

## HONORING ANGELS IN MY PATH: Spiritually-Sensitive Group Work with Persons Who Are Incarcerated

*This narrative tells the story of how I came to work with a group of men who are incarcerated on a variety of life issues related to the process of recovery. This experience has been a spiritual journey for me, as well an opportunity to be professionally involved with spiritually-sensitive social work practice. Glimpses of the group's evolving sense of purpose and connection are provided to illustrate how spirituality can be interwoven with the process of professional helping.*

by  
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### Author's note

Most of the men's real first names have been used in this narrative as specifically requested by them. As one man stated, expressing the sentiment of the group, "I've had my name connected with negative things in the past. I want my name associated with something positive now." I have honored their request. One man who was involved early in the life of the group cannot be contacted; thus, a pseudonym is used.

The author gratefully acknowledges the participation of the men of the RESPECT Recovery Group at Nottoway Correctional Center -- Abbey, Andre, Frankie, Keith, Lennie, Marvin, Paul, Rashid, Red, Saleem, Spellman, Sylvester, Wallace, William, and Vernon - for both the many gifts they've brought to our group and for their valuable review of this manuscript. Also greatly appreciated is the support and talent of the group's two co-facilitators, Mr. Michael Crosby and Mr. Charles Clay, as well as their helpful review of this narrative.

### THE PROCESS OF NOTICING

A movie about angels started the process. Actually, the seeds had been planted long before, but it was the movie's message that stirred the seeds toward expression. My husband and I were driving home after seeing the movie "Heart and Souls." As is our custom, we talked about the movie's overall theme and its lesson. The plot was simple, at the exact moment that a baby boy is born in a car, four adults lose their lives as the trolley car they are riding in careens off a bridge to the street below. The souls of these persons intersect with the baby's new spirit at the moment of birth, and from that moment on they become his special angels. Only he can see and hear them, and the five "hearts and souls" become bonded for some purpose that none of them understand. Later on in the movie, they discover that the boy, now a man, is meant to help the four souls complete the unfinished business they left behind as a result of their untimely deaths. Once the task is accomplished, each soul is

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released to continue on his or her journey, and the man left behind learns a great deal about his own true spirit in the process. My husband and I decided that the theme of the movie was about noticing when significant people "cross your path" and honoring that intersection.

The movie tugged at a part of me that had been lying dormant for some time. As a junior faculty working toward tenure, I had been focusing on my academic life at the expense of several other facets of my life. I feared that my only major contribution had been to move hundreds of graduate students through their research courses while adding lines to my curriculum vitae. This was not my idea of a meaningful life, and I felt that I was at a crossroads. I knew that this "crisis in meaning" was one that could not be simply solved through becoming better organized, or learning more creative scheduling, or volunteering to be a member on one other committee. I also sensed that the solution to my problem was going to require more of me than cognitive problem-solving or psychological exploration. My spiritual self was in trouble and, thus, a spiritual journey was needed.

So as I rode in the car going home, I began to muse about who I might not be noticing in my own life. Were there souls, or "angels in my path," right now who could assist me in my spiritual search for meaning, connection and purpose? As I asked myself this question, a series of faces drifted

across my mind's eye...

Spellman, late 50's, looking angry... Andre, 30 something, with a comical expression on his face... Saleem, about 40, serious and dignified, but with a twinkle in his eye... Carl, early 20's, looking frightened and withdrawn. About a dozen faces entered my consciousness one by one, each seemingly with a message that I found impossible to ignore.

These were the faces of a group of men incarcerated in Nottoway Correctional Center, a maximum security prison about an hour away from where I lived and worked. I had met each of them while doing a program evaluation of specialized group services for incarcerated substance abusers. This volunteer program (called the "Inner Child Workshop Series") had been provided by a woman who volunteered her services to two prisons, one for men and one for women. The workshop's focus was on understanding how unresolved trauma in childhood affect's one's belief system, emotional reaction, and behavior in later life. I had been contacted by a former student that worked at the women's prison to see if I could help evaluate the program's effectiveness. As a part of the evaluation, I had conducted post-treatment focus groups at each prison to solicit feedback about the program from its participants.

During the group interviews, it became apparent that, although both the men and women found the workshop series as immensely beneficial, it had been particularly

important to the men. The women, already participating in a therapeutic community within their institution, did not perceive the end of the Inner Child Workshop Series to be a problem. Conversely, these services were unavailable in the men's prison, and they viewed the end of the volunteer program as a major loss. Most echoed the sentiment of one male participant, "I feel like I am finally beginning to understand my life and how I got here, and have some tools to turn myself around, and now the program is ending. I need a lot more."

Deeply touched by what these men talked about in the focus group, I felt conflicted about the ethics of simply "collecting the data," while ignoring the human needs. I decided to help find another volunteer to provide follow-up services for the men, since the original group leader could not continue. However, after several tries, no one had come forth. I struggled with the idea of volunteering but decided it was impossible. I sat in the car with the men's faces hovering around me; I knew I needed to pay closer attention to these souls whose lives intersected with mine and touched my heart -- these men had appeared as "angels in my path." I needed to volunteer to do the group for my own sake as well as theirs.

This clarity was soon replaced with numerous "yes, buts..." The prison was so far away -- it would take 2 hours just to drive there and back. As a full-time, pre-tenured academic, I didn't have the time; my

schedule was unmanageable, and I needed to spend every free moment writing. Doing the group would take up at least half a day or more each week, time I could ill afford. Also, I didn't want to do the group alone; I would need a male co-facilitator and who would that be? And working with Corrections again! I had worked for 5 years with the department before getting my doctorate and had sworn never to work in that system again. And just who did I think I was? I a middle-aged, middle class white woman working with a group of African-American men whose lives were radically different from mine? Did I really think it could work?

On the other hand, I felt good about the possibility of putting my whole self where I had been saying my heart was. For several years I had become increasingly concerned about the plight of at-risk kids, particularly young black males. The social and political environment was becoming more threatening to this already vulnerable population. I felt a constant tug to "do something," but rationalized that this work was better left to African-American men that were better equipped to deal with the needs of these children than I was. I began to admit to myself that my reticence had as much, or more, to do with my own fear of rejection than any sensitivity to cultural differences. Here was a chance to be involved in something truly meaningful, and it seemed to be the next step in my spiritual journey.

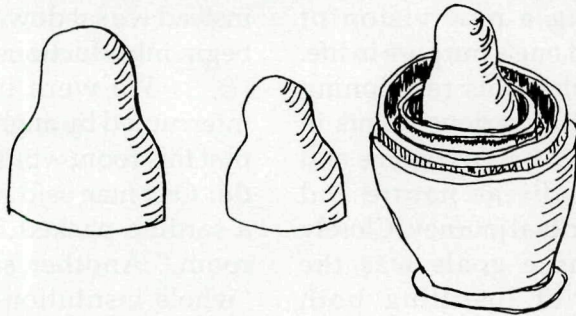
I also began to grow excited about the possibilities of

utilizing a model that my colleague, Dr. Kate Hudgins, and I developed for work with survivors of trauma (Sheridan, in press). This approach, which we call the "Three-Child Model of Recovery," was developed in response to limitations we noted with existing "inner child" models (Bradshaw, 1990; Whitfield, 1986). Briefly, we had observed three problems with previous conceptualizations. First, when clients attempted to follow messages from their "inner child," they had difficulty in differentiating between healthy, recovery-oriented messages and other internal messages, and therefore sometimes hurting themselves or others. Second, many clients encountered "inner selves" that were so isolated or severely wounded that they began to see themselves as "damaged or defective goods." In some cases, this reaction developed into a doomed sense about oneself that left the person incapable of mounting the energy needed to do the work of recovery, either because the task was too great or seemed destined to failure. Third, we found that some persons became so stuck in the sadness and rage of earlier trauma that they became unable to take responsibility for themselves and their own recovery. We tried to address these problems through modifying the metaphor of the "inner child" so that its positive role in recovery could be maintained, while hopefully eliminating its unintended negative consequences. We also made a conscious attempt to integrate

spirituality into our biopsychosocial understanding of trauma.

Specifically, the "Three-Child Model" views the traumatized individual as a series of nesting eggs, similar to the Russian carved figures that hold smaller and smaller versions of themselves, one inside the other. The outer egg represents the "adult child;" the physically grown individual who interacts with the world and experiences problems in thinking, feeling, and behaving characteristic of trauma survivors. Below this adult self is another nested egg we labeled the "wounded child." This part of the self is where most of the cognitions, affect, and sensations of prior trauma are held, sometimes partially or wholly unavailable to the adult child. (This was the part of the self that survivors often thought of as their "inner child.") Finally, the deepest nested egg which we came to call the "sleeping/awakening child," is seen as a patiently waiting spiritual embryo, containing all the positive qualities and life possibilities that the individual possesses. This deeply buried self keeps the seeds of the "true self" or "divine self" safe and protected. Unfortunately, this survival mechanism also keeps knowledge of this part of one's being away from both the individual and others.

This third child state is understood to be the person's spiritual center and the source of spontaneity and creativity or what Moreno (1941), the father of psychodrama, called the



"godhead." Through this part of our being we can experience our own divinity and learn to accept responsibility and co-creation for our lives. Therefore, while the deepest child sleeps, so does our spirituality. Our model suggests that, in persons who are experiencing significant trauma, this core, divine self makes a wise decision when he or she realizes that the external environment is not going to provide what is needed for healthy growth and development. Part of the self simply goes to sleep, patiently waiting until the outside world evolves to a point safe enough for her/him to awaken.

Unfortunately, submer- sion of this spiritual, core self leaves the "adult child" and "wounded child" to battle it out among themselves, often with negative consequences. The survival tactics of denial, repression, disassociation, and rigid or acting out behaviors utilized by the "adult child" are not helpful in healing the unresolved issues held within the "wounded child."

Conversely, the raw feelings and needs expressed by the "wounded child" often overwhelm the person at the "adult child" level and only serve to convince him or her to utilize old, counterproductive coping strategies even more vigilantly. We discovered that if we helped clients awaken their "sleeping child," or their core, spiritual self, this brought a needed third voice to the conversation, one that could communicate effectively with both the "adult child" and "wounded child." It also seemed to bring the vision, the courage, and the energy needed to do the hard work of recovery at the other two levels. As a result, clients were not as likely to experience the three problems discussed earlier: confusion between healthy and destructive messages, the development of a doomed self-image, and the tendency to become fixed in a victim role.

Most of our work using this model had been with white, middle class adults who had experienced physical, sexual, or emotional abuse. I was anxious to see if the approach could be

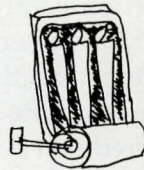
useful with a different group of people. I knew from the data collected during the program evaluation of the Inner Child Workshop Series that many of the men had reported physical, emotional, and/or sexual abuse in their past. I wondered if the trauma of societal abuse and neglect, which all had experienced, could be effectively addressed using the model, too. Finally, I was interested in integrating a spiritually-sensitive approach to practice that attempted to be culturally-sensitive as well. One's racial, ethnic, and cultural background is central to one's identity and sense of place in the world. As African-Americans, I knew that the men at the prison had probably experienced significant wounding of this part of themselves. Thus, any approach, including a psycho-spiritual model such as the "Three-Child Model," must consciously recognize, integrate, and honor racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds and identities to be both respectful and effective.

The pulls toward working with the group were greater than my fears of doing. And so I decided it would just move forward step by step and trust that, if it were meant to be, the way would be cleared. As the weeks went by, each one of my perceived obstacles fell by the wayside. I applied for and got a University Community Associates Project award that provides released time from teaching one course in order to do community service. A gifted male student, Michael Crosby,

agreed to be my co-facilitator as a way of learning more about experiential practice approaches, which I planned to use with the group. He had several years of practice experience in substance abuse and group work and possessed both the strength and gentleness that I thought was needed. An independent study was arranged so that he could receive course credit for his work with the group. Permission from the correctional facility was obtained to run the group, and 17 men were interested in participating. Finally, Tuesday morning was the only time that both Michael and I had free and the institution agreed to let us come at that time. When I expressed amazement at how easily the barriers had evaporated and the way had been cleared, a friend reminded me that "there are no accidents." In any event, whether by a series of lucky breaks or through divine intervention, we were ready to begin!

The following paragraphs provide snapshots of particular group sessions and illustrate the growth in trust and risk-taking that took place over time. Four treatment goals emerged as we worked: recovery from substance abuse; recovery from previous trauma, both as children and adults; recovery from involvement in criminal behavior, including accepting responsibility and forgiving oneself for harm that had been done to others; and recovery from the negative effects of incarceration. These were the clinical goals, but they were also spiritual goals in that

they involved a process of honest self-examination necessary for developing a new vision of oneself and one's purpose in life. I believe that this revisioning is required at various points in all of our lives to recognize and claim our divine nature and unique spiritual journey. Closely tied to these goals was the objective of instilling both hope and pride in oneself as an African-American man. To achieve these outcomes, we endeavored to base our work with the group in cultural and spiritual sensitivity.



## BEGINNING THE JOURNEY

I will never forget when we first stepped into the small room that had been made available for the group. On one side of the room was a door that led directly to a counselor's office that was supposed to be vacant during group time, but was clearly occupied. If we could hear them, that meant that they could hear us. On the other side of the room was a door with a window, which allowed full view of the group by any passerby. Not exactly an ideal environment for developing trust and sharing! In between these two walls was a circle of crowded, disgruntled-looking

men. I felt like a timid rabbit needing a safe place to hide. But instead we sat down and tried to begin introductions.

We were immediately interrupted by angry statements that this room would simply not do. One man said he felt like "... a sardine packed in this small room." Another said that the "whole institution can hear us through the heat vents. I ain't saying nothin." Others shared similar sentiments. It was clear we had hit our first roadblock. After hearing their concerns, Michael and I agreed that it was a pretty bad situation and that we would try to do something about it. Since we were stuck with it, we asked if we could just use the time to get the group started. With some reluctance, the men agreed, and we began to explain the purpose and expectations of the group. We talked about the group becoming a safe arena for folks to work on the recovery issues identified earlier in the Inner Child Workshop Series. Some looked interested, others looked bored, and all of us looked uncomfortable. I reminded myself that, at this point, all of us were wearing protective masks and that if we just hung in there, our true selves would begin to feel safe enough to come out.

Finally, Michael suggested playing a name game whereby each person would think of an adjective that began with the same letter of his first name. Each person would introduce himself and then introduce all the group members that had come before him to the next man in the circle. Michael

started, "I'll begin. I'm "Manly Mike." And you are?" With some awkwardness the next man said, "Well, I'm "Super Sylvester" and this is "Manly Mike," and you are?" As each man thought up his own nickname and struggled to remember the names of others around the circle, the mood lightened and people started to chuckle -- both at the choices of names ("Relaxed Red," "Awkward Andre," "Seeking Saleem," "Sensational Spellman," "Peaceful Paul," "Wasting Wallace," "Friendly Frankie," "Kind Keith," "Attribute Abbey," "Wise William," "Caring Carl," "Learned Lennie," "Researching Rashid," "Messenger Mike,") and the game itself. At the end of the circle, Michael instructed us that we had to go back the other way through all the names. This meant that the first guy, who thought he had to remember Michael's name only, now realized that he had to remember everybody's name. When he pulled off this feat successfully, the group spontaneously applauded and felt as if something important had entered the room through the simple process of naming (and claiming) names.

By the following week, we had secured another group room with much more space and privacy. We obtained it by asking for it. This may not seem remarkable, but in a system characterized by seemingly more barriers than support, it was an amazing accomplishment. The men were impressed and felt as if someone had listened to their

needs. I pointed out that the new room had been arranged through the efforts of one of the institutional teachers and the treatment program supervisor. Some stated doubts about any real support coming from anyone who worked there -- a theme that appeared many times over the weeks ahead. I noted to myself that our efforts needed to be focused on changing the relationship between the men and some of the institutional staff, as well as on the work of the group itself.

I also reminded myself not to fall into seeing the staff as "the enemy," since that would not be helpful to the group in the long run. I vowed to act from a place of "seeing the light in everyone" when dealing with the staff, as well as the inmates. This approach was hard to pull off sometimes, such as the time we had to wait an incredible amount of time to get through security because somebody couldn't find the right paper work even though we'd been coming in on Tuesday mornings for weeks, but in general it worked quite well -- especially when I had to ask permission to do something outside of the usual routine (such as bring in a group birthday cake or a camera to take group pictures or a tape recorder each week in order to

play a drumming tape for background music or candles for our closing ceremony). In any event, "mindful respect" served us well both inside and outside of the group.

In that first real session, we talked about how free one could be, or not be OK—physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually -- inside prison walls. We ended up doing a spectogram (an experiential technique designed to make internal processes external) to make our discussion more real. One side of the room, near the door, was designated as representing total freedom to be oneself, even while incarcerated. The other side of the room, in the far corner, was targeted as a place where there was no freedom -- not to act, to feel, or even to think one's thoughts. I invited the men to place their bodies along the imaginary line between these two extremes and then talk about why they had chosen that particular spot. People took many different places along the line, which surprised me, and spoke quite honestly about their respective positions.

At the totally free end, one man said "I feel pretty free in here. I have my routine... my job, my studies, and my music. I'm developing my faith here. I choose what I say to whom, but I feel as free to have my thoughts and be who I am in here as I did on the outside. Out there... that was not really freedom." At the opposite end, two men expressed how they felt totally controlled. "Man, I think they even control my thoughts

Not free

free

sometimes." As the men spoke, I realized that I had assumed that most would choose the "not free" end. I probably had many misguided assumptions and misperceptions about the lives of incarcerated people. I would have to stay open to hearing their truth without preconceived ideas. At this point, the masks were down a bit, and the group was in the process of becoming. Furthermore, the notion that the self may be more than the physical body had been introduced, leaving the way clear to explore our spiritual, as well as corporal selves.

## UNFOLDING STORIES

In the weeks ahead, Michael and I came prepared with specific ideas about what we would focus on during each group and found that we abandoned our plans each week. I learned that I could not predict what would work with this group based on my previous experiences with other client groups. In using the Three-Child Model previously, I usually started with a brief didactic presentation of the model and then moved fairly rapidly to experiential work with each of the child states. I quickly realized that the act of simply talking (about one's ideas, experiences, or feelings) was a major experiential task for these men. Although I could incorporate some psycho-dramatic techniques fairly easily (such as the spectogram described above), other techniques such as focusing (a process of guided meditation

that facilitates self-awareness and connection with one's spirituality) and role-playing needed slow and needed careful introduction.

Although I was used to working with persons who carried a great deal of pain from previous trauma, generally experienced in their families-of-origin, the level of pain I perceived in these men's lives was more encompassing in that it had been experienced from the larger society as well as within their family systems. In addition, most of the men experienced their incarceration as furthering previous trauma, and worked hard to defend themselves against the pain that came with their current circumstances. We responded by slowing the process down considerably and by letting them lead us to where we needed to go.

Michael and I also directly addressed the issue of racism, which resulted in one of our more productive sessions. During our third session, I asked the men how they felt about doing this group with two white people when all of them were African-American and, on top of that, how did they feel about my being a woman? After some jokes about the desirability of being with a woman for a change, several men started by saying that race didn't matter to them. "You know it doesn't matter to me what color a person is... what matters is whether they're all right or not. You know, can I relate... can I trust them? I've known some bad brothers that didn't care that I

was black, you know. They did me in anyway." We spent some time talking about how people are individuals -- some good, some bad -- regardless of their color. But Michael and I gently pushed the issue and other sentiments began to come out. "Well, I'll tell you. I never trusted any white people, ever. All my life they've tried to mess with me and I don't mind saying that I don't want anything to do with most of them. Now you and Mike, I don't know. I don't know where you're coming from, you know. Why would you two white folk, professionals and all, want to come out here and be with a bunch of inmates? It makes me wonder." This set off a tense, but honest conversation about negative feelings and experiences that many of the men had with white people and questions that they had about us. Michael and I tried to respond honestly about what we were doing there and stressed that we were getting something important out of being there; that we believed that we would get as much from them as we would give.

To say that the session was uncomfortable at times is an understatement; at one point I was wiping away tears of frustration at feeling that I was being misunderstood by one man in particular. I was trying hard to be honest about my own internalized racism and I felt as if my self-disclosure was being used against me. Other group members rushed in to rescue Mike and me, but we just kept talking, sharing and risking about the very hard topic of race

and racism, and the way it affected all of our lives differently. By the end I knew that some of them were afraid we wouldn't come back, but I also knew that we had taken the group to a new level. Because we had the courage to speak our hearts and souls, as well as our minds, a sacred trust had begun to grow among us.

This new level of trust was quite apparent several sessions later when we turned our focus to their lives as children. It was on March 15th - I remember because it was my son's 12th birthday. As I was driving to the institution, I started thinking about the differences between my son's 12 years of life and the men's lives at that age. When I compared the resources, support, and validation my son received from his community and the society at large with the lack of such factors in the lives of many young black men, the meaning of "white privilege" was crystal clear. I was angry about the differences.

With these thoughts in the back of my mind, I started our beginning focusing session with special attention to the men's lives at the important age of 12. They had been growing more and more comfortable with the technique of focusing, and I took a risk that they were ready for some early life work. After helping them turn inward through noticing their breathing and relaxing their bodies, I invited them to go back in time to a younger age - the age of 12, when a young boy becomes a "manchild;" not quite child, not quite grown. I guided them to

be curious about themselves at this age and to see if they could notice what this young manchild was like. (Focusing is done slowly with adequate pauses between sentences to allow the person to notice what is true for them in that moment.)

"What is he like, this young manchild that was you? Don't push -- just notice whatever comes up as you seek to know this young man better. Can you see him or feel him or hear him? Maybe he's just a glimmer. That's fine; just notice what is there and what he has to share with you. See if you can sense how he is physically. Is he growing tall or is he still small? Has his body begun to change? Does his body have a lot of energy, or does he feel tired or weighted down? And how is he feeling inside? What is the expression on his face as you visualize him? What do you think is going on inside of him? Is he happy and proud, or sad or angry? Or maybe he's a little bit scared. What does his heart say to you? Listen. And what about his mind? Is he curious and eager to expand his growing mind? Does he think he's smart? Does he want to know everything there is to know? Has he been told anything about his mind? Good things, bad things... And, now his spirit... How is it? Can you sense it or feel it - can he? Is it growing along with the rest of him or has something happened to it? How "spirited" is he? Take him in and see the truth for him... How he really is - physically, emotionally, mentally, spiritually - as he stands in this very special time - this time

of 12 years - this time of being a manchild? Now see if there is some way you can make contact with him... You, now a grown man and this child inside of you - this manchild. See if you can catch his eye or pat him on the back or hold him in your lap. Whatever is OK for both of you is fine. And when you're ready, see if you can bring part of him back here, maybe to share with the rest of the group - as much or as little as you want. Take your time and when you're ready, just let us know you're back by opening your eyes.

When I finished the focusing session, the room remained quiet.

Then one man spoke, "I don't know how in the hell you picked that age -- 12, I mean. When I was 12, that was some year... Why'd you have to pick that age? I mean, shit... I was one messed up little guy when I was 12." He went on to share that he was living with his Mom, (his Dad had never been with them) and she was tricking for money and drinking heavily and he felt so caught. He was so angry with her and loved her too, and he didn't want to be at home to watch. At about that age when he started hanging more and more with the boys, and the boys all looked up to the men in the big cars, the flashy jewelry, and the wads of money. And he wanted to have someone help him and tell him how to be a man and the drug dealers were the only men that paid attention to him, and so he turned a corner -- at the age of 12. He told his story painfully, with tears and with anger, and the other men leaned



their bodies in closer to the circle and lent their support with nods of their heads and respectful silence. One by one, they each talked about how pivotal the age of 12 had been. Mostly tales of abandonment from fathers they never knew or stories of physical and emotional abuse from substance abusing step-fathers or relationships full of negative messages and emotional distance from the few overworked father figures that were still around. And stories of mothers who kept hanging in there - trying to keep the family going and keep their children safe. Or mothers who found their only comfort in bottles or in pouches of white power or in the arms of johns. And one particularly chilling story about the day that belief in goodness and justice and "doing things the right way" was lost when a policeman tried to get a scared 12 year old to pick up a knife in an alley so that he could shoot him as he'd shot "them other niggers."

Everyone had a story to tell, the theme of racism, abuse and neglect was clear in each account. Racism, abuse and neglect were imposed by a society that had turned its back on who these young men were and who they could be. Abuse, neglect and negative messages also came from family members living lives of despair and doing the best that they could, but did not understand the effect of the wounds inflicted on their young sons. The spiritual wounding that had occurred to each group member was another theme that rang loud and clear. Instead of

being respected and nurtured, the divine child within each boy had been denied and denigrated and "dispirited."

We closed the group session by talking about who those young 12-year-olds were meant to be if they had received the support and nurturing that is every child's birthright. What were their true, spiritual natures? Who were these young children of God? Who would they have become if their circumstances had been different? I watched them as they spoke about what they were like before they learned to hide out within themselves and in the streets - this one's loving nature, another one's zest for adventure, and yet another one's unending curiosity about life around him. Their faces began to light up, and laughter filled the room as they began to grow connected to that true self that had been lost along the way. I knew that the men were beginning to sense their spiritual core - their "sleeping/awakening child" that could help them begin to revision themselves and their lives. As for me, I left the prison that day with a deepened appreciation of my own spiritual child and a joy about her own awakening. This session was a turning point for the group. The level of honesty and the support that we shared that day built a basis for coming together in a different way in the weeks ahead.

The focus of group sessions was diverse. We talked about what it meant to be a man and where those messages had come from. We talked about relationships with women. We

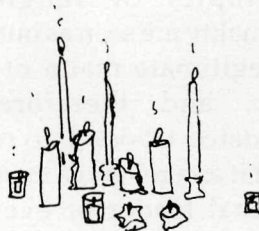
talked about maintaining ties with friends and family members on the outside and letting go of relationships that were no longer there for us. We talked about living a life of recovery inside an institution that mirrored life on the streets where drugs and other negative activities are readily available. We talked about how to deal with feelings and how to express frustration and anger constructively instead of falling into the old cycle of perpetrator and victim. We talked about what spirituality or religion meant to each of us and how we could incorporate it in our everyday lives. We talked about learning to trust and open up. We also joked and teased, griped some about the institution's rules, ate cake and cookies, shared talents, waited it out during weeks of lock-down, learned to confront each other's behavior, and came to care a great deal about each other. Far too quickly, the 12 weeks we'd planned came to an end.

### ...ENDINGS

For our closing session, Michael and I wanted to do a special ceremony to signify the importance of what the group had meant. Unfortunately, when we arrived to begin the group, we were told that since our usual meeting room was being used for other purposes, we'd have to use the staff dining hall instead. This hall is not air conditioned, and we had to choose between sweltering heat or some relief from a large, noisy fan that drowned out our voices. We

chose to live with the heat in order to hear one another. We were also occasionally interrupted by other inmates preparing lunch that day and by correctional officers walking in and out of the area. It reminded me of our first session when the men had complained so about the small, cramped room that we had been given. But this time, we simply set about trying to have a meaningful closing ceremony without too much complaint. I had chosen to use the power of a ritual, rooted in both African—and Native-American tradition, to mark the group's ending. On the floor of the dining hall I placed a woven mat of many colors. In the center was a wooden bowl filled with water, a small hand towel, and a large lit candle. Around the edges lay leopard-skin jasper stones from South Africa, which had special meaning to the men given the recent liberation of South Africa. Finally, there were small individual candles for each group member. One at a time, each group member, including Michael and me, knelt before the bowl of water and the candle and began the ritual. First, each person washed his or her hands in the water while saying, "As a result of this group, I wash away..." One by one we washed away "fear of my own feelings," "hate for all white people," "the belief that I can never get anywhere," "self-doubt and self-hatred," "the need to control everything," and so on. After drying our hands on the towel, we each selected a jasper stone as a symbol of freedom and as a reminder of the negative

thought, feeling, or behavior that we had just released, acknowledging that we would probably have to remember to release it again in the future.



After everyone had his turn at letting go, it came time to claim what each had gained from the group. Again, one by one, each group member took a small candle and lit it from the large candle, which symbolized the power of the group. This time each stated: "As a result of this group, I claim my power to..." "give and receive love," "grow in my art," "be a positive force in the world," "turn my life around," "do the work I need to do," "take responsibility for my life." After each statement, the person would join the standing circle, holding his lit candle, while the rest of the group spoke his name and proclaimed: "We honor your power to...", thus affirming the positive trait that had just been claimed.

At the end, we all stood with sweaty faces and lit candles, oblivious to the noises and stares from persons walking in and out of the room. The group was a group, a sacred trust, and it didn't matter where we were. What mattered was what we had shared and what we had become. Our differences were

noted, respected, and celebrated -- but our common ties and shared humanity were recognized and honored.

## TRANSITIONS...

Following this "closing" ceremony, the group decided to continue, although with some changes. My co-facilitator, Michael Crosby, was entering doctoral school and could not continue. My weekly time with the group, provided through the Community Service Associates program, was for one semester, making it impossible for me to continue on a weekly basis. However, I wanted to be with the group in whatever way I could. My initial sense that the men and the group were essential to my own spiritual journey had proven correct. My time with was giving me the sense of meaning and connection that I needed and was fueling the evolution of my own spirit. I was learning to integrate my head, my heart, and my spirit in my work with others, and I was experiencing a sacred human connection. The question was not if I would continue; it was how?

After discussion of various options with the institution, it was clear that our choices were to meet only monthly (when I could find the time to come out) or to meet with another institutional counselor weekly and have me join the group once a month. Given some of the feelings about institutional staff, it was a real sign of growth that the group chose this latter option. Charles

Clay, an institutional counselor, became my new co-facilitator and leads the group during the weeks I cannot attend. It is significant that, after about a month, the men voted to give Charles his own Jasper-stone as a symbol of his commitment to them and their trust in him.

And so we continue. It's been well over a year since the "12-week" group began. The men have formally named themselves the RESPECT Recovery Group ("respect for self - respect for others - and respect for the community") and we have weathered the transition from the "old" group to the "new" one. A couple of the men dropped out. One man has been paroled and another awaits his release soon. Several men have been transferred to other institutions, which felt like a real wrenching of parts of our soul - but we still count them as part of us. Michael came out to visit during December and will probably come again. And we've developed mechanisms for accepting new members, and have welcomed "Mannered Marvin" and "Victorious Vernon" to our midst. New stories will be shared and our own collective story will evolve.

### **BEGINNINGS, ENDINGS AND TRANSITIONS... THE PROCESS OF SPIRITUALLY-SENSITIVE PRACTICE**

In working with this special group, I tried to consciously integrate spirituality in four major ways. First, we've purposely talked about it -- not

a lot, but as an appropriate topic for conversation among many others.

This may not seem like much of a technique or focus, but in much of social work practice the topics of religion or spirituality are seen as outside of the legitimate realm of social work, and therefore, are considered taboo. I do not talk about it as a religious expert or a spiritual leader or even as a professional with expertise in the area, but rather as one human being to other human beings, all having spiritual parts of self to explore and share with one another. For example, I've asked the men who are Muslim to explain the meaning and ritual of Ramadan to me so that I could better understand their faith and its importance to them. I've talked with other men about how connected or unconnected they feel to the faith traditions of their childhood and where they are now in their beliefs and practices. We've talked as a whole group about spirituality as one component of the human experience, one that can be attended to and developed just like one's mental, physical, or emotional self. We've also strived as a group not to be judgmental of religious or spiritual differences, but to accept, respect, and support our individual paths.

Second, by teaching the group the "Three Child Model of Recovery," with its explicit reference to the "sleeping/awakening child" state as one's spiritual center, I've also reinforced the spiritual aspect of self as an important focus for

exploration and change. As a frame of reference for doing recovery work in many areas, this model communicates the perspective that growth and development are not merely physical or psychological process, but rather an enterprise best approached holistically. It is important to utilize processes that emphasize a sense of purpose and meaning and connection, as well as cognitive, affective, and behavioral change. Furthermore, the model suggests that the spiritual core of self provides the vision and energy for doing the hard work at other levels. For example, when the men discovered and shared the true nature and potentialities inherent in their 12 year old "manchild" selves, they started to regain a vision of self that had been lost and, hopefully, found some of the energy needed to recapture and redirect that vision.

Third, many of the techniques or approaches that we've used in the group have a spiritual component. The very act of "focusing", for example, is a process for turning inward for the purpose of gaining deeper knowledge about one's core self. This process of deeper connection with self usually leads to more meaningful connections with others and often with a life force beyond oneself - whether that life force is known as God or Allah or the Great Spirit or the Goddess or the mystery or the power of the group. Other specific exercises helped group members to focus on where they were developmentally in terms of

spiritual, as well as physical, mental, and emotional growth. And the use of ritual, as in our "closing" ceremony, directly brought a sense of the sacred into our human interaction and provided both meaning and symbolic memory for future endeavors.

Fourth, the frame of reference I've employed in entering into my work with the group and my relationships with the men - initially and before every group session, recognizes the spiritual nature of the work itself. At the very beginning, as I rode home from the movies asking a prayerful question of myself and the universe: "Who am I ignoring that I should be paying attention to?" The answer was immediate and clear, as the pictures of the men at Nottoway began to parade before my eyes. During a time when I was searching for meaning and purpose in my personal and professional life, the group emerged as a sacred experience that has furthered my own spiritual path.

As such, I try to utilize one of the methods of "holistic prayer" that Canda (1990) describes in his discussion of the many approaches to prayer that can be appropriately utilized in spiritually-sensitive practice. I try to take the time to prepare myself before each meeting with the group, to picture and think about each individual, to ask for guidance and support in my interactions with them, to thank the Mystery for the opportunity to be with them, and to center myself so that I can be wholly present and genuine during our

time together. Sometimes the hectic reality of my life results in my spiritual preparation being less than I would like. But at all times, I view my work and my relationships with these men as a gift - one that graces my life and one that I hope enhances theirs.

This combination of a conscious, nonjudgmental focus, a therapeutic model that includes spirituality, the use of spiritually-based techniques, and a recognition of the spiritual nature of the work itself all blend together into "spiritually-sensitive practice." It is certainly not the only model of such practice, but it works for me with this group of men at this time. It will certainly evolve and change as we do, and I look forward to the new experiences and lessons that lie ahead.

#### POSTSCRIPT: THE MANY FACES OF ANGELS

As I was writing this narrative, I received a letter from one of the men from the group. He asked me if I had ever seen a television show on Saturday night about an angel, and he went on to say that it reminded him of me. My first knee-jerk response was to caution him quickly not to put me up on some kind of pedestal, as I certainly was no angel -- and I did ask him not to be idealistic about me when I wrote him back. But as I later realized, and included in the letter, we all have the capacity to be angels to one another, and so I thanked him for the compliment. I also told him that I had seen the "glimmer of his own wings" in group a time

or two. I, for one, am grateful that I noticed the "angels in my path" and am very, very glad that I paid attention. □

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