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Institute for Body, Mind and Spirituality Conference, March 2007 Buki Papillon

On March 30, 2007, the Institute for Body, Mind and Spirituality (IBMS) at Lesley University hosted the “Innovations in Research, Practice and Pedagogy” symposium in the Porter Exchange Building. The seminar began with a welcome address by Dr. Susan H. Gere, Director of IBMS.

The program moderator, Dr. Joan Klagsbrun, Director of the Wellspring Center for Life Enhancement and an adjunct faculty member, thanked the presenters, faculty mentors, and Yishiuan Chin, GSASS Director of Planning and Special Projects, for their work towards making the symposium a reality. She then introduced the panel. Dr. Jared Kass, Professor of Counseling and Psychology, began the keynote presentation, by quoting from the poem, “On the Pulse of Morning,” by Maya Angelou, followed by a moment of centering and contemplation in which attendees relaxed and participated in a deep breathing exercise.

Professor Kass’ presentation focused on the question: How can we speak of something so seemingly naïve and abstract as spirituality, in a world where every major culture in all historical periods, elitism, racism, patriarchalism, greed, and a need to dominate through violence, has created throughout history, a “chain of pain?” He quoted James Joyce, who has described history as “a nightmare from which humanity is trying to awake.” “Young adults can be taught to learn proactively, and to develop recourses for resilience through contemplative practices,” Kass said. “These practices can anchor them in a peaceful aspect of themselves, in a neutral educational environment, without commitment to any religion.” He concluded that the human behavioral response style holds the key to peaceful coexistence.

The panel’s response to Professor Kass’ presentation was varied and addressed almost every aspect of body/ mind studies.

Dr. Nathaniel Mays, Dean of Student Life and Academic Development, responded by relating the spiritual core mentioned by Professor Kass to self-awareness. “I think in the final analysis, spiritual maturity is a matter of the individual having ownership of whatever they profess or believe or practice. Ownership is the key to maturation,” Dr. Mays said. Dean Mays then went on to tell the story of his own spiritual maturation and the process of eventually owning the Baptist tradition he had been given, while eschewing what he called “holy or spiritual arrogance.”

Dr. Sat Bir Khalsa, Assistant Professor of Medicine at Harvard Medical School, disagreed with Dr. Kass with regards to the “chain of pain.” He posited that spirituality and religion do not overlap much, and that the degree of overlap depends on how much

of spirituality a religion has, in terms of the use of things like repetitive prayers and chants, for example. Dr. Khalsa mentioned a study of performance anxiety involving yoga practitioners versus non-yoga practitioners, which showed that cognitive and physiological techniques can lead to quasi-spiritual states of consciousness.

Dr. Cheryl Giles, the Francis Greenwood Peabody Professor of the Practice in Pastoral Care and Counseling at Harvard Divinity School, spoke next. She emphasized Professor Kass' recognition of the need for true connection and focused on the fact that most students who are beginning as pastoral counselors, struggle with difficulties, unless they are able to grapple with their own spiritual issues and develop their own spiritual journey. Wholeness, she said, is the ability to let go of our divided selves. The price for living a divided life is high. Without embarking on an inner journey, we are left with toxic feelings that affect our places/ ways of work. This is the process of spiritual maturation.

Karen Estrella, Assistant Professor of Expressive Therapies, continued the panel response, with a reference to "20th Century Pleasures," by Robert Hass. She focused on "The light that shines out of the primary act of imagination." Professor Estrella talked about eliciting the development of the imaginative capacity in the process of healing, and the ability to act on one's images, through expressive therapies. She mentioned a women's inter-faith book group which she founded, and which has become a vehicle for social change. The book group visited Avila, and Professor Estrella was inspired, during that visit, to write a poem titled "The Storks of Avila," in which she describes the storks they saw, as looking "regal," unlike the "the fairytale deliverers we're used to." In similar manner, the men and women all standing along the walled city were not all *that they appear to be either. As the storks took off, she asked, via her poem:*

*"What birth within us
have they heralded?
What purge?
With whom shall we walk arm in arm?"*

For the group, a moment had been captured and experienced together, and, according to Professor Estrella, those actions all began as acts of the imagination, as images motivated by will, images that captured dreams. She concluded that expressive therapies help people recognize images that get them up in the morning, and that "Music, art, and poetry bring some people closer to their 'god' and enable them to grow inwardly and outwardly. Dr. Nicholas Covino, President of the Massachusetts School of Professional Psychology, discussed emotional maturation in terms of the way in which children are parented. "Affect is regulated not by the child but in relation to the world," he said. "Parents who disengage, lead children to disconnect." He talked about his own personal journey through a church tradition that had no place for certain "others," and had unusual practices about sexuality and family. A disconnect happened and he turned to psychology. He however, remained spiritual and needed something to be part of. He came to the conclusion that it is comforting to separate religion from spirituality, but questions the possibility of successfully achieving that separation. He leaves the audience

with the following questions: who is responsible for change in the church? Is it possible to have a spiritual life independent of a church or organization? Can one raise a spiritual life apart from that?

The first set of presentations followed, and included individual and group presentations, as well as workshops, all running as concurrent sessions. There were a total of thirty-three workshops, each of which addressed aspects of the body, mind and spirit connection. One of the first presentations, by Sohrob E. Nabatian, was titled “Presence as a Catalyst of Transformation in Sufi Metaphysics and Psychotherapy.” Sohrob compared the functional quality of mirroring and presence in Sufi Theology and client-centered psychotherapy. He speculated that the holistic and integral approaches of Sufism connect the clinical tool of empathy with an inherent function of all of creation. “It checks the reductionistic tendencies of clinical psychotherapy,” he said. “The client becomes the face of God.” Hadass Harel’s presentation, “Spirit and Form: An Encounter with Embodied Imagery of the Divine in Hindu India,” visually invited participants into her research. Hadass shared slide shows of Indian sacred imagery which she has been documenting for about twenty years. She asked attendees to think about the question, “Can meaning and spirit travel, via art, beyond the particular confines and dialectics of culture?” Donna C. Owens and Tonya Ferraro presented “What I Think About Me: Assessment of Self-Concept in Adolescent Girls.” The workshop offered preliminary findings in a study designed to construct a creative self-concept tool for use with adolescent girls. They discussed the new phenomenon of “MySpace” and other social networking websites. One of the adolescents participating in the study was quoted as saying, “It is great to have friends you don’t see, because then you don’t get to make an idiot of yourself around them.” Some of the other topics presented were: “Decision-Making Around Ethical Dilemmas in the Elementary School Principalship,” presented by Jennifer DeChiara, “Group facilitation Using Fairytales and Expressive Therapies,” by Lourdes F. Braches-Tabar, “Yoga Psychology Applied to Eating Disorders,” by Anna Renno dos Mares Guia (Divya Jyoti), and “Out In the Convent: The Spirituality and Wellness of Catholic Lesbian Nuns,” presented by Robin N. Tanner.

A networking “tote” lunch followed the morning presentations, and provided an opportunity for faculty mentors, student presenters and attendees to gather around shared topics of interest. Themed tables included;

- 1) Religious Experience, Spiritual Practice and the Body,
- 2) Education,
- 3) Medicine, Wellness, Health and Being.

At the “Community and Culturally Oriented Practices” table, Dr. Eleanor Roffman, Professor of Counseling and Psychology and a faculty mentor, led an animated discussion on consequences of the deportation of “returnees,” members of Cambodian culture street gangs, most of whom are American, culturally and linguistically to Cambodia by the INS. Afternoon presentations included such topics as: “Connecting Body, Mind and Spirituality: Simultaneous Recovery for Women with Trauma Histories

and Substance Abuse,” by Dee P. Genetti; “Imagistic Exchange: Communication through imagery in the Mother/Daughter Relationship” by David S. Stein; “Water Rituals” by Sadada Jackson, “A Mind-Body Intervention to Enhance Quality of Life in Women with Breast Cancer,” presented by Lauren P. Summers with Joan Klagsburn; and “The Social Nervous System and its Correlates to Community Based Art Therapy,” presented by Michael Franklin, to name a few.

Conference attendees and participants had an overwhelmingly positive response to the symposium:

“This event is so inspirational and applicable,” said Erin Blache, a Counseling Psychology graduate student. “This is the reason I came to Lesley in the first place. There need to be more programs like this.”

Konrad Craig, a professor visiting from Flinders University of Adelaide, who specializes in Crisis and Trauma Interventions, said the program was “fantastic” and that “there are so many diverse ranges of arts mixing with science and research, at a level that is not common within a research facility. It is great that Lesley University is bridging that gap,” he added. Donna Sodia found the symposium to be very educational and to have a great variety and cross-section of people.

The symposium was organized by the Institute for Body, Mind and Spirituality, and cosponsored by the Ph.D. Expressive Therapies, and the Ph.D. program in Educational Studies of Lesley University, as well as “Pluralistic Wellness” at the Harvard Divinity School, and the Massachusetts School of Professional Psychology