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“When the Sacred Shows through”: Narratives and Reflecting Teams in Counsellor Education

Abstract: With the resurgence of interest in spirituality in counselling, new forms of pedagogy have emerged to assist student counsellors to bridge the gap between spirituality and counselling. One learning format used in counsellor education involves students exploring their spiritual narratives in order to share them in a reflecting team setting, where other students witness and listen to them in the light of their own spiritual narratives. These reflecting processes originated in family therapy through the work of Tom Andersen, and were further developed for counsellor education by narrative therapist Michael White. Drawing on the work of anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff and her explorations of the spirituality of personal stories and definitional ceremonies, a learning process has been developed as part of a graduate course on spirituality and counselling. Responses of students through follow-up interviews provide descriptions of their experience of the spiritual narrative/reflecting team format as an educational process with a spiritual dimension.

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...we see a group of people creating themselves...No matter how secular the setting, stepping from one world into another is a numinous moment, a hierophony, when the sacred shows through (Myerhoff, 1986, p. 283, 284).

One Friday Afternoon ...

In a university classroom, the seats are arranged in a circle, with a smaller circle of chairs in the centre. A student is invited to share part of her story for ten minutes. She also shows a short segment of a videotape, where she is being interviewed by another student exploring her spiritual narrative. Then, the student returns to the outer circle to sit down and listen. At the same time, a group of five students get up from their seats and sit down with the instructor in the inner circle, and proceed to have a conversation, speaking about the presenter and her story for about eight to ten minutes.

As the conversation draws to a close, the five students get up from the inner circle, and return to their seats. The original presenter, who was listening in on the conversation, is clearly excited. She gets up from her seat in the outer circle, saying “wow” repeatedly in a loud voice, and goes to the inner circle to join the instructor, where she is interviewed for about ten minutes. The interviewer starts by asking her to take the class inside the word “wow”, and asks, “If we were inside this word ‘wow’ with you, what would we see?”

The student responds by describing her experiences of depression and loneliness, but also her sense of hope, something she has shared with few others. She says that she feels affirmed and respected by the listening group, who have just responded to her

sharing of some key turning points in her own spiritual journey through some considerable life challenges. In addition, this student begins to sketch some of the hopeful directions she sees this process opening up for her in both personal and professional areas.

Months later, in an interview, this same student testifies that she has continued to experience the “ripple effects” of this learning process by way of an enhanced sense of direction, hopefulness and energy, which she says have continued to “unfold” through the duration of the course. She described the process in this way:

Interviewer: When you had listened to the conversation of the reflecting team, you came back into the centre of the group saying “Wow.” Can you tell me about what this was like for you?

Student B: That was actually rather an amazing process. I’ve never been in a situation where I’m in a room, and observing people talk about me, and not feel very self-conscious, and think every time somebody opens their mouth that they’re judging me. I really didn’t feel that. The dynamics that I observed in that group were very supportive, not at all judgmental, trying to be helpful and very respectful. (emphasis by student)

Towards an Emerging Methodology in Counsellor Education

One perspective from which to make sense of this event, which took place in a Masters-level course on counselling and spirituality, might be what the anthropologist, Clifford Geertz, describes as “an I-am-a-camera, ‘phenomenalistic’ observation” (Geertz, 1973, p. 6). This perspective would attend primarily, if not exclusively, on the behavioural and cognitive aspects of the event as an educational process, and focus on the learner as a discrete individual rather than on the interactions between students as a site for knowledge construction. As such, an observer might conclude that it was little more than a typical sequence of small-group discussions in a university classroom.

Such an approach would constitute what Geertz would call a “thin description,” an understanding which would miss out on the nuances of the experiences of the participants, the narrative forms of conversation and discourse which permeate the event, the interactional and situated form of learning which occurred in the course of this process, and the spiritual significance for the participants of this sharing and witnessing of spiritual narratives.

In contrast, Geertz would advocate approaching this event as an ethnographer, who develops a “thick description” of the event, that is to say, from a semiotic and cultural perspective consisting not of “an experimental science in search of law but an interpretative one in search of meaning.” (Geertz, 1973, p. 5)

This educational process, which involves students exploring and developing their own spiritual stories as a text, and sharing it in a group context in a sequence of listening, sharing/talking, and witnessing, so that the text is “laminated” and expanded into successive layers of meta-text, is itself situated in the anthropological research of Barbara Myerhoff regarding personal stories as “myth,” and in the social processes which she calls “definitional ceremonies.”

This form of pedagogy is also located in social constructionist ideas, a tradition in the social sciences originating from the work of the sociologists Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann in their classic text *The Social Construction of Reality* (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), where, in their exploration of the sociology of knowledge, they describe the relationship and interactions between the perceptions and thinking of individuals and social institutions and processes. Kenneth Gergen, perhaps the most visible proponent of this movement of thought in the social sciences, proposes that social constructionism

“views discourse about the world not as a reflection or map of the world but as an artifact of communal interchange.” (Gergen, 1985, p. 266) In this approach, language is perceived as being generative, and knowledge is regarded as being relational.

As a learning process for new counsellors, this educational event draws on the reflecting team practices of Tom Andersen (Andersen, 1987; 1991, 1992; 1993; 1995), and the narrative approach to counsellor education as developed by Michael White (White, 1992; 1995, 1997; 2000), as well as others (Bird, 1993; Carlson & Erickson, 1999; 2001). As such, it is in these traditions of thought and configurations of practice that we would be most likely to arrive at what Geertz would call a “thick description” of this educational process.

The development of this format and process of spiritual narratives and reflecting team as a site for situated and interactional learning is the expression of my own ongoing concern of the importance of building bridges between counselling and spirituality. Moreover, it was my intention to develop appropriate learning formats and educational processes in a university setting in order to facilitate students and new counsellors in their skills to integrate their counselling and spirituality. As I have used this educational format of spiritual narratives and reflecting teamwork as definitional ceremonies, it has become apparent that this learning process has great potential in creating connections between spirituality and counselling in an educational context, such as a university.

This pedagogical format of narratives and reflecting teamwork in the area of counselling and spirituality appears to be a relatively novel development, one about which little, if anything, has been written. As an emerging methodology, I envision my role to gather some of the conceptual and pragmatic resources together, which might

assist the field of counsellor education to explore this particular process of adult education more fully.

In this article, I will situate this educational process historically in the relationship between counselling and spirituality, locate the process in the larger context of the course itself, and describe the actual educational process as I currently practise it. I will include some responses of students who experienced this learning format, and share their reflections on this form of pedagogy as a spiritual and educational process.

Subsequently, I will sketch the ideas and practices upon which I drew in order to develop this particular learning format for counsellors. This will include a brief overview of the educational approach developed by the Australian family therapist, Michael White, an approach oriented by a narrative or textual metaphor which he uses in his own practice with counsellors. After this, I will review the reflecting team practices of the Norwegian psychiatrist and family therapist, Tom Andersen, as well as the ways in which Michael White has modified these practices by drawing on the work of the American anthropologist, Barbara Myerhoff.

After this, I will conclude the article by exploring some of the writings of Myerhoff with respect to narratives, definitional ceremonies, and re-membering conversations, with a particular sensitivity to her discussions of spirituality, followed by some brief comments about the implications for future practice in counsellor education.

Historical Background

The Divide between Spirituality and Counselling

It would not be overstating the case to suggest that ever since the proclamation of Freud of religion as compulsive infantilism in his book *The Future of an Illusion*, and as a projection induced by guilt-feelings in another work *Civilization and its Discontents*, there has been a great divide historically between the sub-culture of therapy and the landscape of spirituality. This is not to say that the religious traditions themselves have been silent regarding the human mind, soul or spirit, human relationships, or the place of meaning and values in human life. Moreover, a reading of the history of both psychotherapy and family therapy also reveals several attempts at developing some sort of rapprochement between therapy and spirituality.

Some Hopeful Bridges between Spirituality and Counselling

Of late, there have been some significant attempts in the field of psychology to bridge the “great divide” between these areas of therapy and spirituality. William Miller has edited a collection of articles in his book *Integrating Spirituality into Treatment: Resources for Practitioners*, which focuses on ways in which therapists may be inclusive of the spirituality of those with whom they work, and some of the pragmatics of accomplishing this in assessment and interventions (Miller, 1999). In *Religion and the Clinical Practice of Psychology*, one may find a diverse continuum of perspectives on the place of religion in mental health and clinical practice, including an examination of the conceptual, historical, and cultural context of religion and psychology, and psychotherapy with religiously committed individuals (Shafranske, 1996). While acknowledging the conflict between the domains of spirituality and science, Richards and Bergin offer a framework for approaching spirituality in psychotherapy through a number

of case studies, as well as through their exploration the history of religion and psychology and the beliefs and practices of many of the world religions (Richards & Bergin, 1997).

There have also been some projects by adherents of some of the religious traditions to construct bridges between religious and/or spiritual beliefs and practices and therapy. There are a myriad of attempts to do this in Christianity, McMinn's *Psychology, Theology and Spirituality in Christian Counselling* (McMinn, 1996) being one such example. Perhaps the most ambitious and comprehensive treatment of the inclusion and integration of psychotherapy with Christian spirituality and religious practice and belief may be found in the two-volume work, *Clinical Handbook of Pastoral Counselling* (Wicks, Parsons & Capps, 1985, 1993) and (Wicks & Parsons, 1993). In addition, there have been numerous explorations of the connections between psychotherapy and Buddhist practice, such as Claxton's *Beyond Therapy: The Impact of Eastern Religions on Psychological Theory and Practice* (Claxton, 1986).

Opening Space for Spirituality in the Education of Counsellors

Until recently, spirituality has had relatively little place in the training of individual, couple or family therapists in university or clinical settings. Nor has spirituality as a topic been perceived in the various professional associations as an area worthy of significant attention in the training of professional counsellors, such as family therapists, social workers or psychologists. A case in point: in the standards and responsibilities Handbook for Approved Supervisor Designation for the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy, the inventory of learning objectives for AAMFT Approved Supervisors specifies that Approved Supervisors must be "sensitive

to contextual variables such as culture, gender, ethnicity and economics” (AAMFT, 1997, p. 3), but, curiously, no mention is made with respect to including spirituality or religion as one of the variables.

Some interest in the area of spirituality and how it might relate to the training and future practice of therapists has emerged in psychology in the last decade. Allen Bergin explores the role of values in psychotherapy and the relationship of religion to mental health, and suggests that “including education in values and religious issues in the training of clinicians” be explored (Bergin, 1991, p. 394). Shafranske and Malony studied the spirituality and religiousness of clinical psychologists, their attitudes toward religious issues, how religion was expressed in therapeutic interventions, and some of the implications for the training of psychologists (Shafranske and Malony, 1990). Miller offers an overview of some of the issues regarding diversity training for psychotherapists with respect to spiritual and religious issues (Miller, 1999, pp. 253-263).

In the area of family therapy, Ingeborg Haug offers a rationale for the inclusion of spirituality in therapy and in the training of therapists, and offers some suggestions as to how supervisors may assist trainees in the development of their sensitivity to spiritual issues in a therapeutic conversation (Haug, 1998). In 1999, Froma Walsh edited a collection of articles, which were published under the title of *Spiritual Resources in Family Therapy* (Walsh, 1999). In this excellent collection, Janine Roberts explored some the training formats and exercises she uses with her trainees in family therapy regarding spirituality in her article “Heart and soul: Spirituality, religion, and rituals in family therapy training” (Roberts, 1999).

The following year, a substantial part of the April 2000 *Journal of Marital and*

Family Therapy was devoted to the exploration of several different areas of the relationship between spirituality and family therapy. In the article “Spiritual issues in family therapy: A graduate-level course,” Patterson, Hayworth, Turner, and Raskin describe a graduate level course at the University of San Diego offered over a five-week period, which introduces therapist in training to spiritual issues, to the wisdom traditions of different world religions, and identifies “from current practice many of the spiritual issues that may arise in a clinical setting” (Patterson, Hayworth, Turner, & Raskin, 2000, p. 203).

Spirituality and Counselling: A Description of the Course

It was in the context of this historical divide of and the bridges between spirituality and counselling, as well as some of the attempts to highlight spirituality in the education of new counsellors, that I developed the course on spirituality and counselling. The course has been offered at the Faculty of Human Sciences of St. Paul University, a small university in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada, with a Masters-level program in Pastoral Studies, which includes individual and couple counselling. The course has been provided as a graduate-level elective on two occasions in the faculty, first in the fall term of 2000, and more recently, in the winter term of 2002.

Participants in the course have included students not only from the M.A. program at St. Paul University, but also students from the M.S.W. program at Carleton University and the M.Ed. counselling program at the University of Ottawa. The course also has included a number of counsellors and mental health practitioners (for instance, addictions counsellors, chaplains, EAP counsellors, and others) already working in the field. The

format of the course consisted of a combination of lectures, seminars and group discussion, as well as a number of practice exercises, role-plays, and spiritual practices, such as meditation (Anonymous, 1973; Guigo II, 1978; Main, 1977; Richards, 1962; 1996).

One central goal of the course was to assist new therapists to explore the relationship between spirituality and therapy by helping students to explore their own narratives regarding spirituality, with the hope that this would facilitate and contribute to a re-connection with their own spirituality and therapeutic abilities. The other objective of the course was to encourage students to develop their own skills and associated knowledges in the areas of dismantling and deconstructing unhealthy spiritual practices and beliefs (Whipple, 1987), and bringing forth more liberating relationship practices (Hall, 1995). Through the course, students were offered an overview of the relationship of spirituality to individual and family therapy as a source for hope, healing and enhancement of individual and family relationships (Liske, 1995), as well as some of the historical pathways of bridging the divide between spirituality and therapy (Butler, 1990; Fox, 1981; Fox, 1983).

Students were invited to pay special attention to exploring the influences and factors in their own history, lives and family relationships which act as restraints in therapeutic interactions with families, as well as re-connecting with their own spirituality and re-membering their own family relationships and a way of enhancing their own therapeutic skills and knowledges.

In the course, students were introduced to the way in which meaning and values influence the definition of relationship and family problems, and how they affect a

family's experience and understanding of suffering and distress. Particular attention was devoted to encouraging students to develop a conceptual template of understanding and assessing healthy and unhealthy spirituality, religious beliefs and practices by utilising resources from sociological, psychological, anthropological and pastoral perspectives (Baum, 1975). In addition, students learned how to identify and engage those religious beliefs and practices which negatively affect the lives of individuals and constrain or limit the development of healthy relationship practices (Frame, 2000; Hodge, 2000), and explored ways in which the destructive impact of shame and guilt may be mitigated and replaced with more healing responses.

Students were introduced to practices in family therapy which provide support in times of stress, and the co-construction of forgiveness and hope may be brought forth as empowering resources for change and healing in therapeutic conversations with individuals, families and communities (Carlson & Erickson, 2000). Participants also explored how to open counselling and therapeutic conversation to spirituality (Anderson & Worthen, 1997), and how therapy itself can be a spiritual practice or discipline (Rosenthal, 1990; Simon, 1996). Attention was also be paid to a spirituality of action, and the ways in which social action in the form of justice-seeking, peace-making, and ecological activism could be considered a spiritual path (Aboriginal, 1995; Law, 1994; Tapping, 1993; Waldegrave & Tamasese, 1993; Waldegrave, 2000).

The Learning Format

Spiritual Narratives and Reflecting Teamwork

A significant part of the self-awareness skills in the course was taken up with each

student having the opportunity to explore their own spiritual narrative and stories, not only in terms of themselves as an individual, but also in terms of the micro-culture of their own family-of-origin (and their more recent family-of-choice). Students were also encouraged to explore the themes of their narratives on a macro-level, by attending to the social and cultural discourses which have informed and influenced the development and meaning of their stories and the shape of their own identity and values.

Through the exploration of their own spirituality and professional self-narrative as a counsellor, students were invited to use this narrative as a scaffolding, in which they could situate the emergence and development of their own skills and associated knowledges within their significant family-of-origin, family, and peer relationships. In particular, students were invited to attend to the themes or motifs in their spiritual narrative with respect to these four areas:

1. identifying those experiences which have acted as restraints or barriers, and the negative stories into which the student was recruited as a result, with the intention of unmasking the negative effects of these narratives in shaping the student's life and relationships (externalizing conversations);
2. situating and deprivileging these negative stories and their associated identities in a larger context of one's family-of-origin on a micro-level, as well as in larger social discourses, social-cultural realities or religious institutions on a macro-level (deconstructing conversations);
3. identifying turning points or unique outcomes in one's narrative, and using these turning points as doorways into other territories of life and as entry points into alternative and preferred stories about oneself, with the intention of constructing an alternative narrative stretching through time (re-authoring conversations);
4. focusing on those individuals who contributed to the unfolding of these turning points, and what values or commitments are shared with these individuals, constructing an alternative narrative stretching across personal relationships (remembering conversations).

Students were invited to interview each other, using the format outlined in a course handout as a guideline for a conversation about spirituality. The course handout,

“Our Stories and Spiritualities as Therapists” consisted of three pages of suggested questions regarding several areas regarding spirituality:

- 1 one’s first spiritual experience
- 2 the legacy and effects of spiritual beliefs in the counsellor’s family-of-origin
- 3 rituals, both religious and secular, in one’s family
- 4 changes and shifts in one’s spiritual journey
- 5 utilising spirituality and skills in difficult and stressful changes in one’s life
- 6 impact of spirituality in one’s current life and relationships
- 7 religion and its specifications of personhood, and its role in the construction of personal subjectivity in the areas of gender, race, class, sexual orientation, etc.
- 8 turning points and sparkling moments in their spiritual narrative
- 9 re-connecting with those persons who contributed to these turning points
- 10 skills and knowledges emerging out of the unfolding of one’s own spiritual journey
- 11 the impact of these developments in one’s current or future counselling practice
- 12 influence of spirituality on one’s core values regarding counselling relationships

Three primary sources were used for the development of these questions: 1. an educational handout for a comparable process for family therapists which was developed for another course on family counselling (Lysack, 1998); 2. Frame’s explorations of the use of a spiritual genogram in family therapy (Frame, 2000), and 3. the educational approach developed by Roberts in her program of exploring the role of spirituality, religion and ritual in the training of family therapists (Roberts, 1999).

In doing the interviews, each course participant had the experience of both interviewing, and being interviewed by another class member outside of class time. Students were requested to videotape their conversation, and to keep the tape for their own reference for the duration of the course.

After being interviewed, each student reviewed the videotape of their interview about their own narrative, family and spirituality. After reviewing their videotape, students were asked to reflect on the videotape in the light of the questions and the

assignment guidelines in order to prepare a rough draft of their paper.

In a research interview, one student made these comments about how she experienced the process at this stage where students were to review the videotape of their own story.

Interviewer: What were the real turning points in this process?

Student B: Once I sat down, and I reviewed the tape. It was that ability to see it, rather than just think about it in my head. It was out there, and it wasn't something that was intimately part of me, and I could sit back and think about it as an observer.

Interviewer: So what was that like, being in this once-removed position from your own story like that?

Student B: I think that it was very empowering. It allowed me to see actually how far I had come in my own journey, and it allowed me to go back and look at the source of my beliefs about organized religion. That whole interview process planted the seeds for thinking about how I needed to look more deeply and work towards making some changes.

Interviewer: So it helped put the organized religion parts in some sort of perspective and put some distance between these beliefs and yourself?

Student B: Yes, and it allowed me to see that it was just my beliefs, rather than being dominated by them. In the past, whenever anybody wanted me to participate in any sort of organized religion, I got very defensive. I think that reaction would always prevent me from stepping back and looking at the source of that, and is it really necessary to continue to have that reaction. The process allowed me to be able to see my beliefs outside my own head, and allowed me to be a little more objective about them.

Some students had the opportunity to share their reflections regarding the emergence of their own spiritual narrative, with a brief portion of the tape in a short presentation in class. The presentations took place in the context of a reflection group learning model.

The format of the reflecting team learning model consisted of four sequential elements. First, the student presented the key elements of their own spiritual narratives

both orally and by way of the videotape of their interview, highlighting the key turning points in their own spiritual journey. The presenting student also identified the individuals in their family or in other relationships who contributed to these turning points, and traced the subsequent impact of these turning points in their own spiritual journey.

After the student had shared the key elements of their spiritual narrative, a reflecting team consisting of the instructor and five students from the class responded to the presentation. In this model which draws on the ideas and practices of both Tom Andersen and Michael White, the team does not engage in a diagnostic analysis or a judgement of the person, indulge in a moralising response, or impose their own interpretation on the narrative of the presenting student. Nor does the team propose steps that the person should take in order to address any issues, or centre on their own interests or stories. As suggested by Michael White (White, 1995; 2000), the reflecting team engages in an interactive conversation with one another, positioning themselves in a stance of respectful curiosity. The team reflects primarily on what the student has shared, what this might mean about who they are as persons (identity), what this might reveal about their priorities and preferences for their life and relationships with others (values and ethics), and finally what future directions might arise out of these important developments and turning points in their spiritual journey. In narrative approaches to counselling, these reflections would be described as taking place on “the landscape of meaning“ of the narrative, or what Michael White refers to as the landscape of consciousness or identity (White, 1995; 1997; 2000a).

As part of the preparation for the reflecting team exercise in class, I provided a

quadrant model or a four-part framework for the reflecting team as a way of structuring and shaping their responses in the conversation, drawing on some of the more recent work of Michael White on reflecting teams (White, 2000a):

- a) specify the particulars of what the presenter has shared upon which you wish to reflect, and use this as a starting point, (what was it in the presenter's story which captured your attention?);
- b) describe one's own personal response to the presenter's story and how it has affected you, (how did it affect you personally?);
- c) situate or deconstruct your own response in terms of your own personal or professional narrative, (why do you think that resonated with you? with what in your own journey did this connect?);
- d) share your own curiosity in the form of a question or a "wondering", (what question could you leave with the presenter which might help her step even further into her own story?).

In this format, members of the reflecting team are to participate in de-centered sharing, where the focus of attention is on the original presenter and the spiritual narrative. Thus, while parts b and c are important for the conversation to situate the conversation and to minimise the power imbalance in the relationship between the presenter and the team, nonetheless, the first and last elements are emphasised in the discussion of the reflecting team.

A student in the course described how, despite her original misgivings about the process, she was pleasantly surprised with the ways in which being in this listening position was helpful to her.

Interviewer: When you moved from your sharing to listening to the group share their reflections, can you talk about how you experienced that?

Student C: When it was first presented to me, I thought that I would find that I had great difficulty in not being able to enter into dialogue with the people that were reflecting. I imagined if somebody heard me say something and assumed that it meant something, that I would want to jump in and say “no, that’s not it” or “yes, that is it.” In fact, it was exactly the opposite. Being told “this is your time to listen, and they’re going to talk about you“, freed me to listen very carefully. I didn’t have to be thinking about what I was going to say; I could take notes. Ideally, I would have wanted to tape that because it was so rich, and I would have liked to play it several times because every reflection had a huge richness to it. But the fact that I was freed from the right even to engage in that dialogue gave me permission to listen much more intently.

This same student was also intrigued at how being in a listening position at this stage of the process encouraged the emergence of conversation regarding the topic of her anger towards certain patriarchal practices in her church, an interaction which she doubted would have occurred if she had engaged with other students in a normal discussion.

Student C: An interesting thing happened, because I had very briefly mentioned that I was angry. But I had not followed that thread, because at this point in my life, I have dealt with that and put it aside. So, in the reflecting team, a couple of people shared, and one person shared about that anger, because she was right now in a situation where she was angry about the same sort of patriarchal stuff around the church. If I had been dialoguing with the people at that point, I probably would have said “yes, you are right,” and that would have been it. But because I wasn’t dialoguing with the people, what happened was another person said, “Well I didn’t get that anger because I felt that (student C) was not disempowered, and anger is frequently disempowering.” And so, she talked a lot about my sense of being very empowered now, which I hadn’t been when she was angry, but she didn’t know that. ... I was sitting there, and hearing this really allowed me to see both sides, that “yes, I was angry, but I’m not angry any more, in that I felt that it had actually been an opportunity for a lot of growth and a gift that had been given to me, that had allowed me to move much further.” And so, if I had been dialoguing with these people, I wouldn’t have gotten that richness; I wouldn’t have heard them speaking to each other about it. It was so incredibly rich just sitting there and hearing that.

This student attributed part of the value of the reflecting team process to the fact that the

conversations among the reflecting team members generates a diversity of voices or perspectives, which function as a site of knowledge construction through the process of interaction and dialogue (Kvale, 1996).

Student C: It was very different useful having them see different sides.

Interviewer: ...like multiple perspectives, was that helpful?

Student C: Yes, it was extremely helpful, because I think what happens to us is that we get caught in either-or thinking, or "this is the only way to see this particular part of my life."

Interviewer: If it opened up things for you to get out of either-or thinking, what do you think it opened up space for?

Student C: Multiplicity of meaning, in terms of it really can be both "yes I was angry", and "I'm not angry now, and I was empowered." It's just so exciting when there is that "yes, there is this multiplicity of meanings."

After the reflecting team has concluded their remarks, the original presenter returns to the centre of the group, and is interviewed by myself. During the second part of the process when the reflecting team is engaging in a conversation, the presenter is in a listening position, not only with respect to the team conversations, but also in relation to the "inner speech" which has been taking place in the presenter. Thus, the primary focus of this third section of the reflecting team process is to give an opportunity to the student to discuss which comments of the reflection team resonated with them, and in what ways these reverberations might be helpful for that person to explore new possibilities of thinking or acting.

Finally, there was an open discussion about the exercise itself, allowing for a less structured interaction among the students. The final word goes to the presenter, who describes how they experienced the learning process.

After the class and subsequent to the reflecting team exercise, the presenters were encouraged to add their reflections from this experience as a separate section to the final form of their paper before they submit it to me. The other students who did not share portions of their paper in class were asked to write a short assignment, reflecting on the nature of the reflection team experience, both as team participants and as observers.

In addition, students were asked to continue to reflect on significant experiences and developments in class or in their own work which may be integrated with their own self-narrative as a counsellor, and to record these in their on-going journal throughout the course. The journal entries provided the material for the final integration paper for the course.

Responses of Some Students to the Process

In some follow-up interviews, some students were invited to describe the process of exploring their spiritual narratives and sharing them in a reflecting team context in class. One student proposed that this process has a spiritual dimension.

Interviewer: Would you describe this process [sharing narratives in a reflecting team context] as being spiritual or as having a spiritual dimension?

Student A: Most definitely spiritual. It's compassionate and caring, promoting of growth, positive, loving. It's the philosophy behind it really that makes it so spiritual. It is something that allows you to look inside your very essence, what makes you tick, what makes you unique, what events have happened that are just yours in your life, and how you reacted, and what impact it had on you and your family and other people. It kind of makes sense of it all, and brings it forward into your present day life, and [shows] how these experiences you've had have modified you and shaped you, [and] what stories you have gained from them.

It has given me quite a bit of clarity, I think, because of what it allowed me to do was look at my life from when I was a younger child, and my process of growing up, birth, marriage ... It allowed me to be a little more objective, allowed me to be more open, allowed me to re-experience some of those painful emotions, but in a

different way. I knew that the whole process meant to be compassionate, meant to be one of growth, and opening, and accepting. So I felt secure; I knew when I did it that it wasn't going to be easy, but I knew that I'd be nurtured, and that I'd be okay at the end of it. I've grown a lot through it, and my spirituality's been enriched. I certainly bonded very deeply with my classmates, and it's something I'm not going to forget.

Another student (the same student described in the beginning of this article) echoed the sentiments of this student.

Student B: With the reflection team, first, it allowed people to share in a safe environment, things that normally would never be discussed in a classroom. To share personal issues, to make a connection, a spiritual connection if you like, because in retrospect, I believe that the whole reflecting team experience was a very spiritual event. For me as a participant, it gave me an opportunity to look at information in a different way outside of the traditional class. I'm allowed to sit back and observe the team, and then come back in; so from that perspective, it was very helpful. It shows in a therapeutic sense that having participation by more than one person [in a reflecting team] can be a very powerful, non-threatening tool.

Yet another student described how she found that her own spiritual narrative resonated with that of others students, even though she was not sharing or presenting, but at the moment when she was witnessing the presentation of another student.

Interviewer: One thing that you did notice was that both when you were listening, as well as when you were sharing in the reflecting group, that it was touching in some way different parts of your own spiritual story.

Student C: Oh definitely.

Interviewer: What difference did that make?

Student C: For instance, when I was observing, one person had talked about her mother's death when she was ten. I had shared about my experience of having my best friend dying when I was ten ... Somebody in the reflecting team mentioned that all of the presenters had talked about death, even though I hadn't shared. [It was] seeing the universal themes in our spiritual journeys. When she was talking about death, she was talking about it in the context of comparing it to the birth experience of her sons. And I hadn't even talked about this in my own spiritual journey, but the birth of my second son was probably one of the most spiritual moments of my life. But I hadn't even thought of it until she said it. So it layered, and brought in new

dimensions for me to think about in terms of what is part of my spiritual journey, and what isn't.

As an educational process, a student referred to the holistic orientation of the learning experience.

Student A: It's educational because you take the theory ... and you put it into action, so it integrates your whole being. It's not just an academic activity; it involves the emotions, it involves the intellect and the whole spiritual element of it.

Educational Practices in the Narrative Therapy Approach of Michael White

It is becoming increasingly acceptable within the field of counsellor education to propose that counsellor education involves more than the mere acquisition of certain therapeutic techniques or the apprehension of certain theories of counselling. In like manner, Michael White (1992) describes his own approach to training and supervision as oriented by a narrative or textual metaphor, where the starting point for counsellor education is the personal and professional narrative or the “unique counselling career” of each counsellor. Michael White discusses educational practices and training from a narrative perspective in primarily two locations in his writings: an early essay, “Family therapy training and supervision in a world of experience and narrative” (White, 1989/1990), and his book, *Narratives of Therapists' Lives* (White, 1997).

In his essay, White distinguishes himself from what he calls the ‘positivistic’ view, where supervisees submit themselves to the ‘expert knowledges’ of the supervisor by learning the ‘correct’ skills and developing ‘precision’ in diagnosing the so-called ‘truths’ of the family problems. In contrast, White situates his own practices of counsellor education and supervision within a processual analysis (i.e., a unique location

of events in their movement through time) “rather than a structural one (the interpretation of events according to rules laid down in deep structure)” (White, 1989/1990, p. 78).

White’s therapeutic practice is oriented by the narrative metaphor of the ‘text’ as a way of making sense or ordering one’s lived experience, an idea for which he is indebted to the work of the educational psychologist, Jerome Bruner. In addition, drawing on the work of the anthropologist, Edward Bruner, Michael White insists that narratives need to be enacted or “performed” in some manner, inasmuch as he suggests that stories “become transformative only in their performance” (White, 1989/1990, p. 81).

Drawing on an idea suggested to him by the Canadian psychiatrist and family therapist, Karl Tomm, who uses this approach in his own family therapy training program at the University of Calgary (White, 1992, p. 89), White invites participants to share their own personal and professional narratives by relating the turning points or unique outcomes in their story, how these turning points are related to aspects of their lived experience, what these turning points might reveal about them as individuals, and in what ways these events might unfold in future directions (White, 1992, p. 87). Counsellors are engaged in a re-telling of their ‘counselling career’ in what White calls a “re-authoring conversation,” where the narrative is explored on two different landscapes: 1) the landscape of action, which involves a linear sequence and ordering of events through time according to a plot, and 2) the landscape of consciousness and identity (White, 1989/1990, pp. 86-88), or what I refer to as the landscape of meaning.

White describes the structure and sequence of an exercise which facilitates this

process:

1. identify the “sparkling facts” or unique outcomes of a supervisees’ career,
2. review the crises and turning points in the history of the trainee,
3. explore the unique realizations and conclusions which the person generated as a result of these turning points, and
4. map out the subsequent effects of these new realizations and self-identity claims on the direction of the person’s counseling career (White, 1989/1990, pp. 90-91).

In his book, *Narratives of Therapists’ Lives*, Michael White describes his own experience with counsellors in educational programs and supervision at the Dulwich Centre, where students are vulnerable to internalizing, pathologizing conversations about themselves as persons, frequently locating “the source of difficulties in different sites of their own identity” (White, 1997, p. 151). In a narrative form of consultation, White introduces externalizing conversations to assist “therapists to break from these internalizing conversations and from the practices of the self that are associated with these conversations” (White, 1997, p. 151), which lead to ‘thin’ or impoverished self-narratives. In what White calls conversations of deconstruction, he suggests that it is through these externalizing conversations, that “these thin conclusions become less specifying and capturing of therapists’ identities” (White, 1997, p. 151).

The externalizing and deconstructing conversations are only the first step in this process of counsellors constructing their own professional/personal narrative. White locates the heart of his educational and supervisory work in a collaborative and re-constructive interaction or re-authoring conversations, where the contradictions to these claims of negative identity or “unique outcomes”

provide a point of entry to the alternate territories of the therapist’s work and life, and it is in these territories that traces of the therapist’s preferred knowledges and skills can be identified - traces that can be explored through lateral and longitudinal dimensions of life... This rich description

presents options and proposals for therapist action in the therapeutic context and in life more generally. (White, 1997, p. 152).

In addition, Michael White has developed a specific form of re-authoring conversations, which he calls “re-membering conversations.” These re-membering conversations focus on one’s own identity in the context of relationships, especially by way of shared commitments and values across relationships (White, 1997, pp. 22-52), and are indebted to the anthropological research of Barbara Myerhoff into the definitional ceremonies of the ageing Jewish population in Venice, California. Re-membering conversations focus on the creation or retrieval of “the knowledges and skills that have been generated in the significant memberships of persons’ lives through their histories, and that identify options for new memberships that are potentially generative of yet other knowledges and skills of living” (White, 1997, p. 202).

In this practice of re-membering conversations, therapists are interviewed about the turning points or significant events in a therapist’s life, what individuals contributed to these turning points, and what shared values and commitments can be traced across the relationships of these individuals. These stories are shared in the context of a reflecting team, where the team members act as “outsiders-witnesses” to the “telling” of the story, and engage in a “re-telling” of the story by attending to other possible meanings to the events in the story as well as new possible directions for a counsellor’s life (White, 1997). It is to reflecting team practices that we now turn in our exploration of a reflecting team model of counsellor education.

Reflecting Teams

a) Tom Andersen & Reflecting Teams

The practice of reflection teams in therapy emerged out the work of a Norwegian doctor and family therapist, Tom Andersen, who, in March 1985 initiated a new direction in the practice of therapy. Hitherto, the custom among family therapists consisted of the practice where a therapist would meet with individuals or families in one room, with a team of other counsellors observing the session from behind a one-way mirror with no contact with the clients.

Because of his growing discomfort with the hierarchical relationship this arrangement constructed between the therapists and the family, Andersen initiated a simple practice, which has resulted in profound repercussions throughout the family therapy field. It was proposed to the family and therapist on one side of the mirror, that the team, who had followed a conversation on the other side of the mirror, share some reflections about the session with the family listening to the conversation (Andersen, 1992, p. 58). Subsequent to this, the therapist and the family commented on the reflections shared by the team. Andersen noticed that the way of languaging the reflections on the part of the observing/reflecting team shifted dramatically from pathologizing and “nasty” talk to more respectful language (Andersen, 1987).

In other writings, Andersen has specified the ideas which have influenced this development of these reflecting processes, including 1) an orientation to generating a multiplicity of different voices or what Andersen calls a *polyvocality* of meanings, 2) moving from hierarchical to heterarchical or *lateral* relationships between clients and therapists, 3) an ethical commitment to *openness*, therapeutic transparency and accountability, 4) the *collaborative* co-construction of new meanings through

conversation between the client, therapist and reflecting team, 5) cultivating a *reflective position* both for the therapist and clients through a ‘folding in upon itself, resulting in what anthropologist Clifford Geertz would call a ‘thick’ rather than a ‘thin’ description of the client (Andersen, 1991; 1992).

As early as 1991, there are traces of other directions in Andersen’s thinking which are present, but not fully explored, but which become important later in his work. For instance, Andersen describes how in a therapeutic conversation, there are three conversations taking place simultaneously: two ‘inner’ talks of each person which occur in the ‘interior’ awareness or consciousness of each person, and one ‘outer’ conversation which is transacted between the two persons. A reflecting process involves shifting between “talking about an issue in an outer dialogue with others and then sitting back and listening to others talk about the same issue” (Andersen, 1993, p. 306). While one is in this listening position, one is not only attending to the conversation taking place among the members of the reflecting team, but one is also given the opportunity to be more attentive to one’s own inner conversation. Andersen suggests that this movement between listening and talking positions, (and their attendant movement between inner and outer conversations), is facilitated by the structure of the reflecting team.

b) Reflecting Team Practices in the Narrative Therapy of Michael White

Drawing on the reflecting team practices of Tom Andersen, as well as the ideas of ‘definitional ceremony’ and outsider-witnesses’ developed by anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff, Michael White has reconfigured reflecting teamwork in therapy. Structurally, White has modified the format so that it includes a fourth part to the meeting, where the

primary therapist with the family has a chance to converse about her intentions and experiences during therapy in the presence of the family and reflecting team. (White, 1995). Because of his experience with reflecting teams and his resulting growing concerns about the tendency of pathologizing discourses to find expression in the conversations of the reflecting teams with clients, White has introduced a number of other changes in order to create countervailing practices which can mitigate against the problematic aspects of social discourse and the negative effects of certain cultural assumptions (White, 2000).

White has also explored the possibility of using reflecting teams as an educational process for therapists through the sharing and co-construction of the narratives of therapists in reflecting teams, using other counsellors as groups of ‘outsider-witnesses’ (White, 1997, pp. 93-114). These reflection teams function as ‘definitional ceremonies’ in the telling and re-telling of therapist’s stories, so that there may be “multiple contextualization”, that is to say, linking a person’s narratives to those purposes, values and themes which they share with others in their life, resulting in ‘thick’ and ‘rich’ self-descriptions on the part of the supervisee or participant in a training program (White, 1997, pp. 95-96). White also urges the use of these groups as “forums of acknowledgement”, through which the authentication of the preferred claims of identity on the part of the therapist in supervision or training may take place.

Definitional Ceremonies in the Work of Barbara Myerhoff

Barbara Myerhoff was an American anthropologist, whose work among the ageing Jewish population in Venice, California (Myerhoff, 1986; 1992) brought her

critical acclaim as a social scientist and intellectual. Her book, *Number our Days* (Myerhoff, 1978), and the resulting documentary which won the 1977 Academy Award for Best Short Documentary, brought her work to the attention of the wider public outside the university. In her sojourn among the older women and men of Venice, she focused her work on their struggles to maintain their own sense of self-identity in the face of poverty, ill health, neglect, invisibility in the community, and loss through death.

Definitional Ceremonies

Myerhoff was intrigued with how this community consciously engaged in community activities which addressed this growing sense of invisibility and threatened loss of identity by creating contexts for themselves to share their stories, and by recruiting audiences to be present to witness these events, thereby “enacting their own identities, and constructing their own myth” (Myerhoff, 1978, p. 190). Myerhoff referred to these events as “definitional ceremonies.” These definitional ceremonies took a variety of forms, including a life history group (a community sharing of stories), a parade (enacted or “performed meanings“), and the creation of a community mural (“an inscribed text“) in the Aliyah Senior Citizen’s Centre, located in Venice, California.

Myerhoff suggested that definitional ceremonies consist of three elements. First, there is an initial telling and presentation of the stories by the person or group, with an audience, or what Myerhoff referred to as “outsider-witnesses,” in a listening position. Secondly, these outsider-witnesses respond to the initial telling of these stories through a “re-telling,” which result not only in authenticating the original stories and their identity claims, but also served to enrich and expand the meanings in the narrative. Thirdly, using

these events as “reflecting surfaces” in order to enhance their own self-knowledge, the original presenters themselves respond to and engage with the re-telling of the stories, “enfolding” these new and expanded refractions of these narratives into their own sense of self-identity. Myerhoff proposes that in these ceremonies, “they develop their collective identity, their interpretation of their world, themselves, and their values. As well as being social dramas, the events are definitional ceremonies, performances of identity, sanctified to the level of myth” (Myerhoff, 1978, p. 32).

Narratives and the Construction of the Self

Closely related to the definitional ceremonies which Myerhoff studied were the ways in which individuals fashioned narratives in their search for a sense of order and continuity in one’s life. In her work with a man named Jacob in the community, she was interested in how he “created for himself personal continuity by integrating all the phases of his long life into a single, narrative account, contemplated by a single sentient being, aware of having been other beings at other points in the life cycle” (Myerhoff, 1978, p. 221). This ordering of his life events into a unified narrative account, so that this story could be passed on to others, also involved an integration of both exterior and interior occurrences, as he “incorporated external historical events into his life account, thus establishing continuity between himself and the times in which he lived, meshing inner and outer history into an unified tale” (Myerhoff, 1978, p. 221).

Myerhoff extends the significance of this process, so that the weaving of one’s narrative is not simply to impose order on past events; rather, it also coincides with the very act of constructing a self. Myerhoff writes that Jacob was “not only constructing a

myth, an orderly and moral tale about himself, he was constructing a Self. Through the heightened awareness and consciousness provided by self-reflection, he was crossing the delicate but crucial threshold between merely being and being a man, a sentient human being, *knowing* himself to be” (Myerhoff, 1978, pp. 221-222).

Spiritual Dimension of Stories and Definitional Ceremonies

Myerhoff proposes that there is a spiritual dimension to this process of constructing narratives and sharing them in the context of a community. In her description of her meetings with an elderly man in the community, Barbara Myerhoff observes that “Jacob constructed a sacred story, a personal myth, which took up the ultimate eschatological questions, ‘What has it all meant?’ ‘Why was I here?’ “(Myerhoff, 1978, pp. 221). Drawing on Rudolf Otto’s writings in philosophy and anthropology of religion on religious experience or the numinous, Myerhoff describes how persons who participate in definitional ceremonies experience the process. “Such moments are gifts, numinous pinpoints of great intensity. Then one’s self and one’s memories are experienced as eternally valid. Simultaneity replaces sequence, and a sense of oneness with all that has been one’s history is achieved” (Myerhoff, 1992, pp. 238-239).

This process is not the act of an isolated individual, but rather, is the culmination of a collective and mutually facilitative cluster of events which takes place in the context of a community of persons, who are simultaneously sharing their own stories, and acting as listeners and outsider-witnesses to others sharing their narratives. Those who are outside-witnesses are not detached observers in the sense of a passive audience, but find

themselves enfolded into the process itself, and woven into the emerging narrative tapestry as it is being uttered and enacted. Myerhoff writes that these “old Jews do likewise, separating the curtains between real and unreal, imagined and actual, to step across the threshold and draw with them, pulling behind them, witnesses who find, often to their surprise, that they are somehow participating in someone else’s drama” (Myerhoff, 1986, p. 284). The outsider-witnesses become what Myerhoff refers to as the “fifth-business,” or “witnesses who push a plot forward almost unwittingly; their story is not wholly their own but lives on, woven into the stuff of other people’s lives” (Myerhoff, 1986, p. 284).

This relationship between the recollection process of a person revisiting their own earlier selves in history, and their reconnection with other individuals who have played a significant role in their history, is profoundly dialogical and interactive. Myerhoff names this process as “re-membering,” and insists that it involves a

calling attention to the reaggregation of members, the figures who belong to one’s life story, one’s own prior selves, as well as significant others who are part of the story. Re-membering, then, is a purposive, significant unification, quite different from the passive, continuous fragmentary flickerings of images and feelings that accompany other activities in the normal flow of consciousness. The focused unification provided by re-membering is requisite to sense and ordering. A life is given shape that extends back in the past and forward into the future... Without re-membering we lose our histories and ourselves. (Myerhoff, 1992, p. 240)

The spiritual dimension of this process is highlighted by Myerhoff in her description of the ways in which this re-membering not only unifies persons in respect to their own sense of history and memory and in their relationships with others, but also orients them to relation to meaning and their own ultimate concern. In this positioning relative to the spiritual or religious, Myerhoff suggests that particularities

are subsumed and equated with grander themes, seen as exemplifying ultimate concerns. Then such stories may be enlarged to the level of myth as well as art - sacred and eternal justifications for how things are and what has happened. A life, then, is envisioned as belonging only to the individual who has lived it but it is regarded as belonging to the world, to progeny who are heirs to the embodied traditions, or to God. Such remembered lives are moral documents and their function is salvific, inevitably implying, 'All this has not been for nothing' "(Myerhoff, 1992, p. 240).

Michael White has drawn extensively on the writings of Myerhoff in his reformulation of the reflecting team for both therapy as well as for educational processes for counsellors. However, while he uses some of the same material from Myerhoff in his own writing on reflecting teamwork (White, 1995; 2000), I was intrigued to discover how Myerhoff has explored the spiritual and religious dimension of narratives, definitional ceremonies and the process of re-membering in her original work. This acts to highlight the rich educational possibilities of using this narrative/reflecting team process in the classroom as part of the learning experiences of counsellors who are seeking to explore both spirituality and counselling and their interconnections in the counselling relationship.

Implications for Educational Practices with Counsellors

Both Tom Andersen and Michael White have continued to develop their ideas regarding reflecting processes for a variety of contexts, including as a learning process for therapists. Others in the field of counsellor education have been eager to explore the possibilities of the reflecting team functioning as a locus for participatory and experiential learning for programs in counsellor education (Davidson & Lussardi, 1991; Landis & Young, 1994). Indeed, David Paré has introduced the use of reflecting teams as

part of the clinical training in the internship in educational counselling in the M.Ed. program at the University of Ottawa (Paré, 1999).

To my knowledge, this pedagogy of integrating the exploration of spiritual narratives with the use of a reflecting team format as a form of adult pedagogy for students to explore the relationship of counselling and spirituality is novel and unique. As an emerging methodology, this format of this configuration of spiritual narratives and reflecting teamwork has the capability of fulfilling many of the demands of a model for adult education. It allows for a maximum amount of participation, for a sense of control and empowerment on the part of participants, and moves between various modalities of learning which are generally considered to be components of adult learning.

With respect to the tradition and practices of counsellor education, I would suggest that this model embodies a balanced approach to learning of counsellors, consisting of elements which are inclusive of the polarities of educational process: experiential and reflective, individual and interactional, “interior” and “exterior” conversations, expansive in its generation of meanings, and yet, particular in its application. Clearly, more explorations of this form of pedagogy are needed.

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