

ALLAH, KALI, JESUS: REFLECTIONS ON MY OWN AND RESPONDENTS' SPIRITUALITY

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While inquiring into the ways people cope with poverty-related issues, the author unexpectedly learned about the central role of spirituality in some respondents' lives. She reflects on the purpose, meaning, and significance of selected respondents' spiritual disclosures in relation to her Hindu beliefs and practices. It appears that despite religious differences, our belief in the guiding force of a protective power serves as a wellspring for resiliency, strength, and empowerment for us.

During field research, I was quite taken aback when Armina, a poor Muslim woman in India, very casually stated that she prayed to Kali—a Hindu Goddess—for divine intervention in meeting her basic needs, and when Brenda, a Christian woman in the U.S. who was striving hard to become economically self-reliant, referred to her Karma—a Hindu belief about work and its ramifications in this and other lives. Being a Hindu, I was both startled by and drawn to these respondents because of their references and allusions to Hindu religious and spiritual practices and assumptions in separate research projects that focused on micro-enterprise development and not on spirituality. I reflected upon the purpose, meaning, and significance of these statements. I wondered whether being cognizant of our differences, they were trying to build rapport with me by referring to my cultural and spiritual practices and beliefs. Also, feeling somewhat comfortable with me, were they providing me with insights into their spiritual beliefs? Were they alluding to the critical role of spirituality as a source of resiliency, strength, and empowerment in their lives? I do not know the answers to these questions from their perspectives because religion and spirituality were not the focus of our interviews.

It is worthwhile to pause a little and reflect on the relationship between spirituality and social work research-practice because religion can be both a unifying and a dividing force in society. Growing up in India, I have

fond memories of annual religious festivities that brought families and friends together. I also have vivid memories and knowledge of much divisiveness between and among Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, and Christians in India. Some prominent examples include the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi by a Hindu and Indira Gandhi by a Sikh; the independence of India from the British Raj at the expense of separating Hindus and Muslims by partitioning India into three entities: India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh; and since then the never-ending battles between Hindus and Muslims that have resulted not only in destruction of important historical temples and mosques, but also in death and disruption of citizens' lives.

Although I had imagined that life in the U.S. would be more peaceful in relation to the pervasive Hindu-Muslim and later Sikh conflicts in India, before long I realized religious fundamentalism exists here too, but expresses itself in other ways. Fast forwarding to recent times, I notice religious sectarianism pushing for institutionalizing marriage between heterosexuals only, defining reproductive health practices for women, and prohibiting stem cell research. Furthermore, President Bush's election, the September 11, 2001, attack, and President Bush's re-election to a second term together have changed the public discourse in this country. Many sense a moral dilemma with regard to our attacks in Afghanistan and Iraq. Others wonder how much of the 9/11 attack and the U.S.

counterattacks are rooted in religious-political differences between Arab Muslims and American Christians. And then, almost half the country was stunned by President Bush's electoral victories, not once, but twice. Voting pattern analyses by religious affiliation indicated that religious denomination and practice profoundly influenced his success. This is not surprising given President Bush's campaign rhetoric of "moral values" and "family values." However, since in office this rhetoric has disappeared and has been replaced with a new emphasis on fixing social security.

With regard to the relationship between religion and social services, Ehrenreich (2004) reports that during his first term, President Bush promoted public funding for faith-based organizations to provide social services. This maneuver strongly increased the already existing power of right-leaning Christian churches. As a consequence, these churches not only offer intangibles like eternal salvation through proselytizing and bearing witness, but also provide concrete material assistance. She writes that she has met poor people who reported that in these days of welfare reform and cut backs on public funding for social services, their best survival strategy is to "find a church" (Ehrenreich, 2004, p. 3). In exchange for faith conversion and prayer, such churches offer a variety of programs, such as soup kitchens, free clothing, job search tips, support groups for victims of domestic violence, childcare, after-school programs, ESL lessons, and occasional cash handout. Ehrenreich further notes that evangelical churches in red and blue states have become great places for networking. Such grassroots networking was one important factor in President Bush's re-election success. She states that the irony of this story is that at one time, it was the liberal left that provided "alternative services" in the form of free clinics, women's health centers, food co-ops, and inner-city multi-service centers. With

liberals and liberal social workers shying away from vocalizing their faith and religion to maintain the separation of church and state, conservatives are swinging votes and moving the country towards a direction that is not in the best interests of poor, vulnerable, and marginalized populations for whom social workers work. I believe we need to think about and strategize our professional stance in the nexus of religion/spirituality-politics-and social justice.

My experiences, historical events, and current religious-political struggles hinging on "moral values" force me to stop and reflect on my own religious and spiritual heritage, as well as practices and my overall understanding of the role of religion and spirituality in people's lives. Here I will explore the question: if religious differences are such a strong force in keeping people, cultures, and nations separate from one another, how can I, a social work teacher, research-practitioner, and scholar who is a practicing Hindu, work effectively in the U.S. with people—students, respondents, faculty colleagues—who are different from me with regard to my religious background? I seek possible answers to this broad question by restricting the discussion to my role as an inquirer.

It is important to answer this question for various reasons. Like me, there are many social work practitioners and academics who have immigrated to the U.S. and have varied religious and spiritual beliefs and practices. Some are fortunate enough to work with people from their country of origin and similar religious affiliations. However, after immigration, it is not always possible nor is it desirable to restrict oneself to working with people of one's own faith and national heritage only. In such instances, what are their options? Conversely, is it not desirable and sometimes imperative for social workers born in the U.S. to work with natural and naturalized citizens whose religious orientation is different from theirs?

Recently, there has been quite a burgeoning of literature that shows how gender and race/ethnicity matching affects working and researching with people of color (Kanuha, 2000; Lowery, 2000; Pinderhughes, 2004). This is helpful because it sensitizes outsiders about what to do under such circumstances. While much is known about how researcher-respondent differences have contributed to distorted findings (Rubin & Babbie, 2005, and Vidich & Lyman, 2000), in comparison very little is known about competent and effective research when racial/ethnic and religious background of researchers and respondents do not match. This silence is troubling because it could indicate concerns such as: a) when there is no match, people should not research "others"; b) when there is no match and researchers focus on "others" it necessarily results in poor research. Both these implications are disempowering for social workers who may have immigrated from other countries as well as for native born American social workers who work with people who are different from them with regard to their ethnicity/race, religion, gender, and other personal characteristics.

This narrative attempts to address this silence by presenting an alternative perspective to this dominant view of social work research-practice. Since living in the U.S. for about two decades now, I have consistently done research with people who are different from me with regard to my ethnicity and religion. Have I or have I not been effective in any of these interactions? There is no categorical answer in either direction. I have been effective in some interactions and not so in others. Here I will reflect upon my researcher's role with three non-Hindu women in India and in the U.S. where I believe I have been an effective researcher. But, I will restrict this discussion to the religious and spiritual components of our interviews. To this end, I will first present

aspects of my spirituality that influence my work. Next, I will highlight segments of my interviews with these three women that focus on their spirituality. Last, I will draw lessons for myself and social workers by juxtaposing my spirituality with my respondents' spirituality.

My Spirituality

On reflection, three family members have played a key role in introducing me to Hindu spirituality. But my faith waxed and waned over time as my traditional beliefs and practices were questioned by Western science and education. However, eventually it evolved into a more stable guiding force in my daily living and practices. First, I will highlight a superficial tale related to spirituality, and then I will present my more deep-rooted spiritual beliefs and practices.

Chanting Rama, Rama ... Keeps Ghosts Away

At first it was my cousin and best friend who introduced me to spiritual practices. Although only a year older than I, she lived with my paternal grandmother and had learned many of our traditional practices from her. Perhaps when we were six or seven years old, she taught me how to incorporate prayers and certain spiritual practices into daily living to get strength, overcome barriers and fears, and progress towards salvation. One vivid childhood memory relates to trusting a higher power to overcome fear of ghosts. At that time I used to be afraid of climbing the stairs at night in my grandparents' home. Perhaps to keep a check on children in a large household, the elders had told us that there were ghosts on the tree right outside the house facing the stairs, and that the worst ghosts were those without heads and shoulders! We were also instructed never to go upstairs alone at night, and that if we were naughty, the ghosts would get us. Consequently, if for any reason I wanted to go up and get something, I could

not do it because I was afraid of the headless ghost twisting my neck to replace its own headlessness! Yet, my cousin could very comfortably go up and down the stairs at night. When asked how she could do it despite the ghosts, she told me that she chants the name of Rama, a reincarnation of Krishna, and ghosts never get her because they are afraid of Him. And, she told me that if I did the same, I would be protected too. Not fully sure how much to trust her against the adults, I still gave it a shot. Shivering with fear, I ran full speed up the stairs, got what I needed, and hardly breathing rushed down, repeating the name of Rama all the while! Did her trick work! It took me a while to trust her wisdom in this venture, but in the long run she turned out to be right. On reflection, chanting Rama, Rama enabled me to overcome fear of ghosts at an early age. As a more mature adult, chanting Om Namah Shivayah, or some other mantra, or visualizing a sacred symbol helps me to gain strength and overcome doubts about my abilities—another kind of ghost that haunts adults!

Another time, my cousin told me how she had prayed to all the Gods and Goddesses for four years and had completed her “girls’ vrata” by feeding people, animals, and nature. Very likely she would attain “moksha” (salvation) and go to heaven, I fathomed. I was mesmerized by her tale and wanted the same for myself. But I could not as I did not live with my paternal grandmother. So, I told my mother that I wanted to do what she had done. My parents were not overtly religious at that time. They were busy raising three kids and keeping their lives going. However, my mother honored my request by making arrangements with my maternal grandmother, who lived in the same city as we did, to initiate me into girls’ spirituality.



Four Years of Girls’ Vrata, or Dedicated Worship

Between the ages of nine and twelve, for four years, during the first month of our New Year, my Granny initiated my sister, who was three years old when we started, and me into Hindu girls’ spirituality. These were four very special years in our lives. We were to get up quite early in the morning, bathe and wear fresh clothes, keep a fast, and be in her Puja (prayer) Room by six o’clock. This room was on the terrace, fully dedicated to worship only, and had windows or doors on all four sides which allowed a lot of sunlight and fresh air to come in. By the time we arrived, Granny would have completed her own prayers, and together we would prepare for our worship. It was a lot of fun getting the room set for what we would do in the next hour. There were special silver, brass, copper, and stone utensils in which fruits, flowers, leaves, grass, and sweets had to be arranged in an order established by Granny. Additionally, there was sacred water—from the river Ganges—that had to be poured from a vessel, incense sticks and oil lamps lit, red and white sandalwood paste prepared, turmeric powder, oil, vermilion, and a host of grains, seeds, bells, and conch shells arranged. She also taught us to draw various symbols with sandalwood paste and other ingredients to depict varied deities. Then, with the morning sun beaming in, soft breeze blowing, fragrance emanating from fresh flowers and leaves, incense sticks burning, bells ringing and conch shells blowing to herald the start of a puja, the room transformed itself into a place perfectly suited for prayers to higher powers. (Living in an over-crowded metropolitan city, this was as close as we could possibly get to nature.)

Granny taught us to pray to different Gods and Goddesses—Shiva, Vishnu, Krishna, Rama, Durga, Lakshmi, Saraswati, Kartika, Ganesha, and Kali, as well as any and every God or Goddess that may exist! Each God or Goddess had a prayer that we

memorized with Granny's help—some were Sanskrit mantras and others were Bengali chants. She explained the meaning of the Sanskrit mantras to us—their sounds were powerful as were their meanings. We learned that each God or Goddess also had a favorite flower, leaf, sandalwood paste color, and food. So, all these different dimensions had to be matched to please and pray to them for special favors that each had to bestow on us: strength, courage, steadfastness, truthfulness, relatedness, love, kindness, charity, mercy, humility, honor, justice, health, wealth, education, wisdom, peace and prosperity. But before invoking the Gods or Goddesses, we first prayed to the four sides of the earth—north, south, east, west—and heaven, ocean, sun, moon, sky, fire, air, mountains, rivers, trees, birds, animals, fish, flowers, and our ancestors. It took about an hour each day to complete the prayers. After cleaning up, we went down and first fed a calf before we ate the first morsel of the day. At the end of four years, like my cousin, we too invited family members for a meal, offered gifts to Brahmin males, and gave charity to people who were poor, as well as fed birds and animals in the neighborhood. This was one cherished accomplishment!

Truly, these were four fascinating and memorable years of my life. It was amazing that we had the power to invoke Gods and Goddesses, wake them up, praise them for their qualities and powers, pray to them for what we wanted, and then put them to sleep so they could rest a while from our mundane concerns! At that time, we had learned that these prayers were a way to teach us many desirable life qualities and how to live life, as well as what to value in this and other lives. As I reflect, I realize that these rituals and prayers taught us at an early age various virtues and traits of a good person and a good life: self restraint, cleanliness, and concentration (get up early morning, bathe, do not eat anything until prayers were over,

memorize the chants); characteristics of a good person; ways of living and respectfully relating to humans, animals, and the environment; the difference between good and evil, just and unjust, kindness and hatred; ways to stay centered on good and forsake evil; power of Gods and nature to create, destroy, and maintain; importance of humility, gentleness, and respect within and outside the family. So in this sense, we learned that religiosity and spirituality are intertwined. In Sanskrit the word "Dharma" means both religion and duties of living. Accordingly, our homely practices taught no distinction between religion and spirituality—both are integral to living.

Between adolescence and some years of my adulthood, both my religiosity and spirituality fluctuated. There are many factors responsible for this de-centeredness from my spirituality. On the one hand, after I had prayed earnestly for something—as my cousin had taught me—but did not get the fruit of my prayers, my faith wavered. On the other hand, these were years of growing up when I was strongly influenced by a colonial education system that systematically tried to subvert and devalue my traditional heritage. Upon coming to the U.S., I was even more strongly exposed to Western science and its logico-empirical truth orientation which suggested that anything that could not be empirically observed and quantitatively measured did not exist—or was not valid. Also, among many other philosophers, I was intrigued by Marx's and Nietzsche's critiques and their criticisms of religion: God is an opiate for the masses and God is dead. Coupled with such amoral views was Weber's exposition of technical rationality. And, if these were not enough, then the American Protestant ethic of rugged individualism emphasizing competition, achievement, control, and productivity when contrasted against the more amorphous Indian values of inter-generational cooperation, complexity, and other-worldliness

were sufficient to make me reasonably de-centered from spirituality. I was deeply conflicted by what I had learned at home which strongly affirmed traditional values and mores with what I learned through my formal educational systems in both India and abroad, and especially so when I tried to configure the latter with my Hindu spirituality and the many other ways of knowing, healing, and relating to nature and spirituality that I had become aware of over the years. During this protracted struggle to make meaning of my life and my scholarship that made intuitive sense to me, something else from the Hindu tradition impacted me strongly.

The Gita, Meditation, and Yoga

After coming to the U.S., in addition to intellectual conflicts, I was faced with major personal life challenges. Not knowing how to cope, on my father's recommendation I turned to praying to our family deity Goddess Durga—the ten handed savior of the Gods—and the Gita to get peace, strength, resilience, and courage. The Gita has 18 chapters in which Lord Krishna advises Arjuna, a Hindu prince compelled to fight against his cousins and clan members, how to understand and live life—even how to reconcile to a just war! Each chapter is referred to as a type of yoga or union with something, such as Karma or action, Gyana or wisdom, and Bhakti or devotion. The chapters that continue to profoundly influence me deal with work, knowledge and wisdom, human nature, creator's supremacy and pervasiveness, and meditation and devotion. Here I will share a few facets on work and devotion discussed in the Gita. For example, Krishna offers various nuggets of wisdom about work, the most famous being:

Karmany eva 'dhikaraste Ma phaleshu kadacana

Ma karmaphalahetur bhur Ma te sango 'stv akarmani (Gita, 2/47)

You have a right to action only, not to the fruit thereof. You should not be guided by a consideration of the fruits of action nor should you feel drawn towards inaction (Ghosh, 1972, p. 43)

These are powerful ideas that the pro-capitalist world may have a hard time reconciling with: work but do not expect any outcome of your work! The Hindu notion of Karma has deep significance, not all of which I fully accept or can reconcile with, living and working in an American university. Other work-related ideas include: "It is better to follow one's own duty though defective than to go after another's duty carried out to perfection" (3/35). One's own duty means the relationship between one's outward life and one's inward being, the evolution of action from one's soul and inner law of nature, rather than action driven by external exigencies. This idea too is very hard to fully embrace given how institutions of higher education are choosing to respond to external funding opportunities and faculty accomplishments for ranking purposes. In the last and 18th Chapter, the Gita states that humans attain perfection by following their own duty devotedly—"as an act of worship to Him, who is the source of all beings and by Whom all this is pervaded" (18/45-46). Those who are fully non-attached, self-controlled, and devoid of desire attain supreme perfection by giving up the fruits of action. There are four types of people who turn to Krishna: distressed, knowledge-seekers, wealth-seekers, and wise ones. "All of them are noble," says Krishna, but "Among them, the wise one who is ever centered in the Divine, given to single-minded devotion, is the highest. For I am exceedingly dear to him and he to Me" (7/17-18). Last, Krishna says that wisdom merged with action is the best form of Karma Yoga.

Once I had a discussion with one of my American colleagues about how or whether I could explain the notion of dedicated work

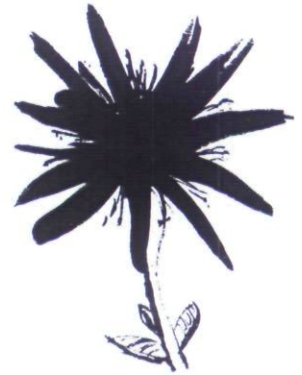
without any expectation of the fruits of its labor. Indeed, it is a hard idea to live by especially in American academia that emphasizes research and scholarship productivity over quality. Over time, I have tried to make sense of the Gita's teaching related to right to work but no right to expect any outcome from work by pulling in another teaching from it. This idea informs that the best form of Karma Yoga is the union of wisdom and action. I interpret this to mean that wisdom requires careful thinking about the pros and cons of one's action and the steps required to bring one's action to fruition. Thus, for me it means that I need to stay totally focused on the process of my work. When I am completely focused and engrossed in my work process, generally it reaches fruition. In that case, I am satisfied with my work. So, while working I try not spend energy worrying about the outcome of my work. But, the truth is that when I have put in effort yet, did not accomplish the goal, I have been somewhat upset with the outcome. I imagine total calmness in the face of failure requires a much higher state of consciousness than what I have now. Nonetheless, the somewhat detached attitude that I have developed so far is helpful for me.

In these ways I strive to incorporate some teachings from the Gita into my daily life and work, but am very far from getting close to their kernel. The Gita also emphasizes meditation to still the mind. Over time I have learned to meditate, and every time that I am able to see a blue light at the end of several phases of breathing exercises, it feels like I have attained temporary bliss! At the same time, there are instances where I am especially disturbed and unable to remain calm in the face of troubles. At such times, I turn to the Gita and it helps me to re-evaluate the stressors and recognize what is important from a spiritual stance. I also seek divine guidance when I embark on new scholarship ventures such as micro-enterprise development and

social justice. I lay the question out to divine power and pray for direction. When despite amazing difficulties they come through, I know they are my divinely sanctioned paths of action; if they do not come through, I know they were not mine. All in all, I am convinced that a higher power exists for me and with me. It has given me much more than what I have been able to give in return.

Reconciliation with Western Education/ Scholarship and Spirituality

The more regular and calm spirituality that I experience now took many experimental tours and detours over several years. While Hinduism is the dominant religion in India, it is followed by a minority of people outside India, and by now I have spent more years living outside than inside India. During the initial years of living abroad, I met many non-Indians who were attracted to Hinduism and especially Buddhism as also some Indians who turned to Christianity or Islam. Because of my father's openness to various Hindu sects, Brahmoism or reformed Hinduism, and other religions, I learned to be open to other religious and spiritual leanings but never felt the urge to convert to another religion to acquire peace of mind. Having lived in countries where Christianity or Islam was the primary guidepost for political economy, I have encountered people who tried to induce me to these other faiths. For example, when I was much younger, I knew a woman who was affiliated with the Assembly of God Church. Due to innocent curiosity about other versions of spirituality, I willingly accepted an invitation to attend her church services. After some time, I started to experience pressures to convert to her faith. Such a request, which later turned to pressure through inducements such as citizenship, job, and welfare benefits, was totally unanticipated. I thought through this provocation very seriously, and although very young, I could immediately reconnect with what my Granny and family members



had taught me about Hindu spirituality and easily and clearly articulate that I was very comfortable with my spirituality and faith—that I was unwilling to cave in despite my vulnerability in the areas where material assistance was promised. I lost her friendship but learned to discern similar people in the future. Since then I have had similar experiences but have learned how to handle such situations better.

Although I did not go to temples regularly when I was in India, I did visit them occasionally with my Granny and later with my parents. Such formal places of Hindu worship are rare in the countries I have lived. I miss them and often have been attracted to attending services at churches, synagogues, and mosques. However, my early experience taught me that I could mislead people by showing an interest in attending their formal religious services. Thus, I clarify my intent and only when I am certain that there will be no pressure to convert my faith, I attend such services. I have always experienced peace and union with others when I have attended these services. More recently, Hindu temples have come up in larger cities in the U.S. and I attend them occasionally. Unfortunately, temple services here tend to be more social occasions than times to relate to higher beings and powers. Being dissatisfied, I have created a space in my house that is totally devoted to worship and prayers. I pray, meditate, and do my yoga in this space. It does not compare in any way to my Granny's wonder-filled Puja Room, but I highly appreciate the empowerment that Granny instilled in me by showing me how to invoke higher powers. So in this space, by considerably simplifying her elaborate model of prayers, I relate to my Gods in my own way rather than rely on a priest to take me to God. I find this to be much more fulfilling than visiting a temple. Yet on special occasions I continue to visit temples in order to pray as well as to stay in touch with my community members living here.

Was there an intellectual shift from a logical-positivist model of science focusing on quantitative investigations that arrive at objective truth to post-modern models of science that validate qualitative ideographic truths during this protracted period of search? The answer is yes. After getting tenured, I was more free to explore intellectual territories that had been barred so far from the scope of so-called rigorous social sciences. I realized that there was not one unified Western mode of thinking and acting; instead, there were many critiques of this dominant discourse. As I delved deeply into understanding pre-modern, modern, and post-modern philosophy and literature, I found that the Enlightenment period was an essential response to the pre-modern mores, and modern science certainly has a place in today's world. Yet, unless I could subvert those aspects of colonial, modern scientific truths that were designed to exclude my existence, I could not embrace and affirm my own and other subjugated ways of knowing and being. From being able to think critically for myself, instead of accepting every other scholar's version as the Truth, I felt a sense of freedom and empowerment that I had not experienced so far. Additionally, I realized that in this alternative discourse there is a legitimate space for the sacred as well. Thus, though Rudyard Kipling had noted that "the East is East, and the West is West, and never the twain shall meet," it became possible for me to integrate Western academia with my Eastern values and spirituality.

One Aspect of my Work: Empirical Research

For about the past decade, my research has focused on micro-enterprise development as one avenue for gaining economic self-sufficiency. Micro-enterprise development or starting a very small business from one's own home or from a small storefront is a viable route to self employment for poor people in

developing countries (Banerjee, 1998; Counts, 1996; Raheim, 1997). The Grameen model (starting a micro-business among a group of peers with a small loan) gained much prominence in the U.S. after First Lady Hillary Clinton visited Bangladesh where the model originated. Because the model was tested in rural areas of a developing country, at first I traveled to India to assess whether and how it worked in an urban area of another developing country. Later, I obtained a state-funded grant in the U.S. to help poor women facing the welfare reform of 1996 start a micro-enterprise and move towards self-sufficiency. It was in these two contexts that I met non-Hindu women who mentioned the central role of spirituality in their lives as they attempted to cope with poverty or the stringency of TANF regulations.

Armina in India

My first recognition of the universality of spirituality came from Armina*, a young Muslim divorced mother of three children, who lived in a very poor community in India. This community had been recently gutted in a Hindu-Muslim riot and the residents had lost their material belongings. To help residents re-start life, various social service agencies provided emergency assistance. However, to help residents in a more permanent way, one agency provided local residents with a small loan to start or re-start their micro-businesses so they could become economically self-reliant. Armina was one of my respondents because she had taken out a very small loan to start a micro-business. The focus of this research was to inquire into the role of micro-enterprise development in poor people's lives and the strengths they employed to survive poverty (Banerjee, 1997, 1998). During this interview, when she first mentioned that she prayed to Kali, I did not pay any heed because it was irrelevant to our conversation. A short while later, with folded hands that touched her forehead, she again stated that she prayed

to Kali when she needed strength and support to cope with life. She mentioned that because she was illiterate, sometimes it was difficult for her to earn enough to feed her three children. This time, I could not ignore it any longer. To ascertain I had heard her correctly, I asked if she had said that she prayed to Kali. I think she instinctively understood where I was coming from—my disbelief that a Muslim would pray to a Hindu Goddess. Armina said, "How does it matter if I pray to Kali—a Hindu Goddess? I am a poor woman. I pray to anyone who listens to me and helps me." I did not probe further into her spirituality as it was not the focus of my interview.

Dana and Brenda in the U.S.

Dana and Brenda were two among about 60 women I worked with while running the Micro-Entrepreneurial Training (MET) Program in the U.S. (See, for example, Banerjee, 2001; 2002; 2003). I knew all 60 women for at least six months as they went through the MET Program. With each woman, I held face-to-face, in-depth interviews inquiring about their experiences with poverty, welfare, welfare reform, and coping with life. Many of them related stories about the power of God/Jesus in their lives that helped them to turn away from undesirable life circumstances such as alcoholism and dysfunctional dependence on men to miracles happening when they needed food, clothes, or shelter to survive (Banerjee & Pyles, 2004). Here, I will share two women's stories related to spirituality that have had a profound influence on my understanding of spirituality.

Dana was an African-American woman in her thirties with two young children. When she participated in MET, she lived with her mother because she had recently separated from her husband and did not have a place of her own. Discussing her meaning of poverty, Dana said that "a life without God" is being poor. She went on, "If you have Him, you

*All names in this narrative are pseudonyms

can always get up and do whatever you need to do, and He'll supply you with your needs. But if you don't, now that to me is being poor because you can't do nothing without Him."

When asked how she copes with her life issues, she again related a spiritual story. It was a story about a very poor Black mother who believed that her young son could change his life through education. So she encouraged him to go to another state to study, but she had only enough to buy him his train ticket. With no money in his pocket except for the train fare and some home-made food prepared by his mother, the young man traveled to a city in the north and stood in line to register for college. There was a long line and he had no idea what he would do to pay for college. Suddenly, someone called out his name and informed him that he had full scholarship to go to college! The moral of this story, according to Dana, was that when people strive hard to change their lives and keep God in their lives, God makes things happen for them. Dana keeps this story at the core of her belief about life's possibilities and strives to change her life for the better.

Brenda was another divorced African-American mother of four children in her early thirties. She had worked on about "a million jobs" but could not keep them because of the "unacceptable behaviors and attitudes" of her supervisors, the work climate, or the work schedule. She quit her last well-paying job because of health issues. She had received welfare assistance for about eight years, "more off than on." Asked how she was faring with welfare reform, she said, "I don't care. They [case managers] could threaten me. I'm not even intimidated by them... They're not my provider. They just assist me with the help that God gives me." She believed that many case managers lack empathy because they have not gone through life circumstances similar to hers. Brenda has worked as a case manager and makes sense of her current life situation by saying, "Maybe God wanted me

to go through things so I would never lose sight of my humanness." At the same time, she does not believe in lying low and taking it all in. She noted that in the Bible, Jesus required his followers to go to battle. Accordingly, she fought when appropriate and sought guidance from God about battles to pick or ignore. In the context of her experiences with welfare reform, she mentioned Karma. She said that her "good Karma" spared her of a lot of grief because "people have no mercy when circumstances are uncontrollable in your life." But her good Karma "always allows for some kind of opening or some kind of positive light to come through." Despite many negative experiences with her case managers, she mockingly said, "I'm not touching you 'cause if I touch you, God might get me."

Prior to participating in the MET Program and throughout, she prayed for divine guidance regarding her next steps. She got directions to enroll in the program and start her own graphic design business where "He's the President and I'm just a sales rep." As she initially started advertising her business, she experienced doubts from people who did not trust her ability to succeed in it. She again asked God for direction. "Then He would answer me that it's not you. ... 'You're not off the mark.' He reassures me and helps me to keep going." Despite doubts from others that affected her self-esteem, she believed that some would buy from her because "God has a blessing for me and not just for them." At the same time, it was not a faith or a belief that God would magically make things happen for her. She realized that while others may not help her, she needed to fully focus on her work to succeed in it.

Brenda experienced many hurdles in her life and overcame them to the best of her abilities and circumstances. She virtually had no social support to rely on for help. When asked how she coped despite all the hurdles, she said it was her "spirituality that got me

up.” For Brenda, spirituality was a personal relationship with God/Jesus. She was born a Baptist but left it. She said, “I’m just Christian.” She continued, “They just water down what God is about. . . . who’s right and who’s wrong, who’s good and who’s not. It defeats the purpose of what God intended it to be—for us to be unified.” She added, “He’s been working on me a lot. Stop trying to draw support from everybody. Let me give it to you... I’ve made you. I love you unconditionally.” Over time, she learned to be “still” and to feel God’s love. She believed that this understanding was a blessing from Him and allowed her to go on with life.

Lessons Learned and Suggestions for Incorporating Spirituality in Research-Practice

So, what are some of the lessons that I have learned from this reflection about religion and spirituality in general, my own spiritual beliefs and practices, and my respondents’ spiritual disclosures? Overall, reflecting on and writing this paper has been a spiritual journey. Drawing lessons from it for a professional audience was initially extremely hard. I wanted to be authentic about the lessons and faced a tremendous professional-personal dilemma in doing so.

First, I recognized the great deal of tension I experience around my professional-personal self with regard to spirituality. While intellectually I subscribe to Canda and Furman’s (1999, p. 37) definition of spirituality—“a universal and fundamental aspect of what it is to be human—the search for a sense of meaning, purpose, and moral frameworks for relating with self, others, and the ultimate reality...may express itself through religious forms, or it may be independent of them”—instead of Van Hook, Hagan, and Aguilar’s definition of it (2001, p. 12)—“inner feelings and the experience of the immediacy of a higher power,” I realized that my spirituality and the lessons from my

respondents’ spirituality are extremely personal. Thus, my professional barrier came up and I struggled to write this section.

While I enjoyed the process of writing about my spirituality and especially the early years of my spiritual training with my Granny, I realized that I experienced a great deal of discomfort in sharing it with a professional social work audience—colleagues, students, and others who may read this. I kept going back and forth—at times wanting to cut out a section completely and at other times wanting to keep it. In this process, I recognized my discomfort with revealing my spiritual beliefs and practices to others. It almost seemed like I had bared myself in front of others. And, at this time I also suddenly recognized my great unease in discussing spirituality with my research respondents. Now, I am certain that while these three respondents’ spiritual disclosures made a significant impact on me, I could not follow through on these leads because of my resistance to discussing spirituality in a professional context that was not related to spirituality. It is likely there are others like me, natural and naturalized citizens, who may have a strong personal spiritual life. But like me, they may not share it with others and may be uncomfortable with research in this area because of the strict professional-personal boundary they maintain in this sphere.

Canda and Furman (1999) report that in their national study on social workers’ use of spirituality in practice, many social workers reported that they were not taught about spirituality in school. And because of their strong grounding in separation of church and state, some do not openly discuss spirituality in their varied practice arenas. Consequently, spirituality gets shoved under the rug. Fortunately, now there is open acknowledgement of spirituality as one basic need of humans (Gil, 2004). And, as Canda, et al (2003) report, that with more than 700 publications related to social work practice with culturally and

spiritually diverse populations, now the social work literature is much more open and embracing about the importance of spirituality in professional practice. I hope this greater openness and acceptance of spirituality in social work allows people like me to come out in the open and share their varied spiritual beliefs and practices. Also, I hope there are others like me who will go back and re-read their transcripts to winnow out spirituality related discussion in their research endeavors

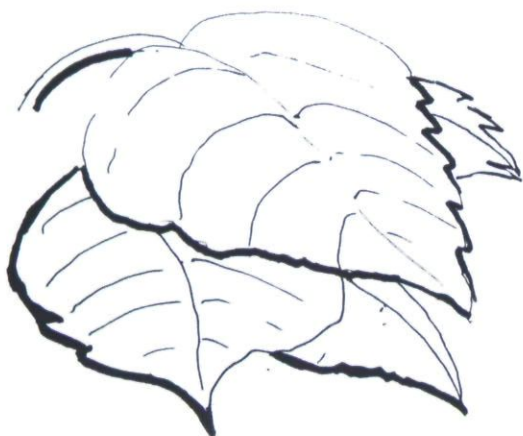
and share it with others as well, rather than putting such data into the miscellaneous or junk pile, never to be used again. This would enhance the social work literature on spirituality and allow greater insights about it to emerge in research-practice.

Second, I learned that despite my strong attempt to keep my professional-personal lives in water-tight compartments, they leak—perhaps occasionally burst—and influence one another. I am certain that because these three respondents touched my own spiritual core in a very strong yet an unexpected way that I have remembered them for so long after the interviews and research projects were over. I learned some important lessons from each of these women. Armina taught me two inter-related lessons: the importance of forgiveness and tolerance together with unity in diversity. Armina's emphatic statement about Kali—a Hindu Goddess with very prominent features—in the context of a predominantly Muslim community—which does not worship any idols—that had been presumably gutted by Hindus made me realize that while there are significant differences in beliefs and practices among faiths, spirituality is something that is larger than religious differences. Spirituality allows us to be fully human—to recognize

humanity in each other and forgive and tolerate others.

It was striking to note that despite the fact that her home may have been burned by Hindus, she still prayed to a Hindu Goddess and was open to being interviewed by a Hindu researcher. I reflected back on my own experiences of Hindu-Muslim riots and the fear associated with them and wondered how a poor, illiterate woman had transcended religious territoriality. I had believed that only some educated people were aware of Ramakrishna's teaching: Krishna, Allah, and Jesus are all one and the same. There is only one God irrespective of the names that we call Him by (Vivekananda, 1907). Instead, my own myopic understanding of religious differences and spiritual unity among people that allows forgiveness and tolerance to show through smacked right back into my face. I realized that while education is one way to expand people's understanding of spiritual relatedness among living beings, it is not the only way. There are many ways of knowing, and lived experience is a strong teacher. Thus, Armina could openly say in a Muslim community that she prays to Kali, perhaps implying that she derives strength from a higher power, no matter who: Allah, Kali, or Jesus. Brenda, too, highlighted this lesson through a wonderful statement: "They just water down what God is about. . . . who's right and who's wrong, who's good and who's not. It defeats the purpose of what God intended it to be—for us to be unified."

Dana's statement, "a life without God" is being poor, was also eye opening for me. Being focused on poverty research and micro-enterprise as an avenue for economic self-sufficiency, I had not stopped to recognize the depth of Dana's understanding about poverty. Although Dana is Christian, Hinduism also teaches the same philosophy. A Hindu saint, Ramakrishna had said: "money is dirt and dirt is money." Dana echoed this same sentiment. What is economic self-sufficiency



if one does not have God's love and peace in one's life? When we are calm and centered, we are able to appreciate the truth of her statement: "If you have Him, you can always get up and do whatever you need to do, and He'll supply you with your needs." In my life, when I tend to forget this truth, sometimes I remember the wisdom in Dana's statement, straighten my shoulders, smile, and get ready to face and live life.

Without any probe from me, Brenda shared with me the great value of her spiritual relationship with Jesus. She talks to Him, listens to Him, asks Him for guidance, and trusts His blessings for her. Knowing the great hardships in Brenda's life since her childhood (See Banerjee, 2003), the depth of her spiritual faith moved me. I wondered whether I could have retained this depth of faith in my Gods or Goddesses had they treated me similarly. I know I had turned away from religion and spirituality when I did not get something I had prayed for. Perhaps I needed to hear Brenda's story to get a perspective on my life and the content of my prayers. After hearing Brenda's life story, I struggled with Marx and Nietzsche's critique of God also. I wondered how a loving God could allow such hardships to befall humans. And then I remembered Brenda had mentioned her Karma and had emphasized the good aspects of her Karma that allow the light to shine through eventually. This taught me the importance of gratitude and contentment with what we have.

Yet, Dana's and Brenda's deeply reflective understanding of poverty and spirituality is problematic as well, especially so in today's political climate. Their spirituality could be used as a two-edged sword against them and other poor people. On the one hand, it could be argued that if you are not spiritual or do not attend church, you deserve to be poor. On the other hand, it could be said that because you have such strong faith in God, you do not need anything from the state; pray

to God for all the material assistance you need. Both these arguments would go against promoting more humane social welfare policies that promote social justice: "equal access to the resources, employment, services, and opportunities" ... necessary to enable all to "meet their basic human needs and to develop fully" (NASW, 1999, p.18).

Just as a large number of MET Program participants openly expressed their faith in a higher power to help them through troubled times, there were some who were silent about spirituality or religion. It is possible that some among this latter group may not have faith in spirituality for varied reasons—youth, life experiences, and so on that could have turned them away from faith or not allowed them to test their faith in a higher power. However, material poverty, even if potentially relative, is real: people either have safe housing or they do not; have a job that pays a living wage or does not, if they have a job; experience domestic violence that interferes with their ability to work or not; experience varied health, mental health, or substance abuse issues that incapacitate their ability to maintain a family or not. Whether or not people have God in their lives, those who experience hardships require public assistance. Consequently, social workers need to be wise in highlighting spirituality as a source of resiliency, strength, and empowerment among poor people in policy discussions. We need to acknowledge the presence of spirituality, like any other natural ability like intelligence or health, but when it comes to public funding for social welfare services, we should advocate for the maximum possible funding to meet all needs so that social justice can be enhanced.

Third, again in the context of leaks between personal and professional selves, it is possible that my deeply held spiritual teachings from my Granny at a very young age dripped into my professional relationships with these respondents. When I went to social work school many years back, the separation

of the personal and the professional was highly emphasized. We were taught how to be a professional and the techniques to employ in professional relationships: starting where the client is, non-judgmental listening, client self-determination, problem solving skills, connecting clients with resources and services, and so on. I wonder how much of these are also related to our spiritual heritage: kindness, gentleness, compassion, respect for self and others, virtue of helping others. As a beginning social work practitioner, I know I used to worry a lot about making sure I applied my newly learned professional skills in my practice. I wonder whether over time as we become more comfortable with our professional selves we allow our spiritual selves to emerge in our professional relationships. Consequently, as clients or respondents experience us more authentically, they are more comfortable in disclosing their spiritual beliefs and practices to us as well. Furthermore, while social work teaches professionals to be culturally competent practitioners, it is possible that our clients also strive towards cultural competency. Thus, Armina and Brenda may have referred to Kali and Karma to reach out to me, just as I had used other techniques to build rapport with them.

Before ending, it is important to clarify that while I experienced tremendous personal-professional conflicts in sharing my spirituality narrative, and had maintained boundaries while conducting research on topics not related to spirituality, it does not mean that such watertight compartmentalization of spirituality is required today by our professional ethics, or that researching into spirituality is not a legitimate topic. In fact, today the ethical principles of social work require that clients' spiritual or religious uniqueness and cultural differences be honored and valued, but that professionals not use their position of power and trust to establish dual relationships such as seeking to evangelize, convert, or

proselytize clients or research informants when interacting with them from a professional role. However, being a believer and a social worker are not antithetical to each other. Thus, through this narrative I do not mean to imply that I consider researching into spirituality an illegitimate issue. In fact, I have personally conducted research on spirituality with some MET participants and have reported it elsewhere (Banerjee & Pyles, 2004). Here, I am merely recounting experiences with other research projects where I did not explore spirituality, and my conflicts in writing about it for a professional audience.

It is inappropriate to generalize from my limited experiences with a few non-Hindu respondents to what social workers could do in research-practice. All I can say is that for me spirituality is a bond that helps me to build bridges with some people who are different from me. It requires me to continuously strive to become a better researcher—person, teacher, colleague—without expecting success in each encounter with respondents, in each submission of grant proposals, or in each peer review of papers. However, I have a few modest recommendations for spiritually sensitive social work research-practice.

First, social workers may consider being more comfortable about sharing their spiritual beliefs and practices with their respondents when appropriate—not to convert others to their own ways of doing things, but rather to share their practices if others want to learn ways to deal with their personal issues. I would be comfortable sharing my meditative practices with respondents should they ask how to develop calmness and peace with oneself. Second, social workers may consider visiting others religious institutions and practices to familiarize themselves with others' spiritual ways. I have taken opportunities to visit Jewish, Catholic, and other services to experience their spirituality. In all cases, I have sensed the universality of spirituality, irrespective of the names we use to refer to

it. Similarly, I have invited my American colleagues to attend Hindu Pujas or to visit the Hindu temple with me to familiarize themselves with others' ways of worshipping. Third, based on my own experiences, it seems social workers—natural and naturalized citizens—could work effectively with some people from other religious groupings. Social workers are known for reaching out to others. So, when they are comfortable with their own spirituality, they could consider allowing this aspect of themselves to shine through in their relationships with clients-respondents of other religious or spiritual backgrounds. Last, social workers familiar with the spirituality literature and working in this area, such as Canda et al, may consider opening dialogues with colleagues and our professional bodies—NASW and CSWE—regarding our professional stance in the nexus of spirituality-poverty-social justice-and Bush's politics.

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