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Building Bridges and Crossing Boundaries: Dialogues in Professional Helping

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Introduction

Where are the boundaries between things located? When we meet another person or when we meet the tree in the forest or the sand by the shore each is changed by the other. We all know that at one level of reality we are different and yet we also know that the apparent rigidity between me and other dissolves in a constant and mutual exchange of cells, conversations and consciousness. In nature, the bridge between two points of apparent difference is a dynamic, interactive field of reciprocal engagement. Indeed, in nature, complex, reciprocal relationships are the *sine qua non* of ecosystems. Everything touches and is touched by everything else. It is in meeting, touching, listening and communicating with another that we discover most completely what we are and are able to express most eloquently who we are.

The helping professions are increasingly seeking ways to bridge the epistemological gap between the atomistic and the ecological and cross those professional boundaries that have for too long kept helpers of every stripe separated and isolated from one another. Ironically, it is a new *rediscovery* of an ancient wisdom that is creating a catalyst for hope and change. Recently, those hopes to discover new linkages and a new era of collaborative professional partnerships to address pressing social and environmental problems took a small step forward. Professional helpers from a variety of disciplines including social work, psychology, nursing, education and environmental studies gathered in Calgary, Canada in May, 2009 for a first of its kind multi-disciplinary conference entitled: *Building Bridges, Crossing Boundaries: Interdisciplinary Dialogues on Person, Planet and Professional Helping*. The conference was suffused with both urgency and anticipation as professional helpers worked to better understand each other and those many ways they might cooperate across professional borders to build bridges to a more balanced and interdisciplinary view of the helping enterprise. This brief introduction provides a short sketch of the historical realities which created the ideological boundaries that the conference sought to bridge and how that has begun to change. It also provides a brief overview of each contributor's work.

From Primitive to Modern

The earth consciousness of ancient peoples determined their values and provided the context for their sense of collective identity and the manner in which they provided both physical and social support to one another. Earth provided medicinal and nutritive resources for both physical survival and emotional well-being as well as inspiration for individual and collective action. Merchant (1992) observed that the analogy of earth as a nurturing, sustaining and benevolent mother permeated many early societies. This earth/mother metaphor prescribed acceptable and unacceptable action because:

one does not readily slay a mother, dig into her entrails for gold, or mutilate her body. As long as the earth was conceptualized as alive and sensitive, it could be considered a breach of human ethical behavior to carry out destructive acts against it (p. 43).

With the beginning of the early industrial period, views of ancient, earth-based culture tended to reflect the human-centered bias of the time. The modern industrial mind found it difficult to imagine a form of existence or definition of human-beingness, except her own. From this vantage point, prehistory is little more than quaint anecdotes of scantily clad hunter/gathers living lives that were nasty, brutish, and short (Oelschlaeger, 1991). 20th century attitudes envision early peoples as wanting desperately to escape their primitive and monotonous lifestyle. This view represents a collective histio-centrism that fails to conceive of a positive alternative framework to explain ancient realities. It also marginalizes any attempt to keep alive ancient forms of helping and healing or holistic epistemologies of the interrelatedness of all things (Fisher, 2002). From modernity's perspective, people of prehistory must certainly have hoped for a more civilized, technological and self-actualized existence. This view of ancient peoples as *primitive* underlies modern society's presumptive superiority especially as it relates to such matters as relationship, community and helping.

Modernity and the Helping Professions

Modern psychology, psychiatry and social work entered onto the world's professional stage at about the same moment that early industrial culture was feeling most flushed with its seemingly unlimited potential. Within a short period of time even those efforts at collaborative engagement between the early professions to address pressing social concerns began to fade (Chriss, 1999). Helping professions became distinct disciplines with their own unique way to understand and address human problems. Collective and collaborative helping slowly diminished while personal rights triumphed over responsibility to community. Helping became hyper-professionalized and standardized, resting primarily on a secularized view of an isolated and individualized *self* nested within the confines of the physical skin and neurobiological processes. Hillman (1995) noted of this early stage of professional helping that the person "was simply me in my body and in my relationship with other subjects" (p. xvii). Transcendence was replaced with immediacy, spirit with ego, and outward relationship with inward familiarity.

Early helping regimens did little to challenge the prevailing idea that ancient peoples were primitive because of their nature inspired ethos of communal life, mutual helping, and inspired animism. These views still go largely unchallenged in the helping professions and in

most sectors of modern life (Metzner, 1999). Modern society tends to presume that dominant psychotherapeutic ideas of self-contained egos and cultural icons of fast paced, consumer-oriented civilization have triumphed. Conventional models of helping continue to reinforce the prevailing value structure that encourages us to think of ourselves as exquisitely rational, primarily independent and therefore ultimately superior, because we have achieved a quasi-scientific understanding of the world, subdued nature through technology, and abandoned our mythological beliefs and focus on collective care (Oelschlaeger, 1991). Professional systems of helping are dedicated to helping people with their internal, personal struggles and are based upon an understanding of humans as primarily cognitive, thereby reinforcing the notion of human separation from nature and all its beneficent contexts (Besthorn, 2007).

Winds of Change

Joanna Macy (1991), along with many others across the intellectual spectrum of modern society, has noted that the Western cultural crisis of identity and emerging struggles to recognize the deep interdependence of all of life has, indeed, been a part of the Western epistemological *counter-tradition* from the very beginning of the industrial era. In recent years, however, this faint and distant murmur has given way to an ever more vocal awareness of the limitations of dominant Western world-views and a global insistence on developing legitimate alternatives to the atomistic view of life. A collection of various movements that share a common critique of rampant western triumphalism and individualism and all their harmful and divisive consequences has grown exponentially around the world. In this context, helping is again becoming a process of engagement with the whole being—both ourselves and the world around us. Healing is a process of finding balance rather than a method to eliminate symptoms. Tegtmeier (2009) notes:

Healing is the collaborative, transformative process by which balance is restored as we become increasingly aware of our wholeness and interconnection with all life. (p. 5)

This special edition of *Critical Social Work* brings together the work of thirteen authors representing a range of theoretical and practice related ideas. These submissions are both scholarly and reflective. They come from a variety of interest areas and skill sets. Some of the works are highly refined and others mark the first tentative efforts to extend the dialogue in order to help broaden our vision. Together, however, they represent the sincere efforts of passionate people who are committed to integrating environmental concerns into our helping and educational practices. The essays are roughly divided into three broad categories: the importance of ‘place’ to inform both our personal development and professional practice, alternative educational and theoretical models that better prepare professionals for effective environmental and social action, and new areas of practice that demonstrate where and how social work can play a significant role.

Dorothy Lichtblau’s narrative self-study illustrates how critical experiential learning and recollections can influence perceptions of the world, and how well-being can be seen to be essentially connected to bioregions in which we grew up and now live. The connection to place can be a substantial contributor to professional development and how one intervenes in the world.

Kim Zapf explores social work's long standing focus on *person-in-environment* to examine why the profession is not a leader in environmental action. He discusses the constraints that inhibit the profession's understanding of environmental issues and the development of effective strategies. Zapf proposes that new directions and more effective models of practice can develop from a focus on 'living well in place,' where social and environmental justice, human and environmental rights, and human and environmental responsibilities, merge.

Mishka Lysack outlines several dimensions of environmental loss and traces promising healing responses and a model of empowerment that are based upon an innate human attraction to life and connection with living things - biophilia. This educational approach uses biophilia and ecological narratives as foundational for deepening a personal motivation for community practice that encourages the emergence of committed environmental citizenship, and social and political action.

The second, theme, the importance of multi-disciplinary education and action, includes arguments for the relevance of building into social work education an increasing awareness of the connection between environmental and human rights. Catherine Hawkins explores the connections between social work, human rights, and environmental justice. She elaborates on the UN Declaration of Human Rights and argues that social work should build on this and integrate into social work education the importance of protecting the natural environment and of seeing this activity as an essential aspect of acting to promote human rights.

Issues of environmental sustainability are complex and solutions hard to discover as individuals and communities are affected by overlapping social, economic, political, and environmental pressures. Cathryne Schmitz, Christine Stinson and Channelle James argue the benefits of interdisciplinary and multi-sectoral education and action. They propose an educational model that brings together social and technical fields with community groups so that educational institutions are better able to prepare effective environmental leaders.

Craig Mosher elaborates the elements of an emerging and alternative worldview that may lead to more effective interventions to address environmental, economic, and social problems that the scientific, reductionist, individualist modern paradigm seems unable to resolve. The emerging wholistic paradigm is based on interdependence, partnership, cooperation, and respect for the Earth and all beings and can assist the profession to meet its responsibility to help create a sustainable world.

The third group of papers identifies specific areas for action that reveal an important role for social workers in areas where the social consequences of environmental realities are more acute. Building on the increasing global consciousness, Fred Besthorn and Erika Meyer argue that helping cannot limit itself to one's neighborhood or even country. They propose that attention to global justice and basic human rights require that environmentally displaced persons become a central focus of attention for social workers and other helping professionals. They review a number of models that may be useful as social workers engage environmentally displaced persons and confront the injustices their plight exposes.

Robert Polack, Shelly Wood and Kimyatta Smith offer a good analysis of fossil fuel dependence in the USA and the analysis certainly has relevance for Canada and other developed economies. The article reviews a number of community oriented initiatives in which social work can become involved to revitalize local economies and move toward more sustainable communities. The initiatives are consistent with social work's knowledge and value base and provide direction on how professions can become more engaged and contribute to the movement toward sustainability.

These papers bring scholarly attention to theoretical, educational, and professional practices that recognize the connectedness of all life, and promote the evolution of a more wholistic theory and practice.

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