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*“A Vital Christian Presence in Social Work”*

**CURRICULUM MODULE OR INTEGRATING FAITH AND  
SPIRITUALITY IN SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION**

**Three Questions**

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**Primary course: MSW Field Seminar**

# CURRICULUM MODULE ON HOLDING ON LOOSELY

## I. Core Competency Addressed:

### Competency 1: Identify as a Professional Social Worker

## II. Specific Practice Behaviors Related to the Module:

1. Continually employ and model conscious use of self, self reflection, self-monitoring in practice.
2. Adhere to and model professional roles and boundaries
3. Advocate for client systems to address barriers to service delivery

## III. Materials Needed and/or Assigned Readings:

Tolstoy, Leo (2003). Three Questions In *Walk in the light and twenty-three tales*. Orbis Books: Maryknoll, N.Y. (Pages 347 – 352)

This provocative five page short story by Tolstoy begins: “It once occurred to a certain king, that if he always knew the right time to begin everything; if he knew who were the right people to listen to, and, whom to avoid, and above all, if he always knew what was the most important thing to do, he would never fail in anything he might undertake” (Tolstoy, 2003, p. 347).

Muth, Jon, J. (2002). *The three questions: based on a story by Leo Tolstoy*. Scholastic Press: New York.

This profound, compassionate picture book for young children is based on Tolstoy’s short story. The story goes that young Nikolai seeks counsel from Leo the wise old turtle who lives in the mountains. Nicolai questions “When is the best time to do things? Who is the most important one? And what is the right thing to do?” (Muth, 2002). On his way to visit the turtle Nicolai responds to a stranger’s cry that leads him directly to the answers he is looking for.

## IV. Description of the Module:

It is not uncommon for social work students to feel anxious, uncomfortable and unprepared as they enter their field placement and field seminar. Field seminar is designed to be a comfortable small group setting where students may discuss the anxiety, questions and contemplate putting theory into practice in the field site. This exercise introduces the students to some of the questions that are often under the surface of their own anxiety and cannot easily be put into words.

The Tolstoy short story is used as an analogy to enter into a discussion of some of the questions that students have as they walk into their field site. Tolstoy’s short tale provides proactive questions for the student as they read of the king who is looking for the right time, the right people and the most important thing to do so he will never fail. In social work timing, being present, listening to the client and intervening are important aspects of the process. Knowing where to start with a client, what skill or technique to use, what theory applies, what to say, how to formulate goals and with whom to set the goals can be monumental resulting in increased anxiety for the student. Believing one must never fail can be immobilizing. Student’s anxiety is often tied to the fear of failure. Students may revert to concrete human services (i.e. giving food

vouchers, obtaining material positions or supplying referrals) for a tangible intervention to reduce their own anxiety. Being present to a client often increases the student's anxiety when no tangible solution is possible. As students gain experience they begin to learn the power of being present to the client. Standing with the client in the midst of the fire as the client goes through the process of change including pain, suffering, evolving insight, and action allows the student to experience the power of being present as the means to the change process. Both doing and being are necessary. We do not merely provide concrete services, but by our presence we provide the experience within the context of a relationship for change. "We have been called to heal wounds, to unite what has fallen apart, and to bring home those who have lost their way" (St. Francis).

The first day of field seminar the students are given a copy of the short story by Tolstoy and the children's version of the story is read to the class. The story is an analogy for the students as they begin field placement. The questions in the story are explored in light of the challenges in field placements "When is the best time to do things? Who is the most important one? And what is the right thing to do" (Muth, 2002). In the story, Nicolai's journey to see the wise old turtle is interrupted by helping a friend dig in a garden, nurturing a lost cub back to health and reuniting the cub with his mother. Each step of the journey required Nicolai to be present to the moment, the task, and the person. The journey answered Nicolai's questions that the best time to do is now, the most important person is the one you are with and the right thing to do is the good at hand. As the discussion unfolds the questions expand and the wisdom emerges. These profound philosophical questions challenge students to develop a professional self. They also stretch the student to ponder ethical responses and cultivate spiritual growth as a result. The discussion continues across the semester focusing on student practice experiences.

Students write a reflective journal to document their practice experience, supervision experience, and integration of knowledge, insights, questions, thoughts, feelings and any confusion. When appropriate, students tie the practice experiences with the analogy of 'The Three Questions.' Students reflect on specific practice experiences documenting the importance of concrete services, active exploration with clients in session, value of silence and being empathically present, and the importance of timing in the process. Doing and being apply to individual, family, group or community and impact solidarity, common good, and the dignity of the person. Students reflect on their personal experience (feelings, comfortably, uncomfortably, anxiety, confusion of when to do what, what to do, and the development of faith in their own interactions) in their field placement.

## V. References

Muth, Jon, J. (2002). *The three questions: based on a story by Leo Tolstoy*. Scholastic Press: New York.

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