

SEEKING AN ETHICAL LIFE

“Justice, justice shalt thou pursue”

Merlinda Weinberg

*T*HE POSTMODERN era has exposed the inadequacy of the values of modernity—rationalism, consumerism, scientism, and individualism—leading to disillusionment and a state of spiritual crisis for many individuals (Coates, 2007). However, throughout time, religion and spirituality have been antidotes for that cynicism and despair. Therefore it is no surprise that there has been a resurgence of interest in spirituality (Coates, 2007; McKernan, 2005), including in the field of social work. The best social workers, according to Simon (quoted in Wagler-Martin, 2005) “don’t check their political, philosophical, and religious convictions at the door.” Instead, they use those values to inform their practice. So what is the connection between spirituality, religion, and a political search for a more equitable world?

The spiritual impulse comes from a belief in transcendence and the interconnectedness of all life on earth. The experience is oriented towards one’s inner world, the “subjective, non-rational, and non-linear, appealing to the intuitive, meditative side” of one’s being (Coates, 2007, p. 9). While spirituality questions what is, those pursuing social justice ponder what ought to be. Both involve a quest and a striving for an ideal beyond the self. Spirituality often focuses that journey on one’s internal life, while a commitment to social justice redirects that search into ideas and actions to change the external world.

I think the same inclinations drive many religious individuals. Like spirituality, religion involves questioning. These paths overlap, but there are differences, too, between those who lead spiritual and religious lives. It is possible for one’s search as a spiritual person to be entirely apart from others, while for the religious such an exploration usually is group and

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organizationally oriented. Nonetheless, a belief in something beyond the individual provides the foundation for values and opens the way for a social conscience because the spiritual or religious person believes in a larger *raison d'être* than oneself (Nissim-Sabat, 2003). Through traditions, rituals, and community, religion provides an organized way of exploring the ineffable and exhorting humans towards goodness. "Religions are metaphorical systems that give us bigger containers in which to hold our lives" (Pipher, 2009, p. 176).

Judaism has been such a container for me. My religious convictions have been the foundation of my life as a social worker, and that receptacle has centred on attempting to create a society that is more equitable and just. I believe that there is no neutrality in my actions as a social worker. Each action I take supports the status quo or accelerates the potential for social transformation. This same sentiment applies to my attitude towards religion as well. Gandhi was often quoted as saying, "Those who say religion has nothing to do with politics do not know what religion is." Judaism does not emphasize dogma and belief. Stress is placed on doing, rather than believing. Like cognitive behavioural therapists who subscribe to the notion that, as one's behaviour changes, so will one's feelings, in Judaism it is postulated that one's understanding and faith will follow from righteous action.

What constitutes such action? "Justice, justice shalt thou pursue" it is stated in the Torah¹ (Deuteronomy 16:20). Why is the word justice repeated? One explanation given is that justice is a never-ending process, with the course of action, as much as the result, being crucial. In Jewish mysticism, there is a story that G-d attempted to fill a vessel (which represented order in the universe) with celestial light. The vessel shattered so that humans entered a broken world in which sparks of the divine were present. An essential responsibility is to use our own G-d-given radiance to gather up the broken bits through *Tikkun Olam* or repair of the world. Social work is one avenue for being involved in *Tikkun Olam*, and a fundamental component of that repair is to seek social justice. The Torah is replete with exhortations to look after the widow, the orphan, the stranger, and all who are in need. Jews are in an odd insider/outsider position in modern society. Often, Jews are not perceived as being oppressed, even only one generation away from the Holocaust. Perhaps that is because many Jews can "pass" (looking no different from the dominant) and, as a group, we have attained a measure of economic and political success in some societies (which at times results in resentment and "forgetting" the history of Jewish marginalization). The reality of that history of subjugation reappearing is always a possibility, requiring all Jewish people to be mindful of the need to fight injustice not only for ourselves but for all people. One of the most significant holidays in the Jewish calendar is Passover, celebrating the story of the exodus of Jews from Egypt. In the text used for this holiday, the

Haggadah, it is stated, time and again: we were slaves under Pharaoh, we were delivered from the house of bondage, and now we are free. But the *Haggadah* goes on to state that none are free until all are free. Therefore it is incumbent upon all Jews to ensure the liberation of every human being.

Yet it is clear that having these beliefs does not necessarily propel one in an emancipatory direction. Throughout history, one could make the case that religious convictions have been the cause of some of the most heinous crimes perpetrated against humanity. So how is it that I can claim religion as the key to my striving for a world that is transformed into justice for all? What distinguishes religion as a force of oppression from one of liberation? I think, in part, the difference has to do with our stance on truth: whether one believes one's personal religion provides the sole and absolute truth or whether one is a seeker of it; whether one's path is clearly laid out and must be followed by rote or whether there is room for questioning and doubt. Religion has always had the dual dimensions of particularism and universalism as divergent impetuses. It is a balancing act of valuing one's heritage, but maintaining suspicion about the potential harms that those traditions incur towards those who are not a part of the tradition (Kaplan, 2003). Religion is a conservativizing force when its institutional forms suggest that the truth is known and must be followed in a prescribed way, and furthermore that others do not have the truth and therefore are damned or must be converted. When the principles of a religion are viewed as being from inspired individuals and not the word of G-d, there is the potential to interpret, allowing for a constructivist view of reality and truth, with the potential that other truths may be equally valid.

The ability to allow for difference is also crucial in the direction a religious impulse takes towards or away from social justice. Does religion foster empathic attunement or the need to eradicate? Much discussion in psychoanalytic feminist postmodern theorizing has focused on difference. How do we differentiate ourselves from others without needing to eliminate their difference, and how do we identify with others while remaining separate? Benjamin (1998) states, "if the other were not a problem for the subject, the subject would be...absolute—either absolutely separate or assimilating the other" (p. 85). The solution psychologically is that "the other's difference must exist outside; not be felt as a coercive command to 'become' the other, and therefore not be defended against by assimilating it to [the] self" (Benjamin, 1998, p. 95). At the same time, individuals must recognize the strain of acknowledging difference, including difference around faith, and be able to tolerate the ambivalence of both love and hate for that difference (Benjamin, 1998). For example, am I able to see the appeal of the prescribed life of the fundamentalist who believes he possesses the route to godliness while simultaneously abhorring his stance on homosexuality?

Power is always implicated in those constructions of self and other. The jailer is as corroded by the prison walls as those jailed, so liberation is required for everyone's sake, both the jailer and the jailed. Therefore, it is also in our own self-interest to strive for social justice. As social workers, we must be cognizant of our power in the helping relationship and the possibility of injury, however unintended (Weinberg, 2005). But the capacity to harm is also due to intrapsychic issues and our need for individuation from others while somehow remaining connected (Benjamin, 1998). Benjamin refers to this problem of difference as "the monster, the Other, within" (p. 86). How we respond to that monster is crucial. Do we do this by rejecting the monster, the Other within, and projecting it onto others or, more productively, by recognizing our potential for violence and accepting it as part of who we all are? Do I see my own inclination to damage my unruly child, or, alternatively, do I see service users in the child welfare system as inhuman and behaving in ways I could never act? Do I view clients in the family assistance office as a breed apart, or see myself as one pay cheque from being in that line? Since we do not always act in ways consistent with our own values (Weinberg, 2007), if the religious individual sees that possibility within herself, she has more potential to avoid turning that hatred outward towards those whose values are discrepant from her own preferred value system.

Emanuel Levinas, Jewish philosopher and theologian, averred that the fundamental philosophical question was "how being justifies itself" (Levinas, 1989, p. 86). In answer to one's right to be, Levinas spoke about the uniqueness of each individual human being and the irreplaceability of one by another. He argued, "in responsibility the same, the ego, is me, summoned, provoked, as irreplaceable" (Levinas, 1991, p. 135). This uniqueness has two significant consequences: to illustrate the trace of G-d in humanity and to gesture to each individual's obligation to change the world through a relationship with the other (Levinas, 1993). If I am matchless and distinct, no one can replace me in the task of seeking a better world that includes embracing those who are different, even as I may disagree with their ways of being. Ultimately, that belief in my inimitability and my responsibility has led to the braiding of religious faith, spirituality, and social work: an integrated tapestry through which I have sought to live an ethical life aimed at social justice.

NOTE

- 1 The holy text for Jews, known by Christians as the first five books of the Bible.

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