

# Letter of Greetings and Commendation



**In appreciation for the  
International Conference on  
Religion, Spirituality, and Social Work**  
Center for Studies in Rural Development  
Amednagar, India  
28-30 December, 2011  
Opening Ceremony Comments From  
Edward R. Canda, Ph.D.  
Professor, The University of Kansas,  
Lawrence, Kansas USA

## Notes:

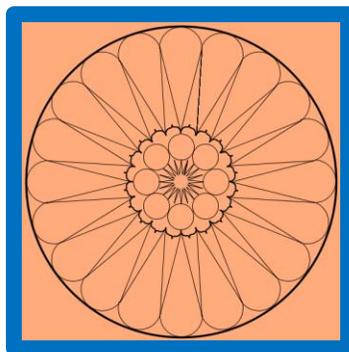
- 1) Dr. Suresh Pathare invited me to offer a keynote address at this conference. Since I was not able to attend, I sent these comments. Dr. Pathare kindly read them at the opening ceremony.
- 2) These remarks and diagrams are based largely on material in my book: *Spiritual Diversity in Social Work Practice*, second edition, 2010, by Edward R. Canda and Leola Dyrud Furman (Oxford University Press).
- 3) I slightly edited the text for this online format in November 2013.

Dear Dr. Suresh Pathare, Director of CSRD and Distinguished Presenters and Attendees:

It is my honor to provide this letter of greetings and commendation at the invitation of Dr. Pathare. I offer my appreciation to Dr. Pathare, the conference organizers, and all of you for your great vision to conduct this innovative conference exploring connections between religion, spirituality, and social work. This opens the possibility for wonderful and inspiring connections among all of you that can synergize your good works and ideas for expanding spiritually sensitive social work in India and beyond. I wish that your experiences here will generate great enthusiasm for you to bring back into your places of service, teaching, and research so that benefits may extend for social workers, their clients and communities, and all people and all beings. Unfortunately, I am not able to join you directly. So at Dr. Pathare's kind invitation, I will offer comments that I hope will add support and encouragement to your initiative.

I will illustrate my remarks with mandalas that I have composed.

The mandala in the background of the title illustration represents my intention to promote an approach to spiritually sensitive social work that respects and connects the diverse religious and nonreligious forms of spirituality around the world.



I very much enjoy mandala designs, because they help us to image and meditate upon the diverse aspects of life, ourselves, and the universe. They help us to envision and understand the

way in which diversities can be connected in terms of commonalities and comprehensive consciousness and behavior. Mandala-like designs can be found throughout all cultures so they are powerful symbols to connect among diversities. For example, there are Hindu and Buddhist meditation mandalas, Christian rose windows, indigenous Native American medicine wheels, Chinese Confucian and Daoist diagrams, and therapeutic use of mandala drawings in Jungian psychotherapy, just to name a few examples.

Indeed, your conference logo, shown here enclosed by the outer ring of the previous mandala, to me represents a profound ideal of connectedness and harmony among all religions and ways of pursuing spiritual development in the context of individual fulfillment, community wellbeing, social justice, and planetary environmental balance. This is the way that an inclusive, widely embracing modality of spiritually sensitive social work can help our profession to realize its highest ideals and potentials.

### Religion, Spirituality, and Social Work: Exploring Connections



It is becoming common in social work, in many countries, to seek a holistic understanding of each person we serve. In the past, we often used the expression, “bio-psycho-

social perspective.” Now it is becoming more widespread to acknowledge the spiritual aspect of the person, and so to say, “bio-psycho-social-spiritual” perspective. This view recognizes that all people, in their many diverse ways, have a spiritual aspect that seeks a sense of meaning, purpose, morality, and profound connection with self, others, the world, and the Ground of Reality, however that is understood.

In fact, this spiritual quest often comes to the fore when social work clients are experiencing crisis, trauma, oppression, grief, and loss. Big questions about the “why” of suffering and the “how” of gaining meaning, purpose, help, and liberation often come up at these times. For people who are engaged intentionally in a spiritual growth process, they wish to understand and connect all aspects of themselves and their relationships in a process of harmonizing and seeking the mutual benefit of themselves, others, and even all beings. They might draw upon their cultural and religious traditions of spiritually based resilience, mutual support, and liberation. Social workers need to be ready to understand and assist such spiritual needs and goals of clients (whether, individuals, groups, or communities) in terms of the clients’ own beliefs and values. Spiritually sensitive professional social work is not about the social worker imposing his or her own spiritual or religious (or anti-spiritual or anti-religious) agendas, but rather it is about discovering and engaging the clients’ and communities’ spiritual strengths and resources in the helping process, in so far as relevant and comfortable to the client or community.

I can summarize my definition of spirituality as follows:



## Spirituality is:

- A process of human life and development
  - *focusing on the search for a sense of **meaning**, purpose, morality, and well-being;*
  - *in **relationship** with oneself, other people, other beings, the universe, and ultimate reality however understood;*
  - *orienting around centrally significant **priorities**; and*
  - *engaging a sense of **transcendence** (experienced as deeply profound, sacred, or transpersonal).*

It is becoming common in social work and other helping professions to distinguish spirituality and religion as related but different concepts. Of course, there are many varieties of these definitions. For my part, based on the insights of social work scholars in many countries, I view spirituality as the broader concept than religion. Spirituality can express in religious and nonreligious forms. Everyone and every culture has spirituality in some form, but not everyone is religious. In some countries, formal religiousness is very common; in some countries, it is very common and there are many varieties of religions; in others, formal participation or belief in religion is rare.

So I define religion as follows:



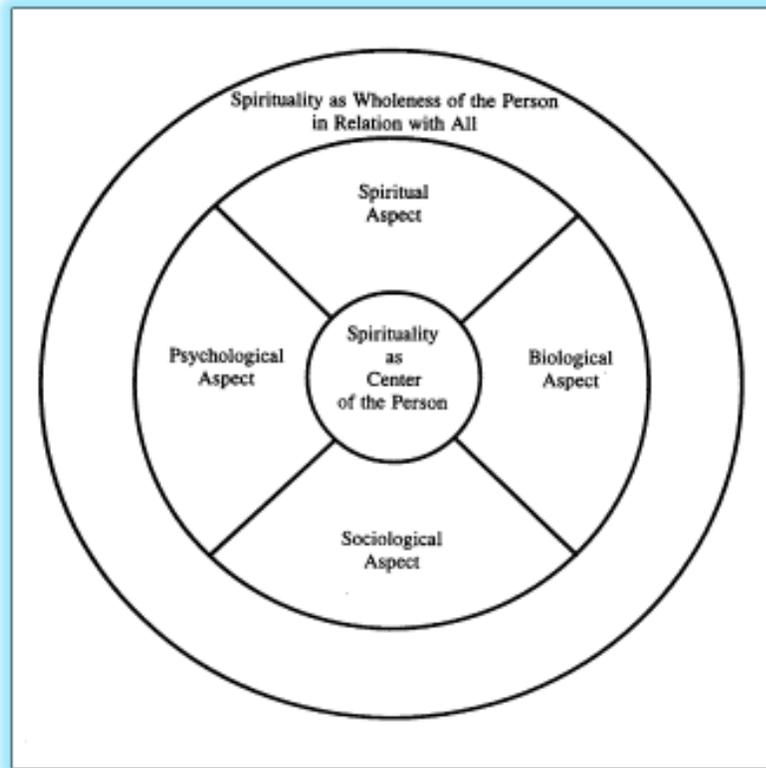
## Religion is:

- An institutionalized (i.e. systematic and **organized**) pattern of values, beliefs, symbols, behaviors, and experiences that involves
- **spirituality**
- a **community** of adherents
- transmission of **traditions** over time, and
- Community **support** functions (e.g. organizational structure, material assistance, emotional support, or political advocacy) that are directly or indirectly related to spirituality.

For social workers and clients who are engaged in spiritual practice (whether religious or nonreligious), people often come to a deep sense of who they really are in their center. This center of the person is the connection point within that can join and harmonize all our aspects together. Indeed, when we go deeply into our centers, we experience a sense of peace and clarity, and a connectedness with all. Some religious traditions refer to this Center as the True Self, True Mind, or Divine Within. But very simply, when we are clearly, openly, and nonjudgmentally mindful of ourselves in the moment, we have a sense of peace and balance. As we know from many traditions of prayer and meditation, such centered mindfulness is enhanced by being in touch with the natural smooth flow of breath and vital energy that moves through us and connects us with all. When we are centered, we are less egocentric and more altruistic, more connected, more empathetic, and more able to flow in the helping process with spontaneity. We are able to truly hear our clients, with compassionate sensitivity, and then we can engage an empowering helping process that is appropriate to the situation.

# Spirituality as CENTER of the person

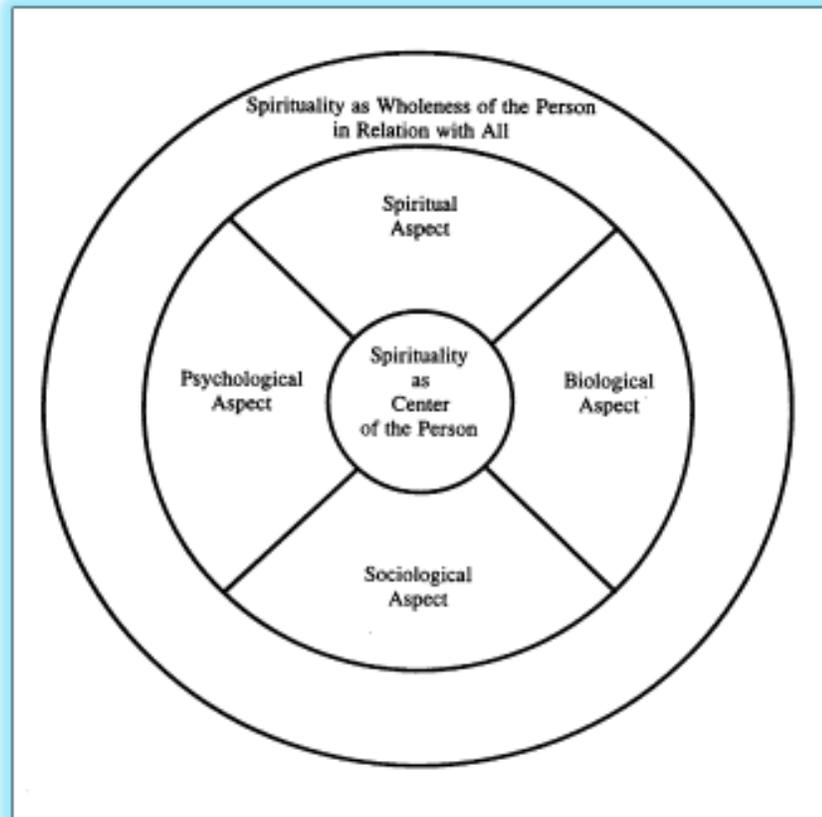
From  
Canda and Furman,  
*Spiritual Diversity  
in Social Work  
Practice, second  
edition*, Oxford  
University Press,  
2010.



Spirituality can also be thought of as the wholeness of the person in relation with all, symbolized by the outer circle of this mandala. Spiritual development may bring us into an expansive consciousness in which we realize a sense of identity fully interconnected with all things. This is a quality of mind beyond divisions and dichotomies, beyond the capacity of words and images to express fully. Spirituality as wholeness has the potential to embrace and transcend all our particular individual and cultural and religious aspects and diversities. When social workers glimpse this mode of consciousness, they are often further motivated to extend their work of compassion and justice to benefit all peoples and all beings, to serve as mediators and brokers and peacemakers. I dare to suggest that this mode of consciousness is urgently needed to spread more widely among social workers and all people engaged in service, so that we can attend to the many needs of people for basic sustenance, for deeper meaning in life, for socially

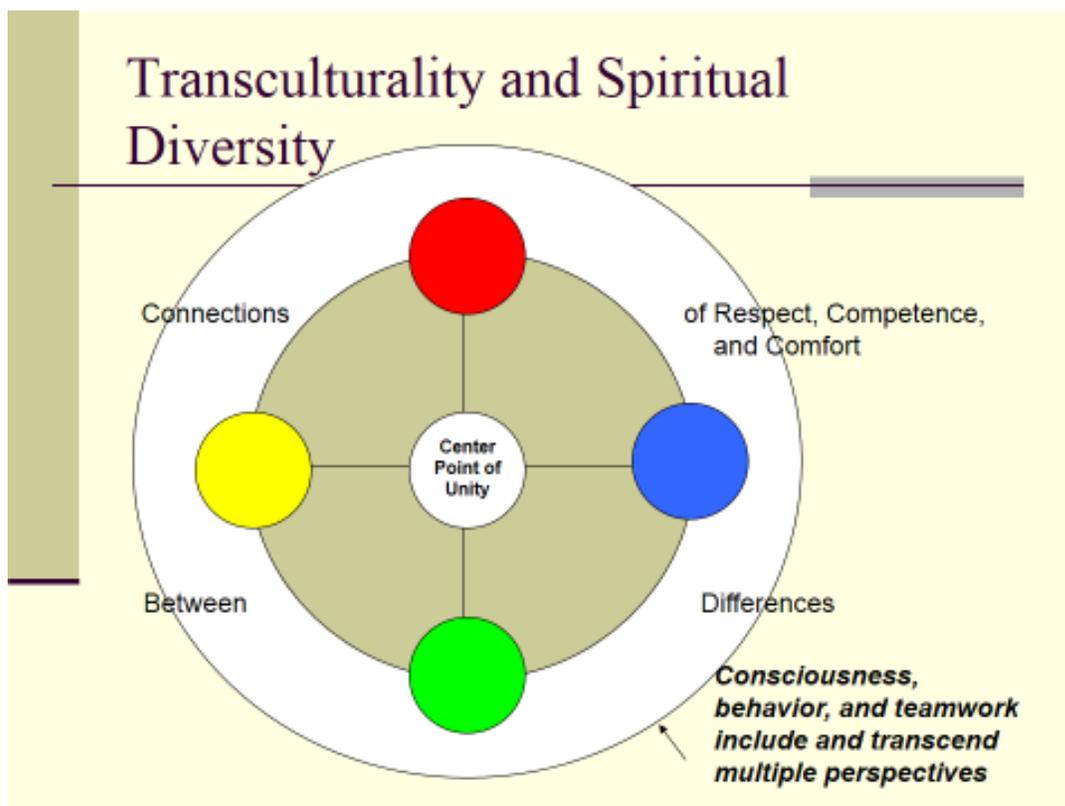
just communities that do not harmfully discriminate or oppress anyone, and for ways of living in harmony with this wonderful yet endangered planet earth.

## Spirituality As WHOLE- NESS of the person



The ideal of spiritually sensitive social work is a deepening of the widely acknowledged need for culturally appropriate social work practice. India is a highly diverse country in many respects, including variety of languages, cultures, and religions. So too is the United States. Social workers in both countries face the challenge of learning knowledge, values, and skills for culturally appropriate service that can respectfully connect with clients' and communities' particular ways of life.

In the following mandala of transculturality, each of the four colored circles represents the diversity of cultures, religions, and other lifeways to be found in a community. Culturally competent or multicultural social work can be represented as the middle circle that connects between the colored circles which represent these diversities. Ideally each social worker and social work agency needs to develop the ability to respectfully and comfortably connect within and between these particular cultural, linguistic, or religious contexts and to ally with professionals and community members who know how to do so from within the perspective of the community.



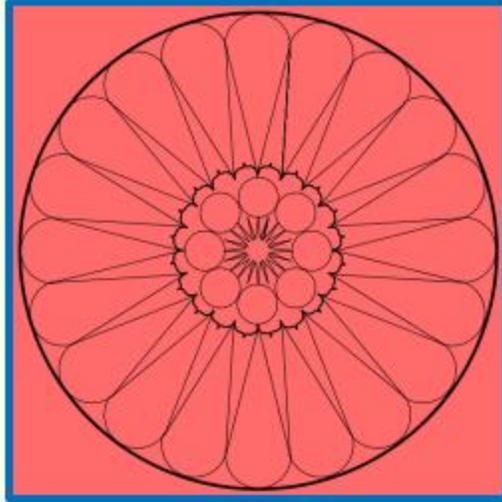
This ability to become multicultural can be enhanced when social workers become centered, as I described earlier. In this mandala, the central circle is the Center Point of Unity, meaning our True Center as the point at which all diversities connect in unity. To realize and

experience this within ourselves and our relationships – not just as an idea– gives an inspiration for how to engage with others appropriately, skillfully, and caringly. This way, we are less likely to become confused or lost or alienated in differences. We are more likely to genuinely appreciate and enjoy connecting across differences, celebrating both what we have in common and what we have in difference.

The outer circle in this mandala is like the outer circle in the previous mandala of concepts of spirituality. It represents a mode of consciousness, behavior, and teamwork that includes, embraces, and transcends all the multiple spiritual perspectives and lifeways that we encounter in our social work. Even on a very practical level, this means that embracing spiritual and cultural diversity requires social work practice based on cooperative teamwork, in which each social worker and each social work agency engages people with the requisite cultural and religious knowledge pertinent to the issue of service. For example, in my work with Southeast Asian refugees in the USA during the 1980s, I found the greatest success when social workers were able to forge collaborations between community-based support systems of refugees (such as Buddhist monks, shamans, traditional healers, bilingual caseworkers, ethnic mutual assistance associations) and the governmental and nongovernmental agencies that provided services, including the Christian congregations that often provided resettlement assistance.

## Conclusion

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In conclusion, I thank you for your time listening to my remarks. It is an honor to have been invited to participate in this way. I realize that my comments were at a very broad level. My hope is that they stimulate and encourage your own efforts of social work to address spiritual diversity in a way that is suitable to the context of India and whatever other countries you may have come from to attend this conference.

You can gain access to numerous resources for addressing spiritual diversity in social work, including international initiatives, at my website: <http://spiritualdiversity.ku.edu/>

May whatever learning and benefit you all experience at this conference be spread widely for the benefit of all those you meet on your spiritual paths of service.

Sincerely,

Edward Canda