

7

A practitioner and faculty member reflects upon her spiritual journey through higher education, drawing on her life experiences and her ethnic background.

Spirit and Nature in Everyday Life: Reflections of a *Mestiza* in Higher Education

Alicia Fedelina Chávez

“Go out and walk by the river and think about life. Consider your place in the world.”

Such was the message I often heard from my mother, Josefita Gonzales Chávez, as I was growing up in the mountains of northern New Mexico. These words still resonate through my spirit as I go about my professional life, connecting with students, stewarding a division of student affairs, teaching in a graduate preparation program in college student personnel, and facilitating the continuous multicultural transformation of university operations.

My path in this profession has become increasingly clear as I pay attention to signs around and in me. I am speaking spiritually, of a sense of myself as a whole, authentic, human being living in connection and communion with those around me. This spiritual journey is challenging yet continues to be my most important work. I was raised in a family that is *Mestizo*, a term referring to the multigenerational blending of Spanish and Native American cultures (Anzaldúa, 1987). This blending is so complex that it has taken me years to develop and gain a sense of which of our traditions and beliefs come from each cultural tradition. My spiritual ways of being originate in these cultures and form the foundation of my professional sense of self.

Recently, thoughtful scholars and practitioners have been writing about personal and workplace spirituality. Senge and others (1999) describe spirituality as the space, freedom, and safety to bring our whole beings to work. Senge suggests that if spiritual intelligence is absent we become tired, fractured, and dissatisfied. We begin to feel invisible. Thomas (1994) frames this same need in the context of productivity among the many types of difference in our current U.S. workforce. He points out that the culture of the organization must evolve in ways that enable each individual to bring the whole natural self into the workplace. He finds that this creates the maximum potential for each to offer the utmost contribution. Myss (1997) urges us to pay attention to our spirit and intuition as we make choices that affect our health and well being. The Dalai Lama, too, in *Ethics for a New Millennium* (2000), urges a spiritual way of being in every aspect of our lives.

Increasingly, individuals in higher education are identifying the need for more reflective, spiritual practice in our universities. David Scott (Scott and Awbrey, 1993), chancellor at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst, calls for our evolution toward a more integrative definition of knowledge, practice of research, and facilitation of student learning. He points out the need for those of us in higher education not to reject science and objectivity but rather resist relying only on the sciences in contributing to our worldview. "Key to our future," he says, "will be the concept of the complete individual, with a greater sense of wholeness and connectedness.

Education must adopt an integrative philosophy of knowledge, including religion and spirituality, which have been largely eliminated from formal education in public institutions for more than a century." (p. 5). Stephen Gould, in *Rock of Ages: Science and Religion in the Fullness of Life* (1999), urges consideration that "science and religion are needed for true wisdom, since any interesting problem at any scale . . . must call upon the separate contributions of both . . . for any adequate illumination" (p. 65). Parker Palmer (1998) as well often describes teaching as a spiritual endeavor.

Like Palmer, I see my work as vocation, as purpose, and as sacred. While stating my teaching philosophy for my first faculty annual review years ago, I wrote of teaching as a sacred responsibility, tying it to my felt responsibility to serve others. In later considering accepting the position of dean of students at the University of Wisconsin, I listened to an intuitive and spiritual call for me to take up this responsibility, even though I knew it would be a challenging and sometimes painful role. This call was clear even though my heart, mind, and body longed for my New Mexico mountains, my extended family, and continued work as a teacher and scholar offered by another position. Following this spiritual and intuitive voice was clearly a choice. Although I do question it at times, I continue to feel a sacred responsibility to serve others in the context of higher education.

Ironically, little of my spiritual grounding has been shaped by higher education or even by educational environments. This life's foundation has instead been shaped by familial, cultural, reflective, and religious influences in my life. My journey as a spiritual being has its foundations in two primary philosophical traditions. In a religious sense, I was raised in a Spanish Catholic faith and practice. Although I disagree with some principles of Catholicism, some of my deepest values, beliefs, and practice originate in this tradition. In a broader, spiritual sense, Native American precepts have been a foundation of my life through subtle and consistent teachings from my parents, grandparents, and great uncles and aunts. In addition, starting in college, I began to read deeply from other world religions and spiritual traditions, especially from Buddhist philosophy, finding commonality with many Catholic and Native teachings and principles to enrich my spiritual journey.

Over the years, I have become increasingly mindful of developing principles that guide my life. These principles have become clear in my thoughts and practice over time and are, at this point in my life, foundational in my way of being. I have developed them through reflective practice; collaboration with others; listening both to the teaching of those around me and to various spiritual teachings; and by listening to my own inner sense, my own intuition, my own connection to spirit. I catalogue these principles in this way:

- Live a reflective life
- Practice balance
- Embody compassion
- Hold relationships as sacred responsibility
- Maintain connectedness
- Sustain openness
- Steward
- Radiate hopefulness
- Live simply
- Give thanks

As I work to facilitate empowering, holistic environments within a university context, I find that no matter how difficult or painful or joyful the work, spirituality moves me toward student affairs practice and scholarship, not as a way of doing but as a way of being. Let me illustrate one higher education context in which I enacted these principles. Each principle discussed is italicized in this example; later in this chapter I provide detailed descriptions of the ten.

While teaching a graduate college student personnel course in group development over a four-year period, I worked to co-construct an authentic, congruent learning experience with each group of students. I invited my fellow learners to join me in creating our own way of being as a community.

As part of my dedication to *maintaining connectedness* with the world around me, and contrary to many faculty cultures, I worked to share authority with students. I facilitated development of shared guides for our work together and ways for us to hold each other accountable.

As part of a sense of *balance*, I challenged students to bring their whole selves to class, and challenged ourselves to facilitate ways to find shared meaning in our learning community. I encouraged students to *hold our relationships sacred* within our learning community and treat each other with a high level of *compassion* and respect.

In bringing their whole selves to class, students became open and vulnerable to learning from each other. Tears, laughter, and even anger were common occurrences in the class as we daily renewed our commitment to stay engaged. I supported this process and students also by *sustaining my own openness* as a learner and in *radiating hopefulness* about our potential as a learning community.

Important in this process was bringing my whole self to class, complete with emotions, personal stories, and candid views. I communicated an expectation that they work with me as a whole human being and not just as "the professor." Together we renamed the course "Building Purposeful Communities in Higher Education," created shared evaluation and grading processes, developed and facilitated the curriculum collectively, and moved purposefully through Scott Peck's stages of community building (1993). Each of us was supported in working toward *reflective*, purposeful student affairs practice and developing skill to facilitate staff and student communities in higher education.

My journey as a spiritual student affairs practitioner and scholar has been one toward living reflectively and in congruence with a set of living principles. I strive toward applying these principles authentically, wholly, and spiritually in my daily professional life. In this chapter, I describe and illustrate each of these principles and discuss how I practice them within the context of university life. In addition, I outline ways in which I encourage others to explore their own journey and to live authentically, as well as discuss the challenge of communities of difference within this context.

Principles of Spiritual Being

In striving to live as an authentic, spiritual being, I am purposeful about living in congruence with a set of principles that I have developed over time. Though doing so will always be something that I need to be mindful about, I find the more these spiritual principles have become my way of being, the easier in many ways it is to be myself and to make choices in my daily practice. I believe this is in great part because I feel free to be the same person in the professional and personal arenas, that I am able to share my full self, and that I continue to take the time regularly to reflect on how I wish to live my life.

Live a Reflective Life. Living reflectively is perhaps the most foundational of all the principles I live by; it affects my ability to live by all of the others. Concepts of contemplative or reflective life originate for me in both Catholicism and Native spiritual teachings. Reflection is critical in my everyday life as it enables me to make conscious choices that are in congruence with my beliefs. Spending time in reflection is encouraged in Catholic teachings. Doing so outside and finding a centering energy in nature are additional messages of Native teachings with which I was raised. I find that in Wisconsin, with its extensive availability of public, protected lands and the beauty of the lake region, I can once again find places to center myself daily and deeply. I regularly use weekends as centering opportunities to walk, camp, and spend large amounts of time outdoors.

In some places I have lived and worked, I found only tiny amounts of public land and experienced great difficulty in finding spiritual renewal. In these places, I experienced a sense of closing in and feeling stifled, as I was unable to connect with the energy of the land around me. As an administrator and teacher in higher education, this reflective time is something I purposefully create with staff and students. I make expectations clear for staff that reflective attention toward one's self is critical to working effectively with students and colleagues as well as in dealing with the complexity of challenges on today's campuses.

In addition, I work with staff to create shared reflective time on our living vision and the processing of issues and needs as they arise. This assists us in developing learning environments and services for students. It also enables us to prepare for the deep work of acting as a catalyst for the transformative evolution necessary in our increasingly diverse institutions of higher education. I encourage staff to schedule time in their week for reflection on their own principles in their daily work, and on long-term solutions.

At first, the challenge is to assist staff and students to learn the value of time spent away from doing to learn to be comfortable with stillness and reflection in their lives. Many student affairs professionals and students we serve need time and assistance to develop this new skill. It may even be frightening for some individuals who are strong external processors or not used to spending time alone with their thoughts. I find this type of discomfort to be fairly common, perhaps because we attract so many external processors and extroverts in student affairs. Students and staff have oftentimes never experienced the positive outcomes of learning from themselves through reflection and benefit from guidance, practice, and reassurance in this area.

Practice Balance. In all things, balance is something Chávez family members are fond of reminding each other about. Balance as a foundational precept is represented in everything, for instance in the circular images of most Native cultural symbols (including the *zia* symbol of balance represented on the New Mexico state flag). This principle of balance involves living in bal-

ance with all life forms, and living in healthy ways every day. It encourages consideration of many perspectives and many voices in any decision or action. Balance is something that I have become increasingly purposeful about incorporating into my own professional way. I also encourage others to consider—and even to be held accountable for—balance in their professional practice. This principle connects in a variety of ways to many of our student affairs principles (see the 1937 *Student Personnel Point of View* and ACPA's *Student Learning Imperative*, 1994).

A common philosophical theme in our profession is encouragement to work with students and each other as whole human beings, to consider the wide diversity and many perspectives of individuals in our collegiate communities, and to balance our own urge to serve with our belief that students are adults. Our developmental theories strive to be guides for balancing the student's moral, social, cognitive, and identity development. Learning theories such as Gardner's work on the multiple intelligences (1993) and personality theories such as that of Myers-Briggs and McCaulley (1985) underscore the need to balance the many ways that individuals contribute to and learn from their environments.

Balance is also important in working with staff members as whole people. We need to facilitate bringing our whole authentic self to work and to consider providing for personal needs that staff have, to enable them to contribute productively and effectively. I find that we often understand and accept that students have this requirement but also need to support staff in this area. If I, for instance, have just had a loss in my family, or if I'm ill and cannot process with other staff, I'm probably going to be less patient, less creative, and less able to do complex work effectively.

Time spent together processing, supporting, and developing flexible ways to operate is critical to doing our work well. Among the symptoms of imbalance within a workplace are patterns of illness, burnout, impatience or bursts of emotions, pulling away from others, inappropriate use of vacation or sick leave, and even acts of aggression or abuse of others. As a dean of students, one of my primary messages to students and staff is for them to consider "doing less and doing what we do more deeply and thoughtfully."

As a profession, we have a sacred responsibility to role-model healthy professional behaviors to our students, to take care of other aspects of our lives as well as our work, and to develop ways of working that are effective in the long run, not just the short run. Perhaps most important (taken from words in Christian writings), we should love ourselves as we love our neighbors. Too often, I have seen professionals in our field forget to love themselves in pursuit of caring for those around them. I believe it is essential for each of us to move away from dichotomous ways of being and toward balancing multiple aspects of our life and our work.

Embody Compassion. The philosophies of Mother Teresa and the Dalai Lama have much in common in urging living a life of compassion. While she was alive, Mother Teresa encouraged us to do small things with

great love; the Dalai Lama continues to state that his only religion is kindness. Living a life of compassion toward others is the principle that I have taken perhaps most to heart from Catholic scripture and teachings.

Compassion toward myself is one that I have added slowly from Native and Buddhist teachings in my struggle to live healthily and happily in a human service profession. I have learned over time as a student affairs administrator, educator, and scholar to embody compassion as a way of being in my everyday practice. At first it was easy in some aspects of my work and difficult in others. It was easy and natural for me to feel compassionate with students in crisis or with colleagues in need, but less so in judicial hearings or diversity workshops when participants would make hurtful comments.

Some things that have assisted me in truly embodying compassion, even under painful circumstances, are taking time to reflect on my behaviors regularly; working to imagine myself in the place of others; and caring for myself daily so that I have the energy, patience, and emotional peace to work kindly with others. These tools and mindfulness help me maintain a peaceful demeanor even in highly charged situations. I still have times when something comes into my world that jolts me; then I take time to breathe, reflect, and try to understand the situation from the other person's perspective. Even the most hurtful behaviors we see on a college campus always seem to come back to some pain, anger, or frustration that the individuals are coping with prior to their choices.

Working to be tough and kind at the same time are critical to maintaining my compassionate way of being. Once again, it is necessary that we move away from being dichotomous—being either tough or kind. In learning how to be both simultaneously, I am able to work at embodying compassion in my everyday practice.

Hold Relationships as Sacred Responsibility. Highly valuing relationships has clearly originated in familial and cultural teachings in my life. In particular, my father, Gabriel Venceslado Chávez, has sent a consistent and regular message to our family that we must hold relationships as a sacred responsibility. He speaks often of this as something that is without question and without exception, that no matter what, we must return to our relationships and work through conflict or difficulty. I believe this originates in both Spanish and Native clan traditions of spirituality, responsibility, and survival.

I have translated this principle into my professional work by facilitating development and maintenance of strong learning and working communities in higher education; in a constant practice of staying engaged with others regardless of the circumstances; and in my purposeful development, in myself and others, of relational skills. In Peters and Waterman's foundational work *In Search of Excellence* (1982), and Allen and Cherrey's student affairs work *Systemic Leadership* (2000), entire chapters are dedicated to the power of relationships in an organization's success. Roosevelt Thomas, in *Beyond Race and Gender* (1994), discusses the criticality of working through

relationships across differences toward task completion for ultimate effectiveness in an organization.

One of the reasons I feel called toward scholarship, teaching, consulting, and activism in the area of diversity and multiculturalism is my sense of purpose in holding relationships sacred as my professional way of being. To do so, especially as a Native and Spanish professional, I work across differences in values, ways of operating, priorities, and perspectives. Because I believe in and thrive on long-term relationships, and because of its effectiveness, I often create an "extended family" in my work environment. We need to articulate purposefully the connection of strong relationships to our primary vision, goals, and objectives. We need to develop relational skills to assist us and those we serve to work effectively across differences to grapple collectively with the increasingly complex issues facing our campuses. We need to dedicate ourselves minute by minute to stay engaged regardless of the circumstances.

Maintain Connectedness. Connectedness is a critical term in many spiritual traditions. It manifests in various forms: the circle of life in numerous Native traditions, the Holy Spirit in Christian traditions, intuition for many nonreligious traditions, spiritual energy forms in the universe in many Eastern belief systems, and what one close friend of mine refers to as listening to "Mother Universe." Maintaining connectedness in my everyday life means I need constantly to listen to more than my five senses. Raised with a mixture of Native traditions, I find it essential to connect with this spirit or energy through time spent out in nature's vibrant places. I find myself in great spiritual distress when I lack the opportunity for time spent at least weekly in parks, forests, or mountains.

My most critical guide in making life choices is my spirit or intuition. I have learned—sometimes the hard way—that even when my heart, mind, and body point in one direction, I need to listen and follow what my intuition and spirit quietly call me to do. At times this has meant going in a direction that at first makes little logical sense, or one toward which others around me are skeptical. After a time, the rightness of my choice has always become clear.

I also have become purposeful in encouraging students and professionals to listen to and learn from all parts of themselves, including their own intuition or spirit. At first, this feels like a great risk for me, to openly encourage intuition and not rationality in the academy. Whenever group members in workshops I facilitate share one aspect of themselves that does not feel welcome in higher education, many express that their spiritual self feels unwelcome and unacknowledged. As I have become purposeful about this, however, lines of people form to relay some story and to share that I am the first one who has ever encouraged them to consider this quiet-but-present guide in their public lives. This connectedness for me is not just an individual source. It is as well a place for us to consider shared spirit and to support each other with this connectedness.

Sustain Openness. The principle that attracts me perhaps most strongly to working in an educational environment is sustaining openness in my life. This points me toward lifelong learning, another connection to our profession. Being open enables me to consider multiple perspectives and to surround myself with others who embody and practice those perspectives. I believe this is the hallmark of a true learning community. We need to create environments empowering of multiple ideas, ways of knowing, ways of learning, and ways of contributing. A very wise supervisor, Gary Schwartz, in the department of residence at Iowa State University, once urged us hall directors to select at least a few staff who made us actively uncomfortable, to create a truly diverse staff team. I have never forgotten this message and have since developed my ability to determine the difference between discomfort that is a legitimate intuitive warning from discomfort that signals a need for me to work across positive differences.

Richard Quantz, a former colleague in my faculty department at Miami University, reminded me at one point that even those with beliefs far from our own are likely trying just as hard as we are to live by what they believe is right and good. Over time, I have become most comfortable in working professionally in highly diverse groups because of the level of creativity, the multiple types of spirit, and the marvelous possibilities. Being an educator for me is based in large part on my way of being as a person who sustains openness, values a multiplicity of perspectives, and encourages them in others.

Steward. Stewardship is a principle of living a purposeful life and working to make a difference in the world. Wilma Mankiller, chief of the Cherokee nation, often speaks of our shared responsibility for "seven generations into the future," not just for humans but for other beings and for the earth that is our home. Stewardship means living a purposeful life; it is part of a definition of a well-lived life within many Native and Spanish contexts. A life with an individual career as the center is often seen as too individualistic and even as inappropriate or selfish. In many collective cultures and spiritual traditions, living a life of purpose is a guiding principle; stewardship is a way in which one might do this.

I have made a variety of transitions in our profession within student affairs, as a diversity consultant and educator, and as a faculty member teaching and doing scholarship in educational administration. With each of these transitions, I have made choices primarily based on how I feel called to stewardship. I consistently feel that my role in the world is to be an interpreter and facilitator among many ways of being, and that educational environments are where I can have an important influence. In my most recent transition, my personal longings for home, family, and the mountains of New Mexico gave way to a strong spiritual and intuitive sense that I needed to be at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. My life's purpose continues to guide me in my professional and personal choices.

Radiate Hopefulness. Some of the most important aspects of my professional practice are wrapped up in my personal principle of radiating

hopefulness. Students and professionals seem to bring to campus increasing feelings of loneliness and hopelessness about their life. Changing societal parameters, movement of many families toward distant locations, the astounding influx of information bombardment, multiple choices available for almost everything, and an emphasis on consumerism may be contributing factors. I work to assist others to see the incredible worth in their own spirit, talent, and contributions—to see, in the words of developmental theorist Roy Heath, “all the marvelous possibilities” of the human spirit (1964, p. 75).

When identifying challenges, I offer hope for creating solutions in the form of ideas and suggestions, and by calling people together to develop a multitude of possible strategies. It is imperative for me to assist staff and students in searching for the best in each other and believing in our ability to continue improving. Reminding staff to give others the benefit of the doubt and to work at learning the reasons behind each other's choices is a small but critical way in which we can keep hope alive in our own professional communities. It is critical as well for me to facilitate joy, fun, and opportunity for celebration in our everyday work.

Live Simply. The principle of living simply has its origins in many spiritual traditions in my life. From Native traditions, simplicity enables me to focus on what is important, to listen to the universe around me; it is a way of honoring my place in a world shared with other beings. In both Buddhism and Catholicism, simplicity is a virtue that enables us to clear our minds of distraction and the pull of things we do not consider important in the long run. In professional practice, I encourage simplicity in our work by facilitating a staff focus on solutions closest to the challenge; by promoting realistic, long-term choices about use of resources; and by encouraging staff to do a few things and do them deeply. Considering more than the human element in all that we do and facilitating a wide ethic in our use of resources, buildings, and grounds in higher education assists me personally and professionally.

Give Thanks. A practice of giving thanks is foundational in so many spiritual traditions and important in our own profession as well. We have so much to be thankful for in our privileged work in higher education: the marvelous spirit of our students, the kindness of our colleagues, the excitement of working in an environment of constant learning, and the joy of doing work that makes a difference in the lives of others.

Some of my most important work is the small daily practice of letting others know how much I value and benefit from their presence, their wisdom, and their contributions. When people feel good about themselves, I find that they are also likely to be patient with others, try to understand different perspectives, and develop creative, long-term solutions to complex issues. I find it is also helpful to continuously place our work in the context of a larger world and to remind ourselves of all the blessings we have in our profession.

Final Words

In closing, I would like to share once again the words of an important leader in our society, Chief Wilma Mankiller. I find it helpful to purposefully develop and be mindful of my own principles daily; I encourage you to reflect on the practice of your own principles in your chosen vocation. I wish you well on your journey as you continue to reflect and develop an increased sense of who you are and how you live your spiritual beliefs in professional practice. “We must live life,” Wilma says, “as full, authentic, human beings . . . living honorably and sharing responsibility for seven generations into the future.”

References

- Allen, K., and Cherrey, C. *Systemic Leadership: Enriching the Meaning of Our Work*. Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 2000.
- American College Personnel Association. *The Student Learning Imperative: Implications for Student Affairs*. Alexandria, Va.: ACPA, 1994.
- American Council on Education. “The Student Personnel Point of View.” In A. L. Rentz (ed.), *Student Affairs: A Profession's Heritage*. (American College Personnel Association Media Publication, no. 40, 2nd ed.) Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1994. (Original work published in 1937)
- Anzaldúa, G. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987.
- Dalai Lama. *Ethics for a New Millennium*. New York: River Head Books, 2000.
- Gardner, H. *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*. Boston: Basic Books, 1993.
- Gould, S. *Rock of Ages: Science and Religion in the Fullness of Life*. London: Ballantine, 1999.
- Heath, R. *The Reasonable Adventurer: A Study of the Development of Thirty-Six Undergraduates at Princeton*. Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh Press, 1964.
- Myers-Briggs, I., and McCaulley, M. H. *Manual: A Guide to the Development and Use of Myers-Briggs Type Indicator*. Palo Alto, Calif.: Consulting Psychologists Press, 1985.
- Myss, S. *Anatomy of the Spirit: Seven Stages of Power and Healing*. New York: Random House, 1997.
- Palmer, P. *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998.
- Peck, S. “Stages of Community Building.” In C. Whitmyer (ed.), *In the Company of Others: Making Community in the Modern World*. New York: Putnam, 1993.
- Peters, T., and Waterman, R. *In Search of Excellence: Lessons from America's Best-Run Companies*. New York: Warner, 1982.
- Scott, D., and Awbrey, S. “Transforming the University.” Paper presented at the Conference on Women in Science and Engineering, Bloomington, Ind., 1993.
- Senge, P., and others. *The Dance of Change*. New York: Doubleday, 1999.
- Thomas, R. *Beyond Race and Gender: Managing Your Total Workforce*. New York: AMACOM, 1994.
- Wheatley, M. *Leadership and the New Science: Learning About Organizations from an Orderly Universe*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 1992.

ALICIA FIDELINA CHAVEZ is the dean of students at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, and has an adjunct appointment in the School of Education.