

# Reflections on Spirituality and Social Work: How I Integrate Spirituality in My Work with Clients

by:

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My clinical work with clients has spirituality integrated on both a conscious and an unconscious manner. I am a strong believer in the importance of story in the work that I do with my clients. I will share some of my story with you to illustrate why and how I came to believe that spirituality was not a distinct part of the individual but indeed an integral part of who all persons are.

I was raised in a rural closed religious community. This community loved and nurtured me and taught me that I could not live without community and that within the context of community I would most clearly see God and that God was a part of all of who I was. God was a part of my coming and my going. Within this community I learned some very strict rules and was taught moral values and the reason for all was spiritual. There was no separation of church life and home life. All of the interactions I had were within the context of my religious community.

If we fast track a few years we will find me in an MSW program with three daughters and a husband. I had been a foster mother, a childcare worker, taught parenting classes and served on a variety of community and church committees. I was in MSW school and recognizing that I was a lesbian. This revelation was not congruent with the religious values I had been taught. It was however very congruent with the spiritual truths I had been taught, learned and embraced over the years. I had a deep faith, a sense of the miraculous around me, and a growing sense of myself as a spiritual sexual being. My sexuality could no longer be disconnected from my spirituality and so I had to come out. I had to live with congruence and integrity. In the morning interdisciplinary panel at this conference Dr. AL Luzon talked about the importance of integrity and pointed out that integrity could not be taken from us; we could only lose it by giving it away and I was in this period of my life no longer willing to give it away.

My story became a public story and soon I found I had people calling me to say that they were looking for a therapist and they wondered if I would be willing to work with them. So in the midst of my part time work I began to build a small private practice. At this time I was aware of no other therapist in our community who were out as gay or lesbian. So as you must realize I had a niche! At the same time as I was developing a niche, I was also establishing a relationship with a woman who was in MSW school and with whom I developed New Directions Counselling. Well before we could get rich on the profits of our labours she was diagnosed with ovarian cancer – stage 4. IT was time for another life lesson. I learned that it was ok to talk about spirituality when you or someone you loved was dying. I learned that spirituality and social work went together in the “living with a life threatening illness stage of life.” I already knew that spirituality was a part of life in the integration of sexuality and spirituality but it had found that there were limits to the expression of the same.

Walking with Bonnie through her illness and eventual death taught me much. I learned that living and dying are deeply spiritual experiences, and that sharing this new knowledge was once again about claiming the integrity of my lived experience.

I learned that my story was once again a public story and that all those articles about when and what to tell clients about my (the therapists) personal life really held very little relevance! Clients came because they knew.

So my integration of spirituality into the work that I did was born out of my own story, out of my own therapy (yes I have done lots and lots of therapy). I learned the importance of knowing my story. I learned that it was important to name and ground myself in my spiritual being. I learned that intentions matter and that I owed my clients self-awareness and positive intention and action.

I believe that as we integrate spirituality into the daily work we do with clients we must remember the importance of mutuality. We must know and appreciate the implications of the language we use and the language our clients are comfortable with. We must recognize the importance of accountability not only to ourselves as professionals but the school that we are a part of and most importantly the clients that we serve. We must be willing to take risks. How do we use spirituality in our work? We listen, we get quiet we just do it. We don't standardize it or commercialize it. We pay attention to each client, to their unique and celebrated stories and we use the language that they understand. We invite them to lead their own healing journey. We invite the spirit to be a part of all the work that we do and recognize that this is what it is to be human. To be human is to be spiritual and to be spiritual is to be growing, and to be growing is to be alive. As clinicians it is up to us to recognize the ability to be alive; to truly live is all that people really seek in therapy. They seek to be acknowledged and celebrated for their aliveness. My gift to my clients is to honour their story and help them claim it as a part of the whole journey they are on. One of the gifts I receive in return is to hear the story of life in its unfolding and in this I am honoured