

**Keynote Address for the 2<sup>nd</sup> North American Conference in Spirituality and Social Work  
“The Helpfulness and Challenges of Holistic Arts-Based Group Work”<sup>1</sup>**

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- I’m going to talk this afternoon about my research and in the process of doing that I’ll also touch on the following:
  - o how holistic arts-based work can help develop self-awareness and self-esteem;
  - o some of the challenges we’ve faced in our work and how we’ve responded to these;
  - o transpersonal practice;
  - o mindfulness-based exercises;
  - o dream work;
  - o and a description of our research findings (when I use “we” & “our” I’m referring to me and my research team, two of whom are here today and will be presenting a paper – Sean Lougheed and Julie LeBreton).
- I’d like to begin by contextualizing my talk by telling you something about my experiences as a student, practitioner, and a researcher.
- I have one of the only research programs in North America that is studying the helpfulness and effectiveness of spiritually-influenced helping. How did I come to be in this position?
- In 1998, I moved to Sydney, Australia to begin doctoral studies (at the University of New South Wales) – I went with three interests: feminist social work practice, spirituality, and postmodernism.
- When I asked myself, What did I really want to learn?, I ended up studying how experienced practitioners who identify themselves as working from a feminist perspective, make sense of and incorporate spirituality in their work - see: Exploring Spirituality in Feminist Practices – Emerging Knowledge for Social Work  
<http://www.library.unsw.edu.au/~thesis/adt-NUN/public/adt-NUN20020226.141311/index.html>
- Why did I choose this topic? There were three broad reasons:
  - o First, as a practitioner I noticed that something was happening – clients were increasingly coming to sessions with spiritually-oriented books and I was increasingly having discussions about spirituality with them, and what I would describe as “deep connections”. Or clients would interpret our process as including spirituality even when there wasn’t any overt discussion of it. While I was in Australia, I worked with a woman for some time who was experiencing a fear of death, even though she was nowhere near being close to dying. She gave me a card when we ended our work together in which she wrote: “I thank you for the very professional guidance which has challenged me constantly. I can see a spiritual future which has been inspired by our sessions.” Truthfully, I was a bit surprised by this because I wasn’t entirely sure how it happened. And I didn’t feel that I could discuss this with my fellow practitioners, even though they were in all

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respects an excellent team to work with – in this way, I think that my experience mirrors that of many social workers.

- o Second, in my own life, spirituality was assuming greater importance, and third, if I was going to devote the next several years of my life to this project, I wanted to do something that I thought was cutting-edge and meaningful.
- I know that many students continue to struggle with finding teachers and spaces where they can study in this area. My own experience as a doctoral student was incredibly positive, even though there was no one on the faculty who had any experience in this area – in fact, there was not a lot of literature or research in the area when I began my work. However, my experience was that even if the faculty didn't feel a connection with what I was doing, or didn't agree with my perspective, they were more than happy to engage in discussion and to think about it.
- During my time in Australia, I was invited several times by another university in South Australia [Flinders University] to discuss my research in that community, and usually these presentations had people spilling out of the rooms, which was certainly not an indication of my public speaking abilities but demonstrated the incredible need and desire for practitioners to speak with others about spirituality and practice, without feeling like they were going to be labelled or ostracized. These experiences certainly helped me feel like I was doing something important and relevant for our field.
- Almost all of my research has been practice based. I was a practitioner for eight years before I began my doctoral work, I worked at a large teaching hospital during this experience, and I continue to practice privately.
- My current research and the work that we've been engaged with over the past three years, explores the helpfulness of holistic group practice for the development of self-awareness and self-esteem. It is highly experiential and arts-based, and is similar to a small personal growth group, but with the inclusion of a spiritual dimension. The group program that has been developed includes guided imagery, meditation, mindfulness-based practices, dream work, journaling, and a host of other arts-based and experiential techniques (Coholic, 2005). The structure and goal of the group is purposefully generic so that we could study this work with many different client populations. Originally, we planned for 6 weekly sessions of two-hours each. We have moved to at least a 12-week model due to participant interest & demand, and the fact that a longer group seems more effective in helping people (especially children) develop their self-awareness and self-esteem (Coholic & LeBreton, in press).
- As an academic I feel incredibly fortunate that my research is based in the real world of people and practice, and that it appears to be having some effect on people's lives. It's easy within the academe to begin to feel like a "talking head", which is one of the reasons I maintain a small private practice – as you know, there is nothing more grounding than sitting with people and listening to their stories. When it comes to my research, I trust that we're going to figure a way through our challenges, and I do believe that I've been incredibly fortunate in attracting competent people at the right times to help me build my research program, and money to fund it.
- Along these lines, I do think the time is now for exploring holistic practices and I would encourage you to make the most of any opportunity that arises and to consider these even if at first it seems that it doesn't fit with your interests or aims. One of the things I've learned from writing grant applications is that you have to tell a good concise story in language that the readers are going to understand.

- For example, one of the ways I was able to attract funding from the Sick Kids Foundation was by framing our work as alternative health care practice. In fact, making the link between my work and health has been important in explaining to funders and others not familiar with this field what we're doing trying to do. Thus, I argue that the uniqueness of our group program stems from its grounding in transpersonal theory/spiritually-sensitive practice, and a holistic understanding of health. For one example, we are concerned with improving the mental health and psychosocial functioning of children, which reflects the World Health Organization's definition of health as a "state of complete physical, mental and social well-being...leading towards full participation in society". Interestingly, children themselves have identified health as encompassing mental, social, spiritual, and environmental factors (Burrows & Wright, 2004).
- Although we began our work with adults, and are currently facilitating groups with Aboriginal women, much of our work over the past two years has been focused on children & youth living in foster care because there are serious concerns regarding the health and particularly the mental health of these children, and their future ability to participate fully in society. They have typically suffered major loss and upheaval in their lives that impacts negatively on their development of a sense of self. Unfortunately, they remain at high risk for poor long-term functional outcomes well into adulthood (Racusin *et al.*, 2005) and are particularly at risk of suicide, and have higher rates of mental health problems (Charles & Matheson, 1991). Clearly, they constitute a population of children in dire need of psychosocial services. Our group program may have direct impact on the health of children-in-care, especially as the focus of the study is with a basic building block of human development: Self-esteem.
- It is important to examine the link between alternative healing methods and spiritualities as the former are often based on spiritual world-views (Gaylord, 1999). In fact, a recent Canadian study found that one of the most common complementary and alternative medicine treatments used by caregivers for their children was prayer (Losier *et al.*, 2005).
- I am encouraging all of you to think about how we can more thoroughly and extensively study and investigate spiritually-influenced intervention methods and their impact on client change. Social work in the Western world has built an impressive body of knowledge in this area, particularly over the past 10 years. But we are at the point in our knowledge development where more systematic investigation needs to occur regarding whether, in what situations, and to what extent, attending to spirituality actually improves client outcomes (Ai, 2002). I am talking here about moving beyond the base we've built into a next phase of development.
- My passion is in helping children, youth and adults learn something about themselves and improve how they feel about themselves so they can live to their potential. I believe that self-awareness is crucial for good mental health and wellness, and that experiential and holistic techniques are an excellent way to access material that sits in the unconscious and drives people to act, think and feel.
- Self-awareness can develop from a connection with one's feelings and/or unconscious processes and learning to pay attention to this material (Birnbaum, 2005b). In fact, mindfulness in contemporary psychology has been adopted as an approach for increasing awareness (Bishop *et al.*, 2004). As Goodman (2005) argues, most of our experience is "deep" in a field of preconceptual and preverbal awareness and people can learn to "abide calmly in that domain during mindfulness practice" (p.205).

- While self-awareness in and of itself may not lead to greater feelings of self-esteem, we believe that developing one's self-awareness and understanding is an important element in this process. In fact, self-awareness and self-esteem are often linked in the helping literature. Self-esteem has been closely tied to knowing oneself and one's capabilities Sadao and Walker (2002). Berger (2005 p.43) argues that in order to develop self-esteem, we have to connect with ourselves, with all of what makes us who we are, and with our past traumas. This connection occurs when we learn about and express our feelings, which are often held in the unconscious.
- Some authors (Silvia & O'Brien, 2004) acknowledge that self-awareness has a "bad reputation" because of its ties to negative affect (for example, people can become locked in a cycle of self-criticism and rumination) but without self-awareness, one could not experience high self-esteem, and that its contributions to constructive human functioning are significant.
- Oftentimes the children & youth we work with will say things that I think are "deep" and illustrative of the group processes. One example concerns a teen girl who we had some concerns about – in fact, I really wondered if she was getting anything out of the experience at all. During one session (I listen to and watch the group), she stated that *I never had the chance to learn who I was*<sup>2</sup>, which is absolutely true for her and other children-in-care who have to devote most of their resources to surviving their life situations.
- Another example concerns a young boy who when he came to group was especially wary. What we've found is that for some of the children, the group environment creates an opening and they begin to talk about their past experiences. This is a good thing as it is a chance to heal from these traumas, but our challenge has been to find resources in the community that can offer the individual therapy some of these children need. When I was reading the post-group transcript of the individual interview with him, I was struck with his interpretation of the abuse that had happened to him, and the reality that he was actually talking about it, to our knowledge, for the first time. He said of his abuser as he confirmed with his foster mom that he was now safe, *He keeps following us around, it's like he has no home*. And to end the conversation and move on to another topic, the last thing he said was *I don't even want him to be in my head right now*.
- I'm fascinated with how people interpret their experiences. I'm told this is a hermeneutic approach – interpreting people's interpretations.
- Speaking of theory, transpersonal theory is part of the theoretical base upon which our group program is built. This theory has been useful to us as there are few psychological or social work theories that specifically address the spiritual dimension in life. Transpersonal theory offers a way of making sense of and discussing spiritually influenced practice. Transpersonal simply means beyond the person or ego. There is a higher or inner self distinct from the personal ego, for example, transpersonal approaches focus on an expanded theory of human consciousness (Cowley, 1996).
- In terms of practice, transpersonal theory is described as a modality that: Seeks to establish a growth producing link between a person and transpersonal experience; and has an interest in the spiritual, which includes intuition, meditation, relaxation, visualization, and dreamwork (Scotton *et al.*, 1996).

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<sup>2</sup> Participants' words are in italics.

- (illustration here of a drawing from one of the groups with youth that shows a wolf howling at the moon) Example of youth in individual post-group interview... *Well I've liked wolves and I believe that you always stay here on earth to continue until you get really good...you undo all the mistakes you did in your life. And I believe that before I was a wolf. Wolves were strong...you know how wolves are in a pack...well I'm really strong. I went through a lot but I've always come out stronger...* [interviewer question about wolves being discriminated against] *there are people who still fear me in a way because I used to be a big bully.*
- I would like to make the point that the exercises utilized in the research groups do not have to be conceptualized as spiritual processes but that in our experience, particularly with the adults, they often do this if space is made for it to occur. An illustration of this comes from one of my favourite books in recent years: "Healing the Soul in the Age of the Brain" by Elio Frattaroli (an American psychiatrist) (Frattaroli, 2001) – he states, self-awareness and insight arise from an ability to pay attention to one's anxieties, fears and other feelings, which often reside in the unconscious mind. You can think of this process as simply getting in touch with a feeling or, more profoundly, as listening to the soul (p.194).
- We refer to spirituality as a universal aspect of human life that encompasses experiences that transcend the self: It is necessarily self-defined (Canda & Furman, 1999). I have difficulty with absolutist claims regarding spirituality and growth. We need to leave room for a variety of experiences and for the ability of people to develop and heal without subscribing to what we might define as a spiritual viewpoint or experience. This also connects with the philosophy of evidence-based practice (EBP) in that a key contribution of EBP is discouraging inflated claims of knowledge that are misleading and hinder the development of knowledge (Gambrill, 2003).
- The influence of EBP is assuming some importance within the profession. I believe that we need to unpack this term and make room for ourselves within these debates and discussions. This is the time to do this as mechanisms for how EBP might really work in social work remain underdeveloped (McNeill, 2006).
- As Gambrill (2003) points out, too much of the discussion of EBP in social work is focused on a very narrow and incorrect conceptualization - one that advocates the use of interventions based solely on empirically demonstrated links to outcomes. As she argues, it is misleading to assume that EBP means decisions have to be based on evidence of their effectiveness. Rather, EBP is a process that involves the integration of research evidence with clinical expertise & client values.
- Social work already had a debate in the 1980s about quantitative versus qualitative methods, which lead to a much expanded notion of what constitutes valid knowledge and ways of creating knowledge. I always encourage my students to develop their research questions first and then the method follows the question, that is, what is the best way to address what you are interested in learning?, not the other way around.
- I believe that it would be helpful for us to adopt and work with the ideas espoused by researchers like Eileen Gambrill and Jane Gilgun who argue that EBP is a process, and that the process of EBP parallels qualitative research. Otherwise, as Gilgun (2006) argues, we are left with a narrowly defined type of EBP that has an uninformed definition of what counts as relevant research, and that marginalizes qualitative research & compromises opportunities for research funding for research that is based on qualitative approaches.
  - As she explains, qualitative research has four cornerstones that parallel the four components of EBP. In summary, both good qualitative research and effective practice are

based in theory & an awareness of methodological assumptions – and practitioners are more likely to use research that matches their experience of practice. Second, both researchers and practitioners bring expertise to their work – and practice often gives language to research and brings research to life by providing concrete examples of theoretical concepts. Third, what participants want is important in both practice and qualitative research. And fourth, is what she terms “the person of the researcher”, which is an acknowledgement of how one’s values and biases inform the research project – no research is objective and without biases, just as it is impossible to completely separate one’s personal values from professional practice.

- One of the longstanding arguments of both EBP advocates and social work in general is that we need to figure out how to disseminate research results more creatively and effectively so that the divide between practitioners and researchers is closed. That is one of things I particularly value about conferences such as this one – there is representation from researchers, teachers, practitioners, and students, and a chance for knowledge mobilization and networking across these groupings.
- I think my research program is a good example of how practitioners working in the community are an integral part of research and can contribute to building new knowledge in an emergent field – in fact, they are essential to this process. They are also involved with helping to disseminate research results. As a research team, we deliver workshops geared for community practitioners, are going to be training child protection workers to sustain the work of our research in the community, and we are making a film about our work. As a researcher and a practitioner, I am always on the lookout for community-based workers and agencies who are interested in forming alliances and collaborations. I realize it’s a challenge to work full-time and work as part of a research team, but as a result, my program attracts people who are really interested and passionate about the work.
- Turning back to this research, I would like to make the point that we can make room for spirituality to enter into healing spaces but people will find and experience spirituality differently. For some people meditation is a chance to connect with a higher power, while for others it is simply a means to becoming grounded, calm and focused. The important point is that in a group that incorporates spirituality, participants are encouraged to make sense of their experiences in a holistic manner if they deem this to be important for them. If we ignore the spiritual dimension of people’s lives, we may be missing an opportunity to help them construct holistic narratives that accurately fit their experiences.
- In our group program, the processes and exercises are in harmony with Kabat-Zinn’s (2003) definition of mindfulness meditation practice: Activity that encourages awareness to emerge through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment. Certainly, the awareness that develops from mindfulness meditation does not have to be limited to meditation activity (Bishop et al., 2004).
- This is particularly true for the groups we deliver to children. Due to their significant challenges it is difficult for them to focus on their breathing for any length of time, or even to close their eyes especially when sitting together in a group. It takes them longer to develop trust, their feelings are often chaotic and intense, and they have great difficulty listening to one another and the group facilitators, and paying attention.
- As a result, the group exercises are more basic and shorter than in work with adults. They also need to be more active and sensory focused, and abstract concepts have to be concretized – developing a foundation of attention is essential for the observation of

thoughts, emotions and body sensations (Goodman, 2005; Semple *et al.*, 2005). Thus, helping the children to pay attention and listen to their thoughts, sensations, and feelings is a good beginning point. Given the difficulty these children have in paying attention not only to themselves but to each other, it is essential to develop group exercises that aim to improve their ability to listen and pay attention. One simple process that we have built into the group is a progressive relaxation exercise where children are taught to tense up and then relax different parts of their bodies and their breathing. By using the relaxation first, excess tension can be released and then the cultivation of mindful awareness can be facilitated by focusing on one of the five physical senses (Goodman, 2005).

- For example, in one mindful listening exercise the children were encouraged to write down everything they were conscious of hearing over a period of three minutes. In comparing the lists the facilitators can highlight the choices that we make in what we choose to focus on and how we might perceive the same stimuli differently. Brief meditations and guided imageries can also be used in conjunction with an arts-based activity, which can follow from the meditation, for example, learning how to do a body scan and then constructing a collage of what their feelings look like.
- Compared with psychology, mindfulness practice has not received much attention within social work. However, studies that have been published report promising results.
- With adults, we facilitate mindfulness practice by way of meditations, writing, arts-based activities, mindful walking, group exercises, and “homework” (daily practice and reading outside of the group). In general, mindfulness meditation exercises can help ground and connect the participants to the work of the group. Meditating before engaging in experiential exercises can help to quiet the mind and open up the possibility for a stronger connection with feelings and/or unconscious processes. And insight can develop from this connection and learning to pay attention to this material (Coholic, 2006).
- One of the first exercises facilitated with the adults is mindful breathing. They are instructed to pay attention to their thoughts but not to judge or engage them, and to gently focus on their breath and breathing.
- Even if they have experience with meditation, participants often report new experiences – for example, light traveling down one’s arms, or feeling like one has gone deep into the meditation; *that may have been the deepest I’ve ever been.*
- Writing is another means of practicing and fostering mindfulness. In one simple exercise, participants were asked to write a list of fifty things that warm their hearts, the intention being to foster appreciation and awareness of how we are surrounded by many pleasing things. I’ve also used this exercise in my class and it really works to lift the students’ spirits and lighten the energy in the room.
- Learning not to judge one’s thoughts and feelings is a key aspect of mindfulness practice. Each participant was asked to sculpt the person on her right without looking at the clay while creating the likeness. Before they presented their sculptures to the rest of the group, they discussed the process of making them, which was described as *relaxing, fun, and awesome*. The facilitator explained that they were not allowed to look at their work so that they could fully engage in the process and not judge it. This is also useful in terms of introducing people to arts-based work as they often feel intimidated.
- Mindful walking has been particularly powerful. Generally, they are instructed to walk while attending to their bodily sensations and movements. One participant reported that she *got lost in the walking*. Her experience was that she *was walking with my eyes closed as much as I could ... it was just completely white. There was nothing.... And I thought 'It's*

*just so bright,' ... There were no thoughts ... I really had to think about the grass on my feet because ... it was just like [walking] on a cloud. I was nowhere.... And I thought 'what a good feeling.'*

- Findings: One of the group participants explained how learning to be mindful helped her to deepen appreciation for her children and other daily experiences, so that relationships and events became *sweeter* than they already were. She explained that she was able to be in particular moments more fully rather than thinking of what else she had to do. Another participant argued that mindfulness helped her to be less judgmental and to just experience moments of joy and not try to judge or interpret others' ideas but rather to *let things be*.
- One participant framed this as a feeling of awe; instead of taking things for granted, becoming mindful helped her to increase her awareness of the world around her and to feel more grateful, *which in turn helped [her] to become more connected to it*.
- Learning mindfulness also helped the participants to sort through thoughts more effectively and to gain perspective on issues. As one participant described, *Certain things would really kind of get on my case and I would just agonize over them.... I've stopped doing that as much and I've kind of taken things into stride and I've just kind of built upon them rather than dwell on them. And I never did that before the group*.
- These outcomes are consistent with the literature that discusses the effectiveness of mindfulness practice (Bishop et al., 2004; Ventegodt *et al.*, 2003). For our group participants, becoming mindful helped them to better attend to and more fully appreciate life's moments and not to judge thoughts, feelings and experiences.
- While working with clients who negatively judge themselves is a common experience in social work, the introduction of mindfulness meditation practice is not going to be appropriate for every client or practice setting. However, learning to be more mindful appears to help some people lessen judgments about themselves and to focus instead on what is taking place moment to moment.
- Although learning mindfulness practice has positive and helpful effects, it is not clear how long these shifts last. However, interestingly, the participants believed that they would be able to maintain the new experiences and perspectives because they had integrated mindfulness into their lives and were practicing it.
- Perhaps one of the reasons we find such strong reports of the helpfulness of mindful practice is because it involves a shift in attitude, toward a mind that is willing to let go of things (Birnbaum, 2005a). Thus, learning mindfulness practice is much more than learning how to meditate since it involves changing viewpoints and even one's approach to life.
- Mindfulness meditation does not have to be conceptualized as a spiritual experience. We know that it can be learned by people with no spiritual viewpoints (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). However, we have consistently found that many group participants do understand this process and other meditative exercises as spiritual experiences.
- How did the group participants conceptualize mindfulness practice as a spiritually influenced process? For some people, being mindful is their spirituality. For example, one participant reported that the learning she gained from the group helped her to put her notion of spirituality into action in her life. She discussed how *it's one thing to say that you have certain morals or values but ... it gave me an opportunity to put the mindfulness into action*. Similarly, another participant explained how she is much more mindful of what brings meaning to her life and how this feels like a spiritual awakening for her. For her, spirituality is her connectedness to the world, and mindfulness practice has helped to strengthen this connection.



- Another participant explained that mindfulness feels spiritual because it is about self-awareness. She discussed her learning from the group that spirituality could be incorporated into life in small ways on a daily basis by way of mindfulness.
- Connecting with one's spirituality and becoming more mindful can encourage broader action that transcends individual needs (Coates, 2004; Nash & Stewart, 2002). This is important to keep in mind because sometimes the quest for spirituality is criticized for being too individually focused (Doherty, 1999). During the last group session, one of the participants explained that mindfulness had made her more hopeful for the world. Consequently, she is now *praying* not only for her family but also for her clients and for the world. She believes that we have to do *small things to make [the world] a better place*. She wants to be *open-minded and mindful of everything*. *And it's just not about our own personal problems. It's a big, big world.... we need to love our community, and we need to love the Universe.*
- Dream work: There is a long history within helping professions of working with clients' dreams (Alperin, 2004; Bird, 2005; Freud, 1994/1900). Dreams have been thought to reveal divine will, to foretell the future, to be therapeutic, and to be a rich source for creative work (Miller *et al.*, 1982).
- Why work with dreams? Everyone dreams – it is a factor that we should not ignore in helping people understand themselves. Helping professions are currently experiencing a renaissance in their interest in dream exploration. Although an interest in dream work is growing, and the literature in social work and spirituality is rapidly developing, the possible connections between dream work and spirituality remain largely unexplored.
- Discussions of one's spirituality and dreams are both highly personal domains, and often clients won't bring these topics up unless you ask, even though they may be having vivid and repetitive dreams.
- One of the aspects of our group work that I find difficult to articulate in words is the connection that people feel and discuss. I suspect that some of this connection occurs because we are working with such personal material.
- The good news is that you don't have to be a psychoanalyst to work with dreams or be engaged in long-term psychotherapeutic work with clients (Barrett, 2002; Merrill & Cary, 1975; Ullman, 1984). And although there are various ways to interpret a dream, increasingly the understanding is that eclectic models such as Clara Hill's work are most effective. Her cognitive-experiential approach combines client-centered, psychodynamic and behavioral theories.
- Working with dreams in group has distinct benefits. It can serve to further both self-awareness and understanding of others, it can promote group cohesiveness, and stimulating therapeutic interactions (Clark, 1994; Edgar, 1992). And group support and learning from others is fostered (Provost, 1999).
- Our findings are in harmony with other research that finds three spiritual themes in clients' experiences: A belief that the dream came from a spiritual source; construction of meaning that relates to spiritual beliefs; and an interpretation of the dream as a message of guidance for the future (Crook Lyon & Wimmer, 2005).
- (slide of dream collage here) We work with dreams as an avenue for people to learn more about themselves. Typically, group participants begin by constructing a dream collage. Participants were asked to remember a dream, meditate briefly on it, and then scan through magazines and cut out anything that seemed associated with their dream images – a type of free association exercise. For example, if one could not locate a picture of a calendar, free

association could lead to other related images such as a clock, symbolizing the progression of time.

- Collages are useful because dreams are often multilayered and have various meanings, so the layering of pictures in a collage can reflect the dream. Group discussion follows the completion of the dream collages, and this process typically takes two group sessions.
- Participants are always encouraged to interpret symbols and images according to their own viewpoints, even though group members are encouraged to help each other by asking questions and offering insights - the final interpretation is always left to the dreamer (Edgar, 1992; Feinberg, 1981).
- Queries focus mainly on the here and now, and emphasize feelings about the dream (Miller et al., 1982). Participants can be asked to discuss:
  - o What stands out for them in the dream/collage, why they might be dreaming this particular sequence now, what they would title the collage, and how they would describe various elements of the dream/collage. Participants can also be asked to relate some of the dream elements to parts of themselves, for example, asking a participant what an open door symbolizes about herself. Writing about the dream can also help with its analysis (Feinberg, 1981).
  - o We agree with most that symbols don't have a universal meaning.
- Findings: (referring to dream collage)... Initially, she was fearful of discussing her dream and felt uncomfortable and guilty because her first literal interpretation was that the dream represented a desire to *discard my husband and move on with something, someone else*. However, after the group discussion, her interpretation shifted dramatically so that she was left with an understanding of the dream as a message to herself that she was not listening to her needs and desires, and that she now had opportunities to change her life's direction. In fact, when she was asked what title she would give her dream collage, she stated "Change". Overall, she described the process as follows:

*My interpretation was very frightening. But when you...look at it from a different perspective, that makes sense...dreams aren't always what they seem...there's many ways of interpreting it...It can be helpful and comforting...to know that the literal interpretation of the dreams may not be what it is. That could be very, very therapeutic...the people in my dream were not necessarily those people, but parts of me...those people in my dreams, those are the parts of me that I need to pay attention to.*
- As Fritz Perls (1969) argued, in a dream we have a clear message of what is missing in our lives and what we avoid doing to fully live. To more fully live, this participant made some decisions about a different career path in order to realize her intellectual aspirations. There was also a spiritual element in this dream work – for this participant, attending to herself meant connecting more with her spirit, and expressing her spirituality more in her life by way of becoming mindful.
- What if someone can't remember a dream? Dream recall can usually be increased by using strategies such as keeping a dream journal and writing down a dream immediately upon waking (Pesant & Zadra, 2004). Others instruct group participants to work with a series of events from their waking lives as if these were from a dream (Lamb & Hollis, 1994). We also suggested to participants that they drink water before sleeping, and when they need to get up in the night, to write down their dream. Or one could work with the images in a guided imagery or meditation.
- With some participants, there was not enough time to fully analyze their dream collages in the group. However, they reported that they brought the collages home and continued to

work with them either on their own or in individual counseling – an important aspect of doing this work is teaching people techniques they can continue to use outside of the group.

- Spirituality was linked with dream interpretation in several ways including the idea that dreams contained divine messages or premonitions. For example, one participant stated that *God was letting me know this all along - that my addiction had to quit. So I went into rehab after [having the dream]*. Others reported premonitions in their dreams, which raised questions of a spiritual-existential nature, wondering if these dreams were *just a fluke or are things predetermined?* Group discussion could focus on the meaning of this experience for the dreamer and other group participants, taking into account their spiritual viewpoints. Indeed, questions such as these should include a spiritual dimension in order to be fully analyzed.
- Whether or not we believe in premonitions should not negate our ability to facilitate such a discourse. For example, some may believe that there is a divine plan for their life and/or messages in their dreams, while others have argued that there is psychological truth in premonition in that we may intuitively and subconsciously foresee the future to which we may be consciously blind (Miller et al., 1982).
- Dreams have also been described as spiritual in that they are a gateway to connect with people who died. One participant stated:  
*That's a way of me knowing that there's still a way of connecting with the people that I love...It's very spiritual for me. It's a gateway...I think without that, then I would have a very difficult...time believing in heaven or hell or whatever I actually believe in.*  
Furthermore, solutions to life's problems also came to her via dreams – things she could not understand in a conscious state of mind. She also described this as a spiritual experience:  
*Because...when I have an issue that I can't deal with in the conscious state, it always comes to me in a dream...after I dissect it and look it over, then I realize how it's attached. And it's very spiritual for me because then I...can step back and say, "I had no control over that...it's out of my hands"...[I'm trusting in a] greater force and a bigger process.*
- Conclusion: Group participants reported that working with their dreams led to increased self-awareness, which then aided them to make informed choices. The process of learning dream interpretation also provided them with a technique that they could take with them into their life, and continue to utilize for the purposes of self-discovery and growth (Coholic & LeBreton, 2007).
- I hope that you will be encouraged to work with dreams. Dream interpretation can be an effective and fun way to help people develop their self-awareness. Helping dreamers to understand themselves is the ultimate purpose of working with dreams (Bird, 2005 p.214), and engendering insight is often an integral aspect of social work practice. As Feinberg (1981 p.510) concluded, "Social work has to do with everyone, and everyone dreams. The possible applications of group dream work are limitless".
- And when the spiritual dimension is considered, clients can be fully engaged in a consideration of existential and spiritual issues, for example, is our fate predetermined?
- In our work with children-in-care, we haven't been able to figure out a way to work with dreams in a way that we might like, that is, to actually analyze the dream. While the children can describe dreams they have and even collage and draw them, they have trouble staying with a discussion of the dream, which again reflects the importance of arts-based

activity for them as an outlet for feelings, thoughts and behaviours. Other times, the group facilitators have had a sense that the dream was reflecting a particular trauma such as sexual abuse, and we made a deliberate choice not to explore this in the group (ours is not a therapy group).

- What have we learned so far, particularly in our work with children & youth? We have learned that six group sessions is not enough. In our experience, and based on feedback from both the children and their foster-parents/child care workers, the children who have attended 12 sessions benefit more and as the weeks progress, we can engage them with more depth and complexity in the group work.
- We had originally thought that each group would begin with a maximum of eight participants, and that we would experience some attrition. In fact, we have had no attrition and furthermore all of the children want to keep attending the group beyond the initial six sessions. This mirrors the initial findings in our work with adults and our surprise at how much “fun” the group participants experienced. We have come to appreciate how the incorporation of experiential practices into helping/health processes adds a safe and creative dimension to the work. This is not to say that pain is not part of developing and healing, but growth in self-awareness and self-esteem can occur in other more joyful ways.
- One of the things that initially surprised me was how much fun the participants were having while they were learning about themselves without feeling like they had to *pull out your wisdom tooth or something* - this is interesting to consider, as it expands our notions of the helping process as including both pain-filled experiences with other more joyful processes (a factor that may be more important for some client groups such as youth). Another participant summarized this well: *I was thinking, well I'm not getting anywhere with this group because I didn't melt down today...because we were having fun through it all. And I think that's something that I know I was missing and that all the women were saying that they were missing...it doesn't have to hurt...for you to be able to grow.*
- In terms of our work with children/youth-in-care, we now also believe that an optimal number of group participants is four. While this may seem to be a small number, these children are a challenging population with high needs, and this number allows the group facilitators to attend to all of the participants, to manage the group discussion and interactions, and to engage all of the members in activity and discussion. The children who had attended two groups also agreed that a smaller number of participants *works better* because they aren't *trying to talk over each other all the time...there wasn't competing against each other...it was not too crowded and people were more on task than the last one.*
- While adults have the ability to articulate how what they have learned in the group has helped them improve their self-awareness and self-esteem, especially for the children, this is more difficult and sometimes beyond their capabilities. Therefore, during the post-group individual interviews with the children we have learned to include their foster parents and/or child care workers in order to gain as much feedback as possible regarding the group's helpfulness.
- Reports from the children's workers and foster parents are very positive. In fact, we have had several foster parents try to refer their biological children to the group. *More kids should be referred to stuff like this* is a typical comment made by the foster parents.
- The children and youth really enjoy the group. Consistently they make statements such as *I like everything about this group*. One young boy was particularly puzzled by questions in

- the post-group interview pertaining to what could be improved about the group; *I don't understand. I told you, I like everything about the group!*
- Another child stated that *I really want to come. Know why I want to do it on Tuesday or Monday? Because then it comes quicker.*
  - The following have been identified as *fun*: The games and creative activities; sharing thoughts and *making things out of them*; meeting other people; *learning lots of stuff*; using imagination during the meditations; and talking about dreams.
  - Foster parents, child care workers, and the children and youth provided examples of how the group helped develop their self-awareness and self-esteem, and influenced behaviours and thoughts. These included standing up for oneself at school with a bully, and feeling “happier” and more confident, for example, *I've noticed that since he has done this [group]...that he smiles in the mirror a lot, like he's confident in himself...you can see it the way he looks in the mirror at himself, the way he...walks and everything...like he pulls himself up.* Also reported were feelings of greater comfort in one's body; improved familial relationships; and understanding better that sometimes choices exist about feelings - you can let them be or let them go.
  - Indeed, rather than feeling controlled or dominated by certain feelings, several of the children and youth now felt they could understand their feelings better and choose alternative options. For example, one ten year old boy explained how he used what he learned in group to shift his thinking about an activity he wasn't interested in attending: *When I was going to my homework club at CAS I had to go there...and I thought it was going to be dumb...like a bad day...using my mind to think of it as a good day [I changed my viewpoint].* Along these lines, one child's foster parents explained how the group work helped to connect him with his feelings and to express them; *I've noticed that he speaks more about his feelings...whatever bothers him, which before...he never would have done.*
  - Some children and youth also reported that as a result of their group participation they learned to better use their imagination and visualization techniques to help themselves achieve tasks and goals outside of the group. In terms of developing self-understanding, one youth stated that the group *has been a way for me to relax and to...get to know myself a little bit better and its helped me make a couple of decisions like based on our behaviour and stuff.* One youth explained that she was able to be authentic in the group, which was what she really liked about the experience. She stated, *when I finished [the group] I was...happier and more just focused on stuff...I just got to be myself, that's not usual...[usually] I try to be somebody else.*
  - Finally, many of the youth in particular explained that the mindfulness meditations were useful in helping them relax and become more mindful: *I never thought I could get that relaxed because I'm always moving and going and doing something...being able to take that ten minutes...just to sort of relax and settle myself down...[it's] something that stood out.* Several reported that they used mindfulness meditation to help them relax before sleeping. As one youth expressed: *School is going pretty good, my marks are getting better and all that...and I'm sleeping better.*
  - That seems to me a good place to end. To wrap up: The work we're doing shows that working mindfully with people and using holistic arts-based and experiential techniques is helpful in developing self-awareness and self-esteem. For some of the adults we've worked with, the group was described as the *missing-link* in their recovery. For others it enabled them to expand their healing to another level or helped them understand and amalgamate previous work they had completed. The group also served as a useful adjunct

to other therapeutic work they were already engaged in. For the children & youth, it helped them feel better about themselves, improved familial and school relationships, and helped them connect and express feelings & thoughts.

- Social work can be “fun” and creative, and creativity can help to build relationships. So holistic practice really can be a resource in our work for both clients and students, and for ourselves.

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