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Spiritual Activism: Grounding Ourselves in the Spirit

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This final article highlights the twin perils of burnout and polarization that often occur during traditional approaches to social activism, and calls attention to an alternative approach that is emerging in the field—variously referred to as “engaged spirituality,” “sacred activism,” or “spiritual activism.” Seven key themes of this new paradigm for social change are presented: spiritual motivation for justice work, recognition of interdependence, the means matter, acceptance of not knowing, openness to suffering, outer change requires inner work, and commitment to spiritual practice. The article concludes by identifying ways the articles in this special edition reflect these seven themes and specifying possible areas for future research.

KEYWORDS spirituality, social justice, spiritual activism, macropractice

Sooner or later all the people of the world will have to discover a way to live together in peace, and thereby transform this pending cosmic elegy into a creative psalm of brotherhood. If this is to be achieved, man must evolve for all human conflict a method which rejects revenge, aggression and retaliation. The foundation of such a method is love. (Martin Luther King’s Acceptance Speech, on the occasion of the award of the Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo, December 10, 1964)

Working for social justice is demanding and arduous, whether the focus for transformation is at the organizational, community, societal, or global
level. Significant social change does not come easily, as the history of any social movement will readily reveal. If you listen to social activists talk, you hear the language of battle—words and phrases that are often suggestive of military engagement (e.g., fighting for the cause, mobilizing resources, employing tactical strategies, neutralizing the opposition, aligning the troops). Social action is often grounded in righteous anger in response to some form of injustice; injustice that is often deeply and stubbornly rooted within systemic structures and maintained by dominant societal forces. Within this challenging context, it is often moral outrage that motivates activists’ initial involvement in the long, difficult push for social reform. The perils of this path are many, but two major pitfalls faced by all social justice advocates are the potential for burnout and polarization.

The first peril of burnout refers to the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual exhaustion experienced by the individual social activist, which develops after long hours turn into months, and even years, of working to right some wrong, while minimizing or ignoring other aspects of one’s life (Loeb, 2010; Maslach & Gomes, 2006). This can involve neglect of several important areas of self-care, such as proper sleep, nutrition, and exercise; recreation or down time; time with friends and family; the restorative benefits of solitude; sources of spiritual renewal; and inattention to other needs or interests—all in service to the cause. Burnout also results when hope turns into despair, optimism becomes cynicism, and solidarity splinters into internal, conflictual factions when there is disagreement about goals or means. It can also be brought on by secondary or vicarious trauma, as the continual witnessing of the many faces of suffering resulting from social injustice begins to affect social justice advocates’ own well-being (Lipsky, 2009). In all of these situations, righteous anger does not often provide sufficient fuel for the long haul.

The second peril, which is more interpersonal or societal in nature, is the potential for polarization. This is particularly likely when passions run high, as is most often the case in social justice issues. When any social issue becomes constructed as “us” versus “them,” finding a way forward becomes difficult, if not impossible. Sometimes the desire to “beat them” becomes the primary goal and the original issue is overshadowed or even lost in the midst of the battle to “win.” As antagonism increases and positions become concretized, the willingness and capacity for mutual understanding evaporates (Chatterton, 2006). Even when one side eventually prevails, the fallout can leave such a high level of bitterness and resentment on the losing side that the intended transformation is limited or even blocked. In this scenario, righteous anger only leads to reactive anger, setting in place a cycle of hostilities that is sure to erupt again at some point in the future.

A different approach to social change is currently being proposed; one that is not rooted in political or economic ideology, but grounded in spirituality. Referred variously as “spiritual activism” (Goldstein, 2011a; Horwitz,
Spiritual Activism

2002), “sacred activism” (Harvey, 2009), or “engaged spirituality,” (Stanczack, 2006), it suggests an alternative path for social justice efforts. Activists within this approach draw from spiritual worldviews and practices to sustain both themselves and their work. They practice neither a socially disengaged spirituality (i.e., withdrawing from the world to pursue self-realization or personal salvation), nor a spiritually disengaged social activism (i.e., focusing solely on the sociopolitical goals without careful consideration to how such goals are shaped and achieved). Rather, spiritual activists view spiritual principles as inextricably linked with the pursuit of justice. As Edwards and Post (2008) describe them:

They take on the difficult work of organizing the downtrodden into groups capable of exerting social and political pressure through persuasion and protest, and do so with reliance on a background picture of a universe in which love and justice go with, rather than against, the grain of Ultimate Reality. (p. 3)

Writings on spiritual activism have exploded on internet sites and are beginning to appear in the professional literature, with various compilations of “principles of spiritual activism” being offered to social justice activists as guidance for their work. Seven themes are apparent in these writings that have implications for connecting spirituality and social justice in macrosocial work practice: (a) spiritual motivation for justice work; (b) recognition of interdependence; (c) the means matter; (d) acceptance of not-knowing; (e) openness to suffering; (f) outer change requires inner work; and (g) commitment to spiritual practices.

The offerings in this special edition are not focused specifically on spiritual activism, as their major purpose was to either provide conceptual frameworks for connecting spirituality and social justice or delineate applications of this connection within a particular area of macropractice or social work education. Yet, to some degree, they all reflect one or more of these seven themes. The following provides an overview of the seven themes, and identifies how they are reflected in various articles in this special edition. Fruitful areas for research are also noted throughout this discussion.

SPIRITUAL MOTIVATION FOR JUSTICE WORK

First and foremost, spiritual activism points to the importance of reflecting on one’s spiritual motivation for social justice work. As Dr. Martin Luther King identified in the opening quote, the “foundation of such a method is love” (1964, para. 3). Carla Goldstein of the Omega Institute, who has written a series of essays on spiritual activism, proposes that social justice efforts must be “born out of awareness, compassion and love, not out of reaction,
This does not deny a place for feeling appropriate anger or outrage, but it does entail a crucial shift from fighting against evil to working for love. This includes finding a way to love and have compassion for those with whom we are opposition or conflict—not an easy proposition.

Lynne Twist (n.d.), activist and cofounder of The Pachamama Alliance, provides some specific guideposts for this challenge, including loving, forgiving, and accepting oneself in order to love others; performing small, loving acts toward adversaries; continuing to act from a place of love and compassion when faced with offense or rejection; and recognizing that one’s adversary is also capable of making decisions for the highest good of all concerned. She stresses that holding negative thoughts about our leaders or adversaries is counterproductive, as this leads to polarization and alienation, and suggests instead praying for their “well-being, guidance and a positive resolution of any differences between us” (para. 4). Similarly, the Satyana Institute’s (n.d.) list of principles for spiritual activism advises against demonizing your adversaries, suggesting that this most often results in defensiveness and less receptivity to dialogue. They also point out that the response to arrogance is most often reciprocal arrogance, leading to polarization rather than resolution.

Three articles focus explicitly on the theme of “spiritual motivation for justice work.” Hodge’s offering, “The Conceptual and Empirical Relationship Between Spirituality and Social Justice: Exemplars from Diverse Faith Traditions,” highlights how diverse spiritual traditions provide a standard for social justice and offer ways to manifest justice in the world. He emphasizes that such traditions can serve as “an independent moral framework” that allow us to step outside of “what is” and lean into “what should be.” Although the article does not directly address the particular features of spiritually grounded motivation (i.e., coming from a place of awareness, compassion, and love), the various exemplars offered from five different faith traditions in this article clearly illustrate these qualities.

Hutchison’s overview of progressive social movements, “Spirituality, Religion, and Progressive Social Movements: Resources and Motivation for Social Change,” directly identifies the role that religion has played in inspiring involvement in previous social movements, but notes that there is much work to do in delineating how social action is “spurred by spiritual but not necessarily religious motives.” She also speaks to the need to better understand the role of emotions in motivating social change efforts, specifically mentioning grief, fear, anger, indignation, hope, and pride in her discussion.

Lysack’s historical analysis of the abolition movement, “The Abolition of Slavery Movement as a Moral Movement: Ethical Resources, Spiritual Roots, and Strategies for Social Change,” also directly addresses the issue of spiritual motivation for social change. In his telling of the unfolding and deepening convictions of early abolitionists William Wilberforce, Thomas Clarkson, and
Olaudah Equiano, Lysack notes that when confronted with “seemingly insurmountable forces and social inertia,” what sustained them was action that was “grounded in a personal faith.” He also illuminates the underlying currents of both compassion and outrage as sources for activism within the abolition movement.

Although none of these three articles specifically tackle the relative merits of action grounded in responsive emotions (e.g., awareness, compassion, love) versus reactive emotions (e.g., fear, anger, outrage), they all highlight spiritually related motivation as an important factor in animating and sustaining social justice work. Additional research is needed on the general motivational factors for such work (e.g., spiritual, ethical, political), as well as investigations on the varying kinds of affective states that best inspire and support social justice advocates. Research on the place of emotions could help delineate activists’ reliance on responsive versus reactive emotions in justice work, as well as explore what differences varying motivations might mean in terms of both process and outcome.

RECOGNITION OF INTERDEPENDENCE

The second theme of spiritual activism focuses on interdependence—or the deep realization that everyone and everything is connected. In Edwards and Post’s (2008) collection of essays drawn from the 2004 conference on “The Love That Does Justice,” Sharon Salzberg provides an illustration of this principle:

Interconnectedness isn’t an abstract, fanciful notion; it is a direct seeing of a deeper reality. Consider for a moment something like a tree. We think of it as a distinctly defined object, standing there by itself. But on another level of perception, it’s not so completely separate. It’s also the consequence, the manifestation, or the function of an extremely subtle net of relationships. The tree is affected by the rain that falls upon it, and the wind that moves through and around it. It’s affected by the soil that nourishes and sustains it. It’s affected by the weather, the sunlight, the moonlight, and the quality of the air. So many conditions help to make the tree what it is. It is the same for a homeless person, a survivor of domestic violence, or an adversary. (p. 69)

Goldstein (2011c) highlights the difficulty of keeping this reality of interconnectedness in our everyday awareness, especially in a culture of disconnection and ubiquitous technology:

While technology serves mighty purposes and connects us in profound ways, it also fosters a real disconnect between the cause and effect of
our actions. For example, we can ship our garbage far from where we live without knowing where it’s buried; shop for things made half-way around the world without knowing the working conditions of those who made them; eat food grown in other states without knowing how the food was cultivated; and, most horrifyingly, drop bombs remotely that kill people without knowing the pain we have caused. (para. 5)

Goldstein (2011b) also speaks of the need to actively cultivate our awareness of our interconnected nature and points out that there are countless ways to do this through paying attention to all of the interrelated webs in our lives (e.g., our work and relationships, our consumption of goods and services; the effects of social institutions, social policy, and global affairs; the realities of a seamless environment). She suggests that the gift of cultivating such awareness is an increase in compassion: “As we grow in our understanding of how we are bound together, we become more careful with each other and with the earth” (para. 13). Thus, cultivating awareness of interdependence informs how we act, not only with those with whom we are aligned, but also with those who see and approach issues of justice from a very different perspective than we do. It encourages us to have a wider lens and more accountability as we understand that our actions reverberate beyond our ability to see their impact.

Three articles in this special edition provide material directly related to this second theme of “recognition of interdependence.” Banerjee and Canda’s insightful analysis of two conceptual models of social justice, “Comparing Rawlsian Justice and the Capabilities Approach to Justice from a Spiritually Sensitive Social Work Perspective,” challenges us to consider justice frameworks in light of four principles for spiritually sensitive social work. One of these principles, “addressing global/ecological interrelation,” clearly falls within the realm of interdependence. Affirming the importance of acknowledging the interconnectedness of all life in justice work, Banerjee and Canda’s analysis concludes that the capabilities approach better addresses this key area than the distributive justice approach, as it “encourages global justice and natural environmental protection.” In addition, Nussbaum’s central capabilities of “affinity” and “concern for other species” also overtly relate to the overarching principle of human and nonhuman interdependence.

Dylan and Coates’ article, “The Spirituality of Justice: Bringing Together the Eco and the Social,” also addresses interdependence at the global, environmental level. Noting that the profession of social work has only recently included the natural environment in their person-in-environment construct, these authors discuss the role of spirituality in facilitating a shift in consciousness deemed necessary for effectively addressing the enormity of environmental issues facing us today. Specifically, they point to spirituality as a transformative force that can help us see “life as an interdependent
Finally, Prior and Quinn’s presentation of their research on social work students, “The Relationship Between Spirituality and Social Justice Advocacy: Attitudes of Social Work Students,” examines interdependence in terms of spiritual interconnectedness. Specifically, their investigation of students’ tendencies toward social justice advocacy reveals how awareness of their “connectedness with humanity” is related to their willingness to act. This offering also points to the need to have conversations about these issues in social work classrooms, as they hold promise for helping social workers sustain their work.

Empirical work in this area could illuminate how awareness of interdependence impacts social work in general, and justice work, in particular. In macropractice, this could focus on practitioners’ understanding of how interconnectedness impacts human service organizations, or acts as a resource in communities, or serves as a template for analyzing social policy. Its relevance to global and environmental practice is also evident. Awareness of interconnectedness on the part of social justice activists when working in opposition to others is another important area for inquiry. As a profession that prides itself on its holistic approach to practice, the issue of interdependence is particularly salient.

THE MEANS MATTER

Interconnectedness has critical implications for how we engage with others in justice work, but can also apply to the connection between our stated goals and the means we use to achieve them. Thus, a third theme evident in discussions on spiritual activism is “the means matter,” or the proposition that the strategies, tactics, and other processes we use are as important as the outcomes. As expressed by Goldstein (2011c):

> Recognizing that all of our actions have impact, we work to bring alignment between our dreams for peace and our actions for peace, our dreams for equality and our actions for equality, our dreams for compassion and our actions for compassion. (para. 16)

The Satyana Institute (n.d.) addresses it this way: “Integrity in means and ends. Integrity in means cultivates integrity in the fruit of one’s work. A noble goal cannot be achieved utilizing ignoble means” (para. 4).

To help us keep our actions aligned with our highest values, Goldstein (2011c) suggests a few moments of critical reflection and honest self-inquiry at the end of the day:
Today, has my activism led me to be unkind, violent, dishonest, manipulative, unfair, or disempowering? Today, how could I have brought greater alignment between values of peace, justice, compassion, and love and my actions for peace, justice, compassion, and love? Did I do anything today that felt effective or satisfying because I brought more balance between the means and ends of my activism? (para. 17)

For social activists, this requires living out our values in all of our roles and relationships; not having one set of guidelines for our interactions with those in agreement with us and another set of standards for our relations with those whose positions or actions we are opposing.

Two articles in this special edition address this issue of “means” or specific strategies and interventions for justice work. Hill and Donaldson’s review of the use of spiritual interventions in community practice, “We Shall Overcome: Promoting an Agenda for Integrating Spirituality and Community Practice,” makes it clear that we are just in the beginning phase of exploring the use of spiritually based approaches within this level of practice. They highlight the need to investigate “how community practitioners use spirituality in their practice” as well as how such strategies may “bolster, renew, (and) engage . . . community change efforts.” They offer a detailed list of spiritually oriented helping activities for community practice that could serve as a foundation for such research. Such investigations should focus not only on what community practitioners are doing, but why they are employing specific strategies over others. Additionally, there is a need to understand how the use of such strategies reflects or aligns with practitioners’ spirituality or deeply held values, and what difference this makes in terms of effectiveness.

Lysack’s previously noted article on the abolition of slavery movement also identifies specific strategies arising from this movement that he suggests could prove fruitful for eco-justice work. He classifies these strategies or means as falling with four categories: (a) internal movement-building, organizational maintenance, and coalition-building; (b) investigative research; (c) public education and communications strategies; and (d) direct political advocacy and economic tactics. There are glimpses in his narrative regarding how spiritual sensibilities were interwoven in the use of these strategies by early abolitionists, reflecting the theme of “the means matter.” Investigation of how spirituality is considered in the choice of strategies by today’s activists would be a worthy endeavor.

As proposed by a spiritual activist approach, attending to both intention and process in our use of social justice strategies (spiritually based or otherwise) poses a challenge to all social workers. How are practitioners employing justice strategies in their work and do they consider spiritual or moral issues beyond professional ethics in selecting various approaches? Are conversations about intention and means being held in social work classes? This area represents fertile ground for research efforts as we attempt to more fully understand the linkages between spirituality and social justice.
A fourth theme emerging from the current writings on spiritual activism concerns standing in a place of “not knowing”—of being able to accept both “ . . . paradox and mystery, which allows us to see that the truth can be ambiguous, complex, contradictory or unknowable. This, in turn, relieves us from the need to always classify into either/or, right and wrong” (Goldstein, 2011d, para. 1). Goldstein identifies one of the biggest challenges in social justice work is avoiding coming from a place that presumes we are the “holder of Universal truth” (para. 10). When we do this, we miss the possibility of gaining the wider vision and deeper understanding that “not knowing” brings and the opportunity to see the element of truth in the opposing position.

Another facet of not knowing is addressed by the Satyana Institute (n.d.) in their second principle for spiritual activism, referred to as “non-attachment to outcome” (para. 3). This is not passive indifference to what occurs, but it is a recognition that what unfolds or emerges is often different than the expectations or aspirations of any one person or group. Here they suggest holding onto positive intention, but letting go of notions of a particular outcome; trusting that a “larger wisdom is always operating” (para. 3). They also advise activists to “Be a perpetual learner, and constantly challenge your own views” (para. 6). These guidelines are consistent with research findings that reveal that curiosity and compassion are more likely to lead to a new level of understanding than holding tightly to a polarized position (Backer, Chasin, Chasin, Herzig, & Roth, 1995).

One offering within this special edition specifically illustrates the theme of not knowing. Barney and Buckingham’s report on their research, “HIV/AIDS and Spirituality in a South African Township: A Qualitative Study,” begins with a stance of “not knowing.” Their approach demonstrates a degree of openness that is emphasized in both spiritual activism and qualitative research. In their exploration of spirituality and HIV/AIDS within an often stigmatizing cultural context, the authors approach their work with curiosity about “what is” versus preconceived notions of what they think they will find. What emerges is a complex and nuanced picture of the role of spirituality in the lives of persons living with AIDS in South Africa, uncovering both positive and negative impacts of organized religion and personal spiritual beliefs. These authors also touch on the need for social workers to place themselves in the role of learner, stating: “professionals are encouraged to achieve social justice by working with client groups to understand and determine the role of spiritual traditions in practice”—thereby recognizing that deep knowing is a continuous journey.

Similar to other helping professions, social work strives to develop the requisite body of knowledge required for effective practice. Given this professional mandate, the value of “not knowing” may not be readily apparent.
However, as demonstrated by Barney and Buckingham’s article, the capacity to engage from a place of openness and respectful curiosity often yields a level of understanding that is not obtained otherwise. Not knowing can also serve as an important counterbalance to an inflated sense of expertise and as a check on cultural imperialism. This theme also suggests several possible areas for research. What is our comfort level with not knowing and how does this affect our work? When does not knowing open up other avenues and possibilities? What kinds of outcomes emerge when we let go of our attachments to particular results? How does a stance of not knowing affect cross-cultural relationships and collective efforts, especially across the many divides of human difference and life experience? These and other areas of inquiry can further delineate spiritually grounded approaches to justice work.

OPENNESS TO SUFFERING

It might be logical to propose that social activists need to protect themselves from the ongoing pain of witnessing the many faces of suffering resulting from social injustice; that maintaining emotional distance must be the way to avoid the personal peril of burnout noted at the beginning of this article. But writings on spiritual activism tend to have a different take on this topic, as evident in the fifth theme of spiritual activism, which urges activists to open up their hearts to suffering. Goldstein (2011e) argues that avoidance tactics only serve to create hardened shells, which diminishes our capacity to respond to joy as well as pain. She addresses the paradox of finding both deeper compassion and better self-care through the process of staying open to suffering and grieving:

Grieving rather than avoiding grief became a gateway to my own compassion... My growing capacity to see into suffering has allowed me to come face to face with how I take part in creating my own suffering and other people’s suffering—directly and indirectly, and has prompted me into a new kind of activism. On the personal level, I am working on creating new habits of thought, and taking greater self-care. In thinking about my care of others, I am examining all the ways my behavior or my inaction impacts others and contributes to suffering. (para. 5–6)

Lynne Twist (n.d.) also reflects this perspective in one of her suggested principles of spiritual activism: “We should not isolate ourselves from the pain and suffering of the world. As we let the pain in, we become transformed, compassionate and motivated to action” (para. 14). This tenet suggests that we can witness and respond to suffering without being consumed by it. Although it may appear counter-intuitive, the more we can
be fully present with whatever is unfolding (including our own thoughts, sensations, and feelings as they arise), the more likely we will have a compassionate response to the situation and can fashion a grounded plan for action while taking care of ourselves. As one of my students succinctly expressed in my spirituality and social work class one year, “Compassion doesn’t burn out; ego does.”

Although several of the articles are concerned with injustice-induced suffering, the article that most explicitly addresses this theme is the conceptual analysis offered by Banerjee and Canda (previously identified), in their discussion of the spiritually sensitive practice principle of “prioritizing the vulnerable,” which clearly resonates with the spiritual activism principle of “openness to suffering.” Both principles call for an unflinching recognition of the impacts of injustice in the lives of marginalized individuals, groups, and communities without turning away or protecting ourselves from these realities. Banerjee and Canda point out that although the Rawlsian model of distributive justice stipulates that inequalities should be for the benefit of the least advantaged, it limits its scope of justice to the working poor. The authors state that this restriction makes this approach incongruent with spiritually sensitive social work, as it ignores the needs of other people severely impacted by social injustice. They assess the capabilities approach as being more comprehensive and consistent in addressing the principle of “prioritizing the vulnerable.” Their discussion makes it clear that how we conceptualize social justice affects the parameters of our work—including our openness to those who suffer.

Given social work’s commitment to “... the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty” (National Association of Social Workers, 2008, Preamble), research is needed regarding how we can best maintain an open, compassionate stance to suffering without burning out ourselves as the human instrument. Related themes of spiritual activism offer possible areas for exploration. For example, does having a more spiritually based motivation for justice work help sustain a commitment to such work? How does the seeming paradox of “opening up” versus “shutting down” to suffering operate in the day-to-day lives of activists? How does not being tied to a particular outcome help create balance during difficult passages? What is the specific role of spiritual practices in maintaining appropriate self-care?

OUTER CHANGE REQUIRES INNER WORK

Probably the most well-known expression of this sixth theme of spiritual activism is Mahatma Gandhi’s well-known quote: “You must be the change you want to see in the world.” It basically addresses the perspective that collective change is dependent upon the processes of individual transformation.
This principle is grounded in the belief that the social institutions and forces that perpetuate injustice in the world reflect the overall state of the human heart and mind within society. Until we are able to transform our own fear-based, delusional ways of being, we are destined to perpetuate injustice regardless of our social, economic, and political struggles. A simple metaphor of this personal-collective connection is offered in Lama Shenpen Drolma’s (2003) compilation of the teachings of Chagdud Tulku Rinpoche:

Trying to change the world without changing our mind is like trying to clean the dirty face we see in the mirror by rubbing the glass. However vigorously we clean it, our reflection will not improve. Only by washing our own face and combing our own unkempt hair can we alter the image. Similarly, if we want to help create conditions that foster peace and well-being in the world, we first need to reflect those qualities ourselves. (p. 4)

Thus, this principle states that personal, inner work on the part of activists (and everyone else) is needed in order to bring about societal transformation.

This perspective is not an “either/or” stance. It is not saying that social change efforts must be set aside while each of us attends to our own personal growth, nor is it promoting a singular focus on collective change while ignoring personal issues. Rather it is advancing a “both/and” approach, where we pay attention to both individual and collective healing and growth simultaneously. Claudia Horowitz eloquently describes the necessity of attending to both inner and outer change in her contribution to Edwards and Post’s (2008) collection of essays on “The Love That Does Justice”:

There is a dynamic tension between individual practice and the community cohesion needed to effect change. If we’re doing the work of our own inner liberation in isolation, without the reflective mirror of a community, then we run the risk of bolstering individualism and attachment to identity. We forsake our part in the development of the narrative. Things become too self-referential and we lose the opportunity to contribute to collective growth. And if we engage in the collective without some practice of individual consciousness, we’re more likely to get caught up in group think and only use a fraction of our human capacity. Without consciousness, there is no choice. That is what makes engaged spirituality so exciting and so critical. (p. 51)

As we enhance our individual capacities for deep listening, compassion, equanimity, and open-heartedness, our collective justice work begins to reflect these qualities as well. Likewise, as our collective efforts are centered on unity, connection, celebration of diversity, and justice, individuals are
changed, too, through their involvement in these kinds of transformative experiences.

Sister Simone Campbell’s narrative, “Explosion of the Spirit: A Spiritual Journey into the 2010 Healthcare Reform Legislation,” best illustrates this sixth spiritual activism principle. As a long-term advocate working with NETWORK for many social justice causes, Campbell’s description of her ongoing spiritual journey clearly reflects someone who has learned that inner work is necessary for effective engagement in outer change. The means of this inner work are clearly grounded in her commitment to spiritual practices, the seventh principle. As these two principles are inextricably linked, a more detailed description of how Campbell’s article reflects these two principles is provided below, after an overview of the seventh principle.

COMMITMENT TO SPIRITUAL PRACTICES

The seventh, and final, theme reverberating within the writings on spiritual activism is the importance of regular engagement in spiritual practices both personally and communally. The subtitle of this writing—“Grounding Ourselves in the Spirit”—speaks to the necessity of having a firm spiritual foundation for engaging in social justice work, whatever the particular composition of that foundation might be. Diverse religious and spiritual traditions offer many practices helpful to activists, including prayer, meditation, reading scripture and other spiritual texts, singing, chanting, sitting in discernment, and many others. Other practices of a broader spiritual nature, such as journaling, spending time in nature, engagement in creative arts, dialoguing with others, also contribute to a spiritual foundation for action. These practices provide inspiration and motivation for becoming involved in justice work, as well as becoming resources for sustained involvement in such activities.

Spiritual practices enhance self-care and help prevent burnout, one of the perils of activist work (Collins, 2005). They can also help advocates avoid the peril of polarization. Edwards and Post (2008) talk about spiritual practice as a “...guard against the ‘thieves of the heart’—the greed, ego, anger, fear, and insecurities that will likely pollute or erode the success of even well-intentioned efforts to be a positive force for change in the world” (p. 8). Spiritual practices diminish the likelihood of “...demonizing one’s enemies, alienating potential allies, or holding on too tightly to a particular vision of ends and means that can eventually become a prison.” Spiritual practice in this regard thus becomes “...both a spiritually and politically subversive activity” (p. 8).

Mirabai Bush’s discussion of a study conducted by the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society sheds light on the role and variety of spiritual practices relative to justice work (Edwards & Post, 2008). Interviews
with people working in social justice-oriented programs and organizations revealed that contemplative or spiritual practices and social justice were viewed as inseparable by the majority of study participants. They also reported that contemplative practices helped to “provide a balance to some of the inherent challenges of social justice work and contributed greatly to the sustainability of this work” (p. 90). One of the outcomes of this study was the creation of “The Tree of Contemplative Practices” (The Contemplative Mind in Society, n.d.), which identifies a variety practices that can be utilized in justice work. These include stillness practices (e.g., silence, centering prayer, insight meditation); movement practices (tai chi, labyrinth walking, walking meditation), creation process practices (e.g., singing/chanting, contemplative art, journaling); relational practices (e.g., dialogue, deep listening, council circle); ritual/cyclical practices (e.g., Shabbat/Sabbath, ceremonies/rituals, building an altar or sacred space); generative practices (loving-kindness meditation, lectio divina, visualization); and activist practices (work and volunteering, bearing witness, vigils and marches). Bush emphasizes that, regardless of the particular practice, it is the intention underlying the activity that is critical: “many activities . . . could be considered contemplative when done with the intent of cultivating awareness, attentiveness, sensitivity, and a stronger connection to God/Spirit and/or one’s inner wisdom” (pp. 90–91). Whatever the activity, intention and commitment to consistent practice is pivotal in creating a strong, spiritual foundation for justice work.

Returning to Campbell’s account of her journey for justice in healthcare reform, the process of attending to inner work through spiritual practices is readily apparent. Indeed, as a personal narrative of a social justice activist, this contribution to the special edition speaks to all seven themes of spiritual activism. Sister Campbell describes her passion for justice work as grounded in the Gospel, which led her to “live her life with others who shared not only my goals, but my motivation.” This directly reflects a spiritual motivation for justice work, the first spiritual activism principle. The second principle of recognition of interdependence is evident in what she describes as her awareness that “. . . we are one body. If I as one cell of that body am called upon to do something for the body and I can do it, how can I say no?” Consistency with the third principle, the means matter, shines through her detailed accounting of the deep discernment that she and others at NETWORK employed in determining their choice of strategies to further the cause; including careful consideration of not only the potential effectiveness of various strategies, but their alignment with higher spiritual values. The fourth principle of acceptance of not knowing is clearly expressed in her awareness to “sit in open-handed fashion,” which helped her to remain open to alternative points of view and avoid having a “hand firmly grasped around my favorite solution.” A commitment to remaining open to suffering is also evident through NETWORK’s over 40 years of work on health care
issues and is particularly palpable in Sister Campbell’s description of a low point when she and her Sister advocates feared that healthcare reform had hit a brick wall:

All I could think was that healthcare reform was once again dead. I thought of the millions of people who would go without access to healthcare and the tens of thousands who would die unnecessarily each year because they did not have healthcare. My Sisters responded as family does with support and concern. They joined me in worry and prayer, hugs and offers of consolation.

In terms of the seventh principle, commitment to spiritual practices, Sister Campbell identifies her personal, contemplative prayer practice as falling within a Zen-Catholic, centering prayer tradition, which she says has led her to “know that all of life is about the contemplative journey.” She specially describes the importance of “deep listening” in the day-to-day activities of justice work and the related practices of “walking willing” and “living yes.” These practices, along with observance of her Catholic faith, are clearly pivotal to Sister Campbell’s commitment to the remaining spiritual activism principle—engaging in inner work for outer change. In total, this description of social advocacy exemplifies a spiritual activism approach to justice work and a clear connection between spirituality and social justice.

Research into both personal and communal spiritual practices and the related arena of attending to personal spiritual growth would greatly inform a spiritually based approach to social justice work. Explorations regarding how these two principles interact with and support the other five principles of spiritual activism, as is illustrated in Campbell’s article, would also greatly enhance our understanding of this topic. Investigation of interfaith coalitions for justice work would be particularly helpful in delineating how social workers of diverse religious and spiritual traditions can work together for common goals of social change. Finally, although the contributions to this special edition make an important contribution to our knowledge base regarding how spirituality and social justice are connected within macropractice, there is clearly room for more scholarship in this area, beyond a focus on spiritual activism. Both conceptual and empirical work is needed to better inform the role of spirituality at all levels of social work practice—especially as it animates and sustains our commitment to social justice.

REFERENCES


