

Holding the Hope: A Path to Becoming a Social Work Educator

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Abstract: This narrative describes events in the author's family of origin which included numerous losses and complicated grief experienced by all family members. There were many obstacles put before this family and there was a social worker who intervened at a pivotal point in the author's life. These experiences began a journey to a career in social work and social work education. This is a narrative about holding hope for others until they are ready to hold it for themselves.

Keywords: parental loss, grief, social work career, educator, chronic illness

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My mother died early on the morning of January 12, 1965. I was 10 years old. She was 38. She had been diagnosed with Myasthenia Gravis years before. My family buried three infants prior to my birth, due to complications stemming from my mother's illness. Fortunately, I was delivered safely. My sister was born healthy five years later. My mother had been intermittently ill during the first 10 years of my life. The morning of her death was at a time when her disease was controlled, so it was a sudden and devastating loss to my father, my sister and me.

The saga of sudden and devastating loss continued just ten days later when my maternal grandmother, Esther, suffered an aneurism and died instantly, leaving my maternal grandfather in a state of complicated grief that he would never really recover from. Within two weeks, my father, age 37, planned two funerals and made plans to move my grandfather from his home of thirty years into ours. As I remember the story, my grandma Esther was the person my father was counting on to help him care for "his girls," making her sudden death even more devastating to our family. Somehow my father continued, doing the best he could for us. I wonder how he ever dealt with such grief. His own mother was beginning to experience signs of early onset dementia and was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease by 1970.

As I reflect back on these events, it is a wonder that it took me so long to seek a social work career and eventually to become a social work educator. I grew up in what I would describe as an urban Midwestern, White, middle class neighborhood located in one of the best school districts in the city. My parents struggled to afford to live there, but wanted to

provide the best possible environment for our family that they could. However, as I write this narrative, it occurs to me that possibly my path to the social work profession was laid from the beginning.

This series of losses of key women in my pre-adolescent life came at such an important developmental life stage. I learned to live in a family experiencing major chronic illness and complicated grief before I had any real understanding of what that meant, but it shaped the course of everything that followed. It is important to note that I believe my father did the best he could in dealing with his own grief, and trying to raise two young girls as a single parent in the late 1960s. However, by the time I reached 15, I was what some might describe as a "classic parentified child." I had taken on the role of trying to keep everything going in our household and I was charged with caring for my sister for the majority of each day after school, until my father returned home from working very long hours. We were "latchkey kids" before the trend, or even the term, was part of this country's culture. It was certainly an uncommon occurrence in our neighborhood.

What happened next might be thought of as predictable based on this series of life events. I, of course, had no idea at the time that I was following a path that should have led me to seek the assistance of a social worker. I became involved with a boy in my freshman class in high school. We fell in love, or so we thought at the time, and I became pregnant with my first child at the age of 16, in the winter of my sophomore year. After much discussion and many arguments with my father on how I was ruining my life, as his plans for me were to be the first in my family to go to college, I decided to get married and start my own family. Much later in life, I realized that my actions created even more devastating loss for my father, and a sense of failure for him as a parent. It

would take years for us to finally reconcile. This choice also meant I was forced to drop out of school as there were no alternative high schools for pregnant teens in 1971. I finished my sophomore year by concealing my pregnancy to everyone other than my closest family members and gave birth to my daughter on what would have been the first day of my junior year. I found myself pregnant again and 13 months later gave birth to my son one month prior to my 18th birthday. I remained married to my children's father for the next seven years, but they were difficult years with many separations. I became a single mother of two at the age of 25. I supported our family as a waitress and bartender, working multiple jobs and very long hours just to survive. I wanted my children to have a different life than I had. As it turned out, these circumstances created my family's next generation of "latchkey kids," taking care of themselves much more than they should have in their early years.

There was a giant leap forward on my path to becoming a social worker professional when I discovered that my son was suffering from drug and alcohol abuse at age 16. His father and I checked him into a residential treatment center to seek help with his addictions, which we felt were already ruining his life. My family was touched by the social worker who did the intake and assessment that night. It was my first experience with a social worker. She helped me feel that there was hope. Hope that we would make it through this, and that my son would survive. At the time, I struggled with how we had gotten there and where we might end up. I struggled to understand how the choices I made as a teenager may have continued my family of origin's saga of grief and despair. I felt hopeless. Over the course of the next several months, the social worker helped me get to a point of letting go of some of the guilt I was carrying about ruining my son's life by not being there for him. I still clearly remember the moment that she said to me, "you were doing the best you could, given all the circumstances. You were able to recognize the need to seek help for him and your family when you needed it the most." What I understand now is that she held the hope for us until we were ready to hold it for ourselves.

Luckily, my son recovered from his addictions and was able to finish high school. Being a high school dropout and understanding the importance of

education, my dream was for both of my children to complete school and hopefully go on to college, just as my father had at one time dreamt for me. My son and daughter both started college a few years later, and they even encouraged me to go back to school. So in 1992, at the age of 37, I earned my GED and decided to enroll in the local community college. I loved being in the learning environment again, and after a few bumps in the path, I started to thrive. I still had not chosen a major. I entered college looking for more of a technical degree, something I could finish quickly that would lead to a job. I was still waiting tables and knew I needed to find another profession sooner rather than later. Having dropped out of high school 20 years earlier, I figured my choices were limited. In the beginning, it did not occur to me that I could work to achieve the higher levels of education required to become a social worker.

Class after class, I got more interested in learning and communicating with other students and professors. While waiting to get accepted into one of the technical programs, I took some humanities courses. Soon I was invited to join the honors program. My professors inspired me to set goals I had never imagined for myself. As I reflected on how a social worker had changed the course of my family's path, I explored the requirements for a social work degree. I had the opportunity to talk with professors about my goals. I found professors who supported me and provided me with hope. They became my mentors. I spoke with social work professionals who helped me see options for employment. The path was becoming clearer.

As I planned to complete my Associate's Degree at a community college in southern Florida and transfer to a local four year university as a social work major, I attended a transfer student day event. At that event, I met the next social worker who would change my life. She was the director of the social work program at the university. She looked at my transcripts and said, "you are well prepared to start with us and I think you are going to be very successful here." That meeting and those words were the moment I knew where my path was leading me. I had the opportunity to work with her once I became part of that program. She became one of the most influential mentors in my life. After earning my BSW, I was accepted into the MSW Advanced Standing Program at the same university. As I was finishing my MSW degree, my mentor encouraged me to apply to a Ph.D. program. She knew

how much my relationships with my professors meant to me throughout my academic journey. She recognized mentoring qualities in me. She encouraged me to follow a dream from my very distant past of being a teacher. To be a teacher in the social work profession, and to train new social workers to assist individuals and families, as other social workers had assisted me, was an inspiration beyond anything I could have imagined prior to meeting my mentor. I followed that path, and completed my doctoral degree four years later. In 2002, ten years after earning my GED, I received my Ph.D. My father and my children were with me to celebrate the proudest accomplishment of my life at that time. My children have also beaten the odds of being born to teen parents whose mother was a high school dropout. Both have received the highest academic degrees in their professions. Interestingly, they both entered the helping professions as well. My son earned his Ph.D. in clinical psychology, and my daughter earned her degree as a Doctor of Chinese Medicine.

What has transpired since then is my growth as a social work educator and practitioner. The past twelve years sometimes feel like a dream. After teaching social work at the collegiate level for 12 years, I have been promoted to Director of one of the largest schools of social work on the west coast. As a practitioner, I have been able to work directly with children and families as a school social worker, where I specialized in grief work with children. The personal perspective from my own family of origin

events gave me the opportunity to help some of my young clients realize that they are not alone in their feelings of grief over the loss of a parent, and that there are others who can and want to support them, as they move through childhood and adolescence.

My understanding of the impact a social work educator can have on the lives of students allows me to speak candidly in my classes about my family of origin and my life experiences. I strive to impress upon my students, at both the BSW and MSW levels, how important and impactful the work social workers do can be. Additionally, I try to impress upon my students that social workers need to listen to our clients, and to understand that everyone has a story, and that story plays an important role in why he or she is seeking the assistance of a social worker. It is also imperative for me to help students understand one of the importance of the one thing that saved me and my family, time and time again, over the course of my own life: there are many times when we, as social work professionals and educators, must be able to hold the hope for our clients and at times, our students, until they are ready to hold it for themselves. In fact, that may be the one thing that social workers can do to inspire people to move forward when they need it most. I know it was for me.

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