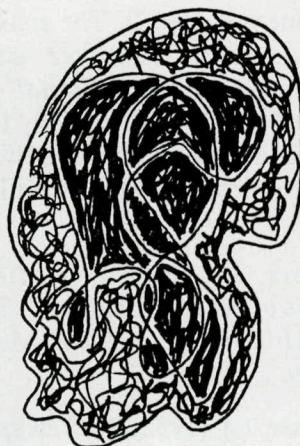


MY SPIRITUAL SOJOURN INTO EXISTENTIAL SOCIAL WORK

This is the story of my origins in existentialist thought and my struggles to link it with the social work profession. I describe how my emerging spiritual understanding found affirmation in existentialist writings and increasing openness in the profession to spirituality. This process enabled me to apply the existentialist perspective in "use of myself" as a social work educator and direct practitioner.

by Donald F. Krill

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During the last few years I have been teaching two graduate courses for social work students, one having to do with Existential Philosophy, as it can be integrated with social work, and the other entitled Religious Issues in Social Work Practice.

Thirty-nine years ago, as a graduate social work student myself, such a set of courses would have been unheard of in our university. When my Dean of that era, was approached by a neighboring school of theology and asked to consider some joint degree arrangement, he told them quite bluntly that social work had no connection with religion. Today, one of my faculty duties is that of liaison between that same theology school and our social work program in relation to two joint degree programs, one for a Masters of Religious Studies and the other for a Masters of Divinity. I would like to trace the changes that made this possible, within myself, the profession, and in our graduate school in relation to the interplay of social work and spirituality.

PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT AND PROFESSIONAL HISTORY

As a student in my final quarter of studies during 1958, I presented a paper to my classmates on the subject of religion and psychotherapy. This was an embarrassing experience because so much of my paper was made up of quotations from other sources that it was that apparent to everyone I had not been capable of making such ideas my own. I was also aware that I used quotes to show my peers that I was not the only person interested in this subject. This seemed necessary to me because the intellectual environment at our school had been Freudian for some time. If the term "religious" came up in a class it was invariably in a derisive context. In 1958 even the term "spirituality" was avoided at our school. When I inquired of one of our psychiatrist teachers as to the place of Carl Jung in American psychiatry, I was told that he had almost no relevance and that he was considered "a kind of mystic." In those days I felt quite conflicted about developing my philosophical base for practice.

I had been raised a Lutheran and had lucked into a theologically sophisticated minister, a former college teacher, who had recommended my reading such religious existential writers as Kirkegaard, Tillich, Niebuhr, and Buber. About the same time, while in undergraduate college, a Cuban Spanish language professor, whom I greatly admired for his forthright critical opinion of American culture, recommended I read the major existentialists of the day: Camus, Sartre, and Marcel. The artistic environment at that time included the Beatnik culture, so many existential writers were being translated into English and were available on the paperback bookstands. A year after I graduated from social work school, Rollo May published the first major work in English about existential psychology, *Existence*. This was followed a few years later by two journals, *Existential Psychiatry* and *The Review of Existential Psychology*. I devoured these writings as I remained especially hungry for some alternative to Freud. While these were stimulating intellectually, they only sharpened my personal conflicts.

I was a depressed rebel in those years of my late 20's. I experienced a strong sense of alienation from the societal values of the day, which were stressing achievement, pragmatic thinking, security, and a generally conforming assurance that "all was well" except for those "annoying Communists" in our midst. Existentialism spoke to my personal despair,

while my budding interest in Zen Buddhism lightened the intellectual atmosphere with humor, irrationality, and mystery. Following undergraduate studies, I left my Pennsylvania Dutch homeland to go west, settling in Colorado until I was called into active duty as an Air Force ROTC Officer. The Korean conflict had just ended and I was stationed in Japan. There I had my first exposure to Zen while studying the martial arts as an Air Police Officer. I was becoming increasingly detached from Protestantism, as I heard it preached, although I still valued theological writings. Upon completion of my Air Force duty, I returned to Colorado where I attended University of Denver's Graduate School of Social Work.

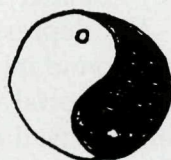
In the 50's when I was a student, there was the left-over optimism of Roosevelt's "New Deal" era regarding the organizing of social institutions to serve the poor better. What was then termed "psychiatric social work," however, was already geared to the needs of an expanding middle class culture. Freud was the great hope of that time and Freudian-guided casework was even utilized among the poor, despite its questionable results.

My personal conflicts were multiple. I was trying to impose structure from my readings to a rather shaky personal identity. I did not yet understand how to integrate existential thought into my practice. Both the social work and psychiatric settings where I was employed were strictly orthodox Freudian in point of

view. My social life with friends, and my relationship with my wife, and growing family left much to be desired. Finally, I took a leap of "unfaith" by entering personal analysis with a Freudian. It seemed the only therapeutic game in town and I decided to enter the lion's den. I couldn't do any worse than what I'd done on my own. Anyway, I preferred to experience psychoanalysis rather than read about it.

My four years of analysis were an eye-opener in several respects. My depression soon lifted, and I found more energy to deal with my social and family relationships as well as my job as a "psychiatric social worker" in a university-based children's psychiatric clinic. The community mental health movement was spreading throughout the country. It resulted in many new approaches to psychotherapy, most of which parted company with the Freudians. I had established a part-time private practice where I could make use of many of these exciting developments without worry about the critical eye of some traditional supervisor. My boss at the university clinic was a closet rebel who began upsetting the rest of the staff by his interest in family therapy and community psychiatry. Family therapy especially appealed to me because of the shift away from the medical model of pathology to a systems model that emphasized here-and-now family relationships. I also realized, through my personal analysis, that the value of therapy for me had little or

nothing to do with "recovering and working through" long buried unconscious material, but rather lay in the relationship itself between me and my analyst. I concluded that healing could have occurred far more quickly by a focus upon our and other current relationships, rather than upon the analyst's preoccupation with past history and the cause-effect insights regarding "transference."



Upon completing the analysis, two important events occurred, both of which provided a release for my flowering spiritual quest. First, I decided to pursue meditative practice following the lead of Phillip Kappleau's book *The Three Pillars of Zen* (1966). I began regular Zen practice the day after terminating analysis. Second, my rebel boss moved to another state, and the staff found a Freudian to replace him, so I quit my job. I had already published two articles on existentialism and its relation to psychotherapy and social work. This impressed my former graduate school dean, who offered me a job as a temporary teacher as few other faculty were publishing at that time.

During the 60's and 70's social workers were enlivened (some threatened) by the stream

of new theories and direct practice methods. Systems theory replaced intrapsychic theory for the most part as social workers became increasingly politicized and aligned with the poor and minorities. Spirituality was viewed with suspicion as it had been since our school's origin in the 40's. "Doing" was important, so spirituality was viewed too much as a nondoing, nonpragmatic, navel gazing activity. Interestingly enough nearly all articles in social work journals written about existentialism appeared during this time period.

To be a professor in the late 60's was a glorious opportunity. Student unrest reflected the overturning of societal values and even professional traditionalism. There were the Kennedy and King assassinations, the March on Washington, the civil rights movement, the anti-Vietnam War protests, the hippies and student radicals. Along with the new therapies, stemming from public excitement over mental health, there were the encounter groups and the personal growth movement—the forerunners to what Marilyn Ferguson (1980) called the "Aquarian Conspiracy" that wedded spirituality and psychology. Researchers were toppling the cherished dogmas of the Freudians and calling for new approaches to psychotherapy. I had become a Unitarian because of the intellectual stimulation and liberating atmosphere this group provided many of my friends and me.

University life permitted more time to write. I no longer

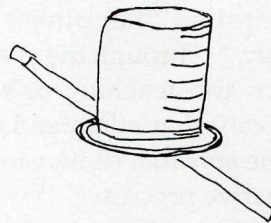
had to spend all my time supplementing my full-time job with two part-time jobs to support my sizable family. I continued publishing and soon gained a national reputation on the subject of Existential Social Work. The 60's and 70's were ready-made for existentialism, and its Asian companion, Zen. Even the magic of American Indian Shamanism, popularized by Carlos Casaneda (1972) fit the thrust of existential thinking. Students in a mood of liberation were responsive to my course in Existential Social Work and its related text (Krill, 1978). As psychological and social theories competed for professional adoption, theoretical confusion became more evident. The time was ripe for existentialism's primary focus on the therapeutic relationship.

The 80's and 90's saw a cautious retrenchment in social work as the political climate allowed the slashing of social service budgets and social programs. Freud was again embraced, now under new trauma terminology. The re-emphasis upon control underscored diagnostic categorization. Professional advocacy and social action expanded "diversity" concerns from the poor and minorities to focus more and more upon gender issues. Women more strongly influenced the profession, both in population and policy making. A large number of graduates were pursuing jobs in private practice. Direct practice was often urged to be short term in response to the watchful eyes of both state legislatures and

insurance companies. Interest in spirituality, however, was on the rise, perhaps as a luxury of the middle class women flooding the field, or as a result of the growing influences of feminist psychology and its linkages to Jung, or because religious differences appeared to be a further extension of diversity concerns. I found more students than ever before seriously interested in spirituality. Even the Council on Social Work Education recently affirmed the inclusion of religious ideas in graduate curricula. This increasing openness to spirituality has afforded more opportunity for me to infuse existentialist interests into course teaching.

In the early 80's, I had retrenched myself a bit in relation to spirituality. I left the Unitarian Church community in order to join the Episcopal Church. I was feeling the need for a rerouting in Christianity, especially with some of its more mystical traditions. I also became a volunteer with a Catholic community that sponsored a lay counseling center for the poor. Existential thinking had always proclaimed a healthy doubt about the optimism of social and political institutions. I found myself strongly identified with one of existentialism's offshoots, *The Theatre of the Absurd* (Esslin, 1961). This was a portrayal in drama of the various alienating forces of modern society and their subtle expression in human relationships. I set forth many of my own professional doubts and critiques in *The Beat Worker* (Krill, 1986). Having been a

magician entertainer since my teenage years, I developed a new psychic magic act entitled, "The Absurd Theatre of Black and White Magic." I hoped to use magical entertainment as a dramatic form of unsettling an audience's mundane views about "reality." Through the interplay between these personal and professional developments, I formed a spiritual perspective strongly influenced by existentialism, linked with my activity as a social work educator and practitioner.



MY SPIRITUAL PERSPECTIVE

What is spirituality? For me it is sometimes experienced as personal power, almost magical, that stirs the imagination and can be willed in new directions. Yet, paradoxically, it often requires resignation before an elusive mystery, sought out of a deep yearning, and discovered—usually by surprise—in wondrous moments some call "grace." Whether in beauty, horror, rhythm, or intimacy, there is inevitably a great intensity that parts company with my mundane, everyday, memory-based attitudes. For me such "peak experiences" are

commonly found in solitude, especially in nature. But sometimes I also find them in personal encounters with others, when I risked exposure of wants, fears, prejudices and meandering thoughts. Spiritual awareness arises out of human freedom when I willingly let go, or am forced to let go, of self preoccupation about worry, regret, security and self aggrandizement. In this regard spirituality is often entwined with my own personal suffering since the "letting go" process usually involves a degree of loss and disillusionment with myself or others. Yet, spirituality is also a sense of meeting, or better, a participation with an immense and affirming "Presence" that occurs in my here and now experience. This boundless "Presence" may take the form of a passive "suchness," "being with," or waiting, and a sense of beauty, wonder, and harmony. Sometimes it comes as an active response to my feeling "addressed" and sensing the need to respond and act in the world about me in an obedient service to a power beyond myself.

I must say that I am attracted to the Christian conception of "The Kingdom of Heaven," not so much as an awaiting heaven-beyond death, but rather as a presently available possibility "to be in this world but not of this world" as Albert Schweitzer (1951) once distinguished Christianity from other religions. Beyond my Unitarian years, I found contemplative Christianity, particularly as described by the

Trappist Monk, Thomas Merton (1961), most to my liking theologically, especially because he was quite open to valuing non-Christian religions and Christian variations in the pursuit of spirituality.

In recent years I have come to value the relationship between the arts and spirituality. The idea of the poet's creative "muse" seems much like the contemplative's awaiting of



some spiritual presence. In psychological terms we may speak of right-brain activity, or intuition, or the artistic side of our professional practice. Zen had long associated its spiritual practice with the arts, and my earliest introduction to Zen was through Sumie Brush Painting and some martial art forms (Suzuki, 1959). My favorite existential philosopher was Nicholas Berdaev (1962), whose best known writing was the *Meaning of the Creative Act*. I had not only been interested in the performing arts, since before my social work career, but had aspirations of becoming a fiction writer. Creative work in the arts spoke of an experienced transcendence of our hum-drum everyday life. Here was an active presence of the realm of

spirit.

Existentialism speaks of a two-part process that can occur simultaneously. First is the pessimistic disillusionment with the social realities we have learned along with the faulty definitions of secured happiness. Second is the realization of freedom, transcendence or spirit as a given possibility for all human beings. The depression of my 20's was, in part, related to the anguish of having known freedom through the arts and nature, while at the same time remaining confused about my own, societal-based expectations of controlled "happiness and maturity." Through the years of practice and teaching of social work I came to understand more fully the spiritual dimensions of the creative process.

My experience of social work students is that a number of them come to school with a healthy amount of intuitive ability that they had already discovered in informal efforts of helping others. I find most regrettable that training programs for professional helpers are so intent upon discrediting students' intuitive abilities and forcing them into a mold of left-brained pragmatic thinking that stresses theory, techniques, policy, research, and politics. The artistic component is seldom mentioned, and few have ideas about how to teach it. Despite the fact that I had a healthy intuitive sense from the start, it had taken me many years of experimental trial and error to find a natural expression of this in my work. No guidelines for this were provided in the

teaching and supervision I had undergone. I have the existential perspective to thank, along with my resurfacing intuitive spirit, for a persistence that eventually linked me with other professional brothers and sisters of an artistic spirit. These allowed me to connect my spiritual perspective to social work education and practice.

APPLICATION TO SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

In my classes dealing with existentialism, I tell students that "practice wisdom" is a path one can begin while yet a student. Research of psychotherapy results continues to produce the same finding: In general, no theory or related therapy model proves itself superior to any other one (Krill, 1986). So I emphasize that effective psychotherapy does not result from theory itself. I then propose another idea: it's not what you know, that is important, but who you are! I define practice wisdom as the integration, and continuing reintegration, of one's theory with one's personal religious or spiritual or philosophical beliefs and with one's personal subjective experience of oneself. Therefore, the course combines philosophical reflections, exercises, and discussion of practice implications. Exercises and sharing with one another are utilized throughout the course to heighten students' awareness of how such integration may occur for them (Krill, 1990). Students usually respond very positively

to this class format.

Exercises are shared in student dyads, in journals for the teacher's examination, and sometimes among the whole class. They are aimed at both personal disillusionment and a realization of the reality of personal freedom to change and expand personal meanings. I attempted to telescope much of my own spiritual quest into this single course. Commonly, students express surprise at the prevalence and power of their own value positions, based in both personal history and societal reinforcements. Many are dismayed as they discover their own responsibility for maintaining problematic attitudes, behaviors and symptoms that they had thought to be alien to what they want. Yet, there is also an uplifting discovery for them as they realize the mystery and possibilities for personal freedom and transcendence beyond these time-worn habit patterns.

I had found over the years that when I inquire about student attitudes on religion, the response is consistently negative. Certainly, an understandable barrier for many students is religious terminology that has negative and distorted connotations stemming from early negative memories or the politicized "religious" debates in our current news. Most social work students seem to fall into three categories: non-religious; advocates of spirituality but rejecting the religion of their family tradition (if they had one); and religious yet often hesitant to reveal this in the presence of

a school atmosphere obviously hostile to religion. While students are great advocates of diversity, they are often outspoken in their criticism of the very religions that are typically embraced by the poor. Because of many students' inability to appreciate religion as a key resource in the lives of so many of their clients, I instituted the course on "Religious Issues in Social Work Practice." In this course I provide students an opportunity to experience and discuss varied viewpoints on religion. One way of doing this is to set up groupings made up of the three categories of students aforementioned. They relate themselves to questions such as the nature of ultimate concern, absolute/relative truth, evil and their own shifting views of religion during their lives. Another means to engage student thinking is to have visiting speakers who are professional social workers and also follow a personal faith that is commonly shared by many poor people. Finally, practice situations involving matters of spirituality or religious belief are discussed in class.

APPLICATION TO DIRECT PRACTICE

Most important in my own direct practice with clients has been the realization of spiritual components of the therapeutic relationship itself. The writings of helping professionals who have most significantly revealed and clarified these components to me include religious as well as

humanistic (non-religious) practitioners: Thomas Hora, Walter Kempler, William Offman, Carl Whittaker, Carl Rogers, Frank Farrelly, Irvin Yalom, Sydney Jourard and Hanna Colm. Other writers have helped clarify the place of spirituality in human understanding and the practice of helping: Otto Rank, Carl Jung, Rollo May, Viktor Frankl, Milton Erickson, Maurice Friedman, Ken Wilber, and Ram Dass.

By-and-large, the practitioners who emphasize healing-as-revealing in the therapeutic relationship speak of what I would term a need for promoting personal humor, intensity, spontaneity, and forthright honesty by the worker. This vitalizing, often unbalancing activity usually occurs within a context of both detached caring and intuitive knowing. The "detachment" is from the emotional melodramas used by clients to control another's responses. The "knowing" is beyond theoretical categorizing and has to do with grasping a client's favorite repetitive organizing values that govern life decisions and also result in problems of complaint. The spiritual quality of such relationship work has to do with providing the client an experience of freedom, or self transcendence, and its related assumption of responsibility.

Freedom occurs in the heightening or expansion of the client's self awareness, in the effort of the worker to understand and clarify this understanding, and in providing genuine feedback from the

worker's personal value stance in relation to what has been understood. The worker must be in a state of mind that is as free as possible from his or her own categories, conclusions, judgments, and worries. In my experience, healing occurs to the extent that the client's own awareness, understanding, and assumption of personal responsibility for a problem-related value stance are stimulated by the worker's caring and engaging activities. Healing is actually a mutual process affecting the growth of both client and worker. It is a creative process involving two human beings aware of their unique selves in this particular hour and willing to use their energies to struggle together toward understanding. Both must be willing to venture beyond social expectations, societal value assumptions, professional theorizing, and the mechanical application of techniques.

For several years I had endured rounds of boredom, irritation, dismay, self-doubt and angry frustration with clients who were not responding to what I deemed well intentioned treatment efforts. Then I read Corsini's *Critical Incidents in Psychotherapy* (1959) and saw a glimmer of light. Not until I read Frank Farrelly's *Provocative Therapy* (1974) and William Offman's *Affirmation and Reality* (1976) did I realize "the way." At last I could not only stay awake in sessions, formerly drab, but I could actively play by means of using my own vitality and spontaneity. Therapy became far more than support

and insight. It became human engagement at a level of honesty in which the healing of both parties was at stake. The possibility of spiritual growth in such a relationship is in the risk of going beyond mechanical, habitual social exchanges so that a new level of understanding might emerge. Instead of seeing therapy as a means of matching categorized clients with prescriptive techniques, I now feel the freedom, the wonder, and the excitement of therapy as a meeting of unknown feelings and possibilities. Love is this affirming engagement of unpredictable personalities as well as that third party I call "Spirit."

CONCLUSION

My disappointment with social work has been with its strong tendencies to be a conforming, tag-along profession hoping to derive its status from "more respected professions." Despite our protest movements and human rights advocacy, we have largely embraced the values of our larger culture, dominated by rationalism, technology, and organizational management. Our need to be in control is based upon fear. We fear public criticism and the risk of loss of funding. Control seeks rational explanations, justifications and procedures. There is little place for intuition. We prefer to see ourselves as pragmatic problem solvers and tend to be overserious in going about our "matters of importance." We have overly invested ourselves in theoretical reasoning to the detriment of our

own spiritual sensitivities.

What I enjoy about social work, and am proud of, is the absurdly expansive array of human problems with which we cope. If human suffering, humility, and spirituality are intrinsically connected, which I believe they are, we have the makings of a profession strongly rooted in spirituality. I have personally found the major tenets of existentialism regularly available in my social work practice, whether direct or indirect. Disillusionment, suffering, freedom, dialogue, and commitment are experiential possibilities to enable the growth of our clients, our students, and ourselves. I have found no better way to challenge my own growth than to work with people whose lives and problems appear quite different from my own. □

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