The Notion of Spirituality in Adult and Higher Education

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Abstract:

Although adult educators are often challenged to help students find meaning and purpose in their lives, educators often avoid the topic of spirituality as a research topic or within the classroom setting. This article considers the notion of spirituality as it relates to adult and higher education. The author provides an overview of current theory and research relating to spirituality and then discusses the need for and implications of incorporating the notion of spirituality into adult and higher education. This article is the foundation work for graduate research leading to a Master of Education degree in Adult Education.

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Introduction

There has been a growing interest in North American society to understand and more clearly define the concept of spirituality. We frequently see the term used in newspapers or magazines and hear the word used indiscriminately by the media in relation not only to religious activities, but to other areas of everyday life including 'spirituality in the workplace' or the spiritual nature of counselling or therapy. Much of the academic work focusing on spirituality has evolved out of research in the area of transpersonal psychology; even within this field, there has been difficulty generating research that might validate the subject's theoretical importance. Mack (1994) identifies the problem, indicating that "the relative inattention to the study of the spiritual in psychology may be rooted in the profession's historical precedents to dissociate itself from nonempirical philosophical disciplines" (p. 15). Mack goes on to note that "this is exacerbated by the fact that the concept is dynamic in nature and… has undergone numerous transformations" (p. 15) related to changes in religious, political, and social structures. This obstacle is apparent with any academic research connected with spirituality.

It is my contention that students entering adult and higher education settings are often engaged in a search to find meaning and purpose in their lives. Unfortunately, students often find the academy devoid of any "morals" in its struggle to be sectarian and politically correct. Young (1997) identifies this concern as well. He indicates that "spirituality evokes the human need for unity and caring, but the integrative, emotional, and universal character of these needs is difficult to reconcile with academic activities today" (p. 142). He goes on to say that although the "history of higher education has involved a human struggle to find lasting and unified truths" (p. 167), spiritual well-being is still a by-product rather than the main result of the public education system.

It is my intention within this article to develop a conceptual framework for understanding and differentiating the concepts of spirit and soul. The article will relate spirituality to transformative learning and consider the impact a focus on spirituality can have on adult education in general, and instructional design in particular. A review of the research that has been done in the area of Jungian psychology as a theoretical foundation for understanding spiritual development is contrasted with research that is being done in the area of self-transcendence as an alternative perspective. I then introduce the notions of spirit and soul and suggest how these two concepts can be differentiated. As a definition of spirituality evolves, the concept is related to our work within the adult and higher education classroom. As one example of how spirituality can be integrated into education, I call upon the notion of transformative learning to illustrate this process. I conclude by challenging the reader to consider the implications for adult and higher education theory and practice, should spirituality and education be integrated.

Psychological Perspectives on Spiritual Development

Among the early research in the field of psychology, the work of Jung has been instrumental in exploring and understanding spirituality within the human psyche. Although Jung (1959) focused most clearly on the concept of 'soul', he saw spirituality as a foundation for human development and described the spirit as the characteristic of a human that "makes him [sic] creative, always spurring him on, giving

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him lucky ideas, staying power, 'enthusiasm' and 'inspiration'" (p. 393). Singer (1972) explicates Jung's interest in spirituality. She argues that

> for Jung, questions of the spirit were of highest importance. By 'spirit' he did not mean the supernatural, but rather those higher aspirations which are so much a part of man's striving, whether they are expressed in works of art, in service to one's fellow man, or in attempting to understand the workings of nature and her order(p. 94).

Although it is impossible to do justice to Jungian psychology within the context of this overview, it is important to understand that Jung believed that religion evolved from the 'collective unconscious' and he considered religiosity to be an instinctual aspect of human functioning.

Jung's knowledge of, and interest in, world mythology led him to recognize that the dreams and fantasies of his clients were often inhabited by ancient symbols, images and mythological motifs that many of these people had never been exposed to. Because they had not acquired this information within their lifetimes, Jung concluded that the motifs were innate structures inherited by every member of the human race. These primordial images, or 'archetypes' as Jung called them, were common to all people: trans-individual, collective, and transcendent. Jung (1959) explained that the interpretation of archetypes was reliant on the fact that

> eternal truth needs a human language that alters with the spirit of the times. The primordial images undergo ceaseless transformation and yet remain ever the same… Always they require a new interpretation if, as each formulation becomes obsolete, they are not to lose their spellbinding power… (p. 396).

In order to understand the importance of the concept of archetypes to Jungian psychology, we must realize that within Jung's approach to religion, the spiritual element was an essential part of the psyche. Singer (1972) explains this more fully:

> It is the source of the search for meaning, and it is that element which lifts us above our concern for merely keeping our species alive… The spiritual element is expressed in symbols, for symbols are the language of the unconscious… The symbol attracts, and therefore leads individuals on the way of becoming what they are capable of becoming. That goal is wholeness, which is integration of the parts of the personality into a functioning totality. (p. 392)

Unlike Freud, as a psychologist Jung did not dismiss spiritual urges as psychological neuroses but rather saw spiritual growth as a component of individuation. In her interpretation of Jung's work, Mack (1994) suggests that individuation involves the

> process of achieving wholeness through synthesis of conscious and unconscious aspects of the self … Jung characterized this process of individuation as religious in nature… According to Jung, both psychological and spiritual health depend on an open relationship between conscious and unconscious forces in personality. This open relationship, which is fundamental for the Jungian process of personality integration, is the criterion in discerning genuine spirituality (pp. 16-17) .

Drawing from Jung's work, several other theorists within the field of psychology have broadened the concept of spirituality to include the process of 'self-transcendence'. These theorists view growth in the spiritual realm differently from Jung in that "the self is not deified and God is not psychologized" (Mack, 1994, p. 17). Within this framework,

theorists such as Wilber (1979) view spiritual development as ontogenetic and unidirectional toward an ultimate unity (a state of mystical oneness beyond all division and duality). Transcendence involves a disclosure to consciousness of psychic and spiritual potentials which to that point were present in an immanent but not yet evident way. Transcendence of the ego is an integration process that is achieved through total dependence on God, a higher power or purpose, or both. Wilber himself indicates that the process of transcendence is difficult to understand, but intimates that this may be a weakness relative to Western culture.

> We have largely lost any direct and socially accessible means to transcendence. The average person will therefore probably listen in disbelief if it is pointed out that he has, nestled in the deepest recesses of his being, a transpersonal self, a self that transcends his individuality and connects him to a world beyond conventional space and time. (p. 123)

Wilber (1979) posits that the recent resurgence of spirituality in Western culture is an indicator of people's desire to find new meaning. Although we strive towards what Wilber describes as 'unity consciousness', he discusses a resistance to this consciousness:

> As a person takes up the special conditions of a spiritual practice, he will begin to realize, with increasing certainty and clarity, an exasperating but unmistakable fact: nobody wants unity consciousness. At all times we are, in truth, resisting unity consciousness, avoiding God, fighting the Tao. It is certain that we are always wavejumping, that we are always resisting the present wave of experience. But unity consciousness and the present are one and the same thing. To resist one is to resist the other… The understanding of this secret resistance is the ultimate key to enlightenment. (p.146)

To expand on the idiosyncrasies of these two perspectives, it is important to first recognize that they are both 'transpersonal' in that they view transcendence as a developmental transition to a level of experience beyond that centred in the ego or personal self. At the same time, there are differences in the models that Wilber suggests may derive from the divergence of Eastern and Western thought. To delineate this East/West perspective more clearly, Wilber's model emphasizes the nonduality of the self, focuses on the cognitive aspects of selftranscendence,
and describes self-transcendence as a process that develops through enlightenment and sacred wisdom.

> Conversely, Jungian and post-Jungian theorists have developed the concept of duality of self (conscious or unconscious), focussed on the interactional aspect of self-transcendence, and maintained that self-transcendence occurs through a restored or redeemed relationship (i.e. reunion of the self with its ground). The continued debate between these two perspectives has been clearly identified by Washburn (1990). He poses several questions for the student of transcendence to ponder:

- What exactly does the process of spiritual development consists of?
- Is transcendence a wholly immanent process or a process that involves contact with transcendent forces?
- Is transcendence primarily growth from within or transformation from without?
- Does transcendence ultimately lead beyond all selfhood or to a point at which a higher form of selfhood is achieved?

These questions continue to stimulate dialogue in the field of transpersonal psychology and challenge us to develop a clearer understanding of the complex nature of spiritual development.

Understanding Spirituality: Differentiating Spirit and Soul

As mentioned previously, the term spirituality has taken on a popular yet ambiguous character. People use the word freely when they discuss concepts like 'breaking the human spirit' or 'the spirit of the times'. We also hear the terms spiritual and spirituality used by religious and secular people in reference to human development or personal growth. Discussions involving spirituality quite often get enmeshed with the word 'soul' and even academic writings often use the terms interchangeably. So what is spirituality?

The clearest definition that I have been able to find for the concept of spirituality from a research framework is from a study done by Elkins, Hedstrom, Hughes, Leaf and Saunders (1988). They define spirituality as "a way of being and experiencing that comes about through awareness of a transcendent dimension and that is characterized by certain identifiable values in regard to self, others, nature, life, and whatever one considers the Ultimate" (p. 10). They go on to identify nine components of spirituality:

Transcendent dimension: The spiritual person has an experientially based belief that there is a transcendent dimension to life. The actual content of this belief may range from the traditional view of a personal God to a psychological view that the 'transcendent dimension' is simply a natural extension of the conscious self into the regions of the unconscious or Greater Self.

Meaning and purpose in life: The spiritual person has known the quest for meaning and purpose and has emerged from this quest with confidence that life is deeply meaningful and that one's own existence has purpose.

Mission in life: The spiritual person has a sense of 'vocation'. He or she feels a sense of responsibility to life, a calling to answer, a mission to accomplish, or in some cases, even a destiny to fulfill.

Sacredness of life: The spiritual person believes life is infused with sacredness and often experiences a sense of awe, reverence, and wonder even in nonreligious' settings.

Material values: The spiritual person can appreciate material goods such as money and possessions but does not seek ultimate satisfaction from them nor attempt to use them as a substitute for frustrated spiritual needs.

Altruism: The spiritual person believes we are our 'brother's keepers' and is touched by the pain and suffering of others.

Idealism: The spiritual person is a visionary committed to the betterment of the world.

Awareness of the tragic: The spiritual person is solemnly conscious of the tragic realities of human existence. He or she is deeply aware of human pain, suffering and death.

Fruits of spirituality: The spiritual person is one whose spirituality has borne fruit in his or her life. True spirituality has a discernible effect upon one's relationship to self, others, nature, life, and whatever one considers to be the Ultimate.

Although this definition is useful in developing an understanding of spirituality, it clearly illustrates the numinous character of the phenomenon. Beck (1986) suggests that a

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spiritual person "has characteristics which range from deep self-knowledge and sensitivity, to awareness of and care for the concrete needs of self and others" (p. 151). He describes 13 different characteristics of a spiritual person: awareness, breadth of outlook, a holistic outlook, integration, wonder, gratitude, hope, courage, energy, detachment, acceptance, love and gentleness. Beck himself indicates that anyone faced with such a long list of characteristics of a spiritual person might wonder if the concept of spirituality is too broad to be of any use. He believes that in fact, "failure in the spiritual domain occurs when too many of the wide range of conditions and elements of spirituality are absent" (p. 153). Attempts at identifying common elements that might define spirituality more completely have been unsuccessful; however, the literature consistently includes the concept of transcendence, and the theme that people yearn for transcendence.

From his readings of ancient literature, Moore (1996) helps differentiate the concept of spirituality from the concept of soul:

> Although the issue is subtle and complicated, in general terms we can see the spirit as focused on transcending the limits of our personal, time-bound, concrete life. The spirit is fascinated by the future, wants to know the meaning of everything, and would like to stretch, if not break altogether, the laws of nature through technology or prayer. It is full of ideals and ambition, and is a necessary, rewarding and inspiring aspect of human life. The soul is, as Jung says, the 'archetype of life', embedded in the details of ordinary, everyday experience. In the spirit, we try to transcend our humanity; in the soul, we try to enter our humanity fully and realize it completely. (p. 12)

Reflecting on the work of James Hillman, Moore (in Hillman, 1989) reiterates this sentiment, emphasizing this tendency for spiritual practice to "rise above or move beyond the valley of the soul…" (p. 7). He continues, "Spirit tends to be escapist, literalistic, and single- minded in its detours around soul…. Hillman speaks strongly for the soul, but at the same time he values spirit highly, stressing the importance of arts, a religious sensibility, and, especially ideas" (p. 7). Moore's description of the nature of spirit and soul draw back to the theoretical frameworks proposed by Jung, Wilber, and other transpersonal psychologists. Moore contrasts spirit and soul and alludes to their role in personal development and adult and higher education. As adult educators, we can challenge students to 'transcend' humanity in the quest for knowledge by providing an opportunity to engage in critical discourse (spirit) but educational institutions need to provide an atmosphere of 'community' and 'fellowship' (soul). The academy frequently fails in this regard.

Transformative Learning

It is possible to consider spirituality from an educational perspective if it is viewed in the context of transformation theory. One of the most significant contributions that has been made to this body of knowledge is Mezirow's work (1989, 1991, 1992 and 1995, inter alia) in the area of perspective transformation. Perspective transformation as defined by Mezirow can occur through transformation of meaning schemes or an epochal transformation triggered by a life crisis or major transition. Mezirow (1991) states that perspective transformation involves eleven sequential stages:

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1. a disorienting dilemma.
2. self-examination with feelings of guilt or shame, sometimes turning to religion for support.
3. a critical assessment of assumptions.
4. recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared and others have negotiated a similar change.
5. exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions.
6. a plan for a course of action.
7. knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans
8. provisional enactment new roles
9. a renegotiation of relationships and negotiating new relationships
10. the building of competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships
11. a reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective. (pp.168-169)

In describing transformative learning, Mezirow (1995) argues that "learning which may involve a reassessment of one's self-concept, as is often the case in perspective transformation, is threatening, emotionally charged, and extremely difficult" (p. 48). Furthermore, he contends that "it is not enough that such transformations effect a cognitive insight; they require a conative and emotional commitment to act upon a new perspective as well" (p. 48).

As we read Mezirow's work, we sense that perspective transformation is individualistic, linear, rational, and cognitive in nature, raising the question of whether the concept of spirituality suits his framework. Although Mezirow's orientation typically asserts the dominance of the rational and the marginality of the extrarational, he does make reference to the notion of 'discernment'. Reviewing the work of Boyd and Myers (1988), Dorland (1995) suggests that discernment is a way of knowing that leads to contemplative insight.

Things are seen in their relational wholeness. "Discernment gradually leads people to wholeness, to meaning, to a tacit knowledge of the mystery held within our beings" (Boyd & Myers, 1988, p. 275). This process requires a silencing of the rational, logical part of ourselves, our ego, and practising 'deep listening'" (p. 27-28). Mezirow has a tendency to avoid these reflections on the 'extrarational'. Instead, he focuses on instrumental, dialogic, and emancipatory learning domains without clearly establishing how meaning and purpose contribute to transformation from a spiritual perspective.

Mezirow's (1989) own comments about adult education point to both the strengths and weaknesses of his framework:

> Adult education goals like social action, intellectual development, cognitive and moral development, self-actualization, democratic participation or liberation, and social and political goals like freedom, liberty, equality, justice, human rights and others are all of great importance, but they are only instrumental. From my erspective, their common purpose is to foster the conditions and abilities necessary for an adult to understand his or her experience through free, full participation in critical discourse. Reflective dialogue represents the most distinctively human attribute, the capacity to learn the meaning of one's own

experience and to realize the value potential in nature through communication (p. 174).

Although Mezirow did not expand on the concept of how we learn the meaning of our own existence, the concept of spiritual development as a component of transformation is introduced in this passage.

Spirituality and Transformative Learning

In his comments about the role of the educator, Purpel (1989) argues that, "we educators have for the most part been able (willing) to separate our concern for education from our discussion of our most serious and profound matters. What is the meaning of life? How do we relate as a family, nation, people?" (p. 5) Although somewhat ominous, these questions challenge us to broaden our perspective of adult and higher education and examine our role as adult educators.

> What is adult education? UNESCO defines adult education as: The entire body of organized educational processes… whereby persons regarded as adult… develop their abilities, enrich their knowledge, improve their technical or professional qualifications or turn them in a new direction and bring about changes in their attitudes or behavior in the twofold perspective of full personal development and participation in balanced and independent social, economic and cultural development… (Selman & Dampier, 1991, p.3)

What does this say about the nature of education? Although it seems all-encompassing, the definition takes on a vocational focus highlighting issues such as technical and professional qualifications. While it does mention personal development, this aspect is related to participation in social, economic and cultural development.

In contrast, Purpel (1989) and many other educators take a more 'holistic' approach to adult learning. Neiman (1995) suggests that "… true liberal education is… that which allows things to grow most naturally, to become what they are by nature meant to be, to achieve their ultimate purpose" (p. 58). Often, both in my personal life and in the readings I have completed, these questions of 'meaning' and 'purpose' come to the foreground. In adult and higher education, they are most clearly developed within a transformative learning framework.

Transformative learning is "a process of critical self-reflection, or a process of questioning the assumptions and values that form the basis for the way we see the world" (Cranton, 1992, p. 146). Transformation may be precipitated by a life crisis (death), a change of circumstances (new job), or through challenging interactions with another person (an adult educator). Mezirow (1992) describes transformative learning as a learning process that mediated by critical self-reflection, which results in a reformulated meaning perspective that reframes one's experience in a more more inclusive, discriminating, and integrative manner." Cranton (1992) suggests five steps for educators trying to promote transformative learning in their classroom :

1. Recognize the learner's assumptions that are acting as constraints;
2. Create an environment which challenges assumptions;
3. Encourage the learner to question the validity of assumptions;
4. Provide guidance and support in the revision of assumptions; and
5. Create an environment where the learner can act on revised assumptions.

Transformative learning is appealing in that it has the ability to combine ideals from

such diverse fields as psychology, philosophy, critical theory, and adult and higher education. It allows the learner and educator to take the best of each, and as Freire or Mezirow might say, to move forward into 'praxis'. One aspect of transformative learning that is often questioned is the individual focus that it seems to promote. If we agree that adult education has at its roots some form of social action, then how might this individualistic transformation converge with social action? Mezirow suggests that individual transformation precedes societal transformation. I would agree, and add that, by expanding on transformative learning through the concept of spirituality, social transformation is even more likely. Griffin (1993) explains spirituality as "...an awareness and awe of the connectedness of what is and what could be. It includes your vision of what could be for yourself—your purpose in life, for others, for nature" (p. 121). Within this context, Griffin proposes that education should move from the realm of looking only at the areas of technology and credentialing to a more holistic education. She stresses the need for links between traditional education and holistic learning but is conscious of the need to avoid using terms that would create the discomfort that typically may be associated with religious doctrine or 'new age psychology'. To bring more clarity to her argument, she goes on to quote from Brown:

> Spiritual experiences are those which give us new expansive perceptions about our relationship to the cosmos, which allow us to glimpse a reality beyond the logical, rational, physically bound world we usually consider to be our home. These new perceptions are naturally accompanied by strong emotions of fear, (and) joy...our thinking may become confused… When we undergo such experiences, our values change. We become more open to transpersonal values: ethical, aesthetic, heroic, humanitarian, altruistic… (as cited in Griffin, 1993, p.122).

Transformative Learning in Practice

When I first read about transformative learning from Griffin's (1993) perspective, I was overwhelmed by the enormity of the ideas she proposed. The union of transformation and spirituality with education did not seem to reflect the traditional role of an adult educator but instead 'psychologized' the profession. Often in class discussions, my colleagues and I struggled with the principle of not imposing our values and belief systems on others. We choose our words not only to be 'politically correct', but also to ensure we don't force our viewpoint on others. How would educators avoid getting into moral arguments or religious debates with students if they incorporated the notion of spirituality into their courses? On the other hand, it is misleading to think that any curriculum could be taught with absolute objectivity.

As I considered the impact that dialogues on spirituality and transformation might have on adult and higher education, I was excited about the possible consequences. Students question the relevance of course material but they fail to understand the relationship course material has to their program, career or life. Krishnamurti (1953) suggests that rather than worrying so much about forcing values on each other, we need to focus more on discovering what an 'integrated outlook to life' might mean through critical thinking and dialogue:

> Though there is a higher and wider significance to life, of what value is our education if we never discover it? We may be highly educated, but if we are

without deep integration of thought and feeling, our lives are incomplete, contradictory and torn with many fears; and as long as education does not cultivate an integrated outlook to life, it has very little significance… Education is not merely a matter of training the mind. Training makes for efficiency, but it does not bring about completeness. A mind that has merely been trained is the continuation of the past, and such a mind can never discover the new. That is why, to find out what is right education, we will have to inquire into the whole significance of living. (pp. 11-13)

So, what does this mean for the role of the adult educator? Krishnamurti (1953) admonishes us when he indicates that "the present system of education is making us subservient, mechanical and deeply thoughtless; though it awakens us intellectually, inwardly it leaves us incomplete, stultified and uncreative" (p. 15). Although Krishnamurti was describing concerns he thought were prevalent in the pedagogy of children and youth, he also directs these comments to the academy in general. Even today, when we look at adult education in the workplace or in the community, the focus is typically geared towards skill development or vocational training.

Purpel (1989) provides a compelling perspective of education in which he describes the purpose of adult and higher education:

… to help us to see, hear, and experience the world more clearly, more completely, and with more understanding. Another vital aspect of the educational process is the development of creativity and imagination, which enable us not only to understand but to build, make, create, and re-create our world… We are here talking about a vision that can illuminate what we are doing and what we might work to achieve. Such a vision needs to inform all aspects of our life, and naturally that includes education… (p. 5)

As adult educators then, our challenge is not only to help students integrate academic theory with skill development, but also to encourage students to look at their own transformative learning. Dorland (1996) suggests that adult educators have a mandate to practice two fundamental virtues, namely seasoned guidance and compassionate criticism. She explains the role of each within adult and higher education:

Seasoned guidance refers to an educator's ability to help learners carry on the journey's inner dialogue. The term 'seasoned' implies that adult educators are themselves involved in a dialogue process with their own personal journeys, and can speak to their personal experience in order to assist learners. Compassionate criticism refers to the process whereby adult educators assist learners by helping them to question their existing world view and 'modus operandi', moving on to criticize the dominant consciousness, and to enter a process of discernment which can open the way to a new, more integrated, holistic future (p. 121).

By encouraging dialogue and critical thinking, we establish a process that challenges students in all realms of social, political and moral issues. Seasoned guidance adds to this process by recognizing that very often it will be the educator who is allenged to critically think about his or her own assumptions. Purpel (1995) summarizes this idea well when he suggests the following:

Each of us engages in some form or another in the troubling and daunting task of searching for and acting on meaning and I believe that those of us who are educators ought to integrate this quest into our professional responsibilities. My

view is that educators need to share that struggle and infuse personal reflection into the intellectual and ideological dimensions of their work not only as legitimate self-reflection but also as a necessary part of genuine dialogue. (p. 156)

Whenever we try to reconcile the concept of spirituality with adult education practice, the union seems to stimulate dialogue on meaning and purpose. Jarvis and Walters (1993) describe the relationship between transformative learning and adult education as … a transformational journey in which the driving motive for learning is the search for meaning. Working with adult students studying various curricula… Daloz saw their experience as a sense-making, meaning-generating search that was far more encompassing than the study of the subject matter… Learning entailed development and growth in which occurs a transformation in how they created meaning. Persons experienced growth when they began to look at life through their own eyes and not the eyes of others (p.135).

Final Thoughts

As a researcher, I chose to study the concept of spirituality within an adult education context because the topic gave meaning and purpose to my research at a time when I questioned my own adult learning experiences. As an instructor, I sometimes question my ability to incorporate these ideas of spirituality effectively into my classroom setting given the academic and political climate of our time. Incorporating transformative learning and spirituality into the classroom is at its best a daunting and intimidating venture. On the other hand, if we believe that transformation is a necessary and integral component of adult and higher education, we are obliged to take on the challenge. This article has provided some insight into the nature of transformative learning so that we adult educators can begin to consider how to incorporate these principles into our education practice. It seems appropriate to conclude where we began, with a challenge from Jung (1957):

The spiritual transformation of mankind follows the slow tread of the centuries and cannot be hurried or held up by any rational process of reflection, let alone brought to fruition in one generation. What does lie within our reach, however, is the change in individuals who have, or create, an opportunity to influence others of like mind in their circle of acquaintance. (p. 121).

Acknowledgements

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