

My Journey as a Social Work Professor

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Abstract: After my second year as an Assistant Professor in the School of Social Work, I began to question the role of my faith in my professional life. This was followed by three seemingly unrelated events: a parting remark from the new Pastor of my church, a 10-week leave to develop my research agenda, and a trip to Rome with my wife. These events led me to search for a way to integrate my faith into the social work classroom. In this narrative, I recount my journey through which I discover that my faith, as articulated through Catholic Social Teaching, has called me to the profession of social work. As a social work professor, I bring my faith into the classroom through the use of my authentic, sacred self to establish relationships with my students that facilitate mutual growth and learning.

Keywords: faith, spirituality, teaching, relational teaching, teacher-student relationship.

At the end of my 2nd year as an Assistant Professor in the School of Social Work at California State University, Los Angeles, I was looking for a way to put my research knowledge and skills into good use into the community. So, I asked for guidance from my friend, who is a Catholic priest, and he referred me to a social justice-oriented Catholic priest who was the pastor of a low-income, immigrant neighborhood in South Los Angeles. When I met him, I was very impressed with the pastor and his community and the level of engagement and organizing that was occurring within the parish. I was certain that I could make a contribution to this community.

“Where did you get your Ph.D.?” the pastor asked me.

I proudly stated, “At USC (University of Southern California).”

“Your education is very secularizing,” he simply stated.

His response felt like a punch to my gut. “Secularizing?” I thought to myself, “What does he mean by “secularizing”? And why is he criticizing my doctoral education, which I am trying to employ for the benefit of his parishioners and his community?” I was offended and dismayed. I never went back to his parish again.

As my anger and hurt subsided, I wondered what the pastor meant by his remark and why I was so angered by it. I remembered that, when I started my doctoral program, my faith became secondary to earning my Ph.D. Before then, I had always been consistent in my faith life through praying and meditating, attending Mass regularly, and volunteering for church programs and activities, but, I did not want any “extracurricular” activities to distract me from my goal of earning my Ph.D. There

was no content on spirituality in the social work curriculum, and I never considered taking any religious courses within the university to complement my doctoral education nor was I encouraged to do so. I slowly came to discover that the pastor was right about my secularized doctoral education in social work. This realization continued to trouble me, but I did not know what to do about it.

Shortly thereafter, as I was sifting through my mail, I caught this byline, at the bottom of the 1st page of the bi-monthly newsletter from the National Education Association: The Spiritual life of the professoriate: Professors are of two minds when it comes to their spiritual role. I was compelled to read on about a study from the Higher Education Research Institute that suggests that professors are not clear about their role as spiritual persons in the classroom (Higher Education Research Institute, 2004). I felt the same way-I was not very clear at all. Do I have a role as a spiritual person as a social work educator?

As a tenure-track faculty member, I had been very involved in the School of Social Work as a coordinator of the graduate program and in my community as a member of several, local governmental committees, agency boards, and political organizations-I ran for the city council and lost--twice. While my most recent reports from the Retention, Promotion, and Tenure (RTP) committees and the Dean of the College of Health and Human Services were satisfactory, they suggested that I needed to seek grants that would allow me to pursue research and other scholarly activities. As I looked at my busy community-oriented life, I determined that I needed to cut back on my community activities to develop my research agenda so that I could focus on getting tenure. However, as I began to pull away from these community responsibilities, I received a call to get involved in my own parish.

At our church, we had a new Pastor, who had just

begun his new assignment that summer. I had some concerns about the church's elementary school, where my daughter was a student, so I made an appointment to meet with him.

We had a very good discussion. I felt that he truly listened to my concerns, and he promised to keep an eye on the situation at the elementary school. As I was leaving his office, I remembered that I wanted to confirm with him something I had heard about him: "Father, I understand that you worked at a university in the Philippines?"

"Yes, I taught at the University of San Tomas in the Philippines," he replied.

". . . because I'm an Assistant Professor at California State University, Los Angeles," I quickly retorted.

"What do you teach?" he asked.

"Social work," I said.

Suddenly, he turned and looked me straight in the eye and pronounced with confidence and conviction, "I need you to start a social justice program here at our parish."

I was shocked, surprised, and saddened.

I was shocked because when I usually tell people I am a social worker, I get a respectful, yet, somewhat puzzled response, let alone a response that includes "social justice" in it. I was surprised because he was so certain that I was there to help him establish this social justice program, and I was saddened because I was in the midst of pulling away from my "community service" commitments to focus on my scholarly activities at the university.

The Pastor told me that he is a member of the order of the Congregation of the Mission, founded by St. Vincent de Paul. He told me to go to their website to find out more about their order and to submit a proposal for a social justice program, with a mission and objectives. I was impressed that he knew about organizational and administrative structure, but I was not excited about the prospect of spending time and effort to build a new church program. Since a new academic year was about to begin, I decided to place this proposal onto the back burner.

A few months later, my sense of obligation (or Catholic guilt) began to nag at me, so I began to do some research for the social justice program

proposal. I found information on social justice programs within the Catholic Church, St. Vincent de Paul, and the Congregation of the Mission (referred to as Vincentians).

The Catholic Church's commitment to social justice resonated with my professional value of social justice. According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, which is "a statement of the Church's faith and of catholic doctrine (United States Catholic Conference, 1997, p. 5)," life in Christ within the human community entails social justice: "Society ensures social justice when it provides the conditions that allow associations or individuals to obtain what is their due, according to their nature and their vocation (p. 521)."

This parallels what I had come to understand from my social work education as social justice, which is generally defined as a society in which individuals "enjoy equal access to the services, rights, resources and opportunities necessary to enjoy a reasonable standard of living and to reach self-fulfillment (Weiss-Gal & Peled, 2007, p.368).

I was fascinated to read about the commitment of the Vincentians to the value of social justice. According to St. Vincent de Paul, who founded the Congregation of the Mission in Paris in 1625, Vincentians are called to serve the abandoned, those rejected by society, the poor, the lonely and to implement the demands of social justice and evangelical charity (Congregation of the Mission, 2004)." My "rediscovery" of the social justice commitment of the Catholic Church and the Vincentians not only brought back to my mind eight years of Jesuit religious education in high school and college, but it reinforced for me my own call to serve as a social worker. I recalled that I had discovered social work as an undergraduate student at Marquette University, a Jesuit university, during a time when I embraced my Catholic upbringing within the context of a Catholic faith community to begin my own faith journey as an adult, independent of my family.

The Catholic Church and the Vincentians provided the path for me to fulfill my call to be a social worker. The Church states that society ensures social justice when it provides the conditions for associations and individuals to receive what they are due, and Article 12 of the Constitution of the Congregation of the Missions outlines how Vincentians should "bring the Good News to the poor":

1. to work within the world of the poor, not just with isolated persons;

2. to work on the level of structures, not just in responding to particular situations;
3. to work to confront injustice, not just to meet the needs of individual poor people;
4. to work with groups (small communities), so that the poor person is a subject, and not merely an object, of evangelization.

This is exactly why I chose social work as my profession—to address societal conditions, institutional structures, and social injustice!

Despite this revelatory information about my Catholic inheritance, I was still not fully committed to following through with implementing this new ministry because I still needed to develop my research agenda to gain tenure. After I submitted the proposal to my pastor to establish a social justice ministry in our church, complete with a mission statement and objectives for the first year, I immediately moved it to the back burner, so that I could focus on my research.

Beginning the Journey

“. . . as people of faith we often talk not only of our Christian life being a journey, but we also realize that this journey requires us to integrate all of life's encounters into that path of development (Conway, 2005, p. 66).”

A couple of months later, I found out that I received a Research, Scholarship, and Creative Activity award from my university. This was exactly what I needed to focus on to get tenure! This award entitled me to a leave of absence for one quarter to develop my research agenda.

I had some ideas, yet none of them had anything to do with spirituality. I was very interested in nonprofit organizations, the level of and type of legislative advocacy in which they participate, and the implications for the clients of nonprofit organizations. So, I started my leave by interviewing a friend who is a director of a nonprofit organization about advocacy activities in his agency and gathering research literature on this area. God had other ideas, though.

It was around this time that Pope John Paul II became ill. My wife, who participated in a Mass with Pope John Paul II when he visited Los Angeles, wanted very badly for us to travel to Rome to be among the faithful who were holding vigil for him in St. Peter's Square. Unfortunately, we were too

busy—I was at the end of the Winter quarter, and my wife had prior work commitments that could not be changed—there was no way we could travel to Rome.

A few weeks later, on April 2, 2005, Pope John Paul II died, and my wife was very sad because she wanted to be there for his funeral. We began to entertain the idea again of traveling to Rome. It was then that we received the first sign that we knew our trip was meant to be.

When we looked at our calendars, we found that we both had a two-week window open during which I would be starting my 10-week leave of absence to develop my research agenda and my wife did not have any scheduled work commitments! We looked at each other in disbelief, “We’re going to Rome!”

I thought it would be difficult to book a trip to Rome within two weeks of our trip, but it turned out to be far easier (and not as expensive) as we had anticipated—this was the second sign. Later, we found out that we would be arriving in Rome on the first day of the Conclave of the Cardinals to elect the next Pope—the third sign. Knowing all of this, we knew that we were meant to be in Rome, and we were very excited!

Upon arriving in Rome, we checked into our hotel and quickly took the metro to St. Peter's Square, where people from all over the world were waiting for the election of the new Pope. We arrived at St. Peter's Square just in time to see puffs of black smoke, indicating that the Conclave had not yet elected a new Pope.

Every day that we waited there in St. Peter's Square was a profound spiritual experience for me. Everywhere, people were praying, singing, and anticipating together. I felt a sense of unity and communion with others that I had not felt in a long time. When the white smoke came forth and the bells of the Basilica began to ring out, we all moved forward to get as close as possible to the balcony, where the new Pope would be presented to the faithful.

When the new Pope's name was announced, “Benedictus” (Benedict, in Latin), people all around us started yelling, crying, and dancing in pure jubilation! I heard a group of young people chanting, “Benedito! Benedito! Benedito!” as if they were cheering for the star player on their favorite soccer team! Then, as Pope Benedict made his appearance on the balcony overlooking St. Peter's Square, he gave his first remarks to the world in Latin, and, then, he led us all

in prayer. At the end of the prayer, the Pope chanted in Latin, “. . . through Christ our Lord,” and in response, all of faithful gathered in St. Peter’s Square chanted “Amen” in unison and in perfect pitch. Immediately, I felt a spirit flow through me that breathed new life into me and opened my heart. I felt that I was now completely ready in my heart, mind, and soul to search for the answer to that persistent question in my professional life-what is the role of my faith as a social work professor?

I did not know how or where to find the answers-but here I was in Rome, spending ten days of my 10-week leave of absence, so I guess I needed to start there. Over the remaining days in Rome, I noticed that religion was a part of Rome’s public spaces. Public plazas where people came to eat, to shop, and to relax were centered around churches; churches in these plazas opened their doors to the public during the evenings for those who wanted to pray or meditate; and make-shift shrines dedicated to Jesus, Mary, the Mother of God, and the saints divulged themselves to us, as we walked along cobblestone streets. All of these experiences revealed to me that I needed to integrate my personal, private faith into my public career, as an Assistant Professor in Social Work at a public university.

Integrating My Faith into the Social Work Classroom

“Social work teachers represent important professional role models for students. We must represent in action what we are trying to teach . . . Our message and our behavior must be congruent (Gitterman, 2004, pp.109-10).”

So, with my renewed faith and my enthusiasm to integrate my faith into my social work life, I decided to reinvest my energy back into my own community. I took to heart the Vincentians’ call to work within the world of the poor, to work on the level of structures, to work to confront injustice, and to work with groups (small communities).

First, I moved forward to implement the social justice program at my parish--the Peace & Justice Ministry. Our first objective was to engage parishioners in charitable activities to focus on serving the poor and needy. Within eight months of our initial meeting of three parishioners, we established a core team of seven members. Our first charitable project, entitled “Operation Christmas Child”, collected from parishioners close to 500

shoeboxes, filled with toys, candy, and toiletries for distribution to needy children in impoverished countries around the world. The next year, we nearly doubled the amount of shoeboxes! During Christmas, our team coordinated the collection of food, toys, and clothing for needy families in our own community, which was distributed through a local food pantry. During the season of Lent (the six weeks leading up to Easter Sunday), we instituted special collections at every Mass to raise money for a local program that served homeless children.

Our second objective was to educate parishioners on Catholic Social Teaching, including the distinction between “charity” and “justice.” We sponsored a 3-evening workshop on Vincentian Spirituality, attended by an average of 20 parishioners for each session, and a workshop on Catholic Social Teaching, which outlined the Church’s teaching on social justice.

Second, I continued my pursuit of an elected position on the Artesia City Council, and, in March 2007, on my third attempt, I won a seat on the council. As an elected official, I can work on what the Vincentians identified as “structural” issues, specifically in government. For example, our city council established a pilot program for residential home improvement for low-income residents; renewed its contract with the Southeast Los Angeles County Workforce Investment Board Child Development Program, which serves low-income families; and filed a letter of protest with Public Utilities Commission regarding escalating water rates for low-income residents of Artesia. In 2011, I held a series of “town hall” meetings throughout my city, to inform and to engage residents in local government. Over these past eight years that I have been on the city council, I have gained knowledge in the administration of city government, such as financing, budgeting, human resources, and public safety; in constituent services, such as public utilities (water, electricity, natural gas), trash disposal, infrastructure, and commercial development; as well as in regional collaboration, networking, and problem-solving. As I gain knowledge about the “structure” of government and how it can better serve its constituents, I can work to change those structures.

Third, I was elected to serve as a Regional Representative to the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Board of Directors. As a member of the board, I helped define, coordinate, and evaluate the program of the association; serve on national committees and task forces; supervise the finances of the association, including the rendering of an annual accounting to members concerning sources and

amount of income and nature and amount of expenditures; interview and select the Chief Executive Officer of the association; and review the governance structure of the association. During my tenure on the Board of Directors, we hired a new CEO, who developed a plan to renovate NASW's legislative advocacy program. Results from a membership survey indicated that the membership wanted NASW to advocate for higher salaries for social workers and loan forgiveness for social work graduates. With approval of the Board, this became the priority for NASW's legislative advocacy program-to change the structure of government to support social workers and the social work profession.

Looking back on this period of my professional development as a social worker, I recognized that I needed to put into practice what I preached about in my classes. For years, I would exhort my students to become leaders in their communities and in our profession; yet, in my life as a social worker and as an academic, I had very limited leadership experience. By implementing a social justice ministry at my church and by serving as a city council member and as a representative on the Board of Directors of NASW, I have been able to be a role model in leadership for my students.

More importantly, in embracing my spirituality and heeding the call to serve others through my chosen profession of social work, I have grown to be more authentic. I learned that I am not able to separate my spiritual, sacred self from my public, professional self because they are one in the same. My call is to use my sacred self as a social worker to serve others in a secular world. As a social worker, I continue to work in my community as an elected official and in NASW to influence structural changes to benefit social workers and social work clients, especially the poor and the powerless. As a social work professor, I invest my time and energy into developing relationships with my students, where I can use my self to help students to grow and to learn about their own unique calling to the social work profession.

I have discovered relational teaching methods that emphasize participation in growth-fostering relationships as a critical element of teaching the social work student through mutual engagement, mutual empathy, and mutual empowerment (Edwards & Edwards, 2002). I am finding that these methods allow me to use my authentic, sacred self in relationship with my students.

Mutual engagement, for example, is an ongoing process, which develops a meaningful connection between teacher and student (Edwards & Edwards, 2002). As a professor at a public university, I treat my students as consumers who deserve and who should expect a high level of service. For example, before the first day of class, I send all of my students an email, in which I welcome them to the class, tell them that I look forward to working with them, and I invite them to come to my office so that we can meet each other before the first class begins. I attach the course syllabus to this email, so that students can prepare themselves for what to expect from my class. In this way, I communicate to my students that they are valued "personally and professionally" (Edwards & Edwards, 2002, p. 39) and that I am responsive and available to them.

On the first day of class, I let students know that I will respond within 24-hours to emails sent to me Monday through Thursday and on Mondays to emails sent to me on Fridays. If I do not respond accordingly, I let them know that it is appropriate for them to send me a reminder email. I also let them know that I am available to them when I am on campus: during my office hours, before or after class, or at any other time they may see me. On the last day of class, I let students know that I remain available to them and that I want to hear about their future accomplishments.

I was excited to receive the following email from one of my undergraduate students in my community organizing class who I came to know well:

Professor Manalo, hope your summer is treating you well! I wanted to share some good news...I was accepted into an MSW Program (name of university withheld), but I am freaking out over the price tag. I am completely torn on what to do and I was hoping you can share some encouragement before I make the next step. Looking forward to hearing back from you. Thank you!

I was so excited to receive this email, knowing that I had made a connection with this student. I hope that, in the future, that I will connect with more students in this way and that I will receive more emails, phone calls, office visits, and LinkedIn messages from these students.

According to Edwards & Edwards (2002), mutual empathy involves leveling the playing field-given the inherent power differential-between students and teachers by demonstrating respect for students. I do this by creating an atmosphere where students and I

share the responsibility of learning through dialogue and discussion. I provide students with ample opportunities to engage and participate: in-class, with me and their colleagues in small groups with prompts; outside of class with their colleagues or families; through online blogs developed for the course; through weekly student journals; during my office hours individually with me or with a small group of classmates; or at other times throughout the course through email.

For example, I let my students know that I expect them to be prepared to participate in discussions by reading and reviewing assigned chapters, articles, videos, etc. before class. I begin each class discussion, using a phrase coined by one of my favorite high school teachers: “Questions? Comments? Burning issues? Nagging doubts?” This is when I expect students to ask questions, make comments, or share reflections on the assigned readings for the class or on any other issues related to class, such as lingering questions or comments from the previous class or current events (police shootings, elections, field placement experiences). I do my best to listen attentively, to respond respectfully, and to allow students to offer alternative views or to disagree with me.

In one of my classes on Institutional Racism, I had an older, male student in the class who was quick to participate in class and to share his thoughts because he wanted the younger students to benefit from his experience. He meant well, but when he would get passionate about sharing his experience, he would interrupt any student that was talking, raise his voice, and scold students as if he were their father. I noticed that after he would speak, no one else in the class wanted to speak. I felt as uncomfortable as the students did. I knew that I had to address him directly, but I was, frankly, just as intimidated as everyone else in the classroom.

The next time that this student gave one of his passionate outbursts, and I could feel everyone in the classroom shutting down, I spoke directly to him, “When you share your thoughts in class, and you raise your voice, I feel like I am a child being scolded by my parents, and I shut down. I am sure that this is not your intent because you have a lot of wisdom to share with the class. I just wanted to let you know how I feel.”

“That’s not going to change anything for me,” he retorted respectfully, “because I believe it is important to share my beliefs with others.”

I could not deny him the opportunity to share his thoughts with others in the class. While I felt much better after I responded to him, I could not get a clear sense from the other students as to how they were affected by this exchange. Perhaps, deep down inside, I did not want to know-this was the first time I had responded to a student in class in such a personal way. However, at the end of the course, one of my students sent me a note pointing to that particular exchange as the pivotal point in her learning during the class. She said that when I opened myself up to the student and to the class, she realized the importance of relationships and the importance of the interactions that we have with one another, as a means to break down the barriers of prejudice and discrimination among diverse people.

Mutual empowerment is a key concept that involves expanding students’ understanding of themselves as persons and as social workers and how they relate to others (Edwards & Edwards, 2002). We social work educators must be able to empower our students’ personal growth within the learning environment, if we want our students to empower their clients. I have chosen to share with my students my stories of professional learning, because students need to understand that I cannot tell them everything that they need to know to be a competent professional-they need to know that learning is a process that entails uncertainty.

For example, I enjoy telling my students stories about how incompetent I was in fundraising when I began seeking a seat on my local city council. I was so uncomfortable asking people for money and I was so insecure about running for office, that it was very difficult for me to raise money for my first city council campaign. I remember going to a candidate interview with the local chapter’s NASW PACE (National Association of Social Workers Political Action for Candidate Election), which provides endorsements and funds for social workers running for local office. I thought to myself, “I am a shoe-in for an endorsement and a \$1000 contribution to my campaign! I know all the members of this committee because I used to serve on the committee!”

Unfortunately, my responses to the committee’s interview questions revealed my insecurity.

“How is the campaign going?” one of the committee members asked.

“Well, it’s pretty tough, but I’m doing the best I can,” I admitted with a sigh in my voice.

“How is the fundraising going?” they asked.

“Well, it’s not going as well as I had hoped,” I sheepishly replied. “I’m having a difficult time raising money.” “Besides,” I added with a nervous chuckle, “I can’t even balance my own checkbook.” I cringe every time I think about it.

When I opened the disposition letter from the PACE committee, I found a check for \$200 and a letter wishing me good luck. “Two-hundred dollars! What a slap in the face!” I grumbled to myself. But, after I lost the election and I reflected upon my performance, I realized that I was so uncomfortable and insecure about my campaign and raising money, I could never raise the amount of money that I needed to run a successful campaign. I had to learn how to raise money. I knew that I needed to be confident about myself and my campaign, so that a potential contributor would feel good about making a contribution to help me. In my first campaign, I struggled to raise \$5000. In my second campaign, I raised over \$10,000; in my third, which I finally won, I raised over \$15,000.

Another way that I have employed mutual engagement in the classroom is to disclose my personal and professional struggles. In April 2014, tragedy struck my family. While my mother-in-law and my three children were waiting outside of a local restaurant, an elderly driver, pulling into a disabled parking space that faced the waiting area outside of the restaurant, mistakenly accelerated forward into the waiting area, instantly killing my mother-in-law, Marisa, and injuring two of my three children. As I write this, it is fifteen months after the accident. Thankfully, my children have recovered from their injuries, but we all continue to struggle with the trauma and to cope with our loss.

A couple of months before the accident, my wife and I took Marisa to a birthday party for our friend Jane (not her real name). Later on in the evening, I saw Marisa talking to someone whom I did not know, so I went over to meet him. His name was Donald (not his real name), and he lived in the same condominium complex as Jane.

After the accident, I saw Donald at a political event, and he desperately wanted to talk to me.

“Victor, I am so sorry to hear about Marisa. I know this is not a good time to talk about this, but I have to talk to you,” Donald said. He gave me his business card. “My business is parking safety. We

are working to prevent automobile accidents in parking lots like the one that killed Marisa and injured your children.” As I stood there totally dumbfounded, Donald declared, “Marisa is the reason why we met.”

Donald introduced me to his colleague, Richard (not his real name), who studies “storefront crashes” in the United States. He tracks these types of accidents from news reports on the internet, because the government does not track them. According to Richard, these types of storefront crashes occur at least sixty times everyday in the United States. As a result of these types of accidents, over 3600 people are injured and over 475 people are killed every year. The accident that killed my mother-in-law, injured my children and traumatized my family was not a “freak” accident. Donald and Richard felt that, as a member of the Artesia City Council, I could do something about it.

They were right. I have reviewed many plans for commercial developments in our city that include the layout of the parking spaces. Before the accident, I had never thought about making the parking lot safer to protect pedestrians or storefronts, especially when the parking spaces (and in this case disabled parking spaces) face directly into the storefront.

I directed our city staff to draft an ordinance for my city that would protect pedestrians and storefronts in commercial developments. This ordinance would require that protective barriers be installed for any parking spaces that directly face a storefront where people are walking, shopping, or sitting. This would be a requirement for all new commercial development, and it would require all commercial developments to bring their parking lots up to this standard within five years. One year after the accident, in April 2015, our city council unanimously passed an ordinance-the first of its kind in the United States-designed to protect people by constructing safer parking lots.

As difficult and devastating that this experience has been for me and my family, I have been compelled to share it with my students because it reinforces for me why I have been called to be a social worker. My personal tragedy has highlighted a public problem that needs to be addressed, just as we social workers encounter the personal challenges of our clients at the micro level, which are symptoms of broader social problems that need macro-level solutions. I recognize that this tragedy brought to light my unique position as an elected city councilmember who is a social worker and my responsibility to ensure the safety of hundreds of people who work, shop, and dine in our city every day. Because of my association with other local

elected officials, similar ordinances are being considered in other cities and the California State legislature is considering similar legislation as well. As a social work educator, I use my authentic, sacred self and share my experiences with my students to ensure that all of them understand their unique call to be social workers.

Conclusions

During this leg of my faith journey, I needed to clarify my values and to reconcile my personal, spiritual values with the values of my chosen profession of social work. When I discovered that my Catholic faith and my social work profession had similar and corresponding value systems (reinforced by various people and experiences along the way), I was able to fully commit myself to integrating my sacred self into my professional life as a social worker and a social work educator.

I feel that this has enhanced my career by improving my teaching ability and helping me to define my future research agenda. I have taken my experience as a local elected official to work on expanding the policy practice model to include activities and interventions at the local level, which I will use to test whether students will become more likely to engage in policy practice in their own communities after they graduate and beyond.

I am more open to sharing relevant personal and professional stories in the classroom with social work students to establish and develop professional learning relationships. Stories bring lived experience and voice to the classroom that otherwise is not heard (Lay, 2005). Stories of tragedy and triumph can foster mutual engagement by creating a safe, trusting environment where the professor is a “real” person, not an authority figure; encourage mutual empathy by making emotional connections; and facilitate mutual empowerment by establishing a classroom environment that focuses on growth and knowledge (Edwards & Richards, 2002). I am able to bring my authentic self directly into the classroom to make myself “real” to my students, in order to facilitate the crucial professional relationship

between my students and me. I pray that I will continue to integrate all of my life’s encounters into my personal and professional development as a social worker in my classroom and my community.

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