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## Grappling with a contemporary and inclusive spirituality

by

Charles Waldegrave

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It takes us rather a long time to say hello in New Zealand! I come from a team of women and men from three different cultures, and it is our custom on these occasions to greet people in a Pacific way.

First in Maori, the language of the indigenous people of our land of Aotearoa/New Zealand: *Whakamoemiti kite Atua mo nga manaakitanga me nga awhina kia matou. Te tangata whenua i tenei wa, Tena koutou. Nga mihinui kia koutou. Nga rangatira me nga whanau awhina, Tena koutou, Tena koutou, Tena koutou katoa.* Firstly, I thanked the source and spirit of life for the many ways we have been helped, and the hospitality of this gathering. Secondly, I greeted the indigenous people of this land and acknowledged their welcome to us, and finally I greeted you all as elders who bring health to families.

In Samoan: *E faatalofa atu i le paia lasilasi ua faatasimai.* I have greeted you in the deepest sacrificial sense of love, acknowledged your own sacredness, and wished you as elders the fullness of Pacific life.

And in our third language, which I assume all of you can understand, greetings to you all from our colleagues at The Family Centre. We would like to congratulate the Dulwich Centre organisers of this conference for their foresight and courage in giving this topic of *spirituality* such prominence this morning.

Spirituality posed a considerable problem for us at The Family Centre. We had formed a cultural partnership of Maori, Pacific Island and Pakeha (European) workers and developed an agency that was determined to honour the cultures, address our colonial history and develop new expressions of equity. Spirituality posed a major problem for us, because in the European world it is largely viewed as a personal matter that has no role in the work place. Whereas for our Maori and Samoan colleagues it was inconceivable to consider health and wellbeing as ever being disconnected from overt expressions of spirituality.

As we reflected on our different histories and traditions around spirituality, we began to understand the complexity of our problem. For example, for most of the cultures whose origins are in western Europe, the concepts of body and soul have been separated. Spirituality has been compartmentalised away from everyday life. It is widely accepted as a sort of perfectly acceptable optional extra out of working hours, for those who are interested in it, but public, professional and working life is viewed as being secular. The roots of this separation of concepts of body and soul have a long history in western thinking going back to Greek Platonic thought.

Our Maori and Pacific Island colleagues, however, have made it clear that the concepts of body and soul for them are integrally interconnected. Furthermore, they are connected to land and the environment. They explained a

holistic perspective that saw compartmentalisation as an anathema. It was inconceivable to them to think of healing or any sort of care for people without spirituality being an integral part.

This posed a problem for all of us trained in the social sciences, because we were taught that secularism (i.e. a worldly or material view rather than a religious or spiritual view) offered a neutral position. In other words, by not expressing overt spirituality, we were respecting everyone's right to their personal beliefs. This fitted well with the scientific view that reality is only that which can be verified or measured.

This view was sorely challenged at our centre as Maori and Samoan workers stated that secular rules actually comprised a religious oppression on them. Secularism is not neutral in this sense. It is at one end of the continuum of spirituality (i.e. non-spirituality), and if imposed, oppresses other explanations of health and wellbeing on other parts of the same spirituality continuum. In other words, in the name of secular neutrality, our Maori and Samoan colleagues were prevented from both expressing their holistic approaches to care within their own community, and also from shared expressions of spirituality within the agency they worked.

To put it simply, we had a choice of expressing the status quo by continuing to impose the European secular view of work and other public places, and in doing so override the calls of our Maori and Samoan colleagues to a holistic view, or we could discover a collective approach to spirituality that we could all feel comfortable with. We chose the latter, because so much of our colonial history in New Zealand has involved disregarding and overriding Maori and Pacific cultural perspectives, and thus denied the possibility of an authentic partnership.

If we wanted to be able to relate authentically across cultures, we simply could not ban the deepest expressions and definition of health, wellbeing and relationship that two of our three cultures adhered to. Furthermore, we could not exclude ourselves from sharing with them, if we wanted to be genuinely in relationship together.

We had to address the deep fear within ourselves that any expression of spirituality by us in a work place would be seen as an imposition on others or even proselytising. We all prided ourselves as liberal thinkers and wanted no part of that. Nevertheless, we dearly wanted to enter into genuine relationships with our colleagues and we wanted to do so in a manner that honoured their cultural expressions and meanings.

The dilemma was to discover ways of speaking about and joining around notions of spirituality in a manner that enabled all of us to freely

express that which each of us held dearest, and at the same time allow those of us from a western tradition to feel comfortable with its breadth and freedom from imposition on others. It became important for us to come up with some common understandings about spirituality and its meaning. This began an exploration.

The following offers a crystallisation of our thoughts. They are simply offered as our reflections, not the 'right' reflections, not the 'only' reflections, and certainly not the 'definitive' reflections. They are just part of our journey at The Family Centre.

Spirituality to us is essentially about *relationship*. For us relationship is expressed in four primary ways. The first of these is the primary relationship between *people and the environment*. By this we refer to the land, the mountains, the sea, the sky and so on. Anything that promotes or facilitates the relationship between people and the environment, to us, is spiritual. Anything that detracts from this relationship, to us, is the antithesis of spirituality. For example, we would consider the environmental work of a green activist as spiritual, regardless of their personal beliefs, including atheism. We would affirm the work itself as spiritual because of the attention given to the land. Of course, they may have their own different understandings, and we would not seek to impose our view upon them. But to us, work that is facilitating the relationship between people and the land, the mountains, the sea, and the sky is spiritual.

In our experience, Maori, whenever they introduce themselves, introduce their mountain and their river. It is just a part of saying who they are. In the Samoan Mental Health Project that we have recently been involved in, participants spoke so clearly about how, if there is something going wrong with the land, then it affects people's minds. Within these cultures there is no cut-off point between individuals, their extended family and the land. Within western European traditions there are also a number of ways in which people's relationship to the environment is considered a realm of spirituality.

The second relationship we understand to be spiritual is that between *people and other people in terms of justice and love*. Whenever people are practising justice and love, whether it is in a household, in a community, in a nation, or internationally, it is spiritual to us. Any act of kindness, any act of love, any act of beauty, is an act of the sacred. We talk about justice *and* love because justice without love can be harsh, and love without justice can be sloppy and even unjust. Within this view, we place deep significance on acts of justice and love that address issues of equity in the realms of gender, culture, poverty, class and other forms of marginalisation. The opposite, of course, is the antithesis of spirituality.

The third relationship we focus on is that between *people and their heritage*, their ancestry, their forefathers and mothers, those who have gone before. That which honours people's heritage is spiritual in our view, and that which denigrates it is the opposite. Everybody has a unique sense of cultural belonging, including everyone of European heritage. We are all a part of the long history of our families. For some, the knowledge is difficult to access, but most people can go back at least one and usually two generations. Even where it is impossible to track down a lineage, we all have a heritage, a place from where we come, a land, a people, family. In some cases there is a shameful element, because their ancestors committed terrible acts against other people. That will not be the total story of the people involved, however, and a later generation can help right the wrongs by owning their heritage and working to transform it in the present. Within therapy there are so many conversations about identity and belonging, because they address the core of who we are and thus provide the basis of much of our health.

The final relationship we speak about concerning spirituality is between *people and the numinous*. We cannot find a better English word than numinous for that which is other, beyond, transcendent, or what some people call God. For us, that which affirms connections beyond the physical seeing, touching, measurable environment to the numinous is spiritual. That which works against this and defines the material, measurable world as the sum total of significant life, is to us, the antithesis of spirituality.

With this understanding of spirituality, we have been able to both share together and feel comfortable despite our very different cultural heritages. It obviously does not require people to sign up to any institutional religious body, although some choose to. There is space for traditional beliefs, and the wide range of spiritualities practised by people. There is also space for those who have difficulty addressing the numinous, but feel okay to share about the beauty of nature, a poem, some cool music, or whatever. This spiritual understanding has become the basis for our meeting together briefly most mornings and many of our discussions and debates. It also informs much of our practice and work life together.

Spirituality has also offered us a new language to describe our therapeutic work. We have abandoned many of the medical and biological metaphors commonly used to describe therapy. We define therapy as a *sacred exchange*. Sacred in the sense of 'the sacredness of life', or as having soul as in 'soul music'. People come to us who are deeply vulnerable and tell us stories that, if they were happening in our lives, we would only tell our closest friends and

people whom we deeply trust. For us, that is a sacred gift that they offer. As therapists, we listen deeply, no matter how strange it may sound, honour the story and analyse the web of meaning that has created the problem. Then, in the best spirit of liberation, facilitate new and transformative meanings that inspire hope and reconciliation. This is the sacred exchange that we use to describe therapy.

In this way, a notion of sacredness has become the primary metaphor of our work. By using spirituality as our central image for an exchange within the therapeutic process, we reckon we are much more likely to treat people with a greater respect than if we applied the more commonly used mechanistic descriptions of casework.

These offer a few examples of our attempts to involve spirituality in a holistic and inclusive sense into our work, in a manner that respects the integrity of the three cultures, and inspires our views of the quality of humanity and the sacredness of human life. It has certainly deepened the quality of our relationships and helped us to express together in the work place, the sort of relationships we are endeavouring to facilitate in therapy.

## **Closing**

Warihi Campbell and Kiwi Tamasese then closed this plenary session on Spiritualities with a similar degree of care with which they opened it – thanking the speakers for sharing with us their stories of what it is that they hold sacred in their lives.