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Elizabeth J. Tisdell

*National-Louis University*

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## **Women Teaching for Social Change in Adult Education: The Spiritual and Cultural Dimensions of "Teaching Across Borders"**

Elizabeth J. Tisdell  
National-Louis University

**Abstract:** This study is an exploratory look at understanding how spirituality is renegotiated and informs the emancipatory work of a purposeful sample of women activist adult educators.

The role of adult education in responding to the educational needs of a multicultural society is being discussed in many adult education circles. These discussions focus on how adult educators can challenge systems of power, privilege, oppression, and colonization, and "cross borders" of race, gender, class, national origin to work for social change. Informed by critical, feminist, and Africentric theoretical frameworks on adult education, some focus on challenging structural power relations in adult higher education classrooms (Hayes & Colin, 1994; Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 1997; Tisdell, 1998), while others on dealing with these issues in popular education settings (Walters & Manicom, 1996). There is acknowledgment that teaching across these borders for social change is difficult, requiring a willingness to deal with conflict, resistance, strong emotions, as groups engage in critical dialogue and hopefully move to social action. What is missing from the literature is attention to how underlying spiritual commitments influence the motivations or practices of these adult educators doing this border-crossing work, or how spirituality can influence dealing with these issues in positive ways. Clearly there are both male and female adult educators who are attempting to challenge power relations based on gender, race, class, and culture. But the vast majority are women guided by feminist and antiracist educational perspectives, many of whom do have underlying spiritual commitments that influence their work. Many of these women grew up and were socialized into a particular religious tradition, but have also had to re-negotiate their adult spirituality in light of having been raised in patriarchal religious traditions. In light of the lack of adult education literature that deals with women, spirituality and social justice, *the purpose of this study is to examine how spirituality influences the motivations and practices of a multicultural group of women adult educators who are teaching across borders of race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and/or are activists for social change, who grew up in a particular religious tradition, and have renegotiated a more relevant adult spirituality.*

The literature within the field of adult education examining the underlying spiritual commitments of adult educators and activists for social change is extremely limited. On one level this is surprising, since almost all who write about education for social change cite the important influence of educator and activist Paulo Freire, who was a deeply spiritual man. Freire only occasionally referred to his own spirituality in his writing but the liberation theology movement of Latin America deeply influenced his work as an educator (Freire, 1997). On another level, it is not surprising that adult educators would be relatively silent about their spiritual commitment. Indeed, there have been many injustices done in the name of "religious righteousness" - indigenous populations have been decimated and colonized by those who think they have a

market on Truth; women have been relegated to second-class citizenship in the name of many patriarchal religions. In spite of these horrors and the dangers of imposing a religious agenda, many women have renegotiated a meaningful spirituality that does inform their work for social change (Ruether, 1996). Many social activists and educators such as Martin Luther King, Gandhi, Dorothy Day, and several participants in the recent study on community and commitment by Daloz et al. (1996), have initiated social change movements fueled partly by their underlying spiritual commitments. Black feminist educator, bell hooks (1994) discusses the importance of spirituality in guiding her own educational practice for social change. O'Grady (1994) discusses how spirituality can be used to diffuse conflict in doing cross-border work in multicultural education, and Hart and Holton (1993) note that it offers hope to emancipatory adult education ventures. Thus, there seems to be a place for spirituality in doing the healing work of social transformation. This study is an exploratory look and attempt at understanding how spirituality has been renegotiated and how it informs the emancipatory work of a purposeful sample of women adult educators.

### **Methodology**

This ongoing qualitative research study was informed by a poststructural feminist research theoretical framework, which suggests that the positionality (race, gender, class, sexual orientation) of researchers, teachers, and students affects how one gathers and accesses data, how one constructs and views knowledge, as well as how one deals with "crossing borders" in research and teaching. Further, all feminist research perspectives (Merriam and Simpson, 1995) argue that research should benefit the participants in some way. While as a feminist poststructural interviewer, I hope that the research is of benefit to the participants, I did nothing in the interviews to overtly effect change except to share some of my own background relative to the subject, as a white woman who grew up Catholic, and who teaches diversity and equity classes. Thus, this phase of the research project is largely interpretive; several of these participants may participate in a more in-depth participatory second phase of the study. This research is ongoing, and thus far, there have been 9 women participants (2 African American, 2 Chicana, 3 European American, 1 Native American, 1 Asian American). Criteria for sample selection were that all participants: (1) be adult educators "teaching across borders" for social change in higher education or as community activists; (2) have grown up and educated in a specific religious tradition as a child; (3) note that their adult spirituality (either based on a re-appropriation of the religious tradition of their childhood, or a different spirituality) strongly motivated them to do their social justice work. All participants participated in a 2-hour taped (and transcribed) interview which focuses on (1) describing their spiritual journey; (2) how their spirituality motivates and informs their adult education practice; (3) how their spirituality relates to their own cultural background in working for social justice. Many participants also provided written documents of their own writing that addressed some of their involvement in social action pursuits and/or issues directly related to their spirituality. Data were analyzed according to the constant comparative method (Merriam, 1998).

### **Findings: Profiles in Focus**

While the data were analyzed according to the constant comparative method, because of the complex nature of the study, and because the particular life-context of the participants is central

to having an understanding of the interplay between their spirituality and their activist work as adult educators, brief profiles of four of the participants (due to space limitations, and chosen because of their diverse ethnic, class, and cultural backgrounds) will be provided to try to give some context to these women. A brief discussion will follow.

Shirley: Shirley is an African American woman who just celebrated turning 50. She grew up in a racially segregated working class neighborhood in the Midwest. As she says, "my family was active in the struggle for the rights of workers and justice under the law for Black people," and had a long-standing relationship with the Black Baptist Church, and there were many ministers in her family. She describes that while her formal religious background is Baptist, her family did not embrace the "no card-playing" or "no dancing" rules in the tradition. She explains the focus was on "the main piece that there's God, and there's justice and mercy, and that your main responsibility in the world is to...share your blessings with others. And to stand up...and be brave in the face of injustice because you're backed up by a power that's stronger than government and armies, as long as you are doing the right thing." She notes that her grandmother "hoped to die what they used to call a 'race woman.'" (She explains that this is a woman who works constantly for justice, particularly on behalf of Black people in both local communities and in national contexts.) Thus, Shirley had a long legacy of activism, particularly around civil rights, and much of these activities were organized through the church.

Shirley went to college, began studying black history, and questioned her childhood Christian beliefs. "I became convinced Christianity was a trick - the oppressor to keep us humble and in bondage... Even the terminology 'Lord', 'Master' - I had serious issue with it, and stopped going to church. It was also part of the Black Power movement that was challenging the civil disobedience that required nonviolence and not physically fighting back." She notes that "there was no spirituality to speak of" in the Black Power movement, and she moved away from the organized church for a long time. Eventually, however, she notes "I was confronted with the notion that I really believed in a power - a positive power and a negative power, and I was calling it by different names, but in reality it was the same power that I had known about as a child." Over the years in addition to raising her two children and being married and divorced, Shirley was involved in many different activists activities, in both her paid and non-paid work. Virtually in all of these activities as an educator for organizations such as the Urban League, Black Women's Health Project, and with adult literacy programs, she was involved in cross cultural conflict mediation, and the development of more culturally relevant educational programs. She currently is a tenured faculty member at a community college teaching reading and writing and adult basic education where she directly teaches across borders of race, class, gender, sexual orientation as it arises in the everyday lives of herself and her students, and raising consciousness about these issues with co-workers on campus. She and a multicultural group of her women colleagues meet in each others' homes explicitly for these purposes where they share both their own vulnerability and knowledge about these issues. In addition their work together has overflowed to the campus in the form of workshops and conversations about diversity. At times there are "spiritual moments" in these conversations, and she describes one experience at a campus diversity workshop, which "showed the power of being authentic and telling the truth outloud."

Shirley currently does not belong to a church per se. Her partner is a Christian, and she notes sometimes she goes with him, and she has connections to the Muslim community and sometimes goes there. She meditates daily, centering on the notion of "God is love." While she reports that she likes many of the prayers in organized religion, some of the word images (father/he) are barriers, and "some of the pictures and images can take me away from centering... I find that I'm able to be more connected in silence and solitude, but I do like the evoking of the spirit that happens through the music." In thinking about how spirituality informs her work she notes "The purpose of life is to restore and maintain the balance, which is ... order, justice...and truth. My intention is to walk my convictions, and to be authentic, and to show love, to teach how to do that through my actions and evoking of spirit, of love, of courage, and justice. Especially in working with women's groups in telling the truth and being as real as I know how to be, and trying to bring forth the power of God in myself, I can touch that in other people." Her daily meditation centers on this. She notes "I am certainly a student of the teachings of Jesus. When people ask me, I say I'm Muslim because Muslim is one who submits to the will of God," but notes that membership in organized religion is not important for her. She seldom discusses her spirituality directly in classes with students, though people know she celebrates Ramadan, and Kwanza, and that she is largely a vegetarian partly for spiritual reasons. In her closing thoughts on spirituality and education for social justice, she notes "I just think it's absolutely connected...I've been going to church a lot more, because I like this church, but my spirituality is separate from that...Like I will keep going to work because this is the best place for me to be teaching, but I am teaching whether I'm at [the community college] or not." In reflecting on her own spirituality in relationship to being an African American woman and her involvement in social justice efforts, she notes: "I think my responsibility is great because I know what people went through so that I could have the freedom and the power to move forward in the world, so I must get up! And I must dig deep! And I must do good! And to not do that would be an affront to my ancestors who stayed alive, and stayed strong, and stayed spiritually connected through centuries of brutality and everything, beyond slavery. That's what it is for me."

Harriet. Harriet is a 44 year-old white woman who grew up in a working class family in the rural South in a particular branch of the Pentecostal church where she went to church four times per week. She describes that in the rural Deep South that "it has to be understood in the context of being your culture. It's not your religion or spirituality, because it's everything you are and what you do and how you live your life... It's your way of life." She also notes that while she didn't realize it at the time "Pentecostal folks are pretty poor people." She was heavily involved in her Church, singing in the choir, teaching Sunday school as a teenager, and says "I loved it; I was just into it." Harriet got pregnant when she was 16, married, finished high school. She had a second child while in nursing school and split with her husband, after he "screamed at me that I was 'queer'. I had no idea what he was talking about... He explained it to me, and I thought, Wow! He's right!" Harriet described a painful story of coming to terms with her lesbian identity in the Deep South, in light of her religious tradition. She talked to many ministers and church people, who alternately made her feel guilty and hopeful, and one finally suggested to "leave it up to God." Harriet described a pivotal experience that happened about a year later. "I got hurt playing softball and I tore my quadriceps so bad I passed out. I went to the best orthopedist in town, who put a splint on it which hurt really bad. I also believed in faith healing, and one night I went to the altar I felt this real coldness go into my leg, and then [it] got really hot, and I thought "wow" and the minister told me - I took the splint off, and the big lump that was on my leg, it

was gone!... Well that was a turning point for me, because I thought 'why would God heal me, if I was this person that was condemned to hell. God wouldn't do that for me, and I thought 'OK, this is my sign, that it's OK for me to be [gay]'." She eventually left her church, and she had many painful experiences, including losing her children (and eventually getting them back) because of being an out lesbian. "I was taught as a kid to be honest above everything else. Be, Be *honest!*" So in spite of her painful experiences, she never lied about her sexual orientation.

In the years that immediately followed, she occasionally went to church because she missed the music. She had been involved in many activist activities, including as a counselor at a battered women's shelter. She met her life partner at an abortion rights rally, and began a formerly battered women's support group at the local college. She worked for years as a nurse. A turning point in her spiritual development was when she attended a women's music festival. It was in this context that she met many women who were both like her in terms of sexual orientation, but very different in terms of cultural background and religion. She also met women who were involved in various versions of "feminist women's spirituality," including the goddess traditions, which she found extremely affirming. Because of her own journey as an out lesbian and her commitments to rights for women and all oppressed people, she and her partner began an adult education center based on feminist principles and honoring of "women's spirit" and the principles of adult popular education. While there has been much attempted violence and assaults on them and their property, they have forged ahead trying to meet the needs of some of the local poor and oppressed people, dealing directly with the transformation of homophobia and other systems of oppression, such as race and class. She notes with irony "it was prophesied in my church that I would preach when I was 14 years old!" and explains that people say to her "you got your calling all right! You're just in a different place!" In asking her if she still defines herself as Christian, she pauses "I think your core beliefs, where do they come from? Mine came out of the Judeo - Christian church. I don't know if people can change what is in the core... First of all I believe in honesty. I believe in fairness,... in justice...." She reports the woman attorney who worked with them in the defense of the violence against them asked "Don't you understand that this is the Bible Belt?" But she retorted to the lawyer, "Yes, that's why I'm here." And she explains to me "You see, I have had turn and face my culture head on, and to say 'No! You're not going to run me out of here like an animal.' Literally, I had rather be dead than for my kids or my family see me having to flee because someone else has that power to make me leave." She stays because of what she has to offer the community and because of her felt responsibility to care for her family, and to work for social change around transformation of systems of oppression of all kinds. She is strongly informed by her spiritual commitments. She and her partner host monthly women's circles based on women's spirituality and their work together for community and justice, and attend a local Unitarian church. In addition, she has meditation place in her house. She describes taking great inspiration in the work and legacy of Harriet Tubman, who in spite of ill health "managed to save about 300 people from hell here on earth. Sometimes I think, 'what can one person do?' One person can do a lot! That's my inspiration. I think of that every day. And when I get depressed, I look at [Harriet Tubman] and just think about 'if she could do it, I could do it!'"

Julia. Julia is a 46 year-old Chicana who grew up in the barrio in Southern California. Julia's paternal grandmother lived with her family and knew no English, so her family spoke Spanish at home, and Julia did not learn English until she went to school. She describes her working class

religious upbringing as "conservative Catholic," and shares warm remembrances of interactions with her grandmother, and her deep connection to "La Virgen de Guadalupe."

Julia was not socialized by her family to be politically active, nor to question authority and notes "we were raised to be 'Mexican Americans' - you know, be grateful to be living in the U.S. and learn English, but yet keep your Spanish!" She describes a key moment in her politicization as a Chicana, and the development of her own activism as occurring in August of 1970, the summer before she began college at Stanford. Ruben Salazar (among others), a Chicano journalist, was killed during the Chicano Moratorium in Los Angeles, which began as a peaceful demonstration focusing on Chicano rights, and resulted in violence and allegations by the Chicano community of police brutality. "I remember that summer watching the hearings and having a growing consciousness, and of going to Stanford, and being a Chicana, and ...not having grown up in a family or community where many of us went to college, I had no clue what to expect." When she began at Stanford, she got involved in the farmworker and other Chicano movements, particularly under the influence of her roommate, "the most radical Chicana" that she had ever met, and one who was particularly central to her own consciousness-raising. Julia continued her activism after graduation by working as an elementary teacher in a bilingual program for a number of years. She went on to work in a desegregation assistance center concerned with national origin and language issues. She currently works as an education consultant doing training for "culturally relevant" curriculum development, and diversity training with educators in the U.S. and the South Pacific. She notes that she is concerned about all issues of oppression privilege and says "It's bigger than just being Chicana. I'm also a member of a global community - it encompasses more... [F]or me, working for social justice isn't just done 5 days a week; it's in every part of my life... it's a way of living. I call it spirituality, it's a spiritual... it's on a different level."

In describing her spiritual journey, Julia notes that she stopped attending the Catholic Church when she was in college, and was disillusioned by its sexism and its irrelevance to her life then. She describes the need in the more recent years to get more centered, and "to focus on the spiritual part of my work." She returned to her Catholic roots in a critical way, and to her connection to her grandmother and La Virgen de Guadalupe. "I think part of my journey is going back to my heritage, my Aztec and indigenous roots...Ana Castillo gives a different picture of what La Virgen could represent in terms of powerful women... But there's another side to it... I don't always just go with 'this is the way that it is' because I do question 'was that a way for the Spaniards to indoctrinate or convert the Aztecs into Catholicism? Or is it really an Aztec goddess?.' That's a question that Ana Castillo asks in her book, so I go back to that too. But I do believe it's a spirit - a spirit that kind of watches over me."

She considers how her spirituality is played out in her work in her multicultural educational consultants' group and 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."

Maureen. Maureen is a white woman from an upper middle-class family background in her early 50s who was raised Methodist. By her college days, she had developed strong intellectual commitments to social justice that in her mind required action. She was torn by questions of meaning and decided that she wanted to devote her energy to the Civil Rights Movement due to her ethical commitments. She found support for this in her church, and notes, "I couldn't have said then whether this was a step of Christian commitment or an existentialist leap... In those days, I was intensely torn by these questions, and some days a Christian, some days not, but since both ethical paths seemed to be taking me in the same direction... the next step called for was action." After graduation in the mid-60s, she went to Chicago and worked for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference on civil rights issues. It was here that she was brought to the study of nonviolence. She felt an intense spiritual commitment among the primary leaders in their preaching and in the music of the community that made her feel that together they were "moving in the spirit" which would give them courage to continue their work. She notes "it was from this crucible of spirituality and social action that my own sense of identity and core beliefs were formed." Nevertheless, she had theological trouble with aspects of Christianity, and after a time she left her church due to what she saw as its hypocrisy.

She continued her social activist work, and approximately ten years later, driven by the difficulties of a failed marriage and its resulting depression, she was introduced to the practice of an Indian based form of yogic meditation. The regular meditation and involvement with a meditation community facilitated much needed healing at sustenance. At times she wondered if those practices were compatible with her politics but was reassured when she went to the main (US) ashram in New York and saw various remembrances to Gandhi and King. She also got involved in women's spirituality movements, and believes that there are many paths to God. But her current meditation, chanting, spiritual practice, is more rooted in the Siddha Yoga tradition. She is drawn to the creation of a sense of the sacredness, and noted that this was what was lacking in the white mainline protestant churches she was socialized in. "They were a social gathering place, a source of social support community when people were sick and dying, and they talked about ethics, so it was kind of intellectual, but they had nothing to offer in terms of helping people to have a deeper experience of God." She suggests that some sense of the sacred was available in the Pentecostal and black protestant churches rather than her own, and notes "it really is invoking the spirit, and I find the Indian tradition I'm a part of, the Siddha yoga, both evokes that kind of spiritual experience, but has an intellectual way of making sense out of it." Maureen meditates regularly, and meets twice a week for community meditation.

Maureen has been working as a college professor for many years, and teaches classes about social movements. She uses readings that have a more spiritual focus in relationship to social action and approaches it "as an essential part of what you have to do to maintain yourself as a social activist just to take care of yourself...I think it's really important for people who want to be activists to learn a different mode of working, and even of managing power in a different way...It's one thing to think you want to be different, but to actually hold a space in yourself so you actually can BE different, I think takes a spiritual grounding." She does not talk about her own individual spiritual journey very much in her classes, noting that it is more implicit in her teaching and is somewhat more present in her advising. She notes, "I do look for a next step in spiritual development for [students], and try to suggest classes and activities that might provide that for them." She notes that in the future it might be in sharing some of her own story.



## **Concluding Discussion**

Clearly, the women in this study all had a deep spiritual commitment that informed their activism. While this played out somewhat differently for each of the participants (including those whose stories were not featured here) and their definitions of spirituality varied, there were aspects that they each had in common. (1) Knowledge of their childhood religious tradition was formative in giving participants something to "push against" in reappropriating a more "woman positive" and redefinition for their adult spirituality and a sense of the sacred. (2) Participants' spiritual convictions, and/or community, and meditation practices provided a grounding place for nurturance in specific and concrete ways, and for renewed courage to continue as educators for social justice (3) Their spirituality is grounded in their culture, and each of the participants found themselves reflecting back and reappropriating the healthy aspects of their early spiritual socialization that kept them connected to their ancestors and/or cultural roots, and discarding what was not life enhancing. (4) All participants reported that their spirituality informs their educational practice in implicit ways, as a way of living and inter-relating, though are hesitant to discuss it directly in the educational activities they lead. Yet most participants reported trying to provide experiential activities that they defined as grounded in a spirituality to unify groups, in solidifying bonds, and in moving beyond conflict. In conclusion, this exploratory study is limited, but it offers some insight to how spirituality informs the work of women adult educators teaching for social action and makes a beginning contribution to the emancipatory adult education literature.

**References:** Provided at the presentation.