

# Heed Your Calling and Follow It Far: Suggestions for Authors Who Write About Spirituality or Other Innovations for Social Work

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## Abstract

This essay provides suggestions for authors who wish to write about spirituality or other innovations for social work. It recommends that authors integrate their life mission, professional commitments, creative process, and the practicalities of writing and publishing within a spiritually sensitive approach to social work.

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THIS ESSAY OFFERS SUGGESTIONS for how to relate one's life mission to the creative process and the practicalities of writing about spirituality or other innovations for social work journals. My writing during the past 20 years has built on the efforts of many others in social work and beyond. It was their accomplishments, passion for the subject, encouragement, and risk to innovate that laid the foundation for spiritually sensitive social work. I hope that the following suggestions will encourage others to continue, through their writing, to build a great space of thought and action for innovation, especially regarding the wide range of spiritual diversity in this country and around the world.

## Suggestions for Authors

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### *Heed Your Calling*

When I was a child and adolescent, the aphorism that "the pen is mightier than the sword" moved me very much. I loved to read widely and voluminously. Each time I entered a world invented by fiction writers, my own universe expanded. When I joined in the excitement of scientists and philosophers exploring inner and outer realms, my appreciation for everything around and within us became greater. Each time I found a new insight from saints, mystics, poets, artists, and

social activists, my soul drew from the flames of their inspiration and became brighter. I felt how I was changed by the writings of others and I observed how the culture around me shifted with new ideas. During much of this period, people on different sides were trying to spread their ideas by guns in the Vietnam War. In contrast, I was attracted to writing as a peaceful way to invite people to new possibilities, and I saw how great ideas could influence people widely, even over hundreds and thousands of years.

Though as a child I had no practical idea of how or what I could write that would be of any significance, I felt called to be a writer. As a Catholic, I learned the value of discerning one's vocation, that is, what God calls one to do distinctively with one's life to make a contribution to others. I have tried to follow that call in my professional work. If any good has come of my writing, I believe it is because I was true to that calling, even when it seemed to lead me into foggy or risky territory. This way, even if I failed to make a contribution, at least my efforts would have integrity and authenticity. Success or failure really has not been the important issue; rather, the important issue is trying to be genuine as much as possible and letting come what may.

So my advice to all writers on spirituality and other innovations for social work is that you listen carefully to your own

calling and follow it far. Look into your own life for occasions of meaning, suffering, joy, grief, stagnation, breakthrough, and simple moments of clarity. Examine the world around for situations of liberation and oppression, celebration and collective misery, wonderful attempts and terrible mistakes. Open to the wisdom, beauty, and mystery of the sacred, the divine, or the ultimate and immediate significance of reality, however you understand it. These are sources of profound possibilities for inquiry and writing. By exploring them, you may discover, sustain, and renew your calling.

### **Know Your Ancestors and Kindred Spirits**

As a contributor to the understanding of spirituality in social work, I am one thread in a long and wide net of contributors of the past and one colleague among many contemporaries who do this innovative work. This awareness of continuity over generations and support from kindred spirits has been crucial for me. It can be a great help for every author who wishes to innovate. Awareness of our intellectual ancestors alerts us to pay respect to those who have come before and passed away, to incorporate their wisdom, and to go beyond it for the sake of future generations. Awareness of support from ancestors and colleagues creates synergy and momentum for innovative movements of ideas and wards off feelings of isolation and frustration that may come from pushing the limits of conventionality.

The field of study on spirituality and social work has become well-established in the past 10 years. So knowing our ancestors and kindred spirits means knowing the body of work that already exists and then identifying areas that would be especially fruitful for further exploration and writing. Authors need to be well-acquainted with the full range of scholarly writing in social work that pertains to their particular subject. There is no longer any reason for newly published articles to begin with such statements as: “the topics of spirituality and religion have rarely been addressed in social work;” or “spirituality has not been defined in social work, so this article will provide a definition;” or “social work education ignores the topic of spirituality;” or “there is very little guidance about how to address spirituality and religion in social work practice.” There is no need to reinvent the wheel once people know it exists.

Writings in English at least should be explored (Canda, Nakashima, Burgess, & Russel, 1999). But there is also important work happening in many places other than English-speaking countries and this should be explored. (See my home page for international Web sites on spirituality and social work: <http://www.socwel.ku.edu/canda/>). I believe that the most important task for further innovation about spirituality and social work is to develop multilingual, international, and transcultural research, collaborations, and writing.

Further, there is an extensive body of material on religion and spirituality relevant to social work concerns in such

fields as cultural anthropology, religious studies, theology, pastoral counseling, psychology, sociology, philosophy, nursing, medicine, and psychiatry. It is time for social work authors to join with the efforts of these fields and pool together our insights.

### **Dare to Innovate**

I published my first article in a social work journal in 1983, on the topic of insights from cross-cultural study of shamanism for clinical social work. That article was my first attempt to integrate my interdisciplinary background in cultural anthropology, religious studies, and social work. The article was derived from my MSW thesis; but the seed of the idea began in an MSW course. I proposed the idea and the instructor rejected it in no uncertain terms as irrelevant and inappropriate for social work. Surprisingly, the teacher became ill and had to turn the course over to another instructor. This gave me a chance to overcome my discouragement and resubmit the idea to the new instructor. Luckily for me, this person welcomed it. (And luckily for the original instructor, the person recovered well.) In the early 1980s, I sometimes wondered if I would ever find a niche in social work because there were few settings for practice, teaching, research, or publication that indicated openness to my kind of work. Yet, throughout my MSW and doctoral education (1980–1986), I was fortunate to find educators and practitioners who served as encouragers and mentors for my writing about spirituality. These early experiences showed me the importance of not letting some people dampen enthusiasm and to keep open to new opportunities when first attempts fail.

I have written more than 80 publications, most of them related to the intersection of spirituality, religious diversity, and cross-cultural studies in social work. My research methodologies have included theoretical, philosophical, and empirical (mostly qualitative) approaches. Due to the content, perspective, and methodologies of my work, over the years it has been regarded variously as innovative, creative, irrelevant, or dubious. However, I did not let myself become discouraged by naysayers for three main reasons. First, I was supported by a few special mentors. Second, I listened to a clear voice within me that kept reminding me to follow the path of inquiry upon which I had set out. Third, I saw that the profession of social work is an excellent fit for my interests, because it is committed to well-being and justice for all people; it has a special interest in human diversity; and it claims to take a holistic person–environment approach to understanding and addressing human needs and goals. I believed that if I could get out this message in a manner consistent with the values and mission of our profession, people would naturally respond.

This proved to be true. In 1986, I was able to identify only about 100 English publications on various aspects of spirituality in social work from the previous 50 years (Canda, 1986). Now, there are about 700 (Canda, Nakashima, Burgess, Rus-

sel, & Barfield, in press). If I had let myself feel alienated and discouraged, I would have missed participation in this wonderful burgeoning of work and connection with so many other fine people involved. So I would like to reiterate to all those who wish to write about spirituality or other kinds of innovation in social work: find mentors; keep true to your calling; and find the fit with social work.

In particular, don't worry if you attempt innovative writing and some people say it is nonsensical, irrelevant, or unacceptable. Rather, worry if no one says that. By definition, innovation (from Latin, "into the new") requires going beyond conventions, norms, the status quo, mediocrity, popular opinion, peer pressure, and institutional dictates.

But perhaps I should add a caveat. If some people criticize your work, listen to the criticism carefully and with an open mind. Innovation does not mean ignoring conventions for high quality scholarship and professional values or the informed evaluation of colleagues. It means taking these standards and evaluations to heart, identifying valuable insights for improving one's work, pursuing these insights to their limits, and then going beyond them.

### **Nurture the Creative Process**

A requirement for good writing is that the author supports the creative process that leads to the actual writing. It is first necessary to conceive a compelling idea. Once conception occurs, the mind may become pregnant with the insight. During the inner mental gestation period, the idea needs to be nurtured. Trying to force early delivery is not wise. One has to sense the right timing for the idea to come to fruition. The idea must be nourished with caring attention, information, receptivity, intuition, careful thinking, hard work, and quiet rest. When the time is right for delivery, prepare an environment that is conducive to writing—a place of comfort, without distraction, and filled with scholarly resources (such as books, notes, computer files) and symbols of inspiration, such as family photos and artwork. This could be a place as simple as a crude wooden desk in a one-room cabin (which I prefer) or as elaborate as an office equipped with a computer and internet connection (which I use most often). Given sufficient time and attention, when the timing is right, the writing will flow.

### **Go With the Spirit**

Writing about spirituality in social work is likely to be most satisfying to both the author and readers if it is pursued as part of a spiritual path, or vocation, and if it is conducted in manner consistent with spiritually sensitive social work practice. An author needs to write from genuine authority—not simply following the dictates of convention or powerful people and institutions. Readers sense authority when authors are authentic—true to professional values, their personal calling, and standards for high quality. Authenticity is key to spiritually sensitive social work.

By spiritually sensitive social work, I mean social work that is aware, knowledgeable, respectful, and skillful in responding to the diverse religious and nonreligious forms of spirituality among our clients and in the world generally (Canda & Furman, 1999). It issues from social workers who engage in a continuous process of self-reflection and learning that joins personal spiritual growth with the process of professional helping, whether as teacher, researcher, administrator, policy maker, or direct practitioner. For example, for social work academics, spiritually sensitive writing can be a significant part of our scholarly roles as educators, researchers, and public servants. Then, writing for publication is not driven by external bureaucratic incentives related to salary, promotion, or tenure, but rather by a desire to provide a service to others. In this way, the commitment to public service and a genuine enthusiasm for inquiry and writing naturally may lead to meeting academic expectations for quantity of publications (Canda, 2002).

In order to organize my remaining suggestions for how to go with the spirit when writing on spirituality in social work, I will play with words derived from the Latin root word *spiritus* which means breath or spirit.

**Aspiration.** Aspiration means how you wish to use your life breath, what you wish to breath life upon, or how you want to send out your spirit. What is your life purpose and mission? Why are you a social worker? Where does your concern for human well-being and social justice come from? What persons, institutions, social problems, critical ideas, or world conditions would you most like to impact as a service to others? Just as in any other kind of social work practice, authors need to identify their focus of concern, relevant stakeholders, and appropriate targets for action in order to have an impact.

In my own case, once I entered the doctoral program in social work, I had decided that my main aspiration was to open further the profession's understanding of spirituality in its diverse forms. So my focus of concern was spiritual diversity; relevant stakeholders included educators, students, and practitioners directly and clients and the general public indirectly; appropriate targets for activity included students, educators, researchers, and practitioners.

Writing has been my main way to encourage more attention to spirituality. But it has also been important to connect my efforts for inquiry and publication with direct advocacy activities, such as networking with colleagues who had similar interests around the country and internationally and working together with them to influence key organizations, such as the Council on Social Work Education, via presentations, informal discussions, writing to policy making groups, and development of scholarly forums, such as the spirituality symposium at the Council's Annual Program Meetings. It involved working together with colleagues to develop advocacy organizations, such as the Society for Spirituality and Social Work. It entailed developing courses and opportunities for learning and networking in my own university.

It meant developing resource materials, such as articles, books, and bibliographies that would help other educators and practitioners to know more about spirituality and to incorporate it into teaching, research, and practice. In summary, writing is one crucial component of social work practice for scholars who are committed to spiritually sensitive social work. All of these activities reinforce each other and support writing through their synergy.

**Inspiration.** Inspiration means breathing in or receiving spirit. In order to clarify our aspiration and to send our spirits out to others in a way that will inspire them, authors need to be inspired. Aspiration requires inspiration, like our lives require both breathing in and breathing out. The in and out flow of breath or spirit is like the reciprocation of creativity: receiving creative insight and sharing it with others.

The question of aspiration begs the question of how to discern it; how to be inspired as to one's aspiration. The earlier comments about vocation are pertinent. One important clue is enthusiasm. If you are a person who believes and experiences sacredness in any way, consider what makes you feel filled with spirit, divine grace, enlightened wisdom, or vital energy. For anyone, what makes you want to jump for joy when you have accomplished something? If you don't already know, or you seek a sense of renewal or ongoing enrichment, try daily practice of journal writing, reflection on conscience at the end of the day, regular prayer, meditation, retreats, sabbaticals, walking in the woods, or whatever ways you find helpful for experiencing the most clear or profound moments.

Many of my best ideas come when I am in a receptive state, rather than when I am working hard to think and write. Dreams, waking reveries, sudden insights during meditation, relaxing recreation, and simply resting in quiet listening to the world—these are rich reservoirs. Sometimes when I am feeling stuck about how to think through or articulate an idea, I go for a long walk in the forest. Just by listening to the rustling of leaves, the scampering of squirrels through the underbrush, the call of a hawk, or the flow of water in a stream; or just by watching a turtle sunbathe on a log in a pond or a bee hovering from flower to flower—a message, image, feeling, sudden aha, or mental clearing will happen. This is just as integral to my creative work as the formalities of research and writing. But to receive such insights, one has to be open to them. One needs to create a receptive and undemanding quality of mind. Then, just by experiencing the moment without expectation, whatever is best will happen. For example, I wrote some of my best work while on long retreats in a forest cabin, in a nurturing retreat environment supported by a Catholic contemplative community. I recommend that you find the ways and resources within your own spiritual traditions that are conducive to inspiration. And if you are not familiar with any, then explore and find new ways that work well for you.

**Expiration.** Expiration literally means to breathe out your last, to set loose your spirit. No one knows his or her own expiration date. This itself is an incentive to act on one's aspiration. Imagine, if you were on your deathbed, what would you have had to contribute in life to rest content? What kind of writing would be consistent with that? Don't delay!

It is also good to keep in mind the expiration date of old ideas. Though I do believe there is perennial wisdom, many ideas simply wear out—they may have been useful at one time and place, but they no longer serve well as times and places change. Checking the expiration of ideas, theories, research methods, and styles of language that pertain to spirituality opens up possibilities for innovation.

It is also important to check the expiration date on one's own ideas. If an author is engaged in continuous exploration and growth, her or his thinking, knowledge, and styles of expression will refine and change over time. This is a sign of vitality. Being stuck in a rut is certainly not conducive to innovation or lively writing. Especially, authors should be wary of their most cherished opinions. They can be constraining. As a Zen saying has it, a person with a strong opinion is like a goat tethered to a stake in the ground. The opinion might serve well for a time, but once a goat eats all the grass within reach, it will starve unless it can run free. We have to pull free of our opinions in order to stretch beyond our limits in innovative inquiry and writing.

**Perspiration.** The saying that creativity is 10% inspiration and 90% perspiration is apropos, but at least for myself I would put the percentages differently: creativity is 100% inspiration and 100% perspiration. Perspiration (“breathing through” or “spirit through”) means working hard enough to pant or move through obstacles. If one's aspiration is strong, then one naturally wishes to work hard. Creative writing often requires blowing with an even, gentle, steady inflow and outflow of breath, like in meditation. Sometimes it requires exerting great effort, like panting during a hard run. In any case, it means consistent and persistent effort.

The following tips are geared toward practical details of this work. They reflect what works for me, so they might not work as well for you. Each author needs to find what works best for her or himself according to particular talents, personality, situation, and working style.

## Practical Working Tips

### **Identify the Audience**

Identify the audience you wish to reach. Like the common social work dictum, “start where the client is,” consider the most appropriate type of vocabulary, style of argument, and style of language. Consider also the readiness of the intended audience. For example, if one is writing mainly for social work educators, researchers, students, and professionals, be sure to follow appropriate scholarly conventions for documentation of sources, rigorous methods of

inquiry, and clear, organized written expression. When promoting challenging and innovative ideas, be sure to build on prior scholarly work and professional mission and values in making your case. It is usually not helpful to engage in polarizing polemics. You will also need to identify which journals are likely to be read by the intended audience.

### **Identify the Publication Outlet**

Read widely to be familiar with the range of journals related to social work and your topic in order to identify which would be the most suitable outlet. Ask your colleagues about the kinds of journals they read. Ask published colleagues what experiences they have had with submission to particular journals. Examine instructions to authors for journals to find out publication mission, guidelines for the review process, length of manuscripts, and format requirements. These instructions usually can be found in a recent issue of a journal in the front or back pages. In addition, read editorials by editors of selected journals to identify their priorities. Peruse sample journal issues of the past few years to find out whether any articles with similar research methodologies or topics have been published. Read the list of editorial board members and reviewers that is usually at the front of a journal to check whether you know if any of them have done work compatible with your approach. If you discover that your interests and approaches are inconsistent with the editorial perspective of the journal, then you can expect that it will be more difficult to publish in it.

For example, if you wish to write from a narrative approach, using first person grammatical style and self-reflection, find a journal that allows this, since many academic journals discourage it. If you wish to publish an article on spirituality, explore whether the journal is open to this topic. If you want to reach a wide scholarly and professional audience, select a journal such as *Families in Society* or *Social Work*. If your topic is very specialized or unusual in its approach, it would be useful to consider relevant specialized journals, such as *Social Thought* (dealing with a wide range of topics on religion and spirituality) or *Social Work and Christianity* (for a primarily Christian audience) or *Journal of Jewish Communal Service* (for a primarily Jewish audience). If the topic of the article is specialized according to field of practice, such as spirituality in child welfare, then a child welfare specialized journal might be most appropriate. Sometimes journal editors are willing to receive drafts or proposals for articles and then to advise the author as to whether the manuscript is relevant or ready for submission.

### **Develop the Manuscript Through Outlines and Drafts**

Very often there is a long process to achieve a well-polished final version of a manuscript for publication. In my experience so far, a single article may take anywhere from a few months to a few decades, from initial conception to publication. For example, even though this article did not

require extensive research or literature review for preparation, it has taken me many years to develop the experience necessary to make these suggestions. I had the idea to write such an article some years ago, but it took the serendipitous connection between my own long mulling, conversations with friends and students on the subject, and an invitation from the editor of this journal for the article to become an actuality. Even after the invitation, it has taken a year for me to find the time, to organize my ideas, and to write the manuscript for review.

Although creativity can be inhibited by excessive organization, it can also be stymied by excessive disorganization. It often helps me to formulate ideas for writing by letting my imagination work with the ideas, leaving an open mental space for insights and connections to appear, and beginning to express the ideas through informal conversations, journal writing, casual jottings, and drawings or other artistic designs. But at some point, precise organization of ideas is necessary. Then I usually develop outlines.

A useful outline reveals all the key ideas that will be included in the article. Typically it includes a clear main topic; an introduction that shows the rationale, plan, and significance of the manuscript; a discussion of relevant literature and research from which the article builds; an exposition of the new research findings, theoretical contributions, or other insights; clear and detailed implications and applications to social work; and a conclusion. Within each of these sections, each point to be made should be listed in the outline. This will ensure that all intended points are covered, that they build on each other, that they are consistent with each other, and that they are organized in a way that will be clear to the reader. Such an outline can also serve as a guide for organizing and labeling sources of literature and data that will be used to support each point. Once an outline is completed after various drafts, it will make the job of further writing much easier. One can systematically work through the writing of each section and add supportive evidence while recording endnotes and literature citations.

In the complete draft of the manuscript, the title, abstract, and first paragraph should grab the attention of the reader. If a potential reader is not engaged from this first contact, it is likely he or she will not bother to read to rest of the article unless it is required for a class or for research purposes. The end of the manuscript should provide a concise summary of significant insights and a sense of closure for the reader.

Even with all this preparation, a first draft complete manuscript is not likely to be ready to send for publication. Multiple revisions are often necessary. It is best to take some time away from the draft and then return to it with fresh mind. Mistakes and flaws are easy to miss when the writer is so immersed in the writing that one can't view it with a certain detachment. This is also why sharing the draft with friends and colleagues can be valuable—others can often provide helpful suggestions for revisions that will make the

manuscript more understandable and better quality. An author often feels that the ideas are clear because they are in her or his mind already. But another reader who approaches the manuscript will often find things that aren't clear at all.

However, whatever readers of drafts say, the author should take their opinions with a grain of salt. For example, if you receive a discouraging reaction, think through carefully how the person's advice can help you strengthen the manuscript. But don't give up on your vision and passion for the manuscript. Feel free to discard advice if you decide it is not helpful. One other caution: if you are likely to feel offended if a friend or colleague reads a draft and critiques it, think twice or three times before sharing it. If you really don't want honest advice, don't ask for it.

Drafts of outlines or manuscripts can also be used for presentations at classes, conferences, workshops, and in-services. Preparing for such presentations helps shape up the ideas and presentation style. Feedback from participants can guide revisions.

Once a manuscript is submitted, be prepared for a possibly lengthy and arduous editorial review process. In anonymously peer reviewed journals (such as this one), reviews can take anywhere from a few months to a year or more (National Association of Social Workers, 1997).

When you receive a review, keep an open mind and let go of egotistic attachment to your own opinions and feelings about your manuscript and the reviewers' evaluations. Humility (not humiliation) is an important virtue for an author. It helps me to keep in mind that whatever little bit I know on a subject, no matter how much, is less than a grain of sand on a giant beach compared to all that is possible in the universe. Each reviewer gives another vantage point on my subject and how to write about it that deserves attention.

Most reviewers are careful, conscientious, and respectful in their evaluations. Some are rude, opinionated, or sloppy. In any case, consider their advice carefully. If a reviewer responds negatively about something, some other readers are likely to have a similar reaction. Even if you don't agree with the comment, you can use it as a clue for how to rewrite the manuscript in a way that will preempt others from reacting that way. It is helpful to outline all the points of each reviewer, affirmative and negative, and then decide how to respond to each when making further revisions for resubmission to the initial journal or submitting to another one. If a manuscript has been rejected but will be considered again after revision, decide whether the requests for changes are reasonable and acceptable to you. If so, make the necessary changes. When sending back the revised manuscript, include a cover letter for the editor and reviewers that shows each point made by reviewers, whether you agree or not and why, and how and where you made changes in the manuscript. The tone of this letter should be polite and constructive.

If your manuscript is rejected, don't be discouraged. It

may be that you realize that the manuscript has so many flaws that it is not suitable for publication—that is itself an important learning. Then you can go back into the thinking, research, and writing process to formulate a new manuscript that is better and more useful. If you are certain that the manuscript has worth, despite the rejection, reconsider the most appropriate publication outlet and use reviewers' suggestions to strengthen the manuscript. If you really believe in the value of your work, don't give up.

## Conclusion

Writing well is much work. But when we do the work with enthusiasm, with a sense of enjoyment, and with an intention to contribute to others, this is a labor of love. When we write to follow our calling, we feel an intrinsic satisfaction as each manuscript is finished. The work is made easier and is more likely to be successful when we build on the efforts of ancestors and kindred spirits, take courage to innovate, nurture the creative process, and join our efforts to our aspirations and inspirations. In the process, the nitty gritty practical details of research, writing, and polishing provide good spiritual discipline for the author. Like the Zen saying, "chop wood, carry water," enlightenment is to be found in the here and now of practical work.

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