POSTMODERNISM AND THE SACRED: RECLAIMING CONNECTION IN OUR GREATER-THAN-HUMAN WORLDS

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This article addresses the many faces of postmodernism and offers the critique that postmodernism taken up in a particular extremist way can tend to sacrifice the sacred, the spiritual, and the recognition of our "greater than human" worlds in a quest for the particular. In response to this critique, I speak to a postmodern family therapy practice that is informed by values of connectedness, community, and communion; enacted through love and pragmatics; and committed to recognition of our obligation to ecological practice.

To reclaim is to recall or bring back. I speak of "reclaiming connection" as recalling the right to acknowledge connection, meaning, and community. It is the prerogative, in an era that is fraught with particularity, to claim a commonality, a communion, and a sacred and spiritual unity that ties us to each other as humans and intimately ties us to a world that is greater than or certainly more than human (Abram, 1996). It is the privilege to reconvene and summon a tentative and "larger-than-me" meaning, significance, and connection about that which is mysterious, sensual, and unknown.

In this article, I address (and am addressed by) postmodernism, poststructuralism, constructivism, social constructionism, and "bring forthism." I offer a synopsis of the critique that has been proffered in regard to some of these stances as well as my own experience of finding my particular but connected human way in the practice of family therapy. Out of this discussion, I submit the notions of community, communion, and connectedness; examine how these can fit with a postmodern practice; and discuss how these bear witness and exact a duty and obligation in therapeutic work with families. The reconciliation of postmodern ideas and spirituality calls for a balancing of particular commitments. This does not necessarily imply a conflict, nor does it suggest that marriage and family therapists are suffering angst in this rapprochement. The intention of this article is not to offer "proof" of the place or relevance of spirituality in therapeutic work, nor to critique current practices, but to open the topic of spirituality once again for discussion, reflection, and recognition.

POSTMODERNISM AND ALL ITS FACES

Postmodernism

Postmodernism is an era, a cultural movement, a social condition, a belief system, and a way of being in and understanding the world. The end of a belief in one single worldview, it is "a resistance to single explanations, a respect for difference and a celebration of the regional, local and particular" (Jencks, 1992, p. 11). It is a worldview with contributions from philosophy, literature, art, culture, film, architecture, media, economics, politics, social sciences, feminism, science, and religion. At the heart of postmodernism is

pluralism: a belief in multiverses and multiplicity, implying that there are as many ways to understand and experience the world as there are people who experience it. Postmodernism is about multiplicity, plurality, and indeterminacy. Postmodernists argue that all human experience is particular, local, and culturally constituted.

Postmodernism, particularly deconstructive postmodernism, is seen as a mode of cultural analysis that seeks to uncover the social construction of "taken-for-granted" beliefs or universals. It pays attention to the ways in which concepts or "truisms" are culturally constructed and posits that, essentially, meaning itself, as an essential structure, does not exist. Rather, meaning is particularized, relative, and mutable. Modernist claims of mastery evoked, in particular, the French theorist Lyotard's recourse of a critique of metanarratives or grand belief systems that contained a universal acceptance of reality. Lyotard (1984) described postmodern knowledge as a refinement of sensitivity and tolerance of difference.

Poststructuralism

There have been many areas of distinctions within postmodernism that have taken up, with varying emphasis, these notions of constructed reality. One such distinction is poststructuralism. Influenced by scholars such as Derrida (1973) and Foucault (1965; although he disavowed himself as a poststructuralist) and a combination of sociology, linguistics, and philology, poststructuralism has emphasized the role of language in the constitution of one's world (Hartrick, 1998; Mitchell, 1996). As with postmodernism, there are inherent assumptions about the nature and creation of reality, but in poststructuralism a basic assumption is that rather than reflecting reality, language constitutes and creates it. The discursive practices of a culture affect how people live out and assign meaning to their lives and relationships. As a result, people are essentially "spoken into existence" in the context of conversational practices that are conditioned, created, and maintained by societal discourses (Hartrick, 1998).

Constructivism

The eighteenth-century philosopher and cultural historian, Giambattista Vico, is generally regarded as a pioneer who subscribed to an epistemology of knowledge now called constructivism. Vico's claim that "truth is what is made" was revolutionary and out of context of his social era. Half a century later, Kant shared some of Vico's position, including the notion that experiences, as well as objects, are the result of our interpretation and construction or invention: the world we experience is such because of the way we have put it together.

Von Glasersfeld introduced the term "radical constructivist," contending that "man—and man alone—is responsible for his thinking, his knowledge, and therefore also for what he does" (1984, p. 18). Von Glasersfeld asserted that knowledge is not a passive reflection of an objective ontological reality but is purely and totally an active and conscious ordering and perception of the world, singularly constituted by one's experience and ultimately organized by intelligence. Watzlawick suggested that constructivists believe that "a real reality exists and that certain theories, ideologies, or personal convictions reflect it (match it) more correctly than others" (1984b, p. 15).

Social Constructionism

Another face of postmodernism presents the belief that reality is constructed within social relationships and, therefore, self is a concept, process, and activity that occurs between people. As a result, people constitute each other (Freedman & Combs, 1996). Freedman and Combs (1996) suggested that the social constructionist worldview envisions knowledge as that which is created and negotiated within communities of knowers. Although there are no absolute "truths," reality as we know it is socially constructed, constituted through language, and organized and maintained through narrative. Social constructionists distinguish themselves from constructivists by placing more emphasis on social interpretation and the influence of family, culture, and language on the creation of meaning (Gergen, 1985; Hoffman, 1990). Social constructionism, practiced in therapy, attends to the politics of power, political action, and social responsibility. Issues of race, gender, social class, oppression, marginalization, and the power differential implicit in hierarchies and patriarchies are obligations to which we are answerable and accountable.

Bring Forthism

There is one more "face" that I am compelled to include in this exploration of postmodernism. Although I hesitate to give it an essentialist status of an "ism," this branch offers the closest affinity I can find to reconciling spirituality, philosophical thought, and postmodern practice. As a result, "bring forthism" most clearly guides my therapeutic practice with families.

The difference between constructing and the notion of "bringing forth" is significant. Maturana (1988) identified the term in an effort to make a distinction between his way of seeing the world and others' claims that he is a constructivist (Efran, Lukens, & Lukens, 1988; Hoffman, 1990; Mills & Sprenkle, 1995). Bringing forth can be seen to be more participatory and less grandiose and as implying less centrality. We do not create the world, but we do distinguish what we can from it; we are able to bring forth through living whatever our changing structures allow. "It compels us to see that the world will be different only if we live differently" (Maturana & Varela, 1992, p. 275).

The description by Hoffman (1990) of Maturana's structural interpretation of nervous systems as "biological isolation booths" ignores the plasticity and "structural coupling" (Maturana & Varela, 1992, p. 245) that accounts for constant change and interaction with the environment. Bringing forth does not isolate our experiences of the world to internal constructions or social phenomena in purely human interaction. It opens up the possibility that we interact—and are in relationship—with the world. We "couple" with the world in a way that allows the world a language and recognizes that the world has something to say about what we bring forth together.

Maturana and Varela (1992) have not claimed that we create matter out of a void; they have not asserted that "nothing exists," but that "no things exist" independent of bringing forth as an embodied action (Capra, 1996). We experience something, and the experiences do not occur in the isolated action of cognition but, rather, at cellular levels. Thus, the Cartesian split is addressed and refuted. Capra (1996) argued that the original split in ancient times did not occur between body and mind but between body and soul or spirit. The terms "soul" and "spirit" have etymological roots in "breath" and are literally translated as such in Greek, Sanskrit, Latin, and Hebrew (Abram, 1996; Capra, 1996). Capra (1996) suggested that since Maturana and Varela's theory extends far beyond the mind and includes the process of life, "bringing forth" can be described as the breath of life. Bringing forth a world also correlates with the ancient Hindu sense of *maya*, or the magical creative power of divine participation in creating a world (Capra, 1996). In this sense, we can bring forth meaning and spirit. Bring forthism embodies the "heart and body" of the way I have taken up postmodernism in my own practice.

CRITIQUING POSTMODERNISM

Patriarchy Revisited

The feminist critique of postmodernism is that it ignores community and commonality among women in favor of recognizing the localized contingencies and culturally constructed particularities. As a result, postmodernism could be regarded as diminishing the collective voice and experience of women, therefore encouraging disconnection (Kermode & Brown, 1996). The feminist critique accuses postmodernism of challenging some metanarratives while ignoring (and, therefore, sustaining) the grand narrative of patriarchy and its oppression (Kermode & Brown, 1996). Because postmodernism has been shaped out of a patriarchal culture, it is argued that it perpetuates patriarchal values of autonomy, separateness, nonrelationship, and power and control through abstraction and analysis (Spretnak, 1991). The critique takes ethical and moral form around issues of violence, rape, abuse, oppression, and power inequities and questions how these are complicitly ignored and perpetuated if they are considered to be simply social constructions. Kermode and Brown (1996) critique postmodernism with this argument: "Postmodernism is at best a distraction, and at worst, an epistemological hoax concocted by white bourgeois patriarchy to divert women and other oppressed groups from participating in the Enlightenment project, while the real narrative rolls on relentlessly—capitalism, patriarchy and power . . . . Rather than providing the basis of a way of knowing, it ensures nothing can be known" (p. 380).

The Critique of Particularism: Individuality at the Expense of Universality

It has been suggested that postmodernism has neglected the ambiguity of individualism. Despite our individual biologies, experiences, and beliefs, it is within the human condition to be connected to a community and to share commonness and kinship with others (Borgmann, 1992). Though different, we share similarities, kinships, commitments, and suffering, and this common ground is as significant as the privileging of the individual. Whereas modernity lost the individual in universalities, postmodernism may lose the universal or the world in the particular and in the individual.

Shades of Modernist Totality

Another critique is situated in the seemingly paradoxical position of postmodernists "championing 'difference, multiplicity, and centerlessness' via a theory that is itself 'totalizing' because it dismisses all other perceptions of reality" (Spretnak, 1991, p. 233). The critique offered is that although postmodernism seeks to relieve the world of totalizing views, it claims in itself a specialness and rightness, therefore leaving little room for other perceptions and worldviews. In deconstruction, postmodernism can tend to leave out or deny and discount the history of its own development. It can discount, as relative constructions, the past that is at play in the present—a past grounded in philosophy, religion, literature, or science. In this process, it diminishes its own creation and source, yet it does not fully subject itself to the same critique, and it does to some extent leave itself generally untouched.

Ethical Abdication

Postmodernism can be regarded as justification for moral and ethical retreat. In presenting a face of acceptance, one can embrace an abdication of responsibility, encased in claims of "it's my choice." This disengagement can be offered as a refusal to explain, discuss, negotiate, or justify the choice (Borgmann, 1992). One settles into self-indulgence or the claim of "it's my right" or "that's your opinion." In living together, our opinions and choices never live alone; we affect each other, and we do not have the option of relegating this influence simply to "difference," for we are touched by each other. In the attribution of all positions as constructions, one can be removed from a sense of responsibility and accountability to others. Postmodernism can become an excuse to relinquish the obligations that own us, obligations that, according to Caputo (1993), bear proper names—our own and others.

The "Slippery Slope of Relativism"

Although postmodernism releases us from being held by the privilege and rightness of specific beliefs, theories, or facts, the "slippery slope of relativism" (Amundson, 1996, p. 475) must be carefully navigated. As Amundson noted, the idea of created constructs leaves our "most noble sentiments and appeals to higher ideals" sadly adrift. "If all things are simply relative, what connects us, each to another, or to our craft, or even for that matter to the world at large?" (Amundson, 1996, p. 475). We need not abandon the usefulness, utility, or belief in "truths," but we need to recognize that it is the absence, denial, or rejection of others' truths that becomes worthy of concern.

Claims of Reality

Borgmann (1992) suggested that in postmodernism we are endangered with losing our sense of reality. He defined reality as "what comes to us in its own right, as unforethinkable joy and as inescapable pain" (Borgmann, 1992, p. 12). Borgmann wondered how reality can find a place in postmodernism when realism has been at the center of the postmodern criticism and deconstruction. As a result, reality has been "stripped of its credibility and authority" (Borgmann, 1992, p. 117), and in this process, reality has been ignored, dismissed, or rendered invisible. The critique lies in what has been missed: in an effect to disband the arrogance of reality in modernism, postmodernism "accepts naively the legacy of that arrogance, namely the disappearance of reality" (Borgmann, 1992, p. 117).

Is There Room for Spirituality?

Deconstructive postmodernists (Derrida, 1981, 1989) sometimes have argued that since meaning does not exist outside of language and is relative, temporary, and constructed, then God, spirit, history, humanism,

thoughts, or beliefs exist only within our invented distinctions in language and that their meanings are contained only within construction. Religion and spirituality are dismissed as outside of the realm of human construction and are therefore nonexistent.

Why then does spirituality lie so often outside of language and beyond our descriptions? We have "moments of graced consciousness so intense that they bring revelation . . . experienced as being joltingly *outside* of cultural frameworks, making it nearly impossible for one to discuss the occurrence afterward except in oblique approximations" (Spretnak, 1991, p. 81). Griffin (1989) suggested that deconstructive postmodernism deconstructs and therefore eliminates what is at the core of a worldview such as God. Though motivated by an ethical concern about totalism, the extreme view of postmodernism can result in nihilism.

Wilber suggested that, at times, postmodernism can be taken to "absurd and self-defeating extremes" (1998, p. 119). Postmodernism, taken to an extreme, moves particularity into disengagement, self-referential construction, and cynical relativism and can become a context for a loss of meaning, community, connectedness, and loss of a sense of embeddedness in and embodiment with the rest of the natural world. Wilber further stated that the radical extremist wing of postmodernism has managed to twist the assumptions of postmodernism with the result of a "totally deconstructed world that takes the deconstructionists with it" (1998, p. 121). Of course, postmodernism itself is not responsible for how it is interpreted. It is not responsible, in a linear sense, for the social problems of the world. Similarly, postmodern-informed practice is not necessarily a practice that disregards spirituality, but when taken to an extreme, it can invite disengagement. Disengagement with the world has ramifications that become apparent in crises of ecology, politics, health care, education, economics, social connection, and responsibility. These forces are played out in the dramas and suffering of families who come into our care.

Spretnak offered that our sense of and faith in the sacred, which might be described as the human experience of a larger mysterious creativity in the universe, has been diminished and devalued in postmodern assumptions: "I agree with the deconstructive-postmodern project to stimulate awareness of processes by which conceptualizations are culturally constructed, but I do not agree with their leap to conclude that there is *nothing* but cultural construction in human experience. I admire the courage of their efforts, but they seem spiritually adrift" (1991, pp. 4–5). Spretnak further suggested that the crises and suffering currently experienced in the world community are directly related to the isolation of spirituality from everyday life and even from acceptability in a postmodern world. These problems are not the result of postmodern philosophy or practice, but they may be fueled by extremist philosophical beliefs that promote our disengagement from each other and from our ethical obligations to our world.

There is a place for spirituality in postmodern assumptions, and its reconciliation lies in our practices. The separateness, fragmentation, and groundlessness in a world of consumerism and disparateness can result in a spiritual groundlessness and a yearning for connection (Abram, 1996; Borgmann, 1992; Spretnak, 1991). In recovering the language of spiritual practice, Spretnak suggested we have much to learn from the great wisdom traditions of suffering in Buddhism; the ecological focus of native spiritual traditions; the feminist sensitivity to relationships and bodily awareness; and the social ethics connected to divine oneness as present in the teachings of the Semitic religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

Spretnak (1991) further offered that spirituality has much to do with the healing of the world's suffering and that incorporation of the sacred traditions of wisdom, equanimity, compassion, and loving kindness are the threads that need to be repaired in our community web. Reawakening the core teachings of the wisdom traditions, which hold a legacy of thousands of years of human relationship with the sacred, into the living present situates meaning not only as a privilege but also as an obligation.

We have and are a larger context. We exist beyond our cultural creation and interpretations. We are connected palpably to each other, to nature, and to the cosmos in a way that is beyond language. Though sometimes ignored or rendered silent, the sacred is living in postmodernism. The constructivist Vico found a way to include it. Von Glasersfeld (1984) interpreted Vico as referring to God, suggesting that although humans can know only what they themselves construct, only God can know His own creations. Bateson suggested that "there is a larger Mind of which the individual mind is only a subsystem . . . . [This] larger Mind is comparable to God and is perhaps what some people mean by 'God,' but is still immanent in the

total interconnected social system and planetary ecology" (1972, p. 461). Bateson also offered that we need to restrain our desire to control the world, which we so "imperfectly understand. . . . [R]ather, our studies could be inspired by a more ancient, but today less honored, motive: a curiosity about the world of which we are a part" (1972, p. 269). We can reclaim Aristotle's belief that "in the human soul there is something whereby it becomes everything and something whereby it makes everything" (cited in Borgmann, 1992, p. 109). We can give this soul a voice, but its life does not require our voices to speak it into being.

Does the World Have a Voice?

The natural world is living, and we are connected to it; it has something to say about us. This sense of connectedness is not new; we have heard this claim before. It existed in Bateson's (1979) epistemology of patterns and relationships as the essence of the living world; in the cultural historian Berry's (1988) exploration of communion, relationship, and interconnectedness; in Maturana and Varela's (1992) account of coupling with the environment; in Capra's (1996) exploration of systems and the web of life; and in Lovelock's (1979) Gaia theory of the earth as being a living, self-organizing system.

Life has an inherent tendency to be novel and spontaneously creative (Capra, 1996). As humans, we do not make this happen. We tend to be a narcissistic "bunch," and when we locate all potential and possibility within ourselves, we divorce ourselves from the past and from that which is other. We ignore what is outside of a human world, the cosmic universal mystery, the spiritually felt, but unnamed, and the named spirituality we choose to reduce to relativism and essentialism. In this act, we seem to claim that there is not only nothing beyond us, there is nothing beyond our construction of us. This, for me, is a highly powerful and violent stance, albeit disguised as plurality and costumed in neutrality. We are not pious or reverent; we are shamefully (or shamelessly) enraptured with ourselves. Postmodernism and its many faces sometimes appear to be linguistic claims to specialness, to the claim that we are only at our best and splendid in the egocentricism of an only human world that is made of meanings that we ourselves claim to construct. We have a "bloated image of the importance of humanity in giving Earth integrity and meaning" (Jardine, 1992, p. 28).

This stance of privilege is embarrassing and paradoxical in its claim of centrality. It is limiting. That we assume there is nothing beyond our grasp and our construction is the ultimate in colonization. It leaves out the mystery, the sacred, and the greater-than-me ecology of this world. It leaves the earth—the humus— out of being human. What of the other things of the world, living and not living, and what of the things beyond this world and unknown to us? Jardine wrote that mystery or all things that extend beyond the known guides us "to a sense of practical propriety, a sense of living wisely and delicately on the Earth, mindful to the patterns that pertain whether we know it or not" (1992, p. 30).

> Gazing out the window to the pine and spruce trees, and this snow and the Chinook winds, it is almost impossible to realise that these things are not *for me*. This is the sting of ecological insight, that these things have an agenda and an integrity of their own and they are not waiting for me to make sense of them or to graciously bestow them with order. . . . [M]y knowledge is not equal to the world and that I do not live in a world that is simply of my own making. . . . [A]ll the images of colonialism that infuse threads of the logic we are living out: the deep rage for imposing orderliness on anything that comes to meet us and the deeper hubris hidden in the belief that there is not orderliness without us (Jardine, 1992, pp. 41–42).

The earth is not here for us. We are obligated to serve and suffer it, to be in relationship with it, and to see ourselves of the earth in fleshy humus. What we do not know has its own integrity and organization, it is greater than our knowledge of it, and we do not get to make it up.

Although Rorty (1989) ascertained that "the world does not speak" (1989, p. 5), that only people and not things have a voice, and that nature in its silence does not give preference for how it is represented (Rorty, 1979), I maintain that the world is full of voice. We are in relationship with a speaking world that we alone do not "speak into existence." The postmodern conversation is often confined to humanity and it rudely ignores the rest of the world. Borgmann suggested that, in its efforts to discredit ethnocentrism and

logocentrism, postmodernism has slipped into anthropocentrism, rejecting "the very possibility that things may speak to us in their own right" (1992, p. 117). The world has a commanding voice without traces of human intonation; it has a resonance of its own.

> Humans are tuned for relationship. The eyes, the skin, the tongue, ears, and nostrils—all are gates where our body receives nourishment of otherness. This landscape of shadowed voices, these feathered bodies and antlers and tumbling streams—these breathing shapes are our family, the beings with whom we are engaged, with whom we struggle and suffer and celebrate. For the largest part of our species' existence, humans have negotiated relationships with every aspect of the sensuous surroundings, exchanging possibilities with every flapping form, with each textured surface and shivering entity that we happened to focus upon. All could speak, articulating in gesture and whistle and sigh a shifting web of meanings that we felt on our skin or inhaled through our nostrils or focused with our listening ears, and to which we replied—whether with sounds, or through movements, or minute shifts of mood. The color of sky, the rush of waves—every aspect of the earthly sensuous could draw us into a relationship fed with curiosity and spiced with danger . . . And from all these relationships our collective sensibilities were nourished. Today we participate almost exclusively with other humans and with our own human-made technologies. It is a precarious situation, given our age-old reciprocity with the many-voiced landscape. We still *need* that which is other than ourselves and our own creations . . . we are human only in contact, and conviviality, with what is not human. (Abram, 1996, p. ix)

BRINGING FORTH THE SACRED:
PARTICIPATING IN A GREATER-THAN-HUMAN WORLD

"How can we come to realize that we live in a participatory universe—that each of us, each minute part of us, is a node within a vast network of creative dynamics—unless we engage in practices that awaken our minds to the realities of such participation" (Spretnak, 1991, p. 22). We as humans are obligated to recognize the communion of the world and to not only participate but to celebrate and honor the universe. I suggest we honor it with gratitude, responsibility, humility, and love.

Jencks (1992) suggested that the universe, at a cosmological level, shows a disposition or preference to create something (perhaps like us) and that it is novel, creative, and passionately alive. In being addressed by the world's preference, we are reclaiming the mystery and spirituality in our lives. We are humbled by the universe; loved from within it; and deeply connected to what comes from it. Capra offered: "The belief that all these fragments—in ourselves, in our environment, and in our society—are really separate has alienated us from nature and from our fellow human beings and thus has diminished us. To regain our full humanity, we have to regain our experience of connectedness with the entire web of life. The reconnecting, *religio* in Latin, is the very essence of the spiritual grounding of deep ecology" (1996, p. 296).

We are unique but not separate; we are connected to each other and to the web of relationships that constitute our universe. When one suffers, we all suffer; when the earth is poisoned, we are all endangered. We are in relationship not only with our selves, our families, and our human community but with that which constitutes us, supports us, and depends on us—the earth, the air, all that is known, and that which is unknown. To alienate ourselves from this connection is self-defeating and other-defeating, and it is impossible. In this unity, even ignorance or benign negligence has implications. We are in the middle, and our complicity is a given. We have witnessed the result of benign or intentional disavowal of connection and have seen it take forms of racism, elitism, violence, poverty, hunger, illness, oppression, homelessness, consumerism, nationalism, patriarchy, spiritual poverty, and ecological endangerment and ruin. We are complicit in language, choice, ignorance, arrogance, and even in inactive concern. Postmodernism, interpreted in a particular way, can encourage this disconnection and estrangement from the web. It is, however, an illusion that there is no connection, but if we behave as if there is not, the implications of our actions can be profound and toxic.

Postmodernism does not have to be about disconnection. We can find ways to preserve both the particular and the common. Postmodernism has taught us well how to recognize and honor the particular. It has taught us to celebrate and legitimize difference. Postmodernists, however, sometimes need the reminder that we are not the only ones at play in the universe and that the other members of our vast web—the plants, animals, events, histories, places, and all those members we have not yet met—might just have something to say about the plurality of truths in our social and cultural constructions. The rhythm of the web is not within our orchestration, or even within our perception. We do not get to have the only voice. We are not central, and we do not get to choose our relatives. We are related, we are deeply immersed, but we are not the only members.

We do, however, have power, and we affect the web. Power requires responsibility, wisdom, and compassion to guide it well. Power must be regard-full; it must keep the world and itself within its regard, and it need remember that it is also in full view and regard of the world. We have an obligation to the web, a duty to our thread and others, and an intense responsibility that we sometimes abdicate. The integrity of *the web is* shared, and the ultimate and unknowable mystery in every thread of the web is the sacred. Our connections and collectivity are deeply ethical and moral.

COMMUNITY, COMMUNION, AND CONNECTEDNESS: IMPLICATIONS FOR FAMILY THERAPY

There is room in a postmodern-informed practice to take up postmodernism with attention to the connections it invites rather than an interpretation of dis-memberment. When we moved from the top positioning of which modernity convinced us, we shifted to more humble levels of community, contribution, and connectedness. These are not new concepts in the field of family therapy, nor are they solely in the domain of spirituality; in fact, some might argue they have always been inherent values central to the field. We are participants, and this participation carries with it responsibility and obligation, which need to be translated into a "practice of wisdom and compassion" (Spretnak, 1991, p. 60). The wisdom is involved in recognizing suffering when it is at play in peoples' lives, and the compassion lies in the desire and obligation to do something about it. Borgmann (1992) suggested that, as in German tradition, the word "practical" is synonymous with moral, and therefore our practice and the decisions that govern our practice and our conduct within it are moral decisions.

What has postmodernism given to us to guide us in practice? Tapp and Wright suggested that postmodernism invites us to "multivocity, collaboration, and willingness to address subjugating aspects" (1996, p. 232) of our practices. Watzlawick (1984a) offered that when we accept that reality as we know it is completely a result of our construction, it teaches us acceptance and tolerance for difference. This leads us to recognize that our ideas do not necessarily fit with others. It leads us, as well, to an ethical responsibility for our behaviors and decisions. There is a freedom in the acknowledgment that how we live and construct our lives has the ever-possible option of change. Postmodernism offers us the legitimacy of choosing any approach in our work with families and the prerogative to claim preference for a certain one—just as long as it is recognized as preference rather than truth.

Hoffman wrote that "the postmodern therapist comes into the family without any definition of pathology, without any idea about what dysfunctional structures to look for, and without any set idea about what should or should not change" (1990, p. 10). I disagree. As people, postmodern or not, we come to the therapy room full of ideas, definitions, prejudices, assumptions, beliefs, hypotheses, and even preferences. We come with our rich legacies of experiences and beliefs about the world. Postmodernism does not (and could not) ask us to relinquish these, but to acknowledge that the people we work with come with their own legacies, which are as rich, valid, and legitimate as our own. It is in this way that we create space for a relationship where mutual change is possible. It is only when we invite others (our clients) into our disciplines and crafts that our work becomes a living, generative thing (Jardine & Field, 1996). We do not define it alone.

Postmodern Escape from Relativism in Practice

We may believe from the depths of postmodern philosophy that all views are relative, yet still escape relativism. We escape it through acknowledgment that, although we cannot know ultimate truth-value, values are constitutionally a part of all knowledge and action (Hare-Mustin, 1994); they are embedded in human life, in family therapy practice, and in our relationships with our world. These values call us into the postmodern practice of recognizing obvious and concealed discourse and influence, traditions, and histories. These values call us to evaluate our relationships and to be accountable, responsible, and committed to them. Amundson (1996) suggested that the escape from relativism is to shift from aesthetics to a pragmatic practice of emphasis on utility rather than truth, seeking for what is useful and what works rather than truth value or adherence to theory.

Postmodern Practice Guided by Both Pragmatics and Pluralism

Amundson (1996) suggested that each family guides us in our practice, each time. He recommended that we can pay attention to "getting things done" by beginning where we can and following the path that is best suited to, or fits with, each family. This is a direct challenge to expert practice, recognizing that expertise exists both within the family and the therapist and that expertise is always relative. It has congruence with Maturana and Varela's (1992) notions of abandoning instructive interaction and acknowledging the role of "fit" in our clinical work with families. It also then affords us the luxury to forsake the colonizing "imposition of foreign guidance through theory" (Amundson, 1996, p. 477) and the risk of "affixing our loyalty to ideas rather than to the people they are to serve" (p. 483).

Postmodern Practice Guided by Love

Spretnak (1991) suggested we practice "active love" through observing practical ways to eliminate mental suffering of self and others, recognizing and nurturing our kinship with the earth, honoring the body, and creating community. Many spiritual wisdom traditions are grounded in the activity of love. Some might suggest that the Christian tradition is based entirely on the notion of active love. Buddhist principles espouse beliefs of how mind states of ill and rage create more of the same. Ghandi (1962) recognized a multiplicity of religions, believing that all religions are true and that there are as many religions as there are people. This does not imply meaningless relativism but rather a fundamental unity that prevails through all diversity. He observed nonviolence of the mind, believing that people are behaviorally influenced by their thoughts and that thoughts of anger or fear alter perception, judgment, and ultimately behavior.

There are those who argue that love influences biology. Maturana suggested that "most human suffering arises from interfering with the biology of love and is cured through the biology of love" (1991, p. 93). The healing of illness through love, and the exploration of the interconnectedness between mind, emotions, spirituality, and biology, is an emerging area of interest (Abram, 1996; Bolen, 1996; Cousins, 1979; Dossey, 1993; Gilligan, 1997; Griffith & Griffith, 1994; Lerner, 1994; Ornish, 1993; Siegel, 1986; Spretnak, 1991; Walsh, 1999; Weil, 1995; Wright, Watson, & Bell, 1996).

Maturana and Varela suggested that love is the "biological interpersonal congruence that lets us *see* the other person and open up for him room for existence beside us" (1992, p. 246). Love is, according to Maturana (1998), the domain of those relational behaviors in which another arises as a legitimate other in coexistence with oneself. Maturana suggested that love is a "biological claim that makes us accept the presence of the other beside us without reason" (1986, p. 60). Love is not solely a human phenomenon, but Maturana (1991) argued that what is unique in human love is what we do in love. Nonviolence or "active love" (Spretnak, 1991, p. 73) could incorporate Maturana's notion of love. Because Maturana (1991) claimed that love occurs in a domain of action, we can assume that we can practice love and that love occurs in our practices. Loving is the active opening of space for another; it is the practice of opening space.

Postmodern Spiritual Practice and Recognizing the Sacred

The family therapy field is increasingly acknowledging the spiritual aspect of human experience and the connection between spirituality, suffering, and healing (Anderson & Worthen, 1997; Harris, 1998; Haug, 1998a, 1998b; Prest & Keller, 1993; Prest, Russel, & D'Souza, 1999; Rotz, Russell, & Wright, 1993;

Stander, Piercy, Mackinnon, & Helmeke, 1994; Walsh, 1998, 1999; Watson, 1997). Wright (1997; 1999; Wright et al., 1996), who has been addressing the place of spirituality with families experiencing illness for many years, considers a large part of her clinical work with families to be an act of "reverencing."

Acknowledging the sacred, in the context of postmodern practice, seems to be about accepting and legitimizing how people come to see and live in their worlds. It allows some clear and pragmatic insight into how this sight or one's beliefs may cause, contribute to, or alleviate suffering, and it opens space for both spiritual exploration and acceptance (Wright et al., 1996). It is a relatively recent development in family therapy that people are asked about their spiritual beliefs and are invited into conversations that explore how these beliefs might contribute to or reduce suffering.

Acknowledging the sacred also shifts the relationship into another level. It allows the therapist the privilege of acknowledging the sacred at work in the room or in the therapeutic relationship. There are times when something just happens, when perfect words seem to just come to the therapist without conscious construction, when there is a feeling or a sense in the room and in the relationship that something inexplicable, or perhaps something holy, has happened. The sense of communion might be interpreted as many things, but acknowledging the sacred allows room to believe that sometimes what happens is bigger than us, we do not always understand it, and sometimes we can only simply honor it. The communion is not something that can be strategized or fully understood. We stand in awe of it, and we know it is there. We have felt it.

Postmodern Ecological Practice

The incorporation of concepts of deep ecology brings to practice the belief that we are fundamentally connected: all phenomena, individuals, and societies are both embedded in and dependent on the cycles of nature (Capra, 1996). "Ecological awareness is spiritual in its deepest sense" (Capra, 1996, p. 7) in that it connects all life to itself and to that which is greater than it (Abram, 1996; Capra, 1996; Spretnak, 1991). An ecological practice suggests that rather than constructing the work we do with families, we participate in it. This participation is communal in nature and it implies that we, as clinicians, have moral and ethical imperatives in our responsibility to the work we do, one of which is to listen and hear the voices of our clients and realize we are accountable to them. It reminds us that families have something to say back to us about the relationship we create, the communities we build, and the kinds of practices we evolve.

Ecology is not only the study of relationships, but its etymological source returns us to the Greek meaning of "house." We create a house for our relationships, a space of love and concern, where our practice is loved, sheltered, and nourished. It is a place where we belong. Capra and Steindl-Rast wrote: "Belonging has a double sense. When I say 'this belongs to me,' I mean that I possess something. But, when I say, 'I belong,' I don't mean that something possesses me, but that I take part in, am intimately involved with, a reality greater than myself, whether it's a love relationship, a community, a religion, or the whole universe. So 'I belong' means 'Here I find my place' " (1991, p. 14).

Since "responsibility belongs to the domain of awareness" (Maturana, 1991, p. 95), we must be aware to be responsible, and we must be responsibly aware. We have a responsibility to maintain the house, and the house reflects us. We must account for the way we are in our homes, for how we share our homes, and for how we participate in the relationships we invite into our homes. We must also remember that we are caught within the regard of those who enter. We are implicated in how things are and how they turn out. Such are our homes in practice, and such are our homes in the world.

SUMMARY

Postmodernism and all its faces offer a context to create and live particular views about the world. The notions of multiplicity and multivocity afford us an ultimate freedom to believe and practice in creative and unique ways. This freedom also grants us the privilege to reclaim connection. Borgmann (1992) suggested that the postmodern spirit might even be considered a holy spirit. In this sense it calls us to the world, rather than removing us from it, or alternately laying claim to it. In this regard then, in a world of my own practice, the postmodern spirit allows me the privilege and the responsibility to acknowledge the sacred, and the

implications brought forth in this act can be claimed, exclaimed, and are at play in the relationships I have with clients.

In recognizing that we can only know our own reality, we cannot lay claim to another. We do not even always understand that which is beyond ourselves. Wilber (1998) suggested that although Kant argued in his *Critique of Pure Reason* that the mind cannot prove the existence of a God, he also argued in his *Critique of Practical Reason* that reason also cannot disprove God's existence. This very sense of unknowingness moves us to a veneration of our place in the dignity of the vast cosmos of this universe: in context with that which sustains us and speaks to us in an equally valid voice of nature; in the incredibly humbling relationships of our work with families; in the contingencies of our own highly particular and personal lives; and ultimately in our relationships with ourselves and with that which is greater and far larger than us—the spirit that maintains and connects us to each other and to a world. This is a world that sustains us, some of which we like to pretend we own but most of which simply and sublimely humbles us.

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