

Notes to accompany 'Reframing Spirituality: Re-Conceptualizing Change' power-point presentation  
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Slide 1:

Begin with centering – body, bones, skin, breath – feeling self in context

Slide 2

3 goals of this presentation

Turn to your neighbour and take a minute or two to answer 2 Questions:

- a) First thought or feeling that arises when I imagine the intersection of spirituality and critical practice?
- b) My greatest fear about the introduction (or re-introduction) of spirituality into critical practice?

Slide 3

Spirituality has emerged as a theme in contemporary mainstream social work, leading to a multitude of opinions, writings, and conferences such as this one. However, the definition of spirituality presented is often confusing and problematic (Potts, 2003), either tending to be concerned with individuals' sense of personal wellbeing at the expense of commitments to social justice, or veering closely toward religious connotations with which many of us are uncomfortable.

Contrary to this trend in the dominant discourse, much critical practice writing, rightly concerned with the frequent appropriativeness of "New-Age" philosophies and with the attempts by White people to seek refuge from dealing with race (Jeffery, 2002), has maintained a canonical stance unwelcoming to spirituality because of fear of a 'slippery slope'.

As a consequence, critical social workers who do have a spiritual framework often feel we must keep our spirituality to ourselves lest we be marginalized by our colleagues (Lerner, 2004).

Slide 4

As critical practitioners we claim to value reflexivity, openness to change and the ability to engage creatively in work for solidarity, empowerment and social justice. Yet with a few notable exceptions,[i] our theorizing has not responded to what is occurring around and within us in regard to spirituality. I find myself deeply troubled by many notions of spirituality in mainstream social work, but equally compelled to engage in dialogue about how we might view spirituality through a critical lens, and how this might alter our framing of social and individual change.

During the past twenty years of my involvement in progressive politics and practice, I have watched neo-liberal governments systematically strip away hard-won changes and witnessed activist organizations crumble under the weight of judgement, self-righteousness and despair. Over time, I have come to wonder whether radical societal and individual transformation can be realized if it is not grounded in a loving stance toward others, especially those considered "other" from ourselves. I mean 'radical' in the etymological sense of 'to the root', rather than surface changes in policies, protocols or governments, which may not address the deeper roots of hierarchical oppression that I understand to lie in our ways of perceiving the other as "other" from ourselves.

Not only do I contend that critical conceptualizations of spirituality have the potential to revitalize and

increase the sustainability of our work, I also fear that if we, as critical practitioners, do not begin to conceptualize spirituality it will be defined for us either by essentializing liberal voices or by those who are intent on social work remaining an instrument of governmentality and colonization.

i] Notable exceptions to this gap in theorizing love and spirituality in critical social work are Brandon (1976), Morley & Ife (2002) and Wong (2004).

#### Slide 5

The notion of “critically-informed spirituality” arose as an emergent concept in a study I conducted on love in critical practice.

#### Slide 6

In spite of a wide divergence in social location and site of practice, participants’ framing of spirituality was remarkably convergent – all participants conceptualized spirituality similarly as: (Definition on slide)

I would suggest that their framing of **spirituality as interconnection** offers us an antidote to the confusing and problematic definitions of spirituality currently prevailing in our practice discourse.

The voices heard in this inquiry contended that this sense of spirituality as interconnection is always available to tap into as a conscious intention inspiring life and practice.

The interconnection of diversity and unity was understood by participants in a spiritual way, but it is not necessarily so. Even among those of us who consider ourselves spiritual, what we call Spirit/Creator/God might differ substantially – we might mean the interconnection, the animating force, or even an actual perceived entity connecting things. Despite having different understandings of that connection, it is the notion that we are all somehow interconnected that is relevant to our discussion.

Regardless of whether we describe it as ‘spiritual’, it is my contention that an understanding of everything as interconnected and everyone as intrinsically valuable, in their difference, has the potential to dramatically alter our relation to practice and how we view change.

#### Slide 7

Processes of healing and change in the spiritual approaches of the participants seemed to be framed differently from mainstream western models including critical social work, which so often begin from a problem-focus. Participants began from an assumption of wholeness rather than on something (usually “others”) needing to be changed or fixed. Change was described as what Hart, 1999, called “an ongoing transitional process of balancing and connecting relationships within the individual and between individuals” (Hart, 1999, p. 102).

The realization that participants’ spiritual lens had implications for the way they conceptualized and approached individual and collective change was one of the most interesting themes to emerge from my research.

In an apparent paradox, participants offered a view of critical practice in which **acceptance, non-judgment, non-attachment and non-interference**, along with **support** and **compassionate challenge** are the ground in which change can flourish.

They suggest the possibility that the approaching practice from a stance of critical spirituality as conceptualized here may *itself* invite transformation to occur.

#### Slide 8

Like other participants, Raven perceived recognition of inherent wholeness and value as a fundamental part of this critical-spiritual lens.

However, as other participants did, she asserted that recognition, and an acceptance of where things were at present did not preclude analysis, critique or “*mak[ing] choices to do something about [current conditions]*” (Raven, p.12).

#### Slide 9

The challenge of the critical-spiritual stance is how might we reconcile the apparent paradox of critical analysis and change *with* wholeness, as-is’ acceptance and non-interference. The key for participants was the notion of ‘**compassionate challenge**’.

Participants did not suggest that acceptance, non-attachment and non-interference were passive states. In fact, truth-telling and challenging were consistent themes in the dialogues. Compassionate challenge was inextricably linked by all participants to notions of inherent goodness and acceptance of ‘what is’, as it is.

Participants suggested that we needn’t try to change people– and can’t – but that we do have an obligation to tell our own truth(s) in practice. Perhaps, as Chödrön and hooks (1999) argue, it is possible to engage with discernment and truth-telling but without blame, to work to “de-escalate suffering” and move toward accountability and social justice without dehumanizing or ‘othering’ ourselves or others (pp. 4-5).

#### Slide 11

The people I interviewed framed their work as a spiritual and interconnected way of perceiving, being, and doing critical practice. They promoted the importance and possibility of emancipatory social and individual change, and they located this change within a supportive, accepting, non-judging, not-knowing and non-interfering stance, while also advocating strongly for speaking one’s own truth in compassionate challenge. All were deeply committed to their practice and to social justice. Their spiritual stance did not prevent them from being critically engaged, but rather appeared to impact on how they theorized and practiced their work for change.

#### Slide 13

In summary: Key contributions of critical social work include challenges to essentialism, the recognition and valuing of diversity, and the recognition of, and movement toward, ending intersecting hierarchical oppressions. Notions of universality must not render diverse ways of knowing, being and doing indistinct, and I believe strongly that we must continue, and even expand, our valuing of difference.

At the same time, I consider it crucial to movements for social justice and community and individual healing that notions of difference do not erase interconnection. In order for our work facilitating change to be meaningful and sustainable in the long-term, I argue that we must also reconnect with a sense of reverence for the interconnection of all the diverse manifestations of Life.

## Slide 14

I have spoken to you about “critically-informed spirituality”, and when I began my research, I described the participants as “critical practitioners”. As I delved more deeply, I came to imagine that a more accurate description might be ‘spiritually-informed critical practitioners’.*// the participants in my research (Like Munroe’s gentle Holocaust resisters, whose only common characteristic was recognition of an underlying connection and ‘essence’ among human beings combined with a belief in human rights (Chinnery & Bai, 2000, p. 92), took a spiritual stance of loving commitment to emancipation that appeared to be based in an understanding of diversity and unity as coexistent. They seemed to recognize both the impact of social construction and a belief in a deeper spiritual Self.*

While causal connections cannot be drawn between values or ethics and behaviour, different beliefs and principles can and do inspire different ways of being and acting. I question whether deep and sustainable change towards social justice and individual wellbeing can arise, or even be fully conceived, if the context for the change process does not include a recognition of unity and diversity as coexistent.

I believe that our times desperately require an infusion of critically-informed spirituality; that we must begin to consider the possibilities that the spiritual might offer to the praxis of critical social work in this century. I look forward to engaging with other practitioners in exploring how this might manifest in our own lives and practice.

Go to next slide – repeat of Critical Spirituality definition - and Move to questions, \*\* (bring poem in case)