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Teaching Spirituality in the Classroom: Building Compassionate and Non-Judgmental Conversations with Students

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This narrative describes the experiences of three social work professors whose lifelong interest in the spiritual realm guided their presentation of material in the classroom that engaged conversation about spiritual and religious beliefs. Specific skills for students to understand and work with their own spirituality and that of clients are reviewed.

There is increasing awareness amongst social work educators and their students that spirituality and religious belief is an important domain for understanding the ways that people give meaning to their lives, cope with problems, ask for guidance and make decisions in daily life (Canda & Furman, 1999; Nelson-Becker, et al, in press). Spirituality is the search for meaning and purpose that lies beyond the self but includes relationships with self, others, and/or ultimate reality or ground of being (Nelson-Becker, Nakashima, & Canda, in press; Canda & Furman, 1999; James, 1902/1961). Religion involves a community's formalized institutional patterns of beliefs, practices and values that focus on spiritual concerns (Nelson-Becker, Nakashima & Canda, in press). Religious and spiritual values about the worth of human beings and duty to serve influence decisions about vocation and guide many of our students into social work programs. The interest in the spiritual dimension of being, as well as the current focus on religious and moral values in the public domain, has led to a renewed interest in understanding how to use religion and spirituality in the education of social work students.

The social work profession is beginning to recognize and accept the meaning of living in a climate of spiritual and religious diversity. CSWE standards now emphasize the importance of including religion when one

discusses diversity and populations at risk (Casco, 1998). Assessment and treatment planning often includes material on religious affiliation and spiritual beliefs. Faith-based programs for providing social services abound. Politicians beckon to their constituents using the language of faith. Yet the majority of social work professors have had little experience in discussing a topic that formerly was considered outside the realm of appropriateness in classroom discussions, especially in public universities. The authors of this paper believed that graduate students in their social work program might have the need to discuss these complex but highly personal issues that impact their work with clients.

Each of the authors has long held an interest in personal and collective spiritual practices and was motivated to help their students expand an awareness of the role of spirituality in their own lives and that of their clients. Guided by their own beliefs in the importance of spirituality, the profession's emphasis on cultural competence, and a recognition that many of their students professed a spiritual connection and/or an affiliation with church communities, these professors embarked on a journey to address the spiritual dimension in the classroom. The authors are all affiliated with traditional Western and Christian religious faiths and

incorporate Eastern religious practices into their daily life to varying degrees.

Many of the students, all of whom were in either first or second year of their graduate studies in social work, were from small towns and rural areas of a large Midwestern state. There was little cultural diversity amongst the students and the majority was from Christian denominations although some were also exploring other religious practices. As we listened to students we heard some of them identifying themselves as “Christians” and expressing conflicts between conservative religious beliefs and the values of the profession, mainly around reproductive choice and affirming practice with gay and lesbian persons. Other students expressed interest and confusion about how to integrate their personal spiritual beliefs and practices and wondered how religion and spirituality could be used by clients in their daily lives. Students reported that they did not always feel comfortable expressing their religious beliefs and concerns, but given an accepting attitude by the professor, they felt they could discuss their conflicts in the classroom.

Although the social work program at our public university provided a popular elective course on spirituality that examined diverse religious and spiritual practices, we recognized that not all students had the interest or space in their schedules to enroll in this class. In response to the students’ voices we, individually and collectively, began to plan and discuss different ways that we might invite our students into conversations about spiritual and religious topics in our classes. Our approaches differed according to our interests and what we envisioned as the goal of the learning experience. One professor had a practical focus. She wanted to understand how to help students with service issues around choice and affirming practice with gay and lesbian persons when their religious beliefs were in opposition to the profession’s code. A second professor sought to help students uncover both personal

spiritual meaning and client religious and spiritual supports. The third professor led students through an exercise to help them to develop an appreciation of their own spiritual journey, to experience the sacredness of others’ life journeys, and to practice listening with compassion and acceptance in the face of diversity.

We had two main goals for our endeavor: first, an exploration with students of core religious and spiritual beliefs and then second, developing their ability to work within a spiritual framework when appropriate with clients. Other objectives included addressing the duality surrounding spirituality issues: assessing whether spirituality/religious faith is a strength or a source of difficulty that prevents optimal growth and functioning. We recognized that students who consider themselves questioning, agnostic, or biased against religion also need to have a forum for discussion. Setting a tone for openness and acceptance of a range of beliefs was crucial. This article highlights the experiences of three social work professors who chose to discuss spirituality and religion in their clinical practice classes. Overall, in this article we hope to provide guidance to other social work educators in how to integrate discussions of spirituality in both foundation and advanced level classes.

Deep Listening without Judgment

I earned my Master’s degree at a prominent graduate school of social work in a large Midwestern city, 27 years ago. Discussions of diversity—cultural, religious, and spiritual—were absent from our “excellent” curriculum. Yet I had learned to be comfortable, non-judgmental, and for the most part affirming and embracing with cultures that were different from my own white, working class, and Catholic roots. As someone who is innately curious about other cultures and belief systems, I have sought out differing experiences in religious practice

throughout my lifetime. My early Catholic education had left an indelible imprint on me which was a lifelong search for religious rituals and practices that brought meaning to life, gave solace and hope in times of suffering, advocated for social justice, and provided a sense of community with persons who had similar spiritual practices and beliefs. I have attended many different denominations of Protestantism, Catholic churches of varying degrees of social justice and conservatism, synagogues, mainly for Bar and Bat Mitzvahs, and Buddhist groups that followed the traditions of different Asian teachers. I embraced the traditions that preached social justice while strongly rejecting those that condemned a woman's right to choose or condemned full inclusion of gay and lesbian church goers.

As a New England Catholic, I had grown up hearing that one did not talk about religion with others. Religion was private. Yet, students in my classroom began to challenge this cultural rule. I remember the day that two students introduced themselves as "Christians" and said that they were getting their MSW degrees to be able to help their husbands with pastoral ministry. Failing to ask what that meant, I made the assumption that their Christianity was of the conservative "evangelical" variety, since public disclosure of religious affiliation seemed in keeping with this religious group. Surprisingly, I had no curiosity about how the religious beliefs of these students intersected with their professional goals but instead made an assumption that they would not be supportive of either women's rights to choose or affirming practice with gay and lesbian persons. This, in my way of thinking, was a clear cut professional issue. If you could not help a woman with all her options for an unplanned pregnancy or provide service to a gay or lesbian client, perhaps you did not belong in the profession. Case closed! No conversation! No dialogue! I was passionate

about my point of view, dogmatic, and frankly close-minded. Rarely did a student challenge me. He or she just shut up and shut down.

When my first academic job took me to a social work program in a large public university in the Heartland, I was faced with many students who hailed from small towns and rural areas, some of whom had religious beliefs that did not support choice nor gay and lesbian relationships. I recall a beginning generalist practice class where we were discussing social work ethics and values and I deliberately chose an example that included a gay client. The majority of the class reacted by citing the NASW Code of Ethics standard on competency which they felt precluded their work with gay and lesbian clients. Instead of exploring the students' discomfort, which might very well have led to a discussion on the challenges of working with difference, including integrating one's religious beliefs with core social work values, I determined that the students needed "exposure" to persons affected by GLBT issues. I called in a panel to "educate" the students.

Ironically, my outreach efforts included several parents from PFLAG (a parent group supportive of their GLBT children) and an elder couple with one member who had undergone surgery for gender change. The students were mesmerized by the discussion, although confused at times about the complexity of the transgendered issues. In their reflection papers, several students quoted a Biblical verse that condemned "homosexual" relationships. I was appalled by this "small-minded" thinking and reflected on this in the classroom (although I did not use these words). I told the students that one never knows who will come into their office for service or when a client may feel enough trust to share their struggle. "Will you then refer?" I challenged. It was quite a dilemma for students. I could see this but I was far away from helping them to deal with their struggles. I wanted them to know how serious

the social work mandate was to offer services to all clients.

In reflecting on my early days of teaching practice, I admit, with some discomfort as a social work educator, that I ignored the opportunity to discuss the highly personal religious beliefs and related values that students brought to my classroom. Instead, I engaged in what I now call "2 x 4" teaching where one coerces students into accepting a specified point of view (mine) instead of helping them to explore the complexity of their own beliefs and struggles. I, who had previously received strongly positive evaluations from students, now read comments that accused me of being disrespectful and biased. Such feedback troubled me greatly, not just because I wanted better teaching evaluations but because I believe strongly that my interactions with students in the classroom serve as a model for their interactions with their clients. My own spiritual practice, in a Buddhist tradition that encouraged "deep listening" without judgment, also challenged the ways that I was interacting with my students. My biased beliefs that religiously conservative students cannot and should not be social workers (strongly supported by some of my colleagues) were challenged as I read student papers and listened to their comments in the class. I saw that many of my conservative religious students were extremely caring and conscientious and that their "Christian" beliefs guided their commitment to serve populations that were marginalized in small towns and rural communities. I saw that students honestly struggled with the social work value that recognizes the "dignity and worth of every person" when their faith communities were condemning. For the first time, I became curious instead of condemning and committed to help students explore how they could integrate personal and religious beliefs with the value base and ethical standards of the

profession. I finally realized that I must start where the student is.

My shift in attitude greatly changed my leadership in the classroom. On one occasion, as the class commented on a documentary where religious parents talked about their children "coming out," students were asked by the guest lecturer to comment on their reactions. Only one young woman said that although she certainly would respect the gay or lesbian client, her religious beliefs would not allow her to serve them. Her comments were accepted along with those of her classmates. (After class she told me that mine was the only class where she felt comfortable making this statement.) In an ensuing discussion the next week, we were able to discuss the difficulties any social work practitioner experiences when his/her value or belief system conflicts with that of the client (normalization). I asked, rather than challenged, the students to think who that client will be for each of them and how they would respond. I began to explore the issue of providing service when you don't agree with the way a person leads his/her life. How difficult it is for each of us when we are faced with a task that we feel conflicts with our value system and how much more difficult it would be for each of us if the value were reinforced by our religious community. What are the options? What if you are the only one who can serve? What will you do? How will you refer? What will you say to clients so that they do not feel devalued by your inability to work with them?

This was the beginning of many discussions on faith-based issues. With the help of supportive colleagues, I dealt with my own frustrations and slowly became an advocate for students to discuss faith-based concerns. I integrated such issues into the curriculum. I believed that my responsibility was to provide a safe environment for discussion and model an accepting but questioning approach to the issues. I

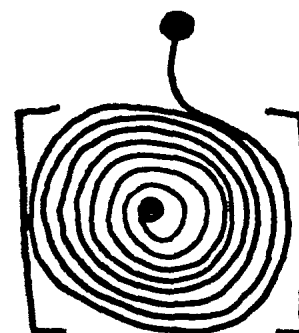
recognized openly that students' concerns around religious beliefs and the mandates of the social work profession were legitimate and that I welcomed such discussions within the class. I found literature that discussed conservative agendas and school social work (Gianesin & Bonaker, 2003) and this provided an "objective" lens through which to have the discussion. I continued to invite speakers who could speak from personal experience about GLBT issues. I encouraged students to dialogue with each other and not just with to me.

When a colleague lectured on Gay Affirmative Practice, a student shared how the discussion of the impact of heterosexual language and assumptions on gay and lesbian persons had a profound impact on her thinking with all of her clients. She was able to dialogue with classmates (both liberal and conservative) about her church-based religious beliefs that failed to affirm gay and lesbian persons and the ensuing struggle between her long held beliefs and the content and process of the classroom. In another school social work class, a lively discussion followed a film where gay parents and their school-aged children discuss the stresses that they experience in an environment where they are often vilified for their diverse family structure. One religiously conservative student challenged another's commitment to Christ by stating "Christ accepts all sinners. We are all sinners." Although I was disturbed by the language of "sin" which is so easily attributed to the lives of gay and lesbian persons, the student was able to explain that she was challenging her classmate's ability to follow the message of Christ's all-inclusive love. The confrontation by another student with similar religious beliefs had a strong impact on this student and she reported a greater comfort as she was "called upon" to advocate for gay and lesbian students and parents in the high school where she was interning.

Through my experiences with conservative Christian students, I have learned to know and understand and, yes, to really have a fondness for many of the students whom I rejected four years ago because I did not think that their religious values could interface with the profession. Given the opportunity, I found this group of students more than willing to discuss their concerns and conflicts because their faith commitments support providing good services to those who are marginalized in this society. I have found it essential to provide the space within my classroom community to discuss how one manages when a social work mandate conflicts with one's personal and religious beliefs. Providing such a safe place also facilitates a classroom discussion where peers can both support and challenge and is a far more effective way of giving feedback than if I, the authority, confront the issue by myself (Kurland & Salmon, 1998). By my modeling compassion, listening in a non-judgmental manner, and providing feedback that is honest but non-judgmental, those students who are committed to serving their clients as Christian social workers have more easily reflected on how they will do this in a way that is true to their profession, their faiths, and themselves.

Creating Spiritual Context; Building Constructivist and Positivist Knowledge

When I was young, about five to eight years old, I remember that Sundays felt different from other days. This was not just because they signaled a different routine in that my family attended church, but I learned to recognize this setting apart by a type of wave that would zing back and forth through my body in a downward direction whether I was at church or at home with illness. Though words as symbols are inadequate to fully communicate this subjective experience, I felt a warmth that quickly glided through the core of my body, leaving me with an inner peace and a sense of relatedness to something



Transcendent. I recognized it innately as a manifestation of Spirit. Even though I have had other types of spiritual experience in my life, this has remained one of my consistent connections to Spirit over time, though as with many things it has a pattern of ebb and flow. My life experience has shaped the way I engage spirituality in the classroom.

I was grounded in a Christian religious faith, one that had its roots in the 19th century American religious awakening, had a history of religious persecution, and believed in angels (say what?) and modern day revelation. Individuals in this faith tradition were encouraged to study and confirm their beliefs through prayer, spiritual ways of knowing, and critical thinking rather than accept religious dogma without challenge. In fact, there was a historical understanding of human imperfection by Biblical writers and the need for scriptural interpretation according to *Setz und Leben* (setting and life situation). Because of this stance, there were many members who had varying beliefs, yet still worshipped together. This taught me that people of faith can have different ideas but still support each other. Over time, this faith tradition matured in a progression along with others to what is considered now a liberal theological position. My love of other people and cultures has also brought me into deep connection with people who have other religious traditions including Eastern and spiritual traditions.

Unlike many peers in my generational cohort, I stayed connected to my early faith. In 1990, I was called to the ministerial office of Elder. While some ministers in my tradition are paid, many are bivocational and volunteer their time in service. Even before the formal invitation to accept this position came from my then pastor, I sensed the calling. My first response was to say, "No, God, don't even ask me. My partner was supposed to be the minister, not me." But as these things happen, I was asked. After discussions with my partner who works for a large Catholic archdiocese

but with whom I share many common religious understandings, he was able to validate the call and I accepted. After training, I was ordained in 1992 and continue to function in this office today. This past year, as I began a practice of meditation and began to read Buddhist writings more regularly, I have been blessed by a series of coincidences and surprising experiences that have expanded my spiritual understandings in new ways. I have felt challenged to bring my sense of the spiritual together with my academic understandings; this has not been an easy journey, but I believe I have a unique contribution to make in the developing area of spirituality and social work.

Because I try to remain open to the presence of Spirit as it permeates all of life, it is important to me to open up this area for students at whatever point they may be and acknowledge the contribution of whatever faith background or other grounding they have. While my own bias has been that students from conservative religious backgrounds may be less open to spiritual discussions, I do respect the centering that their faith-based communities provide them and the often passionate motivation that keeps them invested in doing the often low-paying work of our profession. One of the points I have come to understand is that all voices are important in these conversations, even those who stand at the other end of the faith orthodoxy continuum. My coauthors and another esteemed colleague at my university have also helped me in the process of opening up spirituality in the classroom. They have offered themselves as resources and fellow spiritual travelers.

How I Teach Spirituality in the Classroom

From the first class session I try to create a context that is open to many ways of knowing. Knowledge is transmitted through different methods and one of the most prominent ones in our profession is scientific

validation and verification. This is important and powerful. But I find it essential to combine this in my class with other forms of knowledge that are not deductive or inductive and do not represent scientifically communicated experience. Instead this other type of knowledge is transmitted through direct insight. It is subjective and may be intuitive (James, 1902/1961).

I share with students the story of how I came into social work in a way that suggests that it is a calling and that when they look back at their lives several years hence, they will understand more clearly how the pathway that led them to where they are at this point developed out of a sensitivity regarding their core gifts and life purpose. I hope that they will understand that this profession can engage all of their skills and capacities in ways that can promote their own growth as well as that of their clients. The frame I use with students is that their choice of social work as vocation is a calling.

I have tried approaches to highlighting spirituality that uses both scientific and intuitive ways of knowing. In my HBSE class when I discuss life span development theories, I, like the third author who will explain his method in more detail, use the technique of inviting students to draw their own spiritual timeline or spiritual map. I tell them it can denote any markers that have impacted their own growth or change, but may include significant life events and also mentors in that process. I suggest that this may or may not have spiritual components, but it should be meaningful to them personally. They then can discuss their map or something related to their journey with a partner. Many students indicate they have never done this before, and it has offered them new insight into their own spiritual development while validating the language of spirituality. Even if a student has a non-spiritual stance, he/she can also relate to the life story aspects of his/her own journey and participate fully.

In my aging course, I often write a "quote of the day" on the board. Often, these take the form of larger life understandings about the aging process. One quote that I especially like is by Rilke (1954):

Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves. . . Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. . . Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer (p. 34-35).

Many of these quotes have a spiritual tone. I invite students to reflect on what this means for their own lives and also how it might be helpful in supporting their work with older clients. Much direct work with older adults involves dealing with questions of meaning in the face of chronic illness, debilitating pain, and other life losses. In order to effectively help older clients, I try to teach students not to fear (as I once did early in my social work career) engaging clients in ways that touch their deepest center of meaning. Like this quote, students do not need to have all the answers, but rather can learn to sit with clients in their life struggles and listen closely. Even if major life problems cannot be "solved," there is still much to be given in a helping context.

I also bring into the classroom the content of some of my research which has been about religious coping by different groups of older adults. We discuss how religion has the capacity to help or harm others and why certain individuals (especially Jewish Holocaust survivors I have interviewed) may eschew religion and embrace spirituality. We also talk about individuals for whom religious or spiritual coping is not important but who embrace other forms of personal coping.

In many of my classes I include spiritual assessment in a discussion of general

assessment tools. I suggest that students ask clients what gives them meaning or purpose and whether spirituality and/or religion are important to the clients. If so, I offer sample questions about 11 spiritual domains including beliefs, behavior, emotions, values, experiences, history, therapeutic change, social support, well-being, and extrinsic/intrinsic spiritual focus (Nelson-Becker, Nakashima, & Canda, in press). We look at quantitative measures of religion and spirituality (Fetzer Institute, 1999; Hill & Hood, 1995). Cases (Scales et al, 2002) that help illustrate difficult ethical and spiritual dilemmas that social workers and professionals encounter are useful and have prompted heated conversations as well as new insight for students.

When I close the course for the semester, I sometimes bring in a rainstick to use as a "talking stick." I model for students by thanking them for their participation in the class and sharing what I have learned from them. Then, if they choose, they each have an opportunity to make a statement to the class about what they have learned from each other. I am often surprised by the depth and positive tone of their comments. Several of my students have taken other courses that have touched on spirituality in some form including a course on spiritual diversity. They indicate that instructors approach the spiritual domain in various ways, so they enjoy hearing from them all. One common outcome is that they find themselves more accepting and non-judgmental and are able to be more compassionate. But students do not always feel comfortable enough with their knowledge to manage whatever surfaces from clients in this domain. For many students, awareness of spirituality is new and many express a desire to continue to expand their understanding beyond their MSW education.

What was the impact of these conversations on students? Although I haven't conducted formal follow-up, these classroom

discussions give students the freedom to talk about the meaning of experiences outside the biopsychosocial realm of what is normally discussed in classroom contexts. While I hope to help students develop a deeper understanding of the variety of beliefs and practices surrounding religion and spirituality, I also find that these conversations change me. Over time I have become more willing to integrate my own spiritual side in teaching rather than keeping it separate and compartmentalized, something I had excelled at earlier. With my own integration and increasing sense of wholeness, I hope that I can become a model for students that also feel called to this work.

Teaching Connection with the Sacred in Life

When I reflect back over my own life's course, I can see the coherence and direction that was not obvious while living each day. This journey of discovery over time includes having considered following in my minister grandfather's footsteps with my life's work being church leadership. But for various reasons, I was very confused and conflicted about religion, which kept me from making that choice. The confusion I experienced, however, led to an intense quest for spiritual meaning and direction. The journey was difficult and often seemed incoherent, but in hindsight it was exactly what I needed. For example, studying Buddhism helped me more fully understand how to live my Christian root's mandate to "love one another." Studying indigenous spirituality helped me appreciate the interrelatedness of all life in the sacred "whole" of our existence. Studying energy psychology/medicine has helped heal the rifts between mind-body-spirit and between science and faith created by centuries of dualistic, western thought. I still identify as Christian, but now recognize that "When I was a child, I ate the food of a child." Now my faith is rich, robust, and complex in ways

that can only come from a lifetime of searching for personal meaning and relationship with the Creator.

My spiritual journey continues with the search for ways to help students prepare to assist clients with their own spiritual journeys. When I introduce the topic of spirituality in social work practice by asking students how many think of social work as a “calling” somehow reflecting a “spiritual” aspect to the work (as I do), the majority of hands in the room raise. I’ve been struck with the powerfully central role of spirituality in most people’s lives, yet also struck with how difficult it is to live the ideals of being loving, compassionate, and accepting. For example, I’ve noted how hard it can be for students to talk about spirituality without getting anxious around differing beliefs, moving into judgments about what are “right” beliefs or practices: I note the same temptation within myself at times. In our classes with students whose identifications range widely, including Christianity (from very conservative to extremely progressive), Buddhism, Native American Spirituality, Islamism, Hinduism, agnosticism, atheism, New Age Spirituality, Wicca, and others, there is ample opportunity for tension around what is “right” to emerge. In addition, some students also struggle to reconcile their religious beliefs with social work values such as those related to reproductive choice for women or being GLBT affirmative.

Since my own spiritual awareness, appreciation, and “strength” has come from my journey of exploring the many aspects and expressions of the Divine, I began wondering about how to help students value their own unique spiritual journey of discovery while also opening themselves to learn from others’ unique journeys. I was concerned about how students would facilitate spiritual discussions and exploration with their clients in a safe and open way if they had no experience of doing so themselves. In short, I hoped to help students *experience* the Christian message

“love your neighbor as yourself” in the face of this rich diversity. I hoped to find a way to help them connect with themselves, each other, and the sacred in life rather than respond with polarizing judgment around spiritual and religious diversity. I wanted to help them experience something heartfelt that would take them beyond the intellectual conceptualizations that seemed so hard to translate into an attitude of acceptance and behaviors that embodied compassion. My prayer for guidance regarding these intentions resulted in the following class exercise.

Since the majority of students identify as Christian, we begin with a discussion about the meanings each of us make from the Bible verse: “Remove the log from your own eye before trying to remove the splinter from another’s eye.” The discussion continues with how that verse relates to social work’s focus on self-awareness, respect for human diversity, and belief in the dignity and worth of all people. We also discuss the tendency to guard what we believe to be “true” when we feel threatened by ideas that question our own beliefs. The intent of this discussion is to normalize and “own” what often precedes conflict and judgment. Following this rich discussion, I suggest several assumptions to consider “or try on” for the remainder of the class: that we are all on a “sacred or spiritual journey” of sorts (whether or not we conceive of it that way) and that we learn and grow spiritually over time by stretching and expanding with various life experiences. Even though it is conceivable that someone might reject these assumptions, as yet that has not happened. Even students who identified as agnostic or atheist have accepted “sacred” or “spiritual” in their broadest sense to mean deeply felt, transpersonal or meta-physical experience that offers meaning, solace, and direction in life. Framing the exercise in the hypothetical (“...consider or try on...”) probably also helps suspend judgments and objections. Several examples from my own

practice describing client experiences that are very diverse yet have spiritual significance for those individuals also help students see “spiritual” as a very broad and personal concept (for example, a woman severely physically and sexually abused finding a “spiritual” connection through nature). I also offer examples from my own life to model openness, self-disclosure, risk-taking, and self-acceptance on a journey that is clearer when looking back across time than when trying to envision the future.

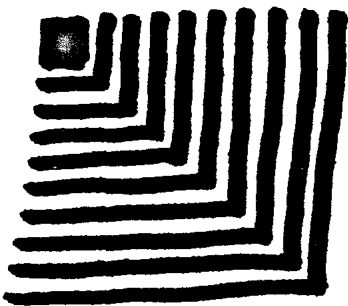
Each student is then given a large sheet of paper (14x17), colored pencils, and crayons to map out their own unique spiritual or “sacred” life journey. Directions are quite simple: have a beginning point, then draw the path to where you are now, and continue that path to where you want to be at the end of your life. Include people that were (or might be) influential along the way (either helpful or hurtful) and events or experiences that were (or might be) turning points in your journey. Students are also encouraged to include beliefs or practices that guided or sustained them along the way, and beliefs or practices that they grew beyond or discarded as they learned and grew. Students are invited to use colors, symbols, pictures, as well as a few words to represent their journey.

After the students complete their drawings, they form into small groups so self-disclosure and connection with others might make it feel safer and easier to share. Directions are to share as much of their journey as they are willing while also noting their thoughts and feelings as they do so. Those listening are encouraged to simply

“witness” each person’s journey as empathically as they can, which includes trying to understand the significance of each person’s unique journey *for that person*, while also attending to their own thoughts and feelings that arise as they listen. The person to the right

of the speaker then reflects back to the speaker what the listener heard the speaker say, without advice or interjection of personal ideas; the intent is to acknowledge and validate the speaker’s story by simply “witnessing” the unfolding journey. All are encouraged to be aware of when they feel compassion or connection with others in the group, as well as when they find themselves tempted to do something that might interfere with really hearing, understanding, accepting, and connecting in a heartfelt way with the other person (e.g., judge, criticize, or correct). An obvious intention is to help students become more self-aware so they can practice removing “the log from your own eye” as part of connecting with others in an open, caring, accepting, and compassionate fashion.

Once the small groups complete sharing, we re-form for a whole class discussion about what students experienced while sharing their journeys, as well as “witnessing” other’s journeys with compassion and acceptance. This generally involves wonderful realizations about the “sacredness” of *everyone’s* unique path, about the vulnerability we often feel when exposing our spirituality, about how difficult it is to listen without trying to direct or educate or otherwise “fix,” and about how powerful it is both to share our sacred stories with “witnesses” and to hear others sharing their sacred journeys as well. Following this, they return to small groups to assemble a list of guidelines for spiritually sensitive social work practice. My only suggestion for this part of the activity is that even though we all struggle to “remove the log from our eye,” we all also have elements of spiritual wisdom, so collectively we can create a “whole” that is greater than any of us can offer alone. I collect these guidelines from each group, type them into a list, and return them to the students the next week as their collective wisdom to guide their spiritually sensitive practice. I am generally touched by what students write, but even more moved by seeing them connecting



with each other and excitedly creating these guidelines. It is gratifying for me to “witness” their experiencing in a heartfelt way how diversity is “sacred soil” that enriches our own and others’ lives.

The response from students to this exercise has also consistently been very positive. I think one reason is that everyone experiences connecting with others around the sacredness of life, using symbols and personal stories to touch the seeds of compassion, humanity, and divinity that are within each of us. Judgments and dualistic thinking seem to dissolve when students have this shared experience that stretches beyond the words, labels, and categories that often separate us from each other and from that which is spiritual. After this experience, one student realized how significant his church experience had been to him as he grew up, why he left it because of hurts he’d experience there, and how he’d grown beyond those hurts to be ready to return to church in a way that allowed him to both give (sing and play his guitar in worship) and receive (support, guidance, inspiration).

Conclusion

Because of our own unique spiritual and religious sensitivities, we, as authors, have felt the need to help students learn to engage in relationships with clients that are non-judgmental and that promote care and compassion. Because the work required by our profession is often all-consuming and can be personally exhausting, we know it is important for students to develop their own reservoirs of strength. If we turn away from exploring the nature of the sacred in our own world and the world of our clients, we are ignoring and indeed failing to honor a resource that may be as important to clients as the biological, sociological, and psychological supports we teach to students as the hallmark of our profession.

In this narrative we have discussed our own backgrounds so the reader can view both our own spiritual limitations and our gifts. We have also offered some of the tools we have developed and, in some cases, the process by which we found them, as a way for social work educators to learn different perspectives on teaching about spirituality and religious beliefs in the classroom. We have found it refreshing to think of the opportunities that we have had to broaden our students’ understanding of how spirituality and religious beliefs influence the work that they are “called” to do in their respective communities. We do not always have the opportunity to learn how our students use the skills that we taught them in the classroom, but it is our belief that by exposing them to a non-judgmental classroom experience where they might safely explore existential and/or spiritual/religious questions, they might be better prepared to bring this dimension to their work with clients. In future work with students, we hope to be able to help students to become more comfortable using these skills with clients in the field. We hope our tools and methods may add to the range of possibilities for exploring the vast terrain of spirituality and religion, and that increased compassion and openness on the part of both teacher and student may be the result.

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