

Episode 159 - Bonnie Collins and Elaine Hammond: Integrating Spirituality Into Social Work Practice: A Conversation (part 1 of 2)

[00:00:08] Welcome to in social work. The podcast series of the University of Buffalo School of Social Work at www.insocialwork.org. We're glad you could join us today. The purpose of in social work is to engage practitioners and researchers and lifelong learning and to promote research to practice and practice to research. We're so sure. Hello I'm Charles Syms and this is in social work bio cycle social every social work student learns this early in his or her social work education. The three dimensional model is the framework used in clinical social work application to help social workers fully assess and appreciate the complexity of the client's experience. Through using this multi-dimensional view the social work practitioner understands that the client's problem may have a number of factors that are interrelated and to be successful a service plan should likely be as comprehensive. Today it is not uncommon to see an additional dimension added to the bio psycho model. Spirituality is an often controversial aspect of social work practice social work students and seasoned professionals are frequently unsure if when or how to introduce this topic area. In October of 2014 Today's guest sat down for a discussion on the use of spirituality in clinical social work practice. Bonnie Collins is a retired licensed clinical social worker with more than 30 years of experience. Ms Collins has an extensive professional background that includes agency based clinical practice private clinical practice teaching at the undergraduate and graduate levels and as a program director. She started her own agency where she specialized in working with adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse.

[00:02:21] She has authored or coauthored several books and articles and trained and lectured extensively. Ms Collins conducted seminars on integrating spirituality into psychotherapy and for many years taught a course on the use of spirituality in social work practice. Elaine Hammond is a licensed social worker with 35 years of professional practice. She has a private practice that specializes in working with very young children and their families and also with adults who experience traumatic events in early childhood. She currently teaches a course on integrating spirituality into social work practice at the University at Buffalo School of Social Work in this part one of a two part conversation Ms. Collins and Ms Hammond described a difference between spirituality and religion. How one might begin discussing the topic with clients thoughts about assessment concerns that social workers bring to this discussion as well as what the social worker needs to do to prepare to explore this topic with their clients and now part one of integrating spirituality into social work practice. So we're here today for you to have an opportunity to talk some about integrating spirituality in clinical intervention. Both of us have taught here believe that it is kind of fun for spirituality and social work course we teach it from slightly different angles. Yes which is interesting. It is but today we're really going to concentrate on those clinical kinds of interventions. Let's start from that very beginning with that question that everybody asks. What's the difference between spirituality and religion. Well it's interesting I have to expect that that of course you would ask that and I have my own definition that sometimes changes in Pentagon situation.

[00:04:26] But at one time I was asked by the state of New York to do a spirituality seminar for the local mental health centers. And they sent the curriculum for me to do and the state of New York to find spirituality this way. So it is an internal process involving one sacred connections to all of life and one's feeling of belonging in the universe which may or may not include belief in God and may be expressed in diverse ways. What do you think. It's a little wordy. I don't think it's entirely off base either. For myself I'd be happier fit was more explicit in it saying collusion of the things that we might think of as agnostic or atheistic. Thus a diverse world. Yes. So that's a nod to those diverse ways. I have to wonder if a lot of people would still see that as diverse religious. Yeah you're probably right. While as compared to religions New York State says as compared to religion

which is the relationship or communication between a superhuman power and individuals involving the organized set of beliefs and practices of a particular faith community the word that jars me has superhuman power. And whenever I taught this at UBI we would always discuss that because we thought it sounded like Superman or something. Humans didn't feel right. So that's somewhat what the state of New York is saying and of course everybody. It's really hard to find spirituality because I think it has a personal component that we need to honor and reflect on. It's still in the DSM which is interesting it's a v quote but the title of that particular diagnosis in the new DSM is spiritual confusion.

[00:06:16] Yes I thought that was just fascinating. And according to the DSM. This category can be used when the focus of clinical attention is a religious or spiritual problem. Examples include distressing experiences that involve loss or questioning of faith. Problems associated with conversion to new faith or questioning of spiritual values that may not necessarily be related to an organized church or religious institution think that was too bad for the DSM. Of course people who are in practice of social work they know that because usually you don't get reimbursed by insurance companies. But I really believe it should always be part of the assessment process. Where are you spiritedly. Do you have a spiritual dimension to your life and can you share with me what it is or whatever. So as part of the assessment those are the kind of questions I asked some of my favorite questions are things like and I like open ended rather than these kind of definitions. When in your life do you feel most alive. Well I like that and think what you'll get from that and also the opposite when in your life do you feel not so alive. And it promotes a real pretty deep discussion if you're working with a client who is able to talk about that. I think the other thing you can do for assessment of spirituality is just ask your client to do an autobiography of himself or herself and where the spiritual high points may have been in their lives where they might have had what I call holy moments. This all of course depends on the fact that you're not sitting with them.

[00:07:53] For instance after 9/11 this is more of the kind of questions you would ask in the quiet atmosphere of therapy. That's a little different. I mean if you're sitting after 9/11 with someone who is sobbing their eyes out it's not appropriate to say hey where do you feel most alive when you tell me what the tears are telling you would be more likely. But sometimes it does evolve because people will say Where the hell was God and this whole thing. So I'm always listening as a clinician I'm always listening for any spiritual references in our assessment sessions and then I plugged in the question I have not got one formal question. Like some people have to you go to church and I don't have that I feel my way with our discussion I listened to their words and whenever I can I tap into it so I'm not giving people real easy assessment tool in that sense but they can look at Canada. He has spoken and written a lot. And spirituality. And he started the society's spiritual and social work which is a wonderful organization. And I'm just going to ramble off a few names in case people want to look them up mark bullets is another one. He wrote a book called spirituality and social practice. And Jenkins wrote one called nurturing and spirituality in children and that one has a lot of activities in it to help children like with death and dying or illness or that kind of thing. Hopkins wrote a lot about working with groups with spiritual themes and Hodge who is really quite prolific writer developed a spiritual eco map which is kind of like the GINA GRAHAM kind of thing.

[00:09:34] So if you do anagrams as part of your assessment you can include the spiritual dimension and Gina Graham's very comfortably. I guess what I'm saying is it seems like the clients and the students I've had are afraid to bring up this topic. It's like there's something wrong to do and they should. That is my experience. And imagine when you taught it I'd say it's changing it. We have a significant conversation about what is that fear about where it's comes from there despite the professional imperative to include assessments of spirituality. And I refer to it as funding the courage to make the changes to meet the challenges that they've come to us for. Yeah somehow we have to get some fuel for that her them and how someone makes meaning in life has I think is instrumental in that. Talk about their fear of stepping over a boundary to evangelize church and

state. Yes thing that they talked about their fear of what do I say if someone tries to evangelize me. Maybe we could go to a little bit about how people make meaning in life is so individual lives we don't even have vocabulary for angry how we move beyond what we think and what we feel into what we believe and not having that vocabulary can make it tough to talk about students very often feel they don't have vocabulary for themselves. And if they do they may hold it so closely. How can I talk with somebody else. What if they're a way of making meaning is so different from mine your own. But if I think it's wrong. What if I think it's a judgment.

[00:11:14] Yes all those judgment kinds of things. I think that's very true. I had a student once when I taught here it will be who came to me in the front of the room and said I would love to take your course in spirituality but I can't because I'm doing my field placement in a public school and you can't mix church and state. But I had another student who stayed for the first class which was about three hours long and she came up to me after she was about 22 I think and she said I'm going to drop out I'm not old enough to take this class. I have to have some kind of wisdom and I said you may be much more full of wisdom than people are older. I don't know that I have a grandson who had four gave me a lot more wisdom than any pastor or ministry had given me for years so I think that's always been an issue with the classroom and the privacy thing I hear you say with confidence. They talk about being afraid. I'm really stressed very strongly that as a social worker if you're going to integrate spirituality into your work you've got to find out where you are as in your own spirituality and you've got to do that in a kind of a formal way so that it's really you really are grounded in that. So one of my assignments in the class was to do an autobiography and reflect on that. That was always interesting. And then another assignment that I always gave was find someone in a spiritual way that you don't know anything about.

[00:12:38] Like we had people come in and do women's spirituality and then Catholicism. But what about those Scientologists. We looked at all these different groups and that was really interesting for everyone. It is have all those assignments still exist in the station and it's one of their fears and the return of old fears is because they don't know where they stand. It was my observation. And once they feel more grounded in their own spirituality whatever it may be then we move on to the next thing which is can you tolerate and accept someone who may be thinking the opposite of you. And this is where the famous social workers statement of honor diversity that's what we're supposed to do. But for some of them that was really a challenge. He doesn't believe in God. How can I sit here and work with him he doesn't believe in God. And I do. Yeah well that's a challenge. And I hope that the spirituality course I thought would get them more comfortable with that. It's interesting how they have more trouble with that than they do with child sex abuse. So listen is it does feel weird and that does. And so sometimes funny kind of thing. And of course the drama I think is the main place to use spirituality and my phrase is what was the gift in your trauma. And of course you got a time that you. You don't say that after one session or one time with them.

[00:14:00] Usually the gift is some sort of spiritual connectedness that they feel as a result of the trauma whether they've actually gone into a group that was talking about spirituality or they go to a church service or they just began to contemplate that yeah I have this spirituality and I need to define it. And then you go in prepared to work with somebody that's hard for us to stumble when we were preparing for this podcast today. You were talking a little bit about how your interest in engaging spirituality with your clients grew out of your practice and became an imperative. Can you talk with us about that. Yeah. One of the specialties I did early in my profession was work with adult survivors of childhood sex abuse. I didn't work with the children that was somebody else's role. And then in my day when we started a lot of the kids nobody ever knew that there was child sex abuse until they became adults. And then I worked with the adults and the flashbacks and the hypervigilance and all that and then I would sit with a client who had been through hell and really early age and she's sitting there at the age of 35 telling me all this awful abuse and neglect she experienced as a child. And I thought how did she survive that and be sitting in front of me. And her

comment would be oh my faith my faith helped me get through this. Or sometimes they would even say spirituality although not as much as faith or church kind of thing. So I begin to think wow I wonder if social workers know this. How do they use it. Do they realize that this is what holds people through. So then I started talking about the gift and the trauma.

[00:15:46] And as I said the big thing I talk to the students about is don't do that in the first session. They're going to slap you silly because they don't see any gift in what just happened to them. But if you can bring it in later. Talk about the idea that you're not alone. That's really a spiritual concept I think and that there's a bigger world out there and not the little world you live in where the abuser was abusing you over and over. Not everybody is like that. So it was a bit tricky to do that. But I think it's a valuable course it's a valuable awareness to take out there especially now. Our society is a mess. So that's important. It certainly has challenges on the personal side just a little bit. I'm aware that you have come up in the Unitarian church and from my point of view that positions you uniquely to appreciate broad diversity of life meaning expressions. Well I think one of the things that I was brought up in the Unitarian Church which in my day was rare because most people are what we call come out or they come out from other religions into Tarion is fine I was raised to honor diversity. It was very much part of my childhood in fact my mother and father are both deceased so I say this. It was where they held the marriage together was at the Unitarian Church. Otherwise it was a horrible marriage and they ended up divorcing later in life.

[00:17:12] But the church was what made us a family and the church itself was honoring diversity all over the place so that helped me be not so judgmental of different religions because in Sunday school we were one of the courses we took was called the church across the street and we would go to churches in the community and then yell back to our church and process it. So I've been processing since about the age of 12. Oh my heavens. I'm not sure. Yeah. So it just came naturally to me. And I think having been raised a Unitarian social work came naturally to me too because we used to process everything and we honor diversity and we did a lot of charity kinds of things and it was a natural progression. And there's a real emphasis on context yes in the military and yes there is still an effects. Yes. You know it's we haven't got it defined so strict. Well it might work on this but it's not over worry that's we are spiritual confusion probably would be a good diagnosis for us because nobody really stands up in the Crusades for their point of view. They'll share it and look at it and as a kid we were told that let's study all these different religions and spiritual things and then make your decision about what fits for you. And we were always told that it may change over time. And if you have had a comma your spiritual connectedness changes sometimes for the worse. I'm so mad at God. And that's something that I actually see missing and what you read on that current living. Oh yes.

[00:18:53] That you and I both know that in therapy maybe not on the crisis itself but as therapy unfolds the relational break may be with the concept of the divine itself here. So you get folks who are now at a developmental stage where they're identifying as atheist. Yes. Where what they may actually be experiencing is anger at a deity that they believe in desperately and who has betrayed them. A lot of betrayal feelings among survivors. And in Mansfield survivors of childhood sex abuse the whole concept of where was God. You know I was a helpless child and where I was especially as a child. Some of them are more angry about God than they are the perpetrator. Absolutely. I have found that what little work I have done with folks who have had significant betrayal by clergy. They are angry at clergy but they seem to be put so much more of it seems to be with the concept of where was this greater God whatever the deity is to look to heaven or named. Not named. And that's open for discussion and my work with people I will acknowledge to them. Boy I don't know that I would believe in God either if that happened to me. Where you at now. Do you miss church or can you think about going back on what I've seen happen a lot as they create their own spirituality and they have little groups that they get together. It's not gay or anything like that and when you get a group of women together who were abused as children. There's a spiritual

connection there seems to be leading does not seem to be avoidable. And I think it just almost just had follows you know.

[00:20:38] So the assessment probably is the trickiest part of using spirituality in a clinical practice because you have to get over of the uncomfortableness of asking spiritual questions and you have to be grounded in your own spiritual sense whether there is or not. But my experience has been sometimes it's like opening the floodgates. Yes when you use any kind of word like spiritual or prayer or meditation it all comes out and people say to me clients say to me I didn't know I could talk about that here. I've had other people who are clinicians and say oh they start out that I refer them out to the local minister. I said How do you do that when they're in the middle of this and they're sharing with you something so intimate you're giving them a message that it's not good to share in therapy. You got to go to the priest to share. I always refer to the fact that I have a priest in my back pocket because sometimes when it's not working I call him intercessions and he's a fun loving guy and he often doesn't wear his collar. So I said please come fully dressed with your cow please no need previous records and sit here and I see the difference between what they'll say to him and what they'll say to me but I'm always honored to be part of that process. And if that's what they want to go that's fine with me. Absolutely. So there is a sense of being part of my thing is that we impoverish the entire process. If we leave that off the table. I agree. I agree. And while we do them I mean the whole idea of spirituality is very social work.

[00:22:06] It is a part of so many people's consciousness and however they express that it might be about gardening might be about their relationship with the grandchildren and seeing into a time in the future where they're not there in the body but the grand. I mean it could be almost like that that's the whole state. One of my questions is what do you find beautiful. Oh that's a beautiful costume. Yes. Yeah really. And actually I find that you can even ask that it very close to the Christ. Yes you could. But what still has beauty for you. That's good cause not self threatening. Yes. And sometimes you get really concrete answers and in some situations that's great. Yeah. Folks who are getting ready to make the sacrifice perhaps of moving into a skilled nursing facility know what has beauty. Well if it's the rug in the front hall let's figure out a way to get the rug into them but it might be the smiles of my grandchildren that it might be the sun coming up in the morning it might be my garden. It gives you so many cues to how will you continue to fund their courage. Well and I think one of the things I've always talked about with students if they have an opportunity to go to a nursing home and just walk down the hall and see the memorabilia and sit on their walls or on their door that's sitting in the dressing room special kinds of moments holy moments in their lives. And it's beautiful to think about. I think you know it's sacred stuff.

[00:23:33] It is sacred said you have been listening to part one of a two part conversation on integrating spirituality into social work practice. Please join us for the soon to be released Part II. I'm Charles Syms your host at in social work. Hi I'm Nancy Smyth professor and dean of the University at Buffalo School of Social Work. Thanks for listening to our podcast. We look forward to your continued support of the series. For more information about who we are as a school our history our programs and what we do we invite you to visit our Web site at www.socialwork.buffalo.edu.