

INTRODUCTION BY THE GUEST EDITOR: FISH IN TREES

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The guest editor, Edward R. Canda, Ph.D., is a Professor and Chairperson of the Ph.D. Program in Social Work at the University of Kansas. He has more than 100 publications, most dealing with connections between spirituality and social work. He is especially committed to international networking and collaborations that further understanding of spiritual diversity in social work. His virtual Spiritual Diversity and Social Work Resource Center offers numerous resources for social workers and other professional helpers via www.socwel.ku.edu/canda.

Reflections Beside a Pond, July 2005

Spotted carp and goldfish glide through the
branches of trees
And leap among clouds.

Water hyacinth lift up their leaves from murky
water
Like palms slightly cupped in prayer toward
heaven.

Rushing waterfalls
Obscure the sound of traffic from just beyond
a fence.

Memory of my brother's recent death
Enters my reflections.
Suddenly
All of this takes on a tint of sadness.

So, a solitary falling leaf
That ripples the surface of the pond
Is not just a leaf
But also a sign of loss.

Kwan Yin, the Bodhisattva of Compassion
Sits across from me
Slightly smiling.
Her equanimity is never disturbed
While her reflection wavers continuously.

As I notice this
The fish in trees reappear.

When the fish are hungry,
I spread a handful of food upon the water.



Photo by Edward Canda

Reflections on this Special Issue on Spirituality in Social Work

This is the second special issue of the journal **Reflections** to focus on spirituality in social work. In the first editorial (Vol. 1, issue 4, Fall 1995), I pondered at the reflecting pool among national monuments in Washington, D.C., regarding large matters of politics, peace, and truth. This time I reflect beside a small pond in my own backyard, regarding personal peace of mind and the loss of a loved one. Reflections at both places and times share the question: how can we understand the images and representations we have of ourselves, the world, and our clients, in such a way as to be of genuine service? The authors in this issue help answer this question by telling stories and sharing viewpoints that reflect how

they connect spirituality with social work in various venues of teaching, research and writing, and direct practice.

Some authors state that their standpoints are shaped by a particular religious perspective (e.g. Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam). Some combine multiple religious influences. Others do not state explicitly their own spiritual standpoint. And others address spirituality without specific religious affiliation. This illustrates some of the spiritual diversity within our profession. Some accounts are primarily personal narratives and some rely more heavily on ideas from professional literature or the stories of students and colleagues.

The first four articles focus on the challenges, rewards, and spiritual growth of teacher and students that can arise through teaching about spirituality in social work degree programs. Letendre, Nelson-Becker, and Kreider discuss how their spiritual backgrounds blending Christian upbringing with Eastern spiritual insights affect their teaching about spirituality in courses related to clinical practice, aging, and human behavior. They reveal personal feelings and lessons learned from both mistakes and successes in the classroom. Lay discusses the importance of being genuinely and fully oneself as a teacher, in part by sharing stories of personal spiritual import with students. As illustration, Lay recounts her own moving story, in response to a student's question, "How did your parents respond to your being gay?" Weaver's brief self-reflective essay conveys her musings from meditative walking and preparing to teach a retreat style course on spirituality in social work practice. Nadir gives an account of how she decided to develop a course about Islam for social workers, including three students' self-reflective stories, and valuable insights she gleaned from this experience for herself and other educators.

The next three articles focus on research and scholarly writing within the authors'

spiritual and academic journeys. Sanger tells the story of his personal experience of continued connection with a deceased loved one and how that intersected with his dissertation research and academic presentations about how social workers respond to clients' accounts of communicating with the deceased. Banerjee explains how her Hindu upbringing in India has shaped and been reshaped through social work research encounters with low income women in micro enterprise programs in India and the United States. Hodge presents his motivations for scholarly work, some of which has been highly controversial, along with his sometimes painful experience of people's reactions.

The last two articles address direct practice. Mili discusses her personal ambivalence about the empowering and disempowering impacts of Christianity on lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered persons in relation to macro practice and social policy. Finally, Bigard recounts the way that her recovery from vicarious trauma as a social worker was helped by the spiritual practice of walking a labyrinth as well as applications of this spiritual practice in social work.

An unplanned but distinctive theme of this issue is inclusion and exclusion concerning spirituality. For example, Lay and Mili reflect on obstacles and breakthroughs as lesbians in a society and in religious contexts that often practice discrimination and moral condemnation regarding people who are not heterosexual. Hodge, who has advocated for more inclusion of conservative religious voices in social work, discusses his ideas and feelings about being ostracized by colleagues. Sanger portrays dismissive or discouraging attitudes of some social workers regarding his explorations of clients' experiences with deceased loved ones. Banerjee and Letendre and colleagues illustrate how they seek to connect with clients, students, and research participants who may have spiritual views very

different from or even in tension with their own. Nadir discusses the need for more social work education about minority religious groups, such as Muslims. Her students' stories show how they came to face discriminatory attitudes and behaviors of themselves and others. All of the authors in some way address inclusion of spirituality within professional social work settings that have often neglected or excluded the topic.

While the articles vary in topics, perspectives and writing styles, they share the insight that careful reflection on self, others, and relationships is crucial for connecting the topic of spirituality with social work. As you read these articles, I suggest that you first just perceive each author's representation of what is real for her or him. This exercise is helpful preparation for 'starting where the client is' (or student, research participant, colleague), in spiritually sensitive social work. As editor, I have little idea about the so-called objective accuracy of the authors' descriptions of personal experiences. Nor do I agree with everything said. But I appreciate the experiential realism and sincerity that all the writers demonstrate.

The authors present their perceptions of their realities within the times and contexts of their stories. Some of their views may be congruent with each other and some may be in tension or conflict. Can you enter each author's world and empathize at least for a short while? Notice your own reactions. What are your immediate feelings, thoughts, sensations, and intuitive insights? How do the author's words and your responses interrelate? What is it about you that predisposes you to these responses? What does this tell you about your strengths and your limitations? By reflecting in this way, what can you learn about yourself—wisdom you have attained and wisdom to which you aspire? How can this learning enhance your teaching, research, writing, or direct practice in a spiritually sensitive manner?

After this exercise of perceiving what is real for the author and how you respond, I suggest that you evaluate the contributions and limitations of each author's writing in terms of stylistic quality, ability to engage the reader in the story, accuracy and fairness in use of scholarly literature, balanced presentation of differing viewpoints, depth of self-reflective insight, and congruence with professional values and your personal values. This can yield additional guidance about ways you may or may not wish to incorporate spirituality into social work.

Fish in Trees

This journal challenges helping professionals to be self-reflective and to share narratives that are self-revealing. It seems only fair that the editor do the same. So I would like to tell a story about a spiritual healing process I have been going through during the editing process.

As I prepared to write this editorial, I sat by the pond in my back yard, which encloses a small meditative space. Sitting there quietly observing 'just what is' helps me to clear my mind. It helps me open to the words and meanings of the authors and to creative inspiration for writing. 'Just what is': fish in trees. But it has been hard to focus on this writing and I would like to explain why.

Each of the past three summers, my wife Hwi-Ja and I have taught a Study Abroad course on spiritual diversity in Korean social work for a small group of students from the University of Kansas. Our colleague and friend, Dr. Seung-Hee Park of Sungkyunkwan University in Seoul, works with us in a teaching trio as we travel around South Korea. Every year, when we happened to visit a lovely pond at a palace or temple, Professor Park enthusiastically said to the students: "Look at the water! See the reflections—aren't they beautiful? Fish are swimming in the clouds! What is real? What is real?"



I recently returned from two months of travels for teaching in Korea and Japan and visiting my family. While I was in Korea for this Study Abroad course, my eldest brother, Frank, died suddenly. My parents called me with the terrible news. We teachers and the students were just getting ready to climb into a van for an all day ride and visit to a huge Catholic social service center and college called Kkottongnae (Flower Village) outside Seoul. My wife and I felt stricken by the news, almost struck down. But we had to continue with our plan for the benefit of students. So I just went along for the ride, sitting in the van, crying. 'Just what is': grief. The students were empathetic and considerate. It felt like a blessing that I could just cry and not worry about it.

The tour of the Flower Village was amazing both due to the scale of the facilities and the loving kindness that staff displayed with residents who have been outcast from ordinary society due to severe disabilities and poverty. But it also seemed surrealistic. The juxtaposition of my inner grief, feelings for my family so far away in Ohio, going through the motions of the tour, and teaching made me feel oddly dissociated and poignantly connected to the moment all at the same time.

During the tour, we stopped at a chapel. Our tour guide offered a time of prayer for my deceased brother. The time for prayer was especially appropriate since my family of origin is Catholic. Most of the students were not Catholic, but they all chose to respectfully observe for my sake and that of my wife. It was serendipitous that we went to a Catholic agency just at the time that news of my brother's death reached me. This helped me feel connected to my family though still so far removed. Later, at the time of the funeral in Ohio, Professor Park and I set up a simplified Korean style memorial table and bowed in respect and appreciation for my brother.

This surrealistic state of mind has continued to the time of my writing now. A

recent visit with my family to have a memorial at my brother's grave helped with the bereavement process. I have been able to focus better as the days go by. But it is still sometimes difficult to see the fish in the trees, to perceive clearly the authors' words, or to be open to inspiration for writing.

However, the responsibility and privilege of being a social worker, and having work to do during this time, raised the challenge of focusing in the midst of bereavement. The challenge is not to ignore or delay bereavement, but rather to go with the flow of the bereavement process while traveling, working, and resting, sometimes seeing the fish in the trees and sometimes only seeing grief.

The statue of Kwan Yin, the Bodhisattva of Compassion, which sits by my pond, depicts a poise of quiet equanimity with compassionate awareness. The Bodhisattva's image in the water continuously moves. Both quiet compassionate awareness and movement: this is a fine ideal for spiritually sensitive social work. Noticing this, something became clearer. Fish in trees *and* sadness *and* quiet awareness *and* hungry fish *and* writing deadline: all of this together in this moment is 'just what is'. No problem, just natural. Finally, I could finish writing this editorial.

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