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Negotiating Challenges in a Diverse Society: Spirituality and Social Work in a Globalized Age

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Abstract:

The meaning-making enterprise has necessitated using stories as the vehicle of making sense out of the world. It is not, therefore a surprise that most of the religions of the world use stories. The historical function of religion as an expression of spirituality has been, according to Berger (1967), world maintaining and world shaking. It is the "product of human activity and human consciousness" p100. What is not understood is explained and put away under certain categories that allow individuals and the community to make meaning and give their lives relevance in an uncertain world. Yet spirituality is not the same as religion, but the need to make meaning involves stories. As the world shrinks as a result of globalization and those who were formally distant are brought closer together through the immigration process and technology, the meaning making enterprise requires a reformulation and understanding of how others make sense of the world. If we social workers are to maintain our position as cultural interpreters, we can no longer take this subject of meaning-making for granted. This paper explores the need for a rethinking of the place of spirituality in the postmodern world and make suggestions for the training of social workers in this area.

Biography:

Dr. Ette is a member of faculty at Northwest Nazarene University in Idaho. He is a graduate of the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, Emory University in Atlanta and Portland State University in Portland, Oregon. His research and writing interests are in the areas of immigration, International social work, Social Policy History, community development, spirituality and culture.

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Introduction

In our postmodern world, cultures that were once seen as distant and foreign are becoming closer and blending together than they used to be (Ritzer, 2007). Culture can be defined as the interpretation of the world, behaviors and reactions within that world. It is a buffer used to separate humans from their environments and allows them to make sense and adjust to such environment (Kendall, 2009). For example, how individuals dress and what constitutes the cultural patterns of dressing may be a reaction to the fact of the weather pattern that they find themselves. If individuals live in areas with frequent sandy storms, they are more likely to see the need for turbans which makes it easy to cover the eyes in such storm. Those on very hot climate may see very little need for layers of clothing and may prefer instead to go for loose clothing. Alternatively, those who live in very cold climate are likely to design suits, ties and socks in an attempt to stay warm. What food individuals eat and how they prepare such food also have a lot to do with what plants grow in their part of the world. Culture has a strong effect on the lives of individuals such that we cannot speak about spirituality and neglect to mention culture. What we think about the world as true, such as storms, hurricanes, fire, flood and death present us with uncertainty and so individuals attempt to control or pacify the forces that bring such calamities and this forms the religion of the people. As Huston Smith (1958) pointed out, we want a world where we can have life free of pain and hardships, be aware, have joy and have all these in infinite degree. In this pursuit, the philosophical questions that arise from what we see and believe to be true, force us to ask questions and seek meaning. Therefore the world presents itself to us, and we as groups interpret what we see and subsequently behave and react to suit what we know and think of that world to be true all in an effort to survive. How reality is

perceived in this understanding, may lead to the construction of grand narratives in a culture (Gallant & Riley, 2008).

Culture, therefore, consists of language, dressing, how humans relate with each other, how they interact and the rules of interaction. It also includes tools, food, values and beliefs. In sum, it is how we live in our environment, the rules of living in such environment and consequently what gives humans self and group identity. Social workers interact and serve people from different cultures. They enter into the lives of individuals within a culture during difficult periods. The parent who is trying to keep the authorities from taking away his or her child, the individual who is struggling with addiction or ill-health and those who are homeless and poor seek not only restoration, but they also struggle with the need to make meaning.

These individuals come from various backgrounds and cultures. The social worker also is a member of a community who has a different culture from that of the client that is to be served. It is possible for the social worker to experience culture clash, yet such worker must avoid pathological homogenization by not assuming that everybody is the same and see the world through the same lenses. The African immigrant who sees the etiology of a situation as a punishment from the gods or ancestors because he or she abandoned the heath in the homeland may seek a different solution and understand the services differently from another client who believes that a deity is sending someone to help. Yet both of these individuals have a need that affects them and the social worker must enter into their lives and examine their claims and help them reach a solution. It becomes important, therefore for the social worker to be aware of the effect of culture in the helping and receiving process.

Spirituality

Throughout history, individuals have tried to make meanings out of events in their lives and in the world. And as Myss (2001) reminded us, humanity has always given names to the many powers of heaven and earth and tried to identify the qualities inherent within each. Thus, we have learnt to work with the things and issues that we face as humans rather than against it. When floods, earthquakes and fire destroy lives and cause destructions, humans asked why and devised ways of appeasing the forces that brings such calamity. Faced with certain mortality humans have also looked for ways to avoid death and have attempted to control the powers and forces that they believe are responsible. Yet, despite the best of efforts and intentions, tragedy is a part of being alive. The question throughout the history of humanity has been that of making meaning out of our everyday experience in the world.

How we see the world, however, springs from our past experiences. We bring our past into the present and our present in turn is influenced by our future expectations about what could or should happen. When our present and future is in dissonance with our past and what is known, we struggle to make sense of our experience and ask the question “why?”. The asking of the question allows us to make meaning out of events in our lives and the world. It aligns our goals with the global flow and thus makes us a part of the universe. Through such alignment we improve our wisdom and willpower in the world and assume a closer connection with the universe and the divine. Such connection gives our lives and existence meaning, providing a grounding that allows us to rise above false illusions (Martsof & Mickley, 1998). In attaining such grounding, we change our thinking and perception of events in our lives and in the world which in turn provides meaning and purpose for our existence. Such changes do affect our values and ethics no matter how deeply held; in sum, the seeking of meaning and the transcendence

thereof that comes from the awareness and connection with the self, others, nature, and the divine is what is referred to as spirituality.

Life Crisis and Meaning

The meaning-making enterprise has necessitated using stories as the vehicle of making sense out of the world. Religion, therefore, fulfills this responsibility since religion essentially has two roles according to Berger (1967). The historical function of religion as an expression of spirituality has been, according to this theory, world maintaining and world shaking. Though religion according to Berger (1967) is a “product of human activity and human consciousness” (p100), its function has been to express spirituality and help in providing meaning of existence in a world that sometimes lacks meaning. What is not understood is explained and filed away under certain categories that allow individuals and the community to make meaning and give their lives relevance in an uncertain world. Yet spirituality is not the same as religion, but the need to make meaning involves stories.

Throughout history, societies and cultures have interpreted anomalies and tragedies according to certain understandings of the culture and the community. In some cultures action and events are assigned to fate or Karma. Fatalism becomes an attempt to give meaning to what appears meaningless. Events and actions that may be deemed senseless in light of human experience become a work assigned to the other. Life crisis becomes the action of fate, and the good are assigned to the benevolence of the divine. A story will illustrate this concept well.

On Christmas Eve 2005, a young immigrant family sat together in the living room opening their Christmas presents. The 28 year old wife and mother always preferred opening Christmas gifts on the night before Christmas. The oldest child, a four year old had a slight cold and was rather cranky that evening. The sister who had just turned two joined in the festive mood

of the occasion as the young couple watched her walk and play with her new toy. Both children have their bedrooms and when it was time to retire for the night, the children were tucked in as usual as snow fell outside. An hour or so after the children were put to bed, the four year old began to cry and told his parents he did not want to sleep in his room. Concerned about their little boy, the parents allowed their youngster to join them in bed. A few minutes afterwards, the mother suggested that the two year old be brought also to their bedroom for a truly family bed on that special night. The two-year old was taken to the room to join the rest of the family while the snow continued to fall outside. In the middle of the night a loud bang was heard as debris flew everywhere. The light went out and it was apparent that something terrible had happened. The family was awakened by the loud noise and soon realized that a big tree next to the house had fallen and destroyed half of their home. The tree trunk fell directly on the two beds where the children usually slept but on this night, the children were moved for simple and mundane reasons that saved their lives. The circumstances that led to the moving of the children apparently saved their lives, but the question still remains: How do we explain it?

This is where culture plays a role in making meaning out of this event. Some people may credit fate with saving the lives of the children. In ordinary conversations the neighbors may say that it was not time for the children. Fate did not will that the children come to die so soon and in such a violent manner. Among many African groups, where the belief in predestination is widely held, the moving of the children was simply the work of fate. They had done nothing wrong in the life before, since these groups believe in reincarnation. Those who believe in Karma would also hold such understanding. But among Christians, the children were simply spared through the Grace of God. Yet the Annangs, a group in West Africa, would have no problem explaining that children are closer to the divine and therefore foresaw the event and the cry was just a cry for

help. The idea of the divine as the protector is inherently found in many religious traditions which explains many events and allows individuals to make sense out of what may otherwise be an anomaly. Such idea as predestination is evident in everyday language in many cultural traditions, and expressed in conversations such as, “it was time”, and “they were meant for each other”.

The need for meaning allowed the ancient Greeks to formulate stories of the three fates that spin the wheel. In Jewish traditions, the ancient spoke about the sour grapes just as the Greeks spoke about the concept of the tragic spring. In the former, human misfortune and crisis were the fault of earlier generations. The divine punished the children because the parents transgressed. This understanding was also the reason many cultures depended on soothsayers as a way of finding out the reasons for misfortunes. The Greek concept of the tragic spring assumed almost a similar understanding, but rather than blamed the former generation, those who violated the natural laws were punished. The individual who stepped on the tragic spring found out that when the spring returned as it must, such individuals were thrown off to fall. Therefore life crisis, within this understanding, was a result of the violation of natural law.

Despite our assumed sophistication and secular inclination, we in the post-modern time are still struggling with the need for meaning. The question about the sources of evil, disease, misfortune and life crisis has led scientists in our time to search for meaning and understanding. Our approach, just as the ancient, has been to conquer and control the forces responsible for human misery. The quest to conquer and control these forces have led scientists, in line with post modernist thinking, to what is referred to as the scientific view. They therefore study genetic disposition, cause and effect and when these fail as they sometimes do, scientists revert to chance.

Why Spirituality?

Western scholarship has often been accused of seeing the world through evolutionary lenses. What is practiced outside the West becomes primitive and what is done inside the culture is seen as advanced. In the same way, tracing the evolution of spirituality in human services or public life, for that matter, through a series of evolutionary process is bound to take one through the same path and the accusation that western scholars are branded with. Yet the fact remains that western thinking has evolved in the last three hundred years. Technology was seen as a vehicle to advancing humanity and lead to progress ever onward. Charles Darwin Evolutionary Theory coming as it did in the middle of increasing inventions and productions of applied science unconsciously stretched the future of humans into the everlasting realm and obviously violated, as it did, the stories through which the Christian community and the western world made out their meaning of the world. (Lukacs, 2002) Humans, seen through the Darwinian lenses are evolving, not according to the idea of reaching towards perfection in the Wesleyan sense, but as Lukacs again observed, we may attain a stage through a yet unknown evolutionary process that changes the conception of what it means to be human.

Because of this orientation towards science and the accompanying ontological understanding, May (1991) reminded us that the place of spirituality is often not acknowledged in western helping relationships. Pembroke (2004) however, observed that human service workers (social workers included) are by the nature of their vocation called to take their presence and skills to refresh the life of the other. Through such giving of the self, change becomes possible and thus allows the other to know self more fully. Pembroke (2004) continued:

Those for whom their vocation is human service...are called to communication of the self in meeting the existential needs of others. (This involves).. the desire and the capacity to first imaginatively enter the inner domain of the thoughts, feelings, values, hopes and aspirations of the other and so to interpret the nature of that claim and then to

make available the best of one's personal gifts and resources in responding to that claim (p.19).

The Social Work Profession

To understand the need and usefulness of what spiritualizes social work it is, therefore, necessary to explore the nature of the profession.

Paul Tillich (1962) reminded us that “the basis of social work is the deficiency of every legal organization of society” (p. 13). If society was organized in such a way that the mechanism of such organization embraces all and provide for every need, according to this logic, then there will not be need for social workers. Two factors, he argued, prevent the existence of such a society namely: human existential predicament and human existential nature. The first relates to our insufficiency and the second relates to the uniqueness of human needs and situations. Therefore, the social work profession has a tremendous concern to relieve suffering, to seek justice, to affirm the dignity of humans and to empower individuals with an awareness gained from study, research and practice. It assumes that oppression and injustice are major causes of suffering. It further assumes that resources are limited and therefore, social work operates within the specific parameters of values and ethics (Reamer, 1995). Through this knowledge and assumptions, the practitioners seek pathways to liberation as a major part of their work. Such pathways include policy advocacy and practice. The former attempts to influence policy on behalf of the clients while the later, according to MacIntyre (1995), is “a cooperative form of activity in which participants activate their excellences to achieve together the good inherent in that particular” (activity) p. 17. The work, in keeping with the cooperative nature and the dignity of the individual, is not on the client but with the client. Individuals are not passive “patients” to be acted upon, but empowered as individuals to work with. The nature of the profession,

therefore, calls for the service of presence, the giving of experience, the reception of stories, the evaluation of actions and the determination of future directions towards the alleviation of suffering. In fact, the social worker engages the client to consider a re-interpretation of the meaning of existence in a broken world. Such task and undertaking require that the social worker is equipped through study, research, and experience to enter into the imagination of the other and see through their eyes. It also requires that the social worker be prepared to undertake this enormous task, for it is a law of nature that one cannot give what the individual does not have (*Nemo dat quod non habet*). Thus, whether the individual needs affirmation, presence, direction or reassurance, it is the professional social worker who is spiritually prepared and has understood own issues regarding these things that can provide an effective service.

Need for Meaning

Historically, three questions have been asked about the meaning of human experience: Who am I? Why am I here? Where am I going? Each of us had occasion to ask each of these questions. Before the Freudians and Neo-Freudians discovered personality theories, humans have wrestled with the problem that we are made up of complex drives and identities. Humans through time have also discovered that actions do not always bring desired results. To navigate the world in light of human experience we must make meaning about who we are in the vast universe. Thus the question of who an individual is, is as complex as human experience. We are first and foremost a product of a culture, for as Berger (1967) reminded us, it is through language that order is imposed on our world. Since language is a part of culture, we understand the world through the naming of ourselves as defined by our culture. Berger (1967) continued:

It is impossible to use language without participating in its order. Every empirical language may be said to constitute a *nomos* in the making, or, with equal validity as the historical consequence of the *nomizing* activity of generations... The original *nomizing* act is to say that an item is this, and thus not that. As this original incorporation of the

item into an order that includes other items is followed by sharper linguistic designations (the item is male and not female, singular and not plural, a noun and not a verb, and so forth), the nomizing act intends a comprehensive order of all items that may be linguistically objectivated, that is, intends a totalizing nomos (p.20).

Through this understanding, we are male or female, black or white, wife or husband, friend, sister, brother or cousin of someone. We are the mother, father, grandfather or grand mother of somebody. We are possessed and at the same time independent. Our lives belong to somebody while it is also ours. From this perspective self harm like suicide becomes selfish and becomes injurious to those we belong to. Outside of these social normative categories and in the vocational sphere we are also an artist, a painter, a teacher, a nurse or a social worker. Others are engineers, doctors and lawyers, yet the question of who we are rises above the mundane to deep seated emptiness that constantly gnaw at us to define who we really are relative to the expanse of the universe. But more than just a void, it is the need to belong, to be a part of some plan, to feel as if our lives have meaning, to know that we matter. Such meaning provides a grounding through which our purpose is understood. How we answer each of the questions above can affect what we do and how we live our lives.

The Center for Health Promotions of the University of Toronto (2006) developed what they called a Quality of Life Profile to provide a measure for the determinants of health and well-being. In this conceptual model designed to show the quality of life, who we are can be divided into three domains namely: being, belonging and becoming. In discussing the concept of identity in the world, I will expand on this model concentrating as is appropriate on the current discussion on the concept of being.

As referred to above, we see ourselves as physical beings through our general physical appearance, as male or female and so forth. It is also true that we see ourselves through our

learning, our feelings and knowledge of the self derived from our history and relationships, but we also see ourselves through our beliefs and therefore directed to act and develop values as a result of those beliefs. With this self concept we find our places in the universe through the concept of belonging. Thus we have physical belonging – having a sense of being a part of a home, school, workplace, neighborhood and community as examples. We feel safe and at home in these physical spaces and can identify with these places like no other. They are where we feel a sense of being at home and can shut out the rest of the world and tune out if we want to. Other places and spaces outside of these domains present an other worldliness to us. If we are away from these places we feel the need to return.. They may be ordinary places, but they carry a form of sacredness not found elsewhere. Thus, the question, “Who am I?” can be answered using not only the physical and mundane concept already referred to, but the physical belonging as well.

Besides being and belonging, we are also, according to this model, creatures with personal goals, hopes and aspirations. The ability to have hope is very essential to understanding and seeing our lives as purposeful. When hope is gone life loses its meaning; for hope provides the cushion through which difficult situations are endured. The ability to see a bright tomorrow in the darkness of today produces endurance. The rigorous demands and unreasonableness of college professors, for example, are endured by students for they see graduation as a goal that would bring better days. The Africans enslaved in the United States endured slavery and even survived for they had hopes in a better life that is to come (Frazier, 1968). Poor immigrants crossing borders are willing to undertake treacherous journeys because they have hope of seeing a better life for themselves and their dependents on reaching the new land. The journey of the immigrant becomes an exercise in hope that the future may hold better promise than the present (Ette, 2005). Hope is so important for us humans that its loss often signals suicide.

Within this sphere, individuals aspire to do and accomplish certain things as a way of reaching their potential of what they can be. When these goals are reached, they have fulfillment and a sense of accomplishment. They see their lives as having meaning and can truly answer the question “who am I?” with the knowledge of their experience in the world.

The second question regarding why we are here is closely related to the first. As science has opened up more knowledge available to us, this question of our place in the universe rather than disappear, as earlier expected, has become more relevant. We did not ask for this life but became aware of our existence, according to developmental theorists, at a certain age. Through socialization we acquire the values and norms of our individual cultures. Evolutionary ideas and theories assign to us the raising of the next generation and frame the purpose of our existence merely as reproduction. All goals and activities, in this understanding, are solely for procreation, and so we toil, reproduce and struggle to stay long enough to raise our children, and then we die. This begs the question for individuals who cannot reproduce or choose not to reproduce. Certainly, human life is worth more than simply playing parent. What then is this reason for being here?

Though spirituality and religion are different, yet we shall return to religion again to explore the above question for it is through religion that spirituality is expressed for some people. Throughout human history, the answer to the question of why we are here has been supplied through canonical stories in many cultures. The need to answer the question has led to story telling and provided didactic examples of living in the world. Fowler (1996) using the structural–cognitive perspective in tracing faith development argues that we humans orient our lives with fundamental values, meanings and beliefs by assigning importance and profundity to these things

“in light of our relatedness to ultimacy” (pg. 21) He goes on to show the human condition by pointing out that:

... we live with a disconcerting duality. We have imaginations, intuitions and moments of awakening that disturbs us into awareness of dimensions of circumambient reality that we can only name, on our own, as “mystery”. And yet our feet are mired in the clay of everyday toil – getting and giving, spending and being spent – in the struggle for survival and meaning... we spend our blessed and threatened years becoming selves through relations of trust and loyalty with others... we are language-related, symbol-borne and story-sustained creatures. We do not live long or well without meaning (p. 50).

Faith, according to this understanding, is a universal aspect of human nature (Fowler, 1984). The question of why we are here is answered and made meaningful through faith that connects us to others and the larger frame of the cosmos. Through such understanding, we can then deal with suffering, tragedy and mortality.

Educating the Future Social Worker

To state that we live at a different time from when the social work profession was born is to state the obvious. As Lukacs (2003) reminded us, the end of the dominance of Europe and the rise of the American power and dominance in world affairs has defined our post modern world. Additionally, analysis and experimentation as avenues and pathway to truth have been questioned. We have come to the realization that human invention does not necessarily lead to human progress and unlike those who lived before us in the modernist age, science does not have all the answers to human problems. What Lyotard (n.d) calls the *petit recit* is now preferred over the meta narratives of the past and as a result what held enormous power in the past is in decline. Given these changes a re-orientation and a new realization have emerged. There is now a recognition that how people act and how they think are products of their history. Facts in this regard are neither absolute nor timeless. This calls for a re-thinking of epistemology, progress,

science and the human place in the universe. The old stories of race and gender are rejected and diversity is seen as important. Such grand concepts as civilization and primitivity where cultures were divided into categories according to the old Comtean typology are discarded in favor of diversity. As the late Senator Patrick Moynihan (1993) reminded us ethnicity becomes important and rather than stress the melting pot concept where the *publius unum* idea was orchestrated, we gravitate towards multiculturalism and reach instead for the “salad bowl”. Thus, difference is celebrated and seen as strength.

No matter the changes in perspectives and orientation, there is however a recognition that human problems and issues remain the same and has been heightened as well as highlighted by these new realities. Hunger, homelessness, illness, poverty and a host of other human miseries continue to be a problem in the world. Spirituality and culture become important since old assumptions have been challenged. The need for meaning, rather than be understood and seen through grand stories, requires personal contemplation and relevance in light of the individual experience. Yet no one institution has the answer and individuals become free to make meanings as they see fit. The world has shrunk as a result of technology and globalization. Individuals, communities and cultures who were once far apart are now brought together and there is a shared awareness of mutuality, benefits, conflicts and sadly perils. Given the nature of social work, the practitioner is caught up in this new world order and given the role of a cultural interpreter. It is the social worker who is prepared and trained to respond well to the human yearning for meaning and the perception of human problems that can be effective in this new world.

What should social workers know and how should they be prepared? Human needs are universal. Maslow (1973) delineated the hierarchy of needs and stressed that self actualization is a universal human ideal. Therefore no matter the culture, self preservation as well as the need to

belong are universal human needs. Bowlby's (1975, 1980, & 1988) attachment theory as well as Ainsworth's (cited in Gallant & Riley, (2008) schema of the inner working model (IWM) has taught us that humans try to shield themselves from the new and unfamiliar. It is the social worker who is familiar with relevant theories of human behavior that can best respond to human crisis. In the same way if social workers are to respond skillfully and refresh other lives through the giving of the self, concepts and theories of cultural consciousness that sensitizes the social worker about the perception of reality must be incorporated into the social work curriculum. (Gerber, 1949) had shown that there are deficient and efficient models of perceiving realities. The examination of such theories should avoid universalisms. Help seeking behaviors of other cultures may be understood through the examination of how individuals from such cultures explain the etiology of specific problems. Since social problems tend to arise where systems intersect, the awareness and how systems and cultures converge can help in the making of meaning, for when meaning is made of events in human life adjustment and coping can be easier than when they are devoid of meaning.

Conclusion

In this paper, an attempt has been made to link culture, spirituality, and postmodernism as forces that should guide us in the planning of the social work curriculum. Globalization and changing realities in our world require new approaches. As cultures and people are brought closer together as a result of transnational movements and technology, social workers in the western world and elsewhere are increasingly exposed to people from cultures other than their own. New stories are increasingly going to be told since human lives are made up of stories. Despite the importance of spirituality, the current practice in some schools is to offer spirituality as an elective course in some schools while most departments of social work do not see the need

for such a course. For those who offer it as a course, it is doubtful whether these courses can separate spirituality from religion. It is difficult to say with certainty how many departments of social work offer courses or a course in spirituality without an empirical study. The next step maybe to conduct a survey to examine the teaching of spirituality and social work in this globalized age.

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