

## **The Diversity and Spirituality Network: A Brief History**

The Diversity and Spirituality Network (DSN) was founded in the spring of 1995, after a series of conversations with Zachary Green and Angelo John Lewis. Their plans to create an organization in which members explored the nexus between diversity and spirituality were realized during a small Washington, DC meeting hosted by the Alexander Institute, of which Green was the executive director.

Shortly after these initial conversations, Rene Molenkamp and Cynthia Franklin joined Green and Lewis to form the DSN Planning Circle. A membership organization, DSN founders conceived the organization as a "diverse group growing towards community that actively explores the diversity and spirituality nexus." As expressed in its brochure, they envisioned the network as "...a process - an experiential exploration of the diversity and spirituality nexus. Participants are invited to bring their differences to the process and to share their experiences of spirituality in their lives.

DSN saw itself as a diverse group growing towards community. The organizations held one-day events called Explorations that were held every other month to find ways to connect and deepen personal and group awareness. The best of these explorations were incorporated into weekend public conferences.

From 1995-1998, DSN hosted a dozen explorations in Washington, Philadelphia and New York, two "discoveries" (experiential events taught by guest teachers) and weekend conferences hosted by Temple University, the National Multicultural Institute and the National Organizational Development Network.

In 1999, the formal organization ceased to exist.

## **Reflections on Diversity and Spirituality**

by

**Angelo John Lewis and Zachary Green, Ph.D.**

(Note: These two concept papers, Diversity and Spirituality, and Diversity: The Challenge of the Spiritual Dimension, helped frame the issues that led in 1995 to the birth of the Diversity and Spirituality Network (DSN), an emergent community that explores the diversity and spirituality nexus. DSN sponsors daylong Explorations, theme-based experiential events facilitated by members; Discoveries, symposia in which papers are read by members and invited guests; and public conferences, in which the best activities and models from the Explorations and Discoveries are utilized. For further information about DSN, call 202-293-3145; or write DSN, 1715 N. St., NW, Washington, DC, 20036; or send e-mail to DivSpirit@aol.com)

## **Diversity and Spirituality**

by

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As organizational development efforts aimed at managing diversity have become mainstream in recent years, this growth has been accompanied by the refining of what advocates call "the business case for diversity," or the notion that the creation of a gender, culture, and sexual-orientation sensitive workforce is good for the bottom line. Demographic trends involving an infusion of minorities, women, and immigrants into the workforce; plus the increasing internationalization and globalization of business are among the many factors that are cited as reasons to embark on company-wide programs to increase workforce cross-cultural competence and sensitivity to individual and cultural differences.

Although this emphasis on the business case will likely remain the main reason that corporations invest in diversity programs, one subtle consequence of this emphasis is that organizations may be more motivated by these economic considerations than the individuals within the organizations. The backlash that often accompanies the rollout of diversity programs seems to underscore this unintended reality. "I can understand, on a philosophical level, what diversity means for the corporation," resistant majority-group member managers seem to be saying, "But I cannot understand what is in it for me."

The need to give this hypothetical resistant manager a square answer to his or her question is one reason why a new philosophic underpinning for diversity work is needed, one which goes beyond the business (and even ethical) imperative and speaks to the needs of individuals who are the targets of diversity programs. Rather than supplanting the business case -- which is the main reason corporate organizations are liable to adopt diversity programs in cash-short times -- the new philosophical underpinning must add an additional, driving motivator for those whom are the end users of diversity programs. It must speak to individuals in much the same way that the business case speaks to organizational managers by answering the ultimate question: "what is in it for me?"

This self-interest question can be answered because the heart of diversity work is about something much deeper than economics. True diversity work is not simply about adding to bottom lines, but about expanding individual horizons and broadening the notion of self. By helping individuals become less grounded in the constraints of their identity as determined by such factors as ethnicity, culture, or gender, we help them expand their notions of who they are. Diversity work, properly facilitated, can be said to be in an individual's self-interest because it enables participants to become freer, more comfortable in any arena in which they find themselves. In this regard, diversity work is not just political or even educational work. In fact, it shares the agenda of and can be seen as a complement and counterbalance to spiritual work.

I am aware that the word "spiritual" is a loaded term and to many implies religion, which is actually a culturally-based expression of spiritual values. But what I mean here is not religion, but spirituality in the broadest sense of the term. i.e. the development of higher moral values and the awareness of transcendental reality. I am making a connection between the goals of diversity work, i.e. cross-cultural competency, freedom of prejudice, increasing understanding of culture, and the goals of spiritual work, which include psychosocial harmony, moral development, and enlightenment.

It would be simplistic to say that the quest for multicultural competency is the same as the quest for spiritual understanding and enlightenment. But the concurrent pursuit of both of these aims

solves inherent difficulties of the pursuit of either without the other. Diversity work without spiritual work -- and its emphasis on the transcendent -- can underscore differences, but yet fail to provide a framework for unity. Spiritual work without diversity work can cause individuals to ignore unpleasant realities such as prejudice and discrimination and, worse, adopt a "them-and-us" attitude towards others not of the same spiritual persuasion.

The common ground between diversity work and spiritual work rests on several implicit similarities. First, the individual incentive towards both is the longing for connection, belonging, and understanding of the self. Second, both quests support the broadening of the self by encouraging the transcendence of the limitations of beliefs and attitudes that limit growth. Third, each provides a practice field for the development of harmonious intergroup relations or individual and group interdependence.

Concurrently linking diversity and spirituality implies a shift in emphasis on the part of the practitioner. It means that we must reconceptualize the work and facilitate it in radically different ways:

- Our emphasis and values must be on inclusion at the core of our work
- Our approach should move away from the didactic, therefore allowing individuals to have their own experience of diversity and spirituality. (Possible techniques: the Group Relations approach and the use of dialogue)
- Our work should reflect the "gray areas" of ambiguity and complexity in both diversity and spirituality, reflecting our learner (as opposed to expert) status
- In addition to confronting the "identify" diversities, such as race, gender, and sexual orientation, we should also confront the more subtle "belief system" diversities, such as religious differences
- Our work should unite human potential work and traditional diversity work.
- We should explore all the implications of diversity in our lives, both workforce and personal
- Our venues for sharing this work are less likely to be in corporate settings, and more liable to be in public, educational or, ecumenical settings

The paradigm shift from an emphasis on the business case towards an emphasis a spiritual (or personal growth) underpinnings of diversity work provides a deeper, more personal incentive for participation in diversity work. Rather than relying on an emphasis on legal/ethical frameworks (as exemplified by Equal Opportunity and Affirmative Action frameworks) or economic incentives (exemplified by both "valuing diversity" and "managing diversity" approaches), the diversity/spirituality link speaks to an agenda that is more personal and universal: the desire to be a broader, deeper, and more conscious human in a shifting and uncertain time.

## **DIVERSITY:**

### **The Challenge of the Spiritual Dimension**

by

**Zachary G. Green, Ph.D.**  
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## **Diversity Training: The Now of It**

In recent years there has been a rich rush to receive "diversity training" of some form or another. Public and private agencies have purchased training and consultation packages to learn how to be more sensitive to that different "other." The need for such efforts stems from the reality that the workforce is changing. Population demographics dictate that Americans learn to work together in the face of, and perhaps despite of, their differences if the country is to remain competitive in an increasingly interdependent global economy.

Most of what is termed diversity training gives focus to the most fundamental differences. Gender communications workshops, sexual harassment prevention seminars, racial bias forums, and sexual orientation panels are typical products that are offered to help people learn something about those who are different. In many instances, a member of such groups speaks about his or her experiences so that those of "privilege" can be passively educated about what not to do to offend some group or another.

Often in the final analysis, what is taught is mish-mash of politically correct language and tips to demonstrate a degree of tolerance. The internal experience seldom shifts in any fundamental manner, primarily because issues of power and the feelings associated with a shift in that power are seldom directly addressed. In this light, diversity training becomes a tool to sustain the status quo, despite the obvious need to make a difference.

As people scurry to receive their certificates to illustrate their competence in managing the multicultural world, the basic question that remains present for each person to ponder is "Who am I." Diversity training gives focus to the other fundamental question, "Who are you." This focus, on the other, while necessary, also serves to block some individuals from recognizing themselves in relationship to another. Most importantly, there is little attention paid in many diversity training models for means that allow individuals to recognize elements that link them one to another.

Intermingled in the questions of 'who am I' and 'who are you' may be one that by its nature precedes---"How did we get here in the first place." Each person, for the self and in terms of the other, grapples with the basic question of existence. Coupled with this question is that of nonexistence. Regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation, social class, ethnicity, or nationality, everyone faces these existential questions. One could argue that fundamental to human consciousness is the question of what we understand about how we have come to be.

Quite often the answer is in how people know themselves to be. Ultimately, beyond place of birth and beneath color skin is the identity we share as spiritual beings.

## **Religious Rhetoric and Spiritual Practice**

We can see evidence throughout history that differences in religious practice have been the source of centuries of conflict. When a person comes to know who they are, central to this identity is a belief system about the unseen and unknown. While conflict arises when one is not recognized by another, this conflict is exacerbated when there is no common ground with regards to beliefs. Religion is the name given to these beliefs and religion is used to justify carnage and violence in the name of some being greater than ourselves. The name of God, in all of its forms, is invoked as a way to understand the conflict, actually an internal, psychological one, about existence. Indeed, if others

exist who believe that we exist for another purpose, then my/our belief about existence may be wrong. If they are defeated, then my "God" is more powerful and I/we are correct.

Left out of this process is the terror with which people attempt to deny their concerns about "What happens after I am gone." Religion, while often related to spirituality, is but one expression of and one direction of this inquiry. In a spiritual journey, one seeks to come to terms with existence in an ineffable fashion that transcends the conventions of religion. The important consideration in terms of diversity is that religions provide routes to the spiritual awakening and enlightenment. The religions provide these routes because of their commonalities: the fact the routes ultimately provide a similar outcome in the spiritual search: a closer relationship with God, the universe, the All.

### **The Need for a New Paradigm**

The unfortunate reality is that nations and peoples have been at war in the name of religion for millennia. The reality of linkage in the spiritual realm does not stop people from fighting about the fundamentals of religious practice. The wars continue because the alternating need to dominate and to remember atrocity at the hands of some other faith lingers. No paradigm exists that allows people to recognize and respect differences in spiritual practice primarily because each religion claims to hold the reins of spiritual legacy, and often, life in the life hereafter.

Any new paradigm that creates a climate for communication amid diversity must begin with the focus on the "here and now" of spiritual experience. The place of connection stems from the seeds of sharing something of the sacred held by us all. Given the closeness to the soul each may hold their religious practice, the learning comes in the observing rather than the converting of those who are different and those who seek the spiritual in an unfamiliar fashion. Empathy is created in this process when others are able to hear the stories and defer the critique. In doing so the atmosphere for a collective experience of the spiritual emerges.

Those who enter such a process run the risk of developing a sort of intimacy that transcends the temporal or the sensual. Such an experience, by all rights, could and most likely will, create a regression into the familiar of fundamental faith practices. The distancing in such diversity creates the safety needed so as to preserve the paradigm of viewing the world through a religious rather than spiritual perspective. More important, the regression preserves the power that each faith practice sustains from controlling its corner of the world.

The new paradigm must begin with two or more gathering together with their beliefs and ability to tolerate the ambiguity of another valid view of the spiritual. An invitation to enter the practices of the other and to share that which comes to be known becomes the new shared reality. Such a process moves beyond faith; it cherishes the difference to create a new whole.

*Angelo John Lewis* is a consultant, trainer and writer who specializes in diversity, team-building, and leadership development. His experience includes a season in a Japanese dojo and mentorship with a Chinese Tantric Buddhist master. Lewis is the originator of the Diversity Circle dialogue method. He can be reached at 609-397-9777.

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