Why Do We Talk So Much?
The Art of Silence in Clinical Social Work

Frederick F. MacDonald PhD, MSSW, LMSW

The majority of our current interpersonal practice models rely heavily on therapeutic conversation as the primary vehicle for change. Interpersonal dialogue is not always required or for that matter appropriate with some clients. Clients who have talked about their situation in depth with little tangible results or those who simply find talking very difficult may be candidates for an alternative approach. For some, the art of silence may be an effective vehicle for healing and change. The following description of the process may be helpful.

Typically begin with clients by asking if they have heard of silence as a helpful technique for anxiety and depression. Explain further that the most important step in learning silence is to learn to be alone with oneself without reading, listening to the radio, smoking or drinking, etc. For many, this is precisely the necessary condition for the ability to heal.

Creating a safe place or holding environment for practicing silence is an essential ingredient of this method. Some agency settings may not be conducive to this approach. They are either too loud, afford little privacy or may simply be overloaded stressful environments. I have had some clients create a safe place in their homes where they can begin to experience silence. Such “sacred” places can become part of a daily practice routine providing an atmosphere conducive to stillness.

Breath work is one among many forms of silent practice with a tradition spanning centuries. Henepola Gunaratana (1991), a Taiwanese spiritual teacher, states in his book entitled Mindfulness in Plain English:

> Breathing is a non-conceptual process, a thing that can be experienced directly without a need for thought. Furthermore, it is a very living process, an aspect of life that is in constant change. The breath moves in cycles-inhalation, exhalation, breathing in, and breathing out. Thus, it is a miniature model of life itself (pg.27).

(continued next page)
Why Do We Talk So Much? The Art of Silence in Clinical Social Work (continued)

Ask clients to find a comfortable position, sitting on the floor on a pillow with their legs crossed or in a chair with both of their feet placed on the floor and continue with the following suggestions (extrapolated from a number of sources): “Try to keep your spine as straight as possible without being rigid. Take a relaxed breath through your nostrils and feel the air entering your lungs. Focus on the breath as you gently exhale through your nostrils. Continue your breathing slowly and deliberately, all the time focusing only on the breath. Don’t accentuate your breathing, just breathe normally. Allow your breathing to assume its own rhythm. Observe your breath and discover that there is a beginning, middle and an end. Observe your thoughts. Without judging, return your attention again and again to the breath. Continue in silence for five minutes.”

After a practice session, it is important to prepare your client for most eventualities: “As you continue your practice on a daily basis working up to twenty minutes or more daily, you will notice that the fleeting thoughts and distractions will diminish as you begin to experience moments with few interruptions. There will also be occasions when you will feel nothing and be aware of nothing; a kind of sleep. This is not the ultimate experience of healing that will come. Rather, it is a kind of limbo state of non-attention. When you notice this happening, gently and lovingly bring your attention back to the breath. Eventually, after weeks or even months, your breathing will slow down and you will experience few interruptions. It is then that you will begin to experience a state of inner calm. Strong emotional feelings and their accompanying thoughts will disappear and in their place will be a feeling of complete freedom, harmony and joy. These experiences will be temporary of course, but will have a profound impact on your life. You will never see yourself in quite the same way, nor will you see others in quite the same way and subsequently the way you live your life at home and at work will change significantly. It is essential that you be kind and patient with yourself as you practice daily. Trust yourself and don’t push. Every time you stumble, gently return to the breath and the present moment”


If the practice is successful, clients may experience profound healing that can literally shift their perceptions of themselves and others... Teaching the art of silence and practicing silence with clients requires that the social worker be willing to let go of the need to talk. Of course the question remains: what does one write in the progress notes?
Why Do We Talk So Much? The Art of Silence in Clinical Social Work (continued)
Frederick F. MacDonald PHD, MSSW, LMSW

References

Transitions

Richard John Auble, 68, of Gladstone, passed away on Oct. 7, 2009, at home. He attended Western Michigan University and graduated with a master's degree in social work in 1974. Richard was employed with a variety of social service, counseling and mental health agencies including Child and Family Service of the Upper Peninsula, Delta County Community Mental Health and Behavioral Health Services of Marquette General Hospital.

Letters
I first knew Dick as a fellow graduate of the WMU MSW Class of 1974. He was one of the most straightforward and honest people I have ever known. I didn't have any professional interface with him, but on a personal level, he was unpretentious, engaged, and had a great sense of humor. When meeting with him, it was easy to see that he was much more interested in making me the most important person, rather than extolling his own accomplishments. I strongly suspect that carried over into his therapeutic contacts.

Despite his failing health over the past few years, he seemed determined to extract every last ounce of an upbeat life that he could. I last met with him in an Escanaba restaurant at the end of July, this year. When we walked out to the parking lot, he went to his vehicle and I walked to my destination across a busy highway. I looked back several times as he took several minutes to get started. As I was about to go back and check, he started driving and I kept going.

If I ever dream about that, it will be reflective of my wanting to go back and tell him that he was one of the best people I have ever known.

Jim Dwyer
Marquette, Mi

Dick was a kind but honest therapist, a real “straight shooter” with authentic but respectful feedback. He worked well with very sick clients, those who presented serious “meat and potato” issues to deal with. He believed in patience and persistence, holding on to hope and commitment “like a dog to a bone.” As a social worker, he did nothing fancy, but was “the real deal.”

John Gagnon
A kind word is like a Spring day.

~ Russian Proverb

Take advantage of the resource on your desktop.
Check out this site
http://www.nyu.edu/socialwork/ip

Legislative Education and Advocacy Day (LEAD)

John P. Mellein, an Instructor at the School of Social Work, coordinated for the eighth year a trip to Lansing for social work students to learn more about the legislative process and skills in advocacy. The 2009 conference was held at the Lansing Center on March 17th and 50 students, both BSW and MSW, attended.

During the first several years of the School of Social Work’s participation in the conference, only a few students attended. The student interest last spring was so great that Mellein had to upgrade to a larger bus for all the students to ride together. Students learned about the process for passing a bill, how to advocate with your legislator, in addition to having the opportunity to attend several workshops addressing key issues or legislation impacting social work practice.

Mellein believes WMU had the most students of any of the School’s of Social Work in Michigan participating in the conference. Ms. Melinda McCormick, a staff member and part-time Instructor at the School, also attended the conference, as did Dr. Linda Reeser.

The event is sponsored by NASW Michigan, and is designed to “Help social workers and NASW-Michigan become an influential voice in the Michigan’s political arena.” The event offers a behind-the-scenes look at NASW-Michigan’s role in Michigan’s political process, and social workers learn how they can become key advisors to the legislators and effective advocates for the social work profession and the State’s most vulnerable citizens. (taken from NASWmichigan.org)

Photo courtesy of Aimee Thompson, BSW, class of 2009.
Office of Admissions & Student Services (OASS) Update

The OASS is pleased to announce the implementation of an on-line application process for all MSW applicants. WMU’s School of Social Work is one of only two Social Work programs in Michigan to offer a comprehensive on-line application process. Prospective applicants can apply using the following link: https://app.applyyourself.com/?id=wmichsw.

Memories of the early days of the SSW

I actually applied to be in the first WMU graduate class in the School of Social Work, starting in 1969. I was scheduled to get out of the U.S. Army where I was a social worker and medic during the Vietnam era. I worked in the “troop clinic” where we addressed a daily barrage of suicide gestures and later in the outpatient and inpatient clinics where we addressed psychiatric issues related to life (and death) in the military. The professional staff of social workers, psychologists and psychiatrists had recommended that I apply for graduate school.

Unfortunately, I hadn’t paid my dues as an undergrad and had barely “scraped by.” I got a job at the Kalamazoo State Hospital as a social worker and met with Nellie Reid, who to my knowledge was the undergrad school of social work. I arranged to make reparations and to take advanced level classes at WMU with the prospect of being considered at a later date for admission. I subsequently took 23 hours of classes and eventually found myself in one of Nellie Reid’s classes. I believe that was in the spring of 1972. She was my only contact with the school and I was getting hopeful that I would have a good shot at reapplying.

Unfortunately, Mrs. Reid started wearing heavy clothes to class and didn't look very healthy. She died during the semester and my hopes plummeted again. I did, however, apply to the program and I was able to meet with Lynn Rieman, the new director of admissions. When I entered her office, her first words were among the best I had ever heard in my life. She had read a letter I had sent and said, “Jim, I am really impressed!” I not only was able to use the GI Bill, but also received an NIMH grant and was “on my way.” The credit hours were an exorbitant $24, three times as much as the $8 per credit hour I had paid during my two years at Northern Michigan University. Fortunately, the grant paid for it.

This memory courtesy of Jim Dwyer, Marquette, Mi, MSW class of 1974. To share your memory, e-mail Melinda.m.mccormick@wmich.edu.

LOVED the class discussion, but HATED the tests?

Want to keep up on Social Work journals…but so, so glad there’s no midterms or finals?

Keep your mind active and your professional knowledge sharp.

Join the Peer Reading Circle, a small group of WMU SW alumni.

We meet on Third Thursdays at 7 p.m. at Panera Breads on S. Westnedge Avenue.

Contact Melinda at Melinda.m.mccormick@wmich.edu for a copy of the next article for discussion.
The sun was warm but the wind was chill. You know how it is with an April day.

Robert Frost

A Happy New Year greeting to all our alumni and friends!

The School of Social Work has made great strides during the 2009-2010 academic year and I am delighted to be a member of the team. Our Kalamazoo and Grand Rapids programs continue to thrive, we continue to offer MSW courses in Benton Harbor, and we are planning to reach out through distance education models to other parts of the state. As you know, however, tight budgets, decreases in human services, two wars and their impact on veterans and families, and an unpredictable national health care legislative process are among the many challenges social workers and educational institutions such as ours share with the world around us. Consequently, we will analyze, plan, and execute with consistency and verve as we seek ways to provide the best education and training possible to prepare our students to be effective change agents.

New York Times columnist David Brooks has written that most successful people begin with two beliefs: that the future can be better than the present, and that I have the power to make it so. This is the spirit in which we are moving forward in the school.

Let me briefly share a few things that are on the horizon and how you can help us as we move the school to Distinction. The School has been educating undergraduate and graduate social workers for more than 40 years and we plan to celebrate this achievement in the near future.

We have the distinction of having several faculty members with more than 20 years of service in the school:

- Professor Gary Mathews: 33 years
- Professor Don Cooney: 32 years
- Professor Linda Reeser: 28 years
- Professor Bob Wertkin: 28 years
- Professor Fritz MacDonald: 23 years

Our faculty remain active in scholarship and service to the profession in the local community of Southwest Michigan and beyond.

Recent staff changes include:
- Barb Howes, MSW, appointed Interim Coordinator of Field Education
- Amy Tuley, MSW, appointed Director of Admissions and Student Services
- Robin Pountain, appointed Administrative Assistant, Director’s Office
- Patti Criswell, MSW, appointed Term Faculty 2009-10

We will initiate a series of “Community Forums.” These forums will provide opportunities for community practitioners to discuss their work with students and other professionals and partner with scholars in the school to
Director’s Corner (continued)

dialogue about best practices. Our goal is twofold: One is to better integrate the school with the community and the community with the school—if nothing else, social work is about “community.” Two is to use this process to infuse social work education, research and practice with vigorous and robust “best practices” for more effective social work.

We are working to improve our relationship with you, our alumni. As I write this note, we are updating our data base of email addresses and other contact information. We want you to be involved in strengthening the school and helping us improve our services and interactions with you. In closing, we will share more with you as the academic year comes to a close. But for now, let me ask for your assistance. Please send us your contact information (send to robin.pountain@wmich.edu) and

• Let us know where you are working and the things the school can do to serve you better
• Let us know if you are interested in serving and supporting the school with your time and resources
• Let us know how we can support gatherings among social work graduates of Western in your communities

May your year be prosperous and productive.
Yours in social work,

Linwood Cousins

Your financial contributions to the WMU School of Social Work are needed and appreciated.

To contribute,
Make checks payable to the WMU Foundation and mail to: WMU Foundation, Gift Processing, 1903 W. Michigan Ave., Kalamazoo, MI 49008-5403
Contribute online at http://www.wmich.edu/foundation/gift/

Or, click on “Make a Gift” at http://www.wmich.edu/hhs/sw/

For more information, contact Preston Hicks, Development Office. Call (269) 387-8881 or email preston.hicks@wmich.edu.
Do you have an area of expertise that you’d like to share with your colleagues?

Contact Melinda McCormick to see about presenting a continuing education event at the SSW.

Have some topic ideas for continuing education?

Know of a great presenter?

Let us know, so we can meet your continuing education needs.

Homecoming 2009

In 2009, the College of Health & Human Services invited program graduates to come celebrate homecoming with beer, brats & Bronco football.

The atrium of the College of Health & Human Services was set up for visiting graduates and current students who were getting ready to attend the big game.

As in past years, School of Social Work graduates Randy Baxter and Deb Brunner volunteered their time to staff a table for Graduate Connections.

Also in attendance were Fritz MacDonald, Associate Director, Linwood Cousins, Director, Amy Tuley, Director of Student Services and Admissions, and Miss Helen Beck.

Thanks for coming out and showing your school spirit.

Go Broncos!

Graduate Connections Fundraiser

To raise funds for our Graduate Connections events (or so that we can have some events in the future), we are selling School of Social Work merchandise at our online store and on campus in the School of Social Work.

Graduates chose several items of interest to them in the classic black and gold that means Western. We have window clings for your car that read “WMU School of Social Work,” t-shirts, travel mugs, and eco-friendly tote bags which are similar to those being sold by grocery stores. Our totes, however, are much larger and have pockets on each end to hold water bottles or whatever else you may want to carry with you.

We have kept prices low, since we all know how much social workers make.

The tees and mugs are $12 and the totes and window clings are $5. Shipping costs are reasonable or you can stop by the School to pick up your purchases.

These would make nice gifts for your social worker friends.

The online store is at https://shopwmu.wmich.edu/ustores/web/store_main.jsp?STOREID=1 or contact Melinda McCormick at Melinda.m.mccormick@wmich.edu 269-387-3158.
Continuing Education at the School of Social Work

Licensure continues to be a concern for social workers as they work to get the continuing education hours they need to renew their licenses. The School of Social Work is providing two continuing education events a month in an attempt to meet the needs of area social workers.

As you know, 45 hours of continuing education are required each licensure period. Social Workers can get up to 10 units of those 45 online. One hour of CE’s must be pain management and five hours must be ethics. The SSW is providing both required events in the fall and in the spring prior to the renewal period.

When you attend CE events, make sure you keep your certificates and the brochure about the event somewhere you can access it if you are chosen to be randomly audited.

May 7, 2010
Tools and Strategies for Working with Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders
Alisha Krcatovich, BA, Croyden Avenue School, Kalamazoo, Amy Helmuth, Kalamazoo WRAPS Evaluation Team, & Karen Bonebright Soule, MSW, KCMHSAS at WMU School of Social Work. This event offers 3 CE hours and has a price of $30, $20 for students, and an additional $15 CE fee.

May 14, 2010
From Boards to Staff: Assessing Organizational Effectiveness
Barb Barton, Ph.D., and James Collier at WMU School of Social Work. This event offers 3 CE hours and has a price of $30, $20 for students, and an additional $15 CE fee.

Register and pay online at our online store: www.wmich.edu/hhs/sw and look for the online store link.