

Brian Ouellette's Biography

Brian Ouellette: Canadian Pioneer Teacher on Spirituality in Social Work

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Presented at the **Fifth North American Conference on Spirituality and Social Work** held

from June 17 – 19, 2010, in Calgary, Alberta at the University of Calgary

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Abstract:

Brian Ouellette practiced social work for exactly 30 years, 10 years as a mental healthy clinician followed by 20 years as a university professor, during which he was recognized as an exemplary clinician, teacher, mentor, and leader; and, for his contagious joy! This paper focuses on Ouellette's role in the re-emergence of *spirituality* in professional social work training and practice in Canada. Among other achievements, this paper highlights Ouellette's contribution to Social Work and *Spirituality* in three areas: the development of course content; demonstration of the connection between social work values and *spirituality*; and the practical teaching and practice methodology. Brian Ouellette is recognized as a pioneer social worker whose course content, skills and teaching methodology was studied and demonstrated as effective; highlighted herein as a practical model for incorporating spirituality in social work training in response to the increasingly diverse and complex social problems in times of the scare economic reality. Ouellette's contribution is considered foundational in the development of the Social Work profession at the beginning of the 21st century.

Biography:

Christine Lwanga is a first year Ph.D. Student in Social Work at the University of Manitoba. She also works as a Counselor, Human Rights and Community Development consultant based in Regina, Saskatchewan

Brian Ouellette's Biography

Brian Ouellette (1951-2005) and the Re-emergence of Spirituality in Canadian Social Work at the end of the 20th Century:

A Biography



Brian Ouellette's adult photo as a professor,

at the School of Social Work , St. Thomas University, Fredericton, NB.

This paper is extracted from a primary based research paper that involved repeated personal interviews with Brian's wife Anne Ouellette and colleagues with whom he had worked at the School of Social Work at St Thomas University in New Brunswick, who had observed Brian's relentless energy and quest for life. In addition, I reviewed Brian Ouellette's personal notes and documents including course outlines, published and unpublished papers, and introduction commentaries on him and eulogies (1951 – 2005). Additionally, I received some information from Edward Canda, at the School of Social Welfare, Kansas University, who is recognized as a leader in spirituality and social work and was the inspiration for Brian Ouellette and Barbara Swartzentruber (Renison College), John Graham (University of Calgary) and John Coates (St. Thomas University) in their founding the Canadian Society for Spirituality and Social Work (CSSSW) in 2000.

Content: *spirituality* and social work, Brian Ouellette's philosophy, course content and teaching methodology.

Brian Ouellette's Biography

Introduction:

Brian Ouellette's contribution to professional social work is framed within the meaning of *spirituality* as-human-essence and a component of human development (Carroll, 1998). It is also rooted in the position and role of *spirituality* in supporting the practitioners in developing and establishing themselves in social work values (Butot, 2007; Tyler, 2002) and in this transformational process that also transforms their clientele leading to deeper and broader personal and social change (Derezotes, 2006; Mathews, 2009). Brian Ouellette's foundational and critical contribution to the profession can only be appreciated from the understanding of *spirituality* as a complex and multi-related construct; therefore, the first part of this biography is committed to establishing the meaning of *spirituality* and Ouellette's philosophy.

Brian Ouellette's unique gifts and skills are also better appreciated within the context of his early awareness of his *spirituality*, his educational background and initial work in mental health and the twenty years as a professor at the school of Social Work, St Thomas University, a Catholic institution with a liberal arts focus, and his active involvement in the community with 228 recorded presentations at conferences and workshops on a broad range on difficult topics including: suicide, crisis intervention and mental health; HIV/AIDS organizing, sex, marriage and family relationships; teamwork at the workplace; education and curriculum development; *spirituality* on top of Brian's teaching career and the various delegated and volunteer positions. I will share anecdotes on Brian Ouellette's personality and disposition; however this paper will focus on teaching spirituality and social work, the lasting the legacy of his work.

Although Brian Ouellette had a short 30 years social work career; ten years in mental health and 20 years as a professor, his passion for *spirituality*, love for people and learning, his gentle demeanour and choice to persistently confront the difficult and irresolvable life issues combined to

Brian Ouellette's Biography

help him develop an authentic and courageous vision that set his presence and work apart from others. While Brian's work may not be comparable to that of the early social work pioneers like Mary Richmond, Jane Adams and Charlotte Towle who published books and established large followings during their life time, he had an equally large heart. Like them, Brian Ouellette grounded his work within the core social work values exemplified through respect of diversity, self-determination and, personal integrity and that of the profession within a religious institution. Brian consciously and deliberately promoted change and growth as part of his own personal *spiritual journey* as articulated through his daily devotional prayer of St Francis of Assisi: "*Lord, make me an instrument of your peace, Where there is hatred, let me sow love; Where there is injury, pardon; Where there is doubt, faith; Where there is despair, hope; Where there is darkness, light; Where there is sadness, joy*", shared by his wife Anne.

Spirituality and Social Work & Brian Ouellette's Philosophy

Since the 1980's there has been an increase of books and research on *spirituality* and social work coupled with a broader meaning and awareness of *spirituality* as a dimension of human nature and a critical part and process of human development. Canda (1988), Derezotes (2006), Mathews (2009) and other scholars who studied and have written on *spirituality* as human essence make reference to its multiple and related perspectives. They specifically make reference to the fundamental principle of vital energy, the underlying potential and capacity for growth and change; for self development, self- transformation and self -realization. It is that human life that involve the awareness of the presence of the transcendent, a higher power that is beyond body, mind, emotions and soul; that to which our souls connect to give meaning and purpose to life. It is the alignment with that which is divine, pure and good in and for humanity and seeks to reject or remove the spiritual domain that seeks evil and is unholy and unjust. Carroll (1998) makes reference to Canda's work (1988) in which he

Brian Ouellette's Biography

identified seven recurrent themes of spirituality: as intrinsic aspects of the person; expressed through individual development and relationship; integrates all aspects of the person; involves search for meaning and purpose; involves love relationship; provides way of understanding human suffering and alienation; and integrates everyday life with the transcendent. *Spirituality* has also been defined as relating to social justice work such as the feminist movement and the global anti-poverty movement (Butot, 2007).

Spirituality includes what is also referred to as a one-dimension and /or religion in all its diverse forms as a path through which some people and even the profession of social work has navigated, (Carroll, 1998; Graham, Coholic, & Coates, 2007; Tyler, 2002) ; but it is also concerned and critical of the different historical and persisting ways religion has served as a double edged sword. Religion (culture and traditions) have served to promote development while at the same time establishing oppression, colonization, sexual abuse and other forms of dysfunction that are detrimental to human and social development ((Butot, 2007; Mathews, 2009). Religion played a significant role in the development of social work in Canada along-side with the labour and women's movements, politicians, the media, individuals and groups etc. (Graham, 2007; Graham, et al., 2007), it has also contributed to various individual and social problems that pre-occupy social workers. Tyler (2002) and Payne (Payne, 2007) point to religion and political philosophy as the sources of social work values. Tyler (2002) and Payne (Payne, 2007) point to religion and political philosophy as the sources of social work values. Tyler (2002) and Payne (Payne, 2007) point to religion and political philosophy as the sources of social work values. Tyler (2002) and Payne (Payne, 2007) point to religion and political philosophy as the sources of social work values. Familiar with the Judeo-Christian historical roots of social work in Canada, Brian Ouellette echoed Canda's observation, "we threw away the baby

Brian Ouellette's Biography

of spirituality out with the bathwater" (Ouellette, 2007) in pursuit of professional credibility and a scientific body of knowledge in response to the Flexner's (1915) challenge.

Spirituality is an important part of social work that allows us to incorporate what science, logic and rational reasoning cannot explain; it allows the recognition of the multiple and trans-rational ways of knowing and, to truly honour people and their vast, complex lived experiences from a holistic approach ((Derezotes, 2006); Mathew, 2009). Additionally, there is vast empirical evidence that *spirituality* as human essence and the transcendent promotes health, wellbeing and much more, for those who attend to it (Tyler, 2003; Mathew, 2009). Derezotes (2006) lists nine methods of *spiritual* transformation: radical change; integral change; enhanced equanimity; temperance; greater ecstasy; increased capacity; here-and –now change potential; new value hierarchies; and service activism.

Although Brian Ouellette was raised, grew up and worked in what can be described as a staunch Roman Catholic family and community he operated from a liberal paradigm. His philosophy on *spirituality* is consistent to it's position as human essence, it's diversity and multiple perspectives as shared in the literature review above; framed within post-modernism and its dialectical analysis, as demonstrated in his attitude and course content ahead. Described as having deep faith yet humble and un-assuming, Ouellette understood that his God was bigger than the religion he knew, and operated from an open-minded stance. He recognized the multiple interrelated view of *spirituality*, as a positive connecting force that helped to heal and restore balance in and around individuals and society as was demonstrated in his own life. In one of his inspirational speeches to students, Ouellette shared what facilitated growth and change in him during his university days, through what he referred to as the five F's of fulfilment: Freedom, Faith, Friendship, Fun and the Faculty at St. Thomas University. On faith he stated:

Brian Ouellette's Biography

Not only does my faith give me a sense of well-being and meaning, but it sure comes in handy during times of stress. You don't have to be Catholic, or even Christian to nurture your faith at STU. This is an institution that recognizes that faith and spirituality are an integral and valuable part of the human condition. (Comeau, Winter 1999)

He encouraged the students to speak freely and openly about their beliefs and to study them; and relating to “freedom”, Ouellette challenged them to form their own opinion about ideas, concepts and theories.

Brian Ouellette's Personality and Leadership Disposition:

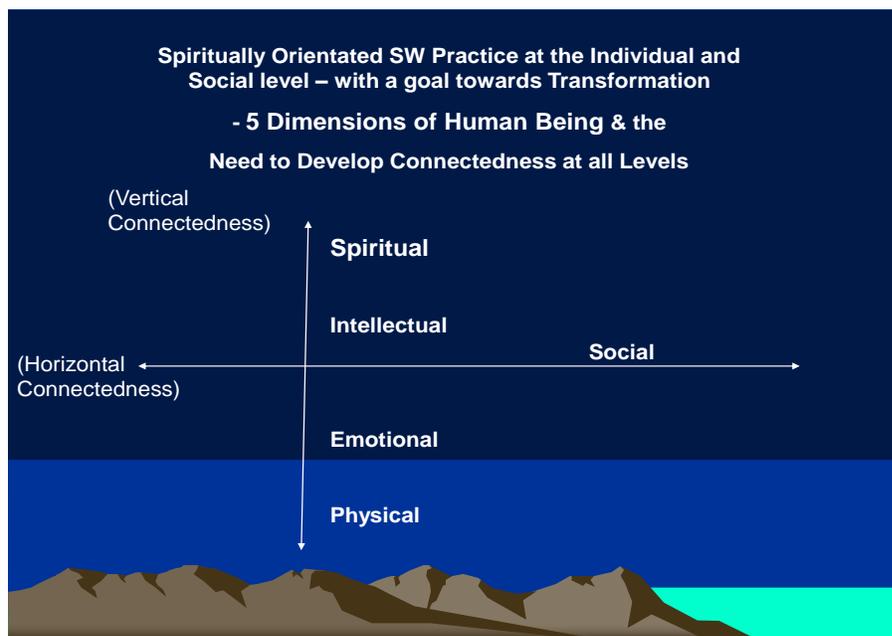
Brian Ouellette's colleague John Coates described him as a gentle, non-judgemental, humble person yet enthusiastic, humorous almost to the point of self-deprecating, and with a contagious joy! During lengthy telephone interviews with Coates and later Sandra Devink who were fellow professors at the school of Social Work, Coates referred to Brian as a good therapist, *“he had the ability to be fully present with a person and people who met him once or twice could never forget him”*. Brian Ouellette was also referred to as always calm about the things, *“he never stressed, pushed his way or rushed things. He had a confidence that if things are done right they will succeed”*. *“Spirituality was always a big part of Brian”*, Sandra explained further. Brian had cultivated in himself a number of effective social work skills such as optimism, humour and self-disclosure that augmented his personality. A statement in Ouellette's eulogy reads: *“Brian was humble and unassuming but this did not detract from the significant leadership role he played in the area of spirituality and social work.”*

Anne Ouellette, described her husband as the most humble person she knew – a hard attribute to give to one with whom we have spent ample time unless they truly are. Anne also referred to Brian as *“spiritual, confident and gentle”*. In response to a question on why Brian moved from mental health to teaching, Anne explained that, *“Brian was given a teaching job because he was a good clinician”*

Brian Ouellette's Biography

and referred to his work in mental health. However, as noted above, Brian modelled not only pro-social behaviour, but also intentional deep *spirituality* that served as the anchor of what others recognized as compassion, respect, pursuit of social justice which are core social work values.

Brian Ouellette's disposition can be visualized in the figure below, in which I attempt to portray the five dimensions of human being in balance. By prioritizing spirituality Brian Ouellette was able to effectively connect with the transcendent and all dimensions of self in a manner that informs and transforms the other dimensions of being, vertical connectedness. He was then able to relate to others from a holistic and balanced position that could fully and effectively honour others – horizontal connectedness. (Lwanga, 2007) Ouellette disposition can be described as what some scholars refer to as a mature stage of spiritual development when one is able to consistently express unconditional love and justice; when one is no longer interested in self preservation.



Brian Ouellette blossomed during his employment with St Thomas University (STU), a Catholic institution with a liberal arts programme that nurtures humanistic heritage and focuses on social issues

Brian Ouellette's Biography

and prides itself as believing in that people of “divergent backgrounds and abilities should have an opportunity to learn and practice critical thought and realize their intellectual potential in an academic setting that is both responsive and stimulating.” (“St. Thomas University - Fredericton, New Brunswick, Canada,") Brian was hired as an assistant professor at the STU School of Social Work in 1985, where he worked for twenty years. Brian excelled where ever he served and he won special awards from the provincial and national social work associations in 2006 and 1996 respectively. He also received two teaching awards, one from the university and another from the school of social work where he taught over 15 different courses some of which he had developed and was recognized for his creativity and mentoring skills (John Coates, November 11, 2009; Sandra Devink, November 14, 2009). Out of the various course he taught, Brian was most recognized for his course on Spirituality and Social Work.

Pioneer Teaching in Spirituality and Social Work:

Brian Ouellette's teaching philosophy was framed in his enthusiasm for learning and his view of people, young or older and regardless of any other differences “*as worthy and deserving of dignity, honesty and respect and, as spiritual being with deep potential*” (Unknown). Brian's public work on *Spirituality and Social Work* commenced in 1993; that year he Brian kept on asking why there was so much resistance to teaching spirituality pointing to void it left in effective professional social work teaching, learning and practice. When he asked for space to start teaching the course he was fully supported by the faculty and the university, Devink recalled. It is possible the Brian's active involvement in mental health, suicide, crisis intervention and the 1980's the HIV/AIDS work contributed to his heightened sense of need to train social work students in spirituality (Anne Ouellette, November 11, 2009 and S. Devink, November 13, 2009).

Brian Ouellette's Biography

Brian taught *Spirituality* and Social Work from 1994 through to 2004. It was an elective undergraduate course however; all social work students who attended the Social Work program during that time chose to take it. As course rationale Brian indicated that, in the recent years, the social work profession had been influenced by factors such as: the emergence of holistic integrative paradigm; the development of feminist practice and the 'personal is political ideological' perspective; the emergency of structural social work as an alternative to conventional social work; and the increased multi-cultural nature of it's clients and workers. These analytical views were framed within post-modernism and its dialectical analysis, combined with the revival of *spirituality* in the 1980's provided strong grounds for profession for change. As part of the course description, Brian provided the following four points as the part of the purpose of the course:

- i) exposure to the religious /spiritual dimension of human behaviour; ii) opportunity to reconcile spiritual beliefs with professional expectations; iii) understanding of the impact of the religious and /or spiritual factors in individual growth, community functioning, policy development and social change; and iv) comfort with integrating the 'spiritual' practice.

(Ouellette, 1999 - 2004)

Brian Ouellette also advocated the multiple perspectives of spirituality, exposed the position of traditional religions as a double edged sword, advocated for spirituality that incorporates the transcendent and involves transformation.

The course content included: the historical and contemporary review of spirituality in social work, the historical evolution of social work and the influence of religious beliefs (charity), traditional and contemporary religions including Eastern holistic religions /cultures that integrate spirituality; exploration of stages of spiritual development, allowing students to reflect on their own spiritual development and how it impacts on their professional life; the conceptual framework and some tools

Brian Ouellette's Biography

for integrating spirituality into social work, allowing the distinction among values, faith and religion- including discussions on the function and dysfunctions. The course included the distinction of “values, faith and religion and the criteria for conceptualizing spirituality” and included the discussion of the contribution of different religions to social work, including Islam, Buddhism, Existentialism, Judaism and Spiritism, and Christianity. The course enabled students to explore spiritual perspective of social work through the exploration of the literature on areas of personal interest and creativity through term papers. Topics could range from social work practice and fundamentalism, feminism and the welfare crisis; spirituality and group practice or direct practice, social action, the workplace, global transformation, Native spirituality and Social Work, other topics based on students' personal search.

Brian Ouellette had read extensively on this subject area; he had over 10 pages of references of books and journals articles covering nursing, mental health, gerontology, liberation theology, sociology, psychology and Ph.D. dissertations including the one by Edward Canda “A Conceptualization of Spirituality for Social Work: it's issues and implication” (1986), Ohio State. He used various text books including: *Spirituality in Social Work Practice* by Ronald Bullis (1996), Taylor and Francis; *Spiritual Diversity in Social Work Practice: The Heart of Helping* by Edward R. Canda and Leola Furman (1999) NY. Free Press; *It's a Meaningful Life: It just takes practice* by Bo Lozoff (2000), Penguin Books, Toronto; and *Spiritual Assessment: Handbook for Helping Professionals* by David Hodge (2003), North American Association of Christians in Social Work, Botsford, CT.

Sandra Devink, who worked side by side with Brian Ouellette, referred to the course as a great success. Through this course, students were allowed “*to explore different religions in a non-judgmental way, and to overcome biases; Brian was a strong teacher for this was a difficult subject to teach. The students gained personal and professional knowledge*”. They explored traditional

Brian Ouellette's Biography

religions and this helped them to become open minded and over come misinformation, learn how to avoid indoctrinating others, and overcome judgmental views about other religions. Ouellette was able to respect other religions yet had strong faith. He was not ashamed to convey his beliefs and respectively allowed others to share theirs. He recognized that people do not have to hold the same belief, the key is to have meaning to life, he never attempted to convince others to change to his beliefs; the goal was not to have people develop the same faith or worldview. Devink also felt that the course allowed space for personal growth and students left the course transformed. *"Students spent a good part of the course writing their spiritual genealogy, identify events that give their lives meaning and purpose, personal exploration of who they are and what shaped their lives"*, she clarified. Students became open minded no longer afraid to talk about their beliefs and at the same time willing to respect and honour others spiritual beliefs.

Teaching Methodology:

In addition to the humanistic, religious inclusive and practical course content, Brian Ouellette's pioneer contribution comes from the unique teaching methodology he employed in delivering this course. Brian's non-judgmental stance helped students to become open-minded and over-come misinformation, confront their judgemental attitudes and views about other religions and avoid indoctrinating others. Brian Ouellette maintained his personal integrity and not ashamed to convey his religious beliefs and was also able to respectively allow others to share theirs. He made it clear that the goal was not to have same beliefs, view or worldview but to explore meaning of life building on one's personal past and on-going journey. Brian's life and course helps me to understand the close connection between spirituality and social work values. Canda in Carroll (1998) Tyler (2002), Graham, Coholic & Coates (2007) Butot (2007) and a number of other scholars make reference to the

Brian Ouellette's Biography

philosophical underpinnings of *spirituality* and how it relates to the development and establishment of social work values among practitioners.

Brian Ouellette and John Coates undertook an empirical research study to assess the impact of the course over a three year period (1997, 1998 and 1999). The study assessed the impact of the students' understanding of spirituality and their attentiveness to spiritual issues in their work, using JAREL Spiritual Well-Being scale. The three cohorts of social work students who took the course were compared to a corresponding group of psychology students at STU, a group that did not take the course and found higher sensitivity to and comfort with their own spirituality for those who took the course. The course had greater impact among student participants who were not affiliated with spiritual/ religious practice.(Coates & Ouellette, 1999) An unrelated but similar study by Csiernik and Adams (Csiernik & Adams, 2003) that compared first year social work students and third year students conducted at King's College, affiliated with the University of Western Ontario, also found that spirituality was of significant importance for social work students than their peers; underscoring the importance of including *spirituality* in social work education. In respect to demographic difference, the study found that the two groups had no difference in respect to religious affiliation.

Brian's effective teaching and practice of *spirituality* was embodied in his personality that was infused in social work values. Brian's life highlights the centrality of *spirituality* in social work values and its importance in social work training and practice. This role of within social work is also articulated by Graham, Coholic and Coates (2007) who refer to religious spirituality as the historical source of social work's primary values, that is "dignity and worth of the individual", "client self-determination", "social justice and reform", "multicultural diversity" and "confidentiality". Tyler (200) traces these values to the work of the early American pioneers like Jane Addams and Hull House through to the 1968 International Conference on Social Welfare that commemorated the 20th

Brian Ouellette's Biography

anniversary of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights; providing a different source to framing social work values in the contemporary secular practice.

One may ask who helped Brian Ouellette in developing this course. According to Anne Ouellette, around the time when Brian developed the course he had attended the Council for Social Work Education conferences (CSWE) in the United States at which Dr. Edward Canda and his colleagues held development workshops on *spirituality*, as part of Canda's founding work of the Society of Spirituality and Social Work (SSSW) in 1990. SSSW has also held annual conferences since, at which members share knowledge, skills and research developments and Brian was one of the early members. SSSW is hosted at Kansas University with the goal to support each other regardless of the contrasting spiritual perspectives and to develop "*innovative approaches to spiritually sensitive social work practice and education*" ("Society for Spirituality and Social Work" The School of Social Work,") and later led to the founding of the Canadian Society for Spirituality and Social Work (CSSSW) of which Brian is one of the founder member. ("Canadian Society for Spirituality and Social Work,")

Conclusion and the Legacy:

Brian Ouellette's Spirituality and Social Work course development, teaching and success can be recognized as positive pioneering efforts in the development of the profession during times of scarce economic times and increasing social problems in light of a number of factors. His work and methodology was grounds social students in the profession's core values and skills and the students in turn learnt to pass on these values to their clients and society at large, incorporating the "function" of social work in practice. As the first recorded person to develop and teach this course in Canada in 1994, Brian dared so in the midst of resistance and sometimes antagonism on the part of the larger professional climate that was and to some extent remains opposed to discussion that includes

Brian Ouellette's Biography

spirituality and religion as important subject areas that students have to openly address on a personal level and in professional practice. Brian highlights the importance and the possibility of both personal and professional integrity within professional practice and while up-holding clients' needs and development in the forefront. Furthermore Brian Ouellette stepped outside the traditional religious approach to spirituality, within a religious institution by teaching spirituality and religion from an inclusive approach, respecting diversity and self-determination. The importance of this first bold step can be well appreciated in light of Csiernik and Adams (2003) observation that the reluctance to teach *Spirituality* and Social Work resides with both the secular and religious institutions although for different reasons. The former is fully aware of the social problems that have arisen from oppression, colonization, sexual abuse and other numerous social dysfunctions within religion that social workers have to end up addressing. And, on the other hand, traditional religious institutions tend to be wary of combining *spirituality* with social work, concerned about the profession's client-centred approach and philosophy on client's right to self-determination, coupled with the feminism, structuralism, post-modernism and anti-oppressive theories that have led some to believe that social workers do not have strong faith and that spiritual matters are not important.

2009 marked fifteen years since that first course on *Spirituality* and Social Work was taught in a Canadian school of social work, deserving of a timely question on whether this subject area has generated adequate interest among Canadian social workers and the profession. Overall, it has been noted that the profession of social work continue to lag behind other professions like nursing and psychology (Mathews, 2009), and there would be many factors that would contribute to progress or lack of progress in this subject area. Never the less, through a preliminary survey, a number of Canadian schools of social work are offering elective classes, lectures or special events on spirituality. They include: the University of Calgary("Spirituality | Faculty of Social Work | University of

Brian Ouellette's Biography

Calgary,"); Renison School of Social Work at University of Waterloo ("School of Social Work - Renison University College - University of Waterloo,"); the University of Windsor Critical Social Work interdisciplinary journal dedicated to social justice ("University of Windsor - Critical Social Work - Spirituality and Domestic Violence Work,"); King's College, University of Western Ontario (Csiernik & Adams, 2003), Carleton University social work classes on Mindfulness (Hick, 2008), the Native Human Service BSW offered at Laurentian University in Sunbury, Ontario; and the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College, University of Regina, Saskatchewan (Csiernik & Adams, 2003)

At STU, the faculty of Social Work and the University explored the possibility of continuing to teach Brian Ouellette's course on *Spirituality and Social Work*. Although there was a general desire to continue teaching the course, at the time no one felt comfortable to teach it. However, in light of the high regard and value attached to Ouellette's course and contribution, it was decided to establish and hold annual Brian Ouellette conferences that would run from Friday through Saturday and would be open to the full student body. The first conference was held in 2006 and they have been held every year since then; the theme of the 2007 conference was: *Spirituality and Community Wellbeing* and the 2008 conference was: *Inner Peace: Caring for Mind Body, Heart and Soul in Professional Practice*. Sandra Devink explained that the conferences have broadened up spirituality to other professions, the larger student body and the public, and they are well attended.

In preparation of a presentation at the 2005 SSSW annual conference held in Tuscon, a few months prior to Brian Ouellette death in December that year, in his speaking notes, Brian lamented about the lack of progress and the general continues resistance to the subject area within the profession in Canada, in comparison in the American counterparts. This lack of progress is also demonstrated in professional policy development. For example, it has been reported that the Council for Social Work

Brian Ouellette's Biography

Education in the United States of America has mandated the course on *Spirituality* in all social work schools Sloan (2007). Further more, there is a wide selection of text books, empirical research and training that has been accumulated over the last 20 years. Ai (2002), Northcut (2004) and Sloan (2007) and many others report on studies that have demonstrated the practicability and effectiveness in teaching spirituality in social work and have shown good results.

Brian Ouellette lived, taught and practiced professional social work with integrity and love, the two most important virtues that are invaluable in teaching and necessary in a profession centred on relationships. Brian teaching model on spirituality and social work, is comparable to a recently developed training model by Rothman (Rothman, 2009) and Ouellette's work has an additional component in that, it's framed in both pro-social work skills and values. A lot more remains to be done in Canada and it's hoped that this paper and Brian's work will stimulate more interest in the teaching, practice and research work in and on this important subject area.

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