SOCIAL WORK AND SPIRITUALITY IN AN AFRICAN CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

The inclusivity of the traditional African world view stands in contrast to the devastating brokenness of many parts of the world. This brokenness may be addressed with components of faith such as centers of value (social justice and empowerment); images of power (compassion, peace, and interconnectedness); and master stories. The development of a social work practice embued with such faith may help social work to face the challenges of brokenness and remain in touch with the commitment to alleviate suffering.

I will share my journey and emerging understanding of social work and spirituality in an African context and my nascent ideas for a social work imbued with faith. The style and content of my teaching continues to be challenged as the admission of black African students to our School of Social Work increases. Black African students bring an understanding of, and relationship with, their

Therese Sacco 2

worlds that are distinctive and different from students entering with Western

world views and upbringing. I have had to open myself to seeing and developing

alternative perspectives which can tap and help encourage the richness that the

students bring into their learning. Students come with experiences of

oppression, hardship, and suffering as well as a passion to create a different

society for themselves, their families, and their communities (Sacco, 1996a).

They also bring distinctive connections, expectations and orientations regarding

relationships to their worlds, their learning and their teachers.

I have been invited to see life as an integrated whole. I have had to question the

oppositions in Western thinking (Shutte, 1993) between both materialism (that

reality is both observable and measurable) and dualism (that humans exist with

two distinct elements: soul and body or mind and matter); between individualism

(that humans are separate, autonomous and independent) and collectivism (that

humans exist in the social where humanity is acquired through occupying a place

within the system of social institutions). I have been challenged to develop an

understanding of human beings and personal development that incorporates

traditional African conceptions of humanity (Sacco, 1996b). These conceptions

call for inclusivity of thinking and being, of the sacred and profane, of task and

process, of individuality and collectivity, and of knowledge coming from many

different sources.

Therese Sacco 3

DIMENSIONS OF A TRADITIONAL AFRICAN WORLD VIEW

The notions of both inclusivity and unity when exploring traditional African world views become increasingly apparent. These arise both from ideas about the universe and traditional African values of spirituality and community.

Ideas about the universe highlight the connectedness of all elements of that universe (Schiele, 1994). Within Africa there has traditionally been no division between the sacred and profane nor between the spiritual and the material areas of living (Parrinder, 1953; Mbiti, 1971; Schiele, 1994). All elements, whether animate or inanimate, are believed to be dependent on each other (Baldwin, 1985) and all life is considered one (Mbiti, 1975; Sengor, 1966).   Africans perceive all of life as constituting a single undifferentiated whole (Bujo, 1992). Sengor (1966, p.4) perceives the universe as a network of life forces which emanate from God and end in God, who is the source of all life forces. It is God who vitalizes and devitalizes all other beings, all other life forces.

Traditional African values of spirituality and community arise from and rest on these notions of the universe. The African world view recognizes the centrality of the spiritual feature of all elements of life. Spirituality in an African context is taken to mean the transcendent or invisible substance which connects all of the

universe. All of life is filled with a Vital Life Force in dynamic participation

(Setiloane, 1986). Sengor's work indicates that Africans have a certain emotive

sensitivity, ...*an affective rapport with the forces and forms of the universe, a*

direct and immediate contact with 'the Other.' (Ba, 1973). This Vital Force is the

source of all life and acts in a living way; it creates, gives life, strength and growth

(Bujo, 1992). The emphasis on spirituality supports and encourages

interdependency (Schiele, 1994) as there is a continuous exchange occurring

between the visible and invisible worlds, between the living and the dead. This

orientation to the universe and spirituality has implications for what it means to be

human in an African context.

Personhood is attained through belonging in **community**. The single, most

important value in traditional Africa is that of belonging in community (Mbiti, 1971;

Baldwin, 1981; Akbar, 1984; Setiloane, 1986; Schiele, 1994). *The most*

cherished principle in life-together is to include rather than separate (Setiloane,

1986, p.10). This is based on the very existence of being human, on one's

humanness. The root of being human is to belong in community (Sacco, 1996a).

In the African view it is the community which defines the person, as person, not

some isolated static quality of rationality, will or memory (Menkiti, cited in Shutte,

1993,p.43). To develop as people, people need to be empowered by others.

According to Shutte (1993), human capacity for free self-realization requires a

certain kind of influence of other persons if it is to develop towards fulfillment.

The process of finding fulfillment is made possible by virtue of complex

interpersonal transactions with others. The interpersonal transactions which

bring about individual growth reveal a kind of personal energy or power that is

not physical, but which is embodied and expressed in physical reality (Shutte,

1993; Sacco, 1996b).

Every member of the community shares the responsibility for strengthening the

life force of others in the community (Bujo, 1992). The morality of any act is

determined by its life-giving potential; good acts contribute to the life force of the

community and bad acts, however seemingly insignificant, diminish life. The

community is a mystical body encompassing both the dead and living members,

in which every member has an obligation to every other. This obligation includes

honoring the Ancestors people seek to empower the Life Force which flows

through the mystical body to which both they and the Ancestors belong (Bujo,

1992; Alt & Munro, 1997). The Ancestors are honored in each and every good

deed a person offers in his or her daily life.

THE CONTEXTUAL REALITY

Yet, looking at the world, at Africa and specifically at South Africa, these notions

of spirituality, interdependency, and interconnectedness seem to be very fragile,

if not non-existent.

Globally people are facing increasing challenges related to poverty,

unemployment, dislocation, war and violence, racial and ethnic conflict,

oppression and abuse of power, wealth and greed, environmental destruction

and all the results of the dark side of human nature. In Africa, most countries are

struggling with post-colonial liberation from dictatorship, ethnic cleansing, and

genocide. Examples of the severity of the problem can be understood when

considering refugees in Africa and genocide in Rwanda. Approximately 10 million

refugees are residing in Africa alone and 45% of the United Nations High

Commission for Refugees's budget is spent on helping these refugees (Thiart,

1997). Over a million people in recent years have been massacred in Rwanda.

The new democracy in South Africa has heralded an era of policy formulation, of

developing human dignity in people who have been oppressed for decades, and

of desire for truth and reconciliation of which most South Africans are proud.

However South Africa faces an unemployment rate of around 40%; seven million

people live in informal settlements; four out of five households are unable to

afford a mortgage; 63% of South African homes have no electricity; and one

million South Africans are infected with HIV (Editors Inc, 1996). Two and a half

million children are undernourished; 87% of whom are black (Reconstruction and

Development Program, 1996). Homelessness and street-living is on the rise.

The country is wracked by civil violence. A lawlessness exists which permeates

the whole society from petty thieving to corruption to child and women abuse to

car-jacking to reckless driving to murder. The residents of all communities live in

fear of their lives some of the time.

Given the extent of human darkness, and the knowledge we have of life-affirming

notions of traditional African spirituality, it is imperative to search for

unconventional, internal resources and to kindle in ourselves and our students

the dying embers of interconnectedness and interdependency. There is a strong

belief that social workers need to develop a social work practice imbued with faith

if they are going to face these challenges and remain in touch with their

commitment to the alleviation of suffering (Sacco 1996a).

DEVELOPING A FAITH FOR SOCIAL WORK

Faith, according to Fowler (1981), helps one get in touch with the dynamic,

patterned process by which people find life meaningful. The system of images

and meanings operates primarily at the imaginative level (Shorter 1996). Faith

helps people reflect on the centers of value and the power that sustain their lives.

"The persons, causes, and institutions we really love and trust, the images of good and evil, of possibility and probability to which we are committed--these form the pattern of our faith" (Fowler, 1981, p.4). Faith gives the passion, the commitment, and engagement for moving into the force field of life. It is a way of finding coherence and giving meaning to the multiple forces and relations that make up people's lives. Faith is a way of seeing ourselves in relation to others against a background of shared meaning and purpose. Human beings require meaning, purpose, and priorities. "We must have some grasp of the big picture" (Fowler, 1981, p.4).

Fowler identifies the contents of faith. First, *there* are centers of value*, that claim us "...the causes, the concerns, or persons that consciously or unconsciously have the greatest worth for us (Fowler, 1981, p.276). These centers of value provide motivation and inflame passionate engagement. Second, are the images of power with which we align ourselves for sustenance in the face of hopelessness and despair. We try to align ourselves with sufficient power to sustain us and the persons and things we love (Fowler, 1981, p.277). Finally, our faith orientations are shaped by the master stories that we tell ourselves and by which we interpret and respond to the experiences that impact on our lives. Master stories are the symbols which clarify for us what we believe to be "fundamental truth".

Therese Sacco 9

What could be included in a faith for social work? What could be the centers of

value, images of power, and master stories? On what kind of faith could social

workers depend and draw to motivate, encourage and sustain them in their quest

for social justice and to bring relief to suffering? Historically, the causes and

concerns that have the greatest consideration for social workers are the fight

against injustice and the improvement of the lives of the poor, dispossessed,

oppressed, powerless and vulnerable. The values which emerge from these

centers of concern are social justice and empowerment.

The fight for social justice continues to be one of the cardinal values of the social

work profession (Konopka, 1972; Pincus & Minahan, 1973; Constable, 1983;

Hepworth & Larsen, 1986; Reeser & Leighninger, 1990; Drower, 1991). There

are, however, numerous definitions of social justice because social workers live

in different contexts with different life experiences, cultures, and interpretations of

their worlds. Saleeby's (1990) understanding makes sense for the yearnings for

social justice within the South African context. According to him social justice

requires that need guides the distribution of social resources (Max-Neef, 1991) in

order to facilitate the development of personal resources; that development is

open to all, but those who have been unfairly hindered must be recompensed;

that policies and agendas favoring human development and enriching human

experiences must take precedence over all other agendas and policies; that the

dictatorial use of power is abandoned; and that oppression and discrimination as the basis for deciding on priorities is repudiated.

Empowerment can be seen as the means by which individuals, groups and communities are enabled to gain control over their circumstances, reflect on their needs, decide on their priorities, work out strategies, choose processes, and transform their lives.   Empowerment refers to the reflective and active processes whereby people maximize the qualities of their own lives (Adams, 1996). From Saleeby's (1992) strengths perspective, empowerment is not based on returning power to people, but on discovering power within people. To uncover that power, we must subvert and denounce derogatory labels; provide opportunities for connection to family, institution and community; transform the victim mindset; renounce paternalism; and trust people's intuitions, accounts, perspectives and energies. According to Saleeby, empowerment is not aimed at only reducing the sense of powerlessness but also at helping people discover the considerable power within. Borg (1994) considers empowerment from an *unconventional wisdom* perspective; only through understanding, acknowledging, facing, and descending into one's powerlessness can there be any hope of reaching for empowerment. The paradox of transformative empowerment is that powerlessness leads us to it.

The images of power, the internal and shared unconventional resources which kindle the fire of commitment, are compassion, peace and interconnectedness. The beginning of humanity, according to Campbell (1988), happens when "…you awaken at the level of the heart to compassion, compassion, shared suffering, which is experienced participation in the suffering of another person"(p.174). When there is an awakening of the heart to compassion there is a transformation from passion to compassion, compassion for the wounded. Compassion turns our thoughts from the concerns of raw life in the world to the deeply human values of self-giving in shared suffering (Campbell, 1988). Compassion is a way of seeing and being engaged in the experience of being alive (Sacco, 1995). Compassion challenges us to cry out with those in misery, to mourn with those who are grieved and to weep with those in tears (Nouwen et al., 1990). This is the awakening of the heart to love and the opening of the way. The call of compassion is a call for us to become healers with knowledge of our own woundedness; to be genuine and open hearted and move beyond phoniness and professionalism; to respect, understand, and value diversity (Egan, 1994); and to strive for congruence of our personal, political and professional lives (Sacco, 1995). Compassion is the richest energy source in the world which must be expanded and developed, if for no other reason than for survival itself (Fox, 1990).

Peace "…is not merely an absence of war but the nurture of human life, and that in time this nurture will do away with war as a natural process" (Addams cited in Sullivan, 1993). There will be peace when everyone is able to thrive without being hampered by conflict, prejudice, hatred, and injustice (Bodine et al., 1994). It is the process of responding to conflict with tolerance, imagination and flexibility (Lyon cited in Bodine et al., 1994). It needs to live, spread and be nurtured. Peacemakers perceive peace as the practice of honoring oneself, others, and the environment (Bodine et al., 1994). Efforts to deal with conflict, violence, and developing non-violent life-styles are inherent in the peace process. These start with the acknowledgment that all humans are capable of violent acts and under certain circumstances we are all potentially violent. Conflict is a normal part of life; thus, there is a global imperative for conflict management and the development of alternative conflict resolution. Shannon (1996) points to the qualities of a non-violent life-style. Non-violence is patient, kind, not envious or boastful, not arrogant or rude, not irritable, not resentful, does not insist on its own way, and does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth (Shannon, 1996). Interconnectedness powerfully and profoundly catches the imagination as one of the images of power.

The centers of value and images of power can be brought into vibrant being through development and reflection on master stories. Stories play a vital role in

Therese Sacco 13

our lives and are particularly compatible with the ways in which meanings and

history are conveyed in an African context, which relies on an oral tradition.

Stories are of reality and can be expressed because stories are instances of

experience itself (Shorter 1996). Stories are the true appearance of reality. They

are communication. Conlon (1994) explains that story introduces us to a unique

human mystery; our humanity is deepened, we are brought together and create

communion, we discover ourselves and share with others, where our journeys

and values are revealed, and we are healed and united. The telling and the

listening strengthen us. Through story sharing we can return to the world with

greater wisdom, better able to face the challenges of human welfare.

African cultural language is expressed through imaginative features. The truths of

faith need to be in accordance with African forms of expression: story, poetry,

dance, music, and song (Shorter, 1996). The richness of African traditional

values can be honored, revealed, and reclaimed by social work students in

instances where educators create open spaces, acknowledge the wealth of the

faith buried in their histories, and humble themselves to learn from their students.

CONCLUSION

It is vital that social workers develop a faith in social work. A faith which forms

the culture of the profession and is given vital expression. A faith which

encourages the struggle to deepen democracy and humanity. A faith which

Therese Sacco 14

gives courage to work for justice in the face of extensive inequality. A faith which

challenges one's own violence as there is yearning for peace in the land. A faith

which affirms gentleness with one's own woundedness as there is reaching out in

compassion to others. A faith which motivates in times of despair. A faith which

sustains in the quest for liberation from the shackles of the past, the present

spiral of civil violence, and the threat to the future. A faith which is crucial for the

survival of social workers in the face of the often despairing reality of a beloved

country.

Therese Sacco 15

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