

"ONLY DON'T KNOW" - THE SPIRITUALITY OF SOCIAL WORK

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This narrative traces the author's experience with and study of communications from deceased loved ones. In the process of crafting this narrative the author realized that social workers, grounded theorists, and Buddhists shared a common belief in the power of seeing things as they really are, not as we think they are. This belief is based on realizing that when we allow ourselves to see the world as it truly is, the truth of each situation is free to emerge, and that emerging truth can reveal the meaningfulness of our world.

To begin in the middle of things, it was a little after 1:00 pm February 28th, the third day of the 2005 CSWE conference in New York City. Outside it was snowing, not the storm the weathermen had predicted, but hard enough to fill Broadway and 48th with a layer of slush. Inside, in an exhibition hall of the ballroom of the Marriott Marquis, I stood beside my poster presentation, the culmination of seven years of study summarized on twenty-some PowerPoint[®] slides, thumb-tacked to the cork board. A two-inch-high heading trumpeted my topic: "When Clients Talk to Deceased Loved Ones," which explored how social workers dealt with clients who felt they had received some kind of communication from a recently deceased loved one. I was proud of my work but concerned about how it would be received, given that the topic was a bit out of the mainstream. But people were reading the slides and talking with me about their experiences with loved ones who had visited them, which confirmed one of the findings from the research—that normal, healthy people in all kinds of life situations talked to social workers about being visited by deceased loved ones.

It seemed important that people not just read the findings posted on the cork board, but that they also have a chance to talk about them with me. For while the dissertation "findings" as presented on the cork board were valid, they seemed to lack "the human touch." My dissertation included face-to-face interviews with 21 social workers in which we discussed how they worked with clients

who wanted to talk about communications from deceased loved ones. These interviews were full of compassion and concern for clients, mixed with ambiguity over exactly what these visits were. The interviews were full of heart. But the dissertation itself was based on abstracting concepts and themes from those interviews, and in the process of abstraction some of the heart was lost—the face-to-face vitality I experienced while interviewing the social workers and which the social workers reporting having shared with their clients.

In the midst of enjoying the give and take with the conference attendees who were stopping by, I noticed a short, distinguished-looking woman reading the slides. Eventually she turned to me and asked, "How did you come to this?"

Her eyes were half happy, half sad. I have noticed that people reflecting on continued connections with their deceased loved ones often display this bittersweet mix—the pain of the loss mixed with the happiness of the continued connection.

I told her the whole story. And as I told her the whole story, her bittersweet look changed to one that was more enthusiastic.

"You have a gift," she said.

"Receiving a visit like that is a gift."

"No," she insisted. "You have a gift. How you mixed the intellect and the heart. You should write what you just told me as a narrative and submit it to *Reflections*."

I was overjoyed by her compliment. And stunned. And scared.

I was overjoyed because the whole time I was working on the dissertation I had struggled with the formality of the format. I had always wanted to put more of myself into it, but the dissertation format required a more detached, objective persona. I wanted to inject more heart and soul, but the dissertation format seemed to require a lot of intellect and concept. Now I was being asked to tell my story.

I was stunned because I had come to the conference half afraid the academic professionals in attendance would tear my research apart. After all, the research concerned clients who talk to dead people, used grounded theory, and suggested that relying on basic social work values rather than on specialized spiritual/religious interventions was enough to create a spiritually competent social worker. So her enthusiastic acceptance of my work was stunning.

And I was scared because writing the narrative she was suggesting meant leaving the safety of "scientific rigor" and re-working my research using my heart as well as my head. This was what I had always wanted to do, but I didn't know if I was up to the challenge.

On the other hand, the woman standing before me was a real human being who had listened to my story and found it of value. In suggesting I share my story she had, in her own way, validated it. By validating my story and suggesting I re-examine it with my heart and my head, she pointed me towards a new understanding of the spirituality of social work. That understanding only emerged in the process of re-visiting my story.

The Story

In 1977, I started to study and practice a form of Tibetan Buddhism, a study and practice I continue to this day. The essence of this practice is being present to what is actually happening in every moment and seeing things as they are, not as we think they are. In

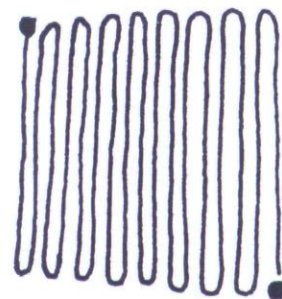
1985, I met Anne Elliot, a perky, feisty, thirty-two-year-old artist who occasionally remarked, when she wasn't teasing me or working on her art projects, how bittersweet our life was. We were married in a Buddhist ceremony September 9, 1989, and just two years later, in the autumn of 1991, she was diagnosed with an advanced colon cancer. After almost a year and a half of fighting the cancer, just before dawn on Tuesday, December 29, 1992, she passed on.

It may sound strange, but I wouldn't trade that last year and a half for anything. We both knew we had a limited time together, so we spent the time really being together. Much of that time she was weakened by the chemo and often she was in great pain. But despite our pain and suffering, or maybe because of it, we were closer and kinder to each other in those last eighteen months than we had been earlier. And while I wish she hadn't died, and certainly wish she hadn't suffered, as deaths go this seemed to be a good one.

Anne let go of her last breath in a hospice residential unit around seven in the morning, with her mother and her sister at her side. Her life force or energy or at least a sense of her presence stayed in the room for a good hour or two afterwards. Three days after she passed on, we held a Buddhist funeral service for her and after that she was cremated.

Two or three days after the cremation, I noticed a strange pattern on the inside left rear window of our blue Toyota Corolla. Nobody ever rode in the back seat, because it was always filled with books and papers and empty cans of diet Coke and sweaty workout gear. I used to smoke my pipe when I drove, so the back windows were kind of grimy, and a picture had been drawn in the grime on the inside of the window. It was a simple line drawing, in the style of a Zen portrait, looking very much like Anne on her deathbed.

Despite being a Buddhist, at the time I was pretty much a materialist; I didn't believe



in spirits or psychic energy or any of that woo-woo stuff. But the drawing was there, and the only living people I could think of who might have made the drawing denied having done so. So to my mind, and to those few friends to whom I spoke of it, this was Anne's last drawing, her final post-mortem gift. Probably. Even today I am not sure that this drawing was not made by some mischievous friend—my oldest niece being the most likely suspect. But no matter the objective facts, I found great comfort in this final "touch" from Anne. Over time the lines of the drawing began to smudge, and I tried to retrace them with a q-tip, but that just made the smudging worse. So with some Windex and a paper towel, I cleaned the window.

About a month later, a coworker was dilly-dallying around the office, not going home even though it was way past closing time. She started telling me about a "ghost" that had been hanging around her house the last few nights and said she didn't want to go home since her husband and daughter were both out of town, and she was afraid to be in the house alone. I asked her if the ghost seemed dangerous to her and she said "No," so I suggested she try talking to it. It never entered my mind that this could have anything to do with Anne.

Until the next morning. When Toni came running down the corridor at work, beaming.

"Michael, you'll never guess what happened!"

"It was Anne," I blurted out, not even thinking about it.

"Yes," Toni said. "I sat down on a chair in my bedroom, made myself calm, and told the spirit that if it wanted to talk, I would listen. I just sat there, and then the spirit came into the room and said it was Anne. She said she just wanted to tell us she was in a good place and was moving on to another good place, but that she wouldn't be able to contact us from the place she was going. She said she

came to me because she knew you weren't sensitive enough to hear her."

Then Toni felt the spirit leave.

I didn't know what to do with Toni's story. If there hadn't been the drawing in the car window, I probably would have put it down to her kind and gifted imagination. But there was the drawing in the window. And five years later, there was more.

The "Ghost" Paper

In the process of Anne's dying, we had been greatly aided by the nurses and social workers from Hospice. In the aftermath of her death, I couldn't think of a better way to spend the rest of my life than to do for others what they had done for us. So six months after Anne died, I applied to and was accepted in an MSW program. Whenever possible, I focused my research papers on religion and spirituality, death and dying, grief and mourning. At the urging of a few faculty members, I moved directly from the MSW program to a Ph.D. and in my doctoral course work, I continued to focus on those issues, planning to do my dissertation on anticipatory mourning—those things we can do before a loved one dies to ease our pain afterward.

Then in the spring of 1997, five years into my social work studies, I stumbled across "the more." I was taking a course in Spirituality and Social Work, planning a paper that reconceptualized the religion/spirituality split. After I presented an outline of this paper to my professor, she told me that her mother had died when the professor was in her mid-twenties and how almost every day for the next month, she felt her mother's nearly physical presence watching over her. Then the professor suggested that rather than writing about the re-conceptualization of religion and spirituality I write a paper about that kind of experience.

I found her suggestion amusing, for it seemed a strange topic to address in an academic paper. I had had my experience with

Anne's picture in the car window and her visit to Toni, but I realized that in all my courses and all my reading and all my studies this topic—receiving communications from deceased loved ones—hadn't been mentioned once. And as important as Anne's visits had been to me, it had never occurred to me that this was a topic social workers should address. So I started to research what I began to call my "ghost paper."

As I started conducting informal interviews with friends and acquaintances I was surprised at how many of them had experienced some kind of communication from deceased loved ones—a finding that would be repeated four years later when, in the course of my dissertation research, I found that more than 35% of adults in national surveys report feeling as if they had been in touch with someone who had died (Davis & Smith, 1997). I was also surprised that while everybody I talked with found the experience of receiving a communication from a deceased loved one comforting, many people were reluctant to talk about it for fear of being judged crazy. For example, two members of the Buddhist meditation center Anne and I belonged to had had "visits" from Anne shortly after her death but had never shared them with me until I had begun my survey. One of these friends, who had had several experiences like this when family members had died, was very explicit in wanting his confidentiality protected. He was afraid that people would think he was "a weirdo" and that it might cost him his government job.

Another example of a person relishing the experience but being afraid to discuss it involved a friend whose little dog had died and then appeared in her kitchen several times afterwards. Margie had told me the story several times of how good it made her feel to catch a fleeting glimpse of Pookie out of the corner of her eye. One evening I was having dinner at Subway with Margie and a mutual friend named Joe. A few days earlier Joe had

told me about being visited by his mother after she had died. The three of us were talking about my "Ghost" paper when I suggested that Margie tell Joe about her dog.

Margie shot a glance at me that was designed to kill and shrugged her shoulders as if to say, "What are you talking about?"

"You know, about after Pookie died..."

She gave us another shoulder shrug and a confused look. I finally realized what was going on, so I said, "You know, the other day Joe was telling me that after his mom died, she came to him in a dream and it really felt like it was his mom – not just a dream."

"Oh," Margie said, suddenly realizing it was safe. "You mean when Pookie came back to visit me after she died..." and went on to share her story with great relish.

Truth Emerging

This combination of people finding the visits comforting yet being reluctant to talk about them was confirmed by the literature reviews I conducted for the "Ghost" paper and later for my dissertation. In a national survey, Grimby (1993) found that while most people find the visits themselves comforting, they are often reluctant to discuss this phenomenon for fear of being labeled crazy. Gotterer (2001) reported a similar reluctance with clients who wanted to discuss spiritual issues in therapy but hesitate to do so: "What clients see as a strength is often pathologized; frequently they cannot discuss their beliefs in therapy for fear of being judged as 'crazy'" (p. 188).

It concerned me that this reluctance to talk about the experience wasn't limited to lay people; it extended to social work educators as well. For example, several social work articles mentioned continued connections between the living and the dead, such as reminiscing about the deceased, keeping their belongings, or writing to them in a journal (Fast, 2003; Sormanti & August, 1997). This desire for a continued connection

was presented as just a normal part of the grieving process, but none of the articles explicitly mentioned visits from deceased loved ones in the list of valid continued connections. Though one article written by a social worker implied that a visit from a deceased loved one might be included in the category of continued connections, it did not say so explicitly. This was intriguing, given the reluctance of so many people to openly discuss it, so I telephoned the author of the article. The author confirmed that in fact some of the continued connections mentioned in the article had taken the form of visits from the deceased. When I asked why the visits had not been detailed, the author stated that it didn't seem prudent to include them since he was not yet tenured.

That admission, combined with a tendency in the psychiatric literature to view communications from deceased loved ones in a pathological light, referring to them as "hallucinations" with all the negative connotations that term contains (Matchett, 1972; Shen, 1986), eventually led me to take these communications from deceased loved ones as the topic of my dissertation.

I decided to focus the dissertation neither on the experience itself, nor on the clients who reported the experience. Rather I focused on the social workers themselves and on how they reacted to clients who brought up this experience. I also decided to use a grounded theory methodology, in part because of its similarity to the Buddhist approach to inquiry, i.e., being present to the moment and seeing things as they are without preconceptions.

Grounded theory is similar in that it is not used to prove pre-existing hypotheses, but rather to allow the truth to emerge from the data. Thus researchers are encouraged to 'bracket their biases' in order to be able to see things as they are so as to allow the theory that exists in the ground of the data to emerge (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). These two traditions (Buddhism and Grounded Theory)

share a faith in individuals' ability to see reality for what it is, beyond their preconceptions of what they think is true.

Resting in Not Knowing

In the course of my dissertation research, I interviewed 21 social workers about how they dealt with clients who reported being in contact with or receiving communications from deceased loved ones, including two students in a BSW program as well as several social workers with more than 25 years of experience. These social workers worked in school systems, hospices, hospitals, community agencies, and private practice. Their work was informed by behavioral, cognitive, psychodynamic, humanist, systems, family, and eclectic models of practice.

Some of those I interviewed thought the communications really came from deceased loved ones, some thought it was a normal part of the grieving process, some thought it was neural activity triggered by external stimuli, and some thought it was best to view this phenomenon simply as an experience that the client was sharing. But no matter how the social worker thought of the experience, and no matter what model of practice the social worker used, all the social workers dealt with their clients in the same basic manner, a manner they often described as simply "doing social work." Another way to say it was that the social workers all respected the dignity of the client and of the client's experience. As one social worker in the study put it:

Who am I to tell my client what her experience is. Have I been dead and come back? I don't know what happens. What right do I have to tell [them] what is? And [how do I know] whether it is part of the grief process or whether there really is a [dead] person who does this ... I don't know, and I don't care.

I always asked the social workers if they thought this was really the dead person or



not, and if the answer to that question mattered. While their answer to the first question varied a good deal, there was almost unanimous response to the second question. The social workers didn't care if the communication was objectively real or not—what they cared about was the client's experience. They were concerned with normalizing the client's experience, validating it, and helping the client explore its meaning.

One aspect of grounded theory methodology is discovering common themes and assigning them codes. To this common theme of "I don't know and I don't care," I assigned the code "*only don't know*." That phrase comes from the Korean Zen master Seung Sahn.

Only don't know echoes one of Soen Sa Nim's favorite expressions that goes to the heart of his teaching. The knowing that he enjoins against is the mind's enraptured production of its opinions, judgments, discriminations and preferences, creating the confusion in which most of us live, and in its wake, our own and other people's suffering. Only don't know means choosing to pay attention. When we choose to just pay attention, this confusion is dispelled; just seeing, just hearing, or just perceiving the needs of others is the turning point for clarity and compassion (Sichel & Lombardo, 1982, p. x).

This echoes what I heard from many of the social workers. They focused on the client's story, and out of that arose concern and compassion. As one social worker shared, "It was almost a spiritual connection with these people and that we were—as wrenching as these sessions could be—we were almost privileged to be in that inner core of the depth of their bereavement."

I was no stranger to feeling privileged when people shared the core of their being with me, for this is what happened in many of these interviews. It often felt as if the process of opening and sharing that took place in my

interviews mirrored the very process the social workers described as occurring between them and their clients.

There was an almost spiritual sense of connection between the social workers and me, a sense of union and of meaning that went far beyond what I would normally think of as "interviewing a social worker for a dissertation." I think that the topic of our conversation helped open us to that space. It seemed that discussing communications with deceased loved ones reminded both the social workers and me of the importance of communication, of openness, and of resting in that space of "only don't know."

Allowing Meaning to Emerge

When I began my dissertation, I was concerned that social workers might tend to pathologize their clients' experience of being in communication with a loved one who had died. I had expected to find that the social workers' responses to their clients would vary based on the social workers' views of whether it was proper to address spiritual and religious issues in practice, and of the social workers' own view of mourning, and of their models of practice. But this was not what I found. The overwhelming factor influencing how social workers dealt with their clients who had received communications from deceased loved ones was the social workers' respect for the client, respect for the client's experience, and respect for the client's interpretation of that experience. Social workers said their approach to clients who communicated with deceased loved ones was the same as their approach to clients in other situations. When I asked the social workers how what they did with clients regarding this topic differed from what they did with clients around other topics, they said "It doesn't. We do the same thing." They often framed their honoring the clients as "just doing social work."

Yet there is more here than "just doing social work." The act of honoring clients and their experiences is similar both to grounded theory's call to "bracket your biases" and the Buddhist suggestion to "only don't know." One does not bracket one's biases just for the sake of bracketing biases. One brackets biases so that the truth of the data can reveal itself. Similarly, one does not "only don't know" just to "don't know." One rests in the space of non-conception so that clarity and compassion can arise.

In the same manner, social workers do not honor the client just to honor the client. They honor clients to learn from them—to be available to their reality.

The social work ideal of honoring the dignity of clients and of the clients' experiences is at heart a spiritual ideal. When social workers framed their actions as "just doing social work," they were pointing to a very spiritual aspect of social work—if by spiritual one means seeking connection to and meaning in the universe. By honoring clients as the best experts of their own experience, by bracketing biases about the client, and by "only not knowing"—these social workers were opening themselves to connection with the clients and allowing meaning to emerge as it may.

Allowing meaning to emerge is the challenge of meeting clients on the ground of their own experience. As a friend who is not only a social worker but a more accomplished Buddhist than I recently said, "You don't have to know *what* [the experience] means, it is enough to know *that* it means."

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