

LESSONS LEARNED FROM MY PROFESSIONAL JOURNEY

By Agathi Glezakos, Ph.D., California State University, Long Beach

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Class of 2004, family members and friends, faculty:

The opportunity to stand in front of you today to deliver this address is a deeply felt privilege. This privilege was given to me by the graduates to whom I was an instructor for two academic semesters. It is the graduates, ten exceptional, committed and hard working women, trained to embark on their professional career, to whom I will relate selected lessons that I have learned during my own professional journey.

In June of 1964, I was one of 52 MSW students who graduated from the School of Social Work, University of Southern California. A week later, I accepted my first position as a professional social worker at the International Institute of Los Angeles.

With the exception of brief educational and maternity leaves, I have remained engaged in social work practice on either full-time or part-time basis. The forty-year span of my professional journey includes experiences in direct practice with individuals of all ages, with couples, with families and groups, in supervision of both MSW interns and staff, in social work consultation and training and social work education. The lessons that I have learned along the way have been many. I will share with you those that affected me most profoundly.

Lesson #1: Human capacity for survival

I am in awe of human beings' innate capacity to devise survival skills when in hostile, non-nurturing environments in their attempts to bounce back from the effects of

traumatic experiences that result from poverty, discrimination, injustice and inequity, oppression, abuse, war. I have worked with clients whose lives were affected by one or by a series of such dehumanizing incidents. Some tried to adjust by conforming at the cost of intrapsychic suffering; others rebelled and used non-conventional or even illegitimate means; and still others created multiple selves ending with a clinical diagnosis of dissociative identity disorder. I have come to view these client behaviors as reflections of conscious and unconscious attempts for survival. I have learned that as social workers, we have the responsibility to use practice skills that will uncover hidden client strengths; to work with our clients collaboratively to remove the presence and the toxic effects of such experiences; and to empower them individually and collectively to believe in their ability to introduce change and in their right to make choices. The Nobel prize winning author, Gabriel Garcia Marquez talked about living with life's "inescapable cycles:" "The sun rises and sets" he said. "The seasons pass. The years go by. The wheels turn. The axle irreparably wears down. We are not given a choice of whether to participate in this process. But this does not leave us without meaningful choices." Social work clients have innate capacities to make meaningful choices and we, as their workers, have the responsibility to help them in the process.

Lesson #2: Respect of human dignity and worth

I have learned that treatment which reflects respect of the inherent dignity and worth

of each person has sustaining effects on clients. In the classroom and in your internships you have learned about the human vulnerability that accompanies the role of "client." I have witnessed how becoming a social work client, particularly in a social environment with a belief system that promotes self-sufficiency and independence, diminishes a person's sense of self-worth. I clearly remember an elderly female client in a skilled nursing facility who, in the course of several sessions, talked about her multiple losses; loss of physical health, loss of her social support system and loss of her financial independence which deprived her of some basic personal items. I thought long and considered all possible ramifications before I decided, just before Christmas, to purchase the personal items that I believed would make a positive difference in the client's life. However, when I presented her with the gift-wrapped purchases, the client refused to accept them and explained to me how my gesture was an insult to her sense of self-worth. From this experience, I learned about the importance of sensitive practice, about the countertherapeutic effects of unilateral assumptions, and about the human need to preserve a sense of self-worth and dignity.

Lesson #3: Dual goal and collaboration

I have come to appreciate humanity's interdependence at all levels: from the family microsystem to the global macrosystem. It does take a village, as former first lady, Hillary Rodahm Clinton wrote, to raise a physically and emotionally healthy child. It also takes a village to care for, nurture and sustain a physically and/or emotionally dependent adult. To serve our clients we need to develop partnerships, to collaborate, to mobilize the resources that are available, and to advocate for the development of new, needed services. To exercise our dual responsibility to our clients and to the broader society, we must help our clients and we must also address social

issues and problems. To do this effectively we need to learn how to work collaboratively with clients, colleagues from our own and other disciplines, and with individuals outside the spectrum of health and human services.

Lesson #4: Professional development

The fluidity of today's social environment and the changing expectations placed on those who become our clients easily render both our knowledge and skills obsolete and require us to re-examine our value and belief systems. The individual differences of our clients, their multicultural backgrounds and the human diversity they present us with, require that we develop and enhance our professional expertise, strive to increase our professional knowledge and skill and aspire to contribute to the knowledge base of the profession. For this it is imperative that we engage in an ongoing process of learning and self-development. The current requirements in the state of CA for licensure and for the renewal of one's license mandate our engagement in this learning process. The diverse situations that social work practice challenges us with, however, require that we go beyond the licensing requirements and attend and participate in as many learning opportunities as possible. I owe a significant part of my professional development to the lessons learned during my work with clients. They provided a forum for the refinement of my practice skills; their experiences helped shape my philosophy about life and sharpened my appreciation of those things that really matter.

Lesson#5: Hope despite adversity

Social work practice at the micro level takes us into the most unthinkable aspects of the human experience - life situations that ran the spectrum from what would be labeled as immoral, unethical and inconceivable to what is defined as illegal and punishable. As we work with both the victims and the perpetrators in these situations, we are

challenged by ethical dilemmas and legal requirements. Aspects of client acts might be so far outside the normal range of expected behavior and the physical and emotional wounds they inflict might be so deep that our trust in the basic goodness of human beings can be shaken. The risk of allowing this to bias our professional objectivity and to lead us to develop a cynical attitude increases. I have learned that to help defuse the impact of these discoveries, we need to engage in an on-going process of self-examination and self-monitoring. To remain objective and effective change and helping agents, we need to reach out to colleagues and through supervision, consultation, membership in professional support groups, seek help that will enable us to view our clients' behaviors and events in macrosystems with a different lens. We need to perpetually cultivate a sustaining sense of hope and optimism. From practice I have learned that perpetrators and offenders are often wounded and traumatized individuals. We do not condone their behavior on the basis of their past traumatizations. We do, however, need to work with them to help them understand themselves, understand the hurt they have subjected others to, often loved ones, and to believe that our interventions will not remain fruitless. We do touch the lives of our clients and I have learned that the therapeutic effects of our interventions might not be recognized until much later. So we do all that we can, in the most professional way that we can and always hope that our work will not be in vain. Today, we are living through perilous times. Worldwide conditions make for an age of fear, uncertainty, and anxiety. Reduction of resources due to budgetary restrictions and shortage of trained manpower inevitably lead to difficult choices in practice. My professional journey this far, has strengthened my conviction that a sense of hope helps sustain our commitment to serve and to make a difference.

And last but not least,

Lesson #6: Responsibility to self-care

I have learned that no matter how great the practice demands might be, I ought it to myself to stop along the way, and take care of myself and of my personal needs. As human beings, we have our own challenges in our personal lives. These challenges, in combination with the demands of professional social work practice, can increase our physical and emotional vulnerabilities. Our effectiveness in the delivery of service correlates positively with our own state of well-being. In addition to maintaining healthy boundaries in our relationships with clients, which contributes to a healthier state of self, we need to establish daily routines that allow for introspection and reflection, for participation in stress reduction activities, for the development of meaningful and nurturing interpersonal relationships, for leisure, fun and humor. As a healthy individual we become more competent and effective healers.

My dear MSW graduates. With the new knowledge that you have acquired, the practice skills you have developed, the professional value system that you have been socialized into during the past three years, join the social work profession and become its latest asset. Do the best with what you have been given. Stand tall, work hard, hope and you will make a difference.

* This graduation address was delivered at a reception on the eve of the Commencement ceremonies. The MSW graduates were students in the Distance Education program sponsored by the California State University at Long Beach. The majority of lectures were delivered over interactive television. The instructor visited the host campus site at California State University, Hayward, two to three times during an academic semester. The graduation reception was attended by the graduating students and their families, friends, field instructors, employers, campus administrators and professors.

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