ME, YOU, GOD, AND THE CLOCK:
MY EXPERIENCE IN SPIRITUAL SOCIAL WORK
AND COUNSELLING

by

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ABSTRACT

This report describes the activities of one student completing the final practicum course towards a Master's of Social Work from the University of Northern British Columbia. The report takes an experiential hermeneutics approach to examine the student's process of change from a content-focus to a process-focus in his interactions with clients. The theoretical bases of social work and counselling in outreach care, spiritual care, and counselling practice are discussed. The similarities and differences the author found between these modes are discussed.

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Acknowledgements

One of the things I have learned
is that it would be impossible to thank
all of those who have been a part of this
wonderful and rewarding practicum experience.

You know who you are, anyhow.

Thank-you.

"Anyone who ever had a heart,
wouldn't turn around and break it.

And anyone who ever played a part,
couldn't turn around and hate it."

-Lou Reed (1942-2013)

Chapter 1: Introduction

This paper describes my final course of practicum experience, being the final requirement before completing a Master's of Social Work degree at the University of Northern British Columbia. The practical course described here was my second during the course of the degree. The first was situated at a Prince George program agency, where I worked principally in the field of police public interaction. Before this, I served as Justice Coordinator for a small reserve community in Northern BC. I mention this only because one theme running through each of the three is my experience of uncertainty in each of these roles. It is important to note this here because my experience and navigation of the uncertainty encountered during this most recent practicum course has been its most valuable aspect. While the learning experiences and practical exposures have been vast and rich, through all of them there was a lack of definitive direction. It was the absence of this specific direction which lay at the heart of this practicum's strong element of personal uncertainty, and which, it seems likely now, was a designed component of the course.

To be clear, the forgoing isn't a complaint, accusation, or lament. On the contrary, and as this report intends to describe, it was the immersion in and navigation of these places of uncertainty where I learned that social work practice is steeped in uncertainty. Furthermore, it has also been helpful in demonstrating that the greatest of uncertainty in social work is not the situation, the client, or the task, but often comes from the social worker him- or herself. This report is in many ways a recording of these uncertainties, and the ways in which I undertook to navigate them. Beyond description, then, of the places, the tasks, or the people with whom I worked, I am attempting here to describe professional and (related) personal

uncertainty in social work practice. Inasmuch as this uncertainty was a necessary element of the practicum course, this report must also attempt to describe the changes I undertook in response to these professional and personal uncertainties as they appeared in my practical work. The experiential learning, supervisory, and academic exposure elements of the placement were all excellent and valuable in terms of responding to social work client issues. However, these did not all directly engage with my personal uncertainties as they related to the actual work of responding. I feel it is important to discuss this aspect, as once the student social worker accepts that the working will involve the worker's personal uncertainties, it becomes clearer that the goal of the practicum experience is to expose the student to them. This forces the student to be immersed, and to find (in this case) his own way through them. Within this, the student is provided with academic, supervisory, peer, and spiritual support, but it is ultimately the student who must traverse the path. Again, this is quite appropriate, for when working in a social work field, the worker may not have access to supervisory or spiritual support. So, the question becomes one of how the student social worker will respond to the professional uncertainties he or she will encounter in the future.

It is impossible to predict the future, and so we must try to draw clues from what has occurred before. In order to glean anything from the past, it is necessary to, first, find some lens, some perspective, some internally uniform context from which to draw individual bits of information together into some whole. However, because the organizing principles we use will go a long way towards determining what conclusions we make, it is necessary to discuss the method of organization.

Who was the person who wrote the proposal? What did he think about social work

practice? What did he think that social work would require of him? Answers to these questions, compared to their present-tense correlates, can provide some clue as to how the student has changed over the course of the practicum. However, while this method of examination holds rich data, and carries with it an air of test-retest respectability, it is only capable of responding in part. That is, in the same way that the proposal can only describe this student as he was, this report can only describe this student as he is now, and cannot actually speak to who he will be in the future.

Having said this, and recalling that what has gone before is our only real information regarding what might happen, it is possible to track the changes as they occurred as the learner was actually undergoing the practicum experiences themselves. Analysis of the changes in how the student perceived and responded-to social work problems, and perceived and responded to his own personal responses to working with those problems, can provide at least a line of inference by which patterns of future development may unfold.

Once a method of analysis has been determined, it still remains to decide what it is that will be analyzed. The obstacle here, I have found, isn't philosophical as much as it is mechanical. Very often, and like my first practicum placement upon entering the social work program, a placement is spent in one place, doing one general form of work. Of course, within each of these general forms there are numerous individual tasks, all drawing from different social work skills. However, each placement location has an outlook, range of responsibilities, methods, and goals underlying the work done there. It is this outlook which provides the grounding for the practicum student to integrate into the role, and the professional responsibilities within the placement location. Furthermore, during times of

professional uncertainty, the practicum student can, as a first step, consider the agency goals as a grounding for examination of how to proceed. Another, perhaps more subtle, benefit to this grounding is that in times of personal uncertainty or conflict around how to *do* the work, the student can reflect on what he understands about how the agency views its goals and its means to achieve them. This provides the student some grounding from which to approach how to resolve the uncertainty.

Because of the nature of this placement, this student was exposed to numerous agency environments, each with differing procedures, areas of social work focus, and underlying agency goals. While there was a far greater breadth of exposure for me, and thus a richer experience overall, these mechanical realities did make it more difficult, at times, to find a true sense of how I was to be a social worker in the immediate moment.

It was these aspects of my practicum experience which provided the most significant learning and growth opportunities, as it was these aspects which forced me to move ahead through uncertainty into actual interface with actual clients experiencing actual social work problems. From this experience, I have begun to realize that much of social work practice occurs in times of personal or professional uncertainty.

Thus, I had thought, I would be describing differences between "then" and "now" in terms of where I thought I was, where I thought I was heading, and what I thought I knew about the specific tasks and environments I had encountered up to that point. I had thought I would be describing the process of change. I had thought I would go out into the community, and everything I had learned would come together with a clearly perceived correlate in the world.

This isn't exactly what happened. In many ways, not even close. This is by no means a failure, but evidence of something deeper and more expansive. I realize now that the very conceptual root of this idea was an attempt to wrest certainty out of the very uncertainty of the practicum to come. I had perceived my location as complete, and I had expected to chart changes in that understanding by finding differences in where I thought I was, then and now. While a test-retest lens makes this comparison theoretically possible, it is ultimately an exercise in guessing at a process through an examination of content. In the same way, I had conceived of my journey through the practicum as something which would steadily unfold in front of me. While this was a nice an idea, it presumes that the horizon will always be defined, and that the distance will always be the same. The fact that it is not was the first of my lessons.

So, how am I to document my experiences in a practicum, as the subject of the examination is the person doing the examining, and as that subject exists in a fluid environment? How can I connect the person who began, who no longer exists, with the person who's writing this report, who will turn and go and be a professional?

In reviewing a journal entry of a conversation I had had with one of my field supervisors, I was reminded of her mention of her background in education, and the stress put in the move from "content oriented thinking" to "process-oriented thinking" in that field. It was at this moment that the difficulties I had been having with examining the practicum experience for the purposes of the report were a function of my examining the wrong things, in the wrong ways. What I saw was that my attempts to feel grounded were, at heart, an attempt to feel competent. Likewise, I had defined knowledge as "things I can do", and thus constructed my

path in terms of capabilities and circumstances I knew how to work within.

In each case, I had been looking for content, when content itself isn't enough to make predictions into the future. Content describes only what has been, and is very much locked into the environment wherein it occurs. So, while I had moved beyond the problems of providing "before and after" snapshots to demonstrate professional readiness, I had only replaced these with a set of very short video clips, without enough information about the connections between the clips for an observer to draw any conclusions about the whole series.

Content seen in these terms provides only "was then" and "is now". I was trying to make statements about what "will be" on the basis of conclusions I had contrived to control, I suppose, from the very beginning.

The discussion of content and process made me rethink about how I was defining and searching for these ephemeral things, and also forced me to confront that I was trying to control the definitions to lessen my own anxieties around my poorly understood environment. However, it also showed that the discussion of content and process can still be used to accurately assess the success of the practicum. If the content of the practicum is seen as the move from "content-orientation" to "process-orientation" within my thinking about the lessons and competencies supposed to be acquired during a practicum field placement, a deeper level of analysis is achieved by giving a description of the actor, not only the actions.

Again, it occurs to me that this insight was expected to occur by my supervisors. Presumably, they knew I needed to see for myself that uncertainty and the necessity of response accompany each other all of the time in social work practice. I needed to move

beyond the anxious response to uncertainty, and the frantic efforts to find grounding in academic knowledge. I needed to be placed in the middle of undefined circumstances, and made to respond in the moment.

These moments, then, become the data in an analysis of the successful or an unsuccessful practicum. Way beyond even true belief in competence, or the means to achieve it, is where a person stops being a "social worker" and begins to become a "person being a social worker", and this trajectory is the only real clue available as to what kind of social worker a student may become in the future.

What becomes relevant, from this perspective, is how this student responded to these times of uncertainty and anxiety regarding how to proceed, and how these response patterns changed over the course of the practicum. In short, what is intended here is to illuminate instances in the practicum where I was uncertain, but had to provide a professional response to a real client, having an actual problem in "real life".

At the start, I responded to these issues through a lens of anxiety, flailing around in academics and "Counselling and Therapy in Video" to find a clue about how to proceed, what to say, what to do. Put another way, I was asking myself what content to provide.

Academic understanding was insufficient. Still, I sit in a room with clients and they have problems and they need help from me. Now what?

This report intends to describe how the uncertainty was encountered, it is the second level of analysis which can perhaps draw some (faint) conclusions around projections from the present into the future. If it is the goal of practical education to prepare students for future professional work, then it may well be that this last element of analysis is the only one of any

real significance. In essence, the act of proceeding in the midst of uncertainty is seen here as the content itself. What becomes significant, then, is the process of proceeding and the foundation on which it is based.

The practicum described herein was the third practicum which had been developed. An accident, and then a union problem, had played roles in my having yet to formalize a practicum, more than a few weeks into my practicum course. Of course, accidents do happen, and unions have to follow their procedures. While I rationally understood these things, I still remained without a practicum placement. I felt as though time was 'ticking away', and I felt tension and anxiety which made the continued search for a practicum more difficult. I was beginning to feel desperate. I had happened to become acquainted with Lauren Aldred through a mutual friend. I had met Lauren briefly the year before, where I learned she was Hospital Chaplain at University Hospital of Northern British Columbia (UHNBC). What I remember most of that first meeting is a comment she made around the distinction between auditory hallucinations and the genuine voice of God. Lauren stated her perspective, that "God will always give you a choice". To me, this represented (and still does) a functional approach to a very difficult practical issue. If, in practice, a social worker is presented with a client who believes he or she is hearing the voice of God, what *do* you do? Lauren's comments remain with me today because they illustrate that the social worker can never know *for certain* that the client isn't hearing the voice of God. Furthermore, the outlook that God provides choice incorporates client perspective, and gives a chance for client connection, perhaps around a discussion of choices and their basis.

At our second meeting, my difficulties with a practicum placement came up in

conversation. Lauren, out of goodness, and a desire for me to have a rewarding student experience, began to develop an idea about incorporating a focus on spirituality within my desired practicum work in counselling and trauma. I had developed a spiritual side, but really wasn't looking at my life and my future practice as a social worker through that lens. I had only rarely felt I had the luxury of spiritual reflection, and I was uncertain as to what spiritual reflection was in the first place.

Indeed, I had blinders on at that time regarding my objectives around my practicum. I think now that I was so intent on a counselling practicum that I had failed to look outside the very obvious of the definitions of what 'counselling' was. When I considered doing practicum in a hospital chaplaincy setting, I was unsettled at first because I was striving for an opportunity to build on what I'd learned, and I felt unprepared for such a placement. I recognized from my previous professional experience that spirituality is an important part of the whole person, and during my MSW studies I saw that spirituality was an important part of service delivery. However, it wasn't until I considered the possibility of working in a "spiritual" setting that I began to more deeply consider my own, and how that spiritual grounding might impact my work in this setting and beyond. How would I remain true to the spiritual aspects of my work, when my understanding of my own spirituality and the spiritual aspects of counselling and social work was so incomplete?

First, I felt I needed a deeper grounding in spirituality in order to understand my own, and in order to understand *how* my own impacts my philosophical approach to social work and the work that I do.

In addition to an untutored view of what spirituality *was*, I was uncertain as to how to

apply spirituality in the context of social work service. I was feeling tremendous pressure to work from a basis of understanding in an environment where I understood little. At the same time, I *was* in a practicum placement, I *was* working, and I *was* being evaluated. I had no choice but to move forward, allowing my understanding to develop at the same time as my approach. What this meant was that my understanding of spirituality-based social work practice developed apace with my understanding of what spirituality is more generally, and to me personally. As this development occurred, I moved from a content-focus to a process-focus in my spiritual social work *work*. Much of this movement from content to process is based on academic exposure to spiritual thought, but more importantly (for the purposes of the present report and my future development as a social worker) it is based on my reflections of myself as a spiritual being, and how this shows-up in the work I have done, what I have thought and felt about this work, and the directions it suggests for the future.

How is this academically relevant? In the experiential perception theory of Epstein (1973), perception of the world is the result of a constantly updated hermeneutic cycle of examination, where experience informs perception, which, in turn, informs experience.

> "When applied to human understanding in general, the hermeneutic circle means that we do not simply acquire knowledge, but rather that knowledge is always a process of looking at concrete details in light of larger ideas, and then recontextualizing those larger ideas based on an understanding of those details. In other words, knowledge is never complete: It is a constant process of reinterpretation" (Hansen, 2011, p. 44).

What we respond to in the world, then, is not a perception of something we encounter outside of ourselves, but the meaning we ascribe to that thing on the basis of our past experience. Therefore, my initial foray into including spiritual concerns in social work

practice was necessarily immature: I was looking at "spirituality" as *meaning*, as a discreet

concept. I thought I might come to an understanding of "spirituality" and find connections

between "spirituality" and "social work". However, during the practicum experience itself, it

became clear that this method was missing an important step. This step related to the element

of myself as a "spiritual" practitioner in the world of social work concerns. That is, while I

was attempting this integration, I was not considering the role of the social worker in that

integration. I was looking to the two areas as content, hoping to combine them into 'greater'

content. What I had not considered is the process of that integration, and how that process

influences the content created between spirituality and social work practice. This process of

integration, for Chan, Chan, and Ng (2008), began with development within an environment

where mind, body, and spirit unity has a long cultural precedent. These adults developed into

adults (and into social workers) in an environment where spiritual concerns and realities are

far more deeply imbued in daily life (p. 36).

By contrast, I am a western-raised person, who saw spiritual concerns as something more

disconnected from his life. From my preparatory work for this course:

> "I believe in the historical Jesus. I am not convinced that Jesus was
> both fully God and fully human. I accept this possibility...I do believe
> that Jesus, like Mohammad (SAW) ascended directly to heaven. I
> believe that God exists, but oscillate between God as an intentional
> force, and God as the sum total of the physical laws of the universe,
> and God as some combination of the two" (Vogelsang, 2012, p. 8).

I look back on this statement now with a sense of satisfaction. This satisfaction doesn't

relate so much to what I wrote, but for how the ideas underlying what I wrote have changed.

It is this change that lay at the heart of my learning in this practicum, and which provides

what indication is possible regarding my development as a social worker in the future. Therefore, the responses to changes in the practicum environment, brought about by changes in tasks, in academic exposures, or in my perception of my uncertainties about this work reflect changes in me as a spiritual being.

These changes were the result of reflection, study, and experience occurring over time. As such, they are the result of a number of disparate influences combining, decoupling, and interacting with the "I" experiencing itself as Christopher Vogelsang. These interactions change that "I" as it moves through time. Most usually, these sorts of interactions are small scale, in that new information is added to a broad base of contiguous information. So, the meaning of a formal academic paper can be traced smoothly backwards to the ideas preceding it.

The present work, by contrast, was the result of a broad set of influences coming from, it seemed sometimes, all directions at once. I was in a position of having to incorporate these far-flung influences in "real time", while actually within the practicum experience. So, while the descriptions of experience flow more-or-less chronologically, my coming to understand the *meaning* of those experiences wasn't chronological at all. Rather, ideas seemed to form constellations, and constellations seemed to form connections to each other, and these connections built what I came to perceive as understanding of the role of the worker, the person *being the worker*, and the role spirituality can play in social work delivery of services.

Because of this, it is necessary that this report be written so as to combine the discussions of the literature review and the work experience in order to more accurately reflect this author's journey through the practicum course. The author understands that this is

not the most usual manner in which a practicum report is constructed and written. However, the more usual manner, with the literature review and work experience sections separated, would not be able to describe this author's experience in contending with all of the simultaneous influences comprising the work and the learning of the practicum, and would not be able to describe how the author came to ascribe the meanings those influences combined to create.

It is in these terms above that a practicum site description is most relevant. Of course, one can find geographic coordinates, read statements of mission, or know the colour of the walls. This does not describe the person doing the work within those walls, advancing the stated mission, responding to the dichotomies between what he feels he is being asked to do, and the uncertainty he feels around how to do it. It is these processes of finding, advancing, and responding to social work (and social worker) issues within the placements which describe the development of the learner in those placements.

Chapter 2: Location Descriptions.

At an 11 October, 2012 meeting between Brent Goerz, Lauren, and I, the general structure of the practicum experience was discussed. In physical terms, my practicum placement occurred primarily in two places. First, I spent mid-October to early-February at the UHNBC Spiritual Health department. This department consists of Lauren as Hospital Chaplain, and Sister Maria. In addition, Lauren takes primary responsibility to organize and administer a large body of volunteers, including a full 'Junior Volunteer' program of High School students. Lauren's work relates significantly to experiences of grief and of loss for patients or their families, and is also available for members of the hospital staff. Lauren also runs services for patients and staff from the Chapel located in the UHNBC grounds. Lauren sits on the hospital's ethics board, and attends ethics consults when hospital staff face questions of medical ethics.

Second, from early-January until late-June was spent at UNBC's Downtown Community Care Centre ("CCC") under Brent Goerz, MSW. Brent is a social worker on UHNBC's staff, who operates under contract with the CCC. This was a more structured and formal counselling environment, operating very much like a storefront services agency, where services are delivered at low or no cost to clients. The CCC is staffed by Master's level counselling students in Education and Social Work, who are supervised and mentored by UNBC teaching staff and community professionals. My principal supervisor at this site was Brent, but I also benefited from peer supervision, clinical supervision, and direct supervision from agency supervisors.

As can be noticed, there was some overlap between my placement at the Spiritual Health

department, and that at the CCC. For the earliest part of 2013, I was effectively located in both departments, as I was still seeing clients from the hospital environment.

My role within the Spiritual Health department was not limited to work at the hospital location. In addition to spending some days at the hospital, I also attended a "Coffee Hour" run jointly between the Spiritual Health department and St. Michael's and All Angels Anglican Church ("St. Mike's") at 5th and Victoria Streets in Prince George. The purposes of this section of my placement were twofold. The Church operates a lunch-bag program designed to aid Prince George community members lacking the funds for adequate nutrition, UHNBC's Spiritual Health department funds the expenses associated with coffee, and volunteers (or practicum students) work to set-up the coffee urn, tables, and chairs. The volunteer sits with those who choose to stay for coffee – people can just pick up a bag and leave if they want – for company or conversation. To be clear, these were not counselling sessions, as that isn't the purpose of the program, and as confidentiality cannot be assured. The goal was basic human connection for a population that is often marginalized both outside in the community and within themselves (Pope & Arthur, 2009, pp. 56, 57). I continued this work until late-May.

I had been resolute throughout that I was most interested in practical counselling experience. This was incorporated into the practicum structure such that my practice areas within UHNBC's Spiritual Health department would focus on relationship and joining skills, and something Lauren kept referring to as "presence". From my journal entry of the meeting:

> *"Lauren keeps talking about being 'present' with clients; how important presence is and how it can be harder in a hospital. I can see about pain, and I can see about dying. Do you have to be present then? What do you say for pain?"*

It was with these questions that my learning began.

Chapter 3: Work Experience and Literature Review

3(a): Spiritual Health

The start of my work with Spiritual Health was a time of dislocation for me. I was approaching this form of social work as, I suppose, I had approached the whole of the MSW degree. In my mind, I had thought I was learning to *do* something. This is important to note, because it implied that my learning was related to physical actions; what actions were needed, when, and with what result intended. This is understandable, perhaps, as I had always been rewarded for learning to *do*. I had succeeded in the formal academic environment for my ability to learn to *do* papers and presentations. Likewise, I had succeeded in my previous employment for my ability to effectively perform (another *do*ing) certain tasks within a complicated legal and social environment. I suppose I should note that even as a much younger person I was rewarded for my ability to *do* for myself, remaining inconspicuous within some difficult family dynamics.

While this had been useful enough in the past, I believe that my practicum work with Spiritual Health was perhaps my first professional encounter with an environment I felt I didn't understand.

I felt a good deal of anxiety around my lack of understanding of my environment, and the increasingly shaky ground of my self-definition as "successful". As a result, I made a concerted effort to create an understanding of the environment I was in. While this makes sense broadly, my historically reinforced habits of learning to *do* as a bulwark against anxiety were slowly nudging me towards a categorical view of my role in my environment, as can be seen from my journal in the earliest weeks of the practicum placement.

> *October 23: *did coffee hour at St. Mike's – I'm having some regulars*
> *returning to chat with me – this is part of the joining piece – likely will be*
> *fewer tomorrow (SA day – people go shopping)*chatted with Lauren until*
> *about 5:30 – at spiritual health office – spirituality – God – how*
> *God/religion/spirituality can become implicated in addressing trauma –*
> *other counselling issues.*

Even in this brief example, the record emphasizes doing. I, for example, "did coffee hour" at St. Mikes. I noted my success, now having "regulars". I noted understanding of the environment with the mention of "SA day" and its impact on service use. As I write these very lines, I wonder who I was talking to.

In this search for bounded order in a generally chaotic mental environment, I had created a mental environment dominated by content-oriented concerns. I was concerned with what order I perceived, and was defining "order" in terms of my self-perceived expertise. Parts of my journal entries from the time are regularly devoted to what seem like recitations of practical knowledge.

> *November 06:*another client did show for coffee and a chat; he spoke of his*
> *medication regimen – he described the first stages of tardive diskynesia – I*
> *asked him to let his health team know of his feeling of "tightness and*
> *energy".*

Here again we see the emphasis on doing. I knew and understood and saw something. And, on the basis of that knowledge, made an informed suggestion. This was content, and content was doing, and doing was the path to success, and success was the guard against the uncertainty of the environment.

The uncertainty inherent in the Spiritual Health aspect of the practicum course is best represented by my experiences in co-facilitating a "Grief Group". I was, to be sure, quite

uncertain in many areas of the social work concerns of the people I encountered at St. Mike's, but the Church location wasn't specifically intended to address any particular issues beyond hunger and cold. In that environment, clients could choose to mention an issue, say nothing at all, or obtain a bagged lunch and go directly on with their day.

With Grief Group, concrete help – specific content – wasn't as well defined. As the date of the group's first meeting approached, I remember a more-or-less constant tug-of-war related to whether I was prepared to be part of the leadership of the group. While both Lauren and Brent had listened to my concerns, and had both responded that I was able to facilitate the group, I still felt unprepared. Looking back on my journaling from this time, I see that I may have responded to this by moving further into the known boundaries of content. I was doubling-down on information, hoping I would find enough ideas to allow me to *do*; perform; succeed. With Grief Group only a short time away, I felt full of tiny bits of information, but without an overall perspective.

> *October 29:*there seems to be more to keep straight in my day – while I've been used to this responsibility in the past – in these circumstances, I was the one with the general idea of how it all worked – so the normal variances required when working with humans was easier to context into the overall plan.*

Most of the journaling from this period is even more content-focused than even this example. Indeed, the last four days' entries before the start of the group are a mash of lists and check marks; a moment-by-moment review of all of the content of my work. I anticipated failure on something for which I was being evaluated. I was providing a defense for the incident review I feared would be coming.

I had experienced this sense of incompetence acutely, and blamed myself, and (to a lesser extent) my environment for my feelings of being unprepared.

> *November 07:*today is the day of the first grief group meeting – I'm a little bit anxious, but mostly I'm more upset and angry at myself and the situation generally – I can't shake the feeling that I should have done more, should have prepared more.*

I go on in this entry to rail against a simple (but time consuming) mistake, the lack of a template to proceed from, and even my personal counsellor, who had canceled an appointment earlier in the week because she was ill.

In the proposal for this practicum, I discussed the implications of traumatic experience in terms of events shaking our most necessary beliefs regarding the operation of the world. I stated that "[w]ithout these structures maintaining a solidity in the mind, the individual must constantly work to reaffirm that solidity, or work to reduce the discomfort caused by that lack of solidity (Vogelsang, 2012, p. 25). It is perhaps fitting, then, that this should so neatly describe *my* mental environment right up to the very first meeting. In an attempt to lower my discomfort, I had done what I always had: I had worked, and I had attempted to produce. This response was *so* ingrained that I was responding thus, even in the presence of the belief that the *lack of solidity* in how to "do" Grief Group was intentional and necessary.

> *October 29:*Lauren's trying hard not to stress me out, but the lack of concreteness in a stressor, though I know it's necessary.*
>
> *October 31:*I let [Brent] know about the stress regarding Grief Group – horrid, uncertain, anxious, under-prepared – Brent reminded me that it's a <u>peer</u> group so I didn't have to worry about doing therapy – it helps sometimes to think in these terms – I have to remember that I am a student, and that nobody needs me to be an expert – later, Lauren sent an email which mentioned she wouldn't set me up to fail – read a little more about*

grief.

As above, I had dived into study on grief and grief therapy. I had found that my overarching idea regarding the operation of self-in-place fit into the prevailing discussions on the topic. In Spaten's (2012) discussion of the grief experience in men he reports that "[the author's] clients would continually ask questions about the loss, themselves, and the world – shifting paradoxically between meaning and meaninglessness" (p. 3). It seemed clear that the men's losses held meanings beyond the concerns of the present, real as those concerns were.

Indeed, grief can be seen as a radical change in an individual's view of self and the world. Adler and McAdams' (2007) comments on narrative and time are interesting here. According to these authors, we connect our past to our present, and our present to our future by combining all of these into stories of ourselves, or "personal narratives" (p. 97). These narratives allow us to make sense of our lives; the experiences we have had, how these impact the here and now, and what these mean about the future (p. 98). Seen in this way, grieving can represent a profound break in one's life, represented by the narrative itself. This fits with the more empirical work of Collier (2011), who noted (p. E265) that the bereavement process for families is affected by family function (as operationalized by levels of conflict and communication). Relating this to Adler and McAdams' personal narrative, a rich and healthy dynamic of openness and communication supports the development of a personal narrative better able to withstand a significant loss without losing functional cohesion. If, as Bronfenbrenner (1979, as cited in Clinton, 2008) supposed, "human individuals are living systems, continually interacting with the contexts in which their lives

are unfolding, including family, peer groups, school, and larger systems" (p. 215), then the loss of even a very significant relationship has a lower net impact on the whole of the survivor's personal narrative if what remains is based on openness and communication. This is echoed in Rutter's (2007) observations around resiliency; that "it is evident that the overcoming of stress or adversity may depend on experiences following the risk exposure" (p. 205). Applied to thinking on grief (Rutter's comments were more directly related to childhood sexual trauma), it may be that how one responds to grief is related to what Rutter calls "social role satisfaction, and a positive sense of community" (p. 207). That is, grief's impact on the personal narratives of the bereaved is related not entirely to the fact of the loss, but also the impact that loss has on the personal narrative's clarity around the future.

With specific reference to parental bereavement, Riley, LaMontagne, Hepworth, and Murphey (2007) note, that whether grief leads to complicated grief ("intense grief that negatively impacts psychological well being over time", p. 277-278) for surviving parents depends on "individual responsibilities or circumstances" (p. 278) of those parents. It is this concept of individualized risk which places Riley's articulation in line with Adler and McAdams' personal narrative, as they both suggest that it is the individual's private, personal self-in-place which is the font of the experience of grief. Further, it is the principle ground on which rests the dichotomy between the 'wholeness' suggested by the personal narrative, and the 'hole' suggested by the personal loss. This may explain why Spaten's subjects found themselves mired in questions of personal meaning when faced with the death of a loved one, in addition to explaining Riley's findings that 'optimism' acted as a bulwark against "intrusive images, yearning and searching behaviours, disbelief and numbness" (p. 289).

This may also go a significant distance towards explaining why complicated grief (as defined by Riley, above) is more likely in cases where the loss is "traumatic – premature, sudden, violent, or unexpected" (Harvard Mental Health Letter, 2006). In the cases where death occurs at the end of a protracted illness, or at the end of a long and happy life, those surviving have had the time to experience and respond to the changes to the personal narrative that the loss entails. However, in cases where the death is unexpected, the survivors' personal narratives linking present and future are just as unexpectedly thrown into a turmoil of radical change in expected future possibilities.

While all of this research was productive, and certainly interesting, it didn't make me feel any better about the fact that I was soon to encounter clients' real grief in the form of Grief Group. While I'd been able to come to an understanding of what I thought might be going on in the existential level for the members of the group, I still felt unprepared regarding how to *respond* to that grief. I wrestled with this in the days preceding the first group.

On November 6th, one day before the first session, I was in the Spiritual Health office for a regular Tuesday morning meeting with Lauren. As the first Grief Group meeting was the next evening, Lauren asked about how I felt. I responded by saying that I felt "functionally useful", meaning I felt I knew what to expect. At the same meeting, I mentioned a particular concern I was having regarding one of the regular visitors at St. Mike's. The issue seemed an intractable problem to which I, in my role at St. Mike's, was completely unable to respond.

In response, Lauren suggested I pray for the client.

To be completely honest, that was the first time this had ever been suggested to me. I'm not certain that I did pray for the client. However, I did think about prayer as being

something one can do when feeling that there is nothing that can be done. I cannot pinpoint when or precisely how the connection came about, but a few of the disparate and ephemeral points of exposure in the placement up to that point seemed to come together around this idea in the time after this meeting. The idea that prayer represents action in a time when no action will suffice made prayer something I could do when I realized there was nothing *I* could do for the St. Mike's visitor whose troubles were troubling me so.

In the way that thoughts do, the connection between this situation, and my troubles around co-facilitating a client group was made. My concerns about Grief Group were related to my feelings about being able to respond in the face of the client's expression of grief. After all of the reading and the thinking, I feared insufficiency.

However, I remembered Lauren's suggestion regarding my St. Mike's client, and I saw that Lauren's suggestion of prayer did not represent a concession to inevitability at all, but a recognition of human limitation, and a willing placement of agency with something beyond those limitations.

If there was only one "a ha" moment in the whole of this part of the practicum placement, this was it. In fact, there were many of these moments, but all of these can be traced in some way or another to this one. Indeed, this realization had a profound impact on my work in other locations in this practicum, as will be discussed below. I was incorrect (or only partly correct) to describe spirituality as a division between "agency" and "surrender" as I had in the practicum proposal (Vogelsang, 2012, p. 33). If surrender is thought of as "leaving the field", allowing what is inevitable to occur, then surrender is a loss of agency, of involvement with the personal narrative of experience. But, if surrender is thought of as more

than an abdication, as when one places a situation in the hands of God, that placement becomes agency. Thus, the grieving, sick, dying, or lonely person can *still* act in the face of inevitability, and can still take a part in writing their personal narrative. It is not a question of handing over responsibility. Rather, a recognition of the reality of the situation, and a commitment to act within it, to the limit of possibility. I have come to believe that this bringing something beyond individual humanity into consideration and action in reference to social work problems is the center-point of spiritual social work.

Pergament, Smith, Koenig, and Perez (1999) state that "it isn't enough to believe or be spiritual in a general sense. One's spiritual life must be made a part of one's lifestyle" (p. 34). During this timeframe of the practicum placement itself, the meaning of this statement in terms of spiritual social work practice began to become a little more clear. I had come across and used the Medicine Wheel idea in my previous work and accepted that spirituality was a foundational aspect of the person. While I believed the words, perhaps I had yet to grasp their meaning.

The thought of surrender being a form of action opened the possibility that spiritual social work was, at heart, the act of connection to that something unrevealed to humans, bringing that connection "into the room" when the social worker and client interact. This 'bringing-in' is an action allowing "the spiritual social work client" (as in the Grief Group participants) to take a more active role in writing the remainder of their personal narrative.

The idea that an important part of spiritual life and spiritual social work was giving over to something beyond our direct influence and understanding is a large one. However, the fact existed that the practicum was ongoing and I was still operating within it. Therefore, while I

was wrestling with these ideas and their personal and professional obligations, I was still

being pulled to perform in this mode in my work in the Spiritual Health department. While

my perspective had opened, I really didn't understand the new one well enough to base

practice. In response, I jumped into a reading review of spirituality and social work and

counselling, but I also tried to keep this perspective in mind while making service decisions.

While the first response went well, the second was somewhat of a climb.

> *November 14:*Okay...last night's Grief Group – I think it went well –
> however, I felt at times I was talking to avoid silences – one member lost a
> spouse* [time reference removed] *and is still devastated – I wasn't sure how
> to help, so I think I may have been going for the shotgun approach (throw
> out a bunch of stuff and hope something hits).*

As can be seen from this entry, I was still working very much from a cathartic model;

where a problem is encountered, treated, and the problem becomes "better".

While I was in the midst of shedding, in the intellectual sense, the idea of the social

worker as knowledgeable expert, this process hadn't yet made available any practice

approaches towards Grief Group clients, St. Mike's clients, or any others. At a deeper level, I

was still looking at practice issues with a 'doing' lens.

> *November 15:*I did a quick grounding/self-grounding exercise I adopted
> from a Tl'azt'en workshop – I liked it then because it brings you back into
> the regular world slowly and carefully – recognizes the feelings, but places
> them in a context of a whole lived experience – I wasn't really intending on
> doing that exercise, but* [client] *was so upset, I felt the need to do something
> – maybe slow the heart rate a little – I find I have to keep reminding myself
> that the fact they're leaving upset is not a failure on my part.*

I really like this entry because it illustrates the strange borderland within which I found

myself. First, it shows rather clearly that I was still very much mentally situated in an active

and positive mode of practice, where I am to *do something* in order to "help". I had used a

grounding exercise I hadn't intended because it was something that I knew how to do. However, there are also present some early indications of what I would eventually realize more fully.

If grief is a process, then anything ("any *thing*") done at one instant in that process is only a part of a whole, and that whole will become resolved in one way or another. The social worker role, then, isn't to make a whole, but to facilitate a process where the whole is resolved such that the client feels empowered to write a new narrative incorporating, but not defined by, the loss.

The idea of becoming, used in this way, opposes a cathartic mindset in social work practice. The spiritual perspective creates the social worker as a witness to a process which is beyond the worker's control. Grief isn't something to be "treated", but something which is experienced. The idea of pain as something to be experienced, understood, and learned from, is a little disconcerting. It was the idea that we should dive into the fundamentally life-altering episodes in our lives, and resolve to move on *with (*as opposed to *from*) it, that focused my reading in spirituality, as it seemed to move the source of the social work issue of pain into a larger context.

But what is this context? I had only a basic grounding in spiritual matters, and I did have some trouble determining where to start. So, I started with myself. I wanted to observe myself in the context of my spirituality in order to understand the role which that spirituality plays in my life and my practice as a social worker.

In "The Psychodynamics of Self-Observation", Falkenstrom (2007) notes that the perspective aims for client self-knowledge, which the client then extends forward into the

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remainder of life (p. 553). One way this is done is with a triangular perspective, so that the individual watches both the self (being) and the ego (wanting). Falkenstrom prefers this over a dyadic model, as it allows the individual to see the interactions between them (p. 561).

Falkenstrom's paper is organized nicely, in that once the difficulties with this third-person self-observation stance are revealed, a resolution is proposed.

Clearly, it is difficult for someone to observe the interactions between themselves and their responses to the world of the external experience. Because experience occurs in "real time", it cannot be both experienced and dispassionately observed for conclusions to be drawn. Falkenstrom relieves this tension by removing conclusions, and any intent at meaning such conclusions may represent. Falkenstrom points out that in Eastern-based mindfulness practices there is no split between observer and observed. The goal is more for depth of experience and being than for depth of reflection and the generation of meaning (pp. 563-4). So, while I started by looking for a way to observe the interactions of myself and my spirituality, I came to rest at the need to experience those interactions. Falkenstrom references Buddhist thinking, and mentions "the ways in which the mind withdraws from experiencing fully the present moment, and they can all be reduced to variations of seeking pleasure and avoiding unpleasure"(p. 565).

The principle of seeking the pleasurable and avoiding the unpleasurable is the very heart of how people form their knowledge of themselves. Ultimately, we provide our own evidence to support the thoughts of self we like, and discount, ignore, or outright silence the evidence for those we don't. The implications of this insight were profound for me. If I was practicing in a spiritual mode, I had assumed that I had to have qualities of spirituality, and understand

those qualities in the context of my work. However, if I could understand my spirituality by being aware of its influence on my experiences, and use that awareness as the grounding for my spiritual understanding, I was relieved of needing to know what was doing this understanding, only that what it was experiencing was important. This was another point on my journey from a content-focus to a process-focus, as I was no longer bound to a distinction between what I knew and did not know about spiritually informed work. On the contrary, this perspective allowed me to concentrate on experience: Mine when exploring my spirituality, and my clients when receiving spiritual care.

I think the first big practice change this refocusing created was related to Grief Group. I have mentioned above that some of my concern around co-facilitating this group was related to the literature's lack of specific direction around what to do and how to do it. I began to realize that one of the most important parts of the successful resolution of grief is the experience of the grief itself. I had been looking for clues as to what to do, but what needed to be done was happening anyway, right in front of me. My role was to be with the client in the midst of that grief.

It was on this basis I took another look at Worden's highly-referenced (1991) discussion of grief 'stages'. Worden noted that these descriptions have been misconstrued in the popular mind to existing in discreet stages, when in fact an individual experiences all of these elements at one time (p. 58). While my earlier search for clarity and procedure came up short, my second look at this literature was very different. I had not found what I was looking for because I was looking for the wrong things. I had been looking for ways to work *against* grief. Being content-oriented, I wanted to understand and to combat what was happening in

the moment-by-moment existence of the group's members. Looking again, this time from a perspective of client grief, and the role of the worker to be supportive in that experience, I came to a better understanding of what these texts had been trying to tell me. As a result, my understanding of what I was to *do* became more clear.

I became much more concerned with what my clients were feeling in the moment during their grief. Using the Buddhist standpoint of non-judgemental acceptance (from Falkenstrom), I saw that I had been rejecting the experience of grief, and was doing so to avoid my own discomfort with the feelings of grief. I was combative towards grief because I did not want to experience my reactions to my clients' grief. As a result, I had to confront my own discomfort, recognize its presence, and avoid responding to in while in session with the group members.

This perspective is reflected in the academic scholarship. Cacciatore and Flint (2012) note that the therapeutic use of mindfulness practice involves both the patient and the provider. As I had seen the poverty of an oppositional approach to grief, this idea of the worker and the client being in something together seemed a promising alternative. In addition, the idea of the provider and the client working from a space of immediate experience, together, suited my general empowerment-based philosophy. The goal here is to truly be with the client, as much as a separate consciousness can. Because grief is a verb, to treat it like something bounded within its own inherent nature (like one does a noun), is to miss the point entirely.

As it happened, it was around this same time that Lauren began seeing an individual client, who was kind enough to allow me to 'sit-in' on their sessions. This client had recently

experienced a significant loss, and had come to see Lauren for help in making sense of the loss, and help in moving forward from it. As I sat in the sessions, I saw descriptions of the client's life and came to notice strong patterns in the client's life, related to the client's early history. In the same way that I was looking for something bounded called "grief" to combat in Grief Group; here, I was looking for definable sources of those patterns. The involvement of early childhood experiences immediately pointed me towards attachment theories (Harvard Mental Health Letter, 2009). I discussed my observations with Lauren during a clinical meeting. I noted in supervision the client's lifetime of environmental instability as an element of these patterns.

Eventually, Lauren responded by saying that the most important element is that the client come to the realization on the client's own. Lauren described this as a guard against "client resistance". Like my presumed role in Grief Group, I had initially been most concerned with the 'reality' that was happening for those I worked with. In essence, *my* understanding of my clients' issues in this loss weren't really as important as my clients' understandings, and this is what Lauren was trying to articulate with her focus on "presence".

I think I was beginning to understand. As a result, my ongoing re-reading of the literature on grief therapy took on a more complex focus. Cacciatore and Flint's comments that "effective psychosocial care that is mindful, humble, and nuanced has the capacity to abate human suffering" (p. 63) seemed to take on deeper meanings.

Mindful. Humble. Nuanced. For me, the image is one of a dance: Two people moving around each other, each being mindful of the placement of feet, but moving to a beat overarching, defining the fundamentals of movement and pattern; each dancer humbly

willing to move as the other directs; and able to adapt to slight variations from the other. I also noted that the statement said nothing about *eliminating* human suffering. If suffering is something that's going to happen anyhow, if it is a normal element of human experience, then the therapeutic interaction need not be cathartic.

The goal for the counsellor, then, has less to do with cathartic intervention, and more to do with getting into the client's mind, heart, and soul. So, mindfulness was important to the therapeutic process, but perhaps the more important element is a nuanced responsiveness to the client's current place, and a humble willingness to be there, in that place, with them.

In short, *presence*.

In this, I am promising to ignore my own sense of self within the therapeutic environment. I am putting away my expectations. I am being aware of my reactions and my thoughts about "What's *really* going on", and trying to fully understand and be with the client in the client's moment. In this light all of the reading I'd done while looking for things to *do* started to make sense.

Earlier in the semester, I had read Running and Girard's (2008) comments about ritual in the expression of grief. At the time, I'd been looking for concrete examples of practice I could emulate or incorporate into my grief group work. I'd been disappointed. I'd been looking, first, for Running's description of ritual. I'd found:

> "Ritual can be seen as any activity, sacred or secular, public or private, formal or informal, traditional or newly created, scripted or improvised, communal or solitary, prescribed or self-designed, repeated, or one-time only – that includes the symbolic expression of a combination of emotions, thoughts, and/or spiritual beliefs of the participant(s) that has special meaning for the participants" (p. 305).

At the time, I hadn't found this description to be particularly helpful. However, with the addition of the insight that *doing* is less primarily defined in concrete terms, and more so in terms of presence and *being*, the idea emerges that presence is *doing*. Being mindful and non-judgemental of self-experience, in an effort to be aware and responsive to a client's experience in the moment *becomes* doing.

So, if grief was happening anyway, and the only thing is to be with grief. In this sense, all that mattered was the moment. Now, Running's remarks about ritual showed that it didn't matter what the ritual is, only *that* it is. What matters is that the ritual provides a place for grief to be experienced. The idea of place is most important for its ability to be entered and exited, not for any element of the structure or content of place.

In much the same way, the rereading of O'Rourke's (2008) comments around presence became more meaningful. I had referenced Banks' (2006) Ethic of Care model in the proposal (p. 36) because I saw in her conception the opportunity for the client to be truly free to express and experience and grow in the absence of the constraint of the outside world. My second reading of O'Rourke, though, seemed to describe what was actually required to create this sort of environment.

> "To welcome without judgement stories of having endured – or inflicted – horrible suffering powerfully conveys to our clients that just as we can hear these stories and not turn away, so too, (sic) can they now face their histories of pain, and know that these histories cannot destroy them" (p. 454).

As someone who located himself in his practicum proposal as "theory-minded and analytical by temperament and training" (p. 8), this way of thinking was something I had to make myself practice. The tension between my older and newer perspectives was the source

of an emotional process for me, where I had to shed some tried-and-true methods of understanding and interacting with the world (and, by extension, with clients), replacing these with other methods and understandings.

A poem I wrote by way of a journal entry during this time reflects the internal tensions I felt between what I had perceived as the order of action-as-being, and the chaos of being-as-action.

> And with a tear, the snow falls.
> Captured, frozen, made blind to the Earth that
> pulled it. A dream of waking – nothing beyond but
> intention and rage and sweat.
>
> And reminders of looking at now
> As something terrible – the point is
> The embrace, the peace is the embrace.
>
> One moment with another – A smile. A Smile.
> The picture is the moment where the snow falls,
> And it lives forever.

I believe that this poem sums-up where my feelings of dislocation were taking me. In making a tear into a snowflake, I am creating it as individual, but losing that individuality when placing it in the context of a snowfall. The 'dream of waking', wherein the dreamer cannot distinguish between the two until they are revealed in their own time, is the anxious moment before something terrible. However, by the end peace is embraced by looking at the moments in their totality (not the individual flakes), and by trying to connect to my emotional self to connect with clients ('A smile. A smile'). As a result, the picture creates the snow as a single moment, and nothing more. While that moment will always exist, it is only one moment among many, many others. I interpret this as indicative of what I was thinking and

feeling. Though I felt exposed and without some foundation of knowledge under me, I was becoming more comfortable with finding foundation within myself and within the relationship with the person in front of me (the client).

However, a close look at the poem does show that the writer is essentially disembodied. All indicators of physicality have been removed from the voice of the writer: He is defined by intentionality, rage, and sweat. These things (like tears and smiles) are markers of personhood, not a description of the person himself.

Who, then, was doing this work?

Perhaps ironically, the appearance of these answers and questions could have been expected under the terms I had defined in the practicum proposal. In referencing Epstein (1973), and Ortner (1996, 2006), I was trying to articulate the interactive nature of self and place. My objective at the time had been to discuss trauma theories, and the intersections of self and place as the points at which trauma creates the fault lines so difficult for an individual. What I hadn't foreseen was that exposure to these deep changes in perspective might create some fault lines of their own for me.

I did interpret my current state as a question of personal meaning, where many of my ideas about social work, counselling, and myself were undergoing a fast and radical revision. This situation is spoken of in Victor Frankl-inspired logotherapies, and I sought some direction from this area.

Frankl grounded his discussion of meaning in the three core tenets that human life has meaning, that humans long to know this meaning, and that all people have the potential to experience this meaning (Schulenberg, Hertzel, Nassif, and Regina, 2008). At the time, the

most salient parts of this exploration for me was logotherapy's insistence on meaning and on the dignity involved in seeking it out. The authors note that logotherapy "affords clients the dignity of expecting them to be capable as human beings in spite of the limitations of their current situation or problem" (p. 451).

I realized that, as a student, it was perhaps a good time to be in at least some turmoil, but that it was actually an opportunity for me to move away from a theory-based, bounded understanding of my clients' problems and how to respond. This loss placed the responsibility on me to respond from something beyond theory. In this, I was moving further away from content, and closer towards process.

But the idea of 'process' was still nebulous and undefined for me. While Epstein, Ortner, and now Frankl all did fine jobs in describing their views of the overall process in the formulation of "the self" in the context of "the world", the breadth of explanatory power comes at the sacrifice of directive power. None of these authors give clear indications of *how* to fill the spaces created by a jolt to systems of being in the world.

At a broader, more purely existentialist level, this is contemplating, I think, a loss of an ability to integrate "the I" into the world, as the individual won't have the resources to incorporate the reciprocal demands of the world. In specific reference to counselling, however, the danger this illustrated to me was the potential for this contact to go off-kilter, and because of its inherent self-referential qualities, just keep going. Because meaning in the world exists as a function of contact with the world, poorly ascribed meanings influence contact to be had in the future. I needed to come to understand my meanings in my life before I could apply these meanings to my work as a social worker, spiritually-informed or

no. I went back to basics.

I went to church.

One of Lauren's responsibilities is the weekly Anglican service at the hospital chapel.

Lauren was away one week, and a community member ran the service. This community

member noted the Newton, Connecticut school shootings only a few weeks prior, making

connections between the personal and social chaos endemic for many in modern life. .

> December 27:*the service linked chaos of the personal and social types
> more closely than I had expected – but, then much of the stuff Lauren
> mentions does the same thing – there's an important spiritual element to this
> that's on the tip of my tongue – for human services this is meaningful; I just
> don't know how to describe it
> *I guess it starts with the presupposition that there is, in fact something
> beyond us. Once you begin from there, certain realities must pertain – the
> first of which is there is meaning to life. This creates two possibilities.
> **life has meaning inasmuch as life has meaning for me. → definite power
> in this position →once a person's life has meaning in itself there exists the
> potential for agency → using the 'meaning' potential as the energy for
> transformative change.
> **life has meaning inasmuch as my life has meaning for something beyond
> me.→ this changes the locus of meaning-making → it requires the
> individual to determine what the meaning is (knowing that meaning always
> existed).

As can be seen, these experiences in this part of the practicum course motivated me to

question and examine my spiritual beliefs not only as a social worker, but as an element of

my spirituality as a person. The focus is on me, as I am trying to understand my beliefs, but

the content is very much within social work, as it is these beliefs that inform my reasons for

working as I seem to do.

Carroll (2001) has described spirituality as relationship or interconnectedness among

self, others, and God – among all that exists in the universe (p. 6). One of the themes Carroll

finds in concepts of spirituality is the idea of a responsive relationship to God, including a

sense of well-being and a focus on a reality beyond the temporal (ibid.). For me, both

personally and as a social worker, it is this reality beyond perception that draws my attention.

Because we have free will, we can choose to be dismissive and cause harm, or we can choose

to try to help others through engagement with them.

From a spiritual perspective, the important idea here seems to be the work itself, and not

the why of the work.

Working to be an aid to others is a good noted in numerous spiritual traditions. Meier

and Rovers (2010) note that Islam encourages followers to help others, and goes further to

say that this should be done for reasons beyond being seen to do so. Judaism encourages

thought and action for the less fortunate, as the Torah instructs fallow crops to be left for

widows and orphans. Hinduism teaches to relieve others' misery and to share that misery with

them. Buddhist thought is that material goods and pleasures are only a distraction from

engagement with the ultimate. The authors remind the reader of Christianity's teaching that

we should help bear other's burdens (p. xii).

Meier goes on to note (p. 3) that two of the oldest ideas in counselling are that the

technique of the counsellor is insufficient by itself, and that the most important element in

therapeutic change is the relationship between counsellor and client. Examining Carl Rogers,

these authors note his insistence that counsellors require respect, acceptance, and love for

their client, in order to take them from a perspective of self as unlovable to a perspective of

self as loved, accepted, and respected (p. 4). Thus, the core element of therapeutic change is

in the creation of a space of acceptance and respect. While this may not be an uncommon

referencing of Rogerian thought, Meier and Rovers do note that near the end of his career Rogers wrote of counsellors' need to be in touch with the unknown in *themselves*. Reflecting on his career, Rogers noted that at times his connection with a client seemed to exist at a deep level of being, creating what Rogers called "a deep sense of immersion" (p. 5).

This makes a strong kind of sense to me, in terms of the experiences I have had in this practicum placement. It was late-December and early-January when I was reviewing this book, and I had been working for a few months at St. Mike's, and formed relationships with a number of the people who came for coffee or lunch. It was winter, of course, and these men and women would very often be coming to the church with improper winter clothing. The need for something so basic, and the relative lack of resources to fill that need impacted me quite viscerally.

Indeed, more than once the lunchbag program's daily resources limit of 20 bags were depleted in fewer minutes. While I would go and assemble a few extra bags in extreme cases, I was conscious of the very real costs of providing food. Often, I was in the position of being able to offer coffee, but had to inform that all of the food was gone. My experience of the emotional conflict between need and limitations was a profound one for me. Through the stories and perspectives of those who attended the lunchbag program, I came to see that obtaining needed social services often felt like and endless circular process. Also, I came to understand more about how individuals often give up on that process entirely. I gained a sense of their dislocation; of the chin-out/eyes-open response to the very often uncaring world.

January 02:

> Trundled, huddled.
> Loose legs; Sunk ships
> Lips. Tight shut- or like a fountain on an upswing.
>
> Eyes, fingers, toes.
> Two. Ten. Ten.
> Frozen in time. Frozen in cold.
>
> Lost & Found hats.
> And boots that don't fit right.
> Or just plain leak. Or just aren't boots.

I see in this shades of Rogers' immersion. Based on the relationships I had formed,

visitors told me of their lives and of their perspectives on them. Learning of these

perspectives allowed me moments of understanding a client's meaning behind the words they

spoke, or of knowing what is being said by a gesture, or a downward glance of the eyes. I

began to understand what I had once thought were "wacky" ideas, such as 'resonance' with a

client. These stanzas articulate much of my learning in the spiritual care process.

These, however, are only shades of Rogers' immersion, and I wrestled with the reality

that though there is connection, I will not understand fully what another is experiencing –

that there are elements of client suffering to which I may never have access, no matter the

quality of my skill or of the therapeutic relationship.

On January 17, there was a 'halfway point' meeting at St. Mike's; attended by Brent,

Lauren, Reverend Glenn Stone (the Reverend supervising my St. Mike's work), and myself. I

described this tension between connection and separation.

> "Having moved beyond coursework and into practical education connected
> to spiritual health, I have been confronted with the reality that what I [had
> been trying to describe for myself] was not a "person" at all. What I had
> been describing was the constructs used to describe something we cannot

describe to another, but only know exists for us, and which we presume is present in that form in the "person" or "people" we talk about. While this discussion was genuine, it's revelatory power was fundamentally blunted because we aren't able to discuss the inner being, only the ways it is described" (Vogelsang, 2013, p. 1).

It was this concentration on inner being, mine and my clients', only revealed in description of outward state, which stayed with me. In this, I had perhaps come to a clearer understanding that problems, and theoretical knowledge of how to respond to them, are all based on ideas we carry about our and others' inner beings. While a grounding in theoretical knowledge is important, engagement with someone's problems and engagement with their inner being isn't the same thing. Description of the outward state can give indications of the inner being, as themes can resolve, and general patterns of thinking can be identified. I've come to believe that the inner state is only truly known by the individual and God. Through the slow reveal throughout life, God allows us to come to know our inner beings. It is this capacity of being subjectively unset, unfinished, which allows change to occur.

Lauren's emphasis on presence with clients, initially so perplexing to me in its implied lack of content, was resolved in my mind to have been content in itself. I had been focused on finding content, so as to please authority, get good grades, and be successful. In shedding these, enabling myself to *be* with a client, my process became one of moving past content. I saw, finally, that I would remain a learner until my inner self is fully revealed. Furthermore, I saw that presence with a client is the most important aspect of the therapeutic relationship, as the client's experiences in the counselling environment are one of shared humanity.

But presence with a client must be with the client only. The worker must, as I had to,

learn to leave all his or her personal concerns out of the space. Paradoxically, in order to "succeed", I had to leave my thoughts and perceptions about success. I had to forget I was being evaluated. I had to move beyond the need to be secure by being pleasing to authority, as it was taking me from clients. I had to involve myself fully in the moment, but make that moment about the client.

These experiences, and the perceptions of counselling, of self, of social work, of spirit, and of care for the spirit that they sparked in me were not yet fully developed, as other references to this meeting will show below. However, as I began to transition into the Community Care Centre for the second half of this practicum placement, many of these experiences stayed with me, informing my work. This second half helped to solidify some of what I had learned in spiritual care duties, and helped me to translate newer perceptions into practice.

3(b): Counselling.

Throughout the month of January, I made the transition from the Spiritual Health department at the Hospital to the UNBC Downtown Community Care Centre ("CCC"). My goal was to learn to function as a counsellor in an outpatient, storefront counselling facility. In addition, I was looking forward to opportunities of direct counselling supervision, as I had hoped I would learn "what to do" in any given counselling situation. I had come to the realization around process and presence, and I'd seen the idea of the inner being during my time with Lauren and at St. Mikes, but these ideas were still quite new. I was in a new environment, and so looking for what I saw as security of understanding, and I did fall back somewhat into the search for confirmable content.

I went to the literature to learn more about spiritual care in a counselling context.

Authors such as Canda have written about how spirituality can (2011)[1] and should (1998) be

a concern in social work dynamics, but I wanted more regarding the role of spirituality in

counselling specifically.

> "To provide care for a human person's spirit is to open your human spirit in
> that moment. The discipline, as I understand it, is to be open to that other's
> spirit's needs in that other's spirit's moment. To care for the spirit of another
> is to be willing to open your spirit to the pain, shock, despair, grief,
> loneliness, fear, isolation, and rage of another's, and to have the personal
> courage to maintain that openness with that other in that anguish in that
> moment, without crowding that moment with personal spiritual needs
> related to that openness" (Vogelsang, 2013, p. 2).

Writing in 1957, Carl Rogers specified six criteria for therapeutic personality change:

1. That two persons are in psychological contact.
2. That the first person (the client) is in a state of incongruence,
   being vulnerable or anxious.
3. That the second person (the therapist) is congruent or integrated
   in the relationship.
4. The therapist experiences unconditional positive regard for the
   client.
5. The therapist experiences empathetic understanding of the
   client's internal frame of reference and endeavours to
   communicate this to the client.
6. The communication to the client of the therapist's empathetic
   understanding and unconditional positive regard is to a minimal
   degree successful. (p. 241)

I remember excitement when I read this paper. Carl Rogers was going to tell me how to

be a counsellor. His six criteria all seemed to exist in the same mental arena as I had

described in the January 17 report: Openness to the other and the other's experience, being

willing to be present with the client and the recognition that the fullness of the client's

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1 This in Furman, Benson, Perry, and Canda, 2011.

experience is unknowable to the therapist (ie: "...to a *minimal degree* successful"). However,

a more dispassionate reading shows that there are few clear statements about what the

therapist must do, outside of the obvious ("be in psychological contact"). I felt stymied again.

I had been trying to achieve some clarity about how to be a counsellor, and even comments

from the Venerable Carl weren't helping. The counsellor was being asked to be congruent in

the relationship, experience positive regard, and experience empathetic understanding of the

client's internal frame of reference, and to communicate all of that understanding to the

client. Of these things, only the last implies action.

Indeed, towards the end of the paper, Rogers explicitly states (p. 246) that these

conditions aren't even limited to therapeutic relationships. I had left the spiritual care element

of the practicum knowing I had "learned much" and "understood little", and I was placing a

lot of weight on coming to "understand" during the CCC element of the placement. Rogers

comments only seemed to muddy the waters more, throwing me into a confusing world.

My intention in this part of the final report is to describe this confusion, and how my

experiences in spiritual care up to that point were involved in my further development,

moving further from a need for content and a trust in the process that Rogers was trying to

articulate in his 1957 paper.

As above, I had developed a focus on the awareness and limits of presence while

working in the UHNBC phase of the course. I had been forced to put away the solidity of

foot of knowing how to respond, adopting to try only to *be* with the client in the moment. I

now had to determine the nature of that *be*ing act for me. I wanted to be able to be open to

the pain, loneliness, and grief of clients; not only because they are fundamental to my aspired

profession, but because they represent for me a spiritual path towards whatever it is I will become. If I have to ditch "knowing" as a marker of progress, and embrace "being" as a fundamental skill, I have to be able to rely on myself in the therapeutic moment. Further, as stated in the 17 January report, I have to rely on myself as an entity (an "I") prior to relying on the aspect of that entity who is being a counsellor at that moment. Meier and Rovers (2010) note this with *their* suggestion of "immersion" with a client. This version of immersion seems to go beyond Rogers', in that the latter authors note that "to be effective, the therapist must see beyond the clients problems and emotional states, and recognize their underlying needs" (p. 6).

My trouble with this idea has always been that I have to come to conclusions of what those needs are. If so, I have to base those conclusions on me. I don't know, and can never know, what the client's needs are. I can only know what my needs would be in the client's circumstances, based on the client's articulation of those circumstances. Therefore, I need to come to an idea of my conception of the self, what it is we do, so that I can move beyond being open to problems, and the client's experience of those problems, and come to an understanding of what those problems may mean to the client. This places the spotlight on the counsellor again, in that the counsellor's understanding of these client meanings could be influenced by meanings ascribed by the counsellor.

Owing to the inherent self-referential nature of (at least!) the therapy session, it is important for the counsellor to have more than an idea of "what it is counsellors do", but also an idea of why *that counsellor* does what (in this case) he does. This way, the counsellor can be immersed with a client, trying to understand the gaps in the self the client's problems

would leave for anyone, while (as in Rogers) working that knowledge into the particular client's context, or (as in Meier and Rovers) trying to understand what the client's needs are, while recognizing the appearance of his own projections of his own context(s) and needs.

So, I needed to get clear on my meanings of self and of counselling. If Banks is correct around her goal of a mutual space where nothing is too trivial or silly, then the content of that space is defined by the entities within it – the two "I"'s in the session. Because I cannot know the other "I" (the client), I am limited to trying to come to a clear understanding of that other "I", based only on it's existence as an "I", all the time trying not to project my understandings of myself on to the client.

This is a tall order, obviously, and benefited from exposure to previous thought on the "I". In Islam, for example, investigations of this sort begin with acknowledgment of the limits of human perception, and the necessary roles of human judgment and reason (Jafari, 1992, p. 328). From this, Islamic scholars of the person see the human psyche as combined of soul, heart, self, and intellect (p. 329; Weatherhead and Daiches, 2010, p. 79). Endeavours to "be in psychological contact" with another must begin from a recognition of all of these parts of the person. Jafari's articulation of counselling begins with the view that "faith is an essential prerequisite for the treatment of mental, emotional, or behavioural disorders" (p. 335). While I hold a reverence for Islam's ideals of worship, scholarship, charity, and peace, I am not a Muslim and do not hold what Jafari terms "a Muslim worldview" (ibid.).While I cannot work therapeutically from the standpoint of Islamic worship (p. 332), the idea of faith as a centrepoint to counselling isn't without precedent to the Western-style Christianity to which I have been exposed directly.

Proverbs 19:21   "There are many devices in a
                                   man's heart; nevertheless the
                                   counsel of the Lord, that shall
                                   stand." (KJB)

Osiowy (1989) notes that counselling is an important part of Christian ministry (p. 201).

This action, undertaken by people, resembles Jafari's comments in that both cases depict an

activity grounded in human concerns, but directed by principles acknowledging reality

beyond individuals' concerns. As such, Osiowy states that the counsellor is not to be an

"answer machine", a director of lives, or the taker of others' burdens or responsibilities (p.

203). Rather, Osiowy's idea is to draw the counsellor out from inside the person with the

problem (p. 204). This is done through the counsellor's concern for the person, and ensuring

full understanding is achieved before giving counsel (pp. 205, 209).

Osiowy's Christian and Jafari's Islamic perspectives share some common elements. First,

there is the admission that counselling perspective is based on a view of life centred beyond

the individual. However, both also acknowledge that human perception is incomplete,

requiring that each of these perceptions rely to some extent on imperfect human reasoning.

Being incomplete, both of these systems must look to figures presumed perfect, else

there isn't any externally validated guide. In this vein, Osiowy notes that the life of Jesus is

the prime example in his ministry, and Keshavarzi and Haque (2013) note that for Muslims,

Mohammad's (SAW) example of life is the route to proximity to God, and thus fuller

social/psychological health (p. 235).

Keshavarzi and Haque's discussion of an Islamic psychotherapy points out that observant

Muslims *begin* from an understanding of who and what they are in relation to God, and that it is possible for a person to realize their full potential (*"fitrah"*) by observing proper standards in life. This gives a specific direction and example for someone working in counselling from a Muslim worldview. In the same way, Osiowy's counselling model sets its priority of counselling as "to ensure that the counsel we give and the direction of the person's life will glorify God" (Osiowy, p. 212), giving a direction and something to aim for. The binding idea is that in the attempt to live like these examples is the dignity, the love, and the acceptance that they are looking for.

Although I can't deliver counselling services as a Pastor or an Imam, there does exist a deep resonance of these ideas in secular forms. Indeed, there is a deep spiritual current running through much modern counselling thought. Sarah Banks' Ethic of Care model (2006, p. 59) envisions two people linked in the radical safety and acceptance of the counselling session. In this space, the attempt to determine one's inner meanings, to be vulnerable, to be authentically yourself to a counsellor and have that vulnerability met with acceptance is a spiritual journey.

But beyond format and bearing, Clement Vontress' comments around existential counselling come to many of the same points around authenticity and acceptance (Epp, 1998). Vontress sees in existential work an effort to connect clients to the deeper sources of meaning in their lives beyond the cognitive and rational (p. 4). Indeed, Vontress' comments on these things beyond the "I" are equally directed at the *counsellor* as a person, and not only when the counsellor is in session. The counsellor is required to bring aspects of his being into the counselling session, and to use the knowledge of these aspects as a stage setting.

> "When the counsellor recognizes that he or she is as mortal as the client, all of the facades of superficiality, superiority, and inequality that may enter the counselling relationship dissolve, and counsellor and client interact with equality and genuineness. When the counsellor sees his or her own mortality in the client, I contend this is empathy, not the forbidden act of countertransference" (p. 5).

In this example, as with the more strictly religious counselling ideas mentioned above, the goal is to make contact in session with something beyond the strictly individualized. Vontress goes on to define 'mental health' as including balance and harmony with one's spirituality (p. 7). Vontress seems to suggest that this sense of balance is only achievable in the context of examination of one's own spiritual life, else this examination would be mere guesswork.

Therefore, like Jafari and Keshavarzi regarding Islamic counselling modalities, and like Osiowy for Christian counselling, the goal of Vontress' existential style is geared at the client's deeper meanings in life, and intends to help the client explore those meanings.

In discussing the applications of spiritual concerns in patient care, Seguil and Phelps (2012) caution practitioners (these authors' comments are directed at physicians) that providers "should consider their personal faith traditions, beliefs and practices, positive and negative experiences, attitudes on faith and healing, and comfort and ability to participate in another's spirituality or share their own" (p. 547). Again, then, the provision of care for the spirit comes back to the *provider* as the tool. Rather than a set of procedures, spirituality in counselling is a matter of the counsellor's ability to draw the client into spiritual examination, and motivating the client to apply the results of that examination, whatever they may be. The goal is not conversion to or from anything, but recognition of those beliefs as important to the

"I" of the individual client or patient (p. 548).

The Buddhist perspective of spirituality – as the connection of the self to the infinite – views our spiritual nature as something deeply definitive of our individual personhood. In his 2009 book connecting modern psychodynamic theory to Buddhist thought on the self, Franklyn Sills looks at the Buddhist conception of the "I" and the relationship of that "I" to what Sills calls "the deeper truths" of our existences (p. 1). For Sills this is important, as the lack of understanding of this relationship is the ultimate cause of "the suffering that we as human beings create for ourselves and others" (p. 2).

Like Vontress' existentialism, Sills' reading of Buddhist philosophy begins with an embrace of impermanence. Buddhist existentialism sees four "Noble Truths" in life. First, Buddhism teaches that suffering exists; it is real and it is a part of our lives (p. 3). Second, Buddhism teaches that suffering is caused by a failure to understand the self's true nature (p. 4). We very often conceive of our lives on the basis of outward things, clinging to them, and demanding that they do not change. We do this because we find security in what is known, as we know how to achieve pleasure and avoid unpleasure within that environment. However, because all of life is impermanence and change, we are bound to fail in avoiding it. It is this failure which is the origin of suffering.

In this part of Sills' articulation of the human self, I can see parallels with Epstein's experiential hermeneutics. The drive to keep everything the way it is is similar to the attempt to achieve a known sense of self-in-place. Also, from the perspective of Ortner's making/made dyad, change is an unavoidable result of human existence. When we act to conserve what already is, we set ourselves in opposition to a fundamental premise of life.

However, for Buddhists, there is an answer, where for Epstein and Ortner there wasn't even a question. The third of Buddhism's Noble Truths is that freedom from suffering is possible. Ultimately, this freedom is realized by understanding "that the self, which seems so solid and stable, is really an ephemeral, contingent process, in which any particular form or identity has only momentary existence" (p. 3). That is, embracing impermanence includes embracing our moment-by-moment states of being as only those. Leading directly from this is the fourth Noble Truth, showing that there is a way to achieve a *modus vivendi* with this impermanence through ethical living and reflective enquiry about self and world (p. 4). This is very much like Jafari's articulation of proximity to God, and in both the ultimate object of enquiry is the nature of the relationship to the ultimate. However, while an Islamic viewpoint sees that ultimate as something beyond human experience, Buddhist thought incorporates that ultimate as the very core of human experience. Buddhism sees what the individual refers-to as 'self' as only the third 'layer' of a person. The person exists simultaneously in three aspects. The first of these is the form of the potential self that developed in relation to that person's life experiences. This self-in-place is referred to as "*atta*". *Atta* exists as an expression of the potential self, "*citta*". *Citta* is the inherent humanity of the person. All of the advantages and limitations of human form and thought are contained in *citta*, with *atta* forming the results of the *citta*'s engagement with the world of external experience, and of the internal experience these external experiences engender.

Within *citta*, though, is that which is not touched by direct temporal-experiential interaction. "*Bodhicitta*" is our individual piece of the ultimate, or as Sills describes, "the already-enlightened ground state" (Sills, p. 4). Sills describes these levels as non-diametric

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and "holographically enfolded", which I am perceiving as meaning that each of these three

are present in each facet of our lives from the cradle to the grave. From *bodhicitta*'s presence

in everything, Sills articulates Buddhism's concept of "source" as the inherent connection of

humanity to the enlightened space beyond temporality – that thing within each of us that cries

out for connection to something beyond ourselves. To interrupt this connection is to offend

against our most basic humanity. "The greatest wounding any of us can experience is the

obscuration of source, and the subsequent disconnection from being" (p. 5).

This articulation resonates deeply for me. In my practicum proposal's discussion of

'trauma', it was described as an untethering of self from place by elimination of the founding

ideas of the operation of reality. Logically, a Buddhist program of awareness and

contemplation must begin with the self-conscious thing doing the contemplating (the *atta*).

This *atta* examines itself to try to determine the nature of her or his *citta*, the truest

expression of self. Through this examination of *citta*, *bodhicitta* is revealed. Traumatic events

would seem, then, to have the immediate impact of a radical insult to *atta*, throwing

knowledge of *citta* into disarray, and thus blocking engagement with *bodhicitta* (p. 7). Thus,

Sills "greatest wounding" is reflected in Epstein's hermeneutics and Ortner's personal/social

dyad.

Sills' viewpoint is useful from the standpoint of counselling, in that the relentless nature

of *atta*'s building of itself requires relational experience with others (p. 6). Because the *atta* is

relational in nature, it is possible to engage with other selves (perhaps that of a counsellor) as

a means to draw experiences into the *atta*. These experiences engender contemplation of

citta, and maybe truer knowledge of *bodhicitta*. Sills notes (p. 11) that therapy can exist at

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any of these levels, and seems to imply that work at progressively deeper levels is based on progressively deepening therapeutic relationship.

For Sills, the ultimate goal of work at this most interior level has "the potential for truly transcending the most painful and distorted conditions held within the self-system" (p. 12). For Sills, the self is created by exposure to the world, and that exposure history determines action in the world (pp. 13-15). Again, here exist tones of Epstein and Ortner. It seems that these two temporally-bound thinkers on humanity's nature are coming to the same conclusions more spiritually-minded thinkers arrived-at long ago. Perhaps in defence of the temporally-bound thinker, I believe that while Osiowy, Jaffir and Keshavarzi, Vontress, and now Sills, are all working from a context established in the pre-existing relationship of the self to the ultimate, Epstein and Ortner's grounding in empirical rationality seems to force them to explain the self in terms of a fluid sculpting process carried-out over time. So, where more secular counselling concepts see the self as something which develops, spiritually-influenced counselling tends to see the self as something developed but unknown. Perhaps it is the definitive view of the nature of being held by spiritual traditions which allows the ease of articulation of that being, and it is the phenomenon-based constructivist position of being which held-up its development in this mode for so long.

> "In development of psychological and object-relations theory, the nature of being and the self-sense are fundamental to understanding suffering and personality formation. Yet, when one begins to enquire into the nature of being, it can be like trying to grasp flowing water (Sills, p. 25).

Sills' grasp of the flowing water is grounded in his perspective of the individual. In presuming, within the individual, a luminous connection to the ultimate, Sills can ground his

therapeutic ideas in the very reality of the therapeutic moment as something sacred for the individuals in the therapeutic space. While not arguing against my reading of Banks' Ethic of Care, Sills' interpretation seems to provide the possibility of an even deeper connection. Banks' articulation of Ethic of Care centres on a suspension of (most of) reality to allow the client near-total freedom within the space. Sills' approach seems to contain a little more of a path to tread.

Sills finds the process of counselling to be one of "unconcealment" (Sills, p. 26). Banks seems to worry less about process, trusting in the radical suspension of reality as the catalyst for therapeutic contact between the worker and client. In both these conceptions, though, the central foundation is *trust* as opposed to *technique*.

This conforms to research indicating that it is the therapeutic relationship which is the strongest predictor of therapeutic change for a client (Duff and Bedi, 2010, p. 91). Duff and Bedi found, however, that this is more than "being nice". Their findings regarding an analysis of therapeutic behaviours predicting an alliance show that encouraging comments, smiles, verbal prompts, and counsellor sharing of similar experiences carry little weight compared to counsellor validation of client experience (p. 99), and a constellation of counsellor behaviours indicating presence (p. 100).

Though presence and relationship are important, and Duff and Bedi do suggest that "counsellors should probably be trained to emphasize validation during the early stages of counselling" (p. 103), there isn't enough here to apply a "how-to" framework.

The content-based search did appear in my first few counselling sessions. From counselling notes, it is clearer now that I started out by working very much from a cathartic

"doing" place. I was trying to solve problems. Everything I'd read and experienced to that point notwithstanding, I was working from a need to respond to my own anxieties about what I was doing. I hadn't yet grasped what I later came to see as the subtle art of counselling work. Instead, I was responding to client issues with information and my perspective. When a client had stated a wish in session around not being "broken", my immediate response was to affirm that I didn't think the client was "broken"

What I hadn't yet fully absorbed was whether *I thought* the client was "broken" didn't matter as much as what the client thought. I was still holding on to "doing" as the basis of the work.

Thankfully, this was recognized. In supervision regarding the very session mentioned above, Ryan James (CCC Director) and I spoke about about my having moved too far away from counselling, and too close to "sympathy". As I was responding in session to my needs (to *do*), I had lost track of the client in the therapeutic space. Ryan and Brent had both noticed this tendency, and had asked me to transcribe segments of sessions. In doing this exercise, I was confronted very clearly with my need to fill space by talking. Also, it was suggested I read a section of Strean and Freeman's (1988) exploration of counsellor anxiety and wonder when working with patients. At the very beginning of the book, I found a similarity between my experience and the authors' observation that "because young therapists feel they have to earn their keep, they tend to talk too much. This interferes with the patient observing himself, saying what he thinks, feels, and remembers of the past" (p. 7).

In the book, Strean recounts his work with a woman who didn't speak at all, and Strean's emotional responses to this. Strean recounts feeling rejected by the client, and goes on to say

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that analysts may feel a whole range of emotions related to clients, emphasizing that

therapists must be aware of and monitor these emotions (p. 9).

Strean recounts how the client's silence impacted him personally, and how he had to

separate his personal responses from his work with the client. He suggests that "the analyst

should ask, "Who does this client remind me of? What emotion or wish or fantasy am I

bringing to this analysis that really does not belong but is present because it is a conflicted

part of my life?" (p. 13). On reflection, Strean saw "[he] was dealing with a second personal

problem – my own strong desire to succeed." (ibid.).

This chapter brought together a number of the individual pieces I had created and

considered thus far. I was concentrating, still, on "doing" as a means to "be successful". In

session with clients, this was translating into my need to show my understanding for the

client. Essentially, I was trying to show how present I was being by my depth of

understanding, displayed for the client. As a result, I was speaking too much, and very

probably at the wrong times.

Knowing *why* I was talking so much, I was able to be aware of it in the background of

my mind in future sessions. This is preferable to having it in the foreground of everything

while in session.

In addition, there was illuminated the element of connection to clients in the client's

moment. I had mentioned this necessity in the January 17 report to the field committee, but it

was after the Strean and Freeman reading I understood far better the idea of *doing* in the

context of *being* in a therapeutic setting. I saw that I was 'doing' when I followed Strean into

the trap he laid for himself in being "determined to help [the client] get involved in her

treatment so she could live a happier life, free from the terrifying ghosts of the past" (p. 13), and then out again, when he saw that "when an analyst can truly see in himself conflicts similar to the one the patient currently expresses, and when he faces the fact that patient and therapist are similar, this is when we hit therapeutic awareness" (p. 14).

Strean was working with his own internal pushes-and-pulls when he was trying to have a client speak, where I was working with my own when I was describing my understanding for the client. Strean's assurances that this was all normal didn't make me feel a whole lot better, but it did open a perceptual pathway to a deeper reading of the spiritual content in counselling.

In his report of a pastoral encounter with a woman widowed by suicide, Richard Hughes (2003) describes his work (totaling 4.5 hours in person and one phone conversation, pp. 44, 49) beginning with what seemed an extraordinarily thorough social and historical genographic assay of both the client and the deceased. For such a short therapeutic relationship, such detail seemed unnecessary. On a second reading of the piece (after having read the Strean chapter) I saw in the detail the desire to truly understand the client, and the willingness of Pastor Hughes to be silent, save only for pointed questions designed to move the client to think about patterns and themes. On the basis of the detailed histories, Hughes was able to "[point] out to [client] that her three husbands all displayed a homicidal intent, either against her or against her children, and [ask] why she was attracted to them" (p. 53).

Initially, I was confused by Hughes' questions. With such a short relationship, and with such specificity of the client's reasons for attending, why go down this path at all? On the second (or third) reading, I saw that Hughes' purpose was more of co-existence of the client

with her grief than it was about 'dealing with' or 'moving past' her feelings.

Keeping this perspective in mind, I was able to make a therapeutic connection with a client only a few days later. This client, 34 years of age, had recently experienced the end of a significant relationship, and had sought counselling for anger and frustration. This client had, since the ending of this relationship, entered into other short-lived relationships, none of which had really worked out. I spent some time with the client discussing past relationships' chronologies, and asked the client about how long the client had been single since becoming a teenager. Being newer than Hughes, I wasn't willing to ask a pointed question. It wasn't until two sessions later that the topic of "single-time" came up again, allowing a discussion of the possibility that the client may not have much knowledge of self independent of a romantic relationship. The client confirmed that the client hadn't ever been single for a long stretch of time, and I believe that this single piece of information had a significant impact on the remainder of our work together.

This brings us to empathy and empathy's role in counselling. One may wonder why empathy hasn't been discussed more fully up to this point, as Carl Rogers discussed the topic frequently, it being the cornerstone of Rogers' person-centred practice. The reason is that I had been seeing understanding and reflecting as empathy up to this time in the practicum. That is, I was conceiving of empathy as something a counsellor *does*. It wasn't until my encounter with Strean's client, with Hughes' widow, and my experience with my client that I saw empathy as something more reflective of a person than of technique (Clark, 2007, p. 4).

I had been challenged around development of a sense of empathy for some months. I had read Clark's review of Rogers' later thought on the subject, which showed that when empathy

is reduced to a specific set of skills, the results are "appalling consequences and a complete

distortion of client-centred therapy" (Rogers, 1980, in Clark, p. 9; one can also see tones of

Duff and Bedi's cautions). In dissecting the distinction between empathy and sympathy,

Clark notes that their similarities do cause problems (p. 12), but that there exists a difference,

in that empathy is more about coming to an understanding of the whole person, where

sympathy is more geared towards the individual's well-being (p. 13). What makes sympathy

so fundamentally dangerous to the client-counsellor relationship is sympathy's desire for a

particular outcome ("well-being"). One must keep in mind that "well-being" is a subjective

quality, and that therefore the counsellor's desires for that well-being in a client may well be

shaped by the *counsellor's* view of what well-being is.

In this way, the distinction between "understanding" and "knowing" becomes clearer.

The counsellor's role is to understand, and help the client to know the feeling of being

understood. If the counsellor moves too far towards concern for client well-being, the client

is lost in the purposes of the counsellor's "knowledge" of the situation. This would only

disempower the client, as he or she is only being told what to do, that the problem they came

in with isn't actually the problem, and that the real problem runs backwards in time, perhaps

for decades. What becomes important in the counselling process, then, is the feeling of

loneliness, or of 'brokenness' on the part of the client. For it is in the supported vulnerability

of sharing those feelings that the client can more fully access them and their connections to

other aspects of the client's life. Egan and Schroeder (2009) note (p. 8) that a "good session"

requires "more effective living" on the part of the client. In my development as a counsellor,

I confronted the idea that "more effective living" did not mean a cessation of problems. If

"more effective living" can include a client's expanded understanding of her or his problems, then it isn't necessary for the counsellor to be concerned with "well-being", as defined by any one outcome. My earliest attempts at empathy weren't successful because they were aimed at improving well-being. The later attempts were more successful because they were rooted in my understanding of the client's experience and of the meanings of that experience. My assurances that a client isn't 'broken' amounts to little more than some guy quoting from his own perceived reality. My asking about time spent single as an adult requires the client to explore the client's own life experience and his or her own perceived reality.

This represents much of the core of the general trend from content-focus to process-focus I have attempted to describe and understand in this report. In my work with Grief Group, with visitors to St. Mike's, and with individual clients at both UHNBC and CCC, I started from the beginning – looking for things to *do* in an attempt to be successful and a good student. Over time, in each of these experiences, I learned (and re-learned) that it is not the role of counsellors to *do* anything, except be understanding of how clients feel. Because there is nothing to be done for grief except to experience grief, because there's nothing I can do to alleviate the general poverty of my St. Mike's visitors, because there's no grand gesture to solve clients' counselling problems, the only appropriate counselling response is the process-related concerns of relationship and trust building, of understanding feelings and meanings, and creating possibility of change in perspective.

In the next section of this report, I will be revisiting many of these circumstances, providing examples of how process-focus changed much of the way I worked with clients. That is, it will attempt to demonstrate how the application of practice experience and

supervision to theoretical knowledge has deepened my understanding of social work praxis in spirituality-informed counselling work.

Chapter 4: Praxis

These practicum experiences have been a whirlwind of variety and depth far beyond anything I could have hoped for as a student. The richness and my experience of having to stretch the boundaries of my "comfort zone" more-or-less all of the time have impacted me at the level of my personhood, and to numerous areas of my practice as a social worker and counsellor. These personal and professional boundary changes are so varied, numerous, and interpenetrating that I have found it difficult to separate them out in order to discuss them.

In being confronted with the anxiety of the unknown, or of the inability to know I am "succeeding", I was forced to confront the constant presence of anxiety in my own life. In facing this presence, I have been forced to examine the perspectives of the world which make my anxiety-filled world rationally possible. While doing the readings (and re-readings) of thought on the person, on the nature of counselling, on the relationship between humanity and our imperfections, I was coming to a deeper understanding of myself, in addition to gaining the rawer knowledge from the research.

Simply put, the more I understand about myself, the more I am forearmed against the intrusion of my own perceptions and desires for the client. I can push these "to the back" and focus on the client in that moment. While this is important, these readings and supervision sessions exposed me to a whole collection of thought about what it is that connects *me* to the Ultimate, and how that impacts the work I have chosen. It is this thought and perspective, exemplified by the movement from content to process-focus, or from *doing* to *being*, that is the core of the perspective I bring to praxis; or the lens through which I see the theory informing actual work with clients.

Philip Burnard's 1999 book "Practical Counselling and Helping" is a very good one, with well laid-out chapters and an accessible style. As beneficial as the book is, Burnard's chapter 'Models of the Person' seems to look rather glibly at spiritual content regarding a person's self-concept, as it relates to counselling practice. Burnard's view of the role of "God" in our lives seems somewhat superficial. He notes that "[t]his point of view is seen in a number of world religions. It covers the idea of us being 'born into sin' and being 'redeemable' by belief in a god or a higher power" (p. 63).

With all due respect to the author, he may be looking at the whole idea of spirituality in a counselling paradigm without the required depth. My reading, experience, and re-reading during this practicum shows me that a spiritual orientation, applied with care and a solid theoretical background, is far away from the directive and prescriptive counselling Burnard describes. Hughes' work did not appear to me to be prescriptive or directive. While Hughes did ask pointed questions I might not have chosen to ask within the parameters of *that* counselling relationship, Hughes did not tell his client what to do, how to think, or what to believe about her problems. This distinction exemplifies for me the distance between content and process-focus in human services work.

Burnard's view of spirituality in counselling seems to be focused on concerns about *content*. A good example is Burnard's concern with the prescriptive nature of the enterprise, and the mention of being 'born into sin' (with the prescriptions set as the means to escape sin). Burnard quotes (at p. 63) the famous psychologist Erich Fromm, crediting Fromm with "suggesting" that "religion offers something of a bargain" based on the acceptance of rigid externally-derived control as a guarantee of a better afterlife.

However, I see far more nuance in the role of spirituality in counselling work than Burnard seems to. The idea of 'original sin', as described by Burnard, depicts a faultiness within the human spirit. This need not be so. As Jafari's description provides, knowing that humans are incomplete, our knowledge must be incomplete. Jafari acknowledges that human judgement and reasoning are necessary in examinations of self and relationship to God. This necessity of reason in an environment of incomplete knowledge gives us the permission to risk and be willing to examine ourselves so that we can improve. After all, we have to reason on the basis of *something*, and this something must ultimately relate to action within the world (ours, or another's of which we are aware). Looked at this way, the idea of 'original sin' becomes 'original disconnection from God'. For Jafari, this disconnection is seen more as in *invitation* for self examination and awareness of self and God, and not necessarily a deficit.

As an element of practice, however, this outlook provides for more. By recognizing human imperfections, counsellors must recognize their own imperfection. No matter how experienced, as with Strean (1988), counsellors can fall prey to their own subtle desires. We must be able to discover the presence and sources of those desires. Most specifically to me, as an element of my practice in the future, this outlook will help to remind me that the slide back into a content-focus can be an easy one for me in times when I am uncertain. However, while I am reminded of my own imperfections, I am reminded that these are a consequence of my fundamental humanity. I see in this the potential linking of myself to the clients' lifeworlds, and their struggles with the imperfections of their lives. I can 'resonate' (if the reader likes) with the client's feelings related to the disappointments, struggles for significance, and questions of personal meaning. In addition, my private and personal sense

of being imperfect frees me from the need to 'say the right thing'. It requires only that I be able to communicate that I can sense and acknowledge the client's feelings.

Another point of praxis is to be found related to recognition of the client's past as an element of the present. Sills' description of the self's development in relation to worldly experience (p. 27) recognizes the power of the past in the formation of perception. However, the Buddhist idea of *atta*, and its distinction from *citta*, allows for the past's impacts on the present's self, but without Burnard's fatalism. This idea recognizes that *atta* is only a response to the world, and that the *citta*, the true self, is something waiting to be found and explored. In this, the individual moves beyond determinism, and becomes more than her or his individual past. Even in cases one finds in counselling work related to corrections – where some clients may have done terrible things – the idea of *atta* being only an indicator of the client's lifeworld, and not necessarily the client's true self, provides a possible vector for client exploration and understanding of his actions. Thus, the idea of *citta* is empowering for clients, as it allows the possibility of a more personal ownership of the client's actions in the future.

Described in this way, the principles of empathy and understanding require a significant duality on the part of the counsellor. On the one hand, the counsellor must be present with the client in the client's moment. On the other, the counsellor must be aware of his triggers, his current concerns, and how they may show-up while in session with a client or a group.

I had an opportunity to witness this duality and its implications applied to spiritual counselling practice principles during the third session of the Grief Group. This session was to be led by Lauren, and specifically devoted to the topic of spirituality in the grief

experience.

During a "human sculpture" exercise, Lauren was leading an effort to help clients display physically what might be more difficult to articulate verbally. Lauren discussed the idea of being "angry with God" for the loss of the loved one all had experienced. What had stayed with me was the assertion that anger with God was a natural and very normal response to grief. Beyond this wonderful bit of practice knowledge, there exists a deeper meaning for me. Lauren's discussion brought the concept of an individual's day-to-day relationship with God into focus as an element of an individual's lived experience. Discussing anger with God, and the belief that God can handle our anger, allows one a fuller relationship with that something beyond ourselves. In this sense, God (however conceived by the client) can most certainly be "in the room" in session because it can bring the wholeness of the client into fuller articulation – both for the counsellor, and perhaps the client, too.

The spiritual implications of this are far and away more profound for me in terms of a lens for practice in the future. This view of a day-to-day relationship with God as a part of a person's lived experience necessarily creates that relationship in human terms. Because each person's relationship with God is a human relationship, Burnard's "fatalist" conjecture is further weakened if one's relationship with her or his view of the Ultimate can become envisioned as a *partnership*. If, as Jafari states, consideration of God and one's relationship with God must be carried out in terms of human judgement and reason, then that other in the relationship (God) will be described in terms extrapolated from human experience.

This is important for my practice in the future, as it removes a stumbling block I have encountered in my attempts to grasp counselling as presence, and presence as being. With

specific regard to the Grief Group participants, Lauren acted to maintain group safety by speaking of the relationship with God as a partnership. By speaking of the relationship to God in this way, Lauren made that relationship a human one, placing the definitive power in that relationship in the hands of the client(s). While this is certainly an act of client empowerment, I see it also as an inherently spiritual act as well. For me, it represents a level of practice including a level of comfort with "letting the client go". As an element of my journey towards process focus in counselling, I become more automatically mindful that the clients are full and complete beings outside of their relationship with a counsellor. Just as someone's "grief journey" is subjective and individualized, so is someone's "life journey". I am not the sole determinant of someone's mental health, and any attempt to be so would disempower the client as much as to *confirm* Burnard's fatalist spirituality. In the final view, the individual has (in most cases) volunteered to come to counselling. Logically, then, this individual perceived that something in their lives might function better that it is currently, and made the decision to seek aid. All of this happened long before the client even met her or his counsellor, and represents a major act of personal strength.

Because these helping relationships, secular or otherwise, are based in human terms, the counsellor can work from a spiritual perspective with a client without risking overreach. Or at least, without doing so in a manner greater than with any other perspective; existentialist, cognitive-behavioural, what have you. Also, this means that a counsellor working from a spiritual perspective need not necessarily be a religious expert. Anyone can acknowledge another's anger with God, giving depth and meaning to a person's relationship with God, and the whole of their experience. By connecting at this level with a person (or group) a

counsellor can perhaps help move the client to think and feel about the events and perspectives bringing him or her to counselling. While certainly no more a panacea than any other vector to stimulate this motion, spiritually-informed practice, conducted from a standpoint of relationship with something beyond the self, can provide a vector to access the interiority of the client's lifeworld – that is, to be in psychological contact.

In his frequently-referenced paper on the topic of resiliency and thriving, Charles Carver (1998) creates a useful (even if skeletal) addition to what is discussed here. Briefly, for the moment, Carver's distinction sees the possibility of "thriving" being something more than "resilience". Carver notes the capacity of many to experience an *improvement* of overall function after a traumatic or adverse event. Lauren's idea about relationship with God, experienced in human terms, creates a freedom in that relationship. Carver's discussion of thriving creates a freedom for the client in defining the remainder of life. That is, a combination of Carver's basic distinction, and the idea of a human (and therefore changeable) relationship with God (or the universe, or physical causality, or the future, or an ideal), could combine to form something with considerable potential therapeutic power.

Carver was examining the phenomenon of people experiencing adverse or traumatic events, and not only recovering from these events, but actually coming to "function at a continuing higher level" than before the event (p. 250). Carver's paper attempts to describe possible factors in this phenomenon, ultimately arriving at a three-way interaction between constructs like "importance", "engagement", and "confidence", arranged relative to each other in an (x,y,z) geometry. Having said all of this, and though Carver is making a brave attempt, for the purposes of the present report, what's important for me is more limited. I am

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interested in this paper because of Carver's attempts to describe what "thriving" really *is*. Carver makes his most general attempt at page 250, where he notes that "sometimes people who experience adversity report later that the experience resulted in greater acceptance of themselves or others (or the world); some people report a change in personal philosophy or orientation to life, changes in priorities, and so on".

However, all of this comes with an academic caution. Carver notes the theoretical possibilities, mentioned by others, that these sort of internal, perspective-related results of adversity may "hint at accommodation" or "a blunting of expectations" (p. 250). Indeed, in a footnote to the point:

> "A separate problem with this sort of outcome is that responses of this form are harder than are behavioural responses to distinguish from rationalization or dissonance reduction, which would not be regarded as thriving under any reasonable definition of the term. Although a given observed positive response to trauma may actually be rationalization or dissonance reduction, or just a positive reframing of the experience, I will disregard this possibility throughout this article" (p. 250).

From a spiritually-informed perspective, the necessity of objective criteria is dimmed, because the relational focus is something beyond the individual. That is, because the individual's focus for thought and action is the relationship to something beyond him- or herself, and because this relationship is subjectively described, whether it is a form of dissociation to see suffering and anger as blessings, as challenges to be overcome, as some of those things that have made us the people we are, isn't an objective question: It is a clinical question.

If the counsellor senses patterns of spiritual thought leading to an obviation of agency, this is something that can be addressed in-session with the client. However, as an

acknowledgement that the counsellor isn't able to make right/wrong determinations about a client's state of being, the counsellor must work with what is present in the counsellor/client relationship, and not directly with any client's individual relationship with God. By working within the client/counsellor relationship the client can come to see her or his spiritual life's benefits and difficulties and perhaps be moved to examine them with the counsellor, with private study, with involvement in spiritual groups, etc. As long as the counsellor recognizes that the client's spiritual centre and movement is something for the client, spiritual counselling can act as a guard against fatalism in spiritual life. But it is worth emphasizing that this guarding function is based in the strength of the counsellor/client relationship.

In another work on resilience, Bononno (2004) points out that although it is common wisdom that an individual who experiences loss will have some sort of reaction, there is no evidence that these sort of reactions must occur in any individual. Further, in a 2012 paper, this same author sees reactions to adverse life events as existing along a continuum, thus allowing for the possibility for little to no reaction being something *other* than a pathological "absence of grief" (Bowlby, 1980, in Bononno, 2004, p. 23). Continuing (into 2012, at least) is the preconception that trauma/loss work will be needed for most people experiencing adverse events in their lives.

Going further, Bononno notes that theory has not been able to penetrate to the level of individual differences, perhaps because our measures aren't sufficiently precise (2004, p. 80). What this means is that academic thought on patterns of coping after adversity presumes, without evidence, that people can't face post-adversity life without intervention, that our methods for determining specific level of required help are specific enough, and that the

ideas on which we're basing these determinations are more than constructs based on other

constructs (2012, p. 78).

However, a spiritual view doesn't necessarily have to rely on mass-validated diagnostic

criteria. By starting with interiority, psychological response to adversity in life can begin

with the individual and move outward, into the fundamental questions of self and existence

adversity can entail. In this way, I find practice to be enriched by working with the client to

describe the client's lifeworld, rather than presuming that specific helps will be needed.

The idea of the wholeness of the individual as the centre of being and of therapeutic

intervention isn't new, of course. Alfred Adler (b.1870-d.1937) is rightly considered a giant

in the field. In one of the more creative papers I've read, James Overholser (2010) conducts a

"simulated interview" with Adler based on translations of Adler's published work throughout

Adler's career. In this paper, Overholser describes Adler's outlook to psychology and

treatment as grounded in the perspective of the self-conscious self who is the client.

> "Heredity only endows him with certain abilities. Environment gives him
> only certain impressions. These abilities and impressions, and the manner in
> which he "experiences" them – that is to say, the interpretations he makes of
> these experiences – are the bricks which he uses in his own creative way in
> building up his attitude towards life...it is his attitude towards life that
> determines his relationship to the outside world." (Adler, 1935, in
> Overholser, 2010, p. 349).

I suppose that for me, as a practitioner, I am most puzzled by the idea of a "healthy level

of adjustment" in an adult therapy context. For Bonanno, and Adler, and Carver, the question

of psychological function after a life stressor is inherently individualized. One of the reasons

I dwell on this point as I do is that much thought on resilience, recovery, etc., seems to

assume that "recovery" is a unidimensional line. So, in practice, the individual is being

"resilient" or "recovering" only to the degree that they are now precisely the same person they were before the event.

I do not believe that this conforms to human experience. Events will change us, either directly (as for Epstein), procedurally (as for Ortner), or perceptually (as for Adler). This changed person is, again, a new person, whose goals, dreams, and beliefs are altered forms of that which existed before. To admit this, however, seems akin to admission of defeat; an admission that the event has somehow "beaten" the person. It follows that the criteria on which "beatenness" has been adjudged is the degree to which the event has changed the person. However, if all events change us, then to determine "recovery" through this lens is to deny the humanity of the client. Spiritually-informed counselling practice is positively implicated here, in that the connectivity of the new individual to the world is not placed in reference to the adverse event (or any temporal event), but in reference to the whole of the individual's life. Viewed this way, the individual isn't pressured through diagnostic criteria and folk wisdom about what "should be" in terms of recovery at three days, three weeks, three years, etc. Rather, the individual is encouraged and supported in determining the new connectivities that exist and emerge.

Spiritual approaches in this case can relate to views of the self as unfinished and adaptable, so as to make the client's journey of the new self a journey of discovery *beyond* fear, of joy in possibility *beyond* loss. These ideas can help a person see illness as a chance to show courage, see despair as an opportunity to change something needing changing, or see suffering as a chance to grow as a person. Once again, I'd like to reiterate that none of this is a blithe view of that suffering; the individual's potentially soul-wrenching present. Indeed, it

is within the perception of this suffering as something which cannot be 'fixed' by the counsellor that the counsellor and client relationship comes to the fore. This relationship allows only that emotions and thoughts be expressed, placing no valence or hierarchy on them, and thus allowing all possibilities to be equally valid. The counselling relationship, by this view, becomes the format within which those possibilities are examined.

The idea of the therapeutic relationship takes on special importance once the conjectures of directionality are removed. Directionality is useful for the purposes of providing guideposts or touchstones, but in reference to any one individual client, the only useful guide is the interiority of that client. The paradox here is clear: Counselling is based on the aggregate of lessons learned by ourselves and by other counsellors, but all of these lessons are meaningless in each separate interaction with each separate client.

The disconnect I felt around this was felt very acutely in the planning of the fourth and fifth Grief Group sessions. I had become more comfortable with the idea of process and flow in the grief journey, and the co-facilitator and I discussed how to address the continuum of responses to grief. Where I had felt the need to actively treat the group members' grief, I now better understood the goal of comfort with expression. This represented, for me, a large part of "letting go", as my perspective had changed to a role of support, not teacher or wizard.

Working from the perspective of grief behaviours existing on a continuum between instrumental and expressive forms of grief (Versalle & McDowell, 2005), the session's goals reflected an emerging "feel" I had, regarding my role in the group. Instead of explaining what was going on (as I had done in the first and second sessions), I was trying to create opportunities for people to talk to each other (or, at least, in the presence of each other) about

their personal grief experience. Like with my "broken" client a few months later, what *I* think about the participants' grief experience isn't as relevant as the experience itself and how it is navigated. This was the central idea behind the fifth grief group session's discussion of 'ritual' in grief. Evidencing my movement from content to process-focus, I used the open-ended, functional definition of ritual supplied by Running and Girard's 2008 paper – the same one which I had thought so useless on my first reading. The main idea here was that ritual – whatever it turned out to be for the participant – was something that could be entered into and exited by the client in the psychological sense (if not necessarily the physical one). Here, the goal was the creation of a truly different reality where grief can be felt acutely, where homage can be paid, and which can be exited again. This seems to me to be a true departure from categorizations, in that the roadmap available is internal to the actor (the grieving person). Whether with an individual or a group, spiritually-influenced counselling must focus on the person who is experiencing, and the only window to this experience is inside the client's mind. We may be rebuilding a roadmap almost completely, and very likely we will only be able to travel with them a short way on the totality of their journey. It may be that the therapeutic relationship can only begin the work of rebuilding after a grief experience. The key, perhaps, lies in the focus on the interiority but directed outwards to the world.

Groups number four and five represented a letting go of my own desires for client improvement. I gave tools only, around concepts like "sacred space" in ritual. Lauren's session three acknowledgement that anger with God is something we all feel frees that anger from many external strictures, allowing it to be faced and expressed without shame or denial. I feel that sessions four and five became the beginning of my movement away from the

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strictures on me, and those I had been imposing on the Grief Group participants. In the same way that it was okay to be angry with God, it was okay to be more of a learner/experiencer like the group members. In session five, my comfort with letting-go was more manifest, as can be seen in the formal session notes, completed after the session.

> +I think that opening the check-in with asking for "one discovery, one difficulty" was successful, as it got people into their feelings, while creating a sort of container for the discussion, allowing a little more consciousness of time than [co-facilitator] and I have been able achieve thus far. The talking stick idea was applied at the beginning, but seemed to naturally fall into disuse.
> +We began with a discussion of what rituals were. I found that during various pieces of this discussion, I felt blank, for trying to keep up with the discussion. More than once, I had to consult my sheet to place myself in the discussion.
> +Ultimately, the group came to discussion of what sorts of rituals they already engage in. [co-facilitator] and I were able to support the group members in the use of these preexistent ritual forms. We didn't really go into the hows of creating our own "sacred space", again, concentrating on the preexistent forms. However, we were to guide some discussion of safety in ritual, and in developing goals in ritual.

Clearly, this "letting-go" isn't always easy. Indeed, while I had created the session plan to be very general, hoping for free discussion about creating space to grieve, I felt ungrounded throughout the session for all of that generality. I kept looking over the session plan during the session for some solid direction, even though I'd written the thing to avoid these very qualities.

Even though I was having trouble with the format I'd come up with, by the end of the session the group had settled into a discussion around what rituals for grief the members were already engaging in. This was telling for me, for even though there wasn't much structure laid into the session plan, the group member's interaction molded a therapeutic

means by which to discuss ritual. A means I had never even considered. In terms of experiential knowledge, I think that this session may have been the most important for me. In many ways, I was more an observer of the group than in any other of the sessions. Although there wasn't much in the session plan by way of structure, there were specified goals. Most of these were replaced in-session in favour of other issues related to time when grieving is expressed, and personal spaces to grieve. What I saw here was an example of the natural process of grief, being experienced and encountered and worked-through by people experiencing it. What occured amongst the participants was the beginnings of new directions moving outward (not forward) into a future where grief is present – and, yes, may always be – but where that grief, and any losses it represents, are only one part of a whole lived life.

The idea of grief being so contained, while being so inherently undefined, was a difficult thing to assimilate in an intellectual sense, to say nothing about a practical application. In looking for one, I came back to Worden's (1991) book on grief counselling. This may rightly be called a seminal book on the topic, perhaps due to its care to articulate a number of perspectives on grief. I was no longer trying to control therapeutic impact or "fix" grief, but I still felt I needed *some* way of speaking about it with the members of the group. Further, I needed a way of articulating the grief process without imposing any directionality, and allowing for the oscillation of emotion experiencing grief. One of the perspectives to which Worden calls attention is the "numbness", "yearning", "despair", "disorganization" constellation (this from Bowlby & Parkes, 1970).

What was so attractive about this for me as someone working with those experiencing grief is its allowance for chaos and a back-and-forth of feelings, showing that these

experiences are not *symptoms* of grief, but that they are grief itself. So, without boundary, one can sob, yearn, feel that everything is unreal, and needs only to accept that this is what *is* at this moment.

It is this focus on acceptance and mindfulness which informed the development and delivery of the last two sessions of the group. Mindfulness ideas are a natural fit here for their objective of removal of the rational, analytical self. Mindfulness practice is, at core, the practice of "attending to the relevant aspects of experience in a non-judgemental manner" (Ludwig & Kabat-Zinn, 2008, in Farb, Anderson, & Segal, 2012, p. 71). These latter authors see in mindfulness practice two equally important aspects. First, present-moment sensations are attended to. Second, these sensations and emotions are observed without any application of a perspective on them as 'good' or 'bad'. The objective is stated to be that emotions and experiences are treated as events which the individual does not seek to judge (p. 71). Interestingly, these authors seem to go so far as to refer to it as a suspension of the need to "manipulate emotions through evaluations, to rationally control the situation" (p. 72). Mindfulness practice trains clients to exercise attentional control, but also uses this increased control to "reduce habitual patterns of evaluation" (ibid.). Kostanski and Hassed (2008) note that "above all, mindfulness meditation or practice is primarily focused on non-doing, as distinct from doing, and in principle clashes with any formalized approach to therapy, which aims to fix rather than heal or prevent disorder" (p. 16).

"Fix rather than heal" draws a distinction which places mindfulness practice firmly within the logical reach of spiritually-informed practice. The key link here is non-elevation of individuality – the person experiencing – to central focus. Mindfulness attempts to have

the individual's reactions to events (thoughts, feelings, sensations) detach from the originating events themselves. In this case, the individual can come to see the event and the reaction to the event as distinct, leading the individual away from being controlled by emotions, defined by them, and towards a sense of control not defined or limited by the boundaries of cognitive understanding.

This formulation allows the individual to pick and choose what avenues into the world of experience he or she will tread. It does this by allowing a view of the world in which the individual's true (or *truer*) self is engaged as an actor, as opposed to a reactor. This brings us back to the distinction made between "fixing" and "healing". Where "fixing" implies restoration to previous function, "healing" acknowledges damage has occured and tries to restore function , but without necessary reference to previous function at all. It is an effort of shedding all of those things clouding our perspectives of ourselves; those things others wanted for us, those things we want as a means to attain something else. As these drop away, we are left with a clearer vision of ourselves and of the world. This is the "zero point" of Jafari's articulation of the search for God through reason and judgement. Without the baggage of the "shoulds" of our lives, our reason and judgement become more precise, more reflective of our true selves and what we are capable of being. It is the return to the client's cleaner view of self which allows more holisticly constructive risks to be taken (Kottler, 2010, p. 10, see also Symington & Symington, 2012).

While session five contained some content elements in ritual, that content was entirely open-ended. Indeed, session five ended with an unplanned discussion about the rituals each of the participants engage in on a daily basis already. Likewise, session six was planned to

engage with the constructs in the Bowlby and Parkes constellation only so much as to give each piece a name. The activity in each individual's moment-by-moment experience exists beyond names, of course, but the objective was a template by which to sort out the individual's feelings as they occured. This was intended to allow the participants to acknowledge these experiences as existing, though not definitive of the moment of the person experiencing it. Content was moved to the back, favouring spontaneity and creation amongst the participants. In fact, the end of session six came and the group still hadn't really discussed the yearning/numbness/despair constellation in these terms. Far from a failure, I considered this to be a success in stimulating honest dialogue between the group members. In sharing their experiences (as it happened, of their experiences of the discomfort of others with the participants' grief), the content of their own experiences became the content of the session.

We carried forward the discussion of Bowlby and Parkes' constellation to session number seven. Here, mindfulness was specifically addressed. The group members were each given cards with the three grief elements (numbness, yearning, despair) and another headed "reorganization". The group discussed examples of each of these on their grief journey, and either its impact, or their individual response. The key here was the recognition of the feeling with knowledge that it is part of the process of grief. From a praxis standpoint, I was happy the participants were discussing their responses for the benefit of all, and although there was certainly present an air of these responses being "negative", there did remain at least an element of mindfulness practice, in that the participants did become more able to sort there feelings into categories.

Of course, this was a psychoeducational group, and not mindfulness training. Still, I had

the chance to see shades of the potential of the inclusion of mindfulness practice in real-world work.

In the final analysis, mindfulness practice is a spiritual practice, because it attempts to get beyond our responses, our reactions to the world. In so doing we can shed all of the internalized lessons of our experience and history, and connect to some aspect of the self that is us and us alone. We can face the world and have life be more than something that happens to us. By achieving contact with something beyond our moment-by-moment experience, we come to see there is a world beyond our experience. While we can study and contemplate, we acknowledge that this world will forever be beyond our full contemplation. We accept we are engaged in a search for the ultimate within ourselves – not in reference to the external world.

Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations

Throughout this practicum course, I have had the fortune of exposure to many perspectives, locations, and forms of practice as a counsellor and social worker. I have also had somewhat of the misfortune to have to write about it. My work in spiritual care created an openness in me which I think made the move from a content to a process-focus possible. By becoming more able to think and work in an environment where concern with clients' human problems is based in something beyond our individualities, I became better able to see more and more of myself in this context, not only as a practitioner, but as a person. While working with my hospital-based clients, I learned to keep more and more conscious of the distinction between my needs as an individual, and what is expected from me as a practitioner.

I have tried in this report to condense and to articulate a whole evolution in my practice knowledge, ideas, and outlook. Notes of my journal entries, poetry, thoughts on client sessions, notes on client sessions, etc., can offer perhaps an account of my activities and their meanings. However, none of this can transmit the confusion, loss, and elation as I felt it. I have described my transitions as a movement from a focus on content in the work I was doing, to one of the process of the work I was doing. For reasons discussed previously, it is impossible to predict the outcome of a social work or therapeutic interaction or relationship. What is important is the characteristics of these relationships, and how the student encounters the uncertainties within it. As in the introduction, this may be the only predictor of how they will be encountered in the future.

I conclude from all of this that, first, professional-level work in this field isn't wholly

determined by knowing how to respond, but significantly by the qualities of that response. While theoretical knowledge is the origins of our work, it is the willingness to be personally open to the immediacy of our client's situation which is its living, breathing heart.

Second, in moving past "What will I do if...", the social worker must find within himself something to rely on. Theoretical knowledge aside, something of the social worker will always be present in the interaction. From this, one recommendation I might make would be to continue building an environment of support for students in practical education. If theoretical knowledge isn't enough, and if some of the elemental premises of counselling and human services are still debated, it remains to the dyad of the student and the student's supervision to explore what exists for the student as the basis of his or her aspired work. In my case, coming to an understanding of human views of God and God's relationship to humanity allowed a view of the person emphasizing the wonder of the search for the completion of the self. However, this need not necessarily be the focus of examination for every student.

Another recommendation would be to expand opportunity for students to be recorded in session, and to view those recordings with a supervisor. The CCC's system for doing so is highly valuable, and these sorts of places should be more the rule than the exception. Further, I might suggest that these opportunities be a regular and significant aspect of all a social worker's training, and not limited to formal practica alone.

I would recommend strongly that venues be developed for (or by) students of counselling or social work for practical experience in spiritual care. While many recognize the role of the spirit in our day-to-day lives, we secular Westerners often leave this area of

ourselves unexplored. As people who aspire to work with and accept the totality of others, we ought to have some understanding of *all* of the aspects of ourselves; including our spirituality. Spending time working in this mode can help to bring a student into touch with these levels of self, and hopefully of others.

In this practicum experience, I have come to see that counselling thought and philosophy isn't as bounded and defined as one might expect. Rather than proceeding from solid knowledge, counsellors learn bearings and approaches within what seems now a nebulous conglomeration of ideas about the self and various types of events. As this is the case, I would recommend that practical education placements be constructed so as to include work in more than one location and one mode. This aspect of the course was valuable, as it expanded the fields from which I could draw in responding to social work or counselling problems.

My interactions with clients became more about the clients than my categorizations. As the worker's focus is shifted away from the worker's own "me", that worker is increasingly free, as a worker, during time with a client. For this to remain focused on the client, the worker requires a wider view of self and the client as *people*, so that this freedom can remain grounded in client experience. I would suggest that counselling training come to include study in philosophy and various theologies of the world. Not only might this further broaden the base from which counsellors and social workers conceptualize their clients, but it may add expanded skills in intercultural and interfaith practice.

Along these lines, I would recommend that workers-in-training be exposed to clients from different socio-economic backgrounds, perhaps specifically the poor and very poor in

our society. In addition to providing practical experience working with an underserved and sometimes difficult-to-serve population, the student could come to absorb some of the often profound wisdom held by street-affected people. Indeed, I have more than once asked clients of middle-class origins questions about trust, of safety, and of the limits of friendship, drawn from a perspective of the very poor in our society.

The overarching metaphor of this report has been change. The underlying concern has been the lines along which change can be thought of, reified, and articulated. My route has been one of exploration of the spiritual and philosophical sides of myself, my clients, and my aspired profession. Paradoxically, as I moved my*self* away from interactions with clients, locations, and tasks, I was better able to move closer towards them in my spirit. Once all (or most) of what is "me" in the moment of the interaction was moved away, it became more possible to engage with the client as an "I": Just a human thing that thinks and feels and is aware of the presence of those thoughts and feelings. This "I" can remove the filter of its own experience, engaging with another at the level of that other's own experience.

Once again, the importance of the support I have received from family, friends, co-workers, student colleagues, supervisors, and professors has been incalculable during my strange and sometimes perilous journey. For all of the answers I have found, I have learned to be more concerned with questions. Of these, the most important remains.

Now what?

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