

# NUGGETS OF GOLD FROM DR. ALEX GITTERMAN

**Cheryl D. Lee, Ph.D., California State University, Long Beach**

*This narrative came about as the result of the author coaxing Dr. Gitterman (noted social work educator, scholar, group worker, and board member of this journal) into granting her an interview at a Group Work conference last October.*

## **Introduction**

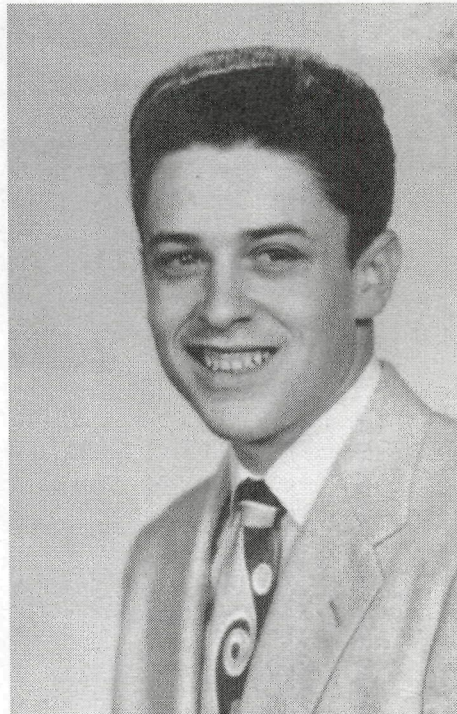
In October 2004 in Detroit, Michigan and in New York City in 2005, I met with Alex Gitterman, the well-known educator, social group worker, and scholar. At first, Dr. Gitterman had resisted being interviewed. He was not comfortable talking about himself. I encouraged him to agree to this interview at the Group Work Conference in Detroit because he is one of the most respected social work scholars. I felt strongly that social workers and social work academics would learn from what he had to say and be inspired to read the immense scholarly contributions he has made to the social work literature. I am happy that he relented.

Dr. Gitterman is currently a professor at the University of Connecticut, School of Social Work and previously was on the faculty of Columbia University for 34 years, serving as Associate Dean for five years. He was president for two terms of the Association for the Advancement of Social Work and Groups (AASWG) and now serves on its board. He has written on varied subjects, including: social work practice, group work practice, the Life Model, resilience and vulnerable populations, teaching, supervision, working with racial and cultural differences, and social justice. He also serves as the editor for the Columbia University Press series on "Empowering the Powerless." By invitation, he has given annual workshops on teaching at the Council of Social Work Education (CSWE) Annual Program Meeting and on group work practice for the Association for the Advancement of Social Work with Groups (AASWG) at its annual symposia. *Reflections* is proud to

publish this interview of Alex Gitterman. He has been a good friend to the journal. Since its inception, he has been helpful to its two editors, Sonia Leib Abels, founding editor, and Jillian Jimenez, the current editor. He has written numerous articles that have been published in *Reflections*, and he co-edited a special issue about September 11<sup>th</sup> with Andrew Malekoff. Additionally, he is a contributing editor and has encouraged many colleagues to write narratives for the journal.

## **The Interview – Detroit, Michigan, AASWG Annual Conference, October, 2004**

**Cheryl:** I have been reading a lot of your work in preparation for this interview.



Alex Gitterman as a high school senior



**Alex:** I'm flattered.

### **Writing**

**Cheryl:** Does writing come easy to you? You've written so much about social work.

**Alex:** No, writing does not come easy to me.

**Cheryl:** But you make it look so easy. I thought it would be just natural for you.

**Alex:** I need to write several drafts before I feel a manuscript is ready to be submitted for publication. For some, it comes easy, but not for me.

**Cheryl:** If you were talking to new writers in social work and new academics who want to write and make a contribution to the literature, would you have any advice for them? How did you learn to be such a prolific writer?

**Alex:** I have had a few people to thank for helping me to write. First and foremost, the late Professor Irving Miller, a close friend and colleague, taught me a great deal about clearly and concisely expressing ideas. He was a wonderful mentor. He edited many articles and willed me to write better. His admonitions to this day ring in my ears: "less is more;" never "address" the problem (to make the point, he would wave "hello, problem, good-by problem"); never write "in terms of;" never write "at this point in time" (write "at present"); never "center around" or "focus in on" (center on and focus on will suffice); use short words, active verbs, and so on. He taught me to value nuance and to struggle to be precise in my meanings. When I write, he is on my shoulders lending me his support and critical eye.

Second, my wife, Naomi, writes very well. She is also a social work educator; we review each other's materials, and

occasionally have the courage to write together. She often criticizes my excessive use of adjectives. Although I love my adjectives, she is usually right that they get in the way of my narrative. When I listen to her (listening to one's wife is a special skill developed by most Jewish husbands) the manuscript is much improved.

A third influence is Ken Bruffee, a professor of English at Brooklyn College. Many years ago, he received a three-year grant. The idea was to teach writing by having peers critique each other's work. He was interested and committed to the use of group processes and peer learning to teach writing. He brought together 25 professors of freshman composition into New York City over three summers. In the morning, he focused on how to teach writing and, in the afternoon, I taught them about how to use the class group for collaborative learning. The three summers I observed him teach how to teach freshman to write was a tremendous gift for me. I'll share just one thing I learned from him. Before starting a writing project, I used to work on developing an outline to guide my writing. He taught me to first get my ideas on paper, to write a first draft and, subsequently, to complete an outline to guide the second draft. The outline helps me to visualize which of my ideas are underdeveloped or out of sequence.

### **Teaching & Writing**

**Cheryl:** I noticed when I took your group workshop that you were an incredible teacher. Similar to your clear and informative writing, you constantly teach what people want and need to know. So, if you were teaching people how to teach, and you have done that at your workshops at CSWE and AASWG, what are some ideas for teachers, new teaching academics in social work? What are some tips that might be useful for them?



**Alex:** Thank you for the compliment. For me, the main challenge is to connect my students with the subject being taught and to connect the subject to the students' interests and learning motivation. Essentially, I work on helping students to actively engage with the curriculum. I have found peer learning to be essential to the teaching and learning enterprise.

**Cheryl:** I have noticed through reading your work and observing you that you have maintained an enthusiasm for teaching which some who have been in a profession for a long time seem to lose.

**Alex:** I love teaching – it is both my vocation and avocation. Teaching is in my “bones.”

**Cheryl:** Is your energy the same as it's always been?

**Alex:** My passion for teaching is as strong as ever if not stronger. Being with young people – and each cohort is different – is a wonderful gift.

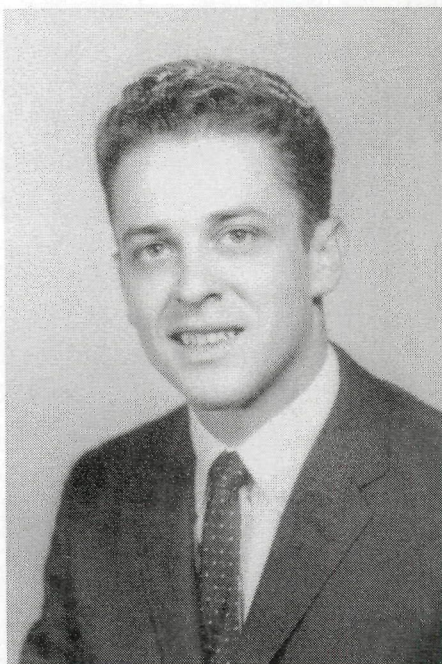
**Cheryl:** Okay. And how do you keep that enthusiasm and not become jaded?

**Alex:** If you are focused on the interaction between the student and the subject, each class and workshop I teach represents an exciting journey. You cannot get bored, because each learning group is different, posing distinctive learning opportunities as well as challenges. All of a sudden a class takes an unexpected detour, or experiences a breakthrough, or faces internal challenges to mutual learning or the students capture the illusive connections between theory and practice and experience that shinning moment of an “aha.” In each class journey, while I am teaching, I am simultaneously learning right along with

students, developing a deeper understanding of the subject as well as about teaching it. Student papers and class discussions (as well as field advising, consultations, workshops and occasional direct practice) fuel my desire to write. My writing ideas often come right out of my teaching and consulting experiences. Irving Miller once told me that my writing had “soul” because it was grounded in people's life experiences and not from data sets. My writing comes from what I have learned from the practice struggles of students and professionals. From these exchanges, I am often puzzled or curious about something, an idea germinates for a period of time, and when I feel like I have reached a greater clarity, then I am motivated to write and to share it with others. And hopefully someone then reads it (at the very least my wife, mother, aunt and/or children).

**Cheryl:** So, your data is life.

**Alex:** My data comes from my life experiences – professional as well as personal. Almost everything I have written evolved from something I experienced that



Gitterman as a senior in college



puzzled me and piqued my curiosity. After much reflection, when I arrived at greater clarity, I then wanted to share my ideas with others.

**Cheryl:** Is there any favorite writing that you have done or pieces that were especially important to you?

**Alex:** That's a difficult question. I guess I have a few favorites – a few which had more personal meaning to me than others. It may be easier for me to think about this chronologically. My first two publications emerged from my experiences as faculty field instructor for a student unit located in a large public housing complex. Eight students and I provided social services to approximately 18,000 tenants. One of the students, Dick Wolf, developed a sixth grade group of boys. His practice was fantastic and I learned about group work in a school right along with my student. His work provided me with excellent practice illustrations. This led to my very first publication, "Group Work in the Public School," published in 1971 in a collection edited by Schwartz and Zelba. I think Bill Schwartz had me do ten drafts before he felt the manuscript was ready (Bill was a major intellectual influence in my career.) Somehow the article and book got completed.

A co-authored article, "The Black Client and White Worker," followed in 1973. My co-author was a soft-spoken, talented and gutsy second year student, Alice Schaeffer. She courageously reached for the racial tensions and obstacles in her practice with African/American clients. I became curious about the dynamic of workers and clients, from similar or different backgrounds and its impact on practice. Alice and I wrote about dealing with racial differences. This was one of the early articles to examine this theme and has been republished in several books and, more recently, *Reflections* invited Alice and I to reflect on the article 26 years later.

In 1972, Carel Germain and I joined the full-time Columbia teaching faculty (I had been a faculty field instructor from 1966-1969 and a halftime doctoral student and halftime faculty member from 1969-1972). We worked on a committee to develop two sequential first year practice courses that integrated casework and group work (now referred to as foundations practice). From this collaboration, Carel and I wrote our first article about the "Life Model." *Social Service Review* published it in 1976 and Columbia University Press published our book in 1980. If you are interested, maybe we can discuss the major ideas later. What I would like to say now is that I am most grateful that Carel came into my life as a collaborator, a colleague and a close personal friend. A few months ago Columbia University Press sponsored a reception at the Council on Social Work Education's Annual Program Meeting to celebrate its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary. I am very proud that our ideas have had lasting power.

In 1983, "Uses of Resistance: A Transactional View" was published by *Social Work*. In all my professional roles, teaching, advising, consulting and practicing, I was troubled by how the concept of "resistance" was pejoratively used to negatively label clients (and students and line staff as well). So I became preoccupied with thinking about why the Freudian concept of an unconscious defense was used indiscriminately. It seemed to represent a potential misuse of professional power. Everyone else is "resistant:" except the person in power who applied this label to blame someone else. By defining a client as "resistant," agency practices and worker interventions did not have to be scrutinized. By viewing resistances as a transactional phenomenon, it requires examining all the contributing factors, provides various potential remedies, and does not burden the client with being responsible for the problem and hence, the need to change. For example, if an adolescent "resists" answering questions



about her sexual activity in an intake interview with a professional stranger, maybe the question doesn't have to be asked right away? I hope I am not being immodest, but I think this is an important article and I like it.

**Cheryl:** You mean that the concept of resistance has been used to judge others and to justify ourselves.

**Alex:** Yes - you put that very nicely. People may resist for different reasons. They may resist because the worker is not responsive to them. They want help with bread and butter issues and the worker wants to engage the client in developing insights. Or clients want help with the hurts in their lives (abandonment, abuse) and the worker wants to do anger management. People may resist because they have different perspectives or expectations than those of their workers. In the article, I try to conceptualize the major sources that trigger resistance, and offer some practice ideas for dealing with it.

**Cheryl:** What do you do about it?

**Alex:** Well, the first step is to develop a transactional perspective – tensions between the client and the agency, the client and the worker, the client and her/his pain. This idea also applies to teaching. If students in a class or workshop I am teaching are not participating, defining them as resistant takes me off the hook from examining my own teaching and my contributions to their lack of participation. However, if I define the lack of participation as something happening between us, about how we are transacting and relating to each other, and I am open to examining my own contributions, the discussion itself will go a long way to improving their participation and to dealing with the obstacles to their learning and to my teaching.

**Cheryl:** You are not going to let things go, you are going to deal head on with what's happening. Would that be accurate?

**Alex:** Absolutely, that's been one of the most compelling learning experiences for me – to tackle things sensitively and directly. I refer to this as the skill of being sensitively direct. In other words, to make demands for work, but to do it in a supportive manner; to integrate giving support and making demands.

**Cheryl:** This is very interesting. I hope I didn't derail you from talking about your favorite publications.

**Alex:** Not at all – you helped me clarify my ideas. I have enjoyed my collaborations with Larry Shulman, including three editions of our *Mutual Aid* book (1986, 1994, and 2005) and countless workshops. He is a gifted communicator. He also was influenced by the writing and teaching of William Schwartz. Our similar views about practice have enabled us to bounce ideas off each other and enjoy a special friendship (at times a little competitive, but reciprocally supportive and loyal).

In 1989, *Social Work with Groups* published "Building Support in Groups." The article identified and illustrated the skills required to foster mutual aid in groups. I think the ideas advanced group work practice and I was pleased to recently learn that the Journal editors have selected it to be republished in a special issue of group work classics.

An article that had great personal meaning to me emerged from a two-semester class experience in which almost half of the class was composed of students of color. The dynamics between a white teacher and students of color, students of color and white students, and between students of color themselves and white students themselves was a challenging teaching experience. The experience was rife with inter and intra racial tensions culminating when a few students of



color confronted me with giving racially discriminating grades. I reflected on this experience a number of years before publishing "Working with Difference: White Teacher and African-American Students" in 1992. I loved this class and still think about it.

The two editions of *Handbook of Social Work Practice* (1991 and 2001) I think added to the profession's knowledge base. I especially valued the opportunity to integrate macro and micro perspectives. Each contributor deserves special recognition for the depth and breadth of their scholarship. The later edition was awarded the Robert Wood Johnson Award for textbook excellence in end of life content.

I hope I am not going on too long, but this feels like talking about one's children and not wanting to leave one out. I published two articles in *Reflections* that had special meaning to me. In 1995, my friend and *Reflections* founder and editor (at that time), Sonia Abels, invited me to reflect on what I learned about teaching from my teaching. This resulted in "Reflections about Learning and Teaching." When teachers tell me that they have found these ideas helpful in their teaching that is music to my ears. Finally, my friend Paul Abels (I think he may be related to Sonia) edited a special group work issue and I submitted "Loss, Grief, and Group Work." It is about the respective contributions and my love for four former group work colleagues and friends (Mary Funnye-Goldson, Irving Miller, William Schwartz and Hyman Weiner) who passed away. They were amazing people and writing about them brought them back to me and to others. Finally, I would like to thank Jillian Jimenez, *Reflections* current editor, for inviting me to co-edit (with Andrew Malekoff) a special memorial issue dedicated to the helping experiences related to September 11<sup>th</sup>. I hope the special issue made a contribution to the profession's literature;

working on it was both personally and professionally meaningful.

**Cheryl:** I noticed that in many of your articles, you use practice examples. Do they come out of students' fieldwork internships?

**Alex:** Many come from my teaching; some come from my consultations and workshops. Whatever I teach, I try to use the participants actual practice productions. In my course assignments, I often ask them to analyze their own practice, using the literature to deepen their understanding. If you have not reviewed the *Life Model's Teachers Guide*, I would encourage you to take a look at it. Various teaching instruments such as records of service, critical incidents, and journals are explained and illustrated. The students and I learn a great deal from them.

**Cheryl:** Your mentioning the *Life Model's Teacher's Guide* reminded me that I wanted to ask you about the Model's major tenets?

**Alex:** In developing the two integrated methods courses, Carel and I were concerned that social work education separated people from their environments. In casework, students were primarily exposed to psychological explanations of human behavior and the focus of intervention was primarily on client adjustment. So our first aim was to develop a perspective that offered equal attention and focus on people and their environments. Carel was beginning to do groundbreaking work on bringing ecological theory to social work. We found ecological theory derived from the natural science of biology more user friendly than systems theory derived from the hard science of physics.

Carel and I were also concerned that social work education not only separated the people from their environments, but also



separated individual, family, group, and community work from each other. Our second aim was to develop a model that builds bridges between historical divisions among casework, group work and community organization. Thus, we attempted to present notions about an integrated method of social work practice. Our conviction was that a client should not wind up receiving, individual or group or family services based upon the worker's specialization, but rather based upon client need and comfort.

Our third aim was related to the separation between the profession's clinical treatment and social reform traditions. We wanted to develop a model that began to build bridges between the treatment and social reform traditions of the profession. In our first edition, we focused on moving from client troubles to influencing organizations. We drew heavily on Brager and Holloway's classic text, *Changing Human Service Organizations* (1978). In the second edition, our focus expanded to community and legislative influences. I think this part of our collaboration is not as strong as the others.

**Cheryl:** In what way is it "not as strong?"

**Alex:** Well, it is not as well developed. In many ways Carel and I had to struggle against the chains of our own micro education and expand our knowledge base. The macro content is simply not as familiar to us. I give us a great deal of credit for the effort, but feel that in the subsequent edition the macro content has to be improved.

**Cheryl:** What made you refer to these ideas as the Life Model rather than the Integrated Model?

**Alex:** In reviewing the available literature for these two courses, we found that clients were required to fit into a well-established medical model of social work practice. Our practice, field instruction, teaching and

advising experiences suggested that oppressed people often resisted being fit into diagnostic formulations and, in turn, were diagnosed as resistant. Thus, we set out to develop a model of practice that attempted, as close as possible, to mirror natural life processes. Using the metaphor of people on a "trolley car of life," the prevailing medical model demanded that applicants get off their "trolley cars," be screened and enter the professional "trolley car." In contrast, we wanted our students to learn how to jump skillfully onto the client's moving life processes and enter their life space, engaging adaptive processes rather than mobilizing resistive processes. Mirroring natural life processes led us to call it the life model. We also thought for purpose of royalties it would be wise to call it the "life" model rather than the "dead" model (laughter).

**Cheryl:** What are the other major changes that you made in the second edition?

**Alex:** While continuing to focus on the integration of methods, we try to spell out much more the differentials in practice. For example, in the first edition we had only one chapter on "interpersonal obstacles." In the second edition we expanded it to three chapters – interpersonal obstacles within families, groups and between worker and client. We also are much more systematic in spelling out how a social worker takes into account issues of class, race and ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, level of physical, emotional, and mental functioning in practice. I think I have told you more than you ever wanted to know about the Life Model – sorry if I got carried away.

**Cheryl:** No, it was very interesting to discuss the life model with you. I think it's important to use models that are written and conceived from a social work perspective and plan on using it with my own students.



## **Motivation to Enter the Social Work Profession**

**Cheryl:** What inspired you to enter the social work profession?

**Alex:** I think there are two prime reasons. I was a sociology major at Rutgers and in my junior year I took a course in criminology. This course was the first course that really spoke to me. We had several field visits to correctional facilities, one of which was an alternative to a reformatory for first time adolescent offenders, and it fascinated me. The setting was very structured, and every night the youngsters participated in group therapy. I was captivated and asked permission to revisit. It struck me that working with groups was a career I wanted to pursue—helping teenagers through the use of groups.

**Cheryl:** So, you found a career direction.

**Alex:** Yes. Another influence was my aunt who had special meaning in my life. She is a holocaust survivor and she came to this country and became a social worker.

**Cheryl:** That's amazing, that women like your aunt accomplished obtaining professional degrees at a time when it was not fashionable.

**Alex:** The issue is not that it wasn't fashionable—the issue is that she overcame insurmountable odds to complete her professional education. She was in a small class of about eight students that graduated from Adelphi sometime in the mid-fifties; I saw her graduate and it motivated me. I think these were two significant influences for me.

## **Influences for Going into Group Work**

**Cheryl:** What influenced your interest in social group work?

**Alex:** The course in criminology and my aunt are what influenced me to go into social work, but the interest in group work was much earlier. It started in high school through my involvement in team sports.

**Cheryl:** How did the high school experience influence your interest in group work?

**Alex:** When playing basketball and baseball, there is something about being part of the team and the bonding that takes place. Being a high school athlete also influenced my acceptance and status with peers.

**Cheryl:** So it made you feel good about yourself.

**Alex:** It increased my self-confidence. Being able to perform under pressure, and contributing to a team effort had a profound impact. I was very much influenced by my high school basketball coach. For a period of time, I even thought about becoming a high school or college basketball coach. However, when I arrived in college and found out how much better other players were than me and that the students who majored in athletics had muscles on top of muscles (laughing), I realized I would have to find a different career path.

**Cheryl:** So, you became a social worker.

**Alex:** A social worker, yes and I am a proud one. Ours is a most noble profession.

**Cheryl:** Were team sports your first experiences that you felt you were of a part of a group?

**Alex:** A part of a structured group with a common goal.

**Cheryl:** You enjoyed the group process



**Alex:** I relished it.

**Cheryl:** That's an interesting answer because I would have thought it might be later (when you discovered group work) and so it's a good thing I asked.

**Alex:** From my junior year in high school and throughout my college years, I worked in summer day camps. Between my first and second years of graduate school, I worked in an overnight camp — a well-known one — Wel-Met camps. These were wonderful experiences, which exposed me to the potential of groups as well as some of the pitfalls.

**Cheryl:** You liked working with children and adolescents.

**Alex:** Until graduate school, my experiences were largely with latency-aged and pre-adolescents. During my first year placement at Lenox Hill Settlement House, I was assigned to work with an adolescent group. I discovered that I had a knack for working with this age group — I could relate to them with ease and was not thrown by their creative testing. Even more than that, the settlement house shaped my view of social work practice — its philosophy, view of community participation and agency membership has fueled my writing and teaching throughout my career. And even more than that, on a personal level, I met my life's soul mate, my wife as co-workers at this settlement house.

**Cheryl:** Which graduate school did you attend?

**Alex:** I was attending Rutgers University; I applied to Rutgers School of Social Work, and also applied to Hunter and Columbia. My initial plan was to remain at Rutgers. I began

to have second thoughts, feeling I have been there four years and felt I was ready for a new experience. I was too comfortable at Rutgers. I decided to move to New York and attend Hunter. I selected Hunter because of its size — we had 30 students in the entire class, 4 of whom were group work majors. I loved Hunter and am a very proud graduate.

**Cheryl:** Did you get a BSW at Rutgers or a sociology degree?

**Alex:** I began as a joint psychology and sociology major, and discovered that I had much greater interests in people than rats — so I majored only in Sociology. I don't want to date myself, but when I went to school the BSW did not exist.

**Cheryl:** The settlement house really influenced you.

**Alex:** Yes, I was exposed to a very different notion of helping than my casework peers. They were learning to complete social studies, develop diagnoses and treatment plans; I was learning about helping a neighbor/member who came on some hard times. We were being socialized to what felt like two different professions. At that time, I did not understand the divergent roots of the Charity Organization Societies and Settlement Movements. As an intern, I experienced the settlement; I breathed the settlement; I internalized the settlement house.

**Cheryl:** Do you still think about your former clients?

**Alex:** I often think about the members; they were tremendous teachers. The younger kids gave me a rough time; I credit them with teaching me about the importance of being real and congruent. I also think about one of my teenagers who committed suicide.



Professionally and personally that has stayed with me.

**Cheryl:** What do you mean by being real and congruent?

**Alex:** I was assigned to this pre-adolescent group while I was learning these theories and professional skills in graduate schools. The kids would be disruptive and I would say in a bland voice, "Did you have a bad day at school?" They would become more disruptive and I would continue with these mechanical bullshit interventions. Finally, one kid smacked me hard in the back of my head; I think for the sole purpose to see what it would take for me to become a real person. Well, I was too upset to think about a "professional" response. Instead, I screamed a few profanities, demanded that the kids sit down and I then proclaimed, "This shit is going to stop!" The kids saw me at my worst, yet I did not abandon nor reject them. They were begging me to create some structure and limits. They also wanted me to be real. They taught me the importance of integrating the professional and personal person and that structure and process go hand in hand. Our work began after that episode.

**Cheryl:** So, you had to be who you are?

**Alex:** A social worker has to integrate his professional and personal selves into one self. One has to learn from making mistakes, the task is to make newer and more advanced mistakes.

**Cheryl:** I am learning something from you. It's always hard for me to confront a student that's not doing their work or being disruptive, rude, angry and so I hold back, but you're saying it's better to just say what you're really thinking.

**Alex:** Yes. There are two processes going on simultaneously in teaching and learning, and the potential for discrepancy between what you teach the students should be done and what you actually do yourself. In reality, more is "caught" than taught. So if you are teaching students to be direct and to speak the "unspoken" and you model the opposite, they will learn to do what you do and not what you say should be done. So if a student is being disruptive, all eyes are on how you handle the disruption. If you ignore it, don't be surprised if your students avoid conflict and negative feelings in their practice. Show them how to make active mistakes (like I did with my kids)—the active ones you can learn from; with the passive ones all you can experience are regrets.

**Cheryl:** You mentioned that the teenager who committed suicide remained with you. How did he stay with you?

**Alex:** I knew he was in great pain and involved in various self-destructive behaviors. We made a special connection. I feel I came into his life too late and struggle with what could have been if I had had more time—you know the "What if...?"

#### **Advice to New Social Workers**

**Cheryl:** If you were going to advise new social work students, what would you tell the students, where do you see social work going or what could they do to be effective?

**Alex:** That's a tough question because what is happening in social work is scary. Social work is losing control over its objectives as well as its methodology. The loss of professional autonomy is a significant threat to the profession.

**Cheryl:** What do you mean by losing its methodology, can you give me an example?



**Alex:** O.K. There is increasing pressure to demonstrate that an intervention has worked. To do so, experimental groups and a control group are established. Let's say you have five professionals leading a certain type of group (e.g., an anger management). In order to study the effectiveness of the intervention, you develop a manual that attempts to standardize the practice – to have the social workers do the same things at the same time. The research design is driving the practice rather than the other way around. And practice conformity is antithetical to practice creativity. As another example, managed care requires treatment goals with the expectations that clients will change in a short period of time. The agency executive is under great pressure to make sure all forms are completed in a timely manner and that positive outcomes are being achieved. The executive's pressures and frustrations are passed on to the supervisors, who pass the pressure and frustration on to the workers. And before long the worker blames the clients for not getting better fast enough. It is a vicious cycle.

I encourage my students to hold on to their professional core. While they must represent their agencies, they must not become their agencies. Representing rather than becoming one's agency is what differentiates a professional from a bureaucrat. When they become their agency, they become agents of social control. So if their agency wants them to do anger management, they need to invite the clients to express what fuels their anger – their hurts, their pain, and their disappointments (past and present). The focus needs to be on the stressors they have in their lives that they are having trouble managing. They need help with managing their stressors as well as the associated feelings and not just the feelings alone. An abused youngster will more likely examine how his angry responses are not in his best self interests if he is able to begin with his perspectives and life narrative.

The notion is that the social worker mediates between agency demands and clients' needs, that's part of our function, mediating agency demands and clients' needs and it is this function that differentiates us from all other helping professions, (Bill Schwartz offered the profession the gift of clarity of function). This is a complex notion about practice and workers require a great deal of support in carrying it out. If workers cannot find the support in their agencies, they have to find it outside their work. To be supportive of their clients, social workers have to be fueled with support in their own lives. Otherwise, it is too easy to burn out. Our clients need us too much for that to happen.

**Cheryl:** When you say get your support elsewhere, for your profession, what do you mean?

**Alex:** Workers need to try to obtain support through their organization, their professional associations, and through personal resources. Day to day we see people with devastating life situations. Without professional and personal supports, I have seen too many workers detach themselves from their clients or burn out. Either detachment or burn out are harmful for clients. Our clients need us to represent their interests and to do so we have to keep ourselves fueled with support.

**Cheryl:** How about you? Where do you get your support from to teach, write, and work?

**Alex:** I have a wonderful wife and two children – we are always there for each other. My mother and aunt have provided me with a lifetime of unconditional love and support. I also have friends who are like family to me. Naomi and I have been blessed with long lasting friendships. Professionally, I had a difficult period at Columbia for several years.



During that time, not much support was available to me. So, I sought outside organizations to have my professional needs for support. I became very active in this Association for the Advancement of Social Work and Groups ASSWG, serving as its president for two terms. These colleagues became an essential support group.

My new institution, University of Connecticut School of Social Work, under the leadership of Dean Kay Davidson, is a wonderful place to work. My new colleagues are most interesting and supportive. And at both institutions Columbia and University of Connecticut, my students have been a great source of motivation. And then there are consultations, workshops, and lectures that stimulate and keep me on my toes.

**Cheryl:** You said as far as seeing social work in the future that the problems are getting more difficult and so social workers need to be supported and they need to mediate between the environment and their clients and the agency. Do you see anything else happening in the profession in the future, like the future of group work, if you looked in your crystal ball?

**Alex:** I am not hopeful about group work's future in graduate education. While agencies are making an increased use of the group modality, graduate schools are turning their backs on teaching group work practice. While group work is taking off in the practice world, it is totally declining in the academy, in the graduate schools at least. The BSW programs seem to be doing a better job. I really don't understand why the academic realities do not reflect the practice realities.

**Cheryl:** What led to the decline of group work education?

**Alex:** Cheryl, that is a complex question. I remember at Columbia an increasing number

of students were double majoring in casework and group work. The field placement expected them to work with both individuals and groups. These students were taking 4 casework and 4 group work courses and integrating the content was left to them. Students began to complain that it was the faculty's job to integrate the content. I was taken by their argument and began to feel that they were right, that the faculty had to develop an integrated methods curriculum.

**Cheryl:** How did that proceed?

**Alex:** There were two conceptualizations. In one, each method received separate attention – five weeks on group work, five weeks on casework, and five weeks on contextual factors such as organizational and temporal contexts. The other entails developing an integrated model of practice. In fact, one of the aims of the Life Model was to develop an integrated model of practice that build conceptual and operational bridges between the historical trichotimization of casework, group work and community organization. As previously mentioned our conviction was that the client should not receive services based on the worker's specialization but rather based on client needs. While integrative ideas had an important impact on social work education, I must confess that I did not anticipate a serious unintended consequence: the cause of social group work would be significantly diminished.

**Cheryl:** The cause?

**Alex:** The social cause of keeping group work alive, of developing future generations of new faculty who were committed and competent to teach group work. That was lost with integrated methods or what is currently referred to as foundations practice. Another unanticipated consequence was that many of the integrated method and current



foundations courses evolved largely into practice with individuals. Hence, another unanticipated consequence is that with the increased uses of groups in the field combined with the lack of formal group work training, workers skills are declining. This conversation is getting depressing.

**Cheryl:** Do you think that since group work is increasingly used in the field, it will return in the academy?

**Alex:** It doesn't look good. Most doctoral programs do not teach group work theory and practice. So I don't see how we will have a faculty cohort to teach the group work content.

AASWG has tried to influence CSWE. We have worked very hard on trying to influence accreditation standards, on developing resources for teachers, on publishing books on how to teach group practice in class and field. While we have made a strong effort, I don't think we have made sufficient progress. I can't look in the future and anticipate if some events will change social work education to be more responsive to group work content, but I don't see any hopeful signs.

**Cheryl:** So, if you're advising the academy, if you wanted to make some recommendations, what would that be?

**Alex:** We need to work on finding a balance between teaching students to feel comfortable with being a generalist and deliver services based on clients needs rather than worker specialization; yet, at the same time, to develop depth in specific modalities. The University of Connecticut, for example, is experimenting with providing in the first year both foundations practice as well as advanced method specialization. We are up for re-accreditation. We will see how the approach is evaluated.



Columbia reception: Gitterman returning to faculty after serving as an associate dean

### **Professional and Life Influences**

**Cheryl:** What are the greatest influences of your life? You mentioned your aunt.

**Alex:** Well, my aunt influenced me to become a social worker. As a social worker there have been numerous influences. At a group work symposium, I confessed that I am involved in an inter-marriage. I married a social caseworker who subsequently expanded her practice orientation. We have



learned a great deal from each other about social work practice. I don't know if you read "Loss, Grief and Group Work", recently published in *Reflections*.

**Cheryl:** I did, I loved it. I learned so much about these great contributors to social work knowledge. I laughed at the funny jokes and cried because of its poignancy.

**Alex:** Thank you very much. Hy Weiner, Irving Miller, Mary Funnye Goldson and Bill Schwartz were profound professional and personal influences as were Carole Germain, Richard Cloward and George Brager. I miss these close colleagues/friends terribly.

**Cheryl:** You didn't write about Carel Germain, Richard Cloward or George Brager?

**Alex:** The article focused only on group work colleagues. I have written about Carel and Richard elsewhere and will be glad to share these with you. George is a more recent loss. All of them are deep in my heart – their ideas; our mutual affection and respect sustains me every day.

**Cheryl:** I don't know if you want to talk about any kind of religion, spirituality, did that have any influence on your life or on your work?

**Alex:** Yes. Ah...I don't know how to frame it...I'm a spiritual person. I don't follow many religious traditions. I don't go to synagogue. However, I do respect Yom Kippur and Passover and follow the rituals. Yom Kippur is the one-day I go to synagogue to be with my two fathers – to honor them, also to pay respect to all my other family members who perished in the holocaust, other losses, and to be thankful for the love, good-fortune surrounding me.

**Cheryl:** You had two fathers? I don't want to bring up anything that is sensitive...

**Alex:** That's okay... you made me think about them. I have wonderful children and a grandson who are central to my life. Neither my son nor daughter is religious, but each in his and her own individual ways respects the holiness of the day. I think they do so out of respect for me. I have no expectations about what they should do, but I feel they are very much with me.

**Cheryl:** The respect for tradition, your family and your ancestry, are these the main tenets you bring into your social work – respect for family, respect for people?

**Alex:** I am the same person in all my roles. I have different functions, but I'm still the same person. I treat other people like I want to be treated. My parents taught me that the most important thing in life is to be a good, honorable and courageous person. They valued good deeds much more than accomplishments. You had to be a good person. You had to do the right thing. I married a woman with the same values and am proud that my children live their lives that way – they are kind, respectful and courageous (as is my grandson.)

**Cheryl:** That's what a good man is, to do the right thing?

**Alex:** Yes – be fair and treat others with respect. That also means having standards and making demands, but do so kindly.

**Cheryl:** I think we answered this: the most pressing issues facing social work?

**Alex:** Survival.

**Cheryl:** Survival?



**Alex:** Survival as a profession.

**Cheryl:** Can you explain that to me?

**Alex:** Our profession has survived many threats. We have the capacity to reinvent ourselves. When a field of practice becomes less hospitable to social work, we generate new fields of practice like homelessness and AIDS. This represents a significant strength. What I worry about is that an increasing number of graduate faculty members have limited practice experiences. They can teach book social work practice, but understandably have a difficult time teaching practice in depth. So what I described about the quality of group work practice is, unfortunately, also true for individual and family practice. If our graduates are not skillful why should employers pay more money for social workers when they can get related discipline for less money? We don't fully understand that professional practice competence is our route to professional survival. Professional incompetence will lead to the destruction of the profession.

**Cheryl:** These are powerful thoughts. I wish we had more time to explore this theme more fully. In our brief remaining time, I would like to ask about your personal background.

### **Personal Background**

**Cheryl:** Were you born in the United States?

**Alex:** No.

**Cheryl:** Where were you born?

**Alex:** I was born in Poland. I'm a child survivor of the Holocaust.

**Cheryl:** I was afraid to ask about this; however, I think it's very important to talk

about because it had to have had an impact on you. How old were you when you immigrated to this country?

**Alex:** I came to this country when I was about eight years old.

**Cheryl:** How did the Holocaust influence you?

**Alex:** One clear influence is that I have a special appreciation for this wonderful country, for democracy and democratic processes. I think U.S. born folks take freedom too much for granted. Surviving also has influenced my strong identification with people who are oppressed and who experience discrimination. I have walked in their shoes – being born Jewish was sufficient justification to have you murdered. Most of my family members were murdered. Being born of color or gay/lesbian in this country leads to cruel oppression – a systematic effort to kill souls. My interest in people's resilience also emerges from being a survivor. Early in my career, I worked in various low-income communities in the Bronx. The people's ability to survive against great odds was ignored in most professional literature. I saw their strengths and resiliencies; others only saw pathology and weakness. I am sorry if I am beginning to ramble.

**Cheryl:** I hear the profound influence the Holocaust experience has had on your personal life and your professional career.

**Alex:** Very much so. I have intolerance for bullies – physical bullies, emotional bullies, and ideological bullies – all kinds of bullies. I also react to people who close their eyes to injustice, or line up with the bully, focusing only on their self-interests. They do not see the bigger picture. Any person or group who is treated unjustly and you don't lift a finger to help: Beware; tomorrow may be your turn.



Thanks to my mother's unbelievable courage, her loving me more than life itself, and much good fortune, I was spared. As a survivor, I have devoted myself to having a meaningful life by giving to others. I learned, primarily from my mother, that meaning in life comes from giving rather than taking. When you give to others, life is full of satisfaction. I also embrace life everyday with much joy.

**Cheryl:** You said you lost two dads?

**Alex:** I lost my biological father in a concentration camp before I was three years old. After the War, my mother remarried a wonderful man. Gitterman means good man and he was a very good man. My stepfather died at a very young age - 58. My mother was widowed twice by the age of 48. I learned from her the meaning of courage, of not succumbing to the dark demons.

**Cheryl:** So, you see yourself as a survivor; a resilient person.

**Alex:** I see my mother, aunt, and myself that way. I have a very special bond with them - I never needed sports heroes - I had my mother and aunt (my aunt has her own narrative of courage and resilience).

**Cheryl:** Are they still alive?

**Alex:** Yes they are - my mother is going to be 90 soon. (Alex's mother died shortly after this interview took place.)

**Cheryl:** It's amazing that you are alive. You're a miracle, and that helps you.

**Alex:** Yes, my life is a miracle. The experience influenced me very much. A brief example: when I was a social work student, I was very skeptical of most of the psychological explanations of human behavior. They didn't

deal with social or historical time, with mass upheavals, etc. They didn't hold up to my life realities.

**Cheryl:** They didn't hold up?

**Alex:** They seemed too linear to me. My trajectory did not follow the prescribed sequencing. For example, my latency years were not very happy, peaceful, or calm, yet my adolescence was total bliss.

**Cheryl:** I know we have to run to a meeting now - thank you so much for agreeing to this interview. It has meant a lot to me both personally and professionally. How about ending it with one of your classic jokes.

**Alex:** Cheryl - thank you for making the interview easy. I wasn't looking forward to it - I'm much more comfortable with talking about others than myself. Let me think quickly about a "clean" joke that won't get us into trouble with *Reflections'* editorial board...okay, let me tell you about a true incident rather than a joke. When my friend Hy Weiner was the Dean at New York University School of Social Work, he met with a student who received the grades of F in research, F in social policy, F in human behavior, and a D in his practice course. When he asked the student to explain his academic performance, the student responded, without a moment's hesitation, "I guess that I spent too much time on the practice course."

### Reflections on the Interview

I have now read most of Dr. Gitterman's writing on social work practice, but talking over his ideas with him helped me understand his theories and techniques in teaching, practice and writing at a more personal level. Just recently I was covering death and dying in my HBSE classes and I found myself talking about the life model and applying it to saying good-bye to loved ones, end of life issues,



and what constitutes quality of life. The students discussed how saying good-bye to someone who is dying is very personal in real life. How making end of life decisions and determining quality of life cannot be manualized. We discussed how the stages of grief are more chaotic than linear. We then talked about Alex's article in *Reflections* about mourning his four friends/colleagues and how he compared his feelings to a grief work group facilitated by one of his students. In his article he reminded us that memories of people who are close to us stay with us and how it's okay, and maybe even good, to think of them a lot and for a long time, and mourn with social support.

It was challenging for me to interview someone of Dr. Gitterman's stature and professionalism. I learned that you have to read everything a person writes before doing an interview, and in his case, that was over a hundred publications. He used his "support and demand" theory on me during my interview with him, which made me want to do an even better job. He demands so much of himself and contributes so much to professional social work and group work. I feel lucky to have had this opportunity and urge you to get to know Alex Gitterman through his writing, a workshop at CSWE, or coming to AASWG where he is always around to welcome new group members. He has been inspiring to me. I've been captivated by his intellect, commitment to social work values and quick wit.

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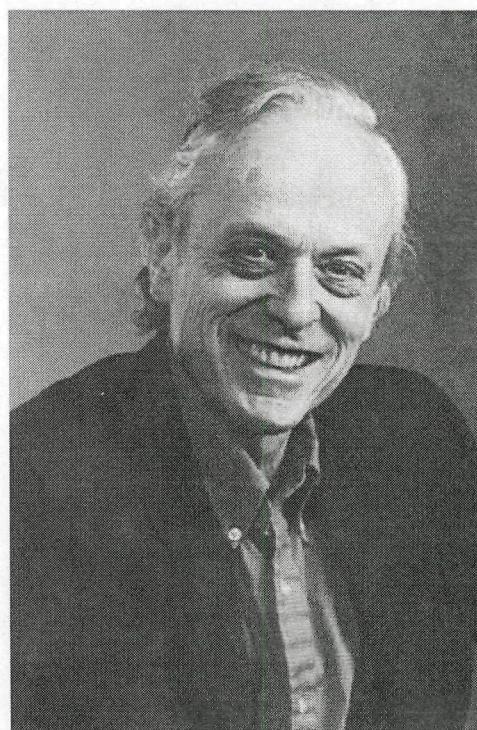
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University of Connecticut faculty portrait



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