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Weaving the strands of spirituality in recovery from violence

The purpose of this paper is to share the "Community of care" approach applied within the Westside Counselling Service; a service that evolved from an affiliation with the researcher and the Massey Community Church in West Auckland in the period from 2000 to 2013. A case study approach was employed to ascertain how effective this model was for working with Māori women whose lives had been impacted by severe domestic violence. For most of these women, violence and abuse spanned throughout their childhood, adolescence, and adult lives, flowing down into the lives of their children. The "Community of care" approach was developed to address health holistically, and equip women, whose lives were immersed in domestic violence, to fully recover physically, mentally and spiritually. It offers a holistic, encompassing approach that provides ongoing support, awareness and the skills needed to integrate back into the wider community. This article focusses on the spiritual aspect of the programme, namely the exploration of the relational side of spirituality, the space in-between where social work, health care, counselling and community development meet.

Key words: domestic violence, counselling, community, women, New Zealand, Māori.

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Pletenje duhovnih niti pri okrevanju po izkušnji nasilja

Namen članka je predstaviti idejo "skrbne skupnosti", ki jo uporabljajo v svetovalnici Westside Counselling Service. Gre za svetovalnico, ki se je razvila iz sodelovanja med raziskovalko in cerkveno skupnostjo v Masseyju v zahodnem Aucklandu med letoma 2000 in 2013. Na podlagi študije primera so ugotovili, kako učinkovit je bil ta model pri delu z maorskimi ženskami, katerih življenje je zaznamovalo hudo nasilje v družini. Večina teh žensk je doživljala nasilje in zlorabo vse otroštvo, mladostništvo in odraslo dobo, deležni pa so ju bili tudi njihovi otroci. Cilja ideje "skrbne skupnosti" sta bila: obravnavati zdravje celostno (holistično) in dati ženskam, ki so bile žrtve nasilja v družini, moč za telesno, duševno in duhovno okrevanje. Gre za holistični, inkluzivni pristop, ki zagotavlja trajno podporo, ozaveščanje in pridobivanje potrebnih spretnosti za reintegracijo v širšo skupnost. Članek se osredotoča na duhovno plat programa, predvsem na raziskovanje vloge duhovnosti na odnose in na stičišče socialnega dela, zdravstva, svetovanja in razvijanja skupnosti.

Ključne besede: nasilje v družini, svetovanje, skupnost, ženske, Nova Zelandija, Maori.

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Prologue

Spirit in action vignette one

When Faye entered the first class of the Master of Social Practice programme, "I sensed a strange sense of knowing and connection". Faye was exceptional in her passion about the topic she focused on and her ability to, not only jump over, but gracefully fly over any obstacles that blocked her

way. The first assignment she did for the Spirituality course was beyond assessment. She facilitated a silent group presentation with a couple of colleagues which enabled spirit to manifest the room. I knew that this was so outside the rigid boundaries of academic assessment, yet it so clearly spoke to all required learning outcomes and deeply touched all participants. She was able to manifest the unspoken with such clarity, and create a context of empowerment where others were able to experience it. There was nothing spooky about it, it was incredibly deep and the whole class “got it”, not only on the intellectual level, but truly got it with their whole mind, body and spirit. This transformative experience prompted me to support this exceptional work being completed and disseminated. (Ksenija Napan)

Introduction

The article focusses on the spiritual aspect of an exceptional, very interesting and quite miraculous piece of community research, conducted by Faye Pouesi as part of her thesis, required for the completion of the Master of Social Practice at Unitec, Institute of Technology, New Zealand. Ksenija Napan’s role was to support the academic part of the research, enable successful acceptance of this unusual piece of work within the academic community, and further disseminate it through books, articles and other means of collegial sharing. The whole case study can be found at the Unitec research bank, as referenced at the end of this article. Here we briefly depict the development of the Westside Counselling Service, which utilised the Community of care approach in working with women and their families who have experienced brutal violence in their relationships, also emphasising the spiritual component of their healing process. We believed that publishing a separate article on the spiritual aspect of the whole venture would be useful as we found that although the thesis received a high mark, within a traditional academic context these spiritual events were suppressed and not explicitly prioritised, as a thesis needs to be assessed by material and measurable outcomes. However, these spiritual, transformative and miraculous events were at the heart of the programme and although they may be difficult to explain, without them the programme would not have been as effective as it was.

Spirit in action vignette two

Prior to the establishment of the Westside Counselling Service, Faye had a vision of an elderly woman, somewhat hunched over, picking up what seemed to be dried up seeds from the ground, and placing them in her apron that she had folded “up and over”, to act as a pocket or carrier for the seeds she was gathering. What was also evident in the vision was that the ground in which the seeds were being gathered from was quite parched, and in parts cracked and open. The elderly woman took her time in gathering, and sorting the seeds. Once she had gathered them she took them into a large barn type building, where she began to sort through them. She placed a lot of care in the way in which she handled them. As she sorted through them, she placed them on large trays. It

appeared from the way she arranged the seeds that each tray held different types of seed; some were in more need of care and attention than others. The vision also revealed a different place to where the old woman had gathered her seeds. It was a large field in which there were many workers, some were breaking in the ground, some were digging, and others were planting and watering. All in all, it became evident that the vision was about the restoration of the seeds that the old woman had gathered, and the care it took in order for the seeds to reproduce, once they were planted and harvested.

“Te Puawaitanga o te Ngākau” translated means “the blossoming of the heart and soul”. The vision that was given to Faye regarding “Te Puawaitanga o te Ngākau” is that of seeds that have been planted, and as they have germinated, grown and blossomed, they have produced more seeds, which in turn will be planted in good soil that will eventually produce sturdy plants.

Te Puawaitanga o te Ngākau also spoke to her about the “blossoming” of her heart, and the hearts of the women she has had the privilege to work alongside over the past decade, while establishing the Westside Counselling Service. It has been a humbling experience to bear witness to women from all ages and different ethnicities grow and blossom, out of backgrounds that have been immersed in violence of all forms. It is therefore appropriate and humbling that this research be named Te Puawaitanga o te Ngākau.

The “Community of care” approach evolved from an affiliation with the Massey Community Church Board and Faye, over fifteen years. The Massey Community Church’s commitment to support the establishment of a community counselling service has been fundamental in creating a community of care for women and children exposed to violence.

Over time, as women accessed the counselling service, it became evident that in order to address their needs, programmes would have to be developed that could address and manage complex issues resulting from brutal acts of violence. Initially the counselling service offered only individual counselling. Over the years, however, the service has diversified and now includes several group-based initiatives for men, women, and young people on low incomes.

The growth and development of the service necessitated a safe empowering environment be established that would provide women with a sense of accessibility and connection. Westside closed its doors in 2015 but the recovery programmes and other community projects continue through the Massey Community trust and Massey Community church.

The setting up of the Westside Counselling Service and the consequent development of programmes derived from Faye’s work as a counsellor and group facilitator working in West Auckland in the early 1990s, and encompasses her own personal journey emerging out of a life lived within a violent context into one that is affirming and empowering. Over the years, a Community of care, equipped with carers and an ethos of “aroha”¹, provided unconditional support for women to begin to address the issues that have impacted their lives. It provided an environment whereby women could come and be together to just sit, talk,

¹ Aroha – love in the widest possible sense.

laugh or cry and/or take part in the programmes provided. Ultimately, many of the women chose to begin to access therapy and/or the programmes offered but there was no requirement that necessitated attendance at therapy sessions or groups. Sometimes, for women coming out of backgrounds where they have been exposed to horrific violence, the initial need is to be among people who care, and to find safety in order for them to begin to relate to something outside of what they have known.

This work necessitates more than a mechanistic problem solving approach. Engaging on a spiritual level and providing a context where participants can grow holistically has been an essential feature of the approach, to the point that miraculous funding opportunities emerged.

Spirit in action vignette three

In the first half of 2000, Faye was contacted by an Auckland businessman who asked: if she was able to do something significant within her field of work, what it would be? She spent an hour opening her heart to him about a vision to pioneer an alternative approach to working with women, in particular, Māori women and families, who were not accessing existing counselling practices for issues concerning violence. The meeting ended with him committing to finance a substantial amount of money over a period of three years to begin the process of establishing a service that would provide face-to-face counselling to low income families and individuals, at no cost, as well as develop programmes for women exposed to domestic and intimate partner violence.

The project had a huge impact on the whole community and principles of mutuality and reciprocity were acted on in practice, enabling women to heal, and in some cases, enabling the perpetrators of family violence to engage in the process through restorative engagements.

Beginning connections

Within the first twelve months of opening, Faye developed and piloted an eight week women's support group, with the first group mainly composed of Pākehā (non-Maori) women. This initiated the emergence of another group that formed the foundation for the Living Free from Violence programme (LFFV), launched in early 2002. It was expected that the LFFV programme would help manage the referrals for the increasingly high numbers of Māori women accessing the counselling service at the time. The women who registered in the LFFV group were mainly of Māori heritage with histories of intergenerational abuse. Most of the group participants had experienced brutal violence.

Spirit in action vignette four

As women entered the group it was noticed by both facilitators that some were apprehensive about being there. There was an impression of

heaviness, associated with one aspect of *whakama*², as described by Metge (1997). A feeling similar to that of someone carrying a huge burden, also entered the room and seemed to linger in the air as the group programme began. Karakia gave a welcome and opened the proceedings and followed with introductions offering the women an opportunity to expand on their *whakapapa*, should they wish to. After the introductions, a facilitator oriented the group to the venue, discussed group rules and health and safety issues.

While this was happening, the co-facilitator (and subsequent researcher) who was still aware of the feeling of heaviness that entered the room at the beginning, was struggling (unbeknown to the group participants) to process an overwhelming feeling to tell the group some of her own story. Instead of proceeding with the planned programme intuitively, she began sharing about her own journey out of violence. As she shared, her colleague and she became aware that a new feeling started filling the space that previously separated them from the group participants. The heaviness that overflowed into the room when the women first entered was diminishing, and there was a sense of a merging together that felt somewhat like a transcendent experience that wrapped itself around everyone in the room, that seemed bigger than the individuals there. It was as if a spirit of oneness entered the room and enabled some heart to heart sharing that “professionalism” often deprives us from accessing.

As Jordan (1991, p. 82) writes,

When empathy and concern flow both ways, there is an intense affirmation of the self and, paradoxically, a transcendence of the self, a sense of self as part of a larger relational unit. The interaction allows for a relaxation of the sense of separateness; the other’s well-being becomes as important as one’s own.

The sharing of Faye’s personal narrative was not planned as part of the group process. She describes her experience of telling her story as sensing something beyond herself, inviting her to spill the beans on what she had come out of, and a “knowing” that was present, perhaps similar to what is described by Lewis, Amini & Lannon (2000, p. 63), as “*limbic resonance* – a symphony of mutual exchange and internal adaption”. They write that as two people have eye contact there is a connection at a neural level, an intimate meeting that brings a mutual enhancement to both parties, difficult though this might be to articulate in words. They describe the leap of recognition with this, and the opposite feeling of deadness when you look into eyes where this does not occur, where perhaps only one party is prepared to engage at this level.

A further phenomenon that helps to explain what happened with respect to connection is that of the relevance theory. As Meadowcroft (2011) explains,

² According to Sachdev (1990) *whakama* is a psychosocial and behavioural construct in the New Zealand Maori which does not have any exact equivalent in Western societies although shame, self-abasement, feeling inferior, inadequate and with self-doubt, shyness, excessive modesty and withdrawal describe some aspects of the concept. It is an important construct, in order to understand the interaction of the Maori with each other and with the Caucasian New Zealander, the behaviour of the Maori in cross-cultural settings, and the clinical presentations of some Maori patients. »Waiho ma te whakama e patu!« means »Leave him alone he is punished by whakama“ (Maori saying).

for communication to be effective it must be relevant to the listener. If the information is perceived to be irrelevant, the person will disengage. This is also the case if the information is too far beyond the reach of their understanding or comprehension. There is also a responsibility on the part of the one communicating to present information in such a way that it is meaningful. The sense of meaning and purpose is essential for spiritual connection. In the case of Faye sharing her story, there was something familiar, yet new and engaging. The group participants were able to relate to it, it was beyond the professional relationship, it opened the possibility for a human encounter and some real heart to heart communication. They became engaged and aware that there was someone with a shared background, but with a story of difference, of hope for the possibility of change. They resonated with a language and a way of being they could connect with, and it transcended a professional helping relationship.

The telling of Faye's personal narrative, vulnerability and shaming experiences provided a vehicle that effectively penetrated and broke down the heaviness, which could qualify for shame and ambivalence, which had entered the room with the women. Carswell (2009, p. 1) states:

Paradoxically, shame arises in the context of relationships, and it is through relationships that its effects are diminished or overcome. There is an ambivalence associated with shame, with similarities to the children's game "hide and seek". Those struggling with shame reflect both the desire to protect and conceal the vulnerable self, and also the yearning to be sought and found.

Additionally, Jordan, Walker & Hartling (2004) note that as people seek connection it is common to experience uncomfortable emotions such as fear, shame and anger. The women in the group were faced with the choice of if they should stay or go. This dilemma continued throughout the process of the group as challenges to building deeper levels of trust occurred. A careful balancing of challenge and support by the facilitators was essential here. Deep spiritual connection and alignment enabled this balance to emerge.

Spirit in action vignette five

As the women began to connect and open up with each other, trust formed and eventually their stories unfolded, as the yearning to be found gradually overcame the strong desire to hide, in what seemed like the safety of self protection. It was as if the "penny had dropped", as they opened up and shared each other's narratives, making links to harrowing descriptions of each other's journeys and furthermore, told stories that had been hidden and never shared before. Each shared story deepened the spiritual connection and enabled the healing process to start.

Surrey (1991) notes that recognising the growth and change in people, along with ongoing connection, implies a process of attunement to change, including the ability to face fear and choose to stay present in a relationship. As the women continued to meet and commit, not just to their own change, but also to each other, they began to make life changing choices over time that

resulted in them taking responsibility for their lives. For some, their choices led to them getting their children out of care and back home with them. These were families whose intergenerational histories were of children growing up in state care. As the women grew in self understanding and awareness, they increased their capacity to make better choices for themselves and their families and started to take more responsibility and control over their futures (Kaplan, 1999). This effectively broke the cycles of intergenerational violence often linked with poverty, addictions and isolation, which they had been part of.

The freedom for being spontaneous in response to sensing, and/or knowing what was needed in the room was an ongoing occurrence throughout the Living Free from Violence group. There was an eight week group format to follow including guidelines and safety procedures. Both facilitators agreed that there would also be a space made available should change for the programme need to occur. Allowing for such a space opened the way for occurrences such as that of the special transcendent experience mentioned above, which could be described as an aspect of spirituality. It also allowed for the co-creation of the programme by participants, which resulted in engagement and a sense of ownership and agency in the process of recovery.

Establishing connections

A key feature in establishing connections with the women in the Living Free from Violence group proved to be the sharing of the facilitator's personal narrative: of her journey out of violence. Subsequently, it established more than just a connection, it penetrated the hearts of these women, and simultaneously diminished the heaviness that had previously entered and enveloped the room. As Walker (2004, p. 9) notes,

In the relational-cultural model, connection is both an encounter and active process, and its fundamental quality is respect. This conception of respect is akin to the concept of unconditional positive regard, emphasised in person-centred models ... to experience connection is to participate in a relationship that invites exposure, curiosity, and openness to possibility.

In addition, Pouesi (2012) considers that there is an understanding that women from violent backgrounds have common ground that provides them with an inner knowing of where each have journeyed. There is also a connection they make with one another that cannot be seen, only experienced. Conversely, the unspoken declaration that happens amongst women who experience such violence affirms one another's journeys. Mearns and Cooper (2005, p. 47) noted that, "Moments of intimacy and relational depth often occur without words". In addition, in the following extract from Mearns and Cooper (2005, p. 45) there is a definite sense that the client here has made a connection, although they do not explicitly mention connection at all:

It is an amazing feeling to feel so understood. I knew she (the therapist) understood me deeply. It wasn't just that she understood what I was talking about – it was that she understood how it feels to be me ... what she was

sharing was not about her own life – what she was sharing was herself, in relation to me.

Furthermore, Briere and Scott (2006) note, that safety is an integral factor to enabling clients to “let their guard down and experience the relative luxury of introspection and connection” (p. 71). In addition, Olthuis (2006, p. 225) asserts that:

When the letting be and reaching-out are mutual, we are in connection, touching and being touched, simultaneously giving and receiving self. We meet neither distant nor fused but in contact, connected in an embrace without demands and without controls, whose only safeguard is mutual trust, an embrace open to finding its own way in hope.

Olthuis (2006) also writes of the delicacy required in building healthy relationships, and how this is impacted upon by all manners of “elements”, including the disposition of participants and how well they work together, heart impulses, and the risks inherent within time and space. Furthermore, building a space where people can be with each other comfortably is required, without the challenges of resentment and resistance (Olthuis, 2006).

As Sandage (2006, p. 235) notes with respect to liminal space, opportunities are created for spiritual transformation “through the humility of unknowing and the courage of authentic self-hood”. He further notes this process is not always linear, as the inauthentic self is dismantled. Surrey (1991) notes that the creation, building and sustaining of deep relationships is not a straight forward process, but may include times of vulnerability when feelings may overwhelm, requiring a commitment to stay connected. The above is particularly true of the women who have accessed the Westside Counselling Services over the past decade. As they grew in awareness, gaining an understanding and insight into the impact that violence has on one’s life, they became more open and willing to enter into the community. As Herman (1997, p. 197) notes:

Helplessness and isolation are the core experiences of psychological trauma. Empowerment and reconnection are the core experiences of recovery.

In relation to this, Surrey (1991, p. 174) states:

Only as we value our connections and see that maintaining and deepening them are crucial to our development, will we begin to take the risks necessary to empower our relationships.

The process from disconnection to connection was not straightforward for the women in the community of care. As Walker (2004) notes, increasing connection and finding a voice can also bring conflict, as individual preferences and differences arise, that need to be negotiated. The Community of Care approach enabled women to stay engaged, in spite of this. Walker (2004) suggests that this ability relates to the quality of trust and relationship that holds the group together and provides a safe and stable environment for this, sometimes fraught, process. As Jordan, Walker & Hartling (2004) suggest, disconnection and connection sometimes interweave. Embracing it, negotiating it and accepting it as normal aspects of growth, rather than shutting it down or suppressing it, enables spirituality to enter the room and a natural healing process to occur.

Spirit in action vignette six

During the process, it seemed that we have been guided and watched by angels. From the vision, to the initial funding proposal, through feelings of the transcendence in the therapy room, to unexpected donations of money, time, services and resources, by tradesmen from the neighbourhood. Also, an amazing transformation of the church itself occurred with an enlarged heart space, allowing acceptance and an increasingly non-discriminatory attitude to flourish.

Over time the identification of needs prompted talks between the Massey Community Church and the Westside Counselling Services to find ways to address some of the gaps in certain areas. The weekly Massey Community Church newsletter was used to access resources for basic needs. Items such as blankets, food, bedding and furniture were donated from the church community, as well as from residents of Massey. Financial sponsors from the community also pledged their support, some of whom donated large amounts of money for families struggling to pay power bills or rent. In addition, a bakery drop of excess goods at Massey Community Church twice a week, assisted families in providing lunches for their children, and on many occasions their goods substituted for an evening meal. The weekly distribution of the newsletter to the church community is still in use today; so too is the commitment from the church community to support and stand alongside the recovery programmes and community initiatives.

We humbly acknowledge that in this work we are not alone. It was work that needed to be borne and done, in this specific setting at this specific time.

This project was multi-layered. It focussed on a space between disconnection and connection when old ways of being were discarded and new ways embraced. It allowed distress and anxiety to emerge while holding a space for women to grow new ways of being. This transformation required a deep relational trust that emerged between participants. This rich relational process offered a narrative of hope, meaning and purpose, which so closely relates to spirituality. This is reflected beautifully in the original purpose of the kete, to hold sacred objects.

Spirit in action vignette seven

A metaphor that encapsulates a “Community of care” approach is that of a finely woven kete made from the blades of pingao grass. Its handles are representative of the Massey Community Church, the Westside Counselling Service, and the Massey Community Trust, plaited together to collectively support the kete. Traditionally the pingao kete is understood to have been used to hold sacred and precious objects. The pingao blades symbolize all of the associations that have formed through support networks and programmes, including facilities and safety, which are all woven together to create a delicate kete: lace like in appearance, yet strong in texture. It is fashioned to support the broken hearted, to declare freedom to the incarcerated, and to provide the opportunity for change to those bound up, in what seems like loveless relationships and overwhelming difficulties. The vision is outworked in seeing the broken hearted mended, and the

achievement of freedom from captivity in violence, prostitution, and drug and alcohol abuse.

This whole project had significant ripple effects, not only on the Massey Community Church, but also for the academic community, in terms of finding appropriate research methodologies to describe non-linear phenomena, and capture the spirit of this unique endeavour. Courage and strength of spirit weaved through the whole process, impacted participants, and contributed to the transformation of all who became involved in it, personally or professionally.

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