

## ***Spiritual Identity and Transformation***

**Third Annual Canadian Conference  
on Spirituality and Social Work**

June 1-3, 2004  
University of Manitoba, Winnipeg

### **Abstracts of Presentations & Workshops**

**Wednesday, June 2, 2004 11:00 AM – 12:30 PM**

#### **“Spiritual Identity and Transformation: Christian Narratives and Critical Social Work Practice”**

Joseph Fardella, PhD, Providence Continuing Care Centre, ON

The definition of spiritual identity includes the recognition of an existential interest in orienting one's life in relation to ultimate questions of meaning or value. As such, the constitution of a spiritual identity reflects a philosophical anthropology, or natural inclination, which is ontologically as true for the non-religious social worker as it is for the religiously motivated social worker. Similarly, the spiritual identity of the non-religious social worker and that of the Christian social worker both include a concern for social justice. This is true because the ethical code of social workers requires it, as does the spiritual identity of practising Christians. Currently, critically reflective social work practice has been influenced by emancipatory themes from Post-modernist theory. This theory cautions practitioners about the role that dominant cultural narratives play in subjugating both clients and professional practice. This paper will argue that the reflective integration of some transcendental themes from Christian spirituality broadens and protects the transformative potential of critical social work practice. As such, this paper will show that post-modern theories are wrong to exclude all transcendental beliefs from their understanding of human freedom from oppression.

#### **“Cast into the Wilderness: The Impact of Institutionalized Religion on Lesbians”**

Deanna Morrow, PhD, University of North Carolina at Charlotte,

Institutionalized religious doctrines are a major source of social oppression for many lesbians in the United States. Some theologians have asserted that social injustice based on sexual orientation is a “sin” for which many mainstream religions have yet to repent (Gomes, 1996; Heward, 1989; Spong, 1988, 1991, 1998). This paper will address the impact of Judeo-Christian religion in the United States as a mechanism of control over lesbian sexuality. The prejudices of sexism and heterosexism in religion will be addressed, and interpretations of Biblical passages relative to lesbian sexuality will be examined. Primary Judeo-Christian groups in the United States, and their respective positions on homosexuality, will be identified. Conversion therapy as a religious weapon of oppression against lesbians will be addressed. Avenues for personal transformation and empowerment toward an ethic of religious social justice will be reviewed, and the following suggestions for social work practice with lesbian clients traumatized by religious oppression will be discussed: 1) Evaluate the extent of religious trauma; 2) Honor losses engendered by religious oppression; 3) Address the impact of religion as a tool for social injustice toward lesbians; and, 4) Develop a list of religious and spiritual resources to share with clients.

#### **“Transpersonal Group Work – Transforming Self-Esteem and Self-Awareness”**

Diana Coholic, PhD, Laurentian University, ON

A recurrent theme in the social work literature is that attending to a spiritual dimension in helping creates a more meaningful and effective helping process. However, much of this knowledge is based on sole practitioner reports, as the literature in this area is at an early stage of development. Little is known about how spirituality is actually discussed in practice, and how these discourses influence the helping process and affect people's lives. I shall present preliminary research findings from a six-week group program offered to women who have completed substance abuse treatment. The overall goal of the group is to build self-esteem and transform self-awareness. The group's uniqueness stems from its grounding in transpersonal theory, which focuses on understanding the language and development of the spiritual dimension in life – that which lies beyond the personal/ego level. One

of the goals of this research study is to explore the intricacies of spiritually influenced practice, and group participants' perceptions about the effectiveness of these processes. The conference themes of considering spiritual identity and spiritual transformation are both matters that are integral to the processes of this group.

### **"Spiritual Transformations in Therapeutic Relationships with Disabled Individuals"**

Donna Forster, MSW, MPA, PhD student, Queen's University

Working with disabled individuals challenges the social work-client relationship in unique ways. Disabled clients have increased needs for clinical support and intervention. Therapists respond to client needs at both personal and professional levels and can experience increased caregiver stress when working with disabled individuals. A new model of service delivery is needed which addresses the needs of both client and professional. This model needs to be interactive, transformative and reflective of spiritual realities. Shifting the emphasis in the therapeutic relationship to acknowledge and use the spiritual resources of both therapist and client transforms the helping relationship. Clients increasingly access spiritual resources as coping tools; they also seek out spiritual conversations with therapists, including social workers. When both client and therapist contribute knowledge and resources, helping relationships lose their draining qualities and become nurturing conversations. Jean Vanier's model of therapeutic reciprocity encourages spiritual transformations in both the carer and cared for. Building on Vanier's concepts, therapeutic relationships are enhanced when the therapist's growth and needs are taken into consideration. This paper argues that caregiver stress is reduced when therapeutic relationships are reciprocal and more specifically, when the spiritual resources of both client and professional influence the clinical focus.

### **"Listening to Our Stillness: Giving Voice to Our Spirituality" WORKSHOP/PRESENTATION COMBO**

Wanda Wagler-Martin, MSW, Shalom Counselling Services, ON  
Ken Mott, MSW, Renison College, University of Waterloo, ON

We live in a culture that promotes a state of perpetual motion both externally and internally. The metaphor of a "basket of wriggling puppies" is used by Barbara Bartocci, in her book, Mid-Life Awakenings to capture the image of this internal momentum. The authors have observed the toll of this busyness in people's lives. Whether someone is presenting with symptoms of depression, anxiety, relationship tension, self-harming behaviours, or work and life stressors, it is significant to encourage people to pay attention to the still small voice within. This is the voice that grounds us and gives meaning to our lives. This voice is imbedded in our sense of spirituality, which frames our view of the world and our deepest beliefs. Over many years of clinical and educational practice the authors have increasingly reflected on the importance of the spiritual component of people's experience. Validating this dimension allows intervention to respond to the whole person, and has become an integral part of the authors' approach to practice. It is a privilege to witness the transformation experienced as people begin to embrace their wholeness. There are many writers who recognize the importance of the spiritual component; Thomas Moore, Jon Kabat-Zinn, Bo Lozoff, Henri Noewen, James Fowler, James Birren and others. The workshop will incorporate these theoretical perspectives, clinical application and experiential exercises to illustrate attentiveness to spirituality. Participants will have the opportunity to reflect on their clinical or educational practice and to experience a number of ways to encourage inner stillness.

### **"Avis de recherche: meneurs de rites" - WORKSHOP**

Nicole Bouchard, PhD, Religious Studies, Université du Québec à Chicoutimi, QC  
Mario Bélanger, PhD, Sociology, Université du Québec à Chicoutimi, QC

Dans de nombreuses sociétés occidentales, les religions instituées, tout comme nombre d'autre lieux de façonnement identitaire, ne semblent plus réussir à fournir d'espaces de construction de sens. Nous entendons par ce terme, des lieux où s'élaborent collectivement des modèles d'interprétation, des représentations. Dans le cas des institutions religieuses, l'espace privilégié a toujours été le rite. Or, nos systèmes rituels sont devenus opaques aux yeux de ceux qui y trouvaient encore du sens il n'y a pas si longtemps. Les femmes et les hommes d'ici sont souvent démunis quand vient le temps de passer, de traverser et de faire du sens avec des expériences telles que la mort, la maladie ou les différents cycles de vie. Il nous semble que cette situation interpelle fortement les travailleurs sociaux qui, au quotidien, doivent guider et favoriser les passages liés à l'existence humaine. Dans cet atelier les participants seront en contact avec les différentes phases de

construction d'un rite de passage. Ce moment, plus théorique ouvrira sur un travail de construction de rituels liés à des problématiques vécues par les participants au sein de leur pratique. Des exemples tirés de travaux de recherche et d'accompagnement seront proposés pour susciter le travail de création rituelle.

**"Abused Religious Women and Notions of Spiritual Identity"**

Irene Sevcik, PhD, University of Calgary, AB

Nancy Nason-Clark, PhD, Sociology, University of New Brunswick, NB

Interest in spiritual matters remains high even though church attendance rates have fallen in recent years in Canada. A central construct within the Christian tradition is the notion of transformation. Based on research collected in Canada over the last 15 years, supplemented by clinical experience, this presentation will focus on the challenges facing abused religious women as they journey from victim to survivor. Questions we will address include: Does the search for spiritual identity and transformation place women in greater danger for domestic violence? What is the relationship between sacred and secular sources of help for religious victims of abuse? What is the role of faith on the road to healing and wholeness for women who are survivors of violence in the domestic setting?

**"Exploring the Impact of Abusive Relationships on Women's**

**Spirituality Using the Process of Drawing Mandalas"**

Nancy Miller, BSW, MA student, St. Stephens College, AB

"Trauma is ultimately a spiritual assault" (Cooper-White, in Stevenson-Moessner, 2000, p. 97). Abuse, in whatever form it takes, affects a person's mind, body and soul. To help understand the experience of being in an abusive relationship and how it affects women's spirituality, three women in a phenomenology research project were asked to represent their spiritual crisis using the process of drawing mandalas. A mandala is a circular art form that has been used historically by most religions and cultures around the world as a container for the expression of the spiritual. The reflection and analysis of the women's work was a joint process with the researcher and the women themselves. The project follows a holistic approach and is grounded in feminist theory and feminist theology. The women's drawings revealed that although their spirituality may have been hidden, covered up or put on hold during the abusive relationship, it was ever-present. A model was developed to understand the interaction between the women's experience of themselves, their abusive relationship and their sense of spirituality. Additional findings of hope, inspiration and transformation will be highlighted as well as the implications for blending the sacred and the secular in counseling women in abusive relationships. In addition, handouts on the use of mandalas and time for questions will be provided.