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Changing values and valuing change: Toward an ecospiritual perspective in social work¹

Mel Gray and John Coates

Abstract

This article examines the relationship between spirituality and the environment and the changing values required as we move toward a new politics of social work where commitment to social and political involvement is integral to spirituality, most notably surrounding environmental change. The ecospiritual perspective recognises human interests are inextricably bound with planetary well-being. It serves not only to broaden social work beyond a preoccupation with the social, but also to shift professional thinking away from the preeminence of individualism and dualism, and the unquestioned acceptance of progress and uncontrolled growth that make it difficult for social workers to fulfill their role as agents of social and environmental justice.

While an ecospiritual perspective has a long history, it has only recently entered the social work lexicon as interest in broader environmental concerns has begun to take hold. Our spiritual connections with the natural environment have long been recognised in nature-centred spiritual traditions, Asian religions, art, poetry, and literature (Egri, 1997; Morton, 2007). While social work is rooted in the Judeo-Christian worldview, and religion and spirituality have had an ongoing presence in the profession's development (see, for example, Graham, Coholic, & Coates, 2007), a focus on the natural environment – and the inextricable link between human and planetary well-being – is relatively new in social work research and practice. This article examines changing values relating to

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environmental sustainability and how this is calling for a new politics of social work rooted in social and environmental justice.

Enduring and changing values

The core of humanistic values that informed the profession a century ago remains foundational and current, despite the impact of secularism as social work sought professional recognition. Social work as a profession began at a time when science was revered and western societies adhered to notions of a mechanistic universe, industrial and agricultural innovation, and the spread of capitalism. The impact of human actions on the environment was largely beyond consideration within a worldview where people were largely understood to be in control of their own destiny. The value base can be seen to be influenced by religion or spirituality as many of the foundational assumptions of dualism (separation of God and people, human from nature, and mind from matter), domination (innate superiority of God over people, and of people over animals), and determinism (rationalism, positivism, materialism, and progress) were shared by science and the drivers of industrial development, as well as the developing profession of social work.

Egri (1997) reviewed the history and evolution of humanity's relationship with nature which has involved a challenge to survive in, at times, harsh conditions. Humans have sought to alter Earth to serve human purposes (see Merchant, 1980; White, 1973) and 'to find spiritual meaning and purpose of life within nature' (p. 408). Egri (1997) reviews several disciplines and authors who have explored human-nature relationships over time (for example, Daly & Cobb, 1994; Eisler, 1987; Gimbutus, 1982; Hughes, 1975; Merchant, 1992) often with spiritual or religious assumptions. A number of scholars brought attention to the need to respond to environmental challenges from an understanding of spiritual relationship with Earth. They called for transformation and a 'new story' to guide human and societal behaviour to align with the direction of planetary evolution (Berry, 1998; Fox, 1990; Merchant, 1992; Spretnak, 1997). The new story centres on the 'sacredness of the planet' (Fox, 1988, 1999, in Egri, 1997, p. 410) where a mechanistic understanding of the universe – and of Earth – has been displaced by a more organic view where Earth and universe are seen as an emergent, creative, and essential source for life itself. To address environmental challenges, several directions

are being advocated, including industrial solutions (Hawken, 1993; Turner, 2007) and political remedies at a global (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), 2007; WCED, 1987) and national level (for example, the Kyoto Protocol).

The major developments that have impacted on social work in recent decades include postmodernism, and the new age and environmental movements. Postmodernism challenged universalism and objectivity, and enabled deeper consideration of diversity and difference. While some prefer the term 'alternative spirituality' (Sutcliffe & Bowman, 2000) or 'human expressivism' (Heelas, 2000), the New Age Movement, though diverse and widely debated, refers to the search for alternatives to 'dominant ideas and structures of "official" religion and secular science' (Sutcliffe & Bowman, 2000, p. 2). While largely responding to dissatisfaction with traditional beliefs and mainstream religion, the New Age movement focused on personal experience with the Divine (however understood) and maintains that the individual is the ultimate authority on spirituality.

For its part, the environmental movement drew attention to the problems of exploitative economic activity and human exemptionalism arising from their perceived superiority over nature (Berry, 1988; Catton & Dunlap, 1997). It highlighted the vulnerability of humans to *inter alia* climate change, ecosystem destruction, and species extinction, and has promoted numerous global, local, and individual initiatives, such as the reduction of greenhouse gases, alternative energy, reduced industrial and domestic waste, and habitat preservation in an effort to reduce the impact of human activity on 'the rest of nature'. For many environmental and spiritual scholars, there is an intimate and complex relationship between spirituality and ecology such that 'spirituality is inherently ecological and ecology is inherently spiritual' (Besthorn, 2000, p. 2). Alongside postmodernism, spirituality and ecology became relevant as sources of personal and professional significance.

In addition to these global developments, scholarship, including scientific reports on the well-being of the planet (IPCC, 2007), philosophical perspectives, such as Deep Ecology (Naess, 1989), Indigenous worldviews (Hart, 2002; Sinclair, Hart & Bruyere, 2009; Wilson & Yellow Bird, 2005), and New Age thinking (see for example, Heelas, 2000 and Miller, 1989), has informed social work theorising. Each of these areas of scholarship share a holistic worldview where dualism, such as, human/nature, self/other, and human/divine, is rejected in preference for interconnection and

interdependence, and where humans are held responsible for the impact of their actions – not only on all people but also on the planet as a whole. While holding unique abilities, humans are not regarded as superior to other species. This scholarship has led to critiques of the anthropocentrism informing mainstream social work theory and practice (Besthorn, 1997, in press; Coates, 2003; Mary, 2008; Zapf, 2009). It calls for the profession to engage in environmental action by joining local and global efforts to confront the damaging effects of climate change and ecological destruction. A growing scholarship is contributing to a theoretical and practice framework that directs the profession to shift its values from anthropocentrism to ecocentrism; from dualism to holism; from individual to community; and from progress to well-being. These directions are consistent with an ecospiritual perspective and imply a change in values for social work to incorporate concerns with the broader natural environment (Gray & Coates, 2012).

Spirituality and environmental justice

Spirituality, it has been argued, provides a vehicle to draw together concerns about social and environmental justice (Besthorn, 2002, in press; Dylan & Coates, 2012). Besthorn's (2000) deep-ecological spirituality, perhaps the first articulation of ecospirituality in social work, recognises that 'humans share a common destiny with the earth ... From this vantage point self-interest becomes identical with the interest of the whole. Humanity and nature cannot be separated – the sacred is in and of both' (p. 2). Environmental and Indigenous scholarship is frequently embedded in views of Earth, and all its components, as sacred (for example, Berry, 1999; Sinclair, Hart, & Bruyere, 2009). Within social work, these areas have had their own discourses. Yet there is overlap among these various schools of thought in their critiques of anthropocentrism and individualism in mainstream social work theory and of the social institutions and economic practices within which social work practice is embedded. They call for personal, organizational, and social transformation (see Besthorn, 2002; Coates, 2003; Dylan & Coates, 2012; Peeters, 2012) that moves away from the exclusive priority of human-centredness and individual rights. Ecospirituality emerges from this common core of ideas and assumptions that builds on, yet is an alternative to, the current theoretical and practice frameworks (see, for example, Coates, in Groen, Coholic, & Graham, in press; Coates, Gray, &

Hetherington, 2006; Gray, Coates, & Hetherington, 2007; Van Wormer & Besthorn, 2011). For example, an ecospiritual perspective critiques modern science and enables humans to see the tragic consequences of exploitive and profit-maximising economic practices (Berry, 1988; IPCC 2007; Korten, 2006, 2009). It has enabled them to question the assumption that scientific determinism and technological prowess will lead necessarily to well-being for all (see Catton & Dunlap, 1997; Christopher, 1999; Gladwin, Newbury, & Reiskin, 1997). It has helped them to see the flaws in a consciousness that assumes human superiority and privilege and to assume some responsibility for the problems arising from social and environmental injustice.

Arising from these critiques are calls for a new consciousness or worldview, one that develops from – yet seeks to overcome the problems inherent in – ‘the most basic social and cultural institutions of modernity (modern capitalism, industrial technology, individualistic morality, and mechanistic science)’ (Christopher, 1999, p. 361). The old worldview, according to Gladwin et al. (1997), cannot meet the requirements of sustainability – inclusivity, equity, and security.

A number of scholars have articulated alternative assumptions and principles to the dualism, determinism, and human domination inherent in modernity (see for example, Benyus, 1997; Berry, 1999; Capra, 1982; Korten, 2006; 2009; O’Murchu, 1997; Rifkin, 2009). At the core of this search for a new narrative or story is the question of the proper relationship of humans to the Earth. This is essentially a spiritual issue as it draws attention to what is of ultimate meaning and purpose. Spirituality is understood as ‘the universal quality of human beings and their cultures related to the quest for meaning, purpose, morality, transcendence, well-being, and profound relationships with ourselves, others and ultimate reality’ (Canda & Furman, 2010, p. 5). Meaning and personal fulfillment can be found in the integrity of personal behaviour, as well as in the practices of larger institutions whose policies support sustainability and social justice (see Coates, in press). An ecospiritual view serves not only to broaden social work beyond a preoccupation with the social, but also to shift professional thinking away from the preeminence of individualism and dualism. It also leads to debates about the unquestioned acceptance of progress, efficiency, and modernity that hamper and prevent effective work across cultures, and make it difficult for social workers to fulfill their role as agents of social and environmental justice.

Ecospiritual social work

The central assumptions and principles of ecospirituality (see Table 1) have developed within a holistic worldview (see Coates, in press), and inform ecospiritual social work where a major focus is the human relationship with ‘the rest of nature.’

Insert TABLE 1 HERE

Its focus is the whole planet. The unity of all things is central to ecospirituality, and, as Besthorn (2000) reminds us, humans are merely one part of the ‘planetary ecosystem’. Earth is a dynamic, primarily closed system, where the health and well-being of all species and the disruption of natural processes has a direct impact on human as well as planetary well-being. Understanding this interdependence leads to a shift from isolated individualism to a relational identity or what Peeters (2012) refers to as ‘autonomy in connectedness’ and Hart (2002) as individual in community. In terms of this thinking, no longer are we isolated individuals maximising personal benefit but our sense of self and our individuality are always conditioned by our relationship to others and to the planet. This realisation of interdependence and relationship leads to an appreciation that individual lifestyles, and the dominant patterns of behaviour in society, have an impact on people everywhere, as well as on other species and planetary ecosystems (Zapf, 2008, 2009).

While it is quite possible to come to an ecospiritual understanding from philosophy (see for example Naess, 1989), from an expanded economic analysis (Korten, 2006, 2009), or from a Christian tradition (Crisp, 2010), this sense of personal responsibility for the consequences of how we live requires an expanded ‘ecological consciousness’ (Uhl, 2004) as a ‘pre-condition for the full-development of the human’ (Mische, 1982/1998, p. 12) (see also Gray, Coates, & Hetherington, in press; Sinclair et al., 2009; Zapf, 2005). Ecospirituality views individual identity and well-being as dependent upon the well-being of Earth and everything on it. It emphasizes a sense of responsibility for oneself and the collective whole. This foundation is similar to Indigenous helping approaches, such as presented by Hart (2002, 2009) that incorporate respect, balance, sharing, harmony, relationship, and responsibility. Flowing from interdependence and responsibility is the belief in

personal responsibility to attempt to effect personal and social change for the well-being of other people and Earth as a whole.

The focus on direct efforts at social transformation is one area where ecospirituality shares more with radical humanism and moves beyond New Age. New Age largely advocates that social change will occur one person at a time, as developments in one's inner life are reflected in one's daily practice (Heelas, 1996). With an ecospiritual approach, this broader commitment to social and political involvement is integral to spirituality (see Hodge, 2007) and to ecospirituality in particular (see Besthorn, 2000, 2002, forthcoming; Coates, 2003). Besthorn (2000) describes this as a 'willingness to question deeply and insistently the social, political, and economic structures of modern industrial society, and secondly the capacity to offer a vision of the kind of society and ecological sensibility necessary to sustain human and ecosystem viability' (p. 3). This is one of the areas where ecospirituality distinguishes itself from the New Age movement. The call to work with others in targeted social and political strategizing and activity to bring about social transformation heralds a new politics of social work geared toward social and ecological justice (Agyeman, 2005; Besthorn, forthcoming; Hawkins, 2010; Lysack, 2010). In practice ecospirituality can lead social workers to focus more on root causes rather than symptom reduction, to be more mindful of the importance of community and responsibility for others in program development and delivery, and be more politically aware and active in the pursuit of justice for All.

As social work scholarship goes forward to clarify theoretical and practical implications of ecospiritual approaches, it will be important to look to what is common among the multitude of expressions of religion and spirituality, as well as the diversity created when spirituality leaves ultimate authority resting with the experience of each individual, as it does in New Age thought (see Heelas, 1996; Miller, 1989). However the core principles of ecospirituality – all is one, interdependence, diversity, inclusivity, sacredness of the Earth, and personal responsibility for the well-being of all – brings to the centre the need to incorporate scientific knowledge and communication strategies, which advocate for personal practices and social structures to displace the exploitation and profit maximisation that is destroying the planet. This focus can only arise from a

deep connection with and concern for the well-being of Earth and its sustainability for future generations.

Hence the strongly related ecology and spirituality movements decry economic growth for overlooking its social and environmental consequences. Social work's ecospiritual perspective offers an alternative to the implosion of self-absorbed New Age spirituality, because it posits a relation with, and responsibility for, the land, Earth, the dispossessed, the marginalised, and the spirit world:

Spirituality ... takes us deeper into the territory of what it really means, or can mean, to be fully human, both individually and collectively. It has been both deepened and widened from its initial individualistic focus into a much more holistic, and eco-spiritual, approach ... Everyone therefore needs to own, and also to explore, the ways in which a 'spirituality discourse' can enrich their understanding of humanity, their relationship to each other and their environment, together with the range of worldviews, both secular and religious, that seek to articulate and explore these key themes (Moss, 2011, p. 4).

Conclusion

The ecological and spirituality movements coalesce around a set of values that stresses unity (everything is one), emergence, and interdependence. Attention to spirituality has revived our sensitivity to meaning and purpose, of connection to something greater than ourselves, and our relationship with, compassion for, and responsibility to the whole of which we are a part:

Many of the deepest thinkers and ... those most familiar with the scale of the challenges we face have concluded that the transitions required can be achieved only in the context of ... the rise of a new consciousness. For some, it is a spiritual awakening – a transformation of the human heart. For others it is a more intellectual process of coming to see the world anew and deeply embracing the emerging ethic of what it means to love thy neighbor as thyself (Speth, 2008, pp. 199–200).

In this holistic worldview of profound interconnection, the welfare and security of every part is tied intrinsically to the well-being of the whole. There are obvious spiritual dimensions as we learn to

‘transcend our sense of a unique and separate self’ (Dylan, 2009, p. 57) and develop mutual reliance and responsibility for others and Earth. An ecospiritual view is compatible with social systems theory. It also recognises dynamics of power highlighted in structural (Mullaly, 2007), feminist (White, 2006), and antiracist (Dominelli, 2008) perspectives. It shares with these perspectives a desire to remove divisive, often hidden barriers to progressive thinking and transformative action. But it differs in that rather than focus on conflict, as many anti-oppressive practice approaches do, it seeks a worldview consistent with more cooperative strategies for personal and global transformation.

Much social work scholarship relating to the environment seems to argue for its instrumental value in offering humans a range of physical, aesthetic, and spiritual fulfilment. It would be extremely difficult to argue for social work to have a mandated or necessary role in environmental issues and problems without reference to human values and interests. In this article, we have argued that an outward-focused ‘ecospiritual social work’, where spirituality is *other* rather than *self*-centred, and ecocentric rather than anthropocentric – embracing concerns for all life forms as well as the sustainability of the planet – seems best suited to social work’s ethical perspective and the global agenda for social and environmental justice.

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Table 1: Ecospiritual Assumptions

- Earth is sacred
- Wholeness (Unity consciousness)
- Emergence
- Interdependence
- Diversity and Inclusivity
- Individual in community
- Creativity