

## ***Humanities: Art, Language, and Spirituality in Health Care***

Series Editors: Christina M. Puchalski, MD, MS, and Charles G. Sasser, MD

# Contemplative Spaces in Social Work Practice

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### **Abstract**

*Exploring contemplative practices and spirituality in social work has developed a new impetus as the understanding of the importance of those variables in patient care has increased. Social work brings its historical attention to the whole person and the many ways the social worker and patient understand their respective roles in assisting in the process of healing and coping with loss. It is essential that social workers attend to their own understanding of the space for contemplative practice in their lives. This article sets the context for this important work and provides an example of a program designed to increase the social worker's awareness and practice skills that reflect the particular dynamics of engaging spirituality in the clinical relationship. J Pain Symptom Manage 2015;49:150–154. © 2015 American Academy of Hospice and Palliative Medicine. Published by Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.*

### **Key Words**

*Contemplative practice, spirituality, social work*

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We can make our minds so like still water that beings gather about us that they may see, it may be, their own images, and so live for a moment with a clearer, perhaps even with a fiercer life because of our quiet.

— W. B. Yeats, *The Celtic Twilight*<sup>1</sup>

### **Introduction**

Coming to stillness is the art of social work practice. As a practice profession, social work draws on the full range of psychological, social, and cultural theories; the developing research in the neurosciences; and relationally based practice theories. The art of practice resides in the social worker and client relationship where theory and research guide assessment and intervention.<sup>2</sup> This is the biopsychosocial-spiritual framework guiding social work practice. Contemplative practices and spirituality, as ways of knowing and experiencing the inner and outer world of human development, are particularly important to creating a transitional and therapeutic space.

To understand the relationship among the connections of spirituality, contemplative practice, and social

work, one must acknowledge the profession as a vocation that is transformative for both the social worker and the client. The social work relationship is grounded in the artful holding of evolving theories from many disciplines. Growing research in neuroscience like that of Davidson and Begley<sup>3</sup> and others suggests significance of space may be enriched by contemplative practice. The many ways of making meaning of the internal processes of both the social worker and the client is essential in understanding life events like loss of hope, suffering, and healing. With the developing research addressing contemplative practice, while mindful of social work values and ethics, we can better inform our ongoing quest for best social work practices in understanding how both social workers and clients make meaning of loss of hope, of suffering and healing.

### ***Historical Links Between Social Work, Religion, and Spirituality***

Social work, a service profession, has always been about working with and for others. The origins of

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social work remind us of the importance of the individual's attention to their own journey as they work with and for others. Service to others is a spiritual practice identified in many religious traditions. For example, The Golden Rule states that we do unto others as we would have them do unto us. This admonition is found in interpretations in 13 sacred texts across the world's religions: Bahá'í Faith, Buddhism, Christianity, Confucianism, Hinduism, Islam, Jainism, Judaism, Native Spirituality, Sikhism, Taoism (or Daoism), Unitarianism, and Zoroastrianism.<sup>4</sup> Gerald May<sup>5</sup> says that "helping others is essential to being 'a pilgrim' on a journey."

The historical grounding of social work practice in religious-sponsored agencies was clearly a way to practice integrating the two religious values of love and justice. These values, born of compassion, enhance the social worker's understanding of the many ways people make meaning of life circumstances and instill a commitment to social justice.<sup>6</sup> Sheridan<sup>7</sup> discusses the resurgence of interest in spirituality from the 1970s into the new millennium and cites increases in publications, presentations, courses, and, in 1990, the establishment of the Society for Spirituality and Social Work as an international organization of social work practitioners, educators, and students (p. 567). Bartoli<sup>8</sup> reviews the historical and ideological framework for attending to the topics of religion and spirituality in psychotherapy practice by examining themes in publications on spirituality and religion between 1900 and 2006. She says that the writings from the first half of the century are psychoanalytic in nature and tend to speak of religion as a form of pathology or as characteristic of people from a distant past or outside of Western culture. By contrast, in the second half of the century, psychological works on this topic become increasingly focused on religion and spirituality as potentially enhancing (or simply nonpathological) expressions of human nature (p. 55).

The 2008 Educational Policy on Accreditation Standards<sup>9</sup> for schools of social work propose the engagement of diversity and difference in practice that includes the intersectionality of religion and culture along with other factors (p. 5). With the influence of self-help and recovery movements in the 1970s, with increases in cultural awareness and holistic approaches to human development, and with research on the effectiveness of meditation and prayer in healing, the question of how to address spiritual issues in social work education and practice has new impetus and urgency. Because few developmental or other clinical theories allowed or accounted for this dimension in the past, most traditionally trained social work practitioners and educators struggle with how to address religious and spiritual issues in practice, field education, and classroom

settings at a time when there is an increasing call to understand diversity as a strength and resource for making meaning of life's experiences and circumstances. There is a critical conceptual issue within the profession regarding the acceptance of an inclusive definition of spirituality that is compatible with social work values and ethics.<sup>10,11</sup>

Canda and Furman<sup>12</sup> outline the historical evolution of definitions of spirituality and religion in social work. They note that the definitions flowed from "Christian social work scholars who felt that basic Christian values could be extended universally by presenting them in nonsectarian terms" (p. 65). They cite Charlotte Towle as saying that a complete understanding of the person should involve material, psychological, social, and spiritual aspects. Towle saw spiritual needs as including use of church-based resources, developing a sense of meaning and purpose in life, forming value frameworks, and gaining a sense of social responsibility. The acknowledgment that searching for life's meaning and purpose as an important dimension of human growth and development seems to be present throughout the profession's history. Canda and Furman say that: "The spiritual relates to the person's search for a sense of meaning and morally fulfilling relationships between oneself, other people, the encompassing universe, and the ontological ground of existence, whether a person understands this in terms that are theistic, atheistic, nontheistic, or any combination of these" (12, p. 66).

Lee et al.,<sup>13</sup> provide a useful perspective for the inclusion of other worldviews in a definition of spirituality that opens and focuses on the uniqueness of other conceptions: "spirituality includes multidimensional parts of human experience. It is universal and more encompassing than religiosity. Eastern conceptions of spirituality, with philosophical roots in Buddhism and Daoism, include the capacity to endure and even grow from suffering and pain, to embrace the present, to live in the moment, to integrate different parts of 'self' into a harmonious whole, to deepen connection with humankind and the universe, and to strive for higher goals such as compassion and loving kindness" (p. 173).

In considering the importance of the relationship in social work practice, Griffith and Griffith<sup>14</sup> define spirituality as the commitment to choose, as the primary context for understanding and acting, one's relatedness with all that is. With this commitment, one attempts to stay focused on relationships between one's self and other people, one's physical environment, one's heritage and traditions, one's body, one's ancestors, and a Higher Power, or God. Spirituality places relationships at the center of awareness, whether they are relationships with the world or other

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