**My Model of Social Work Practice**
**"another drop in the pond"**


**By**


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For


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SOWK 479

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April 8, 1991

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## Introduction

Recent discoveries in science have begun a "revolution" of sorts which is changing how we look at our world (Capra, 1983). Within physics, a major theme has emerged that sees the universe as a "interconnected web of relations" and a "realization that the cosmic web is intrinsically dynamic" (p. 87).

This changing view in the physical sciences has to some extent been accompanied by a changing view in the social sciences. With the adoption of systems theory, the reductionist "fix it" method is becoming a thing of the past (Ramsay, 1990a). As social work is becoming less reductionistic and empirically focused, a greater awareness of the individual uniqueness of each social worker must be acknowledged. Therefore, even though we have a common purpose we also have our own models of practice which help us to achieve this purpose.

To explain what my personal model of practice is, I will use the framework outlined by Ramsay (1990a) in the article, "Toward a Comprehensive 'Design Science-Profession' Conception of Social Work". In doing so, I will look at the domain of social work, the paradigm of social work, the method that I use and finally how I as a person my domain fits into all of this.

## The Domain of Social Work

It is important how we perceive our environment. If the "lens" or framework we use is defective and only allows a limited amount of information through, we are blinded from other knowledge. To be effective when helping people we need to see all of the influencing factors involved, otherwise our efforts will be more prone to failure. As is stated above, new discoveries in science challenge the "lenses" which were previously used to understand the world. It is for this reason we need to examine our "lens" so as to ensure we have a holistic and balanced way of seeing the "arena" within which, we as social workers work.

Gordon (1969) and Swartz (1971) note that the social purpose of social work is to,

> "strengthen coping patterns of people and to improve environments so that a better match can be attained between people's adaptive needs and potential and the qualities of their impinging environments" (as quoted in Germain and Gitterman, 1976).

This is acceptable, except for the way the statement is phrased. The statement implies that to make a better connection between the person and environment, one or both must change. It ignores or lessens the significance of the relationship between the two. To look only at the person or the environment in isolation of the other prevents us from attaining full knowledge of the situation. Gregory Bateson argued that, "relationships should be used as a basis for all definitions, and that this should be taught to our children in elementary school. Anything, he believed, should be defined not by what is in itself but by its relations to other things." Capra (1982).

This strongly indicates to me the significance of Ecological or Natural Systems theory in social work. As it noted by Rodway:

> The person-in-situation concept has long been identified as the crucial base from which the social work profession has developed and the systems model has contributed

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immeasurably to the conceptualization of this person-in-situation concept (Rodway, 1986: 514)

By recognizing and reaffirming that the world (or life) is composed of systems that are connected to each other (and by focusing on the nature of the connection), social work is very much a holistic approach to human issues.

By being relationship-focused, we get a sense of context between the person and the environment that we cannot get otherwise. Thus, we see how a person's values and beliefs will have an effect on what are and are not resources for them. These same values and beliefs will also guide or direct the form of relationships that they have with others (including the social worker). Conversely, the relationships which people have will also affect the values and beliefs which one reaffirms and accepts. The dynamic interplay between one's resources, significant others, beliefs, values and finally oneself, all take part in defining and creating each other and creating the whole.

Although systems theory is very useful in understanding the domain of social work, it can lose its holistic quality if it is understood or depicted in a limiting or linear manner. Eisler and Loye note that "progressive" approaches such as Chaos theory were in the past "often visualized by the great formative social theoreticians, but then fell by the way side as social science bogged down in scientific developmental stages one and two" (Loye & Eisler, 1987: 58). Because of the way we have been socialized or trained there always seems to be the tendency to simplify or "linearize" reality. To be aware of such errors we need to examine the faults in the "lenses" which we have been trained (socialized) to use when viewing and understanding events (Capra, l982).

One of the faults of these "lenses" has been the dualistic or "mono—polar" nature of our understanding. We often see one extreme but ignore the, significance of it's polar opposite (Freud, l988; Capra, 1982; Ramsay, 1990b). This leads us to incomplete and inaccurate perceptions of the situation. As noted by Freud:

> Cybernetic polarities are recursive, … , if one side is maximized at the expense of the other, it becomes the opposite -- and creates pathology. Even virtues carried to their extreme turn upon themselves … to much love becomes possessiveness and over control … (1988: 359)

To correct the fault in our lens we need to be aware of the coexistence of paired opposites. We must realize that we will not have justice if we cannot recognize injustice. Also, men cannot be liberated if women are not also liberated (Sahtouris, l989). It stands to reason that we need to look more toward the "middle ground" and not either extreme. Such a place will contain aspects and elements of both poles, neither of which exist in excess, but are in balance with one another.

An important part of this is the connection between the macro and the micro levels of society. Often people (esp. micro-oriented social workers) believe that what we do as individuals has no connection to the larger, macro picture (Ramsay, l990b). Thus it becomes easy for us to ignore problems outside of our immediate world (ie. poverty, injustice). However it can be shown that what happens at the micro can have profound effects on the macro (Briggs & Peat, 1989; Gleick, 1987: p.22). Also, in regard to quantum theory, Bohr noted that it was possible for one particle to influence another, even though they were large distances apart (Capra, 1982: 86). In a similar fashion Marris noted that if any macro changes in society are to occur there must first be changes at the micro (relationship) level (1982). The two levels are therefore linked and must operate in full recognition of the other, as change at one level will cause change at another. Therefore we do

have a responsibility to address social problems that effect people in all parts of the globe.

Another fault that is sometimes present (depending on the perspective or "lens") surrounds the orientation to relationships. Eisler (1987), in her book *The Chalice and the Blade*, explains how there are two models of society; one is the dominator model and the other is the partnership model. The first is based on a system of ranking, while the latter is based on a system of linking (p. xvii). Because the dominator model places one person in control of the other, it is very much like the unbalanced, mono-polar - dualist view identified earlier. All too often this model can adversely affect the effectiveness of helping agencies (Reiff, l974). The partnership model however, is more in line with the balanced, bipolar view. Theorists like Lovelock and Margulis support such a view, who emphasize that universal cooperation is a central feature of evolution (Briggs & Peat, 1989: 165). Therefore, if we are to progress toward a humane and just world, relationships must be approached with the premise of partnership. This will help to ensure that the dignity of the human person or group will never be compromised.

Though incomplete, this section points out several aspects, which I feel one must consider when operating in the social work domain. The next section will address the background from which I come as a social worker, and am backed by.

### The Social Work Paradigm

I am a social worker. To me this means that I have a social work education and follow a set of guidelines (Code of Ethics) that are set out for me. This in a sense distinguishes me from others who wish to assist and help others. Also it expresses a certain degree of commitment, that if I say I am a social worker, I am then committed to the ideals and goals of social work as well.

Following from an earlier analogy, to work as a social worker is to put on a set of carefully manufactured lenses. Using these I see how I as a social worker can fit into the domain of social work. To understand this view of the social work paradigm, we can look at it in four different parts (Pincus and Minahan, 1973; Ramsay, 1990a).

The first part refers to the change agent system (CAS). According to Pincus and Minahan this is, "composed of professionals who are specifically employed for the purpose of creating change." (as quoted from Zastrow, 1989: 219) Hence, we work to foster change according to our mandate. However, as one is "employed", one must be aware of not only one mandate (of the profession) but the mandate of the agency as well. Often these can work together as the mandate of the profession will provide the basis or foundation, and the mandate of the agency will provide the specifics. These, however can come into conflict. Because the identity I have as a social worker is something more that what I am paid to do my first commitment is to the profession. The unfortunate part about this the price one may pay for doing this is the loss of employment.

Another aspect of the social work paradigm is the client system (CS). This refers to the person or group who is to benefit from a service provided by the change agent system (CAS) (p. 219). In my fall practicum I was working with immigrant-employment issues. As CAS I was working directly with the client system in the form of life- skills groups as well as individual assistance. As the connection is quite direct, it is important how we relate to this system. I believe Roger's approach (found in Bohart & Todd, 1988) to helping, succinctly identifies the appropriate values when working with the client system. These include empathy, congruence and positive regard. By being; open as opposed to putting on a front, respecting and accepting one's dignity (and needs), and by making an effort to fully understand another's situation, we are displaying the appropriate

social work values. (Such values will be discussed further within the methods section.)

A third aspect of the paradigm is the action system (AS). This refers to those systems which the CAS works with to help it accomplish its goals. Helping in this way occurs indirectly as the CAS works to mobilize other systems to provide a service to the client. In my present practicum we are working in the action system by training a group of volunteers who will assist refugees who are survivors of torture.

A fourth aspect is the target system (TS) that is composed, "of the people, agencies and/or organizational practices" which the CAS hopes to influence so as to benefit the client system. This also benefits the client in an indirect manner. Although the client is always the intended recipient of action on the part of the CAS, the focus here would be to seek out other systems which perhaps are more directly connected to the client. An example of this is that before we could begin the training of volunteers (in the action system) we needed to recruit the potential volunteers as well as the trainers who we would use to train the people we found.

These four parts of the paradigm adequately show the variety of ways in which social workers can work in the practice domain. This view reinforces that fact that social work is a generalist, multi—faceted profession, which uses a variety of approaches in the helping process. The extent and manner in which each system is used, will depend on the problem at hand as well as the worker's personal orientation to social work. A person who works in community development will focus mainly on the target and action systems whereas a clinical oriented worker will focus mainly on the client system.

**Method of Social Work Practice**

As I am a social worker, I have a way of looking at (assessing) the person in environment (systems theory). This was identified in the first section. This will directly influence how I function as a social worker, as noted by Ramsay (1990a), "domain and method must fit together synergetically" (p.28). I will therefore extend my view of "relationship-focus" and look at how this influences what I do.

My view of the person is that they are in a sense representative of the entire universe (Meyer, 1990) and within each person is an energy that is individually unique but yet is part of a larger system of energy. As Sahtouris notes,

> Life ... is the self-organizing, autopoietic, activity of matter, driven by energetic interactions between great and minute events, between the tendencies of matter/energy to differentiate and to integrate (1989: 230)

It is also a belief of mine1that if not perverted or altered by extraneous events or circumstances it is most natural for a person to search for life in a way that will not interfere but enhance another's search. As is noted by Briggs and Peat,

> it appears that the greater an organism's autonomy, the more feedback loops required both within the system and in its relationship to the environment. This is the autopoietic paradox (1989: 165).

In this way healthy relationships between people and other systems are constantly exchanging energy. Social work then works to ensure that the feedback loops (relationships) are maintained or reestablished so as to allow the flow of energy to occur freely. As it is stated by Krill, "The therapist (social worker) acts as a midwife for the release of the natural growth energies within personality (of the person or community) so that what is wholly (collectively) and individually unique may emerge." (1986: 189). In other words, it is to assist the normal self-determining processes of growth and change which lies at the basis of all of life.

I find that a lot of what I believe relates to a type of existentialist approach. Krill (p. 181) notes that existentialist social workers focus on several things that I believe in such as:

- more effective treatment of the poor and minorities.

- more present-focused, experiential, task-oriented short-term work with families and individuals.

- a more flexible and eclectic use of varied treatment techniques.

- a lessening of categorization of people and of paternalistic efforts by therapists to adjust the values of the clients to those of their therapist or those of the established society.

On the negative side of this it has been said that existentialists such as Sartre regards the walls between the people as impassable and that, "it is inevitable human destiny that a man has directly to do only with himself and his own affairs" (Stewart, 1986: 384). Buber (as quoted in Stewart, 1986), also an existentialist, alternatively notes that this view, "is perhaps the clearest expression of the wretched fatalism of modern man ...". Buber believes that,

> Only in partnership can my being be perceived as an existing whole. (p. 381)

What I see in existentialism is that when problems or disillusionment occurs it is essential not to deny the existence of others (i.e. God or other life) but to reevaluate and change the understanding or nature of the relationship which one has with another entity.

Remembering what was discussed earlier, I would like to point out that method is not a set linear process going from problem to solution. Thus one's method will be determined by the situation one is presented with. However, even though the specific techniques will change, certain values in my methodology will remain constant. In addition to the values mentioned earlier (empathy, congruence and positive regard) I also believe that any method which I use must respect another's unique self, yet be related or applicable to the community at large (hence relationship-focused). Also as individuals must be able to experience life in its totality (the good with the bad) the method must not promise or give prescriptions for health and happiness. Finally, it must emphasis partnership and not in any way be stifling or fostering dependency (apart from the natural dependence which we have in relation to one another).

By saying one's method is eclectic, one puts the uniqueness of the client first and the techniques used as secondary as they will need to fit the client's situation and need (Krill, p.191). For this reason it is essential to have a full repertoire of methods and techniques.

In the past I have worked in probation as well as within a correctional institute. In both of these areas it is very common for a counselor to use Reality Therapy as identified by Glasser. Often I

was confronted with, "none of this is my fault, everyone just keeps hassling me". As I often agreed with this statement, it was useful to the person to talk about their situation to see if they could do anything different to change this. To have the person realize that they have a choice, gives them an element of control to the situation. Approaches like this are useful as they promote a collaborative approach and reduce dependence on the therapist which is often characteristic of other longer term approaches. Another example of a present-based and cognitive oriented approach is Ellis's Rational-Emotive Therapy. Here one identifies and challenges the irrational beliefs which one has and uses as a basis of action.

It is important to note that the range of effective helping techniques is just as numerous as the number of people in the world. Apart from the established, formalized techniques it is important that I be able to create intervention methods (Rosen, 1988) according to my professional values. If am truly going to respect the individuality of the client then I must be prepared to "intervene" in creative and innovative ways. Ways which have not been formally established, but are intuitively appropriate for the situation. This is especially important because many of the methods which have been set out for social workers have not taken into account the faults (i.e. dualist, dominator) in the "lenses" which were used to create these methods (Hartman and Laird, l990). By re-evaluating them we can see that they were built on inappropriate ideas and assumptions (Mailick, 1990). Thus, there is a need for new discoveries and ideas which do not have to measure up or be validated by these outdated and reductionistic views of humanity.

Even though creativity and innovation are important, each and every technique must be evaluated or checked out as to its usefulness. This is necessary so as to ensure that ethics are not compromised. Rosen (1988) identifies seven points which should be considered when looking at the usefulness of a technique: ethics, quickness, cost-efficiency, applicability to other situations, long-term efficacy, testability and transferability of the model (easily used by others) (p. 398). In terms of more specific forms of evaluation it can be useful to conduct either a qualitative or quantitative single subject design where you see look at the differences before and after an intervention (Zastrow,  p. 266-267).

In terms of community work the same values and ideas which one takes to the individual client situation can be applied. These include the same principles of openness to the uniqueness of the client, commitment to short-term (single bond connection) intervention and being relationship focused in the here and now, all apply. Also the same idea of creativity and innovation in practice is essential.

> The healthy society is one attuned to the creative ideas and efforts of individuals and groups within its structure that propose change and new ideas. (Krill, p. 210)

In the summer I had an opportunity to walk with a large group of demonstrating students in Managua, Nicaragua (see appendix 1 for photos). The feeling of energy which I felt from being there was incredible. The creativity of the murals on the houses and the forms of positive protest (i.e. celebration in the streets) where so filled with energy it was staggering. Social workers need to find such energies in groups and communities which will "de-rut" them and get them on a new track - their own track.

Zastrow refers to three models of intervention with communities (p. 208-209). In the first model the community will have an expressed need and is therefore seeking help. In this case the social worker will act as a consultant catalyst which will help to guide the motivational energies already present within the group. This would refer to the locality development model. The second model is social planning. This is where the social worker identifies a need in the community and takes

steps to satisfy this need. At my present practicum, we have identified services for survivors of torture as a need that we are trying to address with a volunteer program. The third model is social action. This model looks toward challenging and confronting an oppressing and dominating force (ie. the demonstration in Nicaragua). Depending on the situation, any one of these three models can be used. The way that they are implemented however will depend on the resources, motivation for change, and creativity of the systems involved.

As there is a need to evaluate one's work with an individual client, it is also necessary to evaluate one's work in a community setting. To do this one could use a single subject design as mentioned earlier - using statistics (income levels, number of people using food banks, etc.). Or alternatively, if one were to implement a program for a community one could use Rothman's Development Research Model. This involves going through the steps of; research/retrieval, conversion and design, development and finally diffusion (Ramsay, Cooke & Lang, 1990: 337; Rothman & Ayala, 1990). In regard to the program we are implementing at the Red Cross we have to some extent addressed the first two steps. So far we have researched the relevant information about treatment for victims of torture, including established programs. Also, we have finished our initial training program and are setting up the referral process. Throughout all of this, we are soliciting evaluative feedback from all of the systems involved. This information will then be incorporated into future training programs. Also once we get established we then will share this information with other existing programs, as well as those who looking at implementing a new program in their city or community (i.e. Edmonton).

This section has discussed method in terms of generalities in regard to micro and macro practice. It is not conclusive but provides a rough basis for my model of practice.


**My Personal Domain**


As I am a social worker, I am also a person. Following from a systems perspective, I live in a world that I create yet creates me as well. Also I, like everyone else, have my own set of validators, significant others and resources. All of these, as they effect who I am, also effect how I act as a social worker within the social work paradigm, method and domain.

Because I come from a rather rigid Roman Catholic background, "religion" or God has been a significant part of my life. I was taught that at all costs one should always follow the will of God. This I accepted, yet was uncertain as to what the will of God was. Through prayer and sacrifice I was told I would be guided to "the way". From my parents I learned that the will of God was to be productive, to work for others and to always be willing to sacrifice oneself for another. I remember this idea of self-sacrificing because I was often "picked-on" at school and was told more or less to accept this as my lot in life.

For High school I went to a Catholic boarding school. While I was in there, I took the opportunity to join a sort of encounter group that put on weekends for teenagers. Here, teenagers (a lot of whom were sent there because they were "unwanted" by their families) would talk openly about what they felt. Issues centred around personal issues (i.e. self-esteem) as well as relationships with friends and family. It was a good experience for me as it was the first time I was able to really connect with others. I then realized that it was God's will not only to take care of others but in order to effectively do so, one must first make an effort to take care of oneself.

Later I went to University, and after a failure in calculus I went into sociology. It was not too long before I really became interested in critical or Marxist related theory. I saw the extent to which

large economic focused organizations controlled the wellbeing and health (physical and mental) of most of the world. I also saw that as profit was the only motivation for action, thousands of people in the third world (and to a lesser extent in our own country) suffer and die because it is not profitable to take care of them. Previously, I had always thought that I lived in a fair and just society. A friend then introduced me to Liberation Theology and the thought of people such as Gustavo Gutierrez who talked of Christ as a liberator of the poor and a person who believed in justice. From ideas such as these (see appendix 2) I came to believe that it was also the will of God to work toward a day when injustice and oppression were done away with.

Perhaps the latest "face" of God which I have seen is that which relates to different cultures. Recently, I found (from the little I know about Buddhism and Islam) that most religions have remarkable similarities. One can note that death is similarly perceived by most religions (see appendix 3). Joseph Campbell also identified such similarities. In a class with Pam Colorado concerning social work with aboriginal people, I found that in terms of spirituality, what I believe is very similar to what native religions believe. My international experiences (i.e. travel and practica) also affirmed the idea the there is a "commonness" between people everywhere. This leads me to believe that God (or what ever you wish to call the centre of life) is universal, with a variety of names and forms.

As a result of all this I personally believe that to find God and what God sees as my purpose, I need to be continually open to the variety of forms and images through which God speaks to me. Looking back at the "faces of God" which I have seen, I realize my view of "God's will" has been constantly affirmed, challenged and enriched. For this reason I look forward to the future.

Another part of my life which has, so far, created who I am is the people who have had an influence on me. As a child it was largely my parents, as an adolescent it was my "misfit" friends and in university it has been people (friends and professors) with a sensitivity and awareness of the social contexts in which problems are created. In looking at these relationships I see a strong sense of circularity occurring. As I affirm what they believe, they affirm what I believe and alternatively as I challenge them, they challenge me. For example, my Dad and I often have discussions (some would call them arguments) about politics, racism (Native Americans) and religion. I remember one time he referred to natives as "savages" and thought they would never be able to adjust to our modern world because of this deficit. This really angered me and I challenged him on it. About a year later, I went home and found out that as of late, he would often visit this native fellow (about 20 years old) whom he met through my Uncle (a Catholic priest who works up north). I was absolutely shocked when I found out. What surprised me the most however is that I felt guilty. Here he was actively making a connection between cultures and I was not really doing anything except talking about it. I think it was partly for this reason that I took Pam's class on aboriginal peoples. As happened here, I see happening with other's in my life - there is circularity in the way others affect me and I affect them (I don't know if it was me that made my Dad reconsider his harsh view of the native culture, but I like to think it was).

As I am influenced by my validators and by important people in my life, one may be able to pick out certain resources that have been important to me. I would identify these as my family, the Church (the progressive side) and even the University of Calgary. Coming to Calgary opened the door to several new experiences for me. One experience was the opportunity to go to Nicaragua and Cuba for summer school classes. It was an experience that really solidified, as well as put a degree of realism to what I have read and found in my previous academic pursuits. Following from this, my fall practicum introduced me to immigrant issues. Here, I had chance to talk with people from all over the world (South Africa, Central and South America, Europe, Orient and the Middle East). My present practicum is enabling me to work with the community so as to help

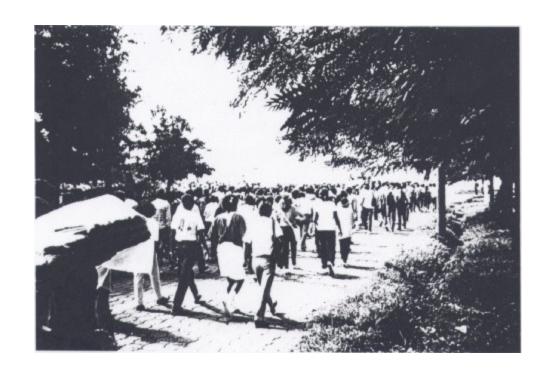create a program that will assist refugees who have been victims of torture.

This is a brief look at who I am and what I am made of. It is by no means complete nor will it likely say what I want it so say. Hopefully, it adds substance to the earlier parts of this paper in that it is congruent to my view of the person and how I as a social worker want to help another.
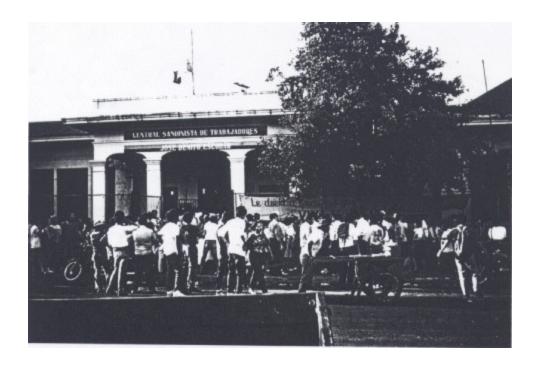
## Conclusion

This paper has addressed how I as a social worker look at the world in which social work works. It also addresses the paradigm or approach that is used, including the method when helping others. Finally by looking at my personal self it discusses how I as a person fit into all of this. I therefore feel that this is a good representation of what my approach to social work is. However, anyone who has ever got his/her pictures back after being on trip and has shown them to others, will likely be aware of the feeling that, "well this is what I saw but it doesn't really capture what it felt like to be there." So to is the feeling I have with this paper. I do not believe that this really expresses my entire position, yet I do believe that this is representative of how I think and look at things as a social worker and how I want to intervene with others. Because reality is constantly changing, nothing is ever complete. For this reason we must always be open to change and new ideas. We should test and evaluate these ideas, but do so on an open, holistic manner. The minute we become closed and think we have an all encompassing view and think that we have reached a limit on the amount to be learned is the minute that we shut ourselves off to the continuing process of life.

**Appendix 1**

Managua, Nicaragua July 1990

**Appendix 2**

"In the class struggle we are struggling to put an end to classes. As long as we are divided into classes, with opposed interests, we have to have class enemies. But if we struggle to unite with them and to form all together a humanity united in the classless society, then we are struggling for love. . . . We Christians have always said, "We must hate sin and love the sinner." I have the impression that Che (Guevara) never fought because of hatred of another people but because of hatred of injustice.
- Ernesto Cardenal (a priest from Nicaragua)

**Appendix 3**

Unless a grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat. But if it dies, it produces much fruit.
- Jesus from the John's Gospel: Christianity

The souls of the just are in the hand of God … They seemed, in the view of the foolish, to be dead; and their passing ... utter destruction … If before others, indeed, they be punished, yet is their hope full of immortality …  they shall shine and dart about as sparks.
- Book of Wisdom: Judaism

If slayers think that they kill, and if the slain think that they die, they know not the ways of truth. The Eternal in each person cannot kill; the Eternal on each person cannot die.
When all the knots of the heart have been released, then truly a mortal becomes immortal.
- Upanishads: Hinduism

Few cross over the river. Most are stranded on this side … But the wise, following the way, cross over, beyond the reach of death. They leave the dark way for the way of light. They leave home seeking happiness on the hard road … Rejoicing greatly in their freedom, in this world the wise become light: pure, shining free.
- The Dhammapada: Buddhism

Man is asleep; when he dies he wakes up.
- Prophet Mohammed: Islam

Never fear your journey ahead, for as God has watched over you all your life … so He will take you through the darkest vale, into the light.
- White Eagle: American Indian

To die but not to perish is to be eternally present.
- Tao Te Ching

- taken from E. Hays (1982)

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