

Engaging Spirituality in Family Conflict: Witnessing to Hope and Dialogue

by
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The challenges of developing better approaches and more holistic systems of care for families, especially families in conflict, suggest that those engaged in professional practice should be exposed to a deeper understanding of the role of faith and spirituality in the delivery of care and healing. Practitioners, whether social workers, psychologists, or lawyers working with families, ought to take a critical look at the ways faith and spirituality can help families move beyond conflict. Indeed, attention to culture and various meaning systems are key aspects of successful work with families in conflict. Ultimately, practitioners are invited to assist families to move beyond conflict by developing dialogic ways that assist in developing re-humanizing relationships.

To understand the importance of spirituality in working with families one must contend with the meaning of faith and spirituality in the lives of individuals, families and communities. The human experience is intricately intertwined in the lives of people. Often, the quality and influence that faith and the spiritual play in people's lives may go unnoticed. Even with the increasing emphasis to provide culturally competent services, practitioners often give little or no attention to issues of faith or spirituality. Culturally competent or responsive practice must take into account a complex matrix of intertwining cultural influences, individual identities, values, choices and behavior in continually evolving dynamic ways. Recent literature underscores the importance of spirituality in practice across various professional disciplines.¹ As a result, a growing literature on, and interest in, the

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¹ See Stacey L. Barker, *The Integration of Spirituality and Religion Content in Social Work Education: Where We've Been, Where We're Going*, 34 *SOC. WORK & CHRISTIANITY* 146 (2007); Jon B. Ellis & Peggy C. Smith, *Spiritual*

topic of spirituality is emerging. Integrating the spiritual and/or religious dimension in all types of practice can offer clients an additional coping strategy to deal with various issues, not least of them, conflict. Holistic health must take into account the integration of body, mind and spirit. These aspects of self are all interwoven. Indeed, the feeling of well-being that comes from a healthy body is a mental and spiritual experience. As human beings, our search for a good life is also our spiritual need to experience ourselves as having a meaningful role in our inner and outer worlds. For families in conflict, holistic health and well-being is the family's search for meaning.

The topic of spirituality presents an important challenge for all practitioners. Indeed, for some practitioners, it is like working in another culture. In developing familiarity with this other culture, it is important to understand certain terms that can help the understanding of important constructs. Indeed, because spirituality and religion play an important role in the human experience, practitioners including lawyers ought to pay attention to these dimensions.

I. Defining the Terms

When one speaks of spirituality, one is immediately confronted with the problem of defining its meaning. When attempting to *define* spirituality, the challenge is the creation of parameters which may appear to touch only the surface of the issue. The difficulty in defining spirituality may speak to the vagueness of the term, the lack of coherence in the term, the abstract nature of the term or the mystery that surrounds the concept. Often *spiritual* is confused with *religious*, further complicating the issue. Unfortunately, some practitioners develop a negative reaction to any opportunities to explore the

Well-Being, Social Desirability and Reasons for Living: Is There a Connection?, 37 INT'L. J. SOC. PSYCHIATRY 57 (Spring 1991); Martha Farrar Highfield, *Spiritual Health of Oncology Patients: Nurse and Patient Perspectives*, 15 CANCER NURSING 1 (Feb. 1992); Jane M. Kaczorowski, *Spiritual Well-Being and Anxiety in Adults Diagnosed with Cancer*, 5 HOSPICE J. 105 (1989). The connection between the law and spirituality has a long, if neglected, history. See Robert F. Blomquist, *Law and Spirituality: Some First Thoughts on an Emerging Relation*, 71 UMKC L. Rev 583 (2002-2003).

landscape of the spiritual. Indeed, one can follow a spiritual path without being religious and vice-versa.

A. *Spirituality*

According to P. Scott Richards and Allen Bergin, the term spirituality can be traced back to the sixteenth century.² It was used to refer to the personal (*and group*) relationship with God (*the Ultimate*) and, thereby, describes all that relates to the relationship one has with God. By this definition, spirituality describes the “very hard to grasp” relationship to some “inner energy” with God and the fullness of one’s experience with that inner energy.³ For these authors, spiritual also refers to those experiences, beliefs, and phenomena that pertain to the transcendent and existential aspects of life (God, Higher Power, the purpose and meaning of life, suffering, good and evil, death, and so on).

Emerging discussion on spirituality shows the need to attend to this issue. In social work literature several writers have addressed the issue of spirituality.⁴ Works on spirituality have included issues of practice, theory, research, assessment, teaching, and education. Issues of definition have also been central to these authors’ concerns. In general, there is agreement that spirituality is a search for connectedness, meaning, and purpose

² P. SCOTT RICHARDS & ALLEN E. BERGIN, *A SPIRITUAL STRATEGY FOR COUNSELING AND PSYCHOTHERAPY* (1997).

³ *Id.*

⁴ RONALD K. BULLIS, *SPIRITUALITY AND SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE* (1996); JAMES L. GRIFFITH & MELISSA ELLIOTT GRIFFITH, *ENCOUNTERING THE SACRED IN PSYCHOTHERAPY* (2002); EDWARD R. CANDA & LEOLA DYRUD FURMAN, *SPIRITUAL DIVERSITY IN SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE: THE HEART OF HELPING* (1999); Edward R. Canda, *Conceptualizing Spirituality for Social Work: Insights from Diverse Perspectives*, 14 *J. RELIGION & SPIRITUALITY IN SOC. WORK: SOC. THOUGHT* 30 (1988); Edward R. Canda, *Religious Content in Social Work Education: A Comparative Approach*, 1 *J. SOC. WORK EDUC.* 36 (1989); Edward R. Canda, *Retrieving the Soul of Social Work*, 2 *SOC’Y SPIRITUALITY & SOC. WORK NEWSL.* 5 (1995); James R. Dudley & Chava Helfgott, *Exploring a Place for Spirituality in Social Work Curriculum*, 26 *J. SOC. WORK EDUC.* 287 (1990); David R. Hodge, *Spiritual Assessment: A Review of Major Qualitative Methods and a New Framework for Assessing Spirituality*, 46 *SOC. WORK* 203 (2001); Michael J. Sheridan et al., *Practitioners’ Personal and Professional Attitudes and Behaviors Toward Religion and Spirituality: Issues for Education and Practice*, 28 *J. SOC. WORK EDUC.* 190 (1992).

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among communities, groups, the non-human environment, and a superior being or beings.

B. *The Definitions*

1. *Spirituality*

According to Laurel Burton, spirituality is a dynamic construction, exploration, and expression of self in relation to the dynamic construction of the Ultimate, growing from experience of and reflection on the tension between possibilities and limits of human existence in history.⁵ This definition underscores Burton's insistence on the need to explore spirituality in context. One would therefore assume that families in conflict present an important context for exploring spirituality.

Edward Canda and Leola Furman have described "spirituality" as "the search for meaning, purpose, and morally fulfilling relations with self, other people, the encompassing universe, and ultimate reality, however a person understands it."⁶ They also provide twelve attributes of the concept of spirituality as follows:

1. An essential quality of a person that is inherently valuable, sacred, or immaterial. This is sometimes associated with beliefs about the soul, spirit, vital energy, life force, consciousness, true self, or core nature.
2. An innate drive of persons to search for meaning.
3. A developmental process of searching and moving toward a sense of wholeness and connectedness in oneself and with others.
4. The contents of beliefs, values, moral frameworks, practices and relationship with the self and others, including ultimate reality, involved in this process.
5. Transpersonal levels of consciousness.
6. Particular experiences and states of consciousness of a profound, trans-personal, or sacred nature, such as out of body experiences, revelatory visions, sense of connection with spirits, communing with God, or cosmic consciousness

⁵ Laurel Arthur Burton, *A Hermeneutical Approach to Religion and Family Therapy*, in RELIGION AND THE FAMILY: WHEN GOD HELPS 13 (Laurel Arthur Burton ed. 1992).

⁶ CANDA & FURMAN, *supra* note 3, at 385.

7. Participation in spiritual support that may or may not be religious.
8. Engagement in particular beliefs and behaviors that support growth toward wholeness, or contact with the sacred, such as prayer or meditation, in a religious context.
9. Central priorities that orient life toward what is considered ultimate, sacred, or transcendent.
10. Virtues that may arise from development of spirituality, such as compassion, love, sense of justice, forgiveness, and humility.
11. Qualities of well-being that may arise from spiritual development, and as a resilience, joy, peace, contentment, and clear life purpose.
12. A holistic quality of the entire person in relationship, not reducible to parts, that includes yet transcends all the part. Holistic awareness may emerge as one becomes aware of all one's aspects and relationships and works out a sense of integration and connectedness.⁷

James Griffith and Melissa Elliott Griffith provide a definition that is relationally based; described as a practical definition, "spirituality is commitment to choose, as the primary context for understanding and acting, one's relatedness with all that is. With this commitment, one attempts to stay focused on relationships between one's self and other people, one's physical environment, one's heritage and traditions, one's body, one's ancestors, and a Higher Power, or God. . . . [a]t the center of awareness are relationships with the world, other people, or relationships with God or other nonmaterial beings."⁸

2. *Religion*

Richards and Bergin link *religion* to *religious* which has to do with theistic beliefs, practices, and feelings that are often, but not always expressed institutionally and denominationally as well as personally.⁹ The word, religion, finds its roots in the Latin word, *religare*, which means "to tie or bind together." Richards and Bergin observe that religion finds expression in institutional, external, cognitive/behavioral, ritualistic, and public practices.

⁷ *Id.* at 74.

⁸ GRIFFITH & GRIFFITH, *supra* note 3, at 15-16.

⁹ RICHARDS & BERGIN, *supra* note 2, at 13.

Spirituality, on the other hand, is spontaneously experienced in affective, internal, and private ways.¹⁰

For Canda and Furman, *religion* refers to “an organized, structured set of beliefs and practices shared by a community, related to spirituality.”¹¹ For Griffith and Griffith, religion is the embodiment of spirituality. Enacting spirituality in particular culture, language, practice, and custom that evolve in traditions often develop into what they describe as religion. “Religion represents a cultural codification of important spiritual metaphors, narratives, beliefs, rituals, social practices, and forms of community among particular people that provides methods for attaining spirituality, most often expressed in terms of a relationship with the God of that religion.”¹²

3. *Spiritual Well-Being*

Spiritual well-being is defined as satisfaction with one’s relationship with a higher being, and one’s sense of meaning and purpose in life.¹³ John Martin and Charles Carlson convincingly argue for integration of the spiritual/religious dimension in health psychology research into clinical frameworks.¹⁴ They present evidence that spiritual commitment lifestyles may be associated with reduced incidence of disease and risk factors as well as improved quality of life. For them, the spiritual world view and having a relationship with God provide comfort and support in dealing with stress or personal threats. Spiritual beliefs or practices can also be of assistance in coping with life stress;¹⁵ coping,

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ CANDA & FURMAN, *supra* note 3, at 385.

¹² GRIFFITH & GRIFFITH, *supra* note 3, at 17.

¹³ See Ellis & Smith, *supra* note 1; Hugo Kamya, *African Immigrants in the United States: The Challenge for Research and Practice*, 42 SOC. WORK 154 (1997); Raymond F. Paloutzian & Craig W. Ellison, *Loneliness, Spiritual Well-Being and the Quality of Life*, in LONELINESS: A SOURCE BOOK OF CURRENT THEORY, RESEARCH, AND THERAPY 224 (Letitia Anne Pelau & Daniel Perlman eds. 1982).

¹⁴ John E. Martin & Charles R. Carlson, *Spiritual Dimensions of Health Psychology*, in Behavior Therapy and Religion: Integrating Spiritual and Behavioral Approaches to Change (William R. Miller and John E. Martin, eds. 1988).

¹⁵ KENNETH I. PARGAMENT, THE PSYCHOLOGY OF RELIGION AND COPING (1997); see also KENNETH I. PARGAMENT, SPIRITUALLY INTEGRATED PSYCHOTHERAPY: UNDERSTANDING AND ADDRESSING THE SACRED (2007).

in this view, is an attempt to find significance in stressful times. Therefore, exploring ones' spiritual well-being can assist in finding an individual's or community's functional coping style.

Martin and Carlson make some important observations: 1) Certain health problems may be related to spiritual deficits or excesses. Optimal health may require a spiritual, as well as a social, behavioral, and physical homeostasis; 2) A number of health-improvement interventions can be characterized as spiritual and have a promising impact on the fields of health psychology and theology; and 3) Many clients view the world and themselves through spiritual eyes.¹⁶ Their behavior is clearly influenced and guided by their religious tenets. These points emphasize the need to consider the overlap between the psychological and the spiritual. Indeed, one may argue that any practice ought to attend to these major components of human experience.

a. *Interest in spiritual well-being*

The awareness of how spiritual well-being impacts the emotional healing process for individuals and groups that practitioners encounter is expanding. The value of spiritual well-being is acknowledged for those living under oppressive conditions,¹⁷ those maintaining cultural ties to ethnic and immigrant communities,¹⁸ and those coping with change and loss inherent in the human condition.¹⁹ As an offshoot of this interest, several professional schools give joint degrees in recognition of the usefulness of psychology, social work, and pastoral counseling as fields that may work in concert toward the healthy development of individuals, groups and communities.²⁰ Not only do professionals in

¹⁶ Martin & Carlson, *supra* note 13, at 58.

¹⁷ JUNE G. HOPPS ET AL., *THE POWER TO CARE: CLINICAL PRACTICE EFFECTIVENESS WITH OVERWHELMED CLIENTS* (1995).

¹⁸ See Kanya, *supra* note 7; Brenda M. Rodriguez, *From Self to Other: Communication Across Cultures*, 14 *FAM. RESOURCE COALITION REP.* 11 (1996).

¹⁹ Patricia Sermabeikian, *Our Clients, Ourselves: The Spiritual Perspective and Social Work Practice*, 39 *SOC. WORK* 178 (1994).

²⁰ See e.g. Mary Thomas Burke et al., *Spirituality, Religion, and CACREP Curriculum Standards*, 77 *J. COUNSELING & DEV.* 251 (1999); Edward R. Canda, *Integrating religion and Social Work in Dual Degree Programs*, 24 *J. RELIGION & SPIRITUALITY IN SOC. WORK: SOCIAL THOUGHT* 79 (2005).

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these fields attend to the well-being of individuals, groups and communities, they also share a commitment to social justice issues. This commitment may certainly generate considerable stress or distress for both professionals, testing their hardiness. Indeed, the implicit and explicit agenda for these professionals necessitate developing collaboration and partnerships in delivering competent services. Spiritual well-being maps influence on psychological issues just as psychological and emotional issues map influence on spiritual well-being.

Thus, practitioners from various disciplines can play a major role in the reduction of conflict and improvement in communication by incorporating spirituality in their practice. For example, knowledge of those elements of spirituality which may be part of a family system or an individual's life perspective may encourage rapport with the client and sensitivity to their strengths and limitations as parents or partners. Of particular importance, lawyers need to understand and appreciate how spirituality may influence attitudes toward victims of interpersonal violence or the capacity of an abuser to acknowledge transgressions or show genuine remorse.²¹ Such understanding and sensitivity is especially necessary across culture and gender when children may have exposure to violence or trauma and the family is in conflict.

b. *Families in conflict*

Families in conflict present an important challenge to practitioners. The experience of such family needs should be understood in a larger context of the stresses that characterize their experience. Family conflict has a profound influence on their lives as they negotiate individual internal resources, supports available to them and their communities. These families go through a grueling alienation process. This process involves multiple losses, including loss of connection with the internal support systems, identity, belief systems, and status.²² In short, families in

²¹ See Michael Flood & Bob Pease, *Factors Influencing Attitudes to Violence Against Women*, 10 *TRAUMA, VIOLENCE, & ABUSE* 125, 133-34 (2009) ("There is some evidence that religious and spiritual involvements and beliefs can influence individuals' attitudes toward violence against women, although some studies find no relationship between religiosity and the endorsement of domestic violence.").

²² RONI BERGER, *IMMIGRANT WOMEN TELL THEIR STORIES* (2004).

conflict experience varying levels of physical, psychological, sociological, emotional, and spiritual/religious rootlessness.

For many families, their experience of community and belonging is often best lived out in their sense of belief and faith. It is about rebuilding this sense of community and connectedness as they find a new sense of home. Indeed, for many the search for this connectedness is often a communal experience of faith. Practitioners can play a major role in rebuilding any fragmentation that conflict brings in their lives. Spirituality is a major force in working toward this sense of connection.

4. *Faith*

Faith is another term that is often cited alongside religion and spirituality. Faith is a characterized set of beliefs and practices based on confidence or trust one has in some divine being. Often, faith is based on the teachings of a religion or religious practices. These practices provide the opportunity for individuals and communities to find a sense of solace and hope.

II. Faith, Religion and Spirituality in Action

My work with families in conflict has increasingly brought me closer to understanding the role of faith, spirituality and religion in engaging with them. Many questions underscore the importance of finding God in the apparent absence of God within their lives. For many people, their faith is tied into their community as they seek to locate hope in the apparent lack thereof. Families in conflict experience numerous losses. As they seek healing through their conflicts they are not only seeking symptom reduction or problem solving they are also seeking a greater sense of connection and meaning in their lives. Indeed, their distress may be related to their spiritual malaise. Surveys indicate that many people want their doctors, therapists, and counselors to address their spiritual concerns.

A. Spirituality as Pastoral Care and Counseling

Two important terms often used in spirituality oriented counseling is pastoral care and pastoral counseling. Pastoral care, according to Howard Clinebell, is the “broad, inclusive ministry of mutual healing and growth within a congregation and its com-

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munity, through the life cycle.”²³ Pastoral care involves attending to the spiritual and ethical wholeness of the human person, of groups, and of the wider system. According to William Clebsch and Charles Jaekle, pastoral care “consists of helping acts . . . directed toward healing, sustaining, guiding, and reconciling of troubled persons whose troubles arise in the context of ultimate meanings and concerns.”²⁴ While this definition refers to some issues of finality for an individual or a community, it also refers to care that supports individuals and communities who suffer exclusion and oppression both within and outside existing structures. Pastoral counseling, however, is intentionally directed toward helping people find the hope and the courage to act in behalf of their own good.²⁵ Pastoral counseling seeks to help people in spiritual and emotional distress. For Hunter, pastoral counseling is an art anchored in a field whose primary metaphors are health and healing.²⁶

Several theorists have written about the clinical practice of pastoral counseling.²⁷ Charles Gerkin, drawing from Seward Hiltner’s earlier work, proposes a hermeneutical approach to understanding people.²⁸ For Gerkin, anyone involved in the practice of counseling is both a listener to stories and a teller of stories. Practitioners, whether they are therapists or attorneys, are involved in the great act of listening.²⁹ Gerkin was also influ-

²³ HOWARD CLINEBELL, BASIC TYPES OF PASTORAL CARE AND COUNSELING: RESOURCES FOR THE MINISTRY OF HEALING AND GROWTH 26 (1984).

²⁴ WILLIAM A. CLEBSCH & CHARLES R. JAEKLE, PASTORAL CARE IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE 4 (1975).

²⁵ See JOHN PATTON, PASTORAL COUNSELING: A MINISTRY OF THE CHURCH (1983).

²⁶ See PAMELA D. COUTURE & RODNEY J. HUNTER PASTORAL CARE AND SOCIAL CONFLICT (1995).

²⁷ ANTON T. BOISEN, THE EXPLORATION OF THE INNER WORLD: A STUDY OF MENTAL DISORDER AND RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCES (1936); DON S. BROWNING, THE MORAL CONTEXT OF PASTORAL CARE (1976); CLEBSCH & JAEKLE, *supra* note 23; CHARLES V. GERKIN, THE LIVING HUMAN DOCUMENT: RE-VISIONING PASTORAL COUNSELLING IN A HERMENEUTIC MODE (1984); SEWARD HILTNER, PASTORAL COUNSELING (1976); THOMAS C. ODEN, PASTORAL COUNSEL (1989).

²⁸ GERKIN, *supra* note 26.

²⁹ For an example of this discussion within the legal profession, see Leonard L. Riskin, *Awareness and the Legal Profession: An Introduction to the Mindful Lawyer Symposium*, 61 J. Legal Educ. 634 (2012).

enced by Boisen, who envisioned such practice as the action of attending to each person's world view as a "living human document."³⁰ Gerkin's focus provides special attention to the recovery of meaning as the central concern of such counseling. He therefore seeks to address the authenticity of one's worldview that must be interpreted and reinterpreted to bring about wholeness in an evolving narrative. Gerkin's observations highlight the context of "story" when counseling the individual or working with the community.³¹ Legal practice and clinical practice endeavor to seek that outcome for individuals and families.

My work with one family whose difficulties were borne out of hurt and betrayal has heightened my sense of community. It has also unfolded the importance of community to their own sense of belonging, connection, and courage. In turn, these attributes have helped them to make meaning and re-story their lives. I have listened to the pain and frustration as their stories have opened to greater and deeper layers of connection for themselves and their families. They have talked about various communities that have brought them closer to themselves and to their own deliverance from the tragedies of life. Two particular areas, prayer and metaphor, deserve mention when therapy uses people's faith to attend to their needs.

In the next sections of this article, prayer and metaphor will be discussed in relation to my work with one family whose struggles brought them to the brink of divorce. Throughout all of this time they have found their relationship with their attorney more meaningful as they have struggled to understand what pulls them apart. They have also developed new relationships to forgiveness and reconciliation. As they have discussed with me they have opened up discussion with their attorney around issues of restorative justice to find some center to keep them going.

B. Prayer as a Form of Communion and Healing

Prayer has become one form of contemplative practice that has grounded them along their journey. On a number of occasions, they have talked about how they have prayed together and asked God to help them understand their differences. They have

³⁰ BOISEN, *supra* note 26, at 183.

³¹ GERKIN, *supra* note 26, at 183.

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found a connection to their legal advocate through their prayer. Prayer has created some calming and soothing. For all the parties involved the willingness to surrender themselves to some “higher power” has given them a new outlook on life. Prayer has allowed them to connect to their own existence and to enter into communication and willingness to surrender to something larger or bigger than their simple lives, as one family member has expressed. Prayer has allowed them to remember times when things were different. It has allowed them to imagine new futures and possibilities. As they have engaged in mediation their attorney has suggested they spend time meditating and journaling practices that have helped them to center themselves in doing the work on their relationship.

C. *Metaphors as Conduits of Healing*

Marty Babits has described metaphor as holding “the inner edge of possibility.”³² Babits views metaphor as an opportunity to expand clinical possibilities. A metaphor often offers more than one way of understanding reality. Metaphors provide complex explanations. Facts do not. Metaphors are alive. Facts are dead on arrival. Metaphors are often rich and complex in meaning. Facts tend to be dry. Metaphors provide new windows of understanding even as they leave a lot to interpretation. For Babits, metaphor is “most readily associated with image, poor vision, which is our most developed sense, occupying a larger area of the cerebral cortex than any other.”³³

Metaphors have been used in many different ways by major faith traditions. Several scriptural texts are laden with metaphoric pictures that seek to explain reality and mystery. They provide the living documents through which mystery unfolds. My work with families in conflict has used metaphor to provide a window of understanding in the plight of their lives. Metaphors have also offered those ways of using their faith to interpret important messages and to assist them in holding on even when things seem impossible. Indeed, our work together has also been best understood through metaphor. In that sense as well, lawyers

³² Marty Babits, *Using Therapeutic Metaphor to Provide a Holding Environment: The Inner Edge of Possibility*, 29 CLIN. SOC. WORK J. 21, 23 (2011).

³³ *Id.*

may serve as “translators” as a “way of both understanding and altering the ways change the meanings of their clients stories.”³⁴

“To love another person is to see the face of God” is a line that one man cited over and over as he reminisced his love for his wife who was threatening to leave him for another man. My work with this couple sought to milk this metaphor. While his wife recalled the beautiful songs of *Les Miserables*, he talked about his own sense of peace as he imagined her face and the face of God. Over the months both have sought to explore this image and found ways to expand this imagery. I have asked him the colors associated with this image: how this image gives him meaning.

My work with this couple and other families in conflict has been one of “faithful companioning” and faithful hoping as we all have sought to locate that “inner edge of possibility” within the metaphors we have consulted, creating even more metaphors that have helped to ground us in our work. Images of hope conjure up metaphors that can be useful in the work with families in conflict. Hope can be seen as a life force that gives meaning in the face of meaninglessness. The power of stories, folklore, gospel, music, art, and so on, do seem to be human efforts to translate past trials, conflicts and traumas into meaningful experiences. Telling those stories in word or song or picture could be evidence of both hope and change in the sense that there is striving for movement and possibility in oneself, and an effort to communicate it in a transformative way to others.

Clinical work using faith is like what some theologians have described as a “leap into the dark.”³⁵ This leap into the dark invites clinicians to enter into what Michael White describes as “remembering” and “re-authoring” of people’s lives.³⁶ For many families in conflict our work has been about putting together different part of fragmented pasts so that they can look into a new future where they begin to author a new identity. This challenge

³⁴ Clark D. Cunningham, *The Lawyer as Translator, Representation as Text: Towards an Ethnography of Legal Discourse*, 77 Cornell L. Rev. 1298, 1299 (1992).

³⁵ THE NEW TESTAMENT BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION, HEBREWS, CHAPTER 11, 1.

³⁶ MICHAEL WHITE, MAPS OF NARRATIVE PRACTICE 129 (2007).

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has cast us into looking in those places where they seek to find solace and comfort.

Dennis Saleeby in his discussion of the strengths perspective in clinical practice addresses the concepts of liberation and empowerment. He states “liberation is founded on the idea of possibility: the opportunities for choice, commitment, and action.”³⁷ This is *hope!* It is the job of the clinician to assist clients in accessing and unleashing these potentials, some of which they may not be aware of yet, in ways that affirm their lives. We assist clients in accessing a sense of hope, acknowledging their resilience and survivorship, as a vehicle for building the sense of power that assists them in meeting their needs, achieving their goals and confronting the environmental constraints that have contributed to their difficulties.

It is in and through the “hopeful, faithful, companioning relationship”³⁸ that change occurs. It is, therefore, the responsibility of the clinician to foster the types of relationships that hold hope for clients, amplify their strengths, acknowledge resilience and collaboratively mobilize their resources. Just as we need to have a sense of hope in and for our clients, our clients need to have a sense of hope in us and our ability to partner with them.

Botcharova presents a model addressing the cycles of revenge and reconciliation.³⁹ This model provides practitioners a way of understanding conflicts in marital relationships. It also provides ways to break through these cycles as parties move toward reconciliation. While the model offers a solid approach to conflict, it does not include faith and spirituality in the analysis. Practitioners however could utilize this model and infuse faith, religion, and spirituality in helping address patterns of revenge that often characterize these conflicts.

Using two concentric circles, the inner circle represents the cyclical nature of conflict and the emotional realities that fuel it while the outer circle suggests intervention to escape this cycle moving toward sustainable peace. The inner circle suggests a

³⁷ DENNIS SALEEBY, *THE STRENGTHS PERSPECTIVE IN SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE* 7 (2002).

³⁸ CHRIS R. SCHLAUCH, *FAITHFUL COMPANIONING* 1 (1995)

³⁹ OLGA BOTCHAROVA *CYCLES OF REVENGE AND RECONCILIATION in FORGIVENESS AND RECONCILIATIONS: RELIGION, PUBLIC POLICY AND CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION*, 151 (2001).

process which begins from acts of aggression, pain, injury through self-blame, guilt, and humiliation to a desire of revenge, dehumanization of the other to more justification to act with aggression against the offender. The outer circle proposes a movement through anger to mourning to building forms of rehumanization of the enemy to constructing meaningful ways to address engagement of the other.

Practitioners are always faced with the challenge of finding ways to move from monologic discourse to dialogic discourse.⁴⁰ One important aspect of spirituality is the invitation to enter into dialogic discourse. This dialogic discourse is accomplished through connection with the other, be it an individual, a family, group, community or a supernatural being. Working with families in conflict raises a number of questions:

- How do people come to terms with conflict?
- How can wounds caused by division and conflict be healed?
- How can therapists begin therapeutic conversations that help people recover from collective pain?
- How do societies, communities and individuals manage?
- And ultimately, how do practitioners frame an ethical imperative to understand the discourses of retaliation while striving to restore human connection?

Addressing these questions invites practitioners to attend to spirituality as an integral part of the work with people under their care. Engaging in spiritual conversations is opening up a new language through which pain and love are shared. It is about witnessing new and old stories. Kaethe Weingarten provides an analysis of the ways in which witnessing can restore dialogue and heal trauma for individuals, groups, communities, and nations.⁴¹

D. Witnessing Community

Kaethe Weingarten writes so powerfully about our role as witnesses in the helping process.⁴² We can be aware and empow-

⁴⁰ Hugo Kanya & David Trimble, *Response to Injury: Toward Ethical Construction of the Other*, 21 *J. SYSTEMIC THERAPIES* 19 (2002).

⁴¹ KAETHE WEINGARTEN, *COMMON SHOCK: EVERYDAY WITNESSING AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF VIOLENCE* (2003).

⁴² Kaethe Weingarten, *Witnessing, Wonder, and Hope*, 39 *FAM. PROCESS* 389 (2000).

ered participants or we can be aware and disempowered participants. Alternatively, we can be unaware and disempowered or unaware yet empowered. In my work with families in conflict, I have continually labored to understand the role I play with these families in conflict as I stand as a witness to their story. My “faithful companioning” compels me to stand in solidarity with them as they negotiate the various aspects of their troubled life and as they move forward to build a new life.

Our work with these families is one in which they continually invite us in their sacred space as a witness to their journey. Spirituality and their relationship to what holds meaning to them become important access points in their lives.

III. Conclusion

The movement from monologic to dialogic discourse creates opportunities for spiritual interaction in which different parties are able to enter into compassion with each other. Indeed, a willingness to engage in such conversations opens up the possibility for healing. Spiritual conversations like prayers and mindful or centering practices provide alternatives to stifling conversations or conversations that oppose the subjectivity of the other. Dialogical discourses respect the traditions of the other, inviting understanding and naming the interconnectedness of all parties. Practitioners must therefore encourage spiritual conversations that help to move people from monologic retaliatory discourses to dialogic healing conversations.