

EDITORIAL: THE REFLECTING POOL

By Edward R. Canda

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As professional helpers, we must engage in careful reflection, with clear minds, to see our clients clearly and to correct the distortions inherent in the reflection process itself. Deep reflection on oneself and the world is a profoundly spiritual practice, because it leads to knowing who we are, to honoring the inherent worth and wonder of our clients, and to holding dear our commitments to be of service.

In this special issue of *REFLECTIONS*, social workers and other professional helpers reflect on the spirituality of helping. Their stories illustrate the inextricable relationship between reflection, spirituality, and helping. Spiritual development is not possible without careful reflection on the nature of oneself and the world. In turn, compassionate nonjudgmental helping is not likely without insight into self and world, clarity of moral purpose, and genuine loving acceptance of others, which are all qualities of spiritual sensitivity. The narratives in this issue were selected because the authors reveal the insights into the spiritual growth of oneself and clients that can occur through a reflective helping relationship. The spiritual perspectives and assumptions of the authors draw on many different sources ranging from humanistic psychology and existentialism to Christianity, Earth-centered spirituality, and

African and First Nations' traditions. But they all share a commitment to reflection on self, the client, and the helping relationship as a path toward spiritually sensitive service.

The process of reflection holds peril and promise. Reflections can distort. The Biblical book of Sirach warns: "What is seen in dreams is to reality what the reflection of a face is to the face itself... What you already expect, the mind depicts" (Sirach, 34: 3-7). If I live as in a dream or rely on fantasies, my mental projections appear to me, unwittingly, as my own reflections. But reflections can also lead to insight and foresight. A clear mind perceives the world as it is. A Shinto oracle pronounces: "All you who come before me, hoping to attain the accomplishment of your desires, pray with hearts pure from falsehood, clean within and without, reflecting the truth like a mirror" (Wilson, 1991).

As a young boy, I was both fascinated and frightened by windows at night. From within a lit room, I liked to peer into a window, and gaze at the surreal mixture of reflections from within and outside the room. Sometimes, when glimpsing such a window out of the corner of my eye, I thought I saw a terrifying face and my heart would skip a beat. As I'd draw closer to investigate, I would discover that I was

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frightened by my own face, distorted by the mix of reflections. I realized this was an illusion, but I also felt there really might be something menacing lurking there. This was an important lesson, because it alerted me to be wary of distorted reflections of myself, seen in the faces and actions of clients and students, loved ones and acquaintances. What is menacing is not the reflection itself, but rather my mistaking the reflection for reality. Just like the dark window reflection, our perception of clients is often a confused mix of their reality and our reflections.

In contrast, I once heard a wonderful metaphor for clarity of reflection concerning the traditional way of educating Aztec scribes to read their sacred texts. The scribe used a mirror with a hole in the middle. The text would be read through the central hole. In this way, the reader was reminded that the meaning revealed was a product of both the message of the text as well as the reflection of the scribe's own mind. This type of reflection joins the self and the world together in clear awareness. Thus, we can understand the way the narratives of our lives are interrelated with our clients' stories. Through the interrelationship of these narratives in the helping relationship, mutual reflection and spiritual growth occurs. This is the common theme of the essays in this issue.

Five articles are by social workers. Michael Sheridan's story about her group work with

African-American prison inmates demonstrates that reflective helping requires paying attention, both to the stirrings within one's heart that lead to service and to the wisdom and healing potential inherent in our clients.

Mitsuko Nakashima's story describes how her ability to clarify reflection on herself and the meaning of life has been refined through challenges presented by hospice clients who deal with dying and grief. The Zen injunction to "keep clear mind," even while confronting life and death situations, is given vivid illustration. Sarah Kreutzger shares testimony about contributions of her Christian faith to helping clients from diverse religious backgrounds. But her story also shows that her development of faith involved much reflection on challenges raised by colleagues and clients. The next author, Donald Krill (BRIEF REFLECTIONS), has been the foremost contributor to writing on Existential social work. Krill's essay describes the interconnections between his personal spiritual journey and the historical development of the profession. Through his own reflection on the struggles of this journey, he created ways of incorporating existential themes into teaching and direct practice.

In this issue's feature WRITING NARRATIVES, the essay by Michael Yellow Bird departs from previous issues' focus on written personal narratives. He explains the traditional manner and purpose of oral story telling among First Nations' peoples by reflecting on

his experiences within his Sahnish-Hidatsa heritage. This approach uses stories to support the spiritual well being of the people rather than to focus on the individual story teller.

The two remaining narratives come from other professional helping contexts. Maulana Karenga examines how he came to develop the holiday of Kwanzaa, which has become a highly influential component of the movement to draw on African spiritual traditions in support of African American solidarity, celebration of heritage, and work for social justice. Karenga explains that his background in grass-roots community organizing, the Black Freedom Movement, and African Studies inspired this significant cultural contribution. Stephen Buhner is a minister whose helping practice uses plant medicine in the context of Earth-centered spirituality. Buhner's essay gives a detailed account of the self-reflective process that helped him relate to plants as personal sacred beings and to use them as a healing adjunct to psychotherapy.

Whenever I visit Washington, D.C., if possible, I take a meditative walk around the large rectangular reflecting pool that spreads between the national monuments. To me, this place feels like a focus point for the tremendous socio-political, economic, and military power that the United States projects upon the world. So I circumambulate slowly, gazing at the reflections in the pool,

praying for world peace. The pool reflects many contrary impressions to me. There is a predominance of human images: visitors from many states and countries; impressive structures erected to celebrate liberty and to glorify nationalism; and many trees landscaped carefully for human pleasure. If I look closely, and lean over the pool, there is my own reflection, reminding me that the meaning of all this is a reflection of my own thoughts and feelings. But also there, the sky is reflected, transcending all this human busyness, self-preoccupation, and grandeur. I am reminded that to be a force for peace, my mind must be clear and reflective like the pool and all embracing like the sky, not imposing anything and open to everything. So really, as I am praying for world peace, I am praying for my own peace.

As you read the essays in this issue, I hope that you can approach them with this type of reflection on self and world. Of course, each spiritual perspective presented in these stories (as in any story) is a human imposition on the world, like the Washington monument. Nonetheless, each perspective reflects a valuable truth, unique to the particular life of each author. Further, like the sky in the pool, there seems to me to be another truth reflected, one that commingles with yet transcends all these particular truths.

As you read, "walk around" these stories like you are visiting a reflecting pool. Without judgment, just be open to the unique truths reflected in the stories, even where they

seem to contradict each other or your own beliefs. Reflect also on the possible truth that may transcend yet unify all these other partial truths. And recognize your own reflection in these reflections.

In this manner, reading these stories can be a preparation for reflection on the stories of our clients, students, and colleagues. Then, as we practice reflection within our activity of service, the spirituality of helping naturally appears. The helping process itself is like a reflecting pool. And it is an opportunity to walk for peace in the world. □

REFERENCES

Wilson, A., Ed. (1991). *World Scripture: A Comparative anthology of sacred texts*. New York: Paragon House.

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