

AS I AM NOW: MY PROFESSIONAL JOURNEY

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The author's path to social work was influenced by friendships with two older women that she met in young adulthood. The friendships with these women not only helped her discover her career path, they also helped prepare her for life. The lessons the author learned from them are now influencing her teaching. This narrative describes the author's journey from student to professor.

In my junior year of high school, I decided that it was best for me to go away to college. Coming from a single parent family, I always felt as if I owed it to my mother to succeed at whatever I did. While the drive to please my mom helped me to always do well in school, it also made it somewhat difficult to figure out what I wanted to do with my life. By going away to college, I hoped that it would be easier for me to detect my own career interests. Ultimately, I chose to attend a private religious college two and a half hours away from home.

My mom dropped me off at college on freshman orientation day. I remember thinking: What possessed me to do this to myself? Why would I choose to go to a college where I knew no one and had no transportation to go home to see my family and friends? I felt sick to my stomach and wanted to tell my mother that I had made a horrible mistake, but I didn't.

My first days away from home were difficult: I felt very homesick. I missed my family and friends terribly. Fortunately, I met other college students who felt the same way and together we began to adjust to college life. To help my adjustment to college life, I became very involved in campus organizations, with most of my activities centering around the women's movement.

Feminism

My mother always described herself as a "feminist," not by choice but because of life circumstances. She had married a man from one of the wealthiest families in the small Mid-

western town where she grew up. My mom gave birth to twins, myself and my sister, 15 months after she was married and another daughter 15 months later. According to my mother, it was after the birth of my younger sister that my father lost his job and chose not to seek another. My mom applied for public assistance, began working the night shift, and eventually filed for divorce.

When I was four years old during the mid 1960s, my family moved to California. We lived with my aunt and uncle who helped my mother get on her feet financially after the divorce. My mother was always good at math, so she was able to get a job as a book keeper and office manager. As a part of her job, she managed the payroll and immediately noticed great wage disparities between male and female employees. When she brought this to the owner's attention, he told her it was because men were the main providers to their families. The owner's justification for paying my mom less, the sole provider in our family, was based on his belief that my father should be forced to pay child support. This experience and others like it resulted in feminist beliefs dominating the household.

Throughout my childhood, my mother was very active in the community. Despite being a working mother, she found time to volunteer with the P.T.A., her church, and the Democratic Party. During my junior high school years, my mom became very active in the League of Women Voters and the National Organization for Women (NOW). When I was in high school, passage of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) became the



main focus of my mother's attention. I was 15 years old when I attended my first political rally at the Los Angeles Federal Building in support of the ERA.

During my first few months of college, it seemed natural for me to become involved in the local NOW chapter. In my freshman year, I helped organize a NOW conference on campus to educate college students on the ERA. During the planning of this conference, I became friends with one of the professors that taught literature on campus. She encouraged me to take her class on women's literature because of my interest in feminism.

In the women's literature class, I discovered writers (e.g. Virginia Woolf, Jane Austen, Charlotte Bronte) that I knew either very little or nothing about. I felt very empowered reading these books because most were about the issues women faced in young adulthood. There was one book, however, that I found very unsettling. May Sarton's book, *As We are Now*, about older adulthood in a nursing home, both intrigued and frightened me. One quote, in particular, concerned me:

Old age is really a disguise that no one but the old themselves see through. I feel exactly as I always did, as young inside as when I was twenty-one, but the outward shell conceals the real me... (Sarton, 1973, p. 80).

If older people felt like 21 year olds, then I wondered if young adults and older adults had more in common than what I previously thought. Also, I wondered what it was like to be old and be able to look back on your life. And, how does an older person deal with regrets?

I discussed my concerns with the instructor, who suggested that I explore the issues raised in the book for the term paper by conducting an oral history of a nursing home resident. The professor told me about Nancy, a 103-year-old woman, who lived in the nurs-

ing home around the corner from campus. I felt nervous about meeting Nancy because I had never met anyone that old before. I feared that she may be too frail to talk and maybe wouldn't be very interested in me. My fears were quickly alleviated when I met Nancy because she immediately reached out for my hand and said how happy she was to meet me. We discussed the class assignment and agreed to begin the oral history the next day.

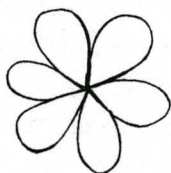
The oral history took two weeks to complete because we did a little bit each day. Nancy openly shared the story of her life and was more than willing to answer any of my questions. Nancy and her family were farmers. She talked about always having a baby on one hip while she worked in the fields. Like all farmers, they experienced good years and bad years. At one point she held up her hands and compared them to mine. She said, "You have the hands of a child, I have the well worn hands of a farmer." Nancy described how she lived through World Wars I and II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War. She had family members that had died in each war: a brother, nephew, and others. Nancy had outlived all of her close friends and most of her family.

As I listened to Nancy, I wondered how my own life would unfold. At the time, my beloved uncle, whom I had lived with when I first came out to California, was terminally ill. I was very frightened about life without him because he was definitely my father figure. He taught me to drive, lent me the money for my first car, and was the person whom I turned to when I needed advice. Even though I did not initially discuss my own life with Nancy (because that wasn't part of the assignment), I found great comfort in listening to her oral history. If she could survive all of the losses that she faced, I felt certain that I would somehow find the strength to survive mine.

When I shared passages from *As We are Now* with Nancy, she openly discussed the

challenges of life in a nursing home. Nancy described her life as being much better than what the book described, but also stated that she hated being dependent on others and would prefer to live on her own. In Nancy's opinion, most older adults would prefer to go to a nursing home versus living with their adult children. Nancy also believed that all women were natural feminists because they are the backbone of their families. Nancy's beliefs were far more progressive than I had expected, which intrigued me.

Even after the assignment was completed, I continued to visit Nancy at the nursing home on a daily basis. Over time, I listened to the story of Nancy's life and began to share my own. For some reason, I felt more at home sitting and listening to Nancy talk about her life than I did in my own dorm room. This realization caused me to seriously think about my career path. I had chosen, in part, to attend a religious college because I thought I wanted to become one of the first women pastors. While I enjoyed taking religion classes, I felt as if my views towards religious institutions were much more radical than most of my classmates.



I continued to visit Nancy on a daily basis throughout my Sophomore year of college. By talking over my career choices with Nancy and others, I realized that the college that I was attending did not offer enough educationally for me. It was tough for me to even think about leaving because I had made a lot of friends, including Nancy, but I realized that I could no longer struggle to find ways to pay for an education that did not meet my needs. I went to see Nancy on the last day of the semester and told her how much her friend-

ship had meant to me. At the time, Nancy was 104 1/2 years old. I agreed to visit her as often as I could. Fortunately, I was able to visit Nancy several more times before she died at 105 years old.

Career Path

The first day at the new college was very exciting. Hundreds of courses were offered, the campus was very diverse, with over 30,000 students in attendance, and many students were on work study, like me, unlike the previous college that I had attended.

I decided to major in nutrition and obtain a certificate in gerontology. I chose nutrition because I was thinking of joining the Peace Corps when I graduated and wanted to acquire a skill that could be of use to other countries. For the nutrition major, I volunteered in a Women, Infants, and Children (W.I.C.) clinic to gain practical experience in the field. At the same time, I began to volunteer for Meals-on-Wheels. While I enjoyed the work at W.I.C., I felt much more intrigued with the Meals-on-Wheels work.

The type of work that I did with Meals-on-Wheels was a little different from that done by other volunteers. I helped a blind couple (the Jungs) with their grocery shopping once a week. While I became very close to both the husband and the wife, it was Mrs. Jung with whom I developed a strong friendship.

Every Friday was my day to visit the Jungs and assist them with their grocery shopping. We would go through the same routine each week. Mrs. Jung would give me the shopping list that she had typed on a Braille typewriter. I would drive Mr. Jung to the grocery store a few blocks from their house and help him find the items on the list. When we returned to the house, I helped Mrs. Jung put the groceries away and then we would sit down and talk.

Mrs. Jung enjoyed telling me about her life. She had taught poetry for the Braille In-

stitute and also played the piano. Mrs. Jung was very proud of the fact that she gave birth to a child who was not blind. Even though she had lived a very traditional life, Mrs. Jung was a firm believer in the need for women to go to college and to be able to support themselves financially. As such, Mrs. Jung was always very interested in how I was doing in school and how I was facing the challenges of young adulthood.

Over time I became frustrated with the nutrition major, a frustration that I shared with Mrs. Jung. Through our conversations, Mrs. Jung pointed out to me that I seemed to be more interested in human relationships than in nutrition. Mrs. Jung also mentioned that my interests seemed similar to the social worker that helped her get MediCal, Meals-on-Wheels, and books for the blind. With Mrs. Jung's encouragement, I went to the college career center to find out about the social work profession.

At the career center, a job announcement was posted for a part-time case management job at Lutheran Social Services (LSS). While I wasn't looking for a job at the time, I decided to call and schedule an interview. I actually had been collecting food and clothes for LSS but had never visited the agency.

My first visit to the agency was both troubling and informative. The agency was located in the center of a very run-down neighborhood. The windows on the apartments were broken, very young children were playing in the street unsupervised, homeless people were sleeping on the bus benches, and prostitutes were soliciting for business during the middle of the day. While I had been to neighborhoods like this before, I did not expect to find it in this area because it was only a twenty-minute drive from my home. I had always thought of my own neighborhood as being composed of mostly low- or middle-income families, but compared to this area; my neighborhood seemed affluent.

When I arrived at the agency, the social worker could tell that I was very troubled by the conditions that I observed. Before we began the interview, she described the economic and other challenges faced by the clients that the agency served. She also told me about her background and the social work profession. She had recently graduated with her Master of Social Work (MSW) degree and had worked in the field for several years. Since I knew very little about social work, I found the jargon (e.g., empowerment, systems theory, cycle of poverty) she used to be a little confusing, but I liked what she was saying. Fortunately, I got the job and began reading everything that I could find on social work.

I decided to finish up my Bachelor's of Science (B.S.) in Dietetics because I was almost finished by the time that I discovered social work. While I was at LSS, professors from the Department of Social Work at California State University, Long Beach (CSULB) visited the agency to meet with the interns. Since I was a field preceptor, I had quite a few opportunities to talk to the professors. On one of the visits, the professor asked about my educational background. I told him I was finishing up my B.S. in Dietetics and wanted to apply for the Bachelor of Arts in Social Work program. He encouraged me to apply for the MSW program and offered his assistance. Around the same time, I began a new class for my gerontology certificate and found out that the professor was from the Department of Social Work. He too offered his assistance and told me about the Older Adult and Family Concentration of the MSW program and encouraged me to apply, which I did. Fortunately, I was accepted into the MSW program.

Personal Development

I was able to continue to volunteer for Meal-on-Wheels and did so for six years because I had every Friday off from LSS.



Over time, my friendship with the Jungs became something that I depended on.

A year after I began at LSS, my uncle died. At this very difficult time the Jungs were among the few friends that understood the severity of the loss. This was my first major loss and the depth of my pain over the loss of my uncle felt unspeakable. Similar to Nancy, the Jungs were able to empathize, without my having to explain how I felt. Their empathy was very therapeutic.

The Jungs began coming to some of my family events, and my mother also became very close to them. This proved to be an important connection because my mother struggled with my decision to become a social worker. My mom always equated higher education with the only guarantee of a woman's financial security and wanted me to choose a profession where I could make a high salary. By observing both my friendship with the Jungs and my love of the job at LSS, my Mom was able to come to support my decision to be a social worker by applying to the MSW program.

Slowly, I began to do more and more things for the Jungs. In addition to helping them with their grocery shopping, I would take them to doctor and dentist appointments. I did not initially equate their growing need for help with increased frailty, but that, in fact, was happening. After a few hospital visits by Mr. Jung for heart problems, I became very concerned as to what would happen to Mrs. Jung if he died. Mrs. Jung was also very fearful about this and talked about it quite a bit. Mr. and Mrs. Jung had been able to maintain their independence by working together as a team. About six months after his first visit to the hospital, Mr. Jung died of a heart attack. I was devastated over the loss but was also frightened about what would happen to Mrs. Jung. After the funeral, Mrs. Jung told her son that she wanted to try living alone in her home. I felt proud of her, but also nervous because many people were against her decision.

I continued to help Mrs. Jung with the weekly grocery shopping over the next year and was very inspired by her courage to live alone. Even though she was obviously grief stricken over the death of her husband, the challenges of living alone seemed to give her a new sense of purpose and increased her confidence. During this time, I too was doing many things for the first time (e.g., presenting at a professional conference, participating in an internship, writing a thesis) as an MSW student, and Mrs. Jung was an important role model on how to not be afraid of new challenges.



Our weekly conversations centered on women's issues. Since she had outlived her husband, Mrs. Jung was more committed than ever to the notion that all women (single and married) need to have their own lives, interests, and careers. She always wanted to know about how my career as a professional social worker was developing and was very supportive of my work. While I had others that were supportive of my decision to get a social work degree, none seemed as interested as Mrs. Jung. She seemed to enjoy hearing about every success and challenge that I faced.

During this time, Mrs. Jung's poetry writing also focused on women's issues, especially relationships. She was particularly interested in sibling and friendship relationships between women. Mrs. Jung submitted most of the poems that she wrote to a journal for blind poets, called *Sight Unseen*. Over the years, many of her poems had been accepted for publication. On one of the weeks that I visited, Mrs. Jung gave me a poem that she had written for me:

*To Molly: A Friend
How may I well describe a friend,
His depth, his breadth well comprehend?*

*Is it as strong as Gibraltar's rock
Or anchored fast like ships in dock?*

*A sturdy limb that none can bend—
Do these words well befit a friend?*

*Or is it like a gentle breeze
Or pale rose song among the leaves?*

*Great you, quiet joy O friend.
You have my love until the end.*

By: G. Jung

Mrs. Jung died shortly after she gave me the poem on friendship. In retrospect, I think it was her way of saying goodbye to me.

Prologue

After I graduated with an MSW degree, I worked in a variety of direct practice settings (i.e., home health, mental health, hospice, Adult Day Health Care) with older adults. As a result of this experience, I had the opportunity to work with many older adults who also positively impacted my development. Ultimately, my strong interest in aging led me to apply to a doctorate program. In May 2000, I graduated with a doctorate degree from the University of Southern California, and I obtained a full-time teaching position the same year.

As a social work educator, I still draw from the lessons that I learned from Nancy and Mrs. Jung to help me with my teaching. Currently, I am the instructor for an intergenerational service learning class for undergraduate students called the Residents Awareness Program (RAP). The program was developed in response to a request made by older adults at a local retirement commu-

nity for the university to develop a program where students lead intergenerational discussion groups with the residents (Rice, Black, & Kelly, 1994). Most of the students are pre-social work majors, in their early twenties, and their participation in this class is their first exposure to gerontology. Through the students' reflection papers, I see that they are learning some of the same life lessons that I learned in my early twenties. I have seen them realize that young adults and older adults have a lot in common: the key to aging successfully is being willing to adapt when confronted with challenges across the lifespan. It is a privilege to be a geriatric social worker.

References

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