

# Pain and Joy in School: Reflections on Becoming a Social Worker

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**Abstract:** This article is an account of family-of-origin issues regarding sexual abuse and sexual assault experienced by the author in her childhood. The article relates her practice of school social work and reflects on her own experiences in school. The story begins with her first job after graduate school in the 1980s. All names have been changed to protect identities.

**Keywords:** childhood sexual abuse, school social work, flashback memories

When I arrived at the elementary school and found the message waiting in my mailbox, I was a little mad at myself for not arriving earlier. Each school I worked at was at least twenty miles apart and I lived another thirty miles from the closest one. I had found that school social workers were not always accepted by teachers and other school staff because we were never at the school when they had free time. Since I was only at this school one day a week, I had to talk to this teacher that day. And I had to interrupt her classroom in order to do it.

Walking up the wide staircase to the second floor classrooms, I was nervous. I was a shy person and I already learned that teachers planned every minute of their day. I wasn't excited about having to interrupt her. The school building was old and huge, with big oak stairs and railings, and heavy oak doors to the classrooms. It reminded me of my elementary school. For some reason I was feeling small.

"Come in," Mrs. Bennett gruffly replied, to my knocking. I glanced through the window and saw that she was standing in front of the class, instructing them on something second graders needed to know. When was the right time to interrupt? I never knew.

"Well, are you coming in or not?" she said, obviously annoyed at my interruption. The children in the classroom all stared at me. They were so quiet.

"Yes, Mrs. Bennett, I got your message about a referral and was wondering when we could talk?"

"And you are ...?"

"I am the school social worker," I sort of stammered. I was so nervous, and felt so small and scared.

"Well this morning would have been nice, around

7:30, but I suppose you weren't here then, were you?" she asked, accusingly.

Why couldn't teachers understand that as a school social worker for the whole county, I couldn't be at their beck and call? It would be nice, but I was only scheduled at this school on Tuesday mornings from 8 to 11:30 a.m. Why was I feeling so threatened?

"How about after school then, around 3 o'clock?" she asked.

"I won't be here at that time. I am sorry," I replied.

I realized how inadequate the time allotted for each school district in this county was, but funding for school social work services was scarcer than funding for educating the students. It was frustrating and this was only my first year as a social worker. I'd only graduated in the spring.

"Well, just wait in the hallway and I will be there when I can." Mrs. Bennett said, dismissing me and guiding me out the door.

As I stood there, I felt humiliated, sad, scared, and alone. My heart was racing. The building felt so familiar; the door to the classroom heavy, with a large, glass window. The teacher, unfriendly, unkind, and scary. Then I remembered my second grade classroom, my teacher and my school building.

I cried often in second grade and my teacher was always exasperated with me. She would take me to the girl's restroom and spank me with a paddle, yelling at me to stop crying. One day after the spanking, she was leading me back to our classroom and she noticed that the window to another classroom door was missing. She pushed my face into the opening, saying, "Now this classroom can see what a baby you are for crying." I remember the humiliation.

At the end of the school day I would go home and report to my mother that I hadn't felt well that morning at school. She would invariably ask me how I was feeling then, and I would reply that I was okay. I was scared to tell her about the paddling because I thought she would be mad about my being in trouble. I never told her about the paddling and neither did the teacher. I hadn't thought about second grade for a long time.

I was born in a small town in Arkansas and we were poor. My father had a sixth grade education and my mother, fourth. We lived without indoor plumbing but always had a roof over our heads and food on our table. My parents worked hard at manual labor jobs and, before I started school, I went to work in the fields with my mother and her sister, picking cotton. I had four sisters and three brothers.

My father got a job outside of Chicago when I was in second grade and would come home about every other weekend to visit. My mother's family was close and her unmarried brother moved in with us while my dad was away. We eventually moved to the Chicago suburbs, where, thankfully, there was no paddling in the schools.

I was a bright student and enjoyed school after second grade. I especially enjoyed fifth and sixth grades. My fifth grade teacher talked with me about going to college, as if it were a given. My family never talked about such things and it was intriguing. In the seventh grade, I entered junior high and puberty. Again, I was really shy and most of the kids I knew in elementary school were not in my classes in seventh grade. School seemed to be more difficult, but the hardest part for me was that a boy in my classes continually grabbed my breasts, whenever he got the chance. He would do it in a crowded hallway, in an uncrowded hallway, and sometimes in the classroom. One day I'd had enough – I couldn't handle the humiliation any longer. The teacher was out of the classroom and Eric walked by my desk and groped me. I never knew if anyone saw what was happening, but no one ever came to my rescue. I got up and ran from the room and ran into the teacher in the hallway.

"What are you doing out of the classroom?" Mrs. Eastman asked, "And why are you crying?" I told

her the whole story.

"Where did he touch you? Which breast? Both breasts? When did this happen? Did anyone else see it happen? How many times has this happened?" The Vice Principal questioned me. "These are serious allegations and we want to get it right." He touched his own chest, squeezing his breast area, as he was questioning me. I was so embarrassed and afraid, and felt like I was being violated all over again. During that time of my adolescence, random men would mention my breasts. It seemed I was a magnet for perverts, and since I never talked about it, I never knew if it was happening to anyone else.

As a result of his behavior, Eric was suspended for the rest of the school year, which was about a month. I was referred to the school social worker, Leo, which turned out to be one of the best things that ever happened to me.

### **Becoming a social worker**

Leo was kind, understanding, gentle, and really listened to me. I started to open up with Leo, but I still couldn't tell him everything. At the time I was depressed but I didn't know why. It felt as though Leo was the first person who cared about me and cared about what my life was like. He liked me, had faith in me, and saw something deep inside that was worth saving. I felt so special. This was a person that I could talk to, that paid attention to me, and who didn't try to hurt me in the process.

I saw Leo for the rest of my school career. He really helped me get through adolescence. After graduation all of my friends went off to college. I got a job in a local factory because that was what my option was, and what was expected of me. No one in my family went to college and there was certainly no money for that kind of thing.

While working at the factory, I began taking classes at a community college. After three years I decided to apply to a four year college, full time. When I visited friends at college, I realized that school was something I was interested in, and something I could do. I got a degree in sociology, graduated with honors and with the award for Outstanding Graduate in Sociology that year. I went to graduate school and became a school social worker. Finally, I felt I had arrived and who I

could do for other children what Leo had done for me.

After that first year I became less shy and more assertive about meeting the needs of the students that were referred to me. I encountered other teachers that were unfriendly, but I didn't have the same reaction that I'd had to that second grade teacher, the classroom, and the building.

I found, however, that talking about sexual abuse and discovering childhood sexual abuse, sexual assault, or harassment was hard for me. I remember a high school student talking about a boyfriend that was demanding and controlling. I pounded my fist on the desk, telling her "he has no right to treat you that way." My emotional reaction to her story was strange to me. I don't think she noticed how strong my reaction was but it stayed with me. There was something in her story that felt familiar. I remembered a similar reaction to a presentation about childhood sexual abuse in graduate school. I'd had a strong emotional reaction but didn't understand why. Leo had once shared with me his suspicion that I had been sexually molested at some point when I was younger, but I denied that anything had happened. I couldn't remember a time that it could have.

Talking about childhood sexual abuse continued to be a difficult subject for me. It wasn't that I didn't believe it when it was presented to me, it was just that I never *saw* it. I never went there consciously. It was a subject that was not a part of my lexicon. The topic made me anxious.

### **Discovery**

My older sister called to tell me about a memory she'd had, in which she put her son in residential treatment for substance abuse and upon returning home, started to clean out his room. While cleaning the room, and feeling extremely sad about her son, she had a memory about being sexually abused.

"Judy, I have something I want to tell you. I had a memory today of being sexually molested when I was a kid."

"Who did it?" was my response. I didn't at all feel surprised by her memory, but anxious to find out

who abused her.

"Uncle Ray."

"What?!" I was astounded. Uncle Ray was our beloved uncle. He was everyone's favorite. He spent time with all of us and all of our cousins. He'd never had any children of his own and he'd lived with us when I was in second grade. He slept in the same bed as my brother and me. Sleeping arrangements are difficult when living in a four room house.

Second grade: the fear, the feeling of being small, the stress of being sexually abused. I was now able to understand why I went to school crying in second grade. I was able to connect the strong feelings that I'd had about the unfriendly second grade teacher and the building that was so familiar. I was having a flash back to the experience of the abuse, and the traumatic incidents that I had to deal with when I got to school. I wasn't able to tell the teacher or my mother what was happening to me. I buried the whole experience and covered it with shame. Even after being assaulted by my seventh grade classmate, I wasn't able to connect my feelings of sadness with what had happened when I was in second grade.

Over the years, through therapy and hard work, the memories slowly came back. My older sisters and I have talked about the abuse, but my older brother and younger siblings have no memories of it happening to them. I changed jobs and worked in children's mental health services where I was immersed in stories of childhood sexual abuse.

### **Teaching others**

When I look back on my years as a social worker, I wonder how much I have missed. I feel very sad at the thought that I could have missed something that children were trying to tell me. A student in a middle school told me that her friend was getting strange phone calls from a teacher. I asked the student if she thought her friend would talk to me about this. When the friend reported who the teacher was, I was surprised. Again, he was a nice man, liked by everyone, and he appeared very kind. I knew that I had to believe the student and I did. The teacher admitted to the phone calls and was fired. The student felt relieved and safety. I learned that everyone is not what they appeared. It felt empowering that I was there to

help this girl.

After years of working in children's mental health services, providing direct services, and supervising other social workers and psychologists, I started teaching in a BSW program. I found that I enjoyed teaching and training others, but I felt conflicted about leaving direct service to work full time as a social work educator.

"Who will take care of all the clients I am leaving behind?" I asked.

"Your job now is to teach the next generation of social workers to be the best they can be. That way you are reaching more clients than you ever could on your own," my new colleague said wisely.

And so I got my doctorate and started teaching full time. I try to keep my hand in direct practice when I have the time, because I really love being a social worker. I am a passionate teacher and I often tease my students that I will *haunt* them if I find out that they are not doing the best that they can, while working with clients.

### **What I have learned**

I have learned that being present with yourself and being present with your client will help you to not miss what a client is trying to tell you. When someone really listens to you with an open heart and mind, they are being present. I use mindfulness meditation as a way of getting students to focus on learning in the classroom, and as a technique to help themselves stay present with the client. I take my role as an educator of social work professionals very seriously. It is my duty to train the next generation of social workers to understand themselves and their clients, to know themselves, so that they do not miss anything.

I believe that it is important for social workers to examine their reasons for being a social worker. A lot of us come to the profession due to family of origin experiences and have to understand them in order to be an effective social worker (Smith, 2014; Barter, 1997; Nuttal & Jackson, 1994; Gore &

Black, 2009; Regehr, Stalker, Jacobs, & Pelech, 2001). My experiences have contributed to who I am as a person and as a social worker. My reflections of my personal experiences contribute to my expertise as a professor.

As a society, we have changed dramatically since I was a child, and the topic of childhood sexual abuse is more out in the open. It is still a very devastating process for people who have been victimized and the issue of re-victimization is an important one for social workers to understand.

I recently saw Leo and we reflected on the impact he had on my life and my decision to become a social worker. I am forever in his debt, and am so grateful that I was able to be one of his clients. He is still practicing after all these years, and still making a difference in the lives of others.

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