community helps students remain spiritually active. Being more intentional about assisting incoming students manage this aspect of the transition to life in the Newberg area may be helpful in their long-term spiritual development. In all these ways, and more to come, we hope to sharpen the focus of our training as well as our students' expectations.

A clergyperson once asked Mother Teresa over tea, "What is your greatest problem?" To his shock, she answered that her greatest problem was professionalism. She went on to explain:

I have five sisters getting their MD degrees and far greater numbers getting RN, LPN and MSW degrees. But a funny thing happens. They come back from their education and they are concerned about titles, offices, and parking privileges. So I take all that away from them and I send them to the hospice of the dying. There they hold people's hands, pray with them, and feed them. After six months of that, they typically get things straight again and remember their vocation to be a spiritual presence first, and a professional presence second. (Bausch, 2001, p. 254)

Perhaps the dichotomy between professionalism and spirituality is stated more strongly than necessary, but the point Mother Teresa made is worth considering. At times professional education may hinder spiritual formation more than we imagine. This complicates how we construe education in our explicitly-Christian doctoral programs, and it calls us to pray often for our students and ourselves so that we may keep first things first.

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