

INTRODUCTION TO THE JOURNAL: MY JOURNEY WITH REFLECTIONS

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The two special issues of *Reflections* devoted to “Doing Research on the Ground,” and my article that appears in the second of the two, are the culmination of an inner struggle about the nature of “scholarship.” It is a struggle that, in retrospect, I am not proud of but that I now feel I can reveal. As a newly appointed dean, who will no longer be judged primarily on my scholarly production, I am now free to publicly question my long-held beliefs about what social work research

should “look like” and the type of work social work scholars should produce in the academy.

This struggle began over ten years ago. I had the honor to be among the second group of teachers in a fledgling social work program in Lithuania. How I got to Lithuania, and its extraordinary impact on me, are long stories well beyond the scope of this introduction. It is enough to say here that that experience transformed me as a person and as a professional, so much so that I continue to go back whenever I am invited; that I continue to be willing to endure the long journey through many time zones; that I hate, but am prepared to experience, the cold winters with their few hours of daylight and even less sunshine; and that the joy of being there is never overshadowed by the lack of creature comforts or the temporary separation from my life partner, Michael.

As I prepared to leave Lithuania after my first experience there in 1993, when Russian troops were still in the streets and mail service

was totally unreliable, a number of the remarkable women who were the first social work students in the country asked me to carry letters back to their first American teachers. It was a simple request that I gladly fulfilled. It was also a request that enriched my life, for it resulted in my meeting Paul and Sonia Abels – they lived in Costa Mesa, just a ways up the 405 freeway from my Los Angeles home.

When I called Paul and ‘Sunny’ to tell them that I had letters for them, they immediately invited me and Michael, who didn’t understand what had *happened* to me that first summer in Lithuania, to dinner. I accepted the invitation not only to deliver the letters, but with the anticipation that our talk that night, about the extraordinary people we had encountered and our common experiences, would help put words to the journey I had begun. I also hoped that it would help Michael understand both why I had changed and why I had to go back. It did exactly those things, and much more.

During our conversation that evening, Sunny asked me, the “academic” at a “research university,” whether I would write about the experience. I responded that what had happened to me in Lithuania was too personal; that it had no generalizability to other people or situations; that I wasn’t sure I could write in the first person or that personal experiences were appropriate in the professional literature; and that there was no place that would publish such a first-person account. As I recall, my response disappointed her.

It was from this long night of wonderful conversation about Lithuania that *Reflections* was born. It was clear that Sunny was

challenged to do something about the fact that first-person accounts about important experiences from which others might learn had little place in the “scholarly” social work literature at the time, and that I wasn’t going to do anything about it. As she recalls in Volume I, Issue 1:

After an exchange of stories with others about the different experiences we each had teaching and effecting social policy in Lithuania, we realized that if these personal accounts remained as sophisticated gossip, the knowledge lodged in the accounts would be lost. We knew the story tellers would write on social change, but they would not write an article, a narrative that described and explained their affect and reasoning; the ways their behavior, interactions, and those of the officials changed over time, and what happened when they failed. In their expository writing knowledge of the process of their practice would be lost (p. 1).¹

For years I tried to write about my experiences in Lithuania; I felt I owed that to Sunny – her role as the birthmother of *Reflections*, and the fact that there was now a place to publish first person narratives challenged me. But I just couldn’t do it. It wasn’t in me – I didn’t know how to write that way, at least not for public consumption. I even tried to keep a diary during my Fulbright year there so that I could extrapolate from the experience in a way that would be “acceptable” to my professional self, but stopped that process shortly after I started. I rationalized that journaling took me “out” of the situation – that reflecting distracted me from “living” in the moment. After feeling guilty for a while about giving up my journal, I simply accepted the “fact” that I was a “quantitative researcher,” trained to collect and analyze “numerical” data and write it up “objectively.”

My experiences, feelings about them, and interpretations of them had little to do with the whole knowledge-building enterprise – or so I thought despite the fact that I taught constructivist and other “qualitative” and “subjective” paradigms in my doctoral research seminars, served on the editorial board of *Reflections* from its inception, and secretly envied peers who could do this type of work and write about it so freely and eloquently. Sure, it was easy to respond to other people’s commentaries on a thought-provoking narrative, but such a response had to be “objective”; it had to be tightly and logically written and based on facts rather than on feelings.²

Then, about a year ago, the current editor of *Reflections*, Jillian Jimenez, asked me to edit a special issue of the journal on “any topic I wished.” I’m sure she expected that I would do something on child welfare, my primary substantive field. Little did she know that I had begun to question the way in which social work researchers like myself denied in our writing (by not writing about it at all) that doing research in the “real world” was transformative and **hard**. I don’t think she knew that I had evolved into a participatory, community-based, empowerment-oriented evaluator, and that I had done so because I believed that one got the best and most useful data by following the principles guiding these research practices – but that I had also come to know, through numerous research projects, that doing this type of work was **hard**. I am also sure she could not have imagined that I had come to resent the fact that too many of my colleagues thought I was crazy for working with real people, in strapped agencies, in tough places. I did so because I believed that that was what social work researchers were supposed to do, even though it was **hard**.

So I proposed doing a special issue on “The Rewards, Frustrations, Challenges, Trials and Tribulations of Doing Social Work Research ‘On the Ground’.” Jillian wasn’t

sure it would fly or could be done – she wasn't sure there would be a response from people in the field. But, to her credit, she agreed to let me try. And so I did.

Through numerous postings on numerous research-oriented listserves,³ I began to get the word of this special issue out to potential contributors. The initial response was almost overwhelming – people contacted me from all over the world wanting to know about formats, deadlines, page limits, and other details about submitting their experiences.

In the end, just under fifty manuscripts were received – some from people I knew, some from former students, but most from strangers living in the U.S., Canada, Australia, England, Hong Kong, and South America. What a chord I had hit; what pent-up demand to tell stories about the messy (and hard) world of doing research on the ground and how it was related to life and other realities. What an embarrassment of riches! What to do???

As I realized the magnitude of the task ahead of me, I quickly asked for guidance and help. Guidance from Jillian about the number of narratives I could accept came quickly and led to a wonderful reaction and demonstration of trust: “take two issues” she said without blinking (if one can blink in an email), and I was cleared to accept the best of what had been received without having to reject anything that had potential.

Help came from a colleague in refereeing the submissions that were received and putting together these final products – I prefer going on new journeys with friends along to help smooth the bumps in the road. Karen Staller, whose integrity, judgment, knowledge of qualitative methods, and use of the narrative format I trust and respect, was the perfect friend to take along on this journey. I am in awe of her intellect, talent, and creativity and am delighted she was with me for the end of this part of my journey.

And so my journey with *Reflections* has come to a new place. I have, for the first time in my professional career, written a first-person article that I believe contributes to what we know about the research enterprise in the first person. And I have written about the *experience* of doing my work, and the frustration that can come with it – that narrative appears in the next issue.

Sunny originally hoped that this journal would “persuade academics, researchers and practitioners that narrative inquiry is another, albeit different, legitimate way to generate knowledge about practice.”⁴ With this introduction, and my narrative about my experiences of “doing research ‘on the ground,’” I happily concede that she has persuaded me that telling compelling stories in a coherent and compelling way is, indeed, a legitimate way to generate knowledge and inform what we do.

(Footnotes)

¹ Abels, S.L. (1995). Salutory. *Reflections: Narratives of Professional Helping*. 1 (1), 1-3.

² Meezan, W. (1996). Letter to the Editor on “Do the Right Thing.” *Reflections: Narratives for Professional Helping*. 2 (4), pp. 3-4.

³ Thanks, in particular, goes to Barbara Solt at the Institute for the Advancement of Social Work Research for posting this call for papers on numerous occasions.

⁴ Abels, S.L. (1995). Salutory. *Reflections: Narratives of Professional Helping*. 1 (1), 1-3; quotation from page 2.

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