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*“A Vital Christian Presence in Social Work”*

## **THE IMPACT OF RELIGION/SPIRITUALITY IN SOCIAL WORK SUPERVISION**

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The current literature is rich in providing resources for exploring the impact of religion and spirituality in Social Work practice, but is poor in providing resources for the same in Social Work supervision. The purpose of this presentation will be to heighten the need for Social Work supervisors/sees to understand that if spirituality and religion are significant in Social Work practice, how much more significant it needs to be in supervision for clarity of practice expectations and implementation of agency policy. The following examples will demonstrate how clarity of religious/spiritual beliefs between the supervisor and supervisee could have prevented unfortunate practice experiences. (Agency and worker descriptions are modified for confidentiality purposes).

Some years ago, a student in a medical setting was assigned to see a dying elderly woman and to contact the family. During the student's visit, the patient indicated that she

was ready to die and looked forward to going to heaven. The student was caught off guard because he was raised in a conservative religion that believed that people don't go to heaven after they die, but remain in the grave until the second coming of Jesus. The student did not believe he could let this patient die with a false belief and proceeded to correct her. The patient was Catholic and became very upset by the worker's intervention. A priest was called immediately to help this patient's distress. The supervisor had no idea that the supervisee had a different understanding of what happens when someone dies, and furthermore, was stunned that the student worker would tell a dying woman something contrary to her expressed belief. While it could be argued that the student "should have known better", the student was acting on what was perceived as moral obligation. Needless to say, everyone involved was distressed, especially the worker learning that what was done with good intent was unacceptable. The supervisor felt bad not understanding that the worker had a very different view of what happens when someone dies. In a setting where death is expected, it would have been helpful if the supervisor and worker discussed their views about death. The supervisor could have emphasized the importance of not correcting a client's belief system even when it feels morally correct to do so. In this situation, everyone suffered for lack of spiritual understanding and assuming that a worker would respect the patient's beliefs.

In a second situation, a client dealing with domestic violence was told by her spiritual advisor that she should consider forgiveness. When the social worker met with the client, the client asked the worker if s/he believed that forgiveness of something so violent was really necessary. The two engaged in a discussion of forgiveness, but no

decision was made by the client at that time. The worker believed it was a valuable discussion helping the client to explore how forgiveness would impact the family. Later in the week, the worker decided to discuss this client's request with the supervisor. The supervisor reacted angrily stating that it was not the role of a social worker to talk about a religious area and to leave it between the client and spiritual advisor. The worker felt unjustly reprimanded, and had no idea that the supervisor had such strong feelings of what could and could not be talked about with clients in the area of spirituality.

In both of the above scenarios, the need for understanding religious/spiritual values is obvious. If there had been an effort to clarify spiritual values between the supervisor/supervisee, both of these situations might have been able to be prevented or managed in a more healing manner for all involved. It is not the purpose of this presentation to define religion or spirituality, but to emphasize that supervision plays a vital role in Social Work practice. If we support that it is important to include religion and spirituality in Social Work assessment and practice, then how can we justify the lack of value of including both in supervision?

While preparing for this presentation, I asked some who are providing supervision what their view was about including spiritual understanding with their supervisees. One responded, "We are not allowed to talk about that based upon labor laws". I responded that is true in the hiring practice, but once a person is employed, it does not prevent a supervisor from having a values clarification understanding between them, especially in settings when religious or spiritual beliefs may be very important to clients. The supervisor's response was, "I had not thought of it as good practice process". I thought that was a

good response.

It may be that supervisors/supervisees feel uncomfortable talking about religion, may not identify with a particular spiritual belief system, may not view themselves as spiritual, or a number of other reasons that result in reluctance to talk about it in supervision. The supervisor may then address how that worker would relate to a client needing to talk about spiritual issues in therapy. Obviously, we are not going to be expert in all religions or spiritual beliefs. Neither are workers obligated to share religious beliefs in practice, but they are expected to be able to ask client to help them understand the client's views and concerns. Therefore, supervision serves as a vital resource for workers to feel more prepared for how to relate to a client presenting spiritual issues rather than feeling fearful.

In addition to practice, ethical dilemmas are often riddled with spiritual values. What comes to mind? Likely ethical dilemmas about abortion, right to die, self-disclosure, self-determination, corporal punishment, discipline of children, divorce, and medical care are just a few that supervisors/supervisees need to address and understand for competency in practice. It is too late to say, "I didn't know s/he believed ...". Added to ethical dilemmas is the cultural understanding of the client. One's culture is often closely tied to one's religion or spiritual beliefs and practices.

Other questions that need attention may be "What if my supervisor/see has a completely different religion—one that I am not familiar with at all?" "What if my supervisor/see is just neutral about spirituality, but it is important to me?" "What if my supervisor/see is an atheist and refuses to talk about spiritual matters with me?" "What are

the spiritual boundaries in practice?" The questions lead us to Canda's (1998) definition of transemic description of religion, which refers to various perspectives of religious beliefs that could be shared in supervision to create an atmosphere of understanding different views, beliefs, and meanings without fear of reprimand, feeling judged, or criticized. Saleeby (1997) described transemic as a strengths perspective in social work practice, and I would emphasize a strengths perspective to social work supervision as a vital part of practice.

Cornett (1992) identified six elements of spirituality in clinical practice that may be adapted to supervision as a guide for supervisors as they seek to share and understand spiritual or religious views and meaning:

1. Supervisor/worker views of meaning of life, meaninglessness, and hope/hopelessness.
2. Values often determine how we view ourselves, others, our world and govern how we behave, make choices and deal with losses.
3. Mortality: Exploring and understanding beliefs and feelings about death, denial about death, and fear of death. How do we relate to the fragileness of life?
4. Our universal view of self and others. Views begin with parents and develop through significant relationships and experiences throughout the lifespan. Our views (and values) are influenced by culture, religion, relationships and basic beliefs.
5. Attitude toward suffering both internal and external.
6. Transcendence: acceptance, responsibility, peace, and at-one-ness.

Likely the above six suggestions would be addressed over time, but they are intended to provide a format to stimulate discussion to enhance dialogue, understanding, and clarity of similarities and differences that could impact the supervisee's practice with clients.

It is of interest that in 1990, Dudley and Helfgott were among others (Joseph, 1988; Sheridan, et.al., 1992) who successfully argued that spirituality should be included in Social Work education to enhance worker competence with clients. In 1992, the new Curriculum Policy Statement of the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) required that content on

spirituality be included as an aspect of diversity education in all social work courses. It is now 2008, and still guidelines and research in the area of spirituality in Social Work supervision remain barely addressed much less emphasized as in practice and education.

Recently, Smith College School for Social Work published a Graduate Certificate Program course entitled *Contemplative Clinical Practice*. The first sentence of the course description states: "This Advanced Certificate Program in spirituality and clinical social work practice will consider the clinical relationship as a potential locus of the sacred". What a beautiful consideration! I would like to see it modified to include "the supervisory and clinical relationship as a potential locus of the sacred". Perhaps supervision is implied by practice, but I seldom observe that to be so. Perhaps we need a course entitled *Contemplative Clinical Social Work Supervision* for surely supervision must be the locus of the sacred as we train social workers and social work supervisors to meet the great and varying needs of clients in social work practice. Perhaps a better title for this presentation would have been "Contemplative Social Work Supervision: A Locus of the Sacred".

Perhaps a significant change for Social Work in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century can be far more emphasis upon the importance and value of Social Work Supervision, especially from a spiritual perspective. The presentation today will serve as a spring board to a research study that will address the issues presented. I invite your response, participation, and support to lift Social Work Supervision to the level of importance and attention that is long overdue. The serious issues confronting supervisors/sees require the same perspective of wholeness given to education and practice with clients.

