

# At the Heart of Social Justice: Using Scholarly Personal Narrative to Explore the Role of Spirituality in My Pursuit for Social Justice

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**Abstract:** “What motivates your pursuit for social justice?” This question had been posed by a professor of one of the author’s social work classes. The difficulty the author faced in answering the question led her on a journey to deconstruct the personal motives behind her passion for social justice. In this paper, the author uses personal narrative to share this journey. She first offers reflections on her early moments of awareness of social injustice and explores the extent to which these experiences motivate her desire for social change. She then wrestles with her inability to understand her motives when using dominant, scientific, and highly individualized explanations. Next, she explores the motivating forces of interconnectedness, compassion, and love, and she explores the relationship between spirituality, social work, and social justice. The author explains how she has come to understand the important role of spirituality within her personal social work identity and suggests implications for social work education and practice.

**Keywords:** spirituality, social work, social justice, social work education, social work practice

I was surrounded by a room full of passionate students on the first day of my social work course titled, Diversity, Oppression and Social Justice, when the question was posed: “What motivates your pursuit for social justice?” In answering this question, each of the professors who facilitated the class shared personal moments in their lives that had influenced and motivated them to pursue social change and to strive for a world that is more just. The class moved on with the session’s agenda; however, the question continued to prod me: What motivates *my* pursuit for social justice? The difficulty I faced in answering this question challenged me to deconstruct the motives behind my personal pursuit for social justice.

In this paper, I use scholarly personal narrative (Nash, 2004) to share my journey of questioning and discovery that I have experienced in attempts to answer this question. I share my reflections on early memories and experiences of social injustice and explore the extent to which these motivate my desire for social change. I then wrestle with my inability to fully understand my motives when using dominant, scientific explanations. Next, I explore the motivating forces of interconnectedness, compassion, and love, and I explore the relationship between spirituality and social justice. I explain how I have come to understand the importance of spirituality within my personal social work identity and suggest implications that this could offer to social work education and practice.

## Reflecting on Early Memories

On that Friday afternoon after a busy week of work and classes, you would think that my mind would have been primarily focused on getting home and relaxing; however, my thoughts were far from relaxed. I was still attempting to pin down an answer to the question, what motivates my pursuit for social justice? Following my professors’ examples, my mind had drifted back to

my childhood.

When I was nine years old, my parents began welcoming foster children into our family. Eventually, an extra bed was set up in my room and my new foster sister moved in. At first, it was awkward. She was very quiet, but we soon became friends and found ourselves staying up late at night sharing giggles, stories, and secrets. I learned a lot about the world from her and from other foster sisters who came to live with us in the years that followed. My heart was broken and my innocence was lost as I realized that the world in many ways was a much fouler place than I had known it to be. I have held tightly to many of the secrets and tears that they shared with me. I know that they have been significant motivators throughout my life on my pursuit for social change.

When I was twelve years old, I learned about a woman who was in her 30s who had a disability and had recently been moved into a nursing home in my town. She was likely the only person under the age of 80 living in this facility. I remember overhearing a family friend telling my mother something to the effect of, “She’s functionally about 12 years old and is not adjusting well. Nobody comes to visit her.” I was 12 years old. I couldn’t imagine how lonely she must have felt. I don’t remember all the details, but I do remember the pain I felt inside when I heard her story. I decided I would go meet her. We became friends and I ended up visiting her almost every week for the next six years. Together we made crafts and scrapbooked, and occasionally we would bend the rules by leaving the institution and going off the property with deviant smiles. Despite the challenges of getting around in her power chair, we would go on little adventures to explore the neighbourhood. She also shared stories and tears with me. Deep down it felt wrong that she lived where she did and was isolated the way she was, which was another layer of motivation for my social justice pursuit.

I discovered at a young age that I learned differently than most kids at school, but it wasn’t until my first year of university that I was diagnosed with a “learning disability.” I vividly remember in middle school advocating for myself by challenging a teacher because I believed the method on which I was being evaluated was unfair. I remember my teacher’s response to my concern. She said bluntly, “Life isn’t fair.” I snapped back, “Then let’s make it fair!” My own challenges and tears through those years have stuck with me and have given me a desire and a motivation for justice regarding the way people who are “different” are treated.

Of course, my thoughts continued swimming in other examples that kept flooding my mind. All were experiences where I saw the results of injustice and I looked them in the eye—in the eyes of people who I’ve met or worked with who were suffering from the social, economic, and political dimensions of inequalities in our world. I began seeing the faces of those who I have connected with over the years who have motivated me: those in foster care, slums, orphanages, or homeless shelters and friends being negatively impacted by the effects of climate change or by the ongoing oppressive forces of colonization. My mind kept swimming through those layers and layers of motivation until I realized that I wasn’t fully answering the question.

### **Pushing the Question Further**

What motivates my pursuit for social justice? The experiences alone cannot encompass the entirety of the answer. I began to dig deeper. *Why* did these experiences with others and with myself each stir in me extreme emotions resulting in motivations to work toward creating a reality that is different, that is more just? *Why* did these experiences stir in me deep sadness or outrage that made my stomach feel sick or caused my jaw to tighten and my fists to clench, pushing me to write a letter, stand in a protest, to make sacrifices, or put myself at risk to advocate for others? *Why*?

My science background suggested that perhaps the source or the reason behind this motivation is simply a biological instinct that pushes me to act in ways that benefit or enhance the survival of my herd or species. If this is true, then my biological instincts have conditioned me to label whatever benefits my herd as good or just and whatever does not benefit my herd as bad or unjust and in need of change. While I do not deny the influence of biological instincts in my life that are part of the human “struggle for existence” (Darwin, 1968, p. 60), I believe this suggestion ignores higher orders of human consciousness and emotions and leaves me with a sense of alienation from purpose and meaning in life. The ideological framework of Western science, which suggests that the physical world is the only reality, does not encourage me to challenge oppressive forces in society in pursuit of equality and justice. Rather, it leads me towards an individualistic mindset that encourages the pursuit of convenience, greed, and materialism. Korten (2006) explains that understanding the world as a mere collection of chemicals and genetic codes subject to physical manipulation for human convenience has influenced the worldview of modern culture and has contributed more to practices of exploitation and oppression than to strides toward social justice.

These questions and thoughts have pushed me to acknowledge that my pursuit for social justice is more than a biological instinct required to enhance the survival of my species. This cognitive journey has helped me to understand that there is a reality beyond the physical which influences my motivations. Surfacing within this reality are values and beliefs I hold regarding life as an embodiment of the sacred—that all people are interconnected through a spiritual realm and that our individual differences are all part of a collectively beautiful Creation. These values led to my desire for all people to be treated as equals and have fair, equitable opportunities to not only experience life but to experience it in its fullest. These beliefs allow me to picture a world where our relationships and social structures are designed to enable all people to experience the fullness of life, and that even through pain and death there is dignity and beauty. Social actions and structures which are incompatible with this picture, those which “turn the natural diversity of human beings into oppressive hierarchies,” are ones which I have labeled as unjust (Solas, 2008, p. 821).

The examples from my childhood that I shared above all have something in common. Each involved a deepening in my understanding of my relationship with others, with myself, and with the world around me. Each involved a profound realization of the value, dignity, and worthiness of compassion and love inherent in all people and a sense of interconnectedness between one another. There was something far beyond the physical tears that connected me to others and to myself, and that changed the way that I think about “difference.” When I push the quest for my motivations for social justice beyond the physical experience, I arrive at what I am calling the

heart of social justice, a very abstract, spiritual reality where love and compassion allow for the thriving relationship between diversity and connection. Prompted by a brief discussion in a classroom, this journey of questioning has helped me to understand and describe my work and my pursuit for social justice as forms of spiritual practice.

Throughout this journey, however, I have also come to realize that discussing spirituality within the social work classroom, in my experience, has been a rare phenomenon. I have often felt isolated and uncomfortable when wanting to discuss spirituality, feeling that it is inappropriate to do so. I am not saying that the topic has never been explored in any of my classes, but when it has, it was very brief and typically focused on the need to respect others' spiritual beliefs. Very little space has been created within academia to discuss and explore how *personal* spirituality impacts who we are as social workers—how my spirituality is a major part of my social work identity.

However, a professor did recently say to me, “I can tell your MSW is not just a degree but a cry from your heart.” This comment struck me deeply as it finally created space within an academic setting for me to acknowledge and explore the fact that my longing for a society based on values of equality, which strives for *all* people to experience the fullness of life, is more than a product of biological instincts and socialized norms (though I do not deny the influence of instincts and norms). I was able to acknowledge that my “heart” or my “spirit” is a significant part of what drives me to be the social worker I long to be. Although discussions with this professor regarding spirituality were brief, they were powerful for me. This space to acknowledge the spirit behind my pursuit was invigorating. Through realizing the important role of spirituality within my social work identity, while also realizing that this topic has been treated as a taboo throughout my social work education, left me wondering why this profession's distancing from spirituality seems to exist.

### **Complex Reasons for Silence**

For many people, including myself, spirituality is difficult to describe, and in trying to define, categorize, or measure it, meaning is often lost. Since spirituality is idiosyncratic and complex, arriving at a single definition is not likely possible (Belcher & Sarmiento Mellinger, 2016). Moss (2012) explains that elements of spirituality are part of the richness of being human; however, they are “notoriously difficult to pin down or describe” (p. 606). While acknowledging that spirituality is an elusive topic which seems to defy definitions, Tisdell (2003) highlights three main themes of spirituality: development of self-awareness; a sense of honoring the interconnectedness among all things; and a relationship to a greater purpose, life force and sacred being (for example, what some may call Spirit, Creator, or God). Such elusive and multifaceted understandings of spirituality can leave people incapable of or uncomfortable with discussing the topic.

For many, the blurry lines between spirituality and religion add an additional element of complication to the topic. Coates (2007) acknowledges the relationship between the two while also assuring that religion and spirituality have taken on distinct meanings in contemporary usage. Religion has come to be known as an organized, structured system for beliefs, traditions,

doctrines, and rituals, while spirituality is a more encompassing term involving the search for meaning, purpose, and fulfillment in relationships with self, others, a higher power, and the environment. Individuals who identify as spiritual may or may not identify as religious (Belcher & Sarmiento Mellinger, 2016; Butot, 2007; Coates, 2007). Although they have separate meanings, spirituality may be coupled with religion, which often creates tension within the social work arena based on the complex history between social work and religion (Coates, 2007).

Butot (2007) addresses this complex relationship directly when she acknowledges the religious roots of the profession and states that “much of the historical religious social work practice (based primarily on EuroChristian values) was in function oppressive and an extension of colonization” (p. 150). In attempts to distance the profession from this history (which I would add, continues to exist in many ways today), many struggle with how to incorporate concepts of religion and spirituality into social work education and practice (Belcher & Sarmiento Mellinger, 2016).

Payne (2016) explains more broadly that within a society that values rational, seemingly neutral, and evidence-based approaches to professionalism, humanistic and spiritual elements of practice are “often a source of public criticism of social work for being vague and idealistic” and “may not be widely accepted among groups in society that social workers seek to influence” (p. 174). While many understand that their passion for social justice is the work of their souls, often grounded in their spiritual commitments, there are mainstream cultural taboos which keep professionals silent about their spirituality, especially in higher education (Tisdell, 2003). Moss (2012) explains that many scholars have questioned the usefulness of the concept of spirituality within social work and highlights that, “Freudian and Marxist analyses of religion and society fueled the suspicion that anything to do with religion or spirituality had to be eschewed” (p. 596). Social work, as it moved into the period of modernity, aligned itself with science by accepting a rational, linear, reductionist view of the world. Although the profession gained credibility by social and medical sciences, a separation from the spirituality discourse simultaneously resulted (Baskin, 2007).

### **Breaking the Silence**

While there are many reasons for distancing social work from spirituality, doing so may be a great risk to the profession. Moss (2012) explains the importance of locating the spirituality discourse and exploring its relevance to social work:

It reinforces and reminds us of the ‘heart beat’ of all social work; it respects and treasures human uniqueness; it urges us to take with the utmost seriousness the environment which both shapes us and is in turn shaped by us; and points us, even in the darkest times, to mystery, wonder and a sense of awe that we lose at our peril. (p. 610)

In terms of social justice, it is critical that concepts of “difference” and “other” do not erase our interdependence. Spirituality offers a framework for cherishing both diversity and unity. It is a

means to understand the coexistence of difference and interdependence. This understanding has great potential to inform our critical and emancipatory work in challenging intersecting systems of hierarchical oppressions (Butot, 2007).

Profitt (2010) reminds social workers that while it is important to understand the complex history of social work and oppressive religious forces, we must not fail to acknowledge spiritual motivations that have driven movements such as the labour, peace, feminist, welfare rights, civil rights, and indigenous movements. Profitt (2010) also highlights that many social work authors have described spirituality as a source of inspiration and sustainability for social justice work, which helps them to remain mindful of a larger purpose within their work.

Although social work is functioning within societal structures based on individualism, consumerism, and other neo-liberal ideologies (at least in Western societies), our profession must not bow to these forces. Upholding and maintaining core concepts of spirituality, such as sacred interconnectedness, can help us in challenging the ideologies which lead to the deterioration of communal cohesion. Defending the coexistence of diversity and unity can help us in challenging what it means to *belong*, what credentials define *success*, and how we construct the *other* (Butot, 2007). A spiritual framework can help in collectively defining and creating the sort of society we want for ourselves and for future generations (Holloway & Moss, 2010).

Butot (2007) warns that discussions of spirituality in contemporary social work often tend to be “depoliticized,” primarily concerned with individuals’ sense of well-being and failing to incorporate a broader relationship to social justice; thus, incorporation of spirituality in social work must be critically informed. Butot (2007) suggests that critical conceptions of spirituality can have revitalizing and sustainable impacts on our work and can bring about “radical societal change grounded in a loving stance toward others, especially those considered ‘other’ from ourselves” (p. 144). Baskin (2016) explains that disciplines such as social work have often defined spirituality as “encompassing an individual’s values, relationships with others, and a perception of the sacred” (p. 51). However, Baskin (2016) adds that spirituality cannot be seen only as an inward journey but also as an outward responsibility to create a better world. Baskin (2016) uses the phrase “a spirituality of resistance” to link individual and community spirituality to social justice, and she writes, “It brings into focus an action-oriented take on spirituality” (p. 55). Baskin (2016) continues, “This helps me understand that my spirituality is not meant to simply make me feel better in times of distress. Rather, it is what pushes me forward in understanding, resisting, and taking action toward social justice for all of humanity” (p. 55).

In reviewing the literature on spirituality, social work, and social justice, I was encouraged to discover that I am not alone in my desire for more space within social work education to explore how spirituality is infused into my social work identity. Tisdell (2003) explains that we need to create space that invites people “into their own authenticity and increased understanding of themselves and other people” (p. 35), and to allow for creative ways to express this process of deeper understanding. Moss (2012) writes, “ways need to be found to encourage students, academics, service users and practitioners to share in, and own, the journey of discovery about spirituality and its relevance to praxis” (p. 598).

It is my invitation to classroom facilitators and to those in the workplace to defy the cultural norm of treating spirituality as taboo and to build a trusting environment where topics of personal spirituality and social work identity can be discussed directly and explored more openly. I do not have a formula for how this should occur, but perhaps one can begin with a recognition that there are likely people in your classroom or at your workplace who are longing to discuss the relevance of spirituality within their practice but feel that it is inappropriate to do so due to Western cultural norms. While striving to avoid the appropriation of spiritual practices, seek to find creative ways to incorporate meaningful discussions of spirituality into the academic and work environment. While it may not be everyone's "cup of tea," for some it can be an extremely invigorating and a liberating opportunity.

### **Conclusion**

Through my journey of exploring what it is that motivates my pursuit for social justice, I have come to realize that beyond the biological and chemical constructs of my identity are values and beliefs that I hold which drive me to participate in the creation of an economically, politically, and socially just world. For me, this pursuit is spiritual in nature. No scientific justification can help me to fully explain it, yet I know the passion and the pursuit are real.

While social work claims to be a profession based on ideals of equality and social justice (Canadian Association of Social Workers, 2005), these concepts can lose their meaning when they become distanced from the why behind our pursuit for such a reality. Exploring the *why* behind our motives and the meanings they have in our personal and professional lives can bring strength when fighting in the trenches for political, economic, social, and environmental justice and can reconnect social workers to the forces that perhaps led them to the profession to begin with.

For me, remembering the motivating giggles and tears that I have shared with others from my childhood bedroom and into my adult life has been important. However, reconnecting with how those moments transformed me, fused deep connections, and helped me to understand a reality far greater than myself has been critical. It is in this sacred reality that I have found, and that I am continuing to find, the heart of my social work identity—my heart for social justice.

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