

From the Editor

Kids are spiritual beings who are looking for meaning in life. We need to relate to their spirituality and help them look for depth and meaning that can sustain them in the long run. Materialism won't do it.

These are the words of noted author James Garbarino, presented at a spring 2004 seminar at North Shore Child and Family Guidance Center in Roslyn Heights, New York. Garbarino recalled another meeting, with several hundred of adults, where he asked the question, "How many of you trust your government most of the time?" Not one person raised their hand.

Have you ever experienced the sense of futility in being lost and without a reliable compass to provide a sense of direction or, alternately, the sense of hope in finding one's way when there is a bright light to lead the way?

What does any of this have to do with group work with children and adolescents, you might wonder? Everything.

I believe that group work is inherently a spiritual endeavor. A

meaningful group is a place where the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Good group work is transformational. It can create something from nothing, make connections among strangers, confront the limits of knowledge and control, encourage a search for meaning, and instill a tolerance for ambiguity.

In a meeting in the late spring of 2003, the steering committee of the Long Island Institute for Group Work with Children and Youth (LIGW) began grappling with the question about what the relationship is, if any, between spirituality and group work. The question emerged from our shared concern about the unrelenting beat of the bad-news-media, an endless succession of adults in positions of authority betraying and exploiting children and youth, and young people's growing loss of faith in institutions meant to protect and provide for and nourish them.

We decided that if we were to commit our time and energy to spirituality that we needed to engage in more than an

intellectual exercise. The challenge, we agreed, called for more of a personal journey. There would be no experts on this trip. We would rely only on our experiences, beliefs, values, and struggles. We agreed, over the months to come, to spend our time with four questions:

- ▶ What is spirituality?
 - ▶ What do you do in your personal life that is spiritual?
 - ▶ What is the relationship between spirituality and group work?
 - ▶ What do you do as a group worker to support or promote spirituality?
- As a result of our year-long mutual exploration, we then decided to bring the discussion to a larger group. One year later, on April 30, 2004 we

organized a roundtable of twenty-five group workers from various settings. The purpose of the *Group Work and Spirituality Roundtable* was two-fold:

- ▶ (1). To raise consciousness and stimulate interactions on the relationship between spirituality and group work with children and youth and
- ▶ (2). To develop a guideline to assist group workers to recognize and promote spirituality in their groups.

This issue of *HUH?!?*, devoted to spirituality and group work with children and youth, offers our guideline and a closer look at a year long journey that we hope you will join.

Andy



Steering Committee, Long Island Institute for Group Work With Children and Youth; Left to Right: Toni Kolb Papetti; Andrew Peters; Stacey Levin-Fletcher; Andrew Malekoff; Roseline Felix; Nelle Taylor-Walhrust; Jean Bacon. (Not pictured: Joanne Ditchik-Stutz; Maureen O'Connor; Amy Reifer; Cynthia Scott.)

Group Work and Spirituality

Roundtable Proceedings

Introduction: What's in a Name?

The Roundtable on Spirituality and Group Work with Children and Youth was structured in a large and small group format. We started with an exercise in which participants paired up with someone whom they didn't know. The instruction was to "Introduce yourself and talk about the origin of your name and how you feel about it." It was interesting how many names have a spiritual component. "My name means light," one participant reported. "I'm named after the grandmother whom I never met and my name makes me feel close to her," another stated.

One's Personal Meaning of Spirituality

After introductions the large group addressed the theme of *one's personal meaning of spirituality*. It soon became clear that spirituality and religion are not necessarily the same thing and that spirituality can be experienced in contexts outside of organized religion. One example was given by a participant who is a wilderness leader who said, "I experience spirituality through a connection with nature, a connection that provides me with comfort and strength in my life. Nature grounds me, reminds me that the world is bigger than just us."

Other reflections included: Spirituality is to me...

- ▶ Feeling a part of something greater than oneself
- ▶ Provides me with an inner strength that helps me through hard times
- ▶ Enhances joyous times
- ▶ Something that 'hits me' at times and makes me feel a part of all of humanity
- ▶ The connection between



"What's In a Name?" Left to right: Marion S. Levine, Executive Director/CEO; NSC&FGC; J.C. Joseph, Salvation Army, Westbury, NY.

spirit, body, and soul

- ▶ Something that comes in waves, not all at once
- ▶ Provides me with a reference for life's choices
- ▶ A language and place to take my emotions
- ▶ A very private part of myself that must be nurtured and provides personal strength
- ▶ Something that provides structure, discipline, and focus in my life
- ▶ Helps me to accept life's vagaries and to find purpose in my life
- ▶ It's my guiding light
- ▶ I can leave it and come back to it
- ▶ Provides a rich interior

life

All of these reflections affirm the statement by James Garbarino. Just to remind you:

Kids are spiritual beings who are looking for meaning in life. We need to relate to their spirituality and help them look for depth and meaning that can sustain

was not solely on what you do or can do to enhance spirituality in group work but, as or more important, what you observe that is innately spiritual in groups of children and youth.

Following is summary of the small groups' reflections on group work and spirituality: group work is elusive...need to have faith in the process...group work requires a leap of faith...can't do group work without a spiritual component...group work is transformative...in groups when we bring food we "break bread together"...spirituality is what truly helps you to be yourself...from spirituality comes a sense of belief and relief...spirituality is an important part of how one deals with stress and life in general...it can provide inner peace...it suggests that there is a peaceful way...helps you to believe that you can handle things and that there is more out there than oneself...

By exploring these issues in greater depth in a more intimate setting, the purpose was to prepare for a return to the larger group to end the day by (1) developing a guideline for spirituality and group work and (2) to construct a group poem that would de-construct spirituality and group work and offer another perspective. They can be found in this issue of HUH!?

them in the long run.

Materialism won't do it.

The Relationship Between Spirituality and Group Work

The roundtable was then divided into three small groups that were facilitated by members of the LIGW steering committee. The charge of the small groups was to continue the discussion on the personal meaning of spirituality and then to dovetail that discussion to an exploration of the *relationship between spirituality and group work with children and adolescents*. The emphasis

A Guideline for Spirituality in Group Work with Children and Youth

Following is a guideline that the roundtable developed. This should not be viewed as a complete list, rather as a beginning and something that you might contribute to with your own reflections on the subject.

• **Listen carefully.** Do not label, contain, name, or control. Recognize that although spirituality is an integral part of organized religion that there are other avenues where people find and nurture spiritual meaning in their lives. Rather than deciding whether or not to include religious expression in your groups, look for the common threads that young people find as they travel down various paths in their lives. Help them see that there are many places open to them to find depth and meaning in their lives.

• **Cultivate spirituality.** Begin by understanding and respecting group development. This means respecting the group process, having faith in the unraveling phases of a group, letting go of

control as the group evolves, and turning the leadership of the group over to the higher power *that is* the maturing group itself.

• **Recognize what children and youth already do that is spiritual.** Just as you might explore family, school, and community life with your groups, include spiritual life in the mix. Give group members an opportunity to talk about what institutions they and their families belong to. Explore what they do there and what kind of meaning, if any, they find there.

• **Explore cultural values.** Offer children and youth opportunities to present and explore cultural values. This can be done through discussion, music, dance, art, or food, for example. Help them to see the differences and to see that there are special things that are important to them and their families and their "people." If they cannot identify anything, this can be the beginning of the journey. A good group can provide the

opportunity and direction.

• **Use activities and discussion.** Be open to different means of expression and connection in the group beyond discussion. Young people can express powerful feeling and beliefs through the use of music, art, and dance for example.

Different ethnic foods and observances have meaning and can help in tapping spiritual meaning in young people's lives. Group workers can also plan outings such as nature hikes that can stimulate ideas about the vastness of the universe and the meaning of life.

• **Allow your own personal spiritual journey to be part of a group.**

Group workers should

look within in an effort to understand the meaning of spirituality in their own lives and how it has changed over the years as different life experiences and exposures test their mettle. Although these reflections might not be shared in specific terms they will enable the group worker to remain in synch with the members and to tune in to their experience.

• **Support the creation of meaningful rituals.** The word *spiritual*, when divided includes the words *spirit* and *ritual*.

Meaningful rituals to begin or end group meetings, for example, can be powerful ways of building the kind of group or team spirit that enhances belonging to

» » *Continued Page 4.*

This guideline, and the poem to follow in this issue of HUH?!?, is presented, humbly, as statement of our work together.

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Spirituality and Group Work with Children and Youth Roundtable Participants, April 30th, 2004.

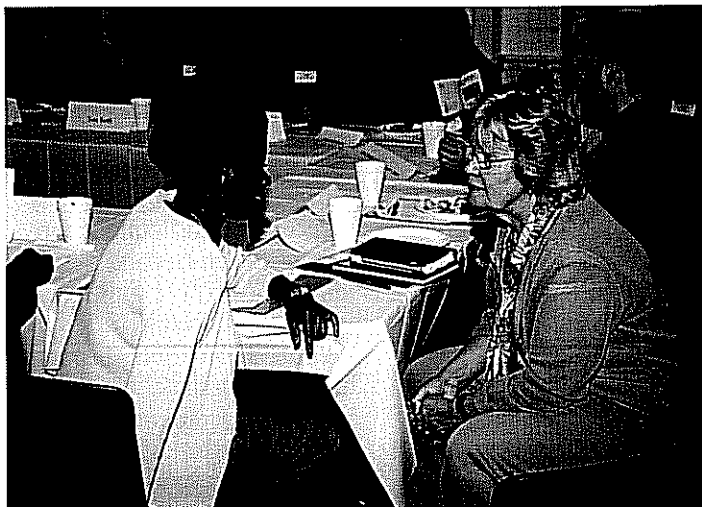
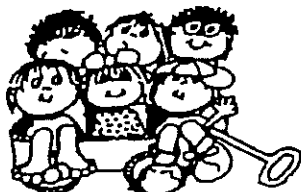
» » Continued from Page 3.
something greater than oneself with a mission that has great meaning.

- **Cultivate the capacity for empathy.** Encourage group members to a higher understanding of each other. Work with group members to move beyond what has been labeled as the *egocentricity* of youth. Use activities such as role playing that might allow group members to get in another's shoes, if only for the moment. This can help especially in building support for the mutual and lonely struggles that children and youth may experience as they try and make sense of their world.

- **Be available to work with the group "in the moment."** Don't always get caught up in moving forward. Allow detours and understand that a group sometimes needs to regress to regroup. Remember, getting lost can be a necessary step to finding oneself.

- **Tune in to various manifestations of spirituality.** Spirituality can be expressed in many ways such as through intimacy, peace, strength, comfort, connectedness, and teamwork.

- **Don't forget that kids are spiritual beings looking for meaning in life.** Group workers need to relate to their spirituality and help them look for depth and meaning that can sustain them in the long run. Materialism won't do it.



"A Meeting of Minds and Spirits" Left to right: Social Work Professors Jean Bacon, SUNY at Stony Brook and Lois Carey, Molloy College.

A New Conversation

Over the past several years, we have been faced with deeply disturbing behavior on the part of young people throughout the country. Although adolescence has frequently been identified as a tumultuous time of rebellion and exploration, it seems that in the past few years, a deep crisis has emerged.

Internal and individual crisis of loneliness, isolation, humiliation, and disconnection are all too often outwardly expressed through the explosive cries of bullets, drug use, abuse of all kinds, and bullying.

When people are hurt, the human "knee-jerk" reaction, is to hurt back. As professionals engaged in work with youth, we need to provide a context in which other possibilities can emerge. It appears that many of our current systems have not yet addressed the screaming darkness that befalls our young people.

As adults, as social workers, as parents, and as teachers, we need to create a new and universal language of healing and understanding that can assuage wounds that cripple the very spirit of young men and women. We need to provide alternative solutions that allow our youth to express their pain, their fear, and even their rage.

Fortunately, there is a new conversation emerging that provides a context in which to explore healing and wholeness from a deep and human level. There is a growing interest in exploring spirituality and its value in the field of the helping professions. Spirituality is simply another word for humanity. It is the place in which we meet each other with love, understanding, and compassion. It is the place where we meet upon a common ground.

The language of the spirit is built upon foundations of mutual respect and deep honor for the divinity that exists in each of us. The invitation

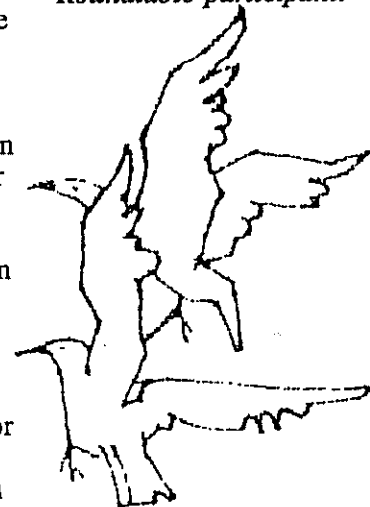
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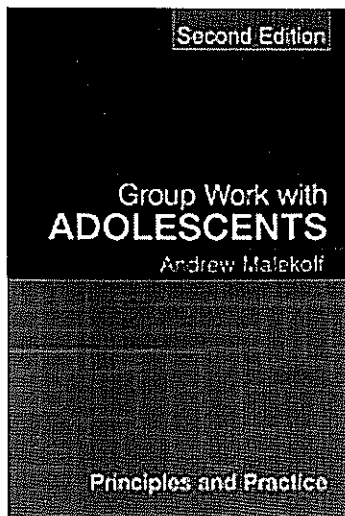
The professional journal, *Social Work with Groups*, recently published its 25th Anniversary Issue. This issue has also been released as a book: *Stories Celebrating Group Work: It's Not Always Easy to Sit on your Mouth*.

If you would like to buy a copy of this book, call Haworth Press at (800) 429-6784.

of spirituality invites you into safe and sacred spaces; where perhaps, not all things can be answered - but, all things, can be understood. It is in this space of reverence, that wondrous possibilities emerge and the miracle of healing comes alive.

Diane Monks, BSW, is the Program Director of the Good Neighbor Interfaith Network (a Robert Wood Johnson Faith in Action program, administered by EAC, Inc.); an Ordained Interfaith Minister; the mother of three children; and the co-founder of Divine Directions; and a Roundtable participant.





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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

ANDREW MALEKOFF, MSW, CASAC is the Associate Director for North Shore Child and Family Guidance Center in Long Island, New York. He is editor of the journal *Social Work with Groups*, Adjunct Professor at Adelphi University School of Social Work, and past board member of the Association for the Advancement of Social Work with Groups (AASWG). He is Chairman of the Civil Service Commission for the City of Long Beach, New York.

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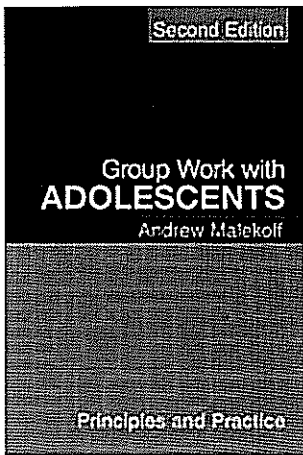
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"Malekoff shows a deep understanding of the issues and concerns of adolescents and expresses this to the reader in a humorous, warm, sensitive, and delightful manner....This book shows the skillful use of the group work method in working with a specified age group in a variety of settings."
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—*Journal of Teaching in Social Work*

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How It Felt to Be There

On April 30th I was privileged to attend the Spirituality Roundtable. It was an event unlike any other in my experience. It was a group of people, all different, with two common denominators: a history of working with children and youth in groups and an interest in the role of spirituality in group development.

From the very beginning it was evident that this would be something very unique and very special. The Community Room at North Shore Child & Family Guidance Center was lit softly. It was cool and serene. The mantelpiece of the fireplace was draped with soft garlands of pale mauve tulle. Tiny votive candles twinkled on the mantel above the tulle and pretty pots of purple violets graced the mantle as well. The buffet was filled with delicious baskets of rolls, bowls of fresh fruit, juices, coffee, and tea. It was an amazing setting to what turned out to be an amazing morning.

At first it felt strange to be in a room full of strangers about to discuss one of the most private and personal aspects of your life. We are always taught to never discuss religion or politics in order to avoid conflicts. Yet here we are about to talk about our spiritual life and how we might use it to benefit others. You feel timid and unsure yet it is exciting at the same time. There is a feeling that spirituality has great power in the world and that, should we find a way to use this concept positively, it would make a tremendous difference to so many others. As people begin to speak, you become acutely aware of the fact that you are all really very much alike. No matter what form a person's spirituality takes, everyone in the room is expressing a sense of awe, wonder, power, and exploration of self.

Each person there becomes more and more familiar as we speak and participate in various activities and break-out groups. We begin to find points of commonality with each other although we are all so very different. Yet our humanity creates a special bond and the morning progresses, becoming more and more commanding. We feel that we are making a contribution to something important and we move onward with great enthusiasm. The morning grows long and we come back into the great room to begin the final stage of the Roundtable.

At the end of the event the group comes together and works to create a set of Guidelines as well as a poem on which I am honored to be asked to work.

Although spirituality can be difficult to address, because we live in a chaotic time and place, the Roundtable left me with the feeling that spirituality can bring tremendous peace and enrichment to your life and to the lives of others. The exploration of spirituality and how one can use it to work with children and youth was a valuable experience and one that only opened up my own widely-expanded personal journey. It was not the end for me, it was only the beginning.

Jane E. Meckwood-Yazdpour is the Public Information Officer at NSC&FGC, a free-lance writer, and a marketing and public relations specialist.

Spirituality & Group Work

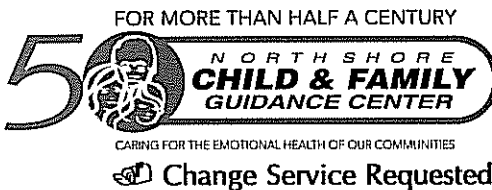
Come into our group
 Today we are taking a magical mystery ride
 Down a corridor of forsythia
 Where dreams become reality.
 A place where our hopes and aspirations
 Become a manifestation of
 Discovery,
 Experience,
 Joy, and faith.
 A special place where love is powerful,
 Where strength has purpose,
 Where connections,
 Build intimacy and "Ah-ha" moments.
 In this group we find challenge
 A challenge to trust and find unity and teamwork.
 A challenge to find commonality in our diversity
 A challenge to take our experiences
 And turn them into serenity, peace, and meaning.
 The fruits of this group
 Are to make us understand the responsibility
 That we have
 To ourselves and to
 The consideration of the eternal soul.
 We will train our minds
 Through prayer and meditation
 And soon we will find those yellow flowers
 And a higher power.
 And this personal journey will make us
 Safe as we find
 A space where we can be
 And
 Comfort in what I can't hold
 But which holds me.

*By the April-2004 Spirituality Roundtable
 (with Jane E. Meckwood-Yazdpour)*

(This is a collectively authored poem. In the two closing activities of the Roundtable, participants first developed a guideline for recognizing and promoting spirituality in group work (see the guideline in the Fall-2004 issue of HUH?!) and then deconstructed spirituality and group work through the development of a group poem. Through a free-associative process of words and phrases, the group summed up their sentiments and thoughts about the day and about spirituality and group work. Their words and phrases were subsequently strung together by Jane Meckwood-Yazdpour, a Roundtable participant, to create this poem.)

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The Long Island Institute for Group Work with Children and Youth

★ MISSION STATEMENT ★

The Mission of the Long Island Institute for Group Work with Children and Youth is: To promote and enhance effective group work practice with children and youth through advocacy, education, and collegial support. **HUH?!?** is the Institute's newsletter dedicated to providing information, inspiration, and support for anyone working with young people in group settings.

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Project Coordinator: Andrew Malekoff

HUH?!? is the twice-yearly newsletter of the Long Island Institute for Group Work With Children and Youth, a program of North Shore Child & Family Guidance Center; 480 Old Westbury Road; Roslyn Hgts., NY 11577-2215; Phone: (516) 626-1971 •• Fax: 626-8043. Executive Director/CEO: Marion S. Levine, ACSW; Associate Director/NSC&FGC and Newsletter Editor: Andrew Malekoff, ACSW, CASAC. Newsletter Design and Layout: Jane E. Meckwood-Yazdpoor, BS. Participating Agencies: Coalition on Child Abuse & Neglect, Garden City; Youth Directions and Alternatives, E.Northport; Herricks School District, Albertson; Sanctuary Project, Huntington; Plainedge School District; L.I.Crisis Center, Bellmore; L.I. Center for Social Therapy, Floral Park; SUNY Stony Brook; Temple Sinai of Roslyn; Huntington Youth Bureau, Huntington; South Huntington School District, South Huntington, NY. © Copyright August 1, 2004/USA.

To Our Readers...

Due to growing printing and postage costs, beginning with the previous issue (Volume 9 Number 1) of **HUH?!?**, there will be two issues per year instead of four. When the newsletter started it was only two pages. Soon it grew to four pages. In recent years we have published a number of special issues, such as the 9/11 anniversary issue. Those special issues were often eight pages long. Please be assured that the newsletter will continue to be of substantial quality despite the fewer number of issues per year.

If you have been subscribing, please continue - if you have received complimentary copies, please subscribe to help us defray costs and keep **HUH?!?** going. Your subscription is a way of giving voice to your support for quality group work for children and youth. Send us your name and address and please make your \$10 check payable and send to: Long Island Institute for Group Work with Children & Youth/NSC&FGC; 480 Old Westbury Rd.; Roslyn Heights, NY 11577-2215.

Andrew Malekoff, Editor