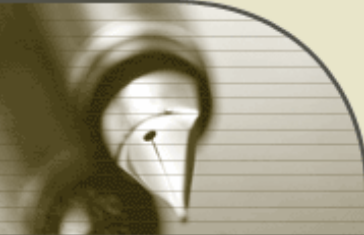




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Expanding Spiritual Diversity in Social Work: Perspectives on the Greening of Spirituality

Fred H. Besthorn

Abstract

There is little doubt that social work has had a strong religious heritage. It has been associated with a Christian and Jewish sectarian service ethos from its early years (Canda & Furman, 1999).

While social work went through a fifty-year hiatus when focus shifted to secularization and professionalization, over the last decades this has begun to change. Many social workers are finding religion and spirituality to be important components of personal growth and professional practice (Sheridan, Bullis, Adcock, Berlin & Miller, 1992). Unlike the earlier period, the focus of this new phase has tended to be on broadening the definition of the religious/spiritual construct, making it more inclusive and honoring of diverse religious and nonreligious spiritual traditions (Besthorn, 2000; Canda, 1998; Russel, 1998; Bullis, 1996; Ressler, 1998).

Fruitful new areas of emphasis in this resacralization of social work are efforts to establish linkages between a deeper ecological consciousness and spiritually diverse practice (Besthorn, 1997, 2000, 2001, 2002). Social work has always had an ecological vernacular. Yet, social work's conventional models have never clearly envisaged the deeper connection between person and the natural environment. And, only recently have there been explicit attempts to couple a deep ecological sensibility with a spiritual or religious consciousness (Besthorn, 2000; Besthorn & Canda, 2002).

This paper will assess the status of new international efforts to infuse green consciousness into spiritual and religious traditions. It will also evaluate the greening of spirituality in social work by focusing on the emerging partnership between spirituality and a deeper ecological awareness. It will suggest specific parameters of a new green spirituality and discuss implications on a range of social work practice domains.

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Introduction

I began this paper mindful of my many social work friends who genuinely seek to find a place in their professional activities for intense engagements in a variety of expressions of personal faith, commitment and discovery. Indeed, this is my experience as well. As an academic, with degrees in both religion and social work, I have more freedom than most to delight my two most embracing passions; deep ecology and spirituality. For much of my professional life these two preoccupations remained important, but fairly differentiated domains. It was not until a number of years ago that I began to seriously explore the connection between ecological awareness, spirituality and social work practice. In the years since, my ardor has only grown and deepened. It no longer seems possible in my mind to separate nature from spirit and to keep them isolated from my professional life. Nature and spirit are, as most of the great indigenous traditions of the world have known for millennia, of one and the same substance. The task for social work is to find ways to incorporate the recognition of this new, yet ancient, ontology into the orientations and primary experiences of our profession. In many areas the process of connecting ecology and spirituality has already, if tentatively, begun. This paper shall trace this development, both in contemporary culture and social work, and attempt to discover where it might lead from here.

Considering a New Story

Famed nature writer and ecological activist Barry Lopez once counseled that when humans behave as though there is no spiritual dimension to the physical places and spaces they occupy, they easily treat nature as an object — utterly imperiled by the vain and exploitive tendencies of human ambition (Lopez, 1998). On the other hand, when nature is genuinely incorporated into the same moral universe that humans inhabit, we are left with no alternative but to bow in acknowledgment of our teeming membership in the mystical and sacred universe story. Indeed, since Rachel Carson raised her incisive alarm in 1964 warning us of impending disaster if our wholesale destruction of the environment continues, many in western society have sought to discover a New Story for defining the unique character of human/nature relationships. Increasingly, this New Story has taken on deeply spiritual dimensions. Thomas Berry (1996, p. 3) observes that “our universal need at the present time is a reorientation of the human venture toward intimate experiences of the world around us.” A return to a mystique of the Earth is a primary requirement for establishing a viable rapport between humans and the natural world.

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The Natural World in Western Religious/Spiritual Traditions

Despite the recent emergence of some innovative interfaith and interdisciplinary efforts to generate ecologically sensitive religious statements and theological positions, for the most part mainstream western religious interpretations of spirit and nature remain generally inconsequential to confronting an ever deepening ecological crisis. In practice, many still perceive nature as spiritually and morally trivial, as the benign backdrop or stage for a more fundamentally important divine/human redemptive drama. Atonement or redemption loses its cosmic dimension and is reduced to an internalized response to an exclusively human condition. As Berry (1996, p. 3) recognizes, the modern western spiritual person is “in some manner abstracted from concern with the physical order of reality in favor of the interior life of the soul.” Attention to the outer material and physical world, when it occurs, is simply in the service to the inner non-material and psychic world.

Almost forty years ago Lynn White Jr. was the first to systematically illustrate the general shortsightedness of the west's religious heritage. White, then U.C.L.A. professor and historian, argued forcefully, in his now famous article entitled *The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis* (1967), that modern western alienation from nature is largely related to the early Judeo-Christian theology of despotic human control over the natural world. White indicts the foundational cosmology of western religion, especially Christianity, as encouraging both social and ecological exploitation by its feral hatred for a much earlier primal worldview in which nature is inhabited by spirits that humankind relied upon to inform their view of human/nature interactions. According to White's analysis:

Especially in its Western form, Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion that the world has seen....Christianity, in absolute contrast to ancient paganism and Asia's religions...not only established a dualism of man [sic] and nature but also insisted that it is God's will that man [sic] exploit nature for his proper ends. (cited in Barbour, 1973, p. 25.)

In White's view, popular religion of antiquity was animistic. “Every tree, every spring, every stream, every hill had its own genius loci, its guardian spirit” (1973, p. 25). Before one could cut a tree or alter nature in any way the spirit in charge of that particular entity or place had to be consulted and assuaged. Dominant western religious expressions, White argues, desecralized nature thus encouraging its exploitation by humans who were seen as separate from nature and superior to it. While first opposing and then destroying pagan animism and primal pantheism western religious traditions “made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects” (p.25). They replaced all the old gods, many of whom were nature deities, and to a great extent demystified nature making it nonsacred and a passive resource to be controlled and manipulated for human welfare.

White's analysis also explicitly connects the rise of modernism and its neo-liberal, techno-scientific enterprise as in large measure a logical result of Judeo/Christian insolence toward the natural world. The predisposition to desecralized nature laid the foundation for the rise of the Cartesian-Newtonian paradigm and the resulting technological manipulation and domination of nature. White notes that the distinctively western version of progress, technological control, the priority of economic ontology, resource depleting consumptivism and especially its heavy reliance on scientific description and prediction are permeated with a religious vernacular that justifies human arrogance toward and dominance over wild nature. He writes:

From the 13th century onward, up to and including Leibnitz and Newton, every major scientist, in effect, explained his motivation in religious terms. Indeed, if Galileo had not been so expert an amateur theologian he would have got into far less trouble: the professionals resented his intrusion. And Newton seems to have regarded himself more as a theologian than as a scientist. It was not until the late 18th century that the hypothesis of God became unnecessary to many scientists (1973, p. 27).

Much of the western theological tradition suggests a view of reality where the divine is primarily interested in human beings. The male god image delegates to them mastery over the natural order which he created for their exclusive use. The human-centered essence of the west's salvific soteriology is almost universally, though perhaps unconsciously, accepted by the preponderance of the Christian and so called "post-Christian" (p. 24) era. For White, both capitalism and Marxism are essentially quasi-religious heresies because, despite apparent differences, both are rooted in a anti-naturalist, anthropocentric Judeo-Christian teleology. The modernist project's absolute faith and, in some quarters, religious-like zeal for science and technology, irrespective of what socio-political ideology embraces them, offers no singular solution to the current crisis of environment and the appropriate human place in the natural world. "Since the roots of our trouble are so largely religious, the remedy must also be essentially religious, whether we call it that or not" (p. 30).

It can be credibly argued that the west's religious traditions do not consistently or unanimously adopt a negative or exploitive attitude toward nature (Boff, 1995; Callicott, 1990; Dubos, 1973; Kinsley, 1995; McFague, 2000, 2001; Santmire, 1985). And, there are numerous wisdom and minority traditions within Judeo-Christian thought (Mishnah, Midrash Tehillim, Maimonides, Kabbalistic traditions, St. Francis of Assisi, Hildegard of Bingen, Meister Eckhart, Transcendentalist traditions) suggesting that rapacious anti-naturalism represents a one-dimensional and mischaracterized understanding of the historical and canonical record concerning the natural world (Cobb, 1979; McFague, 2000; Rolston, 1996;). This, however, does not diminish the fact that for the majority of western sectarian traditions nature was considered a non-sentient object whose primary function was to serve as resource capital for humanity's ongoing economic pursuits. Wild nature is still generally accounted as having no intrinsic value or spiritual dimension. Its value is solely instrumental, associated with its ability to provide raw material for production or, at the very least, to provide some small degree of aesthetic enjoyment.

Homo sapiens remain a spiritually segregated and ecologically superior species, private players in an unfolding drama of redemptive violence (Wink, 1984). Humans are, at the same time, enjoined as stewards and overseers possessed with the divinely sanctioned right to manage and, when required, commandeer nature's bounty. The spiritual and religious, as well as the political and ethical focus of the preponderance of western history has been on the trajectory of the human condition, fully neglecting the reality that human development is rooted in, continually molded by, and interdependent with, natural history. In fact, according to Nash (1996), the myopic and anthropocentric fixation of the west's mainstream religious/spiritual institutions, while not being the sole cause of ecological degradation, have contributed to three elemental failures at the root of the current ecological crisis. These are:

- The failure to adapt to the limiting conditions of life (i.e. the carrying, regenerative, and absorptive capacities of nature), as emerging problems of global warming and human overpopulation illustrate.
- The failure to recognize the intricate and interdependent relationships involving humankind and the rest of nature, in which there can be no isolation or segregation. We know today, for instance, that even vibrant economic systems depend on the welfare of ecosystems whether or not we fully appreciate that reality.
- The failure to respond benevolently and justly to the theological and biological fact of human kinship with all other creatures, from strawberries to dinosaurs. This failure is especially evident in the increasing number of species being extinguished, largely from habitat destruction associated with economic over- development. (p. 6)

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Finding Connections: The Greening of Spirituality

While many dominant western religious traditions have had limited expressions of reverence for the sacred connection between humanity and nature that have hindered their response to evolving and ever worsening ecological crises, there are encouraging signs that this is changing. At all levels, nationally, internationally and locally, environmental and spiritual/religious communities are beginning to re-examine their historic roots, taking note of shared missions and values, and seeking ways to work together to end ecological destruction.

Internationally, for example, the Pope in his World Day of Peace Letter of 1990 entitled *Peace with God the Creator, Peace with All of Creation* held that the ecological crisis is a moral crisis that requires all peoples of faith to humbly accept their responsibility and duty toward protecting and preserving the natural world (Ferkiss, 1993). Just three years later in 1993 the Parliament of World Religions was held in Chicago and was attended by over 8,000 representatives of the world's great religious and spiritual traditions. It issued a statement entitled *Global Ethics of Cooperation of Religions on Human and Environmental Issues*. The declaration sought to give direction to an emerging global consensus that links spirituality to human development and ecological sustainability (Tucker & Grim, 1998). Additionally, the international Eco-Justice movement has strengthened and given new depth to a revitalized Liberation Theology that couples economic and ecological exploitation with spiritual empowerment and social transformation (Boff, 1995).

The Global Forum of Spiritual and Parliamentary Leaders, first held at Oxford England in 1988 and later at Moscow, Rio de Janeiro and Kyoto, has also established guidelines for an International Green Cross which is intended to respond with material aid and expert counsel to environmental emergencies wherever they may occur on the face of the globe. In addition, The Alliance of Religions and Conservation (ARC) has been publishing monographs and holding international conferences since 1995 in an effort to raise consciousness over the inherently spiritual character of ecological and environmental concerns. In North America, the United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP) has established an Environmental Sabbath program that, each year, distributes thousands of worship packets in an effort to arouse congregant support for establishing an earth-based global ethic grounded in international law (Rockefeller, 1996).

In the United States also, since the late 1980s and early 1990s, there has been increased involvement of religious and spiritual groups in developing a comprehensive earth ethic and finding solutions for ecological problems. For example, the numbers of publications attempting to frame an eco-spiritual perspective have grown exponentially each year since the early 1990s. An innumerable array of broadly defined ecological/religious/spiritual partnerships and conceptual models has also been gaining momentum and growing in popularity. From Catholic Bishops in the American northwest fighting to protect salmon spawning grounds, Jewish scholars debating the ecological meaning of ancient texts, and evangelical youth finding new faith expression in wilderness experiences to the mystical rituals of Creation Spirituality, there are growing efforts on the part of religious and spiritual groups to influence change toward a more sustainable, and spiritually animated planetary future (Johnson, 1998).

One of the most successful coalitions in promoting an eco-spiritual perspective has been the National Religious Partnership for the Environment. This group, founded in 1993, comprises most major American faith traditions such as Roman Catholic, Jewish, mainline Protestant, Eastern Orthodox, evangelical Christian, and historic African-American Protestant. It has as its main premise the belief that caring for creation is a fundamentally religious imperative that transcends sectarian differences and partisan politics (Gorman, 2001). Specific beliefs and practices of each member group are valued while each faith tradition is encouraged to explore what it means to be environmentally engaged from within its own unique customs and history. Members of the National Religious Partnership have also formed a special alliance with The Union of Concerned Scientists as a way to affirm the indispensable congruity between religion and science as well as to develop a cooperative interfaith and inter-disciplinary coalition to address pressing environmental problems. For members of The National Religious Partnership for the Environment, this more holistic and collaborative approach to faith expression and environmental awareness means spiritual practice and ecological activism are not separate endeavors but are deeply intertwined and essential to the flourishing of all life on earth.

Another major endeavor to unite various faith constituents in addressing environmental problems has been an ongoing effort entitled The Harvard University Project on Religion and Ecology (Tucker and Grim, 1994). The Harvard Project was inspired by the 1992 World Scientists Warning to Humanity issued by the Union of Concerned Scientists, which concluded that the environmental crisis is so dire that its solution requires the attention of spiritual and religious leaders as well as that of science, business and government. It operates from the major premise that since spirituality and religion are the touchstone of most peoples' deepest motivations and actions, lasting and effective environmental change and protection won't happen without seeking to define and rethink spiritual and religious values regarding humanity's essential responsibility to nature (Tucker and Grim, 1998). The Harvard project brings together policy-makers, scientists, scholars, clerics and activists from spiritual, religious, governmental and non-governmental organizations in a broad interfaith dialogue on environment and spirituality. Through a series of conferences and continuing publications the Harvard project seeks to find common ground between Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, Hinduism, Islam, Shinto, Jainism and numerous ancestral traditions on a assortment of

environmental concerns.

The six major goals of the Harvard Project may be summarized as:

1. Reconceptualizing attitudes toward nature by examining perceptions from the world's spiritual and religious traditions while giving special care to the complexity of unique histories and cultures where these perceptions are rooted.
2. Contributing to the enunciation of a workable ecological ethics grounded in spiritual and religious traditions and inspired by broad ecological perspectives.
3. Identifying the institutional resources within religious and spiritual traditions for bringing about long-term transformation regarding attitudes toward the environment.
4. Stimulating the interest and concern of spiritual and religious leaders, academics and students in centers of religious and spiritual instruction from around the world.
5. Linking the transformative efforts of the world's spiritual and religious traditions to the larger international movements toward a global ethic for a humane and sustainable future.
6. Joining with the ecological sciences and those in business, economics, health, education and the media who strive to reinvent industrial society.

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Spirituality, Religion and Ecology in Social Welfare and Social Work

The current state of spirituality, religion and ecology in social work is a mixed story. There can be little doubt that social services in the United States have strong religious underpinnings. Religious institutions associated with a dynamic Christian and Jewish sectarian human service ethos have been a part of America's social service tradition from its very early years (Canda & Furman, 2000). Indeed, the formative roots of the vast majority of American social welfare programs were religious in nature (Lieby, 1985; Lowenberg, 1988). The Christian church, in both its Catholic and Protestant forms, played leading roles in the establishment of institutions such as poorhouses, orphanages and mental asylums. Residential institutions for children and for the elderly were initially established by Catholic orders in the early 18th century and less than one-hundred years later the first Lutheran associations were formed to address such thorny social problems as alcoholism, homelessness, delinquency, and inner-city poverty (Popple & Leighninger, 2002).

In social work, the early literature is replete with examples of religious/spiritual factors influencing the lives of early workers. Religious helping creeds ranged from very strict behavioral analyses emphasizing individual moral failure, to assigning communal responsibility for care and social justice through institutional change. The values and activities of the Charity Organization Society in early 20th century America were heavily informed by the conservative religious ideology and mainstream protestant ethic of hard work, personal responsibility, and individual achievement. Charity organizations viewed religion, especially in its institutional/church form, as the deep spiritual force and heart of all forms of charity. Mary Richmond, writing of the church's role in charity observed:

The church furnishes us with the motive for all our work; it heartens us. We are prepared to give method...But method and motive have need of each other...For centuries charity has looked to the church and must continue to look to it as the spring in the hills, the source of its power. (cited in Manthey, 1989, p. 104)

Much of the Settlement House Movement also had strong religious overtones but, unlike the Charity Organization Society, took as its inspiration for service the progressive Social Gospel movement (Lieby, 1985). The Social Gospel movement focused not so much on individual responsibility and personal redemption, as on collective action and redeeming the social structures and industrial conditions which were increasingly viewed as causative of the deplorable conditions of human squalor and suffering. Early settlement leaders shared a strong affinity and close contacts with many in the Social Gospel Movement (Marty, 1970, 1980; May, 1977). They found support and sustenance from their collaborative commitments to advance an agenda of remedial change for social injustices. Jane Addams, considered one of the foremost progenitors of American social work and renowned for her work at Hull House in Chicago, was grounded in a profound nonviolent, social change and progressive Christian perspective associated with Quakerism. Addams came to social work only after rejecting a missionary career. She worked diligently throughout her life to find a synthesis of her religious impulses and zeal with her strong political concern and social activism (Manthey, 1989).

While social work went through a fifty-year hiatus when focus shifted to secularization and professionalization, over the last several decades this has begun to change. Many individual social workers are finding religion

and spirituality to be important components of both personal growth and professional practice (Sheridan, Bullis, Adcock, Berlin & Miller, 1992). The professional collective is also re-discovering a substantial and sustained interest in continuing to identify linkages between spirituality, religion and social work theory and practice. This renaissance of the transpersonal has expanded upon the interreligious and spiritual undercurrents that have existed in social work from its very beginning years. Unlike its earlier sectarian period, the focus of this new developmental phase has tended, generally, to be on broadening the definition of the religious/spiritual construct so as to make it more inclusive and honoring of diverse religious and nonreligious spiritual traditions (Canda, 1998; Russel, 1998). The current standing of spirituality and religion in social work is robust and appears to be growing into the international arena as well as expanding more fully into a variety of social work educational and practice settings. This new found strength of the spirit is being given expression in numerous popular books, articles, textbooks, monographs, presentations, informal networking and formal organizational structures of both a sectarian and nonsectarian nature (Abels, 2000; Bullis, 1996; Canda & Furman, 2000; Ressler, 1992, 1998).

While the current status of religion and spirituality in social work is not without challenge and some controversial elements (Hodge, 2001; Hugen, 2001; Ressler, 1998), it is nonetheless a vibrant new force having a significant impact on the way the profession goes about its business of helping. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for the profession's embrace of environmental and ecological concerns. Social work has always claimed for itself an ecological awareness. The profession's person-in-environment, ecological and eco-systems models have consistently centered our professional attention on the connection between the individual and their environment (Besthorn, 1997, 2000, 2001). Indeed, few social workers would claim that some form of environmental or ecological consciousness does not guide their professional orientation.

Yet, for all the help these perspectives have given to our understanding of the human condition, social work's conventional environmental models, with a few notable exceptions (Besthorn, 2001, 2002; Besthorn & Canda, 2002; Besthorn & McMillen, 2002; Coates, In Press; Germain & Gitterman, 1996; Hoff, 1997; Hoff & McNutt, 1994; Rogge, 1993), have shown a near complete disregard for envisaging the deeper connection between person and the natural environment. Social work doesn't generally recognize the connection between person and nature, or inquire into the way humans derive meaning from this association, or develop theory around it, or place it in its computations of what's important to those the profession serves. Nature has tended to become the benign backdrop for more fundamentally important personal or social interactions. And, even on those few occasions when the professional literature does evoke concern for environmental degradation and nature-based awareness there are few explicit attempts to couple ecological sensibility with a spiritual or religious consciousness (Besthorn, 1997; Robbins, Chatterjee & Canda, 1998). It is as if the profession's coming to a more complete understanding of the biological and physical order of the Earth and its progressive devastation precludes it, at the same time, from recognizing and honoring its sacred dimensions.

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Future Prospects: Seeking Alliances between Ecology and Spirituality

The previous discussion has suggested that, along with the rest of the world community, social work is on the cusp of a new era that portends significant opportunities, challenges, and complexities for the way it conceives its professional activities. There is no promise that espousing an eco-spiritual ethos will revolutionize the profession. No one could ever make that claim for a theoretical or practice revision. But, an eco-spirituality may provide the profession an opportunity to explore previously uncharted waters in a manner that could potentially change the nature of its commitments, values and activities.

Thus, although both spiritual and ecological awareness have had their own differential impact on the history and trajectory of the social work profession, what is needed now is a new consciousness of the complex interrelationship between spirituality and ecology. This new awareness will then begin to parallel the coupling of spirituality and ecology taking place in the larger cultural arena. Social work must develop ways to link these twin pillars of its historic past in an endeavor to move beyond the dualism of the western philosophical project and its own practice models, which have tended to keep them quite separate. Ed Canda (1998, p. 104), considered by many the founder of American social work's recent rediscovery of spirituality, makes the important observation that "when social work is infused with spirituality, promoting human fulfillment can become a process that creatively connects personal growth, social justice and ecojustice". Clearly, the question becomes how do we honor the religious and spiritual heritage of our past in a manner that thoroughly embraces the ecological justice factor in addition to our historic commitment to social justice and personal growth?

First, social work must engage in ongoing critical reflection about its current values and actions, which remain largely focused on individual micro level interventions and service brokerage (Cox, 2001; Fisher & King, 1994; Leonard, 1997; Specht & Courtney, 1994). We are embedded in an egocentric mindset while the bulk of recent national and international discourse suggests a emerging world community that is moving toward an ecocentric earth consciousness that is markedly informed by spiritual and religious perspectives (Atkisson,

1999; Boff, 1995; De Boer, 2001; Macy & Brown, 1998; Macy, 2001). Sectarian and nonsectarian spiritual leaders, ecologists, environmental activists, policy advocates and government officials are discovering a holistic realization of humankind's interconnectedness with the natural world, the priority of preserving and protecting nature, ensuring ecological justice, cultivating sustainable societies, and reuniting the spiritual and physical realities of the universe.

Second, we must begin a professional dialogue to find ways of honoring long held traditions suggesting, in profoundly metaphysical ways, that earth and spirit are inherently interconnected. Social work educators and practitioners can become active participants in conversations around this incisive assessment. We can begin the conversation of how to move beyond our narrow environmental and ecological models while building upon the call to embrace a more complete and inclusive spiritual diversity (Canda, 1998; Canda & Furman, 1999). We can give voice to an extended ecological ethos that is rooted in the mystique and sacredness of the Earth. In light of the tragedy and upheaval of September, 11th we must begin to ask deeper questions like how social work might assist the nation and the world in avoiding an even greater tragedy; the tragedy of the commons — the headlong pursuit of short range profits and narrow self-interest at the expense of global, long-term ecological degradation. And, we must ponder the question as to whether we have a moral and ethical duty in our professional activities to actively encourage and inspire our communities and our clients to adopt environmentally responsible and sustainable patterns of behavior rather than just attending to the human suffering in the aftermath of environmental disaster.

Thirdly, we must look to define specific parameters and concrete actions of new eco-spirituality awareness. This new awareness must have sufficient depth and breadth to help prepare the profession for the complexities and challenges of the next one hundred years. If, as some are suggesting, that the 21st century will be the global/environmental century (Annan, 2002; Brown, 2001; Constanza, 1999; Norgaard, 1994, Sklar, 1995; Spretnak, 1997) then social work must position itself to respond to a new set of issues, problems and contingencies. While recognizing that any proposal can never be unequivocal and that any suggestion is at best tentative and provisional, we can at least begin to see some broad outlines. Thomas Berry (1996) offers useful perceptions that have application to social work. He suggests that in order for humankind to embrace a spirituality that is committed to the Earth community, humanity needs to move:

- From a spirituality of alienation from the natural world to a spirituality of intimacy with the natural world.
- From a spirituality of the divine as revealed in words to a spirituality of the divine as revealed in the visible world about us.
- From a spirituality concerned with justice merely to humans to a spirituality of justice to the devastated Earth community.
- From the spirituality of the prophet to the spirituality of the shaman. (p. 3)

These important insights remind social work that a diverse spirituality of the kind that the profession has begun to work to achieve: (1) must be interpreted in terms profoundly related to the natural world, (2) must recognize the interconnectedness and interdependence of all things as the fundamental biological and spiritual norm rather than the exception, and (3) must encourage the rightful, non-anthropocentric place of humankind in the cosmic/spiritual order.

Ecological spirituality recognizes that humans share a common destiny with the earth. It celebrates an ongoing cultivation of a deeper identification of self with the whole of the earth. Humanity and nature cannot be separated — the sacred is in and of both. A deeply infused ecological spirituality acknowledges that we belong, from the very core of our physical bodies to the highest aspirations of our cognitive minds, to a constantly emerging cosmic/spiritual process. Humans emerge from, are dependent upon and shall return to an underlying energy or Divine presence pervading all reality. Nothing exists outside of this relationship cycle.

There are some encouraging signs that the profession is beginning to move in the direction just described. There is growing interest on the part of professional social work educators and practitioners concerning the interface of ecology and spirituality. Recent national conferences sponsored by the Society for Spirituality and Social Work, the Council on Social Work Education, and the International Federation of Social Workers have given rise to a small but increasing number of papers and presentations on ecological and eco-spiritual issues and concerns (Bartlett, 2000; Besthorn, 1999, 2001, 2002; Zapf, 2000). Publications are appearing in book form and in the professional literature not only on environmental issues generally but on the linkages between ecology and multiple forms of spiritual expression (Besthorn, 2000, 2001, 2002; Besthorn & Canda, 2002; Coates, 2001; Hoff, 1998; Hoff & McNutt, 1994; Park, 1996; Roughley, 1995; Soliman, 1998; Streeter & Gonsalvez, 1994; Wolf, 2000). Recently a new organization and Internet website entitled the Global Alliance for a Deep Ecological Social Work (www.ecosocialwork.org) has been developed calling for social workers, from diverse backgrounds, to come together around a common theme of environmental, spiritual and political concern. This organization held a first ever national symposium in Washington D.C. in the summer of 2001 which attracted several innovative papers and presentations on ecological and eco-spiritual issues (Benedict, 2001; Coates, 2001; Rogge, 2001; Shaw, 2001).

Conclusion: Toward a New Story

As environmental crises grow, as global economic and political stratification continues and as the world progresses toward a more interconnected model of collective understanding, social work must also begin to re-evaluate itself. Our current ecological and environmental models are not enough. Our current spiritual emphases have abundant room for development and expansion. It is not sufficient for social work to think of an ecology that is preoccupied exclusively with human reactions related to family, friends, agency, community or social relationships. Nor, will it be sufficient to contemplate a spirituality that is concerned solely with divine-human or inter-human relationships. It is not enough to favor an environmentalism whose shallow conservation ethic simply cordons off sequestered natural reserves while the wholesale pillaging of the earth's carrying capacity goes on unabated. Nor, will it be enough to ponder a spirituality that has, all too often, subtly sanctioned the plundering of the planet by good, even deeply religious, persons for the supposed physical and/or pious benefit of humankind. Our task, as social workers deeply concerned for both spirit and nature, is to join hands, humbly and expectantly, to create a New Story of earth. There is no better place to begin than by reflecting upon, redefining and recombining the best of social work's existing spiritual and ecological awareness. In so doing we fashion, a new covenant whereby we begin to thoroughly fathom that "every being exists and has its value in relation to the great universe community. Nothing bestows existence on itself. Nothing survives by itself. Nothing is fulfilled in itself. Nothing has existence or meaning or fulfillment except in union with the larger community of existence" (Berry, 1996, p. 3).

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