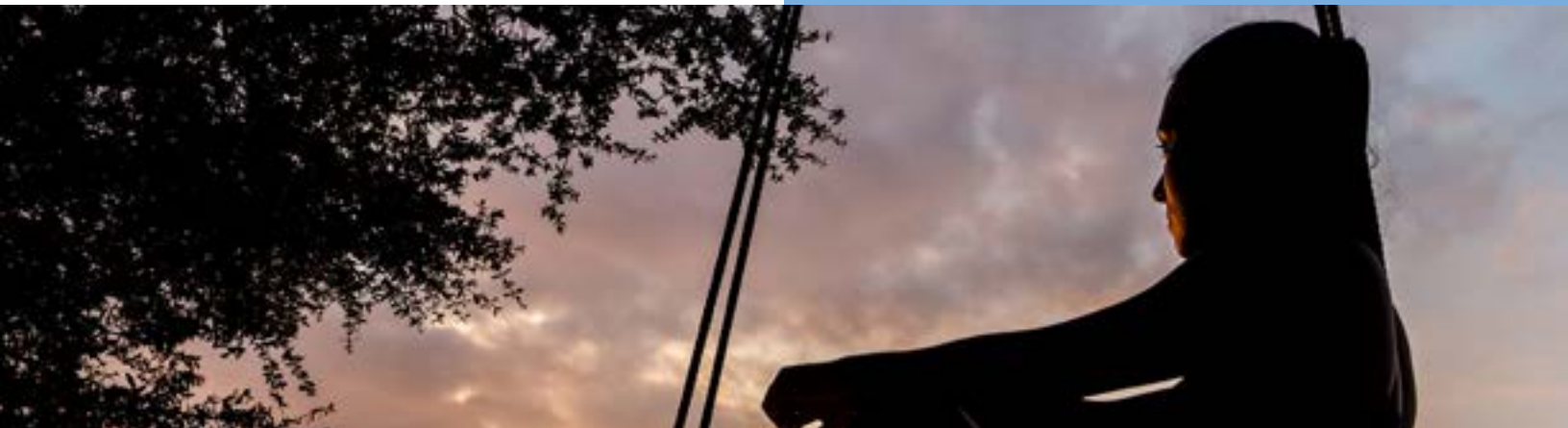




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ETHICAL AND POLITICAL DIMENSIONS OF THE SPIRITUAL DIMENSIONES ÉTICAS Y POLÍTICAS DE LO ESPIRITUAL

*Norma Jean Profitt **

Resumen

Desde 1990 ha renacido el interés por la espiritualidad y la religión en la profesión de Trabajo Social. En Canadá y Estados Unidos se ha producido una voluminosa literatura especializada; parte de esa literatura se ha referido a la espiritualidad y a la política del cambio social², pero, en términos generales, no se han dilucidado suficientemente la interrelación entre espiritualidad y justicia social ni las formas en que la espiritualidad inspira un compromiso con la justicia social.

Por lo anterior, este artículo expone las bases fundamentales del libro *Spirituality and Social Justice* en el que se analizan las dimensiones

políticas de lo espiritual en el Trabajo Social, con base en la justicia social y ecológica. Estos temas han sido muy poco desarrollados y, a menudo, ni siquiera aparecen en las discusiones sobre la espiritualidad y la práctica del Trabajo Social. El libro presenta una conceptualización crítica de la espiritualidad que, enraizada en una visión del bienestar colectivo, destaca las dimensiones políticas de lo espiritual como una respuesta sagrada a las relaciones de poder que producen dominación, opresión y destrucción de la Tierra y sus criaturas. En la lucha por la justicia social, la espiritualidad cons-

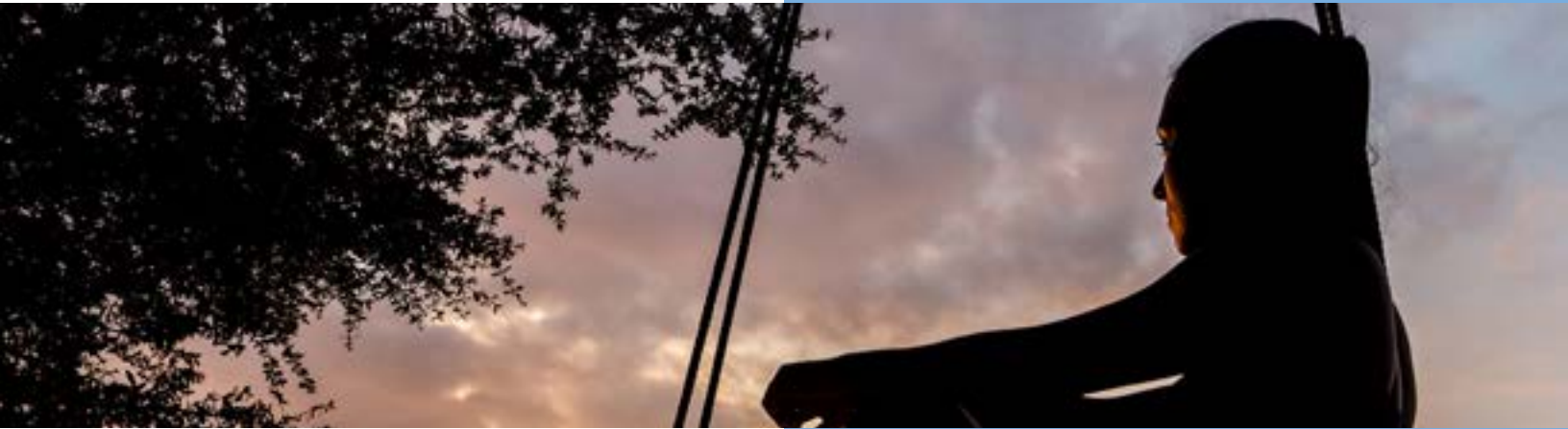
** Miembro del Colegio de Trabajadores/as Sociales de Nueva Escocia y trabaja como consejera de duelo en cuidados paliativos, con pacientes y sus familias y otros/as significados/as.*

tituye una actividad política que es inseparable de los entornos culturales, socioeconómicos y políticos; es fuente generadora de resistencia y cambio radical, y se fundamenta en la indivisibilidad existente entre la ética del Trabajo Social y una agenda politizada orientada a la transformación social. En consecuencia, un compromiso ético-político con la justicia social y ecológica exige concebir el yo espiritual en términos sociales y políticos.

Descriptores: espiritualidad, ética, política, justicia social, justicia ecológica

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ETHICAL AND POLITICAL DIMENSIONS OF THE SPIRITUAL

DIMENSIONES ÉTICAS Y POLÍTICAS DE LO ESPIRITUAL

*Norma Jean Profitt **

Introduction

Spirituality shapes our worldview and directs our actions in the world. As a feminist social worker who traces my curiosity about spiritual and political formation to childhood influences, I have held an abiding interest in ascertaining how spirituality, individual and communal, impels our quest for social and ecological justice. As a child, my first acquaintance with spirituality, faith, and religion was within a Christian framework with Jesus as saviour. Later as a young adult living in the Maritime provinces of eastern Canada, feminism as theory, practice, and social movement vivified my sense of spirit as a desire to create what ought to be in the world. For me, spirituali-

ty signifies a conscious relationship of the self to the sacred, with spirit the Mystery that calls us into being and becoming. In my early 30s I had the privilege of accompanying women in Costa Rica engaged in social justice struggles and this experience forged in me an ethical-political commitment to the commonweal that was rooted in, and inseparable from, a notion of spirit. Thirty years after my tenure in Costa Rica, I felt compelled to articulate the nature of this commitment. In 2017 I began editing a book on spirituality and social justice with co-editor Cyndy Baskin. The collection *Spirituality*

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and Social Justice: Spirit in the Political Quest for a Just World was published in November 2019 by Canadian Scholars and includes my chapter “Coming Alive: Spirit as an Interstitial Presence” about how my life and work in Costa Rica shaped my spirituality.

Since the early 1990s, the profession of social work in Canada and the United States has witnessed a renaissance of interest in spirituality and/or religion, prompting a substantial body of writing on the subject. Focused primarily on spirituality in social work education and practice with individuals and families, the social work literature has paid insufficient attention to social justice activism. Although some of this literature speaks to spirituality and the politics of social change, overall it has insufficiently plumbed the interface of spirituality and social justice for insights into how spirituality inspires a commitment to social justice and how engagement in struggles for social justice deepens spirituality. Thus, the political dimensions of the spiritual in social and ecological justice-based social work have been underdeveloped and often unnamed in discussions of spirituality and social work practice. The aim of *Spirituality and Social*

Justice was to address this underdevelopment and enrich our collective understanding of the ethical and political dimensions of spirituality in social work practice.

In this article, I want to lay out the foundational underpinnings of this edited volume. I advance a critical conceptualization of spirituality, rooted in a vision of collective well-being, that foregrounds the political dimensions of the spiritual as a sacred response to power relations of domination, oppression, and destruction of the Earth and its creatures. I contend that spirituality in the pursuit of social justice constitutes a political quest that is inseparable from cultural, socio-economic, and political milieus. Spirituality as a generative source of resistance and radical change is necessarily grounded in the indivisibility of social work ethics with a politicized agenda for social transformation. Consequently, an ethical-political commitment to social and ecological justice requires that the spiritual self be conceived of in social and political terms.

Spirituality and Social Justice spotlights social work as a helping profession. Despite its origins in Canada in the religious traditions of the late

1800s and early 1900s, social work did not discover the elements of spirituality in social helping—the community support of its members. All cultures across time and place have their ways of helping that are often explicitly based on spiritual ways of living (Canda, n.d.; Haug, 2005; Weaver, 2008). For example, social helping has existed in Indigenous communities for thousands of years (Yellow Bird & Gray, 2008), and the role of spirituality as integral to social helping is a natural part of life in Indigenous cultures (Baskin, 2016b; Hart, 2002). Therefore, the profession of social work is but one realm among many where the relationship of spirituality to helping and social justice could be fruitfully explored.

Scholars have named the practising of spirituality in social justice activism as “spiritual activism” (Keating, 2008, p. 53)², “sacred activism” (Sheridan, 2012, p. 193), “politically engaged spirituality” (Falk, 2003, p. 3), and “justice-seeking spirituality” (Perry & Rolland, 2009, p. 384). For example, in a “spirituality of resistance,” Cyndy Baskin (2007, 2016a, 2016b) affirms that spirituality, lived individually and communally, connects people to social change through political activism. Cornel West’s (1993a) notion of “combative spirituality” em-

braces political struggle for social change but transcends what is solely political by sustaining people in their humanity and attending to the emotions of human existence such as hope, disappointment, and despair. In contrast to widespread privatized, psychologized, or individualist consumer-oriented constructions of spirituality, this form of spirituality considers justice-seeking as a spiritual-political endeavour seeking to dismantle structures of colonialism, power and domination.

Critical conceptualizations of spirituality and social justice

The concept of *spirituality* refers to the search for, and experience of, the sacred that is embodied in and indivisible from actions directed toward respect, freedom, and justice for human beings and all living things. Such a perspective honours the reality that spirituality may be lived outside of any particular religion but at the same time acknowledges that spirituality is the central concern of religions (Canda, n.d.). Given that the notion of spirituality can be understood as “a deeply personal yet complexly social phenomenon” (Stanczak, 2006, p. 161), the socially constructed concepts of both spirituality and/or religion cannot be se-

parated from the contexts of power relations in which they are embedded (Dei, n.d.; Rodríguez, 2004; Todd & Coholic, 2007).

Accordingly, interconnectedness between spirit, self, and other implies moral and ethical connections with others, including the natural world and species other than human. Spiritual perspectives that emphasize the interconnectedness of all beings require holistic frameworks that incorporate fundamental issues such as social justice, economic fairness, human rights, and ecological sustainability (Chile & Simpson, 2004). A critical understanding of spirituality must be capacious enough to accommodate different paths (Schmidt, 2005) while avoiding normative theological judgments that reflect any dominant cultural discourse and thereby subordinate differences (Pesut, Fowler, Reimer-Kirkham, Taylor, & Sawatzky, 2009).

Given that the concept of social justice is also socially constructed, a wide range of approaches to social justice coexist, from libertarian to utilitarian, egalitarian to socialist and more, with different interpretations rendered by ideological and theological positions, culture, and history (Donaldson & Mayer, 2014; O'Brien,

2013; Reisch, 2002; Thompson, 2016; Zajda, Majhanovich, & Rust, 2006). The *Social Work Dictionary* defines social justice as "an ideal condition in which all members of a society have the same rights, protections, opportunities, obligations, and social benefits" (Barker, 1995, p. 354). Scholars who critique conventional liberal notions of rights-based social justice such as equal access to opportunities question whether social justice can even exist in a capitalist, free-market economy (Craig, 2002; Reisch, 2002; Scanlon & Longres, 2001). Other scholars highlight the anthropocentrism that excludes non-human life and so-called non-living entities from the re-visioning of a socially just and ecologically sustainable world (Absolon, 2016; Baskin, 2016a, 2016b; Besthorn & McMillen, 2002; Cajete, 1994; Coates, 2003a; Harris, 2006; Jaimes-Guerrero, 2003; Marcos, 2009).

Critical social work moves beyond liberal ideas of social justice to advance a more radical conception that has the goal of transforming systemic and institutionalized power relations rooted in hierarchies of power, wealth, and privilege that are usually associated with masculinity, whiteness, middle-classness, heteronormativity, and ability, to name a

few axes of power³. Such social hierarchies give rise to inequalities and inequities in the distribution of social and economic goods in the first place; disparities of social class (material well-being) and inequalities of social status (recognition) are deeply intertwined, however, social status is not a mere by-product of distribution (Coulthard, 2014; Garrett, 2010; Marston & McDonald, 2012; Webb, 2010). Any robust notion of social justice must also comprehend the deep relationship between structural inequalities and people's inner worlds, pain, and suffering (Allan, 2015; Frost & Hoggett, 2008; Irizarry, Marlowe, Hallahan, & Bull, 2016; Thompson, 2006) rather than construe such suffering as "individual crises" or "psychological dispositions" (Bonnycastle, 2006, p. 82). Issues of power, politics, and ideology are thus central to social justice struggles.

As both goal and process, social justice seeks to end oppression at all levels: relational, systemic (institutional), structural, and discursive. Challenging colonialism and social relations of power such as sexism, classism, and heterosexism require that social workers undertake change efforts in every realm of social work practice. Thus, social justice

activism encompasses a range of interconnected activities: from individual advocacy aimed at fairness for service users to the development of dialogical relations; from collective advocacy and acts of resistance to community organizing and political action; and from policy analysis and influencing to participation in progressive social movements.

Political dimensions of spirituality

Although spirituality can be conceived as an individual and private matter, a critical conceptualization of spirituality emphasizes its social and political dimensions. In western liberal thought, spirituality is often assumed to have little place in public and political life even when people belong to a community or church that purports to function collectively. The official separation between church and state in Canadian secular society suggests that religion is essentially separate from the politics of governing; however, the Canadian state still reflects a deeply ingrained Eurocentric Christian worldview. Moreover, given the dualism in Western liberal thought between the divine and the material worlds, spiritual concerns have been predominantly regarded as "a private matter concerned with a pri-

vate internal world" (Powell, 2003, p. 110). Yet, there is nothing inherent in the idea of spirituality that makes it a purely personal matter; in fact, "the key spiritual concept of 'connectedness' is intrinsically social" (Thompson, 2016, p. 194).

This Western worldview significantly narrows our thinking about spirituality in relation to public and political life, dissuading a more integrated and nuanced understanding of spirituality, politics, and social justice. Normative constructions of a private/public split between personal belief and political action cast spirituality as a private concern that does not inform political action (Mallory, 2010). When spirituality is construed as strictly the property of the individual—for example, as a private, subjective experience or as a religious way of coping—a common assumption is that spirituality has little to do with politics and social justice. I agree with Neil Thompson (2016) that to conceive of spirituality only in its narrowest, individualistic sense ignores its potential political dimensions and robs us of the pivotal conception of social justice as a sacred and necessary condition for human dignity.

If spirituality is essentially concer-

ned with meaning-making, as Bernard Moss and Neil Thompson (2007) claim, then spirituality and social structures are necessarily connected by virtue of the way in which selfhood, worldview, identity, and purpose are circumscribed by persistent structural inequalities. Wider cultural frameworks of meaning and discourse that shape meaning making are already imbued with relations of power (hierarchies of dominance and subordination), with implications not only for life experiences, but for our interpretations of them (Thompson, 2016). In fact, the dimension of social justice is a decisive litmus test for spirituality, without which it can become self-absorbed and perilously narcissistic (Moss & Thompson, 2007). Consequently, the socio-political dimension of spirituality is indispensable in theorizing and pursuing social justice.

The ethical-political nature of social work

Social justice is a core value of social work, perhaps even the profession's "organizing value" (Wakefield, 1988), and social workers have an ethical obligation to pursue social justice (Canadian Association of Social Workers, 2005). In thinking about

spirituality for a just world, how do we as social workers conceptualize the relation between ethics, politics, and social justice? The Western liberal modernist tradition that underpins the profession of social work is anchored in a conception of power that emphasizes individualism and personal responsibility (Ferguson & Lavalette, 2007). This “often unacknowledged dominant cultural bias” (Jani & Reisch, 2011, p. 14) works to mask from view the ideologies, social structures, and power relations that oppress along the lines of gender, racialization, sexuality, class, and so forth.

The proclivity of the Western liberal modernist tradition to reduce social relations of power to an interpersonal level (Ferguson & Lavalette, 2007) has significant implications for how we think about social work ethics and therefore about spirituality in pursuit of social justice. As Merlinda Weinberg (2010b) argues, the traditional view of ethics in mainstream social work situates ethics primarily within the parameters of the one-on-one social worker-client relationship, holding each individual social worker personally responsible for making ethical judgments. When ethics are situated in a vacuum devoid of any analysis of

fundamental social inequalities, the structural dimensions of power in society and the resource limitations of social work practice are all too readily perceived as peripheral rather than central to ethical practice (Weinberg, 2010b). Consequently, questions of power, structure, and systemic privilege are not considered to be ethical issues but rather discrete political matters outside the purview of social work. However, moral and ethical relations with others cannot be severed from cultural, social, political, and economic ones (Jani, Ortiz, Pierce, & Sowbel, 2011; Nussbaum, 2006; Solas, 2008; Young, 1990).

According to this politicized standpoint, relationships are not just personal “but deeply embedded in the way our institutions, cultures, and structures are arranged” (Powell, 2003, p. 124). The legacy of liberal individualism and the political fiction of the “universal citizen” impede the ability of social workers to name and face into the operation of power in the social world (Fonda, 2011; Gabel, 2015; Gray, 2008; Pateman, 1988). For instance, social workers often assume a benign relationship between people and the state (Reisch & Jani, 2012). For critical practice, though, all social work is political, recogni-

zing the political nature of everyday practices (Baines, 2017a, 2017b; Dudziak, 2002; Goroff, 1981; Gwilym, 2017; Mary, 2001). It follows from this understanding of social work practice as political that the construction of ethics must be broadened beyond the confines of the one-on-one social worker-client relationship in order to bring into view social inequalities and injustices and their roots in the material world. Such discernment of ethics in a broader context is indispensable to any critically informed notion of spirituality in the political quest for a just world.

Social suffering and spiritual suffering

How then can spirituality and/or religion be directed toward the quest for meaning, moral relations, and connections to a larger and more inclusive good through ethical social justice practice? In his discussion of spirituality and social justice, Neil Thompson (2016) points out that although humanitarianism and good works such as charity may be essential elements of spirituality and/or religion, they do not necessarily encompass the aspiration of social justice or strive to counter inequality and unfairness. Nicholas Wolterstorff (2006) reminds us that justice

means “attentiveness to the worth of the other and to all the ways the other can be wronged” (p. 135). Justice rather than charity requires changes not only in individual citizens but also in the social institutions and structures that shape our lives.

The body of literature that informs the book *Spirituality and Social Justice* demonstrates the centrality of spirituality and/or religion to a commitment to social justice, although this is but one path among many for nurturing social change (Jantzen, 1994; Mallory, 2010; Moss & Thompson, 2007; Powell, 2003). There is ample argument that matters of the spirit are deeply rooted in the social world. In his exploration of spirituality and social justice, John Powell (2003) highlights a vital and transformative dimension of spirituality by tracing “how *social justice* might inform the practice and development of spirituality” (p. 102). In doing this, he distinguishes between spiritual suffering, which is an ontological or existential suffering, and social suffering, which he argues is not inherent in being but chiefly due to oppressive hierarchical social structures and institutional arrangements in our socially constructed world.

In his discussion about whether so-

cial suffering informs spiritual suffering, Powell (2003) contends that social justice is in fact indispensable for addressing people's spiritual suffering. A great deal of the social suffering that we inflict on each other is indeed spiritual—for instance, the denial of one another's humanity. Our failure to engage in something larger than ourselves has implications for the secular state of the world as well as the ability to adequately address spiritual concerns. Moreover, the act of attending to spiritual suffering demands that we attend to the material and corporeal conditions of people's lives. Powell concludes by asserting that caring about the suffering of others and its provenance ultimately informs spiritual development. The implication of his claim—that spiritual suffering and social suffering are not separate from one another—is that engagement with suffering must inevitably concern itself with the structural and institutional arrangements of society.

Matters of social justice do inform spirituality. Lived experience and knowledge of social suffering acquired in a myriad of ways can throw into sharp relief the connection between suffering and oppressive social arrangements. Paul Farmer's

work (1995, 1996, 2004; Farmer, Nizeye, Stulac, & Keshavjee, 2006; Rylko-Bauer & Farmer, 2017) is especially helpful in apprehending the nature of structural violence and its contribution to social suffering, including spiritual suffering⁴:

The term “structural violence” is one way of describing social arrangements that put individuals and populations in harm's way. The arrangements are structural because they are embedded in the political and economic organization of our social world; they are violent because they cause injury to people (Farmer, Nizeye, Stulac, & Keshavjee, 2006, p. 1686).

Drawing on his experience as a physician in Haiti and around the globe, Farmer (1996) illustrates “some of the mechanisms through which large-scale social forces crystallize into the sharp, hard surfaces of individual suffering” (p. 263). The structural violence of injustice and inequity (Rylko-Bauer & Farmer, 2017) brings harm to individuals and communities, undermines the social norms that govern coexistence, damages institutions that give order to people's lives, and denigrates the values and principles that form community

(Lira & Castillo, 1993).

Structural violence greatly disadvantages some groups of people more than others, severely curtailing positive access to the social determinants of health (Montesanti & Thurston, 2015) with impacts on individual and collective survival and quality of life. To name a few examples of how structural inequities cause suffering: millions of children around the globe perish from preventable and treatable diseases and malnutrition when there is enough to eat for everyone; many Indigenous communities lack potable water; and inequalities in access to water and sanitation around the world cause systemic harm to poor and marginalized people (Mehta, n.d.). These are examples of what Farmer (1996) calls “a political economy of brutality” (p. 274).

Structural violence, caused by human agency and thus avoidable, is “exerted systematically—that is indirectly—by everyone who belongs to a certain social order” (Farmer, 2004, p. 307). Indeed, it is the apparent absence of visible agency that characterizes structural violence itself, linked as it is to multiple forms of unequal power, shaping the way that social problems are understood

and how this dictates the response mustered. Consequently, harmful social structures and institutionalized oppression appear to be “nobody’s fault” (Farmer, 2004, p. 307). Even when dominant actors, such as national governments responsible for enacting public policy or entities such as the World Bank or International Monetary Fund, are the perpetrators of structural inequality and injustice, all too often no one will be held accountable. Yet for those subjected to structural violence, the harm is not experienced indirectly but rather in the form of embodied pain and suffering (Farmer, 1996). For instance, the systemic sexism and racism of institutional policies and practices have a direct bearing on women, affecting their health, generating incalculable pain, and preventing them from satisfying basic needs.

In studying violence and death for decades, anthropologist Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1996, 2003) exposes diverse forms of “unrecognized, gratuitous and useless social suffering” (p. 889). Barbara Rylko-Bauer and Paul Farmer (2017) observe that many structural inequities are often simply perceived as a natural part of the social order and become normalized or taken for granted. In

fact, “everyday structural violence” is tolerated by society in general (Rylko-Bauer & Farmer, 2017), with “institutionalized social indifference” forming a key part of such tolerance (Scheper-Hughes, 1996, pp. 890, 891). In terms of spiritual development, the process of coming to clearly name structural violence and its ensuing social suffering may be seen to signify a turning point in people’s spiritual path, with significant implications for a commitment to action for social justice.

To take this point a step further, squarely facing into structural violence with the effort of meaning making may in fact constitute a spiritual and political act, solidifying a commitment to both interior and social struggle: spiritual in the sense of consciousness about the relationship of self to the sacredness of all living things, and political because it is cognizant of the socio-political and economic contexts in which we as social actors are situated according to prevailing power dynamics. The willingness to intentionally understand the nature of structural violence has the potential to shift worldviews and alter conceptions of spirituality, for both witnesses to and subjects of injustice. While naming structural violence and acting on it

may elicit a range of powerful and disquieting responses such as compassion, rage, powerlessness, and spiritual anguish, receptivity to perceiving the roots of social suffering may also open a space for critical reflexivity concerning the positions we all occupy in social relations of power. If facing into social suffering can invoke the spirit, then what might this mean for political action in the world? If we grasp the nature of structural violence as embodied suffering, then surely compassion alone is insufficient; we must act, and in acting employ the social and political selves that reach out to others in the rich spiritual terrain of the interstice between individual and collective being.

Spirituality as a political force for social justice

The social work literature overwhelmingly attests that spirituality can inspire a commitment to social justice and engagement with others to create a better world. As a wellspring of animation to pursue social justice, the power of spirituality connects us with something larger than the self. Spirituality can be a source of sustenance by affording balance, faith, hope, and sustainability for social justice struggles (Cozart, 2010; Kea-

ting, 2008; Nash & Stewart, 2005). Furthermore, as a valuable fountain of strength for those experiencing oppression (Dillard, 2006; Este & Bernard, 2006; Freire, 1994; Lorde, 1984; Rodríguez, 2004), spirituality represents an act of reclaiming the right not only to simply exist, but to actively resist oppression.

Spirituality and religion have had an active presence across a wide range of social movements, from the social gospel and feminist to Indigenous and environmental movements. Moral commitments drove the civil rights movement, Gandhi's non-violent independence campaign against British rule, and liberation theology (practised largely in Latin America, South Africa, and the Middle East) (Gutiérrez, 1973; Nadeau, 2002). In these radical movements, social actors united spiritual/religious values and meaning systems with social and political agendas (Hughey, 2005; Peña, 1994). For Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., leader of the US civil rights movement from the mid-1950s to 1968, when he was assassinated, racial apartheid was "a violation of spiritual concerns" as well as unjust in terms of civil rights under the law (Powell, 2003, p. 105).

Individuals and groups acting on their spiritual/or and religious values as well as religious institutions have been forces of change for social justice around the globe. Many women's progressive politics have been inspired by religious moral imperatives of justice, love, equity, and peace, such as the Malala Yousafzai Fund and Jews for Racial and Economic Justice (Ackelsberg, 1998; Blumberg, 1990; Faver, 1993; Fiorenza, 2002; Kaplan, 1997; Smith, 1996; West, 1981; West & Blumberg, 1990; Wood, 1999). Religious people and institutions alike have pressed for democratizing practices in authoritarian regimes in Latin America and Eastern Europe (Wood, 1999). The Antigone movement, led by priests and educators, promoted adult education, community development, and the formation of co-operatives and credit unions to improve the economic and social conditions of rural communities in the Maritimes of eastern Canada. César Chávez's fight for justice as leader of the United Farm Workers movement in the United States was informed by deep religious principles (Zimmerman, Pathikonda, Slgado, & James, 2010). Other examples of spiritual activism include Muslim leadership in the US civil rights movement and the Society of Friends' (Quakers') en-

gagement in the abolition of slavery in England in the late 1700s and early 1800s (Lysack, 2012). In the early 1900s, the faith of Jewish women compelled them to organize against exploitation in the garment trade in New York (Ackelsberg, 1998). These are just a few highlights from a rich history of activism.

Faith-based congregations and organizations have mobilized with communities to respond to people's spiritual and survival needs when oppressed, encouraging engagement in activism to politicize these needs and tackle widespread systemic and structural injustice (Carlton-Laney & Alexander, 2001; Este, 2007; Faver, 2004; Hill & Donaldson, 2012; Perdue, Prior, Williamson, & Sherman, 2012). Examples here include racial and ethnic mutual aid societies; African-American systems of care; radical Christian innovations in social welfare such as L'Arche communities; Jewish communal service; and community social welfare services (Canda, n.d., 2005; Coates, Graham, Swartzen-truber, with Ouellette, 2007; Este, 2007; Harris, Halfpenny, & Rochester, 2003). The Black church, as a primary social welfare institution in African-Canadian communities, has responded to the immediate needs

of community members, promoted activities to foster community consciousness, and challenged systemic racism and exploitation (Este, 2004, 2007).

In the realm of mobilizing for social justice, informal and formal spiritual and religious networks and organizations are tremendous sources of power, connection, political space, and material resources (Ackelsberg, 1998; Hodge, 2012; Hutchison, 2012; Todd, 2009). In this regard, Riyad Shahjahan (2004) notes that Rosa Parks's spirit of resistance was rooted and nourished in community organizing for the civil rights cause. Spiritual and religious communities foster a sense of collective responsibility for political effectiveness (Bradley, Maschi, & Gilmore, 2007) and provide invaluable conceptual and practical resources for social action (Smith, 2015; Wills, 1992). At their best, they nurture a sense of belonging to a sacred community that motivates people "to take on the costs of becoming activists" (Hutchison, 2012, p. 114).

Spirituality as a political force of harm

Spiritual ideas, religious beliefs, and theological discourses are embe-

ded in specific socio-political and cultural contexts and therefore collude with or sustain systems of knowledge that oppress or liberate (Fiorenza, 2002). As evident throughout history and today, spirituality and/or religion can be used to justify, legitimate, critique, or challenge any particular social order, sometimes challenging and supporting elements of oppression simultaneously.

Feminists have tirelessly documented how religions such as Christianity have long histories of misogyny. Connecting feminist critique with social change, they detail countless religious traditions that contradict moral imperatives for justice and impede the full inclusion and flourishing of women in religious ritual, doctrine, and organizational structure (Christ, 2007; Comas-Díaz, 2008; Daly, 1973; Faver, 2000; Fiorenza, 2002; Ruether, 1975, 1983). Religions have also been instrumental in the social construction of heterosexism as the exalted norm, fostering homophobia, and marginalizing people based on sexual orientation and/or gender identity (Canda & Furman, 1999; Fiorenza, 2002; Meinert, 2009; Moss & Thompson, 2007). Acting on religious beliefs, people have promoted hatred, discrimination, per-

secution, criminalization, and violence, including murder, against sexual and gender minorities.

Throughout the world, spirituality and/or religion have been, and continue to be, sources of conflict, oppression, and social injustice on a grand scale, fomenting wars, crusades and inquisitions, fanaticism, global terrorism, massacres, and other forms of violence (Derezotes, Cowley, Thompson, Shields, & Morgan, 2008; Meinert, 2009; Ver Beek, 2000). Institutionalized religion has had a propensity to rationalize and prop up oppressive regimes and corrupt leaders (Hughey, 2005; Nadeau, 2002) although liberation theology and figures such as Archbishop Oscar Romero have fruitfully challenged the alignment of the Catholic Church with the elite in Latin America (Levine, 1988). Religion has been paramount in spreading colonialism and imperialism across the globe, imposing foreign structures and spiritual beliefs on Indigenous cultures, stealing and devastating Indigenous lands, and eradicating entire peoples and cultures (Baskin & Sinclair, 2015; Blackstock, 2009; Davis, 2001, 2009; Haug, 2005; Pesut et al., 2009; Pewewardy & Almeida, 2014; Ver Beek, 2000; Yellow Bird & Gray, 2008).

Social work complicity in colonialism

Social work as a profession in Canada has been deeply implicated in both historical and contemporary manifestations of colonialism and injustice, for example, in colonial processes of oppressing Indigenous Peoples (Baskin, 2016b, 2018; Baskin & Sinclair, 2015; Blackstock, 2009). Social workers were active participants in state policy, ordering the placement of Indigenous children in residential schools as recently as the 1960s (Blackstock, 2009; Sinha et al., 2011). As participants in the attempted cultural genocide of Indigenous Peoples, they removed children from their communities and ignored the deplorable conditions and treatment of children in residential schools, including abuse of every kind (Baskin, 2018; Baskin & Sinclair, 2015; Blackstock, 2009; Canada, Erasmus, & Dussault, 1996; Sinclair, 2004; Sinha et al., 2011).

Colonial values and practices persist in today's social welfare services. Mainstream child welfare systems continue to perceive the well-being of children as distinct from the well-being of families and communities (Baikie, 2009; Baskin, 2018; Baskin &

Sinclair, 2015; Sinclair, 2004). According to the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada, more Indigenous children are now in the care of the child welfare system than at the height of the residential school system (Baskin, 2018). Furthermore, many mainstream social services apply the individual deficit discourse to understand Indigenous Peoples' troubles, refusing to consider colonization, racism, and patriarchy as structural factors that shape people's lives (Allan & Smylie, 2015; Baskin, 2018; Baskin & Sinclair, 2015; Tamburro, 2013). Due to the impact of colonization, Indigenous people are overrepresented in the social services, child welfare, and criminal justice systems in Canada (Baskin & Sinclair, 2015; Harris, 2006). Assuming the universality of Eurocentric worldviews and practices, social workers fail to honour Indigenous Peoples' beliefs, values, and spirituality and thus cannot justly or adequately respond to their needs (Baskin, 2016b; Baskin & Sinclair, 2015).

Examining the historical origins of social welfare in Canada, social work scholars trace the role of colonial and racial ideologies in the development of the social work profession and early social welfare measures

(Johnstone, 2018; Lee & Ferrer, 2014; O'Connell, 2013). This scholarship challenges dominant master narratives of social work as a benevolent profession and reveals it as a colonial mechanism that worked through interlocking systems of domination to consolidate the supremacy of Christian, White, patriarchal, capitalist, and settler positions that remained intact by the very exclusion, racialization, and pathologization of the poor, persons with disabilities, people of colour, and Indigenous Peoples.

In linking the historical with the present day, these scholars challenge currently widespread beliefs about the history of social work and the overwhelmingly beneficial role of spirituality and/or religion in social welfare programs and social activism. Highlighting the role of ideology and power-over mechanisms of social control, they point to how social workers may be complicit in “re-enforcing and re-producing” those accounts of social work that ultimately exclude and marginalize particular communities (Lee & Ferrer, 2014, p. 16). Grappling with history, which is alive in social work today, is a profoundly political project with significant implications for spirituality and social justice. Thus,

an unflinching examination of social work's history and ongoing participation in colonization and oppression constitutes a spiritual ethical imperative.

Moral relations of accountability and action for change

In terms of ethical social justice practice in a deeply unjust world, a pivotal question emerges: How can spirituality and/or religion as a force for liberation be distinguished from its application as a force of oppression (intentional or not) (Weinberg, 2010a)? How can we as social workers support a proactive ongoing practice of questioning whether and how we might be imposing spiritual and/or religious beliefs *before* we have done harm? The social work literature raises concerns about spirituality and/or religion in relation to the infringement of people's rights and the potential for the imposition of agency and professionals' values, beliefs, and practices on service users (Sheridan, 2009; Sherr, Single-tary, & Rogers, 2009; Todd & Coholic, 2007).

Apart from critical social work scholarship, there is scant discussion of how we as social workers take up our moral responsibility to reflect on

our place in relations of power, injustice, and inequality. Our inner and outer worlds are indivisible, and the individual and the social can be understood as necessarily coexistent (Frost & Hoggett, 2008). An ongoing practice of reflection on social location, values, attitudes, and socially embedded practices signifies an opportunity for continuing spiritual growth. For example, Indigenous scholars suggest that a sound way of decolonizing the insidiously present mindset of colonial values is to face into the harm of colonization, deliberately shedding defences of rationalization that help tolerate the great harm done in the past that is still alive in the present (Baskin & Sinclair, 2015; Blackstock, 2009; Harris, 2006; Hart, 2008; Sinclair, 2004).

Michael Hart (2008) recognizes the difficulties inherent in challenging prevailing worldviews, given their unconscious and taken-for-granted nature, without intentionally engaging in concerted efforts to unearth habitual ways of perceiving the world and our relative privilege and disadvantage in it. Such unearthing is vital to living a spiritually-based social justice ethic. A central force of spirituality involves openness to the realities of others by attending to their experience, listening with care

to the language of their perspective and worldview, and bringing a “deeply political” compassion to bear on their struggles (Spelman, 1997, p. 83). We must seek a place where “we cannot compromise with, tolerate, live with or agree to injustice because to do so would be to betray what is innermost and deepest in ourselves” (Casaldáliga & Vigil, 1994, p. 23).

A critically informed understanding of spirituality and/or religion can provide the methodology for both dismantling the investment in preserving versions of our social work role as noble and for overcoming the aversion to taking risks, thereby awakening from the numbing effects of individualism and indifference (Baskin, 2016b; Williams & Briskman, 2015). Such endeavours necessarily involve examining emotions such as compassion, which may be well-intentioned but simultaneously so individualized that they are disconnected from a social justice orientation, tinged still by colonial ideals (Bonnycastle, 2006; Harris, 2006).

In acknowledging our ignorance and complicity in oppressive power relations, the claim of good or misguided intentions or ignorance of wrongdoing does not absolve us of moral responsibility for the conse-

quences of harm (Blackstock, 2009; Harris, 2006). In relation to colonization, Cindy Blackstock (2009) suggests that we interrogate what we believe constitutes harmful social work, given that social workers often wrongly assume that incidents of harm will be obvious and “singular rather than systemic and that codes of ethics, professional training and standards, and anti-oppressive social work” will prevent harm (p. 32). The traditional view of social work ethics, with its focus on the one-on-one social worker-service user relationship, will significantly constrain our understanding of how harm to others is done through the imposition of spiritual and/or religious beliefs and practices. These beliefs and practices often underlie the moral codes governing professional as well as personal conduct.

Another imperative of a critically informed spirituality oriented toward social justice and collective well-being is to bring into closer focus the power relations that constrain our ability as social workers to stand in solidarity with those we are ethically supposed to serve. Part of this interrogation involves recognizing how liberal democracies “do the work of social distancing and denial” through the creation of hierarchies

(Powell, 2003, p. 124). Indeed, part of the function of the liberal state is “to create an impermeable membrane which is resistant to disturbance” from the distress of fellow citizens (Hoggett, 2006, p. 151). Admittedly, the challenge to critical reflection is in figuring out just how this social distancing and denial is accomplished. In systems of domination and oppression such as racism, heterosexism, and classism, status hierarchies can operate just below the level of consciousness to shield us as social workers from fully facing into the suffering of others, to say nothing of our own.

One way that distancing and denial of suffering is accomplished is through professional discourses that function to construct service users as “other than” ourselves as social workers. When social work discourses assume objective or neutral expert positions, they mask the structural power relations that shape our experiences of group identity that can work to obscure our interconnectedness. Such discourses create artificial boundaries that operate “silently and stealthily to contain us within politically ‘safe’ boundaries” in our practice (Bricker-Jenkins, 1994, p. 19). Furthermore, in the context of a present deepening of structu-

ral inequalities and divisions among social groups and classes across the world, the suppression of voices with lived experience by governments and political forces like neoliberalism and globalization contributes to a shrinking capacity to develop “a solidaristic notion of compassion” with fellow citizens (Hoggett, 2006, p. 146). A critically informed spirituality may help us as social workers to engage with others, particularly service users, and to reflect on the complex task of figuring out how the everyday workings of society create and maintain hierarchies of difference, which in turn create distance between social groups and people and constrain possibilities for building a better world.

A spirituality of hope and liberation

Perhaps the question posed by Brazilian educator and philosopher Paulo Freire (1994) is relevant here, querying how spirituality grounded in a politics of hope and liberation can orient social action toward building communities of justice. The social work and related literature offers insights into how spiritual perspectives might strengthen social justice practice. Consonant with critical social work theory, justice-seeking spirituality affirms the indivisibility of

inner transformation and outer action for social change (Freire, 1994; Giuliano, 2005; Shahjahan, 2004; Sheridan, 2012; Zimmerman et al., 2010). A socially oriented, living spirituality is an embodied praxis of daily life manifested in words and actions toward others (Poonamallee, 2011; van den Blink, 2008).

Indigenous scholars have been at the forefront of understanding the importance of engaging the whole person in learning: the spiritual, affective, intellectual, and embodied self (Absolon, 2009, 2016; Baskin, 2016a, 2016b; Graveline, 1998). In teaching and learning about social justice, a spiritual stance can be seen as a methodology for attaining social justice (Freire, 1994; Hanh, 1992; hooks, 1999; West, 1993b). Paulo Freire, whose book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1994) defined the field of critical pedagogy, and Martin Luther King, Jr. both emphasized the ethical imperative of opening to the other and the world with love. Each in his way recognized that liberation for all depends on coming together in communion and mutual struggle to learn from and understand one another. For Freire, a dialectical relationship exists between justice and love (Lange, 1998), or “‘just love’ or ‘loving justice’” (Fioren-

za, 2002, p. 1091), and love is an act of bravery as well as the motivation for social solidarity. Like Freire, Martin Luther King, Jr. speaks of love that transcends the sentimental or personal and becomes a regenerative force for transformation (King, 1963). In political activism for progressive social change, this notion of love requires critical questioning of “why the world is as it is” and answering action to contest the “normality that dehumanises our spirit” (Morley & Ife, 2002, p. 75).

In social change theory, scholars emphasize the need for implementing spiritual and contemplative practices such as mindfulness as modes of knowing that enhance capacity for effective and ethical social justice activism (Battle, 2007; Fischer, 2010; Sheridan, 2012; Todd, 2009; Zimmerman et al., 2010). In this context it is worth noting that Indigenous traditions and ceremonies are integral to daily life as well as in healing from colonial violence (Baskin, 2016a, 2016b; Hart, 1996; Linklater, 2014). Spiritual practice can help activists to counteract such hazards as the overtaking of destructive emotions like anger and frustration; demonizing the other; acting unconsciously from prejudice and fear (Todd, 2009); and burning out or fa-

lling into polarizing positions (Sheridan, 2012). Speaking of her experience of Buddhist practice, Helen Tagesson (2006), drawing on the work of Karl Jaspers, insists that spiritual practice and social movement activism are in an active relationship that informs and propels the actor forward. Spiritual practice helps us to meet ourselves at the edge of individual being and the being of others, able to contemplate pain without being swept away (Tagesson, 2006), or struggle without striking back or seeking revenge even in the midst of political failure (Burtchaell, 1988).

Intentional spirituality attempts to understand the world from multiple and often conflicting viewpoints, to discern the nature of suffering and injustice, and engage in the world in the interstices between individual and communal being. Moreover, experiences of genuine dialogue, reciprocity, and respectful co-involvement can produce feelings of love, care, community, and transcendence (North, 2006; Siegler, 2010; Stanczak, 2006) that in turn spur deeper relationship with others. The learning and hope that comes from spiritual growth and social justice activism can mutually fortify each other, deeply revitalizing and sustaining a

sense of purpose and meaning. Spirituality in critical social work has the potential to open up fresh and creative ways of seeing, being, and doing in social justice-focused social work.

Concluding thoughts

The resurgence of interest in spirituality and/or religion in social work over the past 30 years has been shaped by a diversity of knowledge, theologies, and perspectives from within and outside of social work's borders. Radical social and political thought and social movements have deepened our understanding of spirituality and social justice (Ferguson & Lavalette, 2007; Webb, 2010), including such influences as Indigenous knowledge, Afrocentrism, the theology of liberation, feminist theology and spirituality, Buddhism and mindfulness, ecofeminism and ecological social work, and the inspiration and integrity of such inspired leaders as Paulo Freire and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. All of these enriching worldviews and perspectives offer spiritual ways of seeing and being that attend to "the divine spark within all life" (Faver, 2009, p. 362), and their synergy would merit further study of the liberating impacts on social justice-focused social work.

In this article I have outlined the foundational ideas informing the edited collection *Spirituality and Social Justice: Spirit in the Political Quest for a Just World*. Spirituality does indeed have political dimensions and the value of social work as a profession pivots on its nature as an ethical-political endeavour. Spirituality rooted in a vision of collective well-being foregrounds the political dimensions of the spiritual, affording us the vital conception of social justice as a sacred and necessary condition for all of life.

It is my view that a spiritually-based social justice framework can inform activism for all social workers no matter where they practise, supporting the ideal of fairness, equality, equity, respect for diversity, and inclusion as a sacred condition for human dignity. It can foster social work as political practice, expose the undermining of ethical commitments by neoliberal policy regimes, and prompt a reckoning of social work's role as a profession in maintaining social relations of power. Spiritually-based ethical values can generate receptivity to witnessing people's suffering and discerning the roots of this suffering with the intention to act for social justice, individually and collectively. As social workers we can figure out ways to

stand with people in solidarity, generating possibilities that locate us within a larger collective force of resistance and actions for meaningful social change—meaningful from diverse perspectives. A critically informed spirituality can open up more willingness to take risks on any number of levels in speech and action. It might also help us work with the tension sometimes experienced between pursuing the core value of social justice and practising skills such as non-judgment, consensus-building, and collaboration. Not incidentally, critical spirituality has the capacity to strengthen moral and ethical distinctions and actions, sustaining all of us in our lifetimes of helping as the doing of social and ecological justice.

The interface of spirituality and social justice is in both theory and practice complex, multifaceted, and multi-directional. Spirituality can inspire social activism and engagement in social justice struggles can deepen spirituality. A spiritual self that concerns itself with the social systems and institutions that generate structural violence and social suffering must be conceived in social and political terms. Although the spiritual self is at once social and political, I believe that it cannot be conflated

exclusively with only those dimensions. Rather it is spirit as Mystery that infuses us with the courage to come alive in that space between self and other, where each is neither entirely separate nor completely merged, neither other nor the same.

Notes

1 See, for example, Absolon, 2016; Allen, 2007; Baskin, 2007, 2016a, 2016b; Belcher & Mellinger, 2016; Besthorn, 2003; Butot, 2007; Cerny, 2004; Coates, 2003a, 2004; Coates, Graham, & Swartzentruber, with Ouellette, 2007; Coates & McKay, 1995; Coholic, 2003; Donaldson, 2016; Donaldson & Mayer, 2014; Dudziak, 2010; Este, 2007; Este & Bernard, 2006; Gray, 2008; Hart, 2002; Hill & Donaldson, 2012; Lavalée, 2010; Lee & Barrett, 2007; Moss & Thompson, 2007; Nash & Stewart, 2005; Prior & Quinn, 2012; Proffitt, 2010; Sheridan, 2013; Thompson, 2016; Todd, 2007; Weinberg, 2010a, 2010b; Wiebe, 2010.

2 Keating states that Gloria E. Anzaldúa was first using this term in the early 1980s, developing her theory of spiritual activism.

3 Critical social work theories include feminism, structural social

work, anti-racism, and anti-oppression. Although there are significant differences between them, I focus on critical social work as a body of knowledge that names and seeks to change relations of power in all areas of society—interpersonal relationships, institutions, social structures and processes, language and discourse, and so forth.

4 The term *structural violence* was introduced by sociologist Johan Galtung and used by liberation theologians in the 1960s. Pierre Bourdieu and Arthur Kleinman are two influential scholars who have promulgated the concept of *social suffering* in their respective fields of sociology and anthropology and global health and social medicine.

5 These influences include, but are not limited to, Indigenous knowledge (Absolon, 2016; Baskin, 2016a, 2016b; Battiste, 2000; Battiste & Youngblood-Henderson, 2000; Bruyere, 2007; Cajete, 1994; Deloria, 1999; Hart, 2002, 2014); Afrocentrism (Bernard & Smith, 2018; Este, 2007; Este & Bernard, 2006); the theology of liberation (Aquino, 1993; Brown, 1990; Burtchaell, 1988; Gill, 2002; Gutiérrez, 1973; Levine, 1988; Peña, 1994; Támez, 1989, Welch, 1985; Yoder, 1990); feminist theology and

spirituality (Allen, 1986; Christ, 1989, 2007; Christ & Plaskow, 1979; Daly, 1973; Davis & Weaver, 1982; El Saadawi, 1980; Eller, 1991; Mantin, 2003; Martin, 1993; Plaskow, 1990; Plaskow & Christ, 1989; Ruether, 1975, 1983; Soelle, 1984; Sojourner, 1995; Spretnak, 1982; Wade-Gayles, 1995; Williams, 1993); Buddhism and mindfulness (Crowder, 2016; London, 2009; Øvrelid, 2008; Tagesson, 2006; Todd, 2009; Trammel, 2017; Yellow Bird, 2010); ecofeminism and ecological social work (Adams, 1993; Besthorn, 2000, 2003, 2011; Besthorn & McMillen, 2002; Christ, 1989; Coates, 2003a, 2003b, 2004; Coates & Gray, 2012; Diamond & Orenstein, 1990; Faver, 2009; Fischer, 2010; Gattens-Robinson, 1994; Gebara, 1999; Gray & Coates, 2012; Hanrahan, 2011; Hart, 2002; Hoff & McNutt, 1994; Mack-Canty, 2004; Plant, 1989; Plumwood, 1993, 2008; Ruether, 1992, 1996; Sandilands, 1993; Spretnak, 1990; Warren, 1997, 2000; Zapf, 2005, 2009); and inspired leaders such as Paulo Freire (Freire, 1994; Lange, 1998; Morley & Ife, 2002; Stenberg, 2006) and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (King, 1963; Powell, 2003; Rathbun, 1968).

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