“Borrowed Light”: Reflecting on Learning to Be a Social Worker

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Abstract: The recent death of my mother has made me think about what my mother, a writer and English professor, taught me about how to be a social worker. This paper includes excerpts from her writing, providing her insight to this reflection.

Keywords: women, caretaker, healer, social worker, mother, poetry

In the spring of 2012, my mother asked me why I had become a social worker. Having heard that people in my field are drawn to the work as a result of disruptions in our own families, she was trying to grasp what had led me to this helping profession. To be honest, her question surprised me in spite of the reality that my mother no longer understood many things due to the aggressive tumors growing in her brain. I answered too bluntly, “I needed to try to understand and learn to deal with our family.”

In this paper, I could focus on the very messy and public divorce which drove me to degrees and careers in both psychology and social work, as well as to several years of my own therapy. Instead, I will answer my mother’s question again with the strengths perspective that she shared with the profession of social work. My mother’s death in 2012 was the most powerful disruption in my very lucky life. I share in this paper some of what I learned from my mother, a loving writer and teacher, providing her poetry as her voice in this reflection. “Borrowed Light” is one of my mother’s collections of poetry. I have borrowed my mother’s light as I have developed as a social worker, learning to empower people by listening to their stories, through education, and by focusing on the positive aspects of life.

One quality of an excellent social worker is to start where the client is, valuing her stories, thoughts and feelings. My mother served as a model for this careful attention to the minute details of a person’s story. “Genealogy” is one of my favorite of her poems. I like to think of it as a monument to the everyday achievements of women, specifically the women in our family. As you read this poem, you can glimpse how my mother taught me to be a “people watcher,” paying attention to what matters to each individual. I base much of my work as a clinician and as an educator on the careful witnessing of a person’s unique story, aiming to be attuned to the specific values and traditions of my clients and students.

Genealogy by Karen Blomain (2005, pgs. 19-21):

> How my great grandmother with her sharp needle
> and even sharper tongue raised nine
> children single-handed after himself was killed in
> the mines.
>
> How my great aunt Till baked for the whole town
> and could stretch a Sunday
> roast to feed her own and whoever else came
> to her door in 1930, and many did
> pretending to return the school marm’s
> borrowed book or tool at dinner time.
>
> How in cool October my grandmother opened
> the trunk she’d brought from her New York life,
> blue tapestry curtains pulled from high windows;
> the next week the neighborhood was full
> of kids in flocked snowsuits with braided
> shoulders.
>
> How Mary Clark, no real relation, but called
> “Auntie”
> by three generations, could smell the air in a
> sickroom and know
> what ailed a body and how to cure a sty by
> rubbing it
> with a nickel wrapped in a white hanky and three
> Hail Marys,
> how to plaster for croup and how to calm a horse.
> How my cousin Al could sing and play a song
> she’d heard only once.
>
> How my Nana’s house smelled of apples and
> fresh mint
> and flowers burst from her fingertips and her
> beds were high off the floor and her radiators
> clanked all night
> and when I felt sick she’d come each hour
> into the room to turn the pillow’s cool side to my
> face.

> How Sister This or Sister That would leave the convent in the dark to ring the bell for the miners' early Mass to wake the town and clean and fill the candle trays. How even as a child my friend Betty could predict the weather three days in advance.
>
> How my grandmother sold insurance door to door and liquor bonds when she was married and was forbidden to teach and smoked and chewed Jujubes and said the Rosary as she drove the car to each up-valley miner's bar. How she's never been in a plane before but flew into Italy alone during the war to keep her son from a hasty marriage.
>
> How my Aunt Mary's hair turned white overnight When she was twenty-one, the day her brother was killed in a car wreck. And at eighty how she took the bus two hours and three transfers the fourteen miles each way each day for the six months it took her sister to die.
>
> How our big house on Church Street bulged with four generations knitting, tatting, canning, crocheting, sewing, or embroidering any scrap of fabric, saving string through the Depression and three wars.
>
> How we grew up lace curtain Irish: fruit in the house
> when no one's dead. How the kids next door brought cold potato sandwiches and a mason jar of water for their school lunch, but had five cents for the missions.
>
> How my sister Lucie could make a stone laugh. How my daughter listens so hard with her whole body that she can make you understand yourself.
>
> How somebody told me all of this, whatever I didn't see myself. So that I'd know what to do when my turn came. How I'd be the one to write it all down.

In "Genealogy," my mother portrays the roles of many of women not only in our family but in many families, such as the caretaker and the healer. She describes my role as the listener of the family and her's as the family writer.

For the better part of twenty years, I worked in the clinical practice of social work, mostly with kids who were struggling with family disruptions of their own. Over time, I changed from needing to help directly to wanting to teach what I had learned. My mother was deeply committed to the value of education, particularly for women, as a vehicle to provide them with the tools to be independent. Barely out of high school, she was married at 17 years old. She had to juggle the responsibilities of mothering three children while earning a bachelor's degree and two master's degrees. As she was working on her degrees, my mother started teaching English and creative writing at the undergraduate level. She was deeply committed to bettering the lives of her students through her role as a faculty member. As a social work educator, I follow in my mother's footsteps, training my predominantly female students to develop the skills and qualities of excellent professionals. Students of social work usually come with scars that they (often unconsciously) aim to heal. My work has shifted from clinical work with clients to facilitating the work that my students need to do to be the best instrument to provide social work services. In her poem, "Soap Opera of the Mind: The Last Class," my mother too aims to do more than just teach English. She muses:

> Even those who have taken the course
> because it is the only thing that didn't
> conflict with One Life to Live read
> my summary thoughts carefully, amazed
> by their growth, ready
> to admit that a writing class, not just any
> writing class, but this writing class,
> has changed their lives." (Blomain, 2009, p.73)

My mother was a profoundly grateful person. She would say "Lucky life" all of the time, even as she was betrayed by her own brain, the persistent tumors regenerating faster than the surgeons could remove them. She (and therefore I) believed that she was going to live to be 89. She visited a fortune teller at 45 years old who made this prediction, so she mistakenly thought that she was just halfway done with her life. When at 68 she realized that she would soon die, my mother said that she never wanted to grow old and be a burden to any one anyway. Her final words were ones of gratitude, "I am so happy to be home." The attitude of acceptance, even of dying, was a gift my mother gave to me. In "Halfway," she identifies her persistent sense of

having counted on her (lucky) stars. The poem also highlights my mother's loving nature. Remembering the fortune teller's prediction she wrote:

> From "Halfway" By: Karen Blomain (1992, p.61)
>
> Such luminance
> we take on faith. And I think – halfway,
> imagining the end of light:
> the eyes of children, blurry
> summer afternoons
> the way love shines us, the stars,
> without knowing it,
> I must have counted on all along.

My mother published two novels, "A Trick of Light" and "The Season of Lost Children." Her unfinished third novel in the trilogy was to be entitled "Glorious Untidy Life." This title demonstrates how she approached life. She expected and hoped to have an "untidy life" and she glorified that life in her writing. Our family life was "untidy," yet I was taught to exalt in the beauty of simple moments. This optimistic "glass is half full" attitude has infused my clinical and academic work. My approach to helping others has evolved throughout the years with a natural leaning toward humanism. I have developed my own spiritual practice, fueled by the fields of mindfulness and contemplative practices. I incorporate mindfulness in my work with students, encouraging them to develop acceptance of others and of themselves. My research interests are also impacted by this learned optimism, focusing on how to foster the development of empathy and self-compassion in clients and students.

This paper cannot include all of the ways that my mother formed who I am as a person and as a social worker. To sum up many of those qualities, I share the poem that was requested most often when my mother performed at poetry readings. This poem captures some of the light that I have borrowed from my mother, the keen observation of herself and others, the sense of humor, and most of all her loving nature. Reading this poem makes me glad, like always, that she was here first.

Old Broads by Karen Blomain (2009, p. 13):

> Are everywhere
> Even here, Turn around and look,
> Yes you, look.
> They are doing
> The broad jump
> The dirty flirty
> Bump and if you can't
> Accept it – get lost. Old broads
> Don't care if you approve.
> We've divorced
> Ourselves from labels
> Long ago. So
> Keep your dirty looks
> Your patronizing groans, your high
> And mighty eye
> Brows. If you don't like our hair
> What we wear,
> That we wear on you in grocery lines
> Taking too long to write a check
> Pick A Melon. Too bad.
> We don't ruffle.
> It's our turn to take
> Our Time
> And when yours comes, little sister,
> You'll be glad like always
> That
> We
> Were here
> First.

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