

THE SPIRITUAL TRANSFORMATION OF SOCIAL (JUSTICE) WORK:
A CHARTER OF SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITIES
CORRESPONDING TO VITAL HUMAN NEEDS

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores core elements of a spiritual foundation for transformational social work. The concept of social justice, defined here as “seeing that no harm comes to another,” which lies at the heart of both eastern and western religious and spiritual traditions, will be examined in relation to needs essential to human growth and integrity. A theoretical framework for social (justice) work (practice and pedagogy) based on a responsibility-to-needs conception of justice—as opposed to a rights-based approach—will be articulated. A draft Charter of Social Obligations, corresponding to vital human physical, psychological/emotional, social and spiritual needs, will be discussed and applied to two case examples.. Social justice as harm reduction serves the goal of spiritual transformation in cases of spiritual trauma. Here the spiritual is regarded not as an autonomous realm, but as something expressed in the relations between people. As

Canda (1999) demonstrates, spirituality involves understanding the interconnectedness of all people, inspiring a sense of mutual responsibility. This presentation will provide a framework to operationalize this central principle.

Social work is concerned with addressing a wide range of social problems that affect individual and community well-being, including physical and mental health, psychological functioning, and social participation. Underlying these, however, is often a spiritual component, a spiritual malaise, which social workers must take into account if they are to be effective. A neglected component of social problems is “spiritual trauma,” which is essentially an experience of violation of the spiritual or “sacred” core in human beings, harm at the innermost level, by an external “social” source. Social problems often induce spiritual trauma.

The question of what constitutes the “spiritual” or “sacred” core in human beings has been a subject of ultimate concern within and among major religious and spiritual traditions. Most agree that the child-like yet profound expectation that good and not harm will come to us is located at the core of human existence. As social philosopher and activist Simone Weil (1952a) writes, “There is a reality outside the world, outside space and time, outside man's mental universe, outside any sphere whatsoever that is accessible to human faculties. Corresponding to this reality, at the centre of the human heart, is the longing for an absolute good, a longing which is always there and is never appeased by any object in this world...Just as the reality of this world is the sole foundation of facts, so that other reality is the sole foundation of good. That reality is the

unique source of all the good that can exist in this world: that is to say, all beauty, all truth, all justice, all legitimacy, all order...”

If all human beings are identical insofar as they can be thought of as consisting of a spiritual core, which is an unquenchable desire for good, when one’s life is damaged or destroyed by some external wound or privation, due to another’s action or negligence, an inner wounding may also occur. When this occurs we say that we have suffered an injury to our spirit; there has been a “sacrilege” toward that which is “sacred” in us. Essentially, our aspiration toward the good is altered. At the extreme, the expectation that good and not harm will come to us is replaced by what novelist Philip Roth (2000) calls the “wisdom of someone who has no expectations.” When a destructive rather than preservative path is followed, this is contrary to our instinct for good in life, but quite understandable, Weil argues, when social problems exhaust human capital.

On the other hand, those whose attention is turned toward the spiritual core in others are the intermediary through which good can “descend” to others. According to Weil, the only possibility of expression of respect toward the “sacred core” in human beings is offered by attending to the essential human needs of others. All human behavior that is mindful of responsibilities or obligations to others’ needs honors this “longing for the absolute good” (Weil, 1968). She writes,

If I turn on a flashlight at night out of doors I don’t judge its power by looking at the bulb, but by seeing how many objects it lights up. The brightness of a source of light is appreciated by the illumination it projects upon non-luminous objects. The value of a religious or, more generally, a spiritual way of life is appreciated

*by the amount of illumination thrown upon the things of this world.
Earthly things are the criterion of spiritual things...The virtue of
anything is manifested outside the thing.*

Clearly, Weil did not consider the spiritual as an autonomous realm, but rather as something whose reality is expressed in the relations between people. As Canda (1999) demonstrates, spirituality involves understanding the interconnectedness of all people, inspiring a sense of mutual responsibility. Weil's formulations provide a framework to operationalize this central principle.

Discerning Spiritual Trauma

When one asserts his or her “rights” in Western society today, this is considered a healthy expression toward the goal of having one’s basic needs met. Rarely, however, do victims of spiritual trauma assert their rights; they have come to believe in the futility of such an exercise. The rights-based language of entitlement is essentially the language of the privileged, those whose innermost expectation of “good” has not been seriously violated. It is not the shrill voices clamoring for their rights that are the victims of deep wounding; it is the invisible, silent and anonymous voices, who monotonously, incessantly cry out, “Why?,” which may be translated as “*For what purpose?*,” that seek solutions that go beyond an assertion of rights. A sense of slavery is central to spiritual trauma; it “chains down” thoughts and feelings. In spiritual affliction “the soul is constrained to repeat...a sustained, monotonous groan, ‘Why? Why am I being hurt?’ To which there is no answer given” (Weil, 1951). There is no apparent meaning to the suffering in such affliction.

Spiritual trauma is often the precursor of addiction, mental health problems, and child neglect and abuse, but rather than addressing the root social causes of the trauma, social work is practiced in the context of social institutions which may weaken the worker’s application of harm reduction- and strengths-based ethics. The actual practices of social workers, along with other human service professionals, are located within institutions which utilize or are in the “shadow” of retributive criminal justice policies, objectifying mental health diagnostic criteria, and treatment models that are concerned

only with surface symptoms. The increasingly technocratic nature of social work which legislates, controls, licences, packages and sells human service runs the risk of violating the spirit (Canda, 1999). These practices contribute to the overuse of social control, and thus to spiritual trauma. This paper proposes an alternative method, a spiritually-grounded approach to social work, based on a definition of justice that reflects the centrality of human needs and social responsibilities.

It is difficult to even begin to estimate the prevalence of spiritual trauma in the world. Most seem to manage to avoid such a condition. Weil (1951) tries to capture the essence of this condition which she sees as characterized by some degree of physical pain, social exclusion, and psychological and spiritual distress. Even more ambiguous is the connection between spiritual trauma and compassion, although the nature of this relationship lies at the heart of major religious and spiritual teachings. The Greek myth of Prometheus and the Biblical account of Christ's passion are examples of treatises on spiritual trauma and compassion. The Iliad, the "poem of might," graphically illustrates the ancient Greek association between the ravages of domination (the opposite of compassion) and the state of spiritual suffering.

Simone Weil (1951) wrote bluntly: "Compassion for the afflicted is an impossibility, a miracle akin to walking on water, healing the sick or raising the dead." The professionalization of caring activities has hardly improved matters, as on a community level, citizens have largely disengaged from the spiritually afflicted,

transferring caregiving obligations to the hands of professional service providers (McKnight, 1995).

Spiritual trauma is almost always associated with social exclusion, fear and marginalization--the sort of reaction that one would expect toward wrongdoing is in fact attached to spiritual affliction, according to Weil. Many come to be seen as “specimen(s) of a certain type” and assigned a variety of labels. According to Weil, it goes against human nature to love someone who is spiritually afflicted. True compassion for the spiritually afflicted would have to entail a “voluntary, consented equivalent of affliction” (Weil, 1951)--that is, identifying oneself with the afflicted person to the point of taking on part of the affliction. True compassion is “suffering with” another.

Over time, according to Weil, the contempt and revulsion of others toward spiritually afflicted persons is turned inward. Spiritual affliction is largely mute. “There is a natural alliance between truth and affliction,” because both are “mute supplicants” (Weil, 1951). The spiritually traumatized “sink into impotence in the use of language, because of the certainty of not being heard.”

One important lesson learned from spiritual affliction is that “we can no longer believe that the world is created or controlled by ourselves. Affliction reveals, suddenly and to our great surprise, that we were totally mistaken in this regard” (Weil, 1951).

According to Weil, compassion for the spiritually afflicted is only possible when it rests upon a deep knowledge of spiritual trauma: “compassion consists in paying attention to an afflicted man and identifying oneself with him in thought” (Weil, 1951). Weil’s concept of attention has to do with discernment of what someone is saying, the kind of protest a person makes who is being harmed, and the social conditions which create the climate for injustice and oppression. To see spiritual affliction and not avoid it, to direct our compassion toward the trauma, requires a deep knowledge of affliction, the ability to *read* spiritual affliction and the social conditions and problems that give rise to it. It then involves acting in a manner to reduce harm and social oppression. The implications of such an orientation for social justice workers are profound.

Harm Reduction, Strengths-based Practice, Social Justice, and Social Work

According to Weil, the word “justice” has lost its meaning in modern times, replaced by a vacuous notion of “rights,” with devastatingly harmful results, including the blunting of our pursuit of justice. She writes, “to place rights at the centre of social conflicts inhibits any possible impulse of compassion on both sides.” Rights are always asserted in a tone of contention, which must rely on force in the background, and to buy into rights language is to believe that power can be counter-balanced by power. A latent war is evoked. A strictly rights-based focus on social problems blunts the capacity to care, and to attend to the true needs of others. To say, “if we could just achieve equal rights...” means either snatching rights from someone else, or imposing an ideology. The spiritually afflicted have already been subject to the ravages of power; the call to regain

power over others as a redress is an attempt to transform suffering into retribution, and harms are likely to multiply.

A rights-based orientation, Weil argues, imposes a moral mediocrity in the realm of spiritual affliction. As the language of those privileged to not experience spiritual trauma, the discourse of “rights” is based on an assertion of entitlement, whereas those experiencing social exclusion have learned that they have few, if any, rights. Further, as “rights” refer to individual entitlements, they focus on the question, “Why don’t I have as much as he has?;” as opposed to the, “Why am I being hurt?” of the spiritually afflicted. Calculating what one can obtain as compensation for harms that have been done is the essence of a rights-based approach. According to Weil (1952a), “Thanks to rights, what should have been a cry of protest from the depths of the heart turns into a shrill nagging of claims and counter-claims.” It becomes impossible to keep focused on the real problem: that fact that an injustice has occurred, a harm committed, which cannot be understood as a right that has been taken. Weil uses the example of rape: it is not just a violation of *rights* that the victim has experienced--she has suffered an *injustice*, a type of harm done to her which cannot be adequately understood as a “right” taken. What has been taken and what can be returned in place of the sexual violation? “The real problem cannot be solved by compensation; her cry must be heard.”

The more that rights remain at the centre of attention, the less concerned we become about obligations. Weil (1952b) focuses on the relationship between rights and responsibilities: the two concepts express different points of view, and the actual

relationship between the two is as between object and subject. In this context, Weil (1952b) writes, “The notion of obligations comes before that of rights, which is subordinate and relative to the former. A right is not effectual by itself, but only in relation to the obligation to which it corresponds, the effective exercise of a right springing not from the individual who possesses it, but from other men who consider themselves as being under a certain obligation toward him. Recognition of an obligation makes it effectual. An obligation which goes unrecognized by anybody loses none of the full force of its existence. A right which goes unrecognized by anybody is not worth very much.” Rights are worthless when they are not recognized.

In contrast to the notion of rights is Weil’s view of justice as meeting obligations, “seeing that no harm is done to another,” evocative of the focus of the emerging “harm reduction” and “strengths-based” approaches in social work. According to Weil, compassion for the spiritually afflicted is realized through one basic social intervention: addressing basic human needs—physical, psychological, social, and spiritual—by means of fulfilling our social responsibilities in this regard. She writes, “For every need there is a corresponding obligation; for every obligation a corresponding need” (Weil, 1952b). Through attention we are able to read the nature of the harm being done by social institutional practices not based on addressing essential human needs. We act according to what we read, writes Weil, by meeting core human needs and reducing social harm in particular instances. We are called to take action: “Compassion,” she says, “consists (not only) in paying attention to an afflicted man and identifying oneself with him in thought. It then follows that one feeds him automatically if he is hungry, just as one

feeds oneself. Bread given in this way is the effect and sign of compassion” (Weil, 1951).

Human needs are the nutriments or conditions essential to a human being’s growth and integrity. As such, the needs of human beings are “sacred.” Weil (1952b) provides a starting point for the enumeration of essential human needs, which are not organized hierarchically but as pairs of opposites that complement each other. The needs of the body are fairly easy to identify: food, warmth, sleep, health, rest, exercise, fresh air. The “needs of the soul,” on the other hand, are a little more ambiguous, yet no less essential in preserving the “core of good” that constitutes the essence of spirit. In contrast to Maslow’s (1983) psychologically-oriented “hierarchy of needs,” Weil (1952b) offers a more holistic orientation, recognizing that unmet needs will vary from one individual to another, and from one life stage to another.

According to Weil (1952a), the “metaphysical” (psychological, social, and spiritual) needs are actually primarily “pairs of opposites,” that balance and harmonize each other. Order is the first spiritual need; a stable social environment provides a sense of constancy, predictability, routine and continuity essential to spiritual well-being. The remaining needs are presented as pairs of opposites: equality and hierarchy; autonomy and consented obedience; truth and freedom of expression; honor and punishment/consequences; security and risk; privacy and social life; private property and collective property. Finally, the “need for roots,” a sense of belonging within various “natural environments” such as family and community, is considered by Weil (1952b) to

be the most neglected human need, a tragic circumstance of modern consumer society in which individuals are disconnected from the milieu in which humans have naturally participated, and through which we live as moral, intellectual, and spiritual beings.

Building on Weil's (1952b) foundation of essential human needs, and drawing on more recent frameworks and conceptualizations of human needs (Dunlap, 2004; Brazelton & Greenspan, 2000; Coles, 1997; Erikson, 1994; Maslow, 1983), a Charter of Social Obligations, Corresponding to Vital Human Needs, may be advanced. The following (Table 1) is offered as a first draft of such a charter for the social work profession, in which responsibilities-to-needs constitute an alternative theoretical framework to the predominantly "rights-based" foundation currently dominating the field. The practical application of the framework by social work practitioners is the exercise of responsibilities corresponding to needs in the public sphere. The Charter may be applied in diverse social work settings, fields of practice, and social problems. For example, a statement of social responsibilities corresponding to children's needs in the separation and divorce transition may serve as an operational definition of "the best interests of the child" in child and family practice.

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Following a "biopsychosocial-spiritual" model, the Charter divides human needs into two main types: physical and metaphysical, with corresponding responsibilities addressing both realms. A spiritually-informed practice considers metaphysical needs as

vital to human well-being as physical needs. When these needs are not satisfied, we fall little by little into a state resembling death, akin to a vegetative existence. Fulfilling social responsibilities vis-a-vis metaphysical needs is providing food to the life of the spirit.

The following, listed in part as pairs of opposites which balance and complete one another, are the vital spiritual needs of human beings:

- **Order:** The first spiritual need, order consists of establishing stability and consistency in one's social environment, within a chaotic world. Above all else, order consists of "a texture of social relationships such that no one is compelled to violate imperative obligations in order to carry out other ones" (Weil 1952b). Whoever acts to diminish incompatibility between obligations is an agent of order.
- **Autonomy:** This is the real ability to freely choose, given the constraints of nature, and authorities accepted as legitimate.
- **Consented obedience:** Rules imposed in the common interest must necessarily limit the possibilities of choice. These should emanate from a source of authority which is freely accepted as legitimate, and internalized. Consent and not fear of punishment or hope of reward constitutes the mainspring of obedience. This is not possible with a political or economic power established by force. Rules to which we consent are not felt as limitations of choice.
- **Equality:** An equal amount of attention, respect and consideration is due to the needs of all human beings. This should be reflected in our customs and behaviors toward each other, and also in our institutions. It follows that inevitable differences among people should never imply any difference in the degree of respect. Equality of opportunity is part of this. As a matter of social fact, human beings are far from equal.
- **Hierarchy:** This is the scale of responsibilities: those with greater power have greater responsibility and therefore accountability for their behavior.
- **Freedom of opinion and expression:** Intelligence must be free to express itself without control by any authority. Academic freedom, for example, allows for pure intellectual research where no authority intervenes.

- **Truth:** In many ways, this is a more sacred need than any other. This requires that intellectual culture be universally accessible, and not physically remote or psychologically alien. In the domain of thought, physical or moral pressure should never be exerted except in the interests of truth, which calls for protection against error and lies. Truth calls for protection against error in the domain of thought.
- **Responsibility:** Initiative and responsibility, to feel useful and even indispensable, are vital spiritual needs. For this need to be satisfied self-efficacy is central: the ability to make decisions in matters affecting oneself, and contribute to decisions in one's social environment.
- **Honor:** Honor encompasses being respected and valued within the context of one's social milieu, and being free from oppression. Everyone who is innocent of crime, or has expiated guilt, needs to be recognized as honorable to the same extent as anyone else.
- **Discipline:** Consequences or punishment involve suffering for a crime with the aim of reintegration and restoration, and the recognition that the infliction of discipline is justified for this purpose.
- **Security:** Fear and terror are extremely harmful to the spirit; security and a sense of safety are thus vitally important.
- **Risk:** At the same time, the boredom produced by a complete absence of risk is also harmful.
- **Privacy:** Solitude and privacy are vital needs, as is private property; spiritually we feel isolated, lost, if we are not surrounded by objects used for work, pleasure or life's necessities. Personal property never consists in the possession of money, but in the ownership of concrete objects like a house, a field, tools, and furniture, which become extensions of ourselves.
- **Social life:** Community involvement and participation in collective possessions is no less an important need. This allows for a personal investment in one's surrounding community.
- **Roots:** The most neglected spiritual need of our time, the human spirit needs above all to be rooted in several "natural human environments": one's family, one's country, places where one's language is spoken, places with a culture or historical past which one shares, and one's region and neighborhood. Attachment bonds and nurturant relationships, a sense of belonging and connectedness, are vital needs. Everything which has the effect of uprooting a human being or of

preventing one from becoming rooted is criminal, as it leads to a “death” of the spirit.

As opposed to a rights-based orientation, a responsibility-to-needs theoretical framework offers a practical rule of conduct, an ethic of care, a compassion-based morality, within which we “assume an unconditional obligation not to let another suffer from hunger when one has a chance of coming to his assistance” (Weil, 1952b). The process of addressing unmet needs involves the recognition or “reading” of unmet needs and attendant harms that have been done to another, which itself involves deep attention when the other speaks. Weil (1952a) writes, “Whenever the cry arises from the depths of another’s soul, ‘Why am I being hurt?,’” harm is being done at the level of the spirit: the expectation that good and not harm will be done; the longing for good. Through attention, we begin to recognize instances in which this “sacred core” has been violated, where spiritual trauma has occurred. We then act according to this “spiritual reading;” thus any action is taken at that spiritual level, and involves preserving or restoring this spiritual core in another by means of meeting human needs, with particular attention to the vital metaphysical or spiritual needs.

It is also important to name injustice and oppression where it occurs. As the circumstances that give rise to injustice are “read,” the “reader” feels a little of injustice’s imperative force. In social work practice in the context of spiritual affliction, the practitioner neither respects nor practices power and control over others. Fear, pain, cruelty, humiliation, and shaming make up the “reading” of the circumstances that give rise to injustice, and evoke a concern for justice. Elizabeth Wolgast (1987) writes that to

call something “unjust” is to take it out of the realm of disinterested reportage; saying that something is wrong or an injustice marks it for moral concern and moral indignation.

It is critical that the planning process of assessing alternatives for action to reduce harm, determining goals, be done from the perspective of the spiritually afflicted person. Self-determination and self-efficacy are core elements of strengths-based spiritually-grounded social work; that is, the belief that the spiritually afflicted person has the capacity, strength and will to reach his or her goals, rather than having to adapt to the expectations of the service provider.

Two fields of social work practice in which a spiritually-based approach focused on meeting human needs and applying harm reduction and strengths-based principles to spiritual trauma is essential are work with people struggling with addiction, and child and family welfare work. In both areas of practice, the neglect and violation of basic human needs are at times extreme; in both, a spiritually-based approach to practice is essential as wounding occurs at the innermost level of one’s being.

The restoration of human dignity, the need for honor and respect, equality and autonomy, lies at the heart of harm reduction initiatives in the field of addiction. Addictions represent a failed attempt to address unmet vital needs. In Vancouver, Canada, a coalition of professional service providers and hard drug users formed an alliance under the banner of the “Harm Reduction Action Society,” focusing on the stated needs of intravenous drug users at constant risk of death and disease, the result of failed

“war on drugs” policies aimed at reducing drug supply and curbing demand for illicit drugs. Homeless intravenous drug users, forced into criminal activity and sex trade work to support their habit, and locked in an adversarial relationship with both addiction service providers and police, were meaningfully engaged in a harm reduction effort that began with the acknowledgment of spiritual trauma in this population. Drug addicted residents of Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside, the “lepers” of the poorest neighborhood in Canada, were asked to identify their priorities as part of a “four-pillar” campaign of harm reduction, treatment, prevention, and enforcement to deal with the area’s epidemic social problems. such as the establishment of safe injection sites. The drug user group identified the immediate establishment of a safe injection site as a harm reduction initiative by which their health and safety needs could best be addressed, in addition to their needs for honor and respect, equality and autonomy. It is thus no surprise that the safe injection facility that was established in Vancouver, the first such site in North America, has significantly reduced overdose death and disease associated with street-based consumption of hard drugs. It is also proving to be a more effective program in helping intravenous drug users move toward recovery than traditional treatment approaches. Identifying and naming the injustices of drug war policies and practices was an important aspect of the social justice efforts of the Harm Reduction Action Society’s campaign.

A related project examined the treatment needs of low income women struggling with hard drug addiction in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside. The views of the women about their addiction treatment needs were dramatically different to the main tenets of the

majority of addiction treatment programs currently available to them. These programs have had limited success with women, as they have focused on addiction treatment using exclusively abstinence-based interventions, largely ignoring the multiple needs of women who are, above all else, victims of profound spiritual trauma.

In the field of child and family policy, the removal of parents as caregivers of children is increasingly recognized as a major social problem with profound consequences for children, youth and parents. In the fields of adoption and child protection, such removal is more frequently the result of poverty rather than abuse, and not the preference of parents themselves. Rather than supporting parents in the fulfillment of their parental responsibilities attendant to children's needs, parents are relieved of their responsibilities by the state, resulting in children being left with a sense of not being part of any family—a type of spiritual trauma (Jones and Kruk, in press).

A common example of problematic social policies relating to child and family practice is the forced removal of parents via legal sole custody judgments subsequent to parental divorce. A “suicide epidemic” among non-custodial parents has been identified, linked directly to such judgments (Kposowa, 2000). Both children and parents separated in this manner report a deep spiritual wounding linked to the neglect of a broad range of basic human needs: in addition to physical needs, the need for order, autonomy, equality, responsibility, honor, security, justice and, above all, the need for roots. According to Simone Weil (1952b), “to be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized

need of the human soul;” and “of all the human soul’s needs, none is more vital than this one.”

The family justice law reform campaign, involving diverse groups of parents and social justice workers advocating for a legal shared parenting presumption in litigated divorces involving children, is another example of a spiritually-grounded harm reduction initiative. Social work educators and researchers have supported the campaign by providing data which challenge legislatures to move meaningfully toward reform. These include the emergent perspective of adult children of divorce reflecting upon their experiences and preferences growing up as children of separation and divorce (children want to share time equally with their parents after divorce) (Fabricius, 2003); studies comparing child outcomes in shared care and sole custody families (on every adjustment measure, children in shared care arrangements fare better than children in sole custody situations) (Bauserman, 2002); studies comparing parental outcomes in shared care and sole custody families (parental conflict and violence are reduced in shared care arrangements and dramatically increased in sole custody situations) (Bauserman, 2002); and new data on the distribution of child care tasks and responsibilities in families (the norm is now shifting toward shared responsibility for child care in both two-parent families and non-litigated divorced families) (Higgins & Duxbury, 2002). Social work researchers have also been actively involved in developing alternative frameworks based on harm reduction and strengths-based principles, such as a shared parental responsibility presumption after parental separation (Kruk, 2005).

As intermediaries and harm reduction practitioners, social workers have the potential to facilitate spiritual transformation in those afflicted by spiritual trauma, by acting as bridges in the relationship between spiritually afflicted people and their social networks. The mediation role is thus important, linking afflicted persons with systems of support, including friends and family members, communities, and institutions. For the spiritually afflicted, the opportunity to give voice to the harms they have experienced is in itself transformative. To have these experiences recognized and validated by another, perhaps even the one who caused or allowed the harm to happen, is profoundly healing, and a precursor to seeing that no further harm is done. This is the work of healing through restoration of human dignity, and restoration of loving life-sustaining relationships.

In sum, the spiritual foundation of social work, based on the idea of the interconnectedness of all people, is primarily concerned with restoring the expectation that good and not harm will come to those who have experienced a profound violation of this “spiritual core.” This can only be achieved by means of attending to vital human needs, fulfilling our social responsibilities or obligations in this regard. The central reality of human existence is need, and the one possibility of expression of respect for the spiritual core in human beings—the expectation that good and not harm will come to us—is offered by people’s needs. As this possibility is the basis of obligation, fulfilling responsibilities thus has a direct connection with the spiritual essence of human beings. As Weil (1952b) writes, “Obligation is concerned with the needs in this world of the souls and bodies of human beings. We are bound by the single and permanent obligation

to remedy, as best we can, both in public and private life, all the privations of soul and body which are liable to destroy or damage the earthly life of any human being whatsoever.” To discern and enumerate, as accurately as possible, essential human needs is an ongoing exercise.

The proportions of good and evil in a society depend partly upon the proportion of those who are mindful and attentive of their obligations to human needs to those who are not, and partly upon the distribution of power between those who are mindful and attentive and those who are not. The role of the social work profession in this regard cannot be overstated; power is entrusted to social workers who are expected to understand and consent to be bound by their obligations to human needs, and to know how to exercise these responsibilities.

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Table 1**CHARTER OF SOCIAL OBLIGATIONS
CORRESPONDING TO VITAL HUMAN NEEDS**

“Human needs” are defined as, “the nutriments or conditions essential to a human being’s growth and integrity.” For each need there is a corresponding obligation; for each obligation, a corresponding need.

PHYSICAL NEEDS

Protection from harm
 Food (adequate nutrition)
 Shelter
 Warmth (clothing)
 Personal space (comfort)
 Health and health care (immunizations; interventions during illness)
 Rest
 Sleep
 Exercise
 Fresh air and water

METAPHYSICAL NEEDS

Order (stable social environment)
 Autonomy (ability to choose (within limits), independence, competence, self-efficacy)
 (Consented) Obedience (humility; acceptance (of limits, rules guidelines and legitimate authority in the common interest); guidance)
 Equality (equal respect and attention; equality of opportunity)
 Hierarchy (the scale of responsibilities)
 Freedom of opinion and expression (leisure, activity of thought)
 Truth (trust; education, and an accessible intellectual culture; beauty; justice)
 Responsibility (initiative, industry; participation in a task of public value)
 Honor (being respected and valued in the context of one’s social milieu; freedom from oppression)
 Discipline (punishment, consequences; curb appetites)
 Security (feeling of safety)
 Risk (excitement)
 Privacy (confidentiality; solitude; private property)
 Social life (friendship; collective property)

Roots (attachment bonds and nurturant relationships; love, belonging, connectedness to family, language, religion, culture, neighborhood, region, and country, in the context of the global village)