# REFLECTIONS

## NARRATIVES of PROFESSIONAL HELPING



Interview with Dennis Saleebey (1936-2014)

General Submissions

Teaching and Learning Reflections

Research Reflections

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## NARRATIVES of PROFESSIONAL HELPING

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**Current Issue Cover Art: Robin Richesson**

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# Letter from the Editors

Michael A. Dover, Editor (2012-2017)

**Abstract**: The editor announces discontinuation of subscriptions and plans to publish the journal as an open access journal beginning with Volume 21, Number 1 in January 2016. An appeal is made for support of the journal to help make this possible. New editors are welcomed to the journal's editorial team. A call is made for contributions to the Many Way of Narrative series in the journal.

## Be Sure to See the Last Issue!

Before you read this issue, I must ask: did you see the last issue? Volume 20, Number 3, the Special Issue on Relative Caregiving, edited by Priscilla A. Gibson and Sandra Edmonds Crewe, was a short but powerful issue. It was only listed as the Current issue on our website for about two weeks, prior to the publication of this issue. Of course, it can still be found in Archives.

I would encourage you to read it. The current issue also includes a narrative about caregiving, in a sense. After all, relative caregiving and professional caregiving have in common relationships with people who are facing death more imminently than earlier in their lives. In "Writing to Cope: Meaning Making for Professionals Caring for the Cancer Patient," Nicole Saint-Louis discusses the value of narratives for engaging in social work practice with people with cancer. She discusses the role of narratives in meaning making, the nature of narrative theory, its link with narrative therapy, and the burgeoning field of narrative medicine. She doesn't just tell about this, she shows examples of how narratives help illuminate the nature of the suffering and loss experienced by the professional helpers who are helping individuals and families cope with dying and death.

## Developments at Reflections

Before discussing some of the other narratives in this issue, this letter needs to inform readers of some important developments at the journal. This issue completes Volume 20, which was originally scheduled to be published in 2014.

Over the first three months of 2016, the journal will publish four issues in Volume 21, originally scheduled for publication in 2015. We've been following standard journal practice of back-dating issues until we catch up from delays associated with the transition to Cleveland State University and to the online status of the journal. The website specifies when each issue is actually published, as does the inside cover page. Soon, however, *Reflections* will be fully up to date. Volume 21 (2015) will be completed early in 2016, including Special Issues on Honoring Our Indigenous Elders; Dismantling Social and Racial Injustice; Families of Origin and one issue with general submissions and special section articles.

This will put the journal back on track to publish four issues of Volume 22 in 2016 on schedule. These will include the Special Issue on Librarians as Helping Professionals, the Special Issue on Social Work with Children and Youth, and two general issues including one with the long awaited Special Section on Southern African Reflections on Social Justice. We are also expecting two proposals for themed Special Section and will be issuing Open Calls for Narratives in those areas in the coming months.

*Reflections: Narratives of Professional Helping* is an important journal in social work and the helping professions. One need only read the articles in this issue and in the Relative Caregiving Issue to see how compelling, moving, and intellectually valuable our narratives are. They are useful in teaching, in informing practice, and in thinking through difficult conceptual issues in light of the realities of practice.

In this Letter, I am asking *Reflections* readers, schools of social work and social agencies for the financial support necessary to ensure the survival and development of this beloved journal. A Friends of Reflections account has been established at the Cleveland State University Foundation to provide for the publication of this important journal.

Subscriptions have been discontinued and the journal very much needs support from Friends of Reflections. We will soon formally announce our plans to publish this journal as an open access journal. Please consider becoming a Friend of Reflections, through the link on our website.

### Art Comes First

One article in this issue, by Heather Pizzanello, discusses the role of the humanities in social work education. One of the unique qualities of this journal is our cover illustrations. For each issue, we publish not only the articles but a full issue PDF, including the cover page, inside cover page, and table of contents. Once again in this issue, as had been the case for a number of years prior to the journal coming to Cleveland State University, Robin Richesson, our Art Director, has captured the essence of what needed to be conveyed. In this case, she drew a wonderful portrait of the late Dennis Saleebey. Further below I discuss the interview with Dennis done by Jon Christopher Hall.

Here at Cleveland State University, we are very grateful for the support provided by California State University Long Beach School of Social Work for the transition of publishing and copyright privileges to our university. The last editor there, Eileen Mayers Pasztor, was very helpful as we began our publication with Volume 18, Number Two. The former and current directors, Christian Molidor and Nancy-Meyer Adams, were both instrumental in this transition. Robin has continued to graciously provide important cover illustrations to this journal. We look forward to her continued contributions to one thing that makes this journal unique: it's cover illustrations. To quickly see the cover art in recent issues, visit the new link on our web page to Cover Art, Tables of Contents, and Introductions. This links to a PDF file with that material for all issues since Volume 18, Number One. It permits the reader to scroll through and see not only the wonderful art, but also the tables of contents and descriptions of articles. This is a great way to choose narratives for reading. The articles themselves are then available on the links from Current and Archives.

### Growing Editorial Team

Reflections continues to build a solid editorial team. The current editorial team can always be found under About, Editorial Team, on our website. However, I wanted to utilize this Letter to provide that list, as it shows, I think, the potential for further growth and leadership of this journal.

First, there is Cathleen A. Lewandowski, Ph.D., Director and Professor (Cleveland State University School of Social Work, Publisher). Cathleen came to our School in Summer 2014, after having already completed the editorship of one of the Special Issue on Therapeutic Relationships with Service Members, Veterans and their Families, published in Fall 2014. She has been very supportive of the journal and will be leading our efforts to publish the journal as an open access journal with growing support from our readers and institutional friends and partners.

I have already mentioned Robin Richesson, M.F.A., Art Director (Professor of Art, California State University Long Beach). To be frank, *Reflections* would not be *Reflections* without the art.

Denice Goodrich-Liley, Ph.D., Associate Editor, Field Education (Boise State University School of Social Work) has served since publication of the Special Issue on Field Education (Volume 18, Number Two), as we continue to build a network to help us edit this important permanent section of the journal.

Johanna Slivinske, M.S.W., Associate Editor, Review Quality (Youngstown State University Department of Social Work), previously served first as Assistant and then Associate Editor for Issue Quality. In that capacity, she proofread each issue, copy edited and provided feedback on the Letters from the Editors, and in general helped us enhance our quality. Johanna is a published *Reflections* author and reviewer, an active clinical social worker, a part-time social work educator, and author or co-author of two books. Johanna will be working with me as we strive to enhance the quality of current double-blind, two peer review process.

Arlene Reilly-Sandoval, D.S.W., Associate Editor, Issue Quality (Southeast Missouri State University), also serves as co-editor with Carol Langer of the Teaching and Learning Section. Arlene has been an active reviewer and published her first narrative in Volume 17, Number 2, prior to her article in the Relative Caregiving issue, Volume 20, Number 3. She offered to not only proof read her own article but also to copy edit and proofread this entire issue. She has now agreed to serve as Associate Editor for Issue Quality, in the capacity vacated by Johanna. I am very grateful for her undertaking this role.

In addition, the journal has three Associate Editors without portfolio, who have already made important contributions to the journal. Jennifer Bellamy, Ph.D., Associate Editor (University of Denver School of Social Work), previously edited the Special Issue on Mentoring in the Helping Professions (Volume 18, Number 3).

Priscilla Gibson, Ph.D., Associate Editor (Professor at the University of Minnesota School of Social Work), has co-edited the Special Issue on Relative Caregiving (with Sandra Edmonds Crewe, Dean of the Howard University School of Social Work). Along with Sadye Logan, Professor Emeritus at the University of South Carolina College of Social Work, she also co-edits the soon-to-appear Special Issue on Dismantling Social and Racial Injustice.

Laura Béres, Ph.D., Associate Editor (Kings University College, University of Western Ontario) has been an active reviewer and is a well known scholar and practitioner in the field of narrative therapy. Narratives in this journal aren't necessarily informed by such an approach to professional helping or by its underlying epistemological and theoretical perspective. But the importance of narrativity generically is an important underlying foundation for this journal.

We now are very lucky to have a full complement of editors for our permanent special sections. These are not themed special sections of the kind that will replace special issues in the future. For the Call for Special Themed Sections, please see on our website. Our permanent special sections publish important narratives in areas the journal wants to emphasize, including Research Reflections, Teaching and Learning Reflections, Field Education, and Historical Reflections. See our Call for Narratives for more information.

Julie Cooper Altman, Ph.D., Research Reflections Section Editor (California State University, Monterrey Bay) had published a narrative, How I Lost (And Gained) My Faith in the Potential of Social Work Practice Through Research, in Volume 11, Number Four, as well as one other narrative.

Carol A. Langer, Ph.D. (Colorado State University Pueblo) and Arlene F. Reilly-Sandoval, D.S.W. (Southeast Missouri State University), Teaching and Learning Section Co-Editors, have undertaken leadership of one of our most active sections, as can be seen by the contents of this issue.

J. Christopher Hall, Ph.D., School of Social Work, U. of North Carolina at Wilmington, Historical Reflections Editor, has agreed to edit the Historical Reflections section. Well known for his linking of social constructionism to social work, Chris took the initiative to suggest the publication of his interview with Dennis Saleebey in this issue. Out of work around that article it became apparent that he can help us take historical reflections seriously in this journal. The fact he adds a social constructivist orientation to the journal's editorial term is what in New Orleans we called *langiappe*, a little bit extra.

Kailie M. Johnson, B.S.W. Candidate, Editorial Associate, joined us in September 2014 and has been invaluable. Innumerable authors have worked with her and she is actively collaborating with the special editors for the Family of Origin special issue and the Children and Youth special issue. Kai has mastered the Open Journal Systems software that publishes the journal. Over the holidays, she is doing copy editing and proof reading.

Maureen O'Connor, M.A., M.S.W. Candidate, is our 2015-2016 Graduate Assistant. Readers will note that she co-authored the last two Letters from the Editors. Maureen has been staffing the special issues on Dismantling Social and Racial Injustice, Honoring Our Indigenous Elders, and Relative Caregiving.

## The Present Issue

This issue publishes a number of valuable narratives. First I would like to mention the article keyed to our cover illustration. This journal has a long tradition of publishing interviews with key figures, and this interview continues that tradition. The editors are open to other suggestions for interviews. To see who has been interviewed in the past, just visit our website at www.rnoph.org and use the search engine by typing in interviews under all categories. Press Search and see that those interviewed have included Frances Fox Piven, Mimi Abramovitz, Ann Hartman, Katherine Kendall, Chauncey Alexander, Richard Cloward, Alex Gitterman and David Gil.

Dennis Saleebey's work is well-known and central to social work and other helping professions. In the interview in this issue, Dennis asked a provocative question: "To what extent do the constructions that we have – for example, like multiculturalism – to what extent does that reflect a set of values that are important to the profession?" Later, he pointed out the many different ways people socially construct the nature of the world around them: "They're not totally different, there are similarities and themes that run across what different people would say, but there are differences." Finally, Dennis talked about his approach to postmodernism, and how he would often rail against empirical, empiricist, quantitative research: "Used to drive me nuts." He felt that some research based upon such approaches "bastardized the complexity of human behavior to me."

## A Digression of Sorts

Here is where ye olde editor admits that during the last 25 years that positivism and postmodernism have contended with each other in social work education, he has been an afficionado of critical realism, an epistemological third way that has recently gained more attention from social work scholars (Longhofer & Floersch, 2012). I have applied this approach as I have worked with theories of human need, which tend to stress between group human similarities, and theories of oppression, which recognize between-group domination and difference. I have linked these theories while theorizing the nature of social injustice, which I see as produced by the roles of oppression, dehumanization, and exploitation in creating systematically unequal opportunities for people and communities to address our common human needs in our culturally preferred manners. Along the way I have probably "railed" a bit myself about both positivism and postmodernism, since theory of human need has been criticized for focusing on human deficits rather than on human strengths. But I've been lucky to have corresponded with those who encouraged my normative obsession with human needs. One of those persons was Dennis Saleebey.

After Barbara Hunter Randall Joseph and I wrote the entry on Human Needs: Overview in the *Encyclopedia of Social Work* (Dover and Joseph, 2008), I sent Dennis a copy, with great trepidation. I drew his attention to our contention (2008):

> The strengths-based model of practice stressed that social workers focus on the assets of clients. This model reflected concern that needs talk can reinforce stigmatizing clients as needy, which could in turn lead to the disempowerment of clients (Saleebey, 2006). Arguably, however, the strengths perspective's focus on human capabilities is fully consistent with the use of the capabilities concept in human needs theory...

Shortly thereafter, I received this communication from Dennis by email in early 2008:

> Hi, Mike, I read your piece with interest and I have no problem with the way you employ the idea of needs especially within the larger framework of social justice, and collective and individual rights. The primary difficulty that Charlie Rapp and I see is that needs are often defined narrowly and directly associated with deficits as opposed to being understood as 'common human needs' to be met if a society is to be just and equitable in its distribution of those social resources necessary for the development of personal and familial resources.

What Dennis said then is consistent with what he said in the interview about a "set of values" important to social work. After all, if we are serious about an ethical commitment to addressing human needs, do we not need to clarify the nature of our valuation of human need? Does this not require recognizing that human needs are not weaknesses but rather, along with our dreams and aspirations, part of what make us uniquely human? Are not needs at one and the same time (a) biological, (b) developmental, (c) socially constructed, (d) socially structured, and (e) socially theorized?

These are not questions we should consider settled. Questions about needs and struggles over needs should, however, complement efforts to develop an unsettled social work situated in social justice (Rossiter, 2011). If we were to conceptualize a Venn diagram of how the helping professions have theory and knowledge about (a) to (e) above, to what degree would there be an overlap?

In more recent discussion of needs and strengths, I have contended (Dover, 2016): "For social work, perhaps the most common source of conceptual confusion concerns the relationship of needs and strengths." I cite research that draws on both the strength perspective and needs theory, including self-determination theory (Deci &Ryan, 1987) and a theory of human need (Gough, 2015). I hope the dear reader will forgive this brief detour into personal narrative about an important event in my life – correspondence with Dennis Saleebey – and my reflections upon it. In my defense, letters from previous editors have often addressed issues considered important to the helping professions and to society at large, and it is hoped that future editors will also do so after my term ends in May 2017.

Another reason I also wanted to discuss this question of epistemology was to say that in my view narrative is not the captive of any one particular ontology, epistemology or method. Contributions to this journal, including those of the authors, reviewers and editors, can come from those who are positivists, realists, phenomenologists, social constructionists or any number of other ists. They can come as well from those who have adopted any number of isms.

When I learned how to write process recordings back in the day, they were as verbatim as possible in their

presentation of what was said and done. A practice decision is something said or not said or done or not done in work with a client system. Such a decision can take place in a split second. Split seconds and key moments are not easy to portray in a vignette and have to be put in the context of the relationship and the setting and the events that lead to those moments. After all, in addition to what is said or not said, done or not done, there are also things that are felt (or not felt) and perceived or not perceived, both at the time and when thought about retrospectively. A good process recording would provide an honest account of all that, and more.

I'm not sure how variation among different ontologies or and epistemologies figures into that process. For instance, recently I participated in the process of jury selection. Where I sat in the jury box, I had a bird's eye view of the court reporter, as she took down as best she could everything that was said by everyone. Arguably, a good narrative might include such an approach to doing one's best to portray the actual nature of the verbal interaction. But I'm not sure what best practices are in court reporting. Is laughter noted? Tears? Pauses? How are interruptions handled? Arguably, given our limited capacity for processing what goes on around us, there may be trade offs between getting all of the words down and perceiving what else is happening in the room: the reactions of the gallery, the defendant, and the inner life of the observer.

For an approach to narrative that departs significantly from anything resembling a stenographic approach, please see the approach taken by Sara Morton (2014) in her *Reflections* narrative, "Cold: A Meditation on Loss." In yet another approach to narrative, we soon hope to publish at least one article that includes narrative poetry. Narratives in this journal use a mix of approaches from a variety of voices, including accounts provided by helping professional and the person(s) helped.

As this journal grows and develops, there will be many kinds of narratives published. But it helps for authors and reviewers and editors to have available to us essays and examples of the narrative form. I would like to repeat an earlier call for submissions of essays to our Many Ways of Narrative series. The idea for this series came from a reading of Benjamin Shepard's "Reflections on *Reflections*: Narrative turn in social work" (2000). The first contribution was Josh Kanary's "Show and tell: Narrative and exposition in *Reflections*" (2002).

If you would like to write about the process of writing narratives for this journal, please consider writing a contribution to the Many Ways of Narrative series in this journal. A narrative about the writing of a narrative of practice would also be valuable. And a narrative about the research on narrative therapy would also be welcome, especially for the Research Reflections section edited by Julie Altman.

**Other Narratives in this Issue**

In the next article, "What I've Learned About Activism, Privilege, and Negotiating Boundaries as an Early Career Academic," Shane Brady displays the personal and professional courage that exemplify narratives published in this journal. He gives an account of campus activism in which he personally participated. Shane says, "I am and always will consider myself a community organizer and activist who became a social worker." One of the works he cites, David Wagner's *Quest for a Radical Profession*, created a typology of radical social workers, including those highly critical of social work and those highly identified with social workers, as well as those who were more organizationally embedded in terms of how they saw their march through the institutions. This is a typology relevant to the issues raised by Shane.

Clearly, as was once suggested by Dr. Marti Bombyk, there are activists who come into social work, and there are social workers who come into activism. Shane is saying he was an activist before he came into social work, and he still sees that as a primary commitment. Shane talked of his efforts to involve social work students in anti-racist and other activism. These would be social workers coming into activism. Very few of them were likely activists before becoming social workers. Narratives of coming into social work and coming into activism are important for this journal, which prioritizes narratives of practice, narratives of activism by helping professionals, narratives of research, narratives of teaching and learning, narratives of field education, and historical narratives, of which Shane's is a more contemporary example.

Other narratives in this issue also touch upon the question of involving social work students. Two of them concern the role of faculty and students overseas. Samantha Wyman and Regina T. Praetorius discuss their efforts to bring social work students to India in order to work with local women and church leaders around intimate partner violence. As important as the work in India was, however, the narrative stressed the importance of the social justice values of social work

in reinforcing efforts to improve the human experience, including ongoing work here in the US.

In "When Things Fall Apart in Guatemala: Contemplative Service Advising," Kielty Turner portrays service learning in Guatemala, and the special role of contemplative practices such as journaling. Her narrative is a reflection on the application of Buddhist concepts while serving as an advisor on a service learning trip to Guatemala. The writer explores mindfulness, acceptance, and compassion while journaling on the trip. Insight is provided regarding how to deepen the connection of the advisor's and the students' experiences. The author praises the role of journaling in general. In this case, it enables her subsequent narrative. In other cases, she feels, journals can help students explore feelings about field experiences and classroom material. As this narrative shows, journals and process recordings are perhaps the best basis for solid narratives for this journal.

In his article on his journey as a social work professor, Victor Manalo discussed the evolution of his ability to commit himself to the full integration of his spiritual self into his professional life in his social work practice and teaching. This and a number of other articles are published in our new Teaching and Learning Reflections section, edited by Carol Langer and Arlene Reilly-Sandoval. These are narratives of what Alex Gitterman told his students might be called "teaching practice," by which he meant the practice of teaching.

In their narrative, "Reflections on an Experiential Poverty Simulation Filtered through the Mind's Eye of Three Faculty Members," Stephen Monroe Tomczak, Heather C. Pizzanello, and Dana A. Schneider display another characteristic of good *Reflections* narratives: they question their own teaching practice. After describing how they developed and implemented a poverty simulation program, they asked whether along the way they may have "failed to do what we teach all our social work students" to do, namely starting where the client is. They wondered if they had started where the students were! They also came to realize how much the experience had an impact on their own views of poverty and their own approaches to social work education.

In "Reflections on the Process of Evolving from a Student of Literature to a Social Work Instructor of Humanism," Heather Catherine Pizzanello makes an important connection between social work and the

humanities. Her narrative **shows** how she infuses literature and other material from the humanities onto the teaching of clinical social work. The narrative **tells** the story of how she came to use this approach. And the narrative **reflects** upon the process. Showing, telling, and reflecting are the three core elements of the narratives in this journal. Heather's narrative and her role as co-author of a second narrative in this issue were both undertaken when her title was ABD (the dreaded status of being all-but-dissertation). Dr. Pizzanello's work is a great example of how doctoral students can and should consider writing narratives for this journal.

In fact, Julie Altman, editor of our Research Reflections section, has written the members of GADE (Group for the Advancement of Doctoral Education in Social Work) with just such a suggestion. There is one narrative from that section in this issue: "New Paradigm in Social Work Research: It's Here, It's Queer, Get Used to It!"

In that article, Dirk de Jong relates the nature of his qualitative research on how school social workers engage (or don't quite engage) gender-variant students. He discusses the value of using Queer theory in such research. Queer theory was actually used. In a sense, de Jong was theorizing Queer theory, not just using Queer theory. He was "queering" the discourse about his subject. For de Jong, Queer theory was a "critical lens through which to view issues of identity." He was theorizing identity using queer theory. This kind of approach is consistent with emerging trends in social theory (Swedberg, 2014), which emphasize the process of theorizing. This article is a good example of how narratives in this journal can help contribute to theorizing and to theory, although it is important to note that narratives in this journal do not need to do so.

In fact, some of the best narratives don't have a single reference. That's *Reflections* for you. I hope you enjoy this issue!

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# How Social Constructionism Could Inform the Education of Social Work Practitioners: An Interview with Dennis Saleebey

Jon Christopher Hall

**Abstract**: This narrative came about through attending the Global Partnership of Transformative Social Work Conference with Dennis Saleebey in 2006. We happened to be in the same discussion group and I was so inspired by his thoughts that I decided to study how social constructionism could be used to educate social work practitioners. As part of the study he graciously agreed to a one hour interview.

It has been over a year since the field of social work lost Dennis Saleebey. Dennis' work is well known, and along with Bertha Reynolds who came years before him, he was one of the foremost proponents and scholars of strengths-based practice in social work. I had the pleasure of meeting Dennis several times throughout his career and have been in conversation with him enough to appreciate his brilliant mind and his wonderful sense of humor. Dennis radiated positivity. He brought a smile to all who passed his way and he became incredibly influential in my career.

Dennis represented the best of social work to me. He represented strength, hope, practicality, a real sensibility, and an ever present positive possibility for change. In a place of academic wandering, I found his writing to be a light through the fog and it was in a recent state of wandering that I came across an interview I conducted with him several years ago on social constructionism, practice, and teaching.

In 2006, I was working on a qualitative research project exploring how social constructionism could inform the education of social work practitioners. As part of this project I reached out to Dennis to see if he would grant me an hour interview on the subject. I had known Dennis from our mutual connection with the Global Partnership of Transformative Social Work and its annual conference held in Vermont. We had spent time together in discussion groups and because of this connection I believe he felt comfortable enough with me to say yes to an hour-long interview. I was absolutely elated at the prospect and spent hours preparing for the conversation.

The project was to explore the application of social constructionist theory in education, so I wanted to use an interview approach that was congruent with the topic. To that end, I decided to utilize reflexive, dyadic interviewing (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2010), a social constructionist-informed interviewing method in which one grand tour question was asked and the conversation flowed organically from it. The grand tour question was specific to how social constructionist theory could be used to teach social work practitioners and, if schools of social work were to adopt the approach, how the field could change. While the open nature of the question was designed to create space for the natural construction of conversation, being a very passionate postmodern social work scholar who was thrilled to be able to speak with one of my professional idols, I was a bit nervous with no other question to fall back on. I was interviewing Dennis with no net, but it turned out to be both informative and wonderfully fun. The following is the transcript from our conversation:

**The *Very* Large Question**

**Chris**: Thank you very much for agreeing to do the interview. I really appreciate it. To start off I have a large, overall question, and it's an unstructured interview, so where it goes from there is up to us. At any time, if you're uncomfortable, we can stop the interview, or if a question comes up that you're uncomfortable with answering, feel free to do that. Does all that sound good?

**Dennis:** Sure.

**Chris:** My first large-scale question is: What value, if any, do you see in social constructionist ideas informing the education of social work practitioners?

**Dennis:** (Short pause) That *is* a large question.

**Chris:** It's a *very* large question.

**Dennis:** Well, I am not exactly sure where to start, but I think what I would say is that social constructionism asks us to regard the fact that there may not be, that there probably is not a single truth, but there are many truths, and truths are interpretive frameworks or assumptions that people use to try and figure the world out. The world of their interests and their activity. And I think for social work, that's what we try to do. We

see people from all kinds of social circumstances, cultures, ethnic groups, and part of our job is to do what we can to get into their world and how they can construct and how they construe their daily lives, their futures, their pasts, their relationships, their troubles. So I think social constructionism gives us a set of appreciations and some tools to actually do that more effectively than we might otherwise do.

**Chris:** Right, so a set of appreciations, and tools, and it sounds like, there is a respect of perspectives?

**Dennis:** Yes, I mean, a real social constructionist view suggests that I don't have any privilege because of my own particular or framework or interpretation. But what I *am* concerned about is how my interpretation, my constructions of the world, reflect a set of values which are important to me. And I think that would be the rule for social work, you know. To what extent do the constructions that we have – for example, like multiculturalism – to what extent does that reflect a set of values that are important to the profession?

### Teaching Social Constructionism

**Chris:** How, in your mind, do you think that this idea of social constructionism, and a reflection of values, and to instill in a student the importance of reflecting on their own values and respecting opinions; how do you think that could be taught in a classroom?

**Dennis:** Well, I think there are a lot of ways to do it. Maybe some are better than others. I don't know what "better" means, but maybe some make it more *comfortable* for students to do it and maybe more comfortable for teachers to do. But, I think one of the core things that you do is to ask people to reflect on how they interpret certain elements of the world, whether it's relationships, or parent-child relationships, or understandings of people who are different from they are, or spiritual understandings. If you get people to share their interpretations of parts of the world that are important to them, and you'll notice right off, as you well know, that they are different. They're not totally different, there are similarities and themes that run across what different people would say, but there are differences.

**Chris:** Do you, or have you used any of those ideas in your teaching? And are there any specific exercises that you might use or suggest?

**Dennis:** Well, I'm not an exercise guy. That sounds like a stupid thing to say, but – what I do is if things come up in the moment, then you create something out of that. And sometimes students create things...that look like exercises, feel like exercises. But I don't have a set of things that I do, except to ask students to reflect on their own background and their own orientations and interpretations of various things.

**Chris:** If you could give some advice to social constructionist oriented teachers, on how to keep an open eye, or an open ear, to those moments, could you give some advice?

**Dennis:** Oh, well, I hate to give advice, because they tell us not to do that, but we do it all the time, so I would say that one thing you have to do is surrender the role of expert. You have to suspend your own disbelief...*and* belief, and you have to create an environment where people understand that *you* understand that there may be many truths about a situation.

**Chris:** Okay. Now, as a follow-up question, I'm just wondering *how* you can do that in a classroom where one of the teacher requirements is to grade and to pass.

**Dennis:** Well, that makes it all so damn difficult.

**Chris:** (Laughing) It does. It throws a wrench in it.

**Dennis:** It really does, but I think one of the things you can do is to talk about that. To talk about their understanding and experience of grading, and for you to talk about it honestly, as well, and to talk about grading as an interpretive, evaluative moment, as a social constructionist would. That's what it is. I mean, I read your paper, and if I read it when I have gas or something (both Chris & Dennis laugh), I may have a different interpretation of it than if I read it if I'm, you know, I'm feeling pretty good. I mean, so that we all understand it's an interpretive thing. And the other thing that *I* do in class is, I try to make grading a collaborative – as much as I can, I mean you can't completely do it – collaborative process. And also to give students chances to rethink and reflect on what they've done, and maybe take another stab at it.

**Chris:** Yes, so with this collaborative process of grading, it sounds like you allow them to reflect and maybe redo. What else does it look like; do they put a grade on it as well?

**Dennis:** Well, yeah, they certainly can. They can tell me what they think that their grade is, or what they've striven for in the work that they do and I'll respect that

but we have to engage in a conversation about it if it's different, if mine is different from theirs. And I think the hard thing is to tease out, I don't know if it's hard but it can get knotty – not 'naughty' but 'knotty' –

**Chris:** (laughing) Sure, yeah, I am with you.

**Dennis:** …to tease out what their expertise is as opposed to mine. Because they know stuff I don't know. And they've had experiences that I haven't had. And so that's important too. I don't want to abandon my own expertise or my own knowledge. But I have to understand more clearly what theirs is. And sometimes that requires a sort of a rethinking – this is the collaborative part – about how they've answered. Or, not how they've answered but how they've written an essay or something. But I still have to grade, but I try to give them every chance to do as well as they possibly can. One of the things I do is if we finally end up with a grade, and they don't like it, they don't think that it represents what they did, then they write me a little essay about why they think that's so, and it's a request for me to rethink it. And often that involves a conversation with them.

**Chris:** That, sounds like a very nice way of doing that. And I'm assuming that the way you present it avoids conflict? Or is conflict something that shouldn't be avoided?

**Dennis:** Well, conflict is okay, really, as long as it's respectful, but sometimes students come – I mean they've had, what, fifteen, eighteen years of this kind of education so grades are, *the* thing, and the teacher's the expert, and the judge, and so sometimes it's hard to get around that. But I try to give them the chance to explain themselves in terms of *why* they think they deserve another grade. The problem with the whole thing is, you're sort of making grades more important when you do that, so we talk about that, too.

**Chris:** So it becomes kind of the end state when you don't want it to be the end state, it becomes the goal? (Laughs)

**Dennis:** (Laughs) Yeah, well, what we're all talking about now is grades, and I'm thinking of... 'A.' You know? And that's not really very productive, I think.

### Social Constructionism and the DSM

**Chris:** Right, so with these social constructionist views that different perspectives are respected and that one view is not privileged, as well as the negotiation of grades, and the negotiation of different perspectives; what is it that you hope that your students come away with from your classes? What might they go into the field with that may assist them or assist their clients?

**Dennis:** Well, what I hope is I really want them to be able to be attuned to other people's perspectives and interpretations of events, relationships, ideas, futures, whatever it might be. I want them to be able to be open to hear those. And to not put a grid on it. And that's one of the things I hate about – one of the *many* things I hate about the DSM – is that it gives you a grid and it *obliterates* other people's views of their suffering, of the uncertainty, of their confusion, – maybe that's just the way they live their life. So you can't hear it. You don't invite it because you have a manual of truth. And the DSM is just the most obvious example of that, but we do it, we do it all the time, I guess, in one-way or another.

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**Chris:** And would you hope that your students would find ways to change the field, or to reduce the importance of the DSM in social work?

**Dennis:** Well, we talk about that. I teach a course in mental health and psychopathology, and we start the course talking about the *words* mental health and psychopathology, what does that all mean. But one of the things we talk about it is how could you change it – you *have* to use the DSM, I mean there's no not using it...it's everywhere. It's now in schools, and it's in extended care facilities, it's ubiquitous. So the question is, how can you use it? And so students come up with a lot of really interesting ideas about how to do it, but to do it from a standpoint of respecting different viewpoints. And some of the ideas are encouraging the person they're working with to come up with their own assessment. That's the working assessment, but you don't put it down on paper because the insurance companies won't tolerate it.

**Chris:** Sure, there's no number that's attached to that, right.

**Dennis:** Yeah, right! Well, sometimes, some students do a strengths assessment, a DSM of strengths. And the basic idea is to *expand* the range of interpretations one can take of people's experience. And with the recognition that your institution or organization's going to make you do certain things. In which case, some students do it collaboratively. "We have to have this diagnosis. Now, here's the range of diagnoses that

are available, this is what they mean, which ones do you want to talk about, which ones do you think would be most helpful to you?"

**Chris:** Do you find that students, when they first come to your class, and hear these collaborative ideas and the interpretation of the DSM, are they open to seeing the DSM as something other than this truth-giver, this tomb of truth?

**Dennis:** Uh, no, not really.

**Chris:** How do you? – or do you? – slowly open them up to be able to see the DSM as something other than this giver of truth?

**Dennis**: Well, I think the basic thing is to encourage in them a dose of healthy skepticism...I mean after introductions, after the course gets going...there are several things to do. One is to look at other points of view about diagnosis and the DSM. And there *are* other points of view. And one of the best is, Kirk and Kutchins (1992). So students can see the historical, political, social elements of the creation of diagnoses. And that's helpful. Another thing that seems to be helpful is to have them share, if they want to, either in terms of a client they've worked with or their own personal life – share what it was like to have a diagnosis that didn't jive with your own experience of yourself. And that someone imposed upon you. And sometimes students have some really wonderful examples about that. And, uh...(Pause) oh, God, there was a third one, it just slipped my mind… Uh, oh, shoot. (Pause) Oh, I know what it – yeah. It's to – this is the best, the most important one, that's why I forgot it. (Both laugh) You know. Is to have people come in who have been given diagnoses...and talk about it. And talk about the discrepancy between their experience and the diagnosis, the process of being diagnosed, their view of themselves...and how being diagnosed may have brought the change in their life – and sometimes the change is good, because they get some sort of treatment that they could really benefit from. And that's helpful.

**Chris:** Wow, that's fantastic. And the students, I'm assuming, are pretty receptive to that?

**Dennis:** Oh, yeah. God, they love that stuff. I mean, they really do, they really do want to hear from people who've gone through it. Rather than me.

**Chris:** (Laughs) Right.

**Dennis:** But I admit, I don't tell them my diagnosis

anyway. They can guess.

**Chris:** (Laughing) Maybe that could be an assignment!

**Dennis:** (Laughing Simultaneously) Actually, I do! I ask them! I ask them, "Give me a diagnosis." And they say, "No! What are you talking about?" "No," I say, "seriously. Just on the basis of what we've been talking about – give me a diagnosis" and, Jesus, I can't believe it, I'd just be hospitalized. (Both laughing)

### Social Constructionism and the Social Work Field

**Chris:** So if, let's say, by some stroke of magical fate, that schools across the country, the social work school's master's programs, began to use some of these methods that you've talked about. And began to teach psychopathology in these ways, and deconstruct the DSM, and all of the sudden these graduates started to go out into the field. Ideally, what would you hope for the field? How would you hope that it would change?

**Dennis:** Well, my hope would be that people would not mistake the diagnosis for the reality, for one thing. That people would begin to see every other individual or family or whatever, even community, in much broader terms than are provided by something as narrow as the DSM. That they really would take a bio-psycho-social-spiritual view of people as individuals or collectivities. Social workers are going to have to use the DSM, but what they add to it is the filigree of greater understanding, and possibility of other, more – what would I say? – more humane or more relevant interventions for people.

**Chris:** And what would those interventions look like? Would they change? Which interventions might be more prominent than others?

**Dennis:** Well, for example, the DSM actually doesn't say anything about intervention. So you have to do this on a case-by-case basis. But let's say we have someone who is diagnosed with, and seems to have some of the classic symptoms that people have talked about for years, of schizophrenia. Number one, how do we understand it? And number two, what are the things that are going to be helpful for that person, in terms of them achieving the goal of living the kind of life they'd like to live, maybe normalizing their life a little bit. What are some of the things that we would have to do *with* them in order to make that happen? And, immediately, you want to get beyond medication – I mean, medication is going to be important for a lot

of people – but you want to get beyond medication, to what other kinds of things would be important? And one of the ways to help students think about that is to have, either in person or written, what people have said who've struggled with these illnesses. This is what I wish would've happened, this is what I needed, this is what I wanted, this is what really was helpful to me. So they get a broader sense of the kind of things you can do to be really helpful.

**Chris:** Would you hope in this kind of ideal world that the DSM ceased being pivotal, like the hub of the wheel, if you will?

**Dennis:** Oh, yeah, I do. But, I know, it's hard to see that happening. I mean, because, the fact is, unfortunately, we're under the influence of a cartel. And it's a medical, psychiatric, insurance and pharmaceutical cartel, and it's terrible. And one of the things that has been somewhat helpful for students is to realize the narrowness of that. Just for example – and this is a great example – two years ago, three psychiatrists and one or two public health people used the Freedom of Information Act to get into the FDA's records. The FDA has all the clinical trials of the drug companies. In this case it was anti-depressant drugs. But they never make them public. So people don't really know what these clinical trials suggest about the effectiveness of drugs. So they took all the clinical trials that were done for the six major anti-depressants, from, I think, fifteen years. Fifteen years' worth of clinical trials. They did meta-analyses, they did a very conservative one and a very liberal one; you know, they wanted to make sure the results couldn't be challenged by other people as being biased. And what they found was there's no clinical significant difference between placebos and anti-depressant drugs. And more and more people are saying, *clinicians* are saying, "Boy, there probably are people who need anti-depressants, maybe people with really serious depression, to kind of break the log jam. But my God, there's so many things we can do that don't involve drugs and all the problems that drugs have." And one of the major problems that anti-depressant drugs have is the after-effects once you go off the drug. In a couple of cases, with Zoloft and I think Paxil was the other one, people have struggled for months with all kinds of weird symptoms.

### Research and Social Constructionism

**Chris:** So, if social workers then went out into the field, began to respect client opinions and client perspectives a little more, and engaged with them collaboratively in these interventions using social constructionist thought, would outcome studies be important in that process? And if they were important, what would they look like?

**Dennis:** Well, I have a lot of prejudices about outcome studies. It's not about outcome studies, *per se*, but it's about how they're done. I think – and I'm not the person to do it, 'cause I have no research expertise – but I think if you could do participant outcome studies, *collaborative* outcome studies, that would be a terrific thing. I mean, in community-building we do that all the time. You don't just do a study of how well the program was going or the community-building process was going. You involve the residents in doing that kind of stuff. Building the research and then conducting it and interpreting it.

**Chris:** Could you imagine what that could look like with a client?

**Dennis:** I think it would be great. I think you ought to do it, I mean, you should do everything with clients. Of course, this is easy for me to say – just sitting here. But, I think clients, for example, should have a say in what goes written in a record. And not only read it, but maybe amend it, and say, "Well, no, that's not what I meant. This is what I meant. And this is how I'd like to say that." Because everyone's got to have an official file somewhere.

**Chris:** Sure, and clients could have the opportunity to review it, maybe collaboratively write it.

**Dennis:** Yeah, to review it and then to edit it and say, "This does not represent what we've talked about."

**Chris:** I'm with you – I can go ahead and share with you, because of the nature of this interview – that I also have problems with outcome research. Could you speak a little bit to those problems that you may have with it?

**Dennis:** Well, again, I'm out of my area. But the first problem I'd have with it would be that it's pre-set. It comes not out of the experience of the participant, but it comes out of the values and predilections of the researcher. And oftentimes the outcome study can really be crafted without any input from the people who're going to be a part of it.

**Chris:** So, it seeks to prove what it already has determined?

**Dennis:** Well, and it can change the process. I mean, if you know the outcome is supposed to be – a 'good' outcome – that can affect how, the kind of things you do and then the kind of things you don't do. The question is how can you do this in a participatory way that makes sense and has some degree of power?

### Early Influences, Recommendations, and Words of Wisdom

**Chris:** Just thinking about books, about texts, about certain authors that you might recommend students to read to be able to get some of these ideas across. What might you recommend?

**Dennis:** Oh, well, in terms of DSM stuff, I would recommend they read Kirk and Kutchins (1992). And probably their latest one, which is, I think, called *Making Us Crazy (*Kutchins & Kirk, 2003). Then I think I would have them read some strengths literature, resilience literature, and recovery literature. Not twelve-step recovery. People who have recovered or are recovering from serious mental illness.

**Chris:** Oh, that's interesting. Autobiography?

**Dennis:** Some autobiographical, it's, there's some qualitative stuff. But it's mostly narrative. People who've written *well* and *fairly* about mental illness and its treatment. And I think one of the people who *used* to, I think someone said he's kind of gone off of track lately, is E. Fuller Torrey. I think he had, like, three or four editions of *Surviving Schizophrenia* (2013). Which is a really helpful book for people wanting to understand. He's not saying it doesn't exist, it does exist, his sister has it, he's worked with people with schizophrenia, but he has a much broader view of thinking about it. And I think I'd want students to read some basic social construction stuff. And the two things that I'd recommend that they'd read – doesn't have anything to do with mental illness much – are *Acts of Meaning b*y Jerome Brunner (1990) and *Invitation to Social Construction* by Kenneth Gergen (1999).

**Chris:** I was interested in how you came to these social constructionist ideas, and if you at any time felt like the ideas were or would be a detriment to your career, or hurt you professionally in some way?

**Dennis:** Well, that's interesting, because Stan Witkin and I just gave a faculty development institute at CSWE on post-modern thinking in a modernist classroom, and we just sort of talk and invite people to participate, we don't have any papers or anything outlined. But one of the things we did was to talk about how we came to the position that we have in our thinking. And I really had to think hard, because I wasn't exactly sure how I did it. But I really do think the beginning of it, I don't know *when* the beginning was, probably very early in my career, was that I used to *rail* against empirical, empiricist, quantitative research. Used to drive me nuts. And the reason was not that – there were some important questions that *could* be answered, I believe that's true – but that it just bastardized the complexity of human behavior to me. I mean, doing studies about 'love,'' having people answer a questionnaire about love and then thinking you're getting even *close* to the complexity and fluidity of an idea like that, with some of those methods, just… I don't know, it just drove me crazy – and I don't know where that came from.

**Chris:** I read the article you published in 1979 on those ideas. I don't remember the title of it now, but you talked about research quite a bit and the insanity of it.

**Dennis:** Oh, *The tension between research and practice*, I think (Saleebey, 1979).

**Chris:** That's the one.

**Dennis:** Yeah, that idea about tension and research came from Ernest Becker, he was very influential to me. He wasn't writing about this – he started out studying psychiatry but he became a cultural anthropologist. And he died at a fairly early age, but he wrote some wonderful stuff. *The Denial of Death* (Becker, 2007), is a book that a lot of people know. But other things like *The Structure of Evil* (Becker, 1976) – what he was trying to do was to gather together the threads and remnants of some of the great thinking over the centuries about the nature of human nature and the human condition and how that could be turned into a value-based understanding of human progress. I haven't said it very well, but his writing was very influential to me. And he *couldn't* address the use of quantitative research, because you couldn't do what he was doing with those tools. I mean, what he was doing was philosophical and theoretical and...axiological. I mean, it's a stunning corpus of work. And that was very influential to me. I thought, well, if there's going to be better understanding of things, it's going to come from that sort of thinking. Maybe not quite as broad as that. I mean, I don't think I could think that broadly, but that's it.

**Chris:** And there was room for that kind of thinking in your career?

**Dennis:** Well, I've been very lucky, because a lot of people have asked me, "Well, how could you've possibly made a career out of what you have?" I mean, I wouldn't have gotten out of the doctoral program if I never thought about it. When I came out of the doctoral program, I had no expertise in anything! I was not an expert in anything. And nowadays, I mean, the doctoral programs, they make you an expert in some aspect of child welfare, or...which I'm not denigrating – I'm not denigrating that. That's perfectly fine, but – I don't think I could've been trained like that and done it ten years later.

**Chris:** So it sounds to me at the time, when you were a doctoral student and moving up, that there was room for that, for this way of thinking?

**Dennis:** Well, I think more so, yeah. In my doctoral education, we had – now let me see if I get this right – we had four areas of curriculum. And we had to take a year-long course in each of them at the School of Social Welfare. And then we had to take cognate courses in other departments in each of those areas. And then you had some independent study that you could do. It was pretty rigorous, but it was widely based. So, I just started writing about a lot of different stuff. And even in our year-long course in scientific method, I forget what it was called; it was taught by Ernest Greenwood, who was a real stickler, I mean he was *precise* and rigorous. But he also gave us a heavy dose of the philosophy of science. And so even in that course, I could see there were opportunities to think in a slightly different way. Because there's a lot of wonderful writing involved with the philosophy of science. A lot of it I don't understand, but some of it I do. Arguments about the nature of nature, and the nature of evidence, and all that kind of stuff. And that was fun stuff to read. So I guess what I'm saying is that I had to know, I had to know what they wanted us to know to do various courses. But at that time you had the freedom to be either critical or deviant!

**Chris:** (Laughs) Deviant right! Well some think I'm insane doing a qualitative study on social constructionism –

**Dennis:** Well, I don't think that, but the problem with qualitative studies is, God, they take so much time, it's just – if you just did an empirical thing – if you just send out a questionnaire to a bunch of

people and just said, "Answer the following questions," you know, you'd be through. (Chris laughs)

**Chris:** Great. Well, Dennis, thank you very much for your time.

**Dennis:** Sure, I enjoyed it.

**Chris:** Yeah, yeah, and hopefully I'll see you in Vermont again at some point in time.

**Dennis:** You bet.

### Reflections on the Interview

What struck me most about Dennis, and particularly in this interview, was that his brilliance was coupled with an absolute respect for others and an unbending desire to see the positive in everyone. Even as he discussed the DSM and pathology based thinking he maintained a spark of hopefulness that transcended the negativity of his frustration about the field. It is hard to explain without having been in conversation with him, but he was someone who had a way of explaining topics that represented a level of hopelessness, in very hopeful ways.

I was also struck by his ability to recall texts and influential books from as far back as 1976, and to pull knowledge from decades ago to tie into current knowledge. He was a storehouse of strengths-based knowledge and presented it without being in the least bit pretentious about the depth of knowledge that he possessed.

After the interview, Dennis and I continued to stay in contact through email and the Global Partnership of Transformative Social Work. We became distant friends and he was supportive of my career. In fact, it was Dennis who paved the way through his recommendation for my first faculty position. He is greatly missed.

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# What I've Learned About Activism, Privilege, and Negotiating Boundaries as an Early Career Academic

Shane Ryan Brady

**Abstract**: This article reflects on the author's experiences as an early career academic engaging in activism for social justice goals that is often oppositional to and not supported by academic social work. The author reflects upon two major efforts that he was actively engaged in; the first was related to organizing a national campaign against a major social work research organization that attempted to hold its conference in a location under boycott by low wage workers, and the second related to acting as an ally for a group of undergraduate students seeking to travel to Ferguson, MO in order to protect voter rights and stand with community members against racial injustices. Through these experiences, the author has faced difficult challenges that often put him in a position to have to choose between the values of academia and those of social work and humanity.

Keywords: Academia, activism, Ferguson, LGBTQ.

## My Pathway to Activism and Academia

I am a 36-year-old white male first generation college student, long-time community organizer and activist, turned academic by virtue of my position as an assistant professor at a Research I institution. I grew up in subsidized housing complexes in working class Midwest communities. My pathway to a Ph.D. was filled with challenges and pitfalls. Being a first generation college student growing up in poverty, I lacked the priming for college preparedness, the financial resources, and the social support and mentorship from my family to be successful in higher education. As a result of these challenges, I flunked out of college twice before finally going back at the age of 25. After failing to be successful at college earlier in my life, I became defeated and depressed. During my time between failing out of college and going back, I had the opportunity to work a variety of low wage and working class jobs that included working in a parts factory, being a jackhammer operator in a steel foundry, cleaning offices for rich executives, and working in manual labor construction jobs. I also started to become much more aware of injustice than in previous points in my life. By the time that I was 25, despite not being successful in school, I organized two active neighborhood watch groups as well as a productive block club in several communities. At 25 I found my way back on the path to higher education by way of the local community college. I decided to pursue social work because of its emphasis on social justice and historical legacy of community work. The fear of failure and depression that once filled my body and soul had been replaced with an anger and resentment for what so many of my family and neighbors were going through as a result of the auto industry beginning to fold, cuts to social welfare programs, and an increase in the visibility of social problems like homelessness and mental health. For me, a Ph.D. wasn't about teaching and research, but about power and stratification; a mechanism to achieve social change. The trick was never to allow higher education to change my sense of social responsibility and the deeper resentments that I had about social inequality, but instead to use it as a means to speak to power and cultivate radical change.

## The Activist in Me

I am and always will consider myself a community organizer and activist who became a social worker. Part of the benefits of higher education is that it provided me with opportunities to learn from multiple sources of knowledge. Although when I first chose social work as a career, I did so because I thought that it was a profession with radical roots in advocacy and activism, I quickly learned, as discussed by Reisch and others, that social work was much more about maintaining the status quo through promoting social welfare and incremental change than about transforming social systems (Piven & Cloward, 1977; Reisch, 2011; Solomon, 1976). The more radical changes that have come about have always been more related to social movements and citizen led efforts than to professional driven activism (Piven & Cloward, 1977; Sen, 2003). During my time in school, I focused on community organizing as my area of practice, because it was a natural fit given my past history. During my time in school, I often found myself feeling like the 'anti-social worker' because my activist nature and radical values. When expressing my values to work with communities to challenge institutional racism, economic inequality, and discrimination against the LGBTQ community through social action in social work classes, I would often receive little support from faculty or colleagues. Community organizing was about SWOT analysis, top down community development, and research driven

assessments; it was not about challenging the status quo through social action. In my doctoral program, I received some support for my social action agenda as long as it tied into research, but I also felt as though people were trying to temper my activist values in order to socialize me and prepare me for the reality of academia (Meyerson & Scully, 1995). Professors would regularly say things like, "Good luck doing that as a university employee" or "I wouldn't even attempt that as a junior faculty member." Whether folks realized it or not, social work education through its teaching and practices was rendering the professional ethics and values related to social justice and advocacy to watered down passive practice and rhetoric.

### My Indoctrination as an Activist in Academia

When I defended by dissertation, I hardly had time to take a breath, given that it was the "market" time of the year, where recent graduates are essentially compared and scrutinized alongside their peers by hiring committees looking to fill open positions. Since I graduated in winter semester, I was coming to the hiring party late, and while I received some interest from a few schools, I did not secure an academic position for the following fall. Instead, I continued working as an adjunct lecturer teaching 4-5 classes a semester just to make it, while also trying to write and apply for positions for the next year. As I was preparing a paper for a major social work conference, it came to my attention that the conference was going to be held at a hotel that was being boycotted by low wage hospitality workers and the local labor union. After doing due diligence in researching the facts around the boycott, I wondered why on earth a social work related organization, be it research focused, could possibly justify holding a conference at a hotel that treated workers so poorly and was doing everything possible to stop workers from forming a union. While I had came to accept that social work and academia were not radical, this issue was not overly radical, but simply an important concern of economic justice that I assumed most social work educators, researchers, and/or practitioners would likely support, if they knew about it. Without thinking much about it I started e-mailing the organization's board members, many of them on faculty at the school that I was employed with at the time. I quickly learned that while I may have thought of social work as an increasingly conservative profession, academia was even more conservative or at least less interested in the ethics and values of social work than the profession itself.

Decision makers told me that the organization was aware of the boycott, but due to financial constraints and contracts, was not able to relocate the conference. During the course of these communications, I started e-mailing social work and allied colleagues from around the country and internationally to let them know about it. I also started an online petition to stop the conference from being held at the boycotted hotel. My organizing strategy was mainly social action based mobilization, taken from my readings of Alinsky and others; however, I also wanted desperately to build some community for radical and progressive social workers and/or find these spaces for myself (Alinsky, 1969; Bobo, Kendall, & Max, 2001).

During my time organizing the national campaign, which many were involved in as well as in other similar campaigns, I was regularly told by mentors, colleagues, and supervisors to be careful of my actions, if I wanted to secure a position in academia. I was told that I was essentially making a lot of enemies through my activism and organizing work, which could harm the progression of my career. I was taken aback by how few academic social workers were willing to speak out on the topic of economic justice and take a visible stand against holding a major conference at a place of business that oppressed workers. I couldn't help but think about the implications of the lack of interest in this issue within the academic social work community, especially given the fact that many of the low wage workers involved in the labor struggle at the hotel were persons of color. While many colleagues told me that it wasn't about not caring about economic or social justice, but about the importance of keeping the only social work research organization alive, I couldn't help but wonder if our own privilege as academics had blinded us to what was important in terms of the values, mission, purpose, and ethics of social work. Although I made enemies in my organizing work against the conference, I also found new allies scattered around the country, who happily joined in the effort, but many of them also politely cautioned me against taking it too far, given my position as a beginning level academic without a full-time home. The final result of the organizing effort to stop the conference was that the conference was relocated to other facilities outside the hotel, future contracts would include better loopholes so the organization could get out of them, and a greater awareness and dialogue about our professional responsibility as social work academics in regards to promoting social justice was created. I also came away from the experience, for better or worse, having drawn very clear lines in the sand about who I was as a person, social worker, activist/organizer, and

academic.

## My Early Days on the Job

Despite what many foreshadowed for me, I did eventually attain a tenure track faculty position at a research I institution the year following my activism to relocate the social work research conference. Now, looking back, some of my early career struggles to fit in at my new institution, probably had as much to do with me getting the position in the aftermath of my activism as my qualifications. While my new home has been welcoming to me as a colleague and community member, I also have been amazed by how little my new academic home feels like a school of social work. When I was driving across country to start my new position, I drove right through Ferguson, MO in the immediate aftermath of the killing of Michael Brown. Upon coming to the school, I immediately started e-mailing faculty and administration about the injustices occurring in Ferguson to learn more about how we were responding as a school of social work and how I could help out. I received very few responses, which I also learned was due to my boldness in just e-mailing faculty, many of whom I had not yet met; however, I also received a brief message telling me about what other departments or entities were doing and that maybe I should connect with them. I was confused because even in the very privileged places that I have taught, attended school, or was otherwise affiliated with, the school of social work was a sort of go to place for guidance on addressing injustices and for engaging in difficult dialogues around sexism, racism, and homophobia. Here though, this seemed to not be the case. I decided to use a simple tactic that a mentor of mine had previously taught me; sometimes when it isn't easy to discern what to do next, the best course of action is to wait patiently until it becomes clear.

It was about two months into the semester, when a potential role for me in regards to the events happening in Ferguson became clear. I was sitting at home on a Sunday, when a colleague forwarded me a message written by a student requesting for faculty support to help them fund a trip to Ferguson on Election Day to work the polls in order to ensure the protection of voter rights. In the message it appeared that while a few faculty had donated some funds, students hit a snag with not being old enough to legally rent a van for the trip. The trip, if it was going to happen at this point, was set to leave the very next day. I thought about it briefly and to be honest, as I wrote an e-mail reaching out to the

student for more information, I was hoping to get away with pledging a small donation along with my moral support. I was after all, now amidst a very busy semester in the life of a junior faculty member. I had two grants that I was in the process of writing, proposals for conferences yet to be written, and papers that demanded my attention. I had little time to venture away from it all to play chaperon to a student field trip to Ferguson that would likely make little impact or lead to anything that I could place on my tenure review report. I wrote a very brief e-mail pledging my support for the students' trip and asking the lead organizer if he had found someone to accompany them. He quickly replied that another professor had helped them set up activities and training once they got to Ferguson and a few folks donated money, but no faculty was willing to take them. The student also forwarded a message sent out by the university legal team, letting everyone know that this venture in activism was not a university sponsored activity or endorsed by the university in anyway. Having been in a similar spot as the student, during my days of campus activism and more recently as I organized against the social work conference, I understood the challenges that institutional barriers can create to activism and social change. I also thought about readings on the topic and conversations with mentors about using privilege in positive ways and the responsibility that comes from having privilege (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007; Checkoway, 1995; Spencer, 2008). I also wanted to find a way to make a difference and to get involved at my new institution; I just thought that it would be with faculty colleagues as opposed to student activists. Within an hour of hearing back from the student organizer, I rented a van and messaged him back for more details. Upon hearing the news that I was willing to pay for the van and drive the students to Ferguson, where I would work alongside them at the polls, he was elated and also relieved.

## The Road Traveled

On our way to Ferguson under the cover of the night, I had the chance to learn more about this interesting group of young activists who have decided to get involved in addressing injustice a thousand miles away, despite being within an institution and state that was conservative in values and void of social action. I learned that the students were all undergraduates from a variety of majors. It was interesting to me, but not surprising, that none of the students were social work majors. Some students were in-state students, while others were from all over the country. All students however, were from geographic communities that faced historical racial injustices, and as a result, were

involved in or witness to community organizing and social action from a young age. This made me think back to my own work in the south and hearing about the power of intergenerational organizing (Payne, 1995; Southern Echo, 2008). The students seemed to embrace me as an ally, but with caution early on in our trip. I remember students talking about allyhood and a white student responding, "Being an ally should start with not attaching that label to yourself, but doing the work of an ally, and allowing others to label you, if deserving of it." I remember hearing this from another student of mine, but it really hit home for me this time. The thought of calling myself an ally, now seemed pompous, arrogant, and void of meaning. I don't think it was until the way back home that all of them realized that I was a professor with a Ph.D., as I introduced myself and went simply by my first name.

When we arrived in Ferguson, we had only a couple hours to sleep before getting up for voter rights training. I wondered if their enthusiasm for social action would wane between 3:00AM and 5:00 AM, when we would have to rise for training. I was so nervous and anxious myself that sleep eluded me that night. I was trying to think about everything that could go wrong the next day and how I should respond to each scenario. While I was at Ferguson as an activist ally to students, I couldn't help, but feel that I was responsible for the students' well being and their experience. The next morning, I was surprised by how excited the students were and the energy that they brought. During the course of the day, I saw them grow more and more comfortable in how they approached people at the polls and their comfort in talking and interacting with the community members of Ferguson. Students seemed to enjoy the personal level conversations with local community members about race, poverty, and injustice. I remember one of the students asking a man at the poll his name, only to find out later that he gave them a fictitious name. The man upon admitting this said, "Shit, I didn't know who the hell you people were or what you were here for…I am older than you, been around, and have learned to not trust everyone that I meet." The conversation was lighthearted, but the presence of myself and another white person was also another reason that the man stated for his discomfort when first meeting us, which took me back to the concept of double consciousness discussed by W. E. B. Dubois (Dubois, 1903; Hill-Collins, 1993).

Throughout the trip to Ferguson, I struggled at times to know where my various roles as an

activist/organizer, professor, social worker, and ally started and ended. There was one time where I become very uncomfortable and very aware of my own whiteness and privilege as well as in the fact that I was an outsider in Ferguson. The students wanted to see the memorial where Michael Brown was shot and killed. As we drove into the apartment community where he was slain, we saw a memorial of stuffed animals, flowers, and cards stacked several feet high down the middle of the road, creating a median of sorts. When we parked, I saw students getting their camera phones and technology ready to document the memorial, and I struggled to know whether to voice my concern or not. Finally, when I went to speak, all I could say was that we must remember that we are not from Ferguson and while this might be an exciting experience in activism for us, Michael Brown was this community's son, nephew, friend, brother, and neighbor. As I got out of the van, I instantly felt the need to protect students from potential disgruntled community members as well as to protect the community from possible Twitter posts, Instagram pictures, and selfies, I stopped close to the memorial, but kept a safe distance from it. I was not only feeling a sense of being a geographical outsider from this community, but of being one of two lone white faces in the community. I felt a sense of my own white privilege in a way that no class, activity, or academic experience had prepared me for. I said a silent prayer and went back to the van, feeling comfortable in my decision to leave the students. The students for the most part, were African-American; they were in a sense part of this community in a way that I was not. As I walked back to the van, another student came with me, sensing my discomfort and reassuring me that he understood why I went back to the van and why I didn't ask others to come back. He said, "Man, the whole way down here, all I wanted to do was see the memorial that they kept showing on the news, but now that I'm here, it just doesn't feel right to be staring at someone else's pain…it's fucked up."

During our trip back home from Ferguson, the atmosphere and attitudes of students were positive and vibrant, despite being physically and mentally exhausted from the experience. I remember one of the students stating, "We need to bring this shit home to right here, and start doing something about it." During one point in the conversation, a student voiced that while we were all exhausted and feeling a sense of accomplishment, the people of Ferguson were still feeling tired and still struggling every day for justice. This comment affected me as I had thought about this point, but never voiced it because I was struggling with my role throughout the trip. I wasn't their

professor on this trip, and these reflections, if uttered by me, could easily turn a collaborative exercise in activism into a classroom learning experience; however, when the student voiced it, others listened and seemed to absorb the words. I learned that students and young people are fully capable of deep critical learning and reflection, if they are given the opportunity to allow it to emerge organically from practical experiences.

### What I Learned about Academia

When I returned back to the school the next day after returning from Ferguson, I was faced with e-mails about advising concerns, courses, and committee work, but received only one e-mail from a colleague asking me about the Ferguson trip. I received only a few messages from other colleagues around the country. Here I was trying to fully process my experience in Ferguson, and what my role as an ally should be within my own school of social work as well as within the larger social work community, but in my own school it was as if nothing had happened. The only time that I remember feeling similar was when my mom died. When someone dies, even through you grief, you notice who is around or not around, who calls and sends condolences and who doesn't. After a period of a week or so following their death, the entire world around you is back to normal and acting as if nothing ever happened, but for you, your entire world has changed forever. After Ferguson, I felt different because now the injustices were more real, the students and I had been a guest in their community, and it was harder to tune out the news features and reports on Ferguson. I'm not even sure what I wanted or expected from my colleagues. I guess in my naïve thinking, I had hoped that some colleagues would stop by my office, call me, and/or e-mail me to offer their support for the trip and to find out how it went. I even hoped that a couple folks might want to get involved in the effort moving forward. I had no reason to expect that any of this would happen, everyone has their own causes and projects, none should be seen as more or less important than others, but still it was hard not to take note in these early days on the job that few of my colleagues seemed interested in social action and activism. They were on boards, part of work groups and committees, and engaged in research, but when it came to speaking out and acting on larger social issues, at least in the workplace, few seemed vocal. I will say that the one or two people who did take the time to hear about my experience and voice that they may want to get involved in the future meant even

more to me, given that they were the minority and not the rule.

The biggest lesson that I learned about academia as a result of this experience was that academic social work is different from professional social work. Academic social work is more closely aligned with institutional culture and values than professional ones. People may engage in activism and be involved in causes, but perhaps they separate them from their job. I also couldn't help but to acknowledge the privilege that comes from working in academia. Despite not feeling a great deal of explicit support for my activism in Ferguson, I also did not receive negative sanctions about my trip. I am doubtful that in my former positions as a line level social worker and supervisor that my supervisors or colleagues would have been as accepting of me just taking off work for three days to engage in an activist effort. In this way, colleagues and administration supported me. Despite feeling some anger and resentment towards academia for not being more supportive of activism and social justice, especially in social work, I discovered that I am in the best place possible to create change as a result of being a social work academic as a result of the flexibility, power, and privilege afforded to me in my position.

### What I Learned About Activism

I have realized that being an activist in academia means that the road traveled is not an easy one, but it is also far easier than the road traveled by those facing injustice everyday (Adams & Horton, 1975). Despite social justice and advocacy being represented in social work values and ethics, how each social work academic defines social justice or chooses to engage in advocacy will likely differ from one another. Sometimes the choices made may be driven by the professional culture of the school or organization, or by personal values and choice, or a result of awareness. Part of finding my own path comes in defining what is important to me. For me, I am an activist and organizer who values academic activities such as; research, service, and teaching. I am trying to learn to accept that not everyone has the same values as me or defines themselves the same as me, which is no different than in most other areas of civil life and organizing work (Szakos & Szakos, 2007). There are also colleagues and communities of social justice minded academics and social workers for which I have been privileged to meet as a result of my activism. These individuals are scattered around the world, but have been a steady and critical source of support. Despite having times when I have felt isolated or alone because of my values, these smaller activist

communities have responded with encouragement, resources, and support that have helped me to feel connected and grounded in my role as an activist. Being an activist in professional and academic social work carries with it a certain stigma. Many social work educators teach students that activism is too value driven to be useful in professional practice. When I have engaged in activism inside academia, I have been forced to consider whether or not my cause was the mountain worthy to die on as my mentor framed it to me. In other words, during my charge to get faculty and students involved in discussing racial injustice and about the events happening in Ferguson, I backed off, after my initial attempts were met with a lukewarm response.

Eventually, I found an outlet to get involved in Ferguson by way of collaborating with student activists, but I needed to practice patience. When I am in activism mode, I am more passionate about the issue or issues at hand and generally more invested, which is a huge strength, but it can also lead me to take things more personally and less objectively when others do not seem as interested in an issue. One of the final things about activism that I have thought often about in recent months is how activists tend to fit into one of two categories; activists who are engaged in social action because they are experiencing inequality and oppression and those activists who are generally well intentioned, but very privileged members of society, which is also part of my own scholarship on community organizing (Brady, 2014). My activism was birthed as a result of my own experiences growing up in poverty, but has changed over time as a result of my education and social status; I am now a privileged activist and with that a greater sense of my own privilege and the responsibility that comes along with it. A privileged activist can come and go from communities and causes with great ease, staying to celebrate victories, while being able to leave tough situations and losses by virtue of their privileged status.

## Learning the Power of Privilege

I remember sitting in my first social work class and hearing the term 'privilege' used for the first time and thinking how ridiculous it sounded (Hill-Collins, 1993; Spencer, 2008). It wasn't that I didn't believe that racism, sexism, and discrimination were real, but as a poor white first generation student, who was being evicted from his home at the time, the idea that I somehow had magical powers because of my whiteness or maleness sounded ridiculous. As time went on in my coursework, I began to understand conceptually what privilege meant, but as with many white students, I also grew cynical to how privilege was taught in courses. So many readings and exercises did little more than promote white students or students with obvious privilege to feel guilty, while students of color were made to feel uncomfortable or pushed into roles as educators to white students about racism and discrimination (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007). As I moved into my own early career academic role, I became more aware of my privilege. I make more money than at any point in my life and more than most people. By virtue of my education, I am generally well respected in area businesses or when communicating with professionals. Being a wealthier white male has allowed me to buy a newer vehicle, so I am less likely to be pulled over by police. Sometimes though I feel like I am walking between two worlds. Despite being aware of my privilege, I have experienced classism and poverty most of my life. Even now, when a colleague or acquaintance makes a comment about my choice of dress or tattoos, I have an emotional reaction to it. One time I was at a meeting with some decision makers and someone remarked, "you look like a student, I didn't realize that you were a faculty member." While the person likely didn't mean anything by it, I felt as if they had just called me poor white trailer trash, something that I heard a lot growing up. What I am also learning as an early career academic is how to use my privilege and the power that comes from it to achieve positive social change. During my advocacy against the social work conference, I remember people saying that I had courage to publically speak out against a major social work organization when I was on the job market. But in reality, I never really thought about my lack of privilege or power, only that I was in a much more privileged position than the low wage workers who were fighting for economic justice at the hotel under boycott. When the students and I were at the Michael Brown memorial site in Ferguson, I became very aware of my multiple forms of privilege, from race, to sex, to class. Here I was, a white male of higher social class, similar to the police officer that killed Michael Brown, preparing to approach the site where Mr. Brown, a young Black man, was killed. The students, who were primarily Black, were eager to approach the memorial and even take pictures of it. As I started to approach the memorial, I saw Black residents walking along the sidewalks by the memorial, and something inside me told me that it was disrespectful to go on any further. I turned around and went back to the van. In all of my years of social work education, practice, and teaching, I had never been more aware of my privilege

than at this moment in time. I thought about my many discussions with colleagues and students about what it means to be an ally and activist with privilege. Being respectful of spaces is important. While I felt welcomed and embraced throughout Ferguson during my time there working the polls with students, I think the memorial site was a boundary that as a privileged white man and outsider of Ferguson, I did not feel comfortable crossing. The students may have felt differently, because while they were outsiders of Ferguson, they were still members of the larger African-American community, and so while I did not feel comfortable approaching the memorial, I did not fault them for doing so.

**Epilogue: New Developments**

Since originally writing and submitting this narrative in the winter of 2015 and with the encouragement of the editors, I wanted to provide an update on what student activists have been up to since coming back from Ferguson, MO. As a result of racial injustices experienced by Black students on campus at the university, along with the birth of larger activist movements such as #BlackLivesMatter in relation to racial injustice around the nation, university students organized the a university activist group on campus. Many of the students who I accompanied to Ferguson were part of this movement to hold the university administration, faculty, and students accountable for racial injustice and for creating a more equitable campus community. The university activist group was embraced by many Black students at the university, but also faced a great degree of scrutiny from white students and some faculty as well as other students of color, who felt discrimination from the white normative campus community, but also from the university activist group, which some students of color felt was only for Black students. During this time I kept a distance from student activists as I wanted to respect their space and need to organize separate from faculty members, especially well-intentioned white guys like me. I checked in with students from time to time and showed support for their cause via Twitter, interviews with the local paper, and through heated dialogue with colleagues. During one such discussion, a colleague remarked, "I just don't understand why the university activist group is doing this to the university, it's bad publicity, and the university really attends to students of color better than many other schools." This type of exchange highlights the deep divide between Blacks and whites on campus. It also further illustrates how

even educated social workers who teach about white privilege, may not really get it. During this time, the university activist group held marches around campus, where students would place duct tape across their mouths to symbolize that Black student voices were not heard on the campus. One of the things that struck me during a march was the presence of white students, who also put tape across their mouths in an act of solidarity with Black students. While I understood that their intentions were good, it troubled me that they really didn't understand how to be an ally or what their role was in minority led movements.

As I watched events unfold, I struggled with wanting to give youth activists' space, while also wanting to help them avoid some pitfalls common to inexperienced organizers. In the end, I tried to focus on what I could do within the school of social work that would be complimentary to the mission of the university activist group, while also understanding the importance of community building among persons of color (Gutierrez & Lewis, 1994; Solomon, 1976). I started creating assignments in my undergraduate and graduate courses that would allow students to use classroom time and space to put together school wide and university forums to address difference and injustice. In our school, we have a beautiful community room that can seat over 200 people; however, most of the time the space is used by faculty and administration for various events, meetings, and trainings, and students must go through faculty or student organizations to access the space, which is a barrier to participation. In class, I practiced town hall style simulations with students to prepare them for their assignment. Students worked in groups to put on forums that discussed issues such as; sexism, racism, what it means to be an ally, and other similar topics. During this same time, I was asked by some students connected with the university activist group to put on a 'know your rights' event at the school. I helped to book the space and spoke at the event, but made sure that student leaders and the activist group members led the event.

In early March members of one of the university fraternities was caught on video singing a racist chant. This racist video went viral within a few hours and tensions on campus were high. The university activist group did not wait to hear from the administration, but quickly went to social media to plan a campus march for the next morning. After connecting with activists on campus and making sure that it was a space for white students and faculty to be in, I e-mailed social work students from my classes to let them know of the events and march. The next morning hundreds, if not

thousands of students, held a peaceful protest and march across campus led by the university activist group. Students, and many faculty and administrators of all races attended the march. The president of the university took the microphone at one point and spoke a message of disgust for the fraternity's actions and expressed his commitment to improving race relations and diversity on campus. Members of the university activist group were quickly thrust into not only the local, but also the national spotlight as guests on Reverend Al Sharpton's talk show. During this time news media contacted me for interviews and appearances, and as much as I wanted to speak out and provide my thoughts about the incident, I tried as much as possible to refer them to student activists in charge of the movement. When I was 20, I would have reveled at having the microphone to speak to power and give my commentary, but now in my late thirties, I understand that no movement should ever be about me or any one person (Kahn, 2010; Payne, 1995; Sen, 2003). It is imperative to the long-term success of social movements to allow space for local leadership to emerge and take charge (Aronowitz, 2003; Brown, 2006).

During the immediate days following the injustice by the fraternity, forums were held around campus, administrators took actions to dismiss the students involved in the racist chant, and bloggers around the nation chimed in with their thoughts about the event. During this time, I tried to use the classroom space to discuss the issues at hand in more depth, which is when I learned even more about privilege and oppression. It had not been even a few days after the fraternity event, when a white student in one of my community practice courses looked visually disgusted as I attempted to facilitate a dialogue about the deeper root causes of difference in communities. When I asked the student what was wrong, they responded, " Look, this fraternity issue was terrible, but we have used up countless amounts of class time to talk about it, can we just move on to social work material for the class?" Another well off white female student responded, "I am a member of a Greek organization that is not at all responsible for this stuff happening, and now I feel hated and fearful when I am walking around campus, because Black students look at me like they hate me." One openly LGBT identifying student, stated that he was not involved in any of the campus forums or protests, because honestly, Black people have not really supported LGBT equality over the years." All of these comments by students should not be seen as negative, because they had the courage to speak

what many others were thinking in classrooms around the country, yes, even in social work classes. What was equally illuminating to me was that almost no students of color in the classroom responded to their peer's comments or chimed in on the dialogue. During these same exchanges, I also saw some students raise their voices to counter their peer's perspectives. One student stated, " I am sick of talking about racism and injustice, tired of seeing women victimized on campus, white students allowed to be openly racist, and students of all colors being allowed to hide their homophobia behind religion…when will we stop talking about and start acting to change something?" This divide among social work students did not come as a surprise to me as I have long thought that we pat ourselves on the back a bit too often in social work education when it comes to teaching about diversity, oppression, privilege, and social justice. What these sorts of dialogues with students did for me was to open my eyes again and to commit myself to not just talking about these content areas in the classroom but to creating experiential opportunities for students to truly understand them, by moving from dialogue to actions that we can all take individually and collectively.

While the university continued to make moves during the course of the academic year to improve race relations on campus, including hiring our first university diversity administrator to spearhead efforts, in most regards, the university continued on with business as usual. The student activists went through many ups and downs during the year. While everyone, from peers, faculty, and administrators, turned to the university activist groups for answers to how to improve race relations on campus, these students, mostly undergraduates, were faced with attending to these large level social issues that they did not create, while trying to complete courses, apply to graduate schools, work jobs, and enjoy being college students. One colleague became irritated that the university activist group had not responded to her student's requests via social media to come and speak to them or to help them start their own movement. People seemed to forget that these were young people tackling age-old problems that we as faculty members and adults should have been addressing a long time ago. While my role often changed throughout the year from an organizing mentor/trainer to a bridge person, it shifted at times to being more of a cheerleader and supporter to student activists, who were trying to continue building the movement without burning out. One way that this was addressed was that some students decided that the university activist group was being forced to deal with too much of the work to be done, and as a result a group of students, some of them members of

the university activist group, approached me about resurrecting a long forgotten chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). I consulted students about how to go about building the organization, writing a new charter, and working with statewide NAACP leaders to resurrect the university chapter.

One of the challenges that we discussed was how an official student organization like the NAACP would work with the grassroots student movement group discussed in this narrative. Students decided that there was a need for both entities. The activist group was meant to be a social movement with no formal structure or association with the university, this way the movement could be much more radical in their strategy and tactics than if it were an official student organization. The NAACP would be a more formal and less divisive entity for engaging in racial justice work on campus. The NAACP could recruit students, work with state chapters, and also be able to do tasks such as book campus spaces for little cost, apply for university funding, and have a greater voice in more formalized university spaces. On April 30, 2015, more than 50 Black students and students of color packed out a room in the school of social work to hold the first formal election of officers for the university chapter of the NAACP. Students asked me to run as faculty sponsor, which I did. I was elected alongside several activist group members, Ferguson activists, and new student activists to lead the organization. As I spoke to students, I was overcome with pride for the hard work that they had accomplished and the work to still be done. I plan to continue taking a behind the scenes approach in my role with the chapter, so student leadership and agendas can be out in front.

### Final Thoughts

Is social work academia completely separate and different from the values and direction of professional social work or is it simply a mirror image of the state of the current profession? I have spent countless hours considering this question as I have tried to figure out how to navigate my new role as an academic. I have quickly learned that activism is not valued at an institutional level. As a result it is doubtful that I will receive large amounts of credit towards tenure for engaging in activism or receive the support of my institution, but when I really think about it, the privilege that comes with being an academic has afforded me the flexibility and to a lesser degree, the time to engage in activism, which illustrates a certain level of privilege that comes with

being an academic. By engaging in activism, it keeps me grounded and connected to something bigger than myself, and to my past. The major difference though is that in my past, I was an activist out of necessity, but now I am an activist of privilege, and with that comes a level of social responsibility that I never truly considered previous to my start in academia. Students and community members are more likely to view me as having some sort of wisdom or knowledge because of my position and perceived power. As a junior faculty member, I feel like I am in a paradox because others may view me as having much more power and privilege than I feel that I have based on my role and challenges within my own institutional environment. Moving forward, I will continue to be critical of the status quo, both within my school and institution as well as the greater society; however, I will also proceed with a certain degree of caution when it comes to involving others in activism as my own level of privilege is much more visible to me. As a lifelong community organizer, I watched with pride and hope as once again student activists and young people led the way in the march to social justice and social change. Students marched with other young people for racial justice in Ferguson, started a student movement on their own predominantly white campus, and created spaces and organizations to continue to fight for racial justice. When people say, less talk and more action, perhaps these young people can illustrate to them, what this really means in reality. As for me, it has been a long couple of years, but I am finding a way to combine activism, organizing, education, and research into my academic career. As much as I detest academia at times and feel like I have sold out to the man, it affords me with the income, time, and space to be able to engage in social change work at a level that I never knew before as a professional social worker.

As I move forward, it isn't the words of Dr. King, Gandhi, Kahn, West, Hamer, or other famous organizers and activists that guide me, but something that my momma said on the last day of her life in December of 2012. "Son, I am so proud of you for overcoming what you have to become Dr. Brady, but I am more proud of the man that you have become in the process, and that you have never lost sight of who you are or where you come from…fight with all you have to never lose yourself in all that you do and the places that you go in life."

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# Writing to Cope: Meaning Making for Professionals Caring for the Cancer Patient

Nicole Saint-Louis

**Abstract**: This paper will focus on the use of narrative or writing as an opportunity to bear witness, honor and work through the grief and loss professional caregivers experience in their oncology practice. The discussion includes, meaning making, narrative theory, narrative therapy and the growing literature of narrative medicine. Sample narratives will be shared to elucidate how writing can assist with the pain, loss and grief professional caregivers experience in the care of those coping with death and dying.

*Keywords*: meaning-making, narrative oncology, cancer, theory

During my tenure as an inpatient oncology social worker, I spent much of my time supporting patients and families. At one point, I noticed that I was spending nearly as much time providing support for my colleagues. I worked in a nationally recognized cancer center that was a preferred treatment facility for a number of different types of cancer. Over the course of one particular month, the nurses, physicians, social workers, and other professionals that I worked with on one of the three-inpatient acute care oncology units, experienced fifteen patient deaths. The stories of sorrow, pain, and despair felt by patients and families were palpable and were worn on the faces of my professional caregiving colleagues. In order to cope with my own emotions, I began to write. I integrate parts of my own caregiving narrative into the discussion.

In this paper, I briefly reflect on the emotional manifestation and observation of grief and loss in the professionals that care for cancer patients. Then, I provide a theoretical framework for the use of narratives in coping with suffering, grief and loss in professional caregivers in oncology practice. I mention Frankl and meaning making in the midst of suffering and the parallels to the daily practice of oncology professional caregivers. Additionally, the theoretical discussion includes narrative theory, narrative therapy and the burgeoning literature of narrative medicine. Nearly fifteen years of inpatient hospital social work and oncology experience inform this discussion. Sample narratives are shared to elucidate how writing can assist with the pain, loss and grief professional caregivers experience in the care of those coping with death and dying.

## Observation and Manifestation of Grief through Narrative

Many emotions accompany a cancer diagnosis, which the patient expresses through patterns of gestures, expressions, sounds or words, and which the oncology healthcare professional observes and internalizes. Anxiety, hope, and distress manifest when a patient and his or her health caregiving team embark on the beginning of treatment (NCCN, 2008). Patients and the medical providers accept the risky side effects of the treatment with the anticipatory knowledge that the cure will be worthwhile. In those instances when the treatment does not go as expected, or all treatments have been exhausted and death is imminent, patients and the professionals that care for them are confronted with the reality of their own mortality. The need to deal with multiple losses simultaneously is the foremost coping task faced by a dying patient, their loved ones and the health care workers (Block, 2001). Writing in the form of personal journaling and/or blogging (an illness narrative) is one medium that helps individuals cope with the distress, grief, and loss associated with a cancer diagnosis.

As a social worker and mental health professional, the impact of the suffering of the patients and families we work with can be especially intense. We are taught to empathize with our clients and to forge strong alliances with those we serve, especially during times of suffering. This prolonged contact with patients in emotional distress can be painful. Brown (2006) discussed that vulnerability is at the heart of a lot of emotions, especially empathy and shame. Empathizing with our patients requires the professional caregiver to be vulnerable. We share their emotional journeys, we grieve and we mourn the loss of patients with whom we have developed close relationships. I began to write down thoughts about my experiences and the pain I was witnessing.

One nurse became tearful in a corner of the nurse's station while organizing her medications to give to her next patient. I went over to speak with her. She strained to speak through a cracking voice and she looked at me through her tear- filled eyes saying, "it's just so hard…I just came back from maternity leave and [the patient] has young kids…"

One of the patients that we had worked with for years

died unexpectedly. The nurse taking care of him exited the room and collapsed as she let out guttural sobs…

I frequently held back tears welling in my eyes so as to be present with patients and families. I never wanted them to feel like they had to take care of me, but the constant dissociation of feeling takes an emotional toll. In the next section, I share a narrative of my work with Ms. F and her family.

## Narrative: Ms. F and Family

While in rounds this morning, I observed the beleaguered nursing staff listen closely while the inpatient oncology attending, Dr. T, explained that all efforts to help Ms. F, a 40-something mother of four, were in vain. Ms. F was a full-code and the physician stated solemnly, "I do not know if we can keep her alive through the night. She has mets pervading every portion of her lungs, along with multiple PEs and is on a 50% nonrebreather…" While Dr. T rattled off the multiple comorbidities everyone in the room gasped and the air we began to breath seemed somehow thicker. We were all still reeling from the numerous deaths that had occurred over the past few weeks.

I met with Mr. F, the patient's husband regularly since Ms. F was admitted and he was struggling. It was only 3 days ago that she came to our floor, but it seemed like weeks. His wife's turn for the worse happened so suddenly. Mr. F was unsure if he should tell his four children about her condition and if so how to tell them. He hoped that Dr. G, the outpatient oncology attending that had been treating his wife for months would bring better news.

Before Dr. G met with the family, he came to my office. He did not have anything hopeful to share with Mr. F and he looked so defeated. Ms. F's rapidly declining health also hit him hard. He had given her excellent care and at one point, she seemed like she might go into remission. I listened intently to Dr. G as he recalled getting to know this patient and family and his recommended course of treatment. I knew that he kept searching his mind for something else he could give her, some therapy, some medicine. He was questioning his abilities as a healer. What happened? How come it didn't work? I always knew him as someone who cared for all of his patients and I reassured him that it sounded like he had done everything he could do to help Ms. F. At the end of our lengthy conversation, he thanked me for working with the family. As he was leaving

he turned and asked, "Do you think he [the husband] should tell the kids?"

I responded that I thought it was best to give the kids the option; three of their children were young adults and should have the opportunity to decide if they wanted to see, and very likely say goodbye, to their mother. I acknowledged that the youngest child was probably too young to understand, but that the patient might want to see her baby. Dr. G lowered his head and said, "I will talk to him too…this is so hard." I could see and feel the weight of this situation on his shoulders. I walked him out to the nurses' station, where he leaned on the counter, to balance himself and took a deep breath. "Dr. G, this family is so blessed to have such a caring doctor. You have done everything you could for her," I said quietly. He looked at me, let out another deep breath and said, "It's just so hard." I knew what he meant. The nurse standing nearby had a similar posture and listened intently. We shared a knowing glance as Dr. G readied himself to enter the room. "Would you like me to go with you?" "Yes, that would be great."

Initially, the patient's husband and father of their children thought it would be better if the children did not miss school and did not have to deal with witnessing their mother dying. Over the three days we met, I provided emotional support in all of our interactions and acknowledged his ambivalence about telling his children. It was clear, he was having difficulty coping and he wanted to protect his children from the pain he was feeling. He was also holding out hope that Ms. F would improve.

Ultimately, when it was apparent that his beloved wife was going to die, he told me that he thought about it and he felt that giving their children the opportunity to make a decision was what he wanted to do. He asked if I would be there when he called his children…at the close of the phone call, he told me they would be at the hospital in about two hours. He asked if I would meet with them when they came to the hospital…

I sat with him in the corner of the oncology unit, near the elevators as we waited for two of his four children (ages 18 and 16) to arrive. His eldest child, age 20, was away at college and was coming in after classes that evening. As we sat on the bench, the father said with his voice shaking and head to his chest, "I do not think I can be here when they come." He looked up at me and his eyes pleaded, "Please help." I encouraged him to take some time for himself. He had been there from the moment his wife was admitted with no time to truly grieve. He checked to make sure I was willing

to stay, he thanked me, and then he politely and quietly excused himself.

As I waited for the kids to arrive, I thought, "tissues, I need tissues…" I grabbed a bunch of boxes of the cheap hospital tissues, wishing I had some nice soft brand-named ones, and placed them in various strategic locations. I decided I would also carry three boxes with me. I paced back and forth in front of the elevator waiting for the doors to open. I watched the elevator doors open and I saw two teenagers and Ms. F's sister-in-law. Ms. F's sister-in-law had been at the hospital and she went to pick the children up from school.

Both of the children were so poised, however, their breathing was rapid and the sadness and fear flickered in their wide-eyed expressions. I introduced myself to them and asked if they would be willing to talk for a minute before they went into the room to see their mother. They both nodded affirmatively seeming relieved to catch their breath. I took them to a quiet conference room on the unit that the clinical nurse specialist had reserved for us. Once they sat down, I let them know my role and that I had been talking with their dad since their mom was admitted to the hospital. I told them their dad would be back soon and that he had just taken a walk. I then asked them what they knew so far. They both looked at me and the eldest began pausing in between words to catch his breath, "We know our mom has cancer and she is really sick. We know it's bad." I responded, "yes, your mom is quite sick…When you go in the room your mom will look very different than the last time you saw her…"

They looked at me as I spoke to them and I knew they were listening intently. I felt as though I could hear their hearts beating loudly. I admired their courage. I could tell the brother, who was older, was trying to be strong for his sister and he rubbed her head as she leaned into him. I tried to calm them, and myself, through soft tones attempting to model relaxed breathing. I asked them if they had any questions. The daughter was kneading her hands and she looked at her brother who asked, "Is this it? Should we say goodbye?" It was here that I almost lost it. I slowly inhaled and did not speak until I knew my voice would be steady. I let them know that the doctors said that their mother has been fighting hard to get well, but that despite her strength and determination, her body was giving out. After I finished answering all their questions and we sat for a moment, I asked them if they were ready to go see their mom. I let them both know that

"whatever you are feeling is normal and okay."

I encouraged them to talk to their mother and tell her whatever they wanted her to know. We all left the conference room together. I led the way with their aunt walking behind them. It was a long walk in short hallway. We walked quietly and slowly together. I stopped to wait for them periodically, checking to see how they were doing and then I would turn towards the room. It felt as though we were in a silent film walking in slow motion. I could not hear the noise of the unit and it seemed eerily quiet for the afternoon. As we walked by the nurses' station, one nurse turned away as if she was looking at the screen, but I could see that she was wiping tears from her eyes. As we got just outside of Ms. F's room, the 16-year-old daughter collapsed onto the floor with her head in her hands and began to sob. Her aunt was nearest and reached down and plucked her from the floor embracing her with tears streaming down her face. I fought tears with all my might and I could see a number of my colleagues had tears running down their cheeks. I waited for Ms. F's daughter and her aunt until they indicated silently that I could continue to lead them to the room.

As we approached the door, Ms. F's 18-year-old son put on his bravest posture attempting to hold back tears and as he did this his thin frame convulsed with no sound. The patient's daughter entered the room after her brother and both children embraced and began to sob. They held each other for a couple of minutes and I stood next to them with eyes full of water as their aunt embraced them. I was still holding the tissue boxes as a stray tear escaped and trickled down my cheek. Once they had released all of the initial tension, both teens and their aunt faced me and took a tissue as I offered it to them. I reassured them. "Tell your mother whatever you want her to know." I told them that I was going to give them time as a family and I would be just outside if they needed anything or had any questions. I watched as they approached their mother's bed so gingerly and then they began to hug her, laying their bodies across hers as they cried. As I walked out of the room, the patient's husband approached and we shared a look. He braced himself as he walked into the room.

## Reflections

I began to question the meaning of this work. How do we prevent emotional exhaustion and stay fully present and empathic in the midst of such suffering? How can we find meaning of the seemingly senseless death of this young mother? How do we witness suffering day after day without losing empathy? How do we stay

focused and attentive to the needs of our patients? Charon (2006) echoed these questions:

> How can one develop the state of attention required to fulfill the duties incurred by virtue of having heard the accounts of illness? I have become very interested in the state of attention these days – it seems the most pivotal skill with which to endow a health professional who wants to be a healer. How does one empty the self or at least suspend the self so as to become a receptive vessel for the language and experience of another? This imaginative, active, receptive, aesthetic experience of donating the self toward the meaning making of the other is a dramatic, daring, transformative move…(p. 263).

According to Kleinman (1988), "an approach that takes the illness experience into consideration is a reconceptualization of medical care to include the empathic witnessing of the existential experience of suffering and practical coping with psychosocial crisis" (p.10). Over the past several years, there has been an explosion of illness narratives published by patients. Concomitantly, there has been an increase in the production of narratives in healthcare professionals (Charon, 2006; Frank, 1995, Kleinman, 1988). Charon (2006) who coined the term *Narrative Medicine*, and later, *Narrative Oncology* commented:

> By telling of what we undergo…in the care of the sick, we are coming to recognize the layered consequences of illness and to acknowledge the fear and hope and love exposed in sickness (p. 262).

Professionals experience both the pain and the privilege of caring for the sick. We also attempt to recognize each patient's individual and unique narratives. Accordingly, we healthcare professionals need to have a forum to share their own caregiving illness narratives reflecting upon the "layered consequences" of helping and healing the sick person.

When the professional caregiver listens to the patient tell his or her story, he or she encourages the patient to give voice to their pain. The professional *bears witness* to the suffering that their patients experience, thus informing their own caregiving narrative. Telling and subsequently hearing the illness stories or caregiving stories of others puts the experience into personal and social contexts, gives coherence, structure, symbolism, and meaning to

what may be an otherwise chaotic and *distressing* experience.

Several studies in a variety of populations have shown that the ability to make sense of loss (in personal, spiritual or philosophical terms) alleviates disabling grief symptomatology (Coleman & Neimeyer, 2010; Currier, Holland, & Neimeyer, 2006; Davis, Wohl, & Verberg, 2007; Niemeyer, Torres, & Smith, 2011) and that writing is one way to make sense and meaning in the midst of loss. The use of narrative helps the professional caregiver alleviate grief the same as it does for patients.

There is a movement to utilize the methods of oral historians and those who work in trauma studies as testimony to learn how they equip themselves as witnesses to others' suffering (Charon, 2005). As more health professionals share their caregiving experiences, their experiences and indirect suffering are given a language so that other professionals understand. There is a therapeutic component to the combination of reading, writing and sharing – - healing.

Through identifying their own strengths and weaknesses in caregiving, and the sharing of one's oral narrative, the health professional "bears witness" to the distress, grief, loss, and suffering of illness and is better able to attend to the needs of their patients. Additionally, through the process of sharing and discussing these narratives the caregiver is better able to deal with the rigors of working with death and dying (Saint-Louis & Bourjolly, n.d.).

**Meaning Making**

Narrative theorists study how stories help make sense of the world and phenomenon while also studying how people make sense and meaning of the stories. In Frankl (1959/2006), the narrative of his personal experience in the concentration camps, he described an extreme version of emotional exhaustion that occurred as a result of witnessing the constant exposure to the horrors of these death camps and brutal human loss. Along the way Frankl discovered that human beings' ultimate drive is to find meaning and purpose for existence. He asserted that if one is able to find this meaning and purpose, then one can endure all of life's hardships, including suffering and death: "When we are no longer able to change a situation …we are challenged to change ourselves" (Frankl, p. 112).

The professional caregiver has the opportunity to assist a dying patient's attempt to find meaning, while also

finding his or her own meaning in providing this care. Additionally, through participation in reflective writing, or writing groups such as narrative oncology or narrative medicine, the professional finds a way of avoiding depersonalization, demoralization and meaninglessness during suffering. The narratives or stories help transcend the suffering and restore meaning to chaos, and rejuvenate workers to deal with the rigors of their work. Grieving among the professional caregivers should be encouraged rather than stifled. It is in the safety of a room of colleagues, which allows for the vulnerability necessary to restore empathy (Brown, 2006). Through the use of narrative, it is supposed that clinicians constantly exposed to death, disease and human loss can examine their own emotions about these situations. By examining their inner feelings about the difficulties of care, one reasons they will be reenergized and thus able to identify with the singularity of each patient. In the case of Frankl, perhaps the mere act of writing his thoughts and feelings down contributed to his ability to cope with the horrors of his experience.

**Narrative Theory and Narrative Therapy**

The theoretical foundations for narrative medicine or narrative oncology come from a number of clinical fields whose practitioners are committed to hearing patients out and acting as active receptacle for their patients' stories of suffering (Charon, 2006).

Narratology is the structuralist study of narrative or of stories. Traditionally, narratologists have concentrated on the criticisms of the narrative plot. Culler (1983) discussed how the contemporary narratologists emphasize story presentation or the narrative act as a key component of the meaning of the story. The shaping of the human experience is initialized and continued through stories. The structuralist analysis of narrative attempts to comprehend how the recurrent themes and patterns yield a set of universals that determine the makeup of a story. Moving from taxonomy of elements to how the elements are arranged in the actual narratives is the ultimate goal (Pradl, 1984), as also noted by White (1980, p. 5):

> To raise the question of the nature of narrative is to invite reflection on the very nature of culture and possibly, even on the nature of humanity itself. So natural is the impulse to narrate, so inevitable is the form of narrative for any report of the way things really happened, that narrativity could appear problematical only in a culture in

which it was absent…far from being a problem, then, narrative might well be considered a solution to a problem of general human concern, namely, the problem of how to translate *knowing* into *telling* (p. 5).

The French philosopher, historian and sociologist Michel Foucault whose thoughts and work heavily influenced the development of narrative therapy, noted:

> Medicine offers modern man the obstinate, yet reassuring face of his finitude; in it, death is endlessly repeated, but it is also exorcised; and although it ceaselessly reminds man of the limit that he bears within him, it also speaks to him of that technical world that is the armed, positive, full form of his finitude (Foucault, 1973; p. 198).

Narrative theory is actualized when it is applied to therapeutic situations. Narrative therapies or approaches are derived mainly from the works of White and Epston (1990). They began their collaboration in the 1980s and drew upon the works of Foucault, Jerome Bruner (psychologist), Erving Goffman (sociologist) and Gregory Bateson (anthropologist and communications theorist) (Kelley, 1996; Walsh, 2006; White & Epston, 1990). Bruner had been using narrative as an organizing metaphor for numerous years prior to the connection or use of it with family therapy circles (Bruner, 1986; Freedman & Combs, 1996).

When both narrative and social constructionism are used as guiding metaphors for one's work, one sees how the stories that permeate our society constitute our lives and the people we work with (Freedman & Combs, 1996). Societies construct the lenses through which their members interpret the world, whether that society is in south central Los Angeles, in rural South India, or in the corridors of an inpatient oncology unit.

In narrative therapy, White and Epston (1990) wanted *the clients* to be the authors of their stories and to partner with their *therapists* to deconstruct and eventually re-author a new narrative. In rendering accounts of individual experience, once an illness event, interaction with a patient or related emotions are identified, one wants to link those events, interactions or emotions that occur over time in order to make sense or meaning from them. Thus, once a preferred illness event is identified and storied, we can ask questions and inquire about what might link it to other events in the past and the future (Freedman & Combs, 1996). White and Epston (1990) wrote:

Social scientists became interested in the text analogy following observations that, although a piece of behavior occurs in time in such a way that it no longer exists in the present by the time it is attended to, the meaning that is inscribed into the behavior survives across time…In striving to make sense of life, persons face the task of arranging their experiences of events in sequences across time in such a way as to arrive at a coherent account of themselves and the world around them (p. 9).

In White and Epston's (1990) narrative therapy, the person is not seen as the problem, but rather that there is a problem-saturated story that requires deconstruction, externalization, and later reconstruction forming a new co-created story. In the context of narrative therapy the therapist attempts to step away from oppressive parts of a person's story and discover untold narrative, intentions, hopes, desires, dreams and values and to discern the client's preferred way of being. The focus is not on the "expert" therapist solving the problem like a facilitator, but it is through these conversations that the client and therapist will re-story and co-construct a new narrative for the client. Clients are often asked to view the story as if he or she were an outsider and to think about alternative outcomes for the protagonist in the story.

Thus, the use written narratives about illness as the "preferred event" or "problem saturated story" helps the writer to make meaning, to deconstruct and then externalize the issue. The reconstruction or co-construction of stories occurs in the verbal discourse of the narrative oncology sessions – the verbatim oral recitation of the written narratives and the subsequent exchange between the healthcare professionals and the facilitator.

### Narrative Oncology a form of Narrative Medicine

Narrative Oncology is a type of narrative medicine practiced by oncology professionals. This type of *Narrative Medicine* uses writing as a co-creation of meaning between the patient and the professional or brings a more relational stance to medical practice through writing. Charon defines narrative medicine as medicine practiced with narrative competence or as "fortifying clinical practice with narrative competence to recognize, absorb, metabolize, interpret, and be moved by the stories of illness" (Charon, n.d.). Charon identified five narrative features of medicine – temporality, singularity,

causality/contingency, intersubjectivity and ethicality:

> [Medical] practice is suffused with attention to life's temporal horizons, with the commitment to describe the singular, with the urge to uncover plot (even though much of what occurs in its realm is, sadly, random and plotless), and with an awareness of the intersubjective and ethical nature of healing (Charon, 2006, p. 39).

Medicine practiced narratively was initially intended as a clinical writing discipline for physicians. However, it now includes a broad range of professionals and refers to "theory and practice of reading, writing, telling and receiving stories" (Charon, 2006, p. viii).

An important component of narrative medicine or narrative oncology is the act of telling one's story in the presence of another. The other bears witness and helps mitigate existential fears of loneliness, suffering, physical harm, loss and death. Both the practitioner and patient, or in the case of narrative oncology rounds described below, practitioner and practitioner, witness the unfolding of a life story in the former or the observing of a professional caregiving narrative in the latter. In narrative oncology rounds or sessions, the professionals share their narratives and comment on the writing of the other.

Narrative oncology sessions typically occur in the healthcare facility where the professionals are situated. The rounds or sessions can last anywhere from forty-five minutes to an hour-and-a-half. There is a usually a facilitator that helps to keep the discussion moving and pulls out themes in the writing and sharing of colleagues. These meetings can occur monthly or bi-weekly. The oncology professional caregivers are urged to write to a prompt or questions posed by the facilitator. Alternatively, they can bring something they wrote outside of the session.

### *Temporality*

For healthcare professionals, especially those practicing with terminally ill patients, time is a particularly vivid concept. They struggle to find more of it for their patients. When there are no treatment options left physicians may recommend administering salvage chemo treatments. Nurses and social workers may advocate maintaining a patient's comfort and recommending transitioning their suffering patients to hospice care, which supports quality of life rather than an extension of it at the cost of maintaining comfort.

Sometimes the entire medical team sees the futility of treatment, but cannot imagine "not fighting" or "giving up" on the young mother who had to terminate her pregnancy when diagnosed with leukemia, but who has other young children at home. No matter what struggle presents itself daily, there is the irrefutable fact that time is precious and that it is fleeting. They grapple with the fairness of their jobs and the fact that they feel obligated to see each of their critically ill patients before they leave for the day because they may not be there tomorrow. They listen to the stories told by their newly diagnosed patients, who prior to lying in their hospital bed were working in healthcare themselves. The Latin saying "tempus fugit" rings especially true in oncology work.

### *Singularity*

Through acknowledging their own singularity, oncology professionals recognize the singularity of their patients and are better able to bear witness and accompany patients on their respective journeys. The sentiment shared in the narrative excerpts below is akin to Charon's previous assertions:

> The reflective writing that is growing in medicine for students and for professionals testifies to professionals' willingness and skill to examine their own experiences and to make sense of their own journeys, not for solipsistic reasons but for the sake of improving the care they deliver (Charon, 2006, p.47).

Although, all of the patients that oncology professionals care for have cancer, many with the similar diagnoses, they are each unique. Ms. F had children like many of our patients, and by writing about and recognizing the singular experience of the F family, it helped me to continue to hear each individual patient voice. Singularity in the narrative realm means that each patient is no longer reducible to a number and his/her individual situation is recognized and appreciated.

### *Causality/Contingency*

Narratives have plots and announce a series of events. Narratives attempt to make sense of why things happen, connect thoughts through motive or cause (Charon, 2006). There are a lot of unknowns in caring for the terminally ill and there are many questions that consume the thoughts of professional caregivers. Why do some persons respond to treatment and others do not? What causes leukemia

or lymphoma? How long can I continue to work in this environment?

The plots that we encounter and create in medical practice are very practically and irrevocably about their endings. They point to human ends, using their geometries to understand or to imagine the vectors of life, the plottedness of life, the inevitability of death, and the narrative connections among us all (Charon, 2006, p.51).

The patient was diagnosed with cancer is a story. The patient was diagnosed with cancer, was working full-time until she was admitted, and her husband was not coping well is a plot (Forster, 1927). The effort to find causes and make sense of why things happen is the engine that propels narrative (Charon, 2006). In the case of Ms. F, I had to uncover Mr. F's reasoning for not wanting to tell his children about his wife's illness. Part of the plot was his fear of losing his wife and the great pain and suffering that would come in having to tell his children they were losing their mother.

### *Intersubjectivity*

"The subject is the self-who-knows, the self-who-acts, and the self-who-observes," (Charon, 2006, p.51). As healthcare professionals, we often struggle with emotional proximity to our patients and their stories. We simultaneously strive to have empathy and emotional closeness and to be present and care for them while also maintaining enough emotional distance to continue our work. These seemingly conflicting ideas demonstrate one of the major challenges and risks involved in oncology work.

The professionals struggle with how to connect and at the same time self-protect. The intimacy between patient and healthcare professional occurs through our interactions with them, especially through listening to what they tell us (Charon, 2006). We become receptacles for patient stories and join with them to create meaning. Additionally, we learn from one another when we share our caregiving narratives. The intersubjective exchange with patients or with colleagues allows for each individual professional to make personal discoveries.

### *Ethicality*

How do oncology physicians, nurses, and social workers sustain themselves in oncology work? How do these professionals make meaning in their work? By sharing narratives in the hospital setting, the receiver owes something to the teller by virtue of

knowing it (Charon, 2006). The stories told within conference rooms on the hospital wards and their tellers expect confidentiality and the receivers of this knowledge do as well. The comfort found in the "safe-space" is both literal and allegorical.

### Three Movements of Narrative Medicine

In addition to the five features of *Narrative Medicine*, there are also three movements of narrative medicine are *attention, representation and affiliation* (Charon, 2006). The three movements support the theoretical orientation that *narrating* is an avenue toward consciousness, engagement, responsibility and ethicality.

Healthcare professionals *attend* to the multiple issues, requests, and patients at once. In the context of dealing with a terminally ill patient, *attending* to a patient's needs change from the hope and optimism of treatment to dealing with the emotions of death and dying. These feelings are often intensified in inpatient settings as the healthcare providers deal with the most acutely ill patients. The use of narrative helps the professional to refocus on the story of a unique patient.
Through the story the healthcare professionals are *representing* what they have witnessed. Additionally, by sharing the writing verbatim in a group setting colleagues from the same or other disciplines share or *affiliate* in and learn from the story. In a recent study, professionals expressed comfort in these shared perspectives (Saint-Louis & Bourjolly, n.d.). The *affiliation* through the attention and representation occurs not only among clinicians themselves, but also includes an affiliation with the patient – a greater understanding of the patient's journey.

This reflective and/or creative writing is not confined by or bound to the limits and conventions of the medical chart or the electronic medical record. Narrative medicine and it relatives, i.e., literature-and-medicine, relationship-centered care, patient-centered care and others, encourage healthcare professionals to *represent* more completely what they learn about patients and themselves (Charon, 2006).

### Bearing Witness-Sample Narratives

### Sample Narrative A

The following narrative written by an oncology nurse demonstrates the emotional journey of this one

professional.

Zora (Oncology Nurse) narrative:

> I think it's hard when in the end, the effects of our chemo end up hurting the patient. He was so positive, so optimistic and I knew the first hour of my first shift caring for him that he'd be a patient that I'd never forget with a passion for the Phillies and college football, we immediately hit it off. I was his RN the day of his day 14 bone marrow biopsy and you could just see the hope in him and his wife. As days and weeks went by those results meant little. Persistently febrile, fungal pneumonia, we just couldn't win. Even days I was not caring for him, at least 5 minutes of my day included a quick chat with him and his wife – pitching debates, or a "it's fine, I'll get through it." Ultimately, the time came that we couldn't handle his care here [on a regular medical oncology floor]. It felt like such a defeat. When I finally got the guts to see him in the MICU, he wasn't the man we all got to know and love anymore.

Sitting in my car unable to stop crying.

What's the point of working here? I just can't imagine how his family is dealing without such an amazing man… last week when he was in my dream – I'm still unsure where we were, but we were walking together. I kept saying, "No you're dead, how are you here? And all he could say is – 'Zora (name changed), I'm fine, it's ok now.' And all I can hope is his family knows too. Zora spoke of the hope in the beginning of treatment and the subsequent disappointments, loss and pain encountered through her interactions while caring for this patient. Zora had been carrying the grief of the loss of this patient with her so that it manifested in her dreams where she was searching for peace. Through her writing she shares her grief and her story closes and cycles back to hope again. She was able to use the supportive environment of narrative oncology rounds to confront her emotions. By writing down her story, she was able to come full circle from hope to hope and she found meaning in her knowledge of and relationship with this patient. Other narratives might appear cold to an outside reader, however, fellow healthcare professionals can relate to the reality and the emotional toll of this narrative within the group setting.

### Sample Narrative B

A nurse, who came to the narrative oncology session on her day off, wrote the following narrative,

We practice primary nursing on our floor. The first patient I ever signed up for was [Patient's Initials] – a 45-year-old female. Personally, I'm not particularly good with names – but, to give you a sense of how well I knew this patient, I can tell you I not only knew her, but her children's names, her daughter's boyfriend's name, best friends' names, her favorite color, what she thought of her husband, etc. etc. [Patient name] was being treated for ALL. She had not achieved remission and the last time I saw her – she was receiving MOAD chemo regimen. During our last encounter, she was not my assigned patient for the day. I found that I was avoiding going to visit her, because I knew I would cry in front of and with her. Her last bone marrow biopsy showed 70% blasts – this was her last ditch effort chemo – it had to work…or else. I finally made myself go to her that day – she was sleeping – just had IV Benadryl. I gave her a hug, she smiled, and I left. About a week later, I was working and overheard someone mentioning her name. I inquired about it and heard she passed away in the MICU. I was in disbelief. I could not conceive of what had happened.

Professionals like the nurse who shared this narrative often create physical distance between themselves and their patients. The nurse admits how well she knew this patient, which indicates the emotional bond forged between this professional caregiver and this patient and her family. They admit that they do not visit with the patient if they are not actively caring for them, but as this narrative indicates their thoughts are still very connected to these patients. There seems to be a feeling of guilt in the lack of closure, the fact that there were no goodbyes, that one moment the person is alive and the next moment they are not.

### Sample Narrative C

The following narrative by an inpatient oncology social worker expresses deeply complex emotions experienced while caring for a young mother. She wrote about the conflict of the wishes of the patient's family for prolonged hospitalization and "extraordinary medical care" or measures taken to extend the patient's life and her ultimate desire for the pain and suffering of this young patient to end:

> I am writing about my experience working on a very poignant case. I first met this patient a year ago when she was first diagnosed with acute lymphocytic leukemia. She was 36-years old and also 21 weeks pregnant at the time of diagnosis.

She had to terminate the pregnancy at that time with minimal family support. The patient was a single mother to a 3-year-old girl. I got to know this patient very well, as she was initially admitted for a month and she had several other admissions for more chemo for a period of several months. This patient received a BMT in February and since she was discharged from [the Hospital] in March, she suffered several complications, forcing her to be hospitalized multiple times, with several admissions being very lengthy. She has not been home since May, going between [the Hospital] and a nursing facility. The patient is now in the MICU on a ventilator, dialysis and several pressers. Her heart is so weak and she will most likely die very soon, despite the fact that she remains a full code, per her family's request. I've seen her in the MICU. Her body looks like it is rotting. After all the suffering that this woman has endured, I just want for her suffering to end.

Sometimes the narratives resemble the bluntness and lack of emotion of chart writing. However, there is so much emotion and pain in the last sentence and the desire to have her suffering end. Here the clinician's wishes for the patients suffering to end are based on her experience and the knowledge of probable outcomes, which ran contrary to the desire of the family. The social worker seeks release from her pain as well.

This type of conflict would rarely manifest in a setting other than the supportive context of a narrative oncology session. Here the facilitator can lead the discussion of the narrative and colleagues support this professional in her emotional conflict and turmoil because they too have had similar experiences. In traditional daily medical rounds, the professional might simply express that the patient and/or family have "unreasonable expectations," but he/she would not elaborate on the feelings underlying this statement. Through the use of narrative medicine rounds, this writing in the group setting and verbally sharing what was written offers support to the writer that might not have otherwise been available. Additionally, it helps others in the group affiliate with the writer's experience thus building community. Through these moments of reflection, professionals described feeling better equipped to deal with similar situations and to cope with the rigors of their work (Saint-Louis & Bourjolly, n.d.). The clinical detachment or emotional numbing exhibited in Sample Narrative C is also a part of the meaning making that occurs within the group setting and for the writer of the narrative.

### Sample Narrative D

Below is another sample narrative shared in a narrative oncology group setting. The following is an excerpt of James' (name changed) story, which highlights the last meeting of this clinician, and this patient, who presented to the emergency department for leg pain. The leg pain and wound that accompanied the pain would later be diagnosed as a pathologic fracture due to Stage IV lung cancer. James' initial admission lasted three months (Late February to April) and three months later (July), upon readmission to the hospital he died on inpatient hospice.

We then began to communicate nonverbally. I rolled up a pillow and put it under his head and we moved in this silent way both of us trying to alleviate his apparent discomfort and air hunger. In the midst of this awkward dance, he made us both chuckle when he stated with a delivery that was quintessentially his, "I'm going for the 'L' shape." Ironically, I immediately understood what he meant because it helped maximize the flow of oxygen to his labored lungs. After we managed to make him less uncomfortable, I sat in the chair next to the bed. I knew he was tired, not just physically tired, but emotionally. He was ready to go soon. "James, it's ok if you want to go to sleep." He replied, "you ain't gonna leave me is you." "No, I'm right here. I will sit with you for awhile." I thought I would try to stay until Kendra came back so that he wouldn't be alone. I was hoping she wouldn't be too late as I thought about all that I had to do before days end, but I chose not to worry, and to sit and absorb this moment. I sat still somewhere between tears and stoicism. I sat in the nondescript concave blue chair next to a sleeping Jake as a swirl of emotions rushed over my person. I thought about my first interaction with Jake who was admitted through the emergency room for an orthopedic issue, only to find that it was caused by metastasized tumor from his stage IV lung cancer. Jake pulled me out of my thoughts with a whisper, "I feel like the devil is on top of me…"

My heart sank and I felt a chill in my spine. " What makes you feel like that?" " I've done a lot of bad stuff in my life." I chose to comfort him and to engage in a discussion about his spiritual beliefs. Later I would ask the Chaplin to stop in and see him as well. He stated that he talked to God all of the time and that his ultimate comfort came through his redemptive relationship with his Creator. Silence fell upon us once again with only the sound of the oxygen flowing through his mask. "Are you

scared?" "Sometimes." I just rubbed his hand and my heart ached inside my chest. We sat like this for several moments and I said; "we knew it was going to happen, we just didn't know it would be this soon." He shook his head as a tear trickled down his cheek, "I wish I had more time." I fought back the tears welling in my eyes.

This particular narrative highlights the author's coping with her own grief rather than the detailed clinical interactions she had with the patient in previous meetings. This narrative focuses on what was important to her at the moment of the meeting and compelled her to write. She was in pain and grieving and as she was writing about him tears began to stream down her cheeks. Writing this narrative allowed the author to bear witness to the suffering of the patient and his family as well as to grieve for and eulogize the patient. It also allowed for the revisiting of tender moments and memories of a patient that she came to admire and adore.

Additionally, the memorializing and reflection through the narrative and subsequent sharing with colleagues of the patient and the moment allows for learning to occur. Through sharing this story with other colleagues in narrative oncology rounds, the professional found comfort in the similar stories of colleagues – thereby affiliating and building community. Professionals have little time to process their own emotions, however, through the writing of the narrative she gave form to her pain and she was then able to work through the emotions. She was also able to share this story with her colleagues who processed the story of the patient and shared similar emotions. In the next section, I share a narrative of my practice with Mr. A:

### Narrative: Mr. A

One evening around 7pm, I was finishing up some documentation when there was a knock on the door. It was the Clinical Nurse Specialist. Her eyes showed a glimmer of hope mixed with relief that I was still in the office, "I know it is late and you are trying to get out of here, but we have a situation."

"Of course, what is going on?"

"We have a patient in Room 21, that is end stage. He is mostly unresponsive and he is actively dying. We do not have a single contact. We do not know what to do and we don't want him to die alone. We have made him comfortable…" She trailed off, "would you?"

Before she finished her sentence, I started to get up from my chair.

She looked at me with such appreciation and thanked me. I walked to the back nurses' station and I opened the paper portion of the chart to see what information might identify the patient. There was nothing. I searched every computer database we used, also nothing. According to the chart and the nursing staff, the patient's primary language was Japanese. However, he was fluent in English. I then gowned and gloved and went into the patient's room. He was in and out of consciousness. I touched his hand and introduced myself. "Mr. A, is there anyone I can contact to tell them you are here?" He opened his eyes, pulled on my hand, and began to speak, but his words were garbled. He closed his eyes and returned to his agitated slumber. He did not look completely comfortable so I spoke with the nurse.

Then, I sat with him for a couple of minutes, thinking about how I was going to find someone that knows this man and cares for him. The nursing staff knew that he had some children, but that was all of the information they had. I could see the collective concern of the faces of my colleagues and their trust and hope that I could help. I knew finding family was as important for the staff as it was for the patient. We all hated the thought of someone dying alone in a cold, sterile, hospital environment.

As I was thinking, I began to speak to Mr. A. " Is it alright if I look through your bags to see if I can find any information?" I did not know if he truly understood or heard my questions, but he seemed to assent. Subsequently, I began to search respectfully through the pockets of two bags that he had with him when admitted. I did not find much and I was about to give up the search when I realized I missed a pocket. I reached in and found a basic (non-smart) cell phone with duct tape around the battery. I searched through the phone directory and was relieved to see that there were a number of contacts. I went to the Nurses' station across from the patient's room and began to dial the first number on the list. I reached a voice message. Hi "this is …a social worker at… calling to speak with Mr. V. I found your number in Mr. A's cell phone and it is really urgent that I speak with you. I was hoping to get in contact with his family." I methodically made my way through the alphabet of contacts in his phone. Somewhere around the middle of the alphabet, someone answered the phone. I began my introduction, "Hi this is…Do you know Mr. A?"

He spoke English with a thick accent, "Yes, I know A. I am his neighbor." I asked if the neighbor knew Mr. A's family and if he would be able to help me get in contact with them. I sensed some hesitation, perhaps skepticism, which I understood. I acknowledged his concern and I told Mr. A's neighbor that I would not be asking if it were not an emergency situation. He seemed to soften. He told me that Mr. A had two children and that they were hanging out with his children. The neighbor indicated that Mr. A mostly kept to himself and that he was estranged from his wife. He told me he would try to get in touch with family, especially, his children and call me back. I returned to Mr. A's room and let him know that I reached out and tried to find his children.

I tried to encourage him that we were doing everything possible to get his family there. As I sat with Mr. A, I noted the change in the hospital surroundings, the normally well-lit hallway was dark now as it was nearing 9pm and a quiet came over the unit. In spite of Mr. A's deteriorating condition, I thought it was best to give him verbal updates. I sat and spoke to him for quite awhile. Finally, one of the nurses came to the room and stated the phone was for me. The neighbor told me he tried to get the children to call me, but they were busy. I now felt a greater sense of urgency. I thanked him for his efforts to this point and I pleaded with him to please have his children call me as soon as they can. I had not disclosed any details to the neighbor at that point, but I felt I needed to share how dire the situation was with Mr. A.

"Mr. A is very sick. He is probably not going to make it through the night. I know this must be a shock, but we want his family, especially his children, to come and be able to say goodbye to him…" As soon as I said this, the neighbor said, "I will get in touch with them right now. They went to get some food and they are coming back to my house. I promise I will call you right back." I imagined the previous conversation between the neighbor and Mr. A's children. The teenagers probably did not want to be bothered as they were hanging out with friends. Perhaps, they did not have a strong relationship with their father. Also, I had not heard back from anyone else on the list. This time the neighbor called me right back. He indicated that the children were on their way and they should arrive at the hospital in 30 minutes. The neighbor told me he would call some other family and they would come a little bit later.

I shared the news with the clinical nurse specialist, the charge nurse and the other nurses and CNAs caring for Mr. A. They all seemed relieved that some family

were on their way, but uneasy with the fact that two children would be coming. Sensing their discomfort, I reassured my colleagues that I would stay until the children arrived and talk with them before I left for the evening. We spoke about how hard it had been on the unit lately. One nurse shared, "I don't think I could handle it without your help tonight." I knew what she meant. We talked through how we were feeling and we supported one another as we waited for the children. I felt incredibly lucky to work with such compassionate colleagues.

I re-gowned and gloved and went into the room to speak with Mr. A who seemed to be resting more comfortably. I spoke to him and told him his children were on their way. I touched the top of his hand, but he seemed to be slipping further away. I whispered again, "I am trying to get your family here. Your children are on their way." I hoped that he would hold on and wait for them to arrive. I knew the look and smell of impending death and I knew it would not be long. I stayed with him for a bit and realized I had not called my own loved ones. I realized how tired I was and I went out to the desk to make a phone call. Just as I finished the call, two children came around the corner and appeared at the nurses' station.

They looked around the same age, approximately, 11 and 12 years old. Later, I found out they were 14 and 12. They had terrified looks on their faces and seemed apprehensive to approach Mr. A's room. They were dressed casually and each had a fast food container in their hand. The nurses looked at me with an expression that pleaded, *please don't leave yet. Please help us with the kids.*

I introduced myself and Mr. A's primary nurse to the children. As I gowned and gloved, I spoke to them and two nurses helped both children gown and glove..We walked into the room together. I reintroduced myself to them and explained my role. However, they did not respond. Their eyes were wide open and they were staring at their father in the bed. They looked like they were in shock. Both teenagers had been out having fun with friends and now they were thrust into the harsh realities of life. I pulled some chairs near the bed as both children watched my every move. I encouraged them to sit and I pulled up a chair next to them. Both teens sat facing the bed with their chin to the chests with their backs rounded hunching over their laps. They seemed to be avoiding looking at their father. The eldest put his head in his hands. As we sat there, I began to try to engage them in conversation. They

looked at their father but quickly averted their eyes and then they looked at me.

I realized I had introduced myself, but I did not know their names. The older child was more communicative so I asked, "What is your name sweetheart?"

"Jay."

"And what is your name?" directed at the younger of the two. He did not answer. Jay responded, "His name is Matt." I asked about their mother. Jay indicated that she was working and the neighbor would tell her where they were. He indicated that his parents did not really talk to one another. I asked if they had any questions about what was going on with their father, but they did not respond immediately. I explained as sensitively as I could what was happening. They remained quiet and polite. I noticed that Jay wanted to say something, but he seemed stuck. He would mouth words, look at his father, then at me. I let Jay know that it was okay if he wanted to talk to his father. I modeled this by talking with Mr. A and touching his hand.

After I did this, Jay dropped his head to his chest and took a labored breath. I wondered if I had done something disrespectful or culturally inappropriate. I asked the children, what I could do to help them right now. Once I said this, they both relaxed a bit. Jay fixed his eyes on me and I knew he wanted to tell me something. I began to think that I should give them time to themselves and that my presence might have been impairing their communication. I also did not want to leave them alone if they were scared. I started to mention that if they would like I could give them some time alone with their father. They nodded their heads affirmatively. However, I did not feel convinced they wanted to be alone. I acknowledged how difficult this must be for both of them and how they had been having a relaxed night with friends and all of a sudden, they were thrust into a very serious and shocking situation. As I was about to inquire further, Jay seemingly mustered all his strength to say, "We were fighting. We did not have a good relationship."

I thanked him for sharing this information with me and acknowledged again how hard this must be. I shared that "relationships can be complicated, and sometimes even difficult…" They both remained quiet so I continued. "There must be so much going through your minds right now…no matter what happened between you I can see that you care for your father… right now you have the opportunity to talk to him…" I reiterated that I would give them some time alone with

Mr. A. After we sat in silence for a minute or two, I slowly began to move.

Jay grabbed my hand, "Will you stay for a minute?"

" Sure. Of course." I sat next to Jay as he began to cry and squeeze my hand and his father's hand. He did not let go of either as he spoke in both Japanese and English. Every once in awhile, he said, "Why?" through his tears.

The younger child, Matt hesitated, but seeing his brother reach out gave him the courage to do the same. He also held his father's hand. Then Matt looked at me and innocently stated, "Will he be alright?"

I acknowledged that this is a lot to take in right now, but that their father was quite ill. I told them that in a little bit the doctor would be up to see them and they could ask any questions they might have of both the physicians and the nurses. In the meantime, I let Jay and Matt know that the doctors were keeping Mr. A comfortable. I answered their questions and I indicated that the medical team felt that Mr. A had probably a couple of days. However, I knew based on how Mr. A looked that it was probably more like hours. I reiterated that we could call the doctors to come and answer any questions they might have right now, but they seemed to be okay for the moment. I let them know again that the nurses could also answer any medical questions they have about how their father was doing. I sat with them for a bit and I let them know I would give them some time with their father. This time they both seemed to calm down and were more comfortable. I thought this might be a good time to allow them to be alone with their father. After leaving the room, I debriefed the nurses all of whom were nearby at the RN station. As we talked, we could hear the children crying in the room. We paused our conversation and all took a deep breath fighting back our own tears. One nurse looked at me and said, "This is so hard. I do not know how you do it all of the time…Thank you." I agreed that this was difficult and that it impacts us all in different ways. I thanked her for taking such good care of Mr. A…"

## Conclusion

Narratives or writing about clinical practice provide oncology caregiving professionals an opportunity to bear witness, honor and work through the grief and loss they experience in their daily work. As we take care of people in healthcare settings, we become a part of their lives. We are immersed in their stories and simultaneously our own caregiving stories emerge. These experiential stories or narratives incorporate patient suffering, pain, grief and loss as well as the emotions of the individual professional and are an integral part of the practice of narrative oncology.

Narratives help make sense of conflicting or confusing emotions and allow the individual author to reflect on each situation, mourn and tap into the pain of others. By finding meaning in the suffering of one's patients' or colleague's stories, we can find significance in providing care in the midst of overwhelming sorrow.

Using writing or narrative is a strength-based exercise and can be personally empowering. Each participant shares their own unique phenomenological experience and its specific meaning to them. They bring emotions, which may otherwise be repressed or forbidden, to a safe discussion among colleagues. The condition created is relational and emotionally validates each member.

Numerous schools of thought influence narrative medicine/oncology and narrative methods in medical and psychotherapeutic practice.

Writing is one medium that helps individuals cope with the distress, grief, and loss associated with caring for individuals with cancer diagnoses. The use of these narrative methods and narrative medicine rounds in healthcare practice gives the professional caregiver the opportunity to articulate the great privilege to work with sick and hurting people and to take heed of their suffering, to listen, acknowledge and share.

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# A New Paradigm in Social Work Research:
# It's Here, It's Queer, Get Used to It!

Dirk H. de Jong

**Abstract**: This article recounts the development of a qualitative study regarding the response of school social workers to gender-variant students. Specifically, it discusses the use of a Queer theoretical framework, still quite rare in social work research, and its implications for research design and methodology. In conclusion, it suggests the relevance of Queer theory in exploring issues related to flexible and non-normative forms of identity, and in describing "difference" as positive.

*Keywords*: Queer theory, qualitative research, orientational research, research methodology, identity.

## Introduction

Decisions about how to proceed with a research idea, especially with respect to relatively uncharted territory, are typically idiosyncratic. This article explores the development of my dissertation study regarding the response of school social workers to the phenomenon of gender variance among students. In particular, it examines the rationale for the Queer theoretical framework that I utilized, and the implications of this choice for research design and methodology. To avoid having the reader's eyes glaze over at this point, let me recount one interesting anecdote that happened early on in the process. As I met with a number of faculty members to explore their willingness to serve on my dissertation committee, one of them (a professor who ended up not serving) made a vague suggestion for me to examine certain epistemological considerations in my relationship to the topic of gender variance and Queer theory. In essence, I believe, he wanted to make sure I was sufficiently "queer." I don't know what caused his concern, but I now wish I would have responded something like this: "It's not only about sexuality or gender anymore, important as these topics are. More generally, Queer theory is about the acknowledgment and the appreciation and the power of the non-normative."

This paper describes a process, the particular approach I took to in examining a topic that is just beginning to get the attention it warrants. My interest in the topic of gender variance among youth came from my experience as a school social worker, my knowledge of several gender-variant and transgender children and teens, and my attendance at the national Trans Health Conference in Philadelphia for a number of years. The term gender variance covers a broad spectrum of feelings and behaviors, ranging from gender nonconformity to cross-gender identification. As I was deciding on a dissertation topic, I knew that gender-variant students were

becoming more known and visible at all grade levels in schools across this country and, in fact, many other countries. My initial curiosity about the manifestation of gender variance in school settings concerned the divergent views about whether or not transgender students ought to "come out" or remain "stealth." After reviewing the literature and upon further reflection, I developed a second strand of possible inquiry by considering the concept of "school climate" as an antecedent variable, contributing to a student's decision about whether or not to come out. Thus, it seemed to make sense to refocus my research on the perceptions, attitudes, and practices of school staff (social workers in particular) with regard to the issues of gender identity, gender socialization, gender expression, and gender variance. This shift in focus to the response by school staff was also consistent with the view that gender variance is not an issue of individual pathology, but is instead only a problem because of the way gender-variant people are marginalized.

With few exceptions, inquiry into the manifestation of gender variance among youth has only begun over the last decade (for example: Davidson, 2006; Renold, 2004, Russell et al., 2011; Toomey, McGuire, & Russell, 2012; Wyss, 2004). These studies were primarily conducted in school settings (but not by social work researchers) and were typically informed by concepts from Queer theory, particularly its critique of heteronormativity (suggesting ideals of femininity and masculinity based on the norm of heterosexual relationships: Butler, 1993) and the rigid gender binary (according to which gender identity exists only as "woman" or "man"). Queer theory emerged in academic circles in the early nineties, coinciding with the decline of identity politics, and influenced by postmodern feminist writings, like those of Judith Butler. Butler became one of the founders of Queer theory, proposing that gender and sexual identity are "performative" and flexible, with the potential to "resist" social norms (Butler, 1990, 1993). By contrast, earlier notions of "doing gender" (West &

Zimmerman, 1987) reinforced rather than questioned existing social categories.

## A Queer theoretical framework

Due to the relative paucity of research about transgender students, it seemed to me that the topic needed to be explored by way of a qualitative study. While some qualitative approaches eschew a priori explanations, support for theoretical frameworks in qualitative research has been provided by Anfara and Mertz (2006), who described their use as the application of "lenses" in the exploration of phenomena. Similarly, Patton (2002) noted the role of theory in qualitative data analyses, and Charmaz (2006), in her description of constructivist grounded theory, acknowledged the functions of interpretation, context, and reflexivity. Given the existing literature on gender variance in schools, concepts from Queer theory (heteronormativity, gender binary, silencing of differences) seemed to offer an appropriate framework for my study, as well as guidance in terms of data collection and data analysis. More importantly, from my perspective it seemed impossible to discuss or even conceptualize gender variance without critical reference to the traditional gender binary and the related concept of heteronormativity.

Compared to educational research, there have been few qualitative social work studies that employed Queer theory as a conceptual framework. To illustrate this rather stark contrast: A recent data base search (Academic Search Complete, December 2014), using the key words "education" and "Queer theory", resulted in 231 matches, while the key words "social work" and "Queer theory" produced only 22 matches. Of course, it is quite possible that there is just more research regarding educational settings than social work settings. However, Queer theory is also typically absent from textbooks on social work research. The general lack of attention to Queer theory may, at least in part, have been due to social work's historical embrace of "the oppression model and the identity politics it generates" (McPhail, 2004, p. 5). However, the potential impact of a Queer perspective on social work practice has been noted at least by some (Burdge, 2007; McPhail, 2004; Peterson, 2013).

I would argue that Queer theory is the framework of choice for an investigation into gender variance. While there may be other frameworks that can accommodate such a study, they do not seem to have inspired a deluge of social work research. To the

contrary, a search in Academic Search Complete (again in December of 2014) provided these results, using the following key words: "social work" and "heteronormativity" yielded 29 matches, "social work" and "gender binary" 6, and "social work" and "gender variant" 13. In the sentence above I purposely used the phrase "inspired research", because I believe that, in part, this is the role of theory. Thus, the lack of Queer-inspired social work research and the paucity of studies into such topics as heteronormativity and gender variance may not be coincidental.

In terms of my study, Queer theory provided – first of all – the concepts of interest and the language to talk about them, as was reflected in the research question:

> How does the heteronormative environment of public education affect the perceptions, attitudes, and self-reported practices of a sample of school social workers in the Northeastern United States with respect to gender variance?" Sub-question: "How are the perceptions, attitudes and practices of the social workers in this sample mediated by professional and personal experiences?

Clearly, the research question alone would not have carried the same meaning without the term "heteronormative", since its use implied a lack of accommodation of gender-variant persons by the environment, rather than pathology on the part of the individual. Additionally, I would suggest that the topic of my study was queer, or more accurately, was queered by me. Writers in the field of queer studies have noted its "… intellectual and political relevance to a wide field of social critique….", describing "… queer as a political metaphor without fixed referent" (Eng et al., 2005, p.1). Accordingly, I argue for the applicability of Queer theory to social work research, particularly as a critical lens through which to view issues of identity. For me, Queer theory helped me envision my dissertation study, providing at least the broad outlines, as well as the parameters of my literature review. While I had quite a bit of knowledge about gender variance going into the project, Queer theory provided a new intellectual context. Throughout, it challenged me, fueled and sustained my interest and curiosity and self-reflection. How great is that, considering how many doctoral candidates burn out on their dissertation study!

## From Queer framework to research design

As mentioned, I believe that Queer theory is about the acknowledgment and the appreciation and the power of the non-normative. If so, how did that assertion

inform my research design? Given the stated research question and the theoretical framework, I explored various study designs and approaches. Because of my focus on the response from school personnel, I first considered a phenomenological study, inquiring about the "lived experience" of school social workers in terms of heteronormativity, gender socialization, and gender variance in public education. However, as I started to develop an interview protocol, it became obvious that I was interested not only in experiences, but also in perceptions and attitudes, perceived knowledge and skills, ethics and personal feelings. While seemingly broad-ranging, my draft questions were focused on a narrow slice of professional practice and not open-ended enough to suggest a purely phenomenological interview.

Subsequently, I explored the idea of a case study approach, centered around a social worker dealing with a clearly identified issue of gender variance in a school setting. However, given the sensitive nature of the research topic, issues of access and confidentiality loomed large, issues which also have been noted in terms of school-based studies regarding sexual orientation (Donelson & Rogers, 2004). Moreover, due to the relative intrusiveness of a case study approach, I was concerned about the ethics of letting others deal with the potential fall-out of my research after data collection had been completed. I was about six months into the project, still enthusiastic, but also frustrated as logistical and ethical problems conspired and caused an inability to operationalize my study.

Then I hit gold! After further reading and consultation, Patton's description of "orientational" research (Patton, 2002, pp. 129-131) seemed to fit the purpose and theoretical framework of my study. Commenting on the role of critical theory in this kind of research, Patton notes:

> Within any of these theoretical or ideological orientations one can undertake qualitative inquiry, but the focus of inquiry is determined by the framework within which one is operating and findings are interpreted and given meaning from the perspective of that preordinate theory (p. 131).

Given my intended focus on a fairly circumscribed practice domain and my interest in finding data with clear social work implications, the orientational approach seemed compatible with the need for feasibility and relevance in qualitative research (see

Yardley, 2000). Also, with regard to transparency of my overall design, I wanted to be clear about my personal (queer) take on the research topic. According to Patton (2002), "Reflexivity has entered the qualitative lexicon as a way of emphasizing the importance of self-awareness, political/cultural consciousness, and ownership of one's perspective" (p. 64). Consequently, I wrote an introductory chapter, explaining my identification with "queer" in terms of its non-binary conceptualization of gender and my hopes for alliance building consistent with queer politics (see Taormino, 2003; Schlichter, 2004). At this point I felt on solid ground, confident that I would successfully complete the dissertation and learn something meaningful about the topic of interest.

### Queering the methods?

The sample that I recruited for the study was purposive, consisting of fourteen school social workers from the Northeastern United States, employed in public elementary and secondary schools. The data for the study were collected through individual, semi-structured interviews. The interview questions asked about experiences and perceptions of gender socialization and gender variance in the school setting. Based on a secondary theoretical framework provided by multi-cultural practice theory (Fowers & Davidov, 2006), other questions asked about the social workers' personal attitudes toward gender variance and their actual or hypothetical response to gender-variant students. The interview data were analyzed according to a two-tiered approach, first applied in British health psychology. This model of "interpretative phenomenological analysis" (IPA) examines the personal accounts of study participants, while accommodating prior theoretical conceptions which the researcher uses to interpret these accounts (Smith, 1996).

Given the methods of sampling, data collection, and data analysis described above, what - one may ask - makes this a Queer study? Considering Queer theory's emphasis on the constant challenging of normative ideology, how do the various components of my study form a cohesive methodology that reflects resistance to the normative? For the sake of internal consistency, is it necessary to queer the research methods of a study framed and informed by Queer theory (see Browne & Nash, 2010)? If so, what would such research methodology look like? It seems that this question cannot be answered definitively. After all, queering research methods can never result in a prescription of what such methods must be. Put differently: "...there can be no one queer research methodology, but many

methodolog*ies*." (Warner, 2004, p. 334; Italics in original).

One principle I did try to honor in my study, consistent with Queer-informed research if not unique to it, concerned an effort to give voice to the research participants. Thus, I asked them to describe aspects of their identity that they considered important in terms of their relationships and interactions with other people, and to their work. This was my attempt to elicit an "authentic profile" without imposing pre-conceived parameters, congruent with Queer theory's opposition to fixed identity categories. The resulting information was included in the study's final report as an appendix titled "The social workers in their own words." In addition, I reported my findings by presenting lengthy verbatim quotes from the interviews, resisting a temptation to overanalyze the data. The method of interpretative phenomenological analysis that I employed seemed appropriate to such a cautious approach, since it is "strongly idiographic" (Smith, 2004, p. 41) and based on a "study of persons-in-context" (Larkin, Watts, and Clifton, 2006, p. 105). Consequently, interpretation of the data was qualified by the unique features of individual cases and by contextual considerations.

## Afterthoughts

Queer theory, with its historical ties to feminism, its linkages with activists among sexual and gender minorities, and its role in an expanding universe of queer studies, is a critical theory. Relative to the field of social work research, it allows one to reconceptualize identity in the context of power and resistance to power. This endeavor is inherently political and involves a call to action. As such, it is congruent with the historical mission of social work and with emerging social movements. Thus, Queer theory is about gender variance, but it also speaks to the Occupy movement, which is notably different from social movements of the past in terms of its lack of identity politics (we don't need to judge others' queerness, for example). Queer theory is about a new paradigm. Get used to it!

On a more personal note: I completed my dissertation in two years, while working full time. This was important to me, as I wanted to make a contribution to the discussion about a very timely topic. Along the way, there were the typical challenges with respect to participant recruitment, and the process of interview transcription was rather tedious. However, I am happy to report that my use

of the ideological perspective of Queer theory did not run afoul of doctoral dissertation requirements. In fact, the dissertation earned an award of distinction. In terms of the study's findings, they helped elucidate how the discourse about gender variance is silenced in schools and uncovered the confusion about gender and sexual identity among well-intentioned school social workers. This was documented in two articles that were accepted for publication within ten months of successfully defending the dissertation (de Jong, 2014, 2015).

These observations are made here only to suggest that there is indeed a place for Queer theory in social work research (and, by extension, in social work practice). The phenomenon of gender variance is important to social work because of the human rights issues involved. Moreover, thinking about it in the context of Queer theory leads us to question much of what we have taken for granted about fixed forms of social categorization based on assigned identity. As suggested by Davidson (2006), the application of Queer theory helps in our analysis, by foregrounding "difference" as positive rather than deviant. I believe that this aspect of Queer theory is particularly relevant to future social work research regarding alternative/intersectional forms of identity and emerging patterns of social and political organization.

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# "Women don't have a right": Reflections on translating a US intimate partner violence curriculum to India

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**Abstract**: The following narrative, written by an MSW student with the guidance of her research professor, presents an autoethnographic narrative of her experiences in facilitating a 4-day training in India. The training was to assist women and church leaders in learning how to help fellow Indians in dealing with intimate partner violence. The narrative includes struggles with translating US conceptualization of how to address intimate partner violence to the Indian culture and a discussion of how these struggles help the social work profession better plan for future endeavors such as this one.

*Keywords*: intimate partner violence, curriculum, women, domestic violence, India.

## Introduction

While a great deal of progress has been made, equality for women continues to be an international social justice issue. In the United States, there are many organizations working to help women who have experienced domestic and sexual violence as well as to change cultural norms that perpetuate these issues. While these organizations are common in many parts of the United States, many other countries do not have the same structures in place. This brings unique challenges for women who experience violence in countries such as India, where the country's 2004-2005 national health survey found at least one third of women have experienced some form of physical violence (Yee, 2013). The International Clinical Epidemiology Network (2000) found out of 10,000 women in India, nearly 50% had experienced physical or psychological violence.

## The Situation

Knowing first hand the reality of the need for available resources and support, the pastor of a church just outside of New Delhi, India contacted an organization in Texas in hopes that he and other leaders in the church could get the knowledge and tools necessary to be able to respond to domestic and sexual violence. The organization is a faith-based, non-profit organization that offers programs specifically designed for women who have experienced intimate partner violence. After the pastor explained the needs in his community, he and the organization founder began to plan a four-day women's conference. The conference was designed to equip the female leaders to respond to women in crisis as well as to be able to facilitate a 15-week class aimed to facilitate healing and help women overcome the negative impacts of intimate partner violence.

In order to conduct the conference, the founder knew she would need at least three other women to go with her to help facilitate the large group and breakout sessions. She contacted a woman who works in her local community's intimate partner violence shelter to request that she join the team. She then reached out to me, as she knew of my experience from working at the local rape crisis center. The third woman who joined our team was a woman who has been a part of a number of local and international efforts to bring equality to women. Once our team was formed, we began to immediately prepare for the trip. We began to meet six months prior to the conference. Additionally, I am pursuing my Master's of Social Work.

I contacted a former social work research professor – second author of this manuscript – to see if this could be integrated into my coursework. Together, we decided that this would be a great topic for an autoethnography. Chang (2008) and Muncey (2010) describe autoethnography as an autobiographical reflection exploring the writer's subjective experience of a culture (as cited in Siddique, 2011). Thus, my professor asked that in order to track what I learned and how I was impacted by this opportunity, I journal my thoughts, emotions and experiences. With my second author's/professor's guidance, this narrative contains excerpts from my journaling as well as outlines the themes that emerged through the process and the implications of what I learned and experienced for future social work practice. Through documenting my experience and coding the journal entries using a qualitative constant comparative method guided by my second author/professor, the following four themes emerged: learning through experience, differences between two cultures, similarities between the cultures and evidence supporting hope for change. The presentation of these themes is followed by reflective discussion from my professor and me regarding how this experience informs international social work practice.

## Learning Through Experience

As a graduate student, I have spent a great deal of time reading about working with people from different cultural backgrounds. However, I have not gained much experience applying this knowledge through actually working with people while being submerged in their culture. While reading about doing something in preparation to do it is important, I anticipated that I would gain a greater depth of knowledge from the opportunity to actually implement what I have learned.

While sitting in the plane, on our way to India, I had a great deal of time to reflect on what we were about to do. As I thought about my ability to be culturally sensitive, I realized that I rarely have to be sensitive of other people's culture due to my experience of privilege. Being part of the dominant culture in the U.S. has enabled me to live without much thought about my culture and its impact on me. As a result, it may be hard for me to truly understand the impact of culture.

Further, my lack of personal experience with oppression and violence caused me to question my ability to work with and relate to the women we were on our way to meet. While on the plane, I wrote:

> Throughout my social work education, I have been taught that we do not have to have shared someone's exact experience in order to empathize with them. So far in my work I have found that to be true. However, I still wonder if this will be true with women who have had such different life experiences than I. Therefore, as we prepared for this trip, I have been aware of my need to be particularly attentive as I listen to these women and try my best to understand them.

My experience once working with the women affirmed what I have been taught. It continued to seem true that the most important thing is a person's openness to learn from and listen to the other person describe what life has been like for her.

Throughout my time in India, I became acutely aware of how complex the impact of culture is on a person. Hearing the women share their experiences and going with them to the places where they live, study, and worship provided me with a much different understanding of their experiences than simply reading about them from a news or academic article. Additionally, executing a conference after

spending many hours working to adapt it to being culturally sensitive gave me a much different understanding of the importance of taking the time to make those adjustments than simply reading about its necessity in a textbook. The depth of learning through experience was rich and complex and something that has made a lasting impression on how I will move forward with my work as a social worker.

## Differences Between Two Cultures

### *Preparation*

From the beginning, we anticipated that we would encounter cultural differences throughout our work with this community of people. Therefore, we immediately began discussing what we needed to do in order to adapt the curriculum to fit the culture and the needs of the people. The church leaders helped us with our adjustments. We also discussed how important it would be for us to emphasize that while we have tried to adjust it to their cultural norms, we wanted them to feel free to adjust it as well. While we were trying to learn, we recognized that we would not be able to fully understand their culture or the challenges for their community in the same way that they do. We needed their help.

### *Different Ways to Do the Work*

In preparation for the trip, we emailed and video conferenced with the leaders of the church we would be helping. They helped us begin to gain an understanding of how the women there identify domestic and sexual violence. They also explained the current way that women often respond to abuse. We learned that there are not easily accessible agencies or shelters throughout the country like there are in the United States. Additionally, they explained that women do not often go to the police because they do not feel safe. Instead, if someone is experiencing violence, they often turn to their faith community. As a result, the church that asked us to come requested that we teach them how to help survivors of domestic and sexual violence overcome the abuse they have experienced.

They also stated that they have seen many instances where the couples they have worked with were able to continue in their relationship. They explained that this has been possible after working with the husband to help him change his patterns of abuse. This sounded extremely interesting to us, because, in our personal work with intimate partner violence survivors, we do not commonly see reconciliation. We are used to

women leaving their husbands and seeing reconciliation as something that is not an option. We are also used to formal therapeutic intervention such as a Batterers Intervention and Prevention Program. It was beneficial for us to be reminded early that not only would we need to be sensitive to the differences in their thoughts about violence, but that we would need to also be open to different practices for going about addressing it.

*Differences In the Rights and Value of Women*

**"In India, women don't have a right**." During our first session, on the first day of the conference, we asked the women to share their expectations for participating in the conference. The women began to share openly about their experiences and the hope for change that they had for their community. I was particularly struck when one woman shared, "The problem here begins before a girl is born." She went on to describe the negative impact of the rigid gender stereotypes that are commonly reinforced. As she continued, she stated, "In India, women don't have a right." I do not think I will forget hearing her say that. I was not only compelled by the meaning of those words, but by hearing the pain and anger that she felt as a result of this reality.

I realized that before this moment I had not really grasped what the women in India face on a daily basis. It seemed that oppression and violence against women is even more prevalent than we see in the United States. This was reinforced as the women continued sharing their individual stories. Multiple women who were at the conference shared that they were currently living with abusive spouses. We were not expecting this. Due to many of the women having endured so many of these painful experiences, the four day conference became an opportunity for many of them to work through some of their own struggles.

**Designated parking spaces**. Our first full day in India, we went to the mall and saw reserved parking spaces for women. We asked the woman who was with us if that was out of courtesy for women. She said no, that it was because they think women are bad drivers and therefore, that they need special spaces since they cannot be trusted to park in the standard parking spaces. We were not expecting that to be the reason. In the United States, people often make jokes about women being bad drivers, but I have not seen a business actually put up a sign reflecting this idea. These signs seemed to be a reflection of the different valuation-or

devaluation-of women that we were learning was pervasive throughout the cultural norms.

**Women in politics**. While we drove to different places throughout our trip, we would often ask the women who guided us questions about the community or culture. During one of these conversations we began to discuss the representatives in the political system in India. I asked about the number of women who hold political positions despite the prevalence of the oppression of women. The woman explained that a lot of people think it is due to the government beginning to enforce a law prohibiting people with a criminal record from running for political office. She explained that this is thought to have caused men to have their wives run for office so that they can control them and, in a sense, continue to have the power of being in a political position. We could not have imagined this being the reason. While it was discouraging to hear, it makes sense given what we learned about the devaluation of women.

## Concept Confusion

The conference consisted of large group sessions and break out sessions. Each of the large group sessions was facilitated by one of the four of us. The large group session that I facilitated covered boundary setting. Despite our efforts to adapt the curriculum to the Indian culture, we did not fully prepare for the challenges that would arise during this session. During the session, the women began to hear us suggesting that women in abusive relationships should set boundaries by communicating their rights to the abusive partner. Therefore, they were alarmed and began expressing their concerns that this will put the women in even greater danger. This was not our intention.

We wanted to communicate the importance of women learning how to set boundaries in other relationships they have, such as friendships, family relationships, or even in their work environment. This is important because women who experience abuse are often impacted in such a way that they lose their ability to set boundaries not only in the abusive relationship, but also in other relationships in their lives. Learning to set boundaries with people who are not their abusive partner is a step that can be taken to empower them before addressing their abusive intimate partner relationship. While I tried to clarify what I was trying to communicate, it seemed that several of the women continued to be very concerned. By the end of the session, all four of us were working together to listen to the women and to respond to their concerns.

After we finished the session, I felt very discouraged and embarrassed. I felt responsible for the misunderstanding and confusion that erupted. Being the youngest member on the team, I already felt insecure about my level of experience compared to the other women. At first, this experience reinforced my insecurity. It made sense that it would need to be adjusted since we learned that many of the women often feel as though they do not have any rights. As a result, they are likely to have a hard time communicating their rights in any relationship. I could not believe that I did not think of this before I began speaking. Being mindful of this would have framed how I introduced the concept in a way that would have likely been much clearer. This experience reinforced the importance of diligently trying to consider every adjustment that is needed for cultural sensitivity. While I would have liked to prevent this experience, it allowed me to see the complexity of cultural sensitivity and that, even with immense diligence, it is possible for us to miss something. It also allowed me to learn how to respond if this does happen again. I was able to listen to the women, gain understanding and then adjust accordingly.

**Similarities between the two cultures**

Throughout our interaction with the women we worked with, I realized we had so much in common with them. As we talked about their efforts to address and fight against these issues, it became more and more evident that we face the same challenges. We learned that they too face struggles getting people in their community to understand the importance of empowering women and not seeing their work as trying to teach women to be rebellious. Additionally, as with us, it is challenging for them to get people to acknowledge that violence against women exists. Once I realized this, I was surprised that I didn't anticipate this. For some reason it had a different impact on me hearing these experiences from the women leaders first hand.

*Similar Self-talk*

We also observed similarities in the automatic thoughts that the women identified that they often have about themselves. Many women shared that they realized they often tell themselves things like, "You're not pretty," "You're stupid," "You're fat," or "No one really likes you." It was interesting to hear that women in India are taught the same concepts about what gives them value and worth and, further, that they are constantly told that they do

not measure up to those standards. As a team, the four of us discussed how heartbreaking it is that the world is such that universally, women are oppressed in such similar ways. At times, realizations like this make it feel like the problem we are fighting against is too big, too pervasive and beyond what we can change. However, hearing the women's eagerness to discard those negative automatic thoughts and replace them with new, affirming thoughts reminded us of the resilience of women and the hope that comes with empowering them.

*The Connection Between All Forms of Oppression*

In my efforts to end violence against women in the United States, I have learned that all forms of oppression are connected. This concept was also affirmed throughout this experience. In preparation for the trip, I read a number of news articles telling about the particular struggles that many women in India are facing regarding experiencing sexual assault. One story told about girls in rural areas not being able to go outside to use the restroom at night without facing a large risk of being sexually assaulted demonstrating how socio-economic status can create situations that increase someone's risk of violence.

Similarly, another article talked about the connection between the caste system and the rate of sexual violence. This immediately got me thinking about the violence against women in minority racial groups as well as the increased level of objectification of these women that we see in the United States. Seeing these connections in a different cultural setting supports the need for violence prevention to work to address other forms of oppression in our communities as well.

**Evidence Supporting Hope for Change**

While we observed many heart breaking realities throughout the trip, we were encouraged by a number of signs that there is hope for change. The first area where we began to see hope was in the people in the church we were helping. Part of the conference involved us dividing the women into small groups and them preparing to facilitate part of a session. When we first introduced this idea to the women, it was evident that many of them were very nervous about this. However, many of them shared that they went home and their children, who can read and write, helped them prepare for their section. We were overjoyed hearing how proud the women were after they facilitated their practice session. Not only could we hear how proud they were through what they said, but also it was evident on their faces and through their

body language how empowering that experience was for them. Seeing and hearing this encouraged us. By the end of the week, it seemed evident that the women were beginning to feel equipped to make a significant impact in their community.

Additionally, by the end of the third day, multiple women talked about the steps they could take to begin to operate a crisis hotline and open an emergency shelter for women and children. It was evident that they felt empowered to do something about this tremendous need in their community. The church leaders' sense of empowerment was even further evident on our final day with them when they informed us that they had obtained a phone number for a crisis hotline. We were even more encouraged when they stated that they had located an apartment that could serve as the first phase of an emergency shelter if they could raise the funds to purchase it. Amazingly, the leader of the Texas-based organization that sponsored this training was able to provide them with funds that could be used to secure the facility for at least the first three months. We did not expect this kind of progress after less than a week. Their eagerness to take action and respond to their community's need gave us all a tremendous amount of hope that progress will be made.

Further, on the third day, we were able to discuss with the pastor the progress taking place throughout the conference. Through our conversation, we were able to arrange a one-hour presentation for the 20 male pastors in the church. Our team discussed how much we would like an opportunity to speak to some of the men at some point during future trips, but we did not think this would be something that would happen in any way in the first trip. We would definitely like to spend more than an hour with them and with other men in the church, but this was a wonderful starting place.

It was additionally encouraging because the pastors were incredibly receptive to the information we shared with them. They seemed very eager to support the work being done to address intimate partner violence through their church. We are very hopeful about continuing conversations with them. During our last meeting with the pastor and his wife, we discussed including men more in the conference that will be held again next summer. We were amazed because we do not get support for this information like this in churches here in the United States. Therefore, experiencing this support in India was so encouraging for all of us.

Other efforts to promote cultural shifts, also contributed to the hope that we developed. The woman who guided us throughout our trip told us that the advertisements have been changing. She explained that they are beginning to encourage independence to women in the middle and upper class who are educated. We saw one billboard that was aimed at this when we drove into one of the cities. It surprised me see since we had been hearing the women talk so much about the pressure that the women face to be married and have children, as well as how they are not often encouraged to pursue an education. Knowing that these campaigns are happening brings hope that the social norms will begin to change, offering more options and freedom for women. Hopefully, the campaign will be expanded to include not only women in the middle and upper class. It would be wonderful to see the value of education and independence being encouraged for all women in India.

**Samantha's Post Script**

This process was a tremendously formative experience for me. Before leaving for India, many people asked me about my excitement. As I would respond to them, I often thought about how strange it was to be excited but not really have any idea what to expect. Before leaving, it was hard for me to even imagine what it would feel like to be on the plane on our way there, or to be talking with the women at the conference, or even just to be in India. I had some sense that I would be deeply impacted, but I could not really imagine how much I was going to learn or be changed through this experience. It far exceeded all of my expectations. I am still not certain that I am even fully aware yet of how much it has impacted me.

This trip provided me with an opportunity to become better aware of my continued need to work towards being culturally sensitive. While I was focused on being sensitive to the differences between the Indian culture and mine, the realization that I had many things in common with the women reflected my lack of experience with people in other cultures. I recognized that cultural sensitivity includes not only being cognizant of the differences between cultures, but also of their shared values and experiences. Through this, I saw my need to continue to be exposed to people in different cultures so that I can continue to learn these rather simple concepts that will improve my work as a social worker.

After returning home and seeing my parents, my dad said that when we begin to hear about the exciting things happening to bring respect and freedom to all

women in India, he can't wait to say that his daughter was a part of it. We laughed about it and I reminded him that we're just one small group and that there are other organizations working there too. However, later I continued to think about this and I kept thinking about how thankful I am to have been given such an opportunity.

In my work at my full-time job, I am encouraged when I realize that the work I am doing really is likely changing the dynamics of the community. I never would have imagined having the opportunity to have a similar impact in another country. This sense that I get to be a part of something bigger than myself was one of the things that drew me to social work. Often I think about the things or ideas present in my everyday life and I think about the impact of the person who made it or who promoted the idea. For example, I think about something as simple as an intersection light. I don't know who invented it, but I am so thankful they did because it helps bring safety and order to my community. I also think about the women who advocated for my right to pursue an education. I am so thankful for their courage. Similarly, it is neat to think about the work we were able to do in India. People may never know we were there, but I imagine that they will be thankful for the outcome that our work will produce. I am hopeful that we have done work that they will be thankful for.

A month after returning from my trip, I found myself really missing the women that we worked with. I am amazed by the connection I made with them in less than a week. I am curious about how they are doing. I wonder if they have continued growing in their sense of empowerment. I also think about those who are currently in abusive relationships and hope that they are safe. We have already scheduled a continuing education conference as well as a conference to teach new women the material next summer. While I look forward to seeing them then, I wish I could see them before then. My experiences with them are really what gave meaning to the entire experience and again, I am amazed by their impact on me.

**Regina's Post Script**

My role in this project was as that of a guide. I was quite far removed. My involvement focused on helping Samantha document her experiences and then process these in an organized way using qualitative research techniques. The goal of this for me personally was to continue to emphasize for social work students that social work practice and social work research can and should be two sides to the same coin. This coin is currency toward the social justice values of social work where we strive to improve the human experience. However, I'm grateful to say that this project has impacted me beyond giving me the opportunity to show a future social worker how research and practice intertwine.

As a social work educator, I very much embrace "learning on the job." Field work is considered our "signature pedagogy" by the Council on Social Work Education (2014). I challenge social work educators to expand that to the classroom experiences that complement those field practicums we require of our bachelor and master level students. I emphasize this for a singular reason: as an educator, I also serve as the Chair for our School's Professional Standards Committee. This committee often reviews complaints from field agencies related to students who are not performing well in their field practicums. This underperformance often expressed in terms of violations of our Code of Ethics-is rooted in the students' lack of exposure to the field prior to the field practicum. Our students need agency experiences and exposure prior to their field practicums.

This course exemplifies a means of doing this through the service-learning approach to education. In this approach, educators and students connect with a community partner and ask how they can help. It is not a time for educators and students to say "Here's what we can do for you" or "Here's what you need." The educational experience is driven by the community partner and processed by the students through reflection assignments. In the case of Samantha's independent study course, a community entity had a need and Samantha worked with that entity and her colleagues to fulfill the need. The entity obviously benefitted based on Samantha's observations; and, Samantha is a stronger future social worker based on her experiences with that entity.

Her reflective journaling serves as not only a great place for her to process her experiences but also serves as rich qualitative research data. As she noted, we taught her much about cultural competence but it didn't resonate fully in an application sense until she had to put her knowledge to the test with another culture. And, what she learned is what I've always thought was core in social work practice: "start where the client is." I challenge us as educators in both the academic social work education setting and the agency settings to strive to create more opportunities like this one for our students learning to be social workers.

## Discussion

### *Importance of Cultural Sensitivity*

Throughout this process, the concepts that I have been taught throughout my education about the absolute necessity of cultural sensitivity were affirmed. Specifically, I observed the importance of being open minded to the way the leaders of the community were working to address violence against women. I learned the importance of asking the community leaders questions in preparation for the training as well as during. Very early on it became apparent to our team that we were not only going to teach them, but that they would teach us a great deal as well. While they asked us many questions about how we did things, it was important that we remember and express to them that things might not work the same way in their community as they do in ours.

In my work addressing violence against women in the U.S., I have studied a great deal about the importance of taking action to end all forms of oppression in order to decrease violence against women. The church that we worked with demonstrated this especially well through their many programs to meet the needs of people in their community.

We learned that they started a school in the slums where they are able to provide many children with food and an education that they would not have access to otherwise. They also began an orphanage where they provide a safe home and quality education for 22 children. Their efforts to address oppression in their community will likely continue to support the work there are doing to reduce intimate partner violence. Seeing the work they are doing challenged me to consider ways that the organization I work for may be able to partner with organizations addressing other needs in my community.

Additionally, after developing my interest in international social work, I began to read about other foreign aid efforts. As I read, I learned about many well-intentioned efforts that caused unanticipated negative consequences in the communities where they were working. While it is still too early to tell, our team worked diligently to try to reduce the chances of our work causing any harm.

The risk of causing unintended harm is likely to increase if social workers do not respect their clients' right to self-determination. From the beginning of our preparation, we were reminded that we must be open-minded to the interventions implemented by the people who invited us to help them.

For example, each of us on the team was interested to learn more about the pastors' efforts to restore relationships after abuse has occurred. As discussed earlier, this is not the commonly promoted practice in the United States. However, as we further discussed this process during our trip, we discovered that these efforts are similar to the interventions based on social learning theory that are implemented in the United States. Further, it caused the four of us to discuss the possibility of us learning from them how to better utilize our local faith communities. This experience reminded me of the importance of respecting the way that people in the community work to address the problems, rather than insisting that they conform to my knowledge of what should be done.

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# My Journey as a Social Work Professor
Victor A. Manalo, Ph.D.

**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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# Reflections on an Experiential Poverty Simulation filtered through the Mind's Eye of Three Faculty Members

Stephen Monroe Tomczak, Heather C. Pizzanello, and Dana A. Schneider

**Abstract**: Three social work faculty members, one macro-practice and two clinical, reflect on the process of developing and implementing a poverty simulation program on the campus of their urban university. The process by which the program was developed and implemented is examined, the experience of the simulation discussed, and some lessons learned offered.

*Keywords*: poverty, simulation learning, social justice

## Introduction

On May 9, 2012 we held our first poverty simulation at our urban public university. The poverty simulation is an experiential learning program that was developed first by the Reform Organization of Welfare (ROWEL), a welfare rights group in Missouri in the late 1970s, and then expanded in the early 2000s, by the Missouri Association for Community Action (MACA). The simulation itself is an hour-long exercise that allows participants to take on the roles of individuals and families living in poverty, and in so doing potentially develop a greater understanding of, and empathy for, the struggles that poor people endure. This hour of simulated poverty - divided into four 15 minute "weeks" to make up the "month" - is preceded by an orientation period and followed by a debriefing.

This paper will examine the process by which the poverty simulation program was developed at our university. Initially, the simulation was incorporated into our undergraduate program as part of their "common day" program, beginning in May of 2012. Eventually, it was also institutionalized as part of the graduate program, beginning in the fall of 2013. As of this writing, we have organized six simulations and are preparing for our seventh. The proceeding portions of this paper will present our reflections as key individuals who have participated in this event and offer an analysis that may be useful to others considering the implementation of similar educational programs. Our narratives will provide insight into our experiences of bringing the simulation to a public university and provide recommendations for implementation.

## Faculty Member #1's Reflection - Bringing the simulation to campus

I could feel the tension as I waited in line to get to the Quick Cash station. I hadn't been in this position in 20 years, even though I had run many poverty simulations. Would I make it up to the front of the

line in time to be served before the whistle blew? As it turned out, I was the last person to be served, and obtained my transportation passes, which enabled me to meet my needs for the simulated month in poverty. But if I had not made it, it might have been a different story.

This kind of experience, at a recent United Way poverty simulation, was what stuck with me over the years since I had first participated in what was then called the "welfare simulation" as a graduate student. This recent simulation conducted in our local community allowed me to have the experience of playing a member of a poor family for the first time since graduate school, an experience that was one of the most vivid experiences of my masters' education. And it was what motivated me to bring this program to the university where I was now employed as a full time faculty member. That re-introduction to the stress of participating in an actual simulation has sensitized me to the student experience in ways I think I had become removed from while running them at our university. In doing the facilitation role - orienting students to the simulation prior to the event and answering questions during the experience - I had become, I think, somewhat detached from what it was like to actually participate. Having the opportunity to participate as a member of a poor family in the United Way simulation changed that. While I was generally successful in surviving my most recent simulated month in poverty, I did become re-acquainted with the intense, and very real, stress that these simulations produce for participants. As the recollections of my colleagues show, this stress can manifest itself in unanticipated ways, both for those who play the roles of poor families, and those who play the roles of community service personnel.

The "welfare simulation" that I experienced first in the 1990s as a graduate student had since been expanded into the "poverty simulation" and was now packaged into a far more elaborate "kit" produced by the Missouri Association for Community Action (MACA). And these kits were costly. But, after I was

hired as a full-time faculty member in 2010, I was determined to bring this program to our campus and institutionalize it as part of our curriculum. Before I could even explore the purchase of one of these kits, I had to gain approval from our faculty and the support of the university. I researched and wrote a detailed justification that laid out the impact this program had at other universities. I saw it not only as an important enhancement to our curriculum but also as a way to pass along the kind of transformative learning experience I had benefitted from, because I felt compelled to bring this transformative learning experience to our students as it had been brought to me so many years ago. I was very relieved and pleased at the unanimous endorsement the simulation received from the faculty.

Having secured approval from our faculty, I brought this to the Dean of our school, who quickly endorsed the idea. Then, the struggle to put this program into place really began. For although I had gained approval of all the relevant academic and administrative authorities within our School, I had not reckoned with the obstacles I would face in dealing with the state government bureaucracy.

It seemed straightforward, at first. I had worked through our university system to obtain the funding necessary to purchase the poverty simulation kit. The School administration was very supportive of the endeavor and funds had been committed to the project. A date to run the simulation was secured for early May. All that was needed was to sign the contract and licensing agreement that the Missouri Association for Community Action (MACA) required for us to purchase and use the kit. Difficulties quickly emerged because the university demanded that, due to state government requirements, that MACA include a lengthy non-discrimination provision in its purchase agreement - a provision that representatives of MACA felt was not applicable to this agreement, and refused to include. Informed of this, the state official responsible for purchasing at our university informed me, "if they want us to sign their agreement, they will need to accept the State's terms and conditions." It felt as if a brick wall had been erected in our path, one which might prove insurmountable.

By early March, we were in a quandary, and the pressure was on. The organization that would provide the materials that we needed to run a poverty simulation would not budge, and neither would the state. Meanwhile, we had scheduled a date in early May for our first poverty simulation for 70 students and the planning group was meeting! To say that I felt pressured would be an understatement. I also was rather frustrated with the bureaucratic procedures of our State.

But, I had to persevere - after all, as I saw it, a key piece of the work that I wanted to do was on the line. I kept the issue in front of our Dean, and while he indicated that there might be alternative possibilities for funding - it was not clear at this time that the financing would be available. I did not think that it would be a good course of action to abandon the simulation and I was determined not to. Finally, with about a month to go, and no clear resolution of this situation in sight, I decided to put up my own money to purchase the kit. A year earlier, my elderly grandmother had passed away and left me a portion of her estate, most of which she had inherited from her grandfathers - 19th century local level "robber barons." As a political radical opposed to extreme economic inequality and injustice, I found it deliciously ironic to be using this money, generated during one of the most exploitative periods in U.S. history, to advance awareness of economic injustice, inequality and exploitation in the 21st century!

The struggle to get the simulation in place seemed to be reaching its end, then - but in some ways, it was just beginning. While the main problem, getting the kit, had been solved, there was still an event to plan - and we had never done this before. And, as the coordinator of this effort, I was particularly worried. Entering uncharted territory is always extremely nerve-wracking for me, and I had no sense of the level of commitment others might bring to this. Poverty simulations require a tremendous amount of effort to put together - many volunteers have to be recruited to play the various "community resource" roles, adequate facilities have to be obtained, and many other details tended to - and I was frankly not certain that we had the capacity to do this. Truthfully, I was frankly not certain I had the capacity to do this.

Thankfully, several key faculty, along with a group of interested students, assisted with putting on the simulation. I cannot convey in words the gratitude I feel for these individuals and all who have followed them. The final month of implementation also presented challenges, some of which proved to be, if not as disconcerting as the effort to secure the kit, perhaps equally frustrating. It is not a stretch to say that running these events is stressful on those responsible, and it certainly was for me - particularly

this first time. But we survived -and learned from the experience. And we continue to learn from each administration of the simulation.

### Faculty Member #2's Reflections - The Day of the Poverty Simulation: My Descent into the World of Full Immersion

Feeling hurried and exhausted as the weight of the end of the semester pressed down upon me I made my way into the room where our first poverty simulation was held. Aware of the fact that I was running late I attempted to slip inconspicuously into the room, only to feel besieged by the swarm of activity surrounding me. I furtively scanned the room for my colleague who was running the event so that he could point me in the direction of what would be my designated post for the afternoon. He directed me to a nearby table which held an abundance of laminated materials and plastic containers. The plastic containers gleaned from afar, encasing what appeared to be the *props* needed to fulfill my designated role of the "Quick Cash" administrator. I quickly untangled and opened the various containers that lay spread out before me, searching for the laminated card that would provide me with the general context and backdrop of the "Quick Cash" office and my role as its administrator. After locating the card I scanned its contents quickly in an effort to glean from it what my *performance* would entail. I inferred from reading it that I would both embody and facilitate the simulation of some (bureaucratic and relational) of the barriers that are encountered by individuals living in poverty. I read that I was the despondent and at times disgruntled "Quick Cash" worker who would need to intermittently announce the unplanned closing of the office as a result of it being robbed and the impending issues of safety that ensued. I assumed that these announcements would work to further simulate our undergraduate students' immersion into the often unpredictable, oppressive and even ominously contextualized world of poverty. This realization, however, stood in striking juxtaposition to my own awareness of the proverbial line which clearly delineated fantasy (the simulation) from reality (my position as a volunteer actress and faculty member), an awareness that became further heightened as I felt the bright, crisp, paper bills that I was tasked with arranging slip through my fingers while images of board games and childhood play fleeted through my mind.

It was the blast of the whistle piercing through the air that pulled me out of this momentary reverie, it marked the commencement of the simulation and prompted me to search in haste for the plastic name tag that denoted my identity as the "quick cash worker." Finding my name tag, I quickly affixed it to my shirt as I saw the line of students gathering before me-signifying my full descent in to the world of the simulation.

As part of my full embarkment in to the role of the disgruntled and disengaged "quick cash" worker I moved (per my outlined protocol) to enact the fact that the center had been robbed and needed to be temporarily shut down. Inherent in this announcement was the fact that individuals and families (played by our students) would not be able to cash their checks, pay their rent or receive the tokens that were needed to provide their transportation to work and various other imperative destinations. My announcement was accompanied by audible grumbles of frustration and aggravation. The temporary closing not only stalled all activity but meant that the wait to obtain services would be even longer and exceedingly daunting.

Once I announced the reopening of the center and resumed my work as the "quick cash" administrator what seemed like an infinite mass of students grew in front of me. It was during this time that a graduate student (assisting with the simulation) informed me that an undergraduate student became quite upset when she discovered that her "family's car" was repossessed as part of the simulation. Feeling perplexed by this fact I wondered if this student was only acting/pretending to be upset as part of the simulation because, "we all knew this wasn't real?", "Right?" "Weren't we all aware of the artificiality of playing this simulation out as students, instructors and professionals from the community?" I voiced my questions out loud in a state of disbelief and the student assisting me said she was unsure of what was happening for this undergraduate student.

I pushed my questions and feelings of bewilderment aside and I continued in my role as the unpleasant and disenchanted worker who counted money and handed out tokens in a painstakingly slow manner. The next participant/student approached me in line. I continued to dismissively count and push the money out towards her and instantly felt jolted out of my mechanistic role play. The student standing before me started to yell and scream in what felt like a fit of pain, rage and most of all anguish. I felt jarred by her reactions, catching myself in a momentary haze of disbelief. I tried to reorient myself to the reality that lay before me. However, I felt as though I was trying to make my way through an impermeable bank of fog, a fog which

felt insurmountable and surreal as it rendered me into a state of disorientation and utter devastation.

I attempted to pull myself back to the present, only to see a flash of red (clothing) as she (the student) fleeted across the room and bolted out of the door way, in what felt like a split second in time. A colleague of mine who had witnessed everything informed me that what had just transpired was out of character for this student and went to search after her. As my colleague left in search of her (the student/participant) the graduate student who had been previously helping me with the simulation came over to inform me that she believed that was the same student who had become upset during an earlier portion of the simulation. "Oh no I thought!" feeling stunned "What just happened???!!!"

### Faculty Member #3

I was pulled out of my time keeping, as I saw one of my former students from class, run across the ballroom in tears. Although she seemed to be talking, I could not hear her words clearly. I quickly followed the student out of the ballroom into the hallway. Through her angry tears she explained to me that she didn't need to experience a simulation about poverty; she was living it. She also shared that she was engaged in finals and this had merely added to her stress, rather than being a learning experience. This student's heartfelt response to the simulation made me realize that we had neglected several very important elements in the planning and implementation of this common day. We did not account for the fact that we were asking students to participate during one of the most stressful periods of the semester when they would be doing exams and papers.

We did not anticipate that mandating this event at such a time of the semester could have unattended consequences. Furthermore, we did not account for students who already were intimately familiar with living in poverty and that the simulation would only act to reinforce the very real and daily stress of some of our students' lived experience. I began to contemplate how the simulation might be potentially retraumatizing for some students, if we were careless in our introduction, or remained silent about the potential backgrounds of our students. From this vantage point, it also became clear that the poverty simulation was perhaps designed for students who perhaps came from more privileged backgrounds and who had not deeply considered the daily challenges of individuals living in poverty.

### Faculty Member #2

My colleague returned after finding the student and told me that the student had felt triggered by her interaction with me and other portions of the simulation. "How could what felt like such a distinct form of artificiality and *play* to me have felt *so real* to this student?" I wondered, "How did the line which to me so glaringly delineated fantasy from reality become so blurred for her?" It was then that I learned that the student's life in many ways had at some point mirrored elements of the simulation, swallowing her into a full state of immersion. I also discovered that the stress of finals and the overall exhaustion that accompanied the closing of the semester caused the immersion in the simulation to feel all *too real* and engulfing. In addition, I mentally and verbally questioned out loud how the simulation was introduced. I also questioned how clearly the point was made that we were playing out roles to facilitate for the participants (students) the experiences of hardship and oppression that often contextualize poverty. I left the simulation feeling emotionally exhausted, disheartened and still perplexed as I continued to grapple with these questions which felt essential, yet daunting. I did not know the student who became upset but I also left the simulation feeling distressed about the disequilibrium of power that existed between us as instructor and student, further magnifying my concerns regarding the dynamics that had transpired between us.

This student's experience and reactions to the simulation were indeed heightened by some of the struggles that she had encountered in her life. However, upon entering the only undergraduate class that I was scheduled to teach the proceeding fall semester, I learned that she was not the only student who grappled with *the felt* obscurity of the proverbial line that delineated what I clearly experienced as the *fantasy* and *play* of the simulation from *reality*. The fact that this line of delineation was quite opaque for other students as well became clear when a more outspoken undergraduate student stated (something to the effect of) that she did not know me outside of the poverty simulation but that in the simulation I was not the kindest person. I intuited that what lay behind this statement was concern and anxiety that there would be no differentiation between who I was in the simulation and who I would be as her/their course instructor. Although, I felt momentarily jolted by this statement, it also gave me the opportunity to provide more context around the simulation. I explained to the class that I was playing a role, like an actor/actress and that who I was in my role as the "Quick Cash" worker was quite different from the reality of who I felt I was as a

person and as an instructor. I also explained that how I interacted with participants during the simulation was taken from a composite of experiences that I had witnessed my impoverished clients encountering when they interacted with various systems to obtain necessary resources and services. My students appeared surprised by the fact that my role play had been informed by actual client experiences. They also appeared to experience visible feelings of relief from the clarification that my acting performance in the simulation did not represent the reality of who I actually was as a person and as an instructor.

After this class I sought out my colleague who had run the simulation and shared what had come up in my undergraduate course and the discussion that ensued. I expressed my belief that the concerns raised in this class indicated that the one student who had become very upset by the simulation did not appear to represent an entirely anomalous experience. I also informed him that based upon my experience and the feedback that I had just received from my students that I thought we really needed to make clear in the next simulation what is real, what is not real and the full purpose of the simulation. We also discussed the provision of an alternative assignment for students who might be triggered by the fact that the simulation mirrored all too closely the reality of their own lives.

### Faculty Member #3

Unfortunately, the student's exit from the simulation seemed to contribute to some preexisting ambivalence about the value of the simulation. Often events, like the simulation, are coordinated by one or two faculty, with little resources or support. To institute another event, meant more volunteer time and more coordination of a large group of students, when many of the faculty were already committing to other events. Was it relevant for our undergraduate student population? In supporting a new and alternative learning opportunity, had we failed to do what we teach all our social work students "start where the client is"…."start where the student is"?

After several iterations of the simulation, it became clear that the simulation provided a much-needed bridge between practice and policy. If we could invite students into a situation that potentially deepened their empathy and widened their perspectives, we could create an internal motivation for how to make a difference in the lives of others.

Poverty would shift from being a word, to becoming a pictured experience. The affective connection of the stress of the simulation, just might carry over into interactions with clients and community partners.

In my own process, I initially underestimated the impact of the poverty simulation on my own transformation and learning. After all, I became involved primarily to support an eager colleague who clearly had a passion for the simulation. In a setting where everyone is stretched and resources are limited, sometimes the best we can do is simply be present for others. My involvement at first was for the undergraduate program and then, particularly after the student incident, became to support my colleague.

In retrospect, I think of the ways my own work has been shaped by my participation in the simulation. During the activity, I have the very safe role of being the keeper of the time and blowing the whistle. What I've noticed is that I can stay out of the fray, watch closely as students move through different systems, and appreciate the various roles my colleagues have taken on. I can serve as a sounding board to the facilitator of the event, and help move things along, yet I am not required to interact with others, and am cloaked by the confines of the timekeeper's role.

However, in retrospect, I realize the impact has gone far deeper for me. Around the time we started implementing the poverty simulation, I began to brainstorm a major research project with a colleague from a local community social service agency. We wanted to create a "Story Corps" experience for individuals in New Haven who are homeless and whose voices are not typically heard. While consciously I did not develop this project with the poverty simulation in mind, I believe that it was part of a larger process of moving beyond concepts and entering into the lives of others, through interviews and narratives. When we connect people to the concepts we teach and study, we are all much more touched and moved to make a difference.

The poverty simulation has acted as a bridge. It has opened up discussions about experiential activities that do not force a dichotomy between clinical practice and policy. It has enabled community activists and social workers to work side by side with students and faculty. It has also served as a bridge between the graduate and undergraduate programs, as we have developed committees made up of students from each program. We have also made an important bridge between explicit learning that takes place within the classroom, and the implicit learning that evolves through

activities and interactions beyond the classroom.

When we first started, we thought we were inviting students into a deeper understanding of poverty, as faculty supporting this endeavor; we had no idea of the number of connections we were inviting in ourselves. And so we have shaped the poverty simulation to account for the experiences of those in the room, we have developed discussion questions that enable participants to deconstruct their experiences, and we have continued to attempt to bridge the divide between practice and policy, client and worker, student and faculty.

### Concluding Reflective Thoughts on the Poverty Simulation and its Lasting Impact on Faculty and Students

### Faculty Member #3

The poverty simulation served as not only an experiential activity for our students, but also an important learning experience for the three faculty most closely involved. We learned the importance of *knowing your audience*, and clearly had underestimated the impact that the simulation might have on our students, some of whom who knew intimately the challenges of living in poverty. Additional time to process the experience, both immediately following the simulation and in class discussions, invited all students to share their experience, and to help reduce students' experiences of being overstimulated by the event. While all students were required to attend the simulation and roles were assigned, we learned that building in flexibility and choice enabled students to have a degree of flexibility in their level of involvement in the simulation. The simulation is broad enough in scope to allow for students to take on a role of a community member, or help administer the simulation. The scripted orientation to the simulation does not fully indicate the possibility of the type of impact the simulation may have. Preparing students for the feelings that may emerge in participating in the simulation, not unlike duty to warn, may normalize the myriad of reactions that might surface. In light of the second author's experience, we have also now underscored in the orientation that individuals performing in the simulation are tasked with playing out various roles to simulate the experience of poverty and that their performance in these roles are not indicative of who they were are in everyday life as faculty members, field liaisons and other people working in our community.

While time is granted to do some initial processing of the simulation experience, we recommend that poverty simulation facilitators encourage instructors in identified courses to allow for a follow up discussion on student experiences and how this simulation relates to the conditions in which they are living or working. This is an opportunity to stress that the artificial line drawn between ourselves and our clients is often nonexistent.

Our planning groups have run quite successfully with student involvement. Inviting student involvement to continue beyond the planning groups, and encouraging students to take on roles assisting the simulation, or as potential community workers, expands the impact on students and enhances the collaborative relationships between students and faculty. This allows students to have an extended exposure to the simulation over time and helps move them into important mentoring roles for other students. This has also assisted in our goal to increase contact between our graduate and undergraduate students. Often poverty can feel quite overwhelming and unsurmountable. Providing students with concrete opportunities to make a difference can encourage activism among the student body.

### Faculty Member #1

Student involvement has been a central element of the simulation since its inception, and this has only deepened over time. While the first group of students who participated in the initial simulation were graduate students, the most enduring and indeed rewarding collaboration from my perspective has been with an undergraduate student who began even before she was accepted into the social work program. This student had expressed an interest in learning more about the macro aspect of social work, and the simulation seemed like a good place for her to gain some experience. After participating in several of them she was so inspired by her involvement in the simulation that she chose to do her undergraduate honors thesis on its impact on our graduate students' behavior in their practica. She has also, and will continue to be, the primary student assistant working on the simulation. And, having recently been accepted into our master's program, she has indicated that she hopes to make the issues and level of awareness that the simulation works to sensitize us to her life's work as she pursues further study in the field of social work. This student's response perhaps represents the most profoundly gratifying aspect of this work to me.

From my perspective, I see the involvement of

students in planning and implementing activities like the simulation an important part of our "implicit curriculum," and it is one which is most rewarding for me as an educator. Several of these students have returned as alumni to continue to assist with the simulation, so this is yet another way in which it enhances the program, and benefits students even after they have graduated. Overall, while there are still difficulties in planning and implementing this program, and it requires a phenomenal amount of work on my part, I find it to be one of the most satisfying aspects of my work. The feeling of watching an actual simulation develop is truly exhilarating for me.

While I was less immediately aware of, and involved in the situation of the student who experienced the intense reaction to the simulation noted by my colleagues, it opened up my eyes to something I had clearly overlooked - the ability of the simulation to cause very real and traumatic responses in some students. Personally, I found this quite disturbing, as my purpose in bringing the simulation was of course to enlighten and sensitize, not to cause harm of any sort to anyone. But it exposed, in some sense, a blind spot deriving from my own relatively privileged background, and also relative ignorance of the composition of our student population. Although a graduate of our university, I had attended many years ago, and the population was different, and perhaps somewhat more advantaged. It did not occur to me that there would be individuals who perhaps lived in, or had experienced, poverty, or if it did, that some of them might experience particular stress as a result.

While I experienced guilt at not having recognized in advance what seemed obvious to me in retrospect, I harnessed this guilt to make change in our administration of future simulations - and was well-advised by my more perceptive colleagues in this regard. Afterward, as we discussed this, we made the decision to respond in two main ways. One was to schedule the simulation earlier in the semester, so as to not compound finals-related stress,

and the second was to offer students an opt out "conscience clause." While it has been my experience that most students choose not to opt out, offering the option is critically important in running these events, something I had to learn, as I often do, the "hard way." The simulation has been, and does indeed continue to be, a learning experience for me as well.

### Faculty Member #2

The experience that awaited me as I entered my first undergraduate class of the fall semester and the discussion it incited with my colleagues about adaptations we would need to make moving forward brought me back to the full palpability of that day. This palpability prompted my reflections on how my initial experience and understanding of the simulation drastically shifted within only a moment in time.

The jarring experiences that jolted such an instantaneous shift in how I viewed the simulation, now felt less charged, as everything coalesced into and ultimately abated within my mind's eye, yet, there was still one fact that remained quite clear. As I looked back on the day itself and the events that followed there was one reality that remained fully emblazoned within my mind, perhaps even more so now with the vantage point of distance. This reality was the remarkable irony that resided in the fact that what our students had taught us about that day was far more profound and further reaching in its indelibility than what we had taught them.

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# When Things Fall Apart in Guatemala: Contemplative Service Advising

Kielty Turner

**Abstract**: Service learning in a developing country can be a transformative experience, especially when we engage in contemplative practices such as journaling. This is a reflection on the application of Buddhist concepts while serving as an advisor on a service learning trip to Guatemala. The writer explores mindfulness, acceptance, and compassion while journaling on the trip. Insight is provided regarding how to deepen the connection of the advisor's and the students' experiences.

*Keywords*: service learning; contemplative practices, journaling.

Three Buddhist teachings draw me most personally to contemplative practices: mindfulness, acceptance, and compassion. As a social worker, researcher, and faculty member, I have explored these concepts and their connections, researching how to develop these qualities in myself, my students, and my clients. While serving as an advisor on a service trip, I applied these teachings, keeping a journal of my experiences. After rereading my journal from this two week long trip to Guatemala, I am able to connect what I learned about both myself and the role of service learning advisor.

**Guatemala Service-Trip 2012**

At the start of my fourth year as a full-time faculty member in a Bachelor of Social Work Program at a small Catholic University, I applied for and accepted the position of advisor for a 12-day service trip to Guatemala. I had just completed my three-year review document and was really interested in getting out of the classroom/office and back into the "field." The previous three years had been challenging for me, requiring me to balance the teaching, service, and research requirements of a tenure-track position with my roles of mother, wife, and daughter. That time had been particularly difficult since my mother died from malignant brain cancer a month before the signup for the trip. Along with my husband and two teenaged children, we had provided my mother with in-home care. Prior to her illness, my mother had retired to Mexico and had a strong interest in serving indigenous people. I committed to be a service trip advisor, in part, to honor my mother. The other part of my decision to go on the trip was my desire to reconnect to myself and to my contemplative practice.

During the 9 months leading up to the trip to Guatemala, the other trip advisor, Sister Donna, attempted to prepare me and the 10 students in our monthly meetings. None of the students were in my Social Work Program. Most of the students displayed a strong connection between their Catholic religion and their commitment to serving others. Our trip would include service at two sites, a Catholic mission in San Lucas Toliman and a Catholic school in Chichicastenango. The preparations for our trip included the standard directives for immunizations and packing. In our monthly pre-trip meetings, we worked on team building and fund raising, while also engaging in prayer and reflection. Having been raised Catholic, I blended in, familiar with the prayers. My own spiritual path has led me to identify more as a Buddhist, something that I did not share in the pre-trip meetings. Sister Donna gave us all blank journals which she had brought back from Guatemala for us to use during the trip. We began to learn about the beauty and the tragedy of Guatemala. We read and watched films about "La Violencia", the civil war from 1960-1996 which resulted in the death of in excess of 200,000, mostly Mayan, people. We also began to hear about the resilience, generosity, and beauty of the Guatemalan country and people.

One of the conversations that came up several times in our preparations for the trip was the impact that technology has on the service trip experience. Sister Donna spoke of cell phones as a distraction from the experience of being with the people we were serving. She said that there would be limited wifi in our sites in Guatemala, establishing the expectation that we would be somewhat "unplugged" from our usual technology.

Since I teach undergraduates, I am very familiar with the reluctance that 19-year-olds have about turning off their devices. I contemplated researching the felt experiences of students on unplugging from technology. Due to timing and lack of IRB approval, I left for the trip feeling frustrated that I was not going to be able to study the experiences of the students on the trip.

Regardless, I decided to unplug myself for the 2- week

trip, focusing on being as present as possible for the experience of Guatemala, rather than escaping into the usual distractions of contemporary society. Instead of bringing novels to read during free time, as I normally would do on a vacation, I brought only my journal, yoga mat, and a book on Buddhist teachings by Pema Chödrön. I received *When Things Fall Apart* (Chödrön, 2005) as a gift from a friend several years earlier. I have always wanted to know how to keep things from falling apart, and my first reading of the book had been superficial with a good degree of skepticism. I remembered that the book was about accepting life as it is, with all of its pain and messiness. I chose to bring this book because I wanted to use my free time in Guatemala to think more deeply about Buddhist teachings, developing my own, often neglected, contemplative practice.

I brought my phone on the trip, intending to use any technology mindfully. I was the first participant to arrive for the airplane shuttle, and I noticed my conditioned reflex to look at something, anything, on my phone. I resisted and picked up my journal, "A minute after he (my husband) is gone and my first instinct is to pull out my phone, check Facebook, e-mail but I don't." In social work, I often assign journals to explore feelings about field experiences and classroom material. Journal writing has been identified as a "special form of reflection through which new meaning can be created, new understandings of problems can be circumscribed and new ways of organizing experiences can be developed" (Bringle & Hatcher, 1999, p. 113). It had been about 10 years since I regularly wrote in a journal, and that first entry was spent on noticing my anxiety about the trip, the work that would pile up while I was away, and the sadness of leaving my family. So off we went on the airplane to Guatemala City. I had my last calls and texts and watched a film on the flight. By the time the movie ended, I started to wonder if I should buy a book at the connecting airport in Georgia. This commitment of mine to refrain from "distraction" was going to be harder than I expected.

Our University runs a trip to Guatemala at least once per year and has developed relationships with two venues for volunteering. For the first week of the trip, we built beautiful clay ovens in the small homes of local families through the Mission at San Lucas Toliman. These ovens enable the women to vent the smoke from their cooking fires through their roofs. Health-related illnesses associated with having an open fire pit inside a small windowless building are significantly reduced by installing these ovens. The

second week, we were at the Centro Educativo Anunciata, a parish school in Chichicastenango (Chichi) where we taught English. We stayed at a small hotel in San Lucas Toliman, the typical arrangement made by the mission for their volunteers. In Chichi, we stayed at the "Internado", a residence run by the Dominican Sisters for poor, indigenous girls from the rural Guatemala highlands.

So I went to Guatemala, without my usual distractions and obligations. I carefully read the Chödrön book and wrote in my journal a few times per day. The journal and reading naturally connected, revealing three main themes: mindfulness, acceptance, and compassion, connecting the Buddhist writing of Chödrön to my experiences on the trip.

**Mindfulness**

Mindfulness, the central principle of Buddhist meditation, has been described by Kabat-Zinn as "…paying attention in a particular way, on purpose, in the present moment and non-judgmentally" (1994, p.4). Intention, attention, and attitude are identified as three building blocks of mindfulness (Shapiro, Carlson, Astin, & Freedman, 2006). Mindfulness is described as being purposefully focused and accepting of present moment internal and external experiences. Mindfulness can be practiced in a variety of forms. These practices include, but are not limited to, formal meditation, such as sitting meditation. In my time in Guatemala, I was intending to practice mindfulness throughout the day, noticing when my mind wandered to the past or to the future and then to gently return to my present moment internal and external experiences. Writing in my journal enabled me to be even more conscious of my thoughts and feelings.

"We become so accustomed to speeding ahead, we rob ourselves of joy" (Chödrön, 2005, p. 36). My mind is the classic "monkey mind" described in Buddhist writings, always making lists, thinking about the future or ruminating on the past. When I first started doing yoga 25 years ago, that is literally what I did during the meditation time. I would make lists of what I needed to do/get after the yoga class. In Guatemala, there is so much going on in the present moment, so much to attend to. Jon Kabat-Zinn (2013), who is credited for popularizing mindfulness, writes about cultivating wisdom and equanimity in the face of life's "full catastrophe." This phrase "full catastrophe" came to my mind as I intentionally embraced the present moment in Guatemala; there is so much beauty and so much pain apparent at all times there. For example, in one moment, I noticed the puff of the active volcano

over the beautiful but contaminated Lake Atitlan; I heard the sounds--a symphony of birds, roosters, dog fights, firecrackers, and marimba music; I smelled smoke billowing out from under the tin roof of a small adobe house, the tamales from the street vendor, and the scent of an explosion of flowering bushes; and I saw the cobblestone street with shoeless children and starving dogs.

Despite my decision to allow this trip to bring me closer to the "present moment," I often felt an intense desire to escape. Chödrön (2005) writes, "There are so many ways that have been dreamt up to entertain us away from the moment…so we don't have to feel the full impact of the pain that arises…"(p. 15). I experienced that pain and desire to escape as a native Kakchiquel Mayan woman from San Lucas Toliman told our group of her experiences in the civil war. Tears rolled down her weathered face as she looked through me, telling of the 1981 capture and "disappearance" of her own husband. She told of cleaning the bloody floor after the assassination of Father Stan Rother in nearby Santiago de Atitlan. She told of risking her life as she smuggled a truckload of 12 orphans through a military checkpoint, keeping the children, whom she claimed to be her own, from crying by giving them candy. The description of these nightmares on a rainy afternoon had a dreamlike quality. I looked around at our students who were trying to remain alert but were nodding off, as the pain provided no escape. Despite my own sleepiness, I willed myself to be "present," maintaining eye contact as she took us through those traumatic years. I chose to remain mindful of my own thoughts, refraining from the urge to get away from the fear and pain. Chödrön suggests, "Basically, the instruction is not to try to solve the problem but instead to used it as a question about how to let this very situation wake us up further rather than lull us into ignorance" (2005, p. 178).

I wrote about the difficulty staying with the present moment in my journal, "12 days seems like a long (too long) time. What was I thinking? I feel a bit of panic now and then and I remind myself that I am only in the present moment--be here now." The simple act of writing those words, acknowledging the panic that I was experiencing in a nonjudgmental way, loosened the grip of my distress. I was relaxing with whatever was arising, developing gentleness and curiosity towards my own thoughts. I still wanted to call my husband, to find out how each detail of our family life was doing without me. Chödrön encourages readers to notice this urge to do

something, anything, to escape from the moment, felt as fear or edginess. "Through refraining, we see that there's something between the arising of the craving-or the aggression or the loneliness or whatever it might be--and whatever action we take as a result"(2005, p.40).

### Acceptance

Part of what I had to let go of in Guatemala was my usual roles. I was there as an advisor, having agreed, according to my contract, to be a "mature influence, add educational value to the trip, be a role model, and build a relationship with students in a nontraditional setting." I was not the teacher and was not in my other major roles as mother and wife. I wrote in my journal, "I am really enjoying Sister Donna (other advisor) and the students. I am working to be authentic with them on a personal level rather than "professor." One of the students introduced me as 'amiga' today."

My University, the two Missions, and most of the trip participants were Catholic, unlike me. I had a book of Buddhist teachings and a yoga mat with me. I struggled with how to maintain my authenticity and fit in during the trip. In Chichi, while our students stayed in the girls' dorm, Sister Donna and I had rooms in the convent upstairs. The idea of staying in a convent was unsettling for me at first, but I quickly adapted to the comfortable, quiet place. I wrote, "I am negotiating the religion issue. We do a lot of praying at meals, and as we gather in the evening. I have not led a prayer but have discussed that I am not Catholic with Donna and one of the students."

In my journal, I reflected on the role confusion that I experienced and my difficulty letting go of my habitual desire to control things. When the students were planning their lessons for the schoolchildren, I was aware that I did not want to take over, giving too much direction to the students. I also had materials and ideas to share, but I struggled with being an advisor/participant. One of my most joyful times in Guatemala was when I took a risk, sharing openly with the students. I asked if I could teach the group a song as our prayer for the night. The students were enthusiastic, singing, line by line after me, a song written by Kenneth Guilmartin to commemorate the tragedy of 9/11, "May all children everywhere live in peace, sweet peace." For the rest of the trip, the song became a touchstone for our group, shared with the girls at the Internado. In post-trip evaluations, our students identified the song as a highlight of the contemplative practices for our trip.

Throughout the journal, I wrote about my difficulty with letting go of control, evidently one of my core issues. "I just realized that we have 9 more days. Each moment here is precious…I hope that they (my family) are doing OK, getting along, helping one another…I am thinking about the events coming up… I am reading about letting go of my habitual tendencies, realizing that the world can continue to spin on its axis without me."

There is so much to want to fix in Guatemala. Children walk shoeless through streets littered with dog feces. Busses spew out toxic black smoke. Each market has a number of limbless or blind beggars sitting on the street curb. Chödrön explains that the moment when we reach our limit and want to avoid suffering is a moment of great potential for the development of compassion. We can "let the energy of that emotion… pierce us to the heart" (2005, p.18). In my journal I wrote about this suffering, "Shopping in the villages is overwhelming and sad to me. So many beautiful things and the people are so desperate to sell to me; yet it makes me not want to buy any of it. I admire their work and yet I would rather give them the money since in relation to them, I do not need anything." Also in my journal, I wrote, "We had a very hot sunny day. Second day with no rain. I cannot imagine how hot it would be in one of the tin houses, cooking tortillas three times a day over an open fire like the local women do. They have so little here." And I worry in my journal for the people that we meet, "Sister Josephina, the head of the school, spoke to us about the history including having to leave Chichi for months when the religious were being killed during the war. Both this and the last mission seem so fragile, not sure if there will continue to be money to keep going for another 50 years."

The morale of the service trip group was impacted by the suffering that we witnessed. We were wanting to help with so many needs, "We had a great meeting to end our night. The students planned for tomorrow's classes and then we all checked in. There was some good sharing about the difficulties of privilege, of wanting to DO more for the people, and of the love, sharing, and fun with the kids." By the end of the trip, we all started to feel the powerlessness of really helping in Guatemala. We all had things, shoes, clothes, or money that we wanted to give. We realized that none of it could be enough to fill the need. I wrote, "Last night in our reflection time we talked about service. Some expected to help more. We talked about service being more of an accompanying than an act of I do

this for you. This connects with what I am reading about egolessness…It is hard coming from our culture to think more communally and to accept that we cannot fix things."

## Compassion

Gyalwa Karmapa according to Chödrön (2005, p. 107) said, "You take it all in. You let the pain of the world touch your heart and you turn it into compassion." I wrote of one experience that our group had with compassion, "Last full day in Guatemala, Donna introduced us to Maria (alias). She was seeking help from the Internado since she had just been caught trying to enter the U.S. illegally. Wanting to join her boyfriend in New Jersey, she had borrowed $3000 to pay the "coyotes" to bring her to the United States. She was arrested in Texas where she had to give up all of her possessions, even the blouse under her sweater. She was flown back to Guatemala City and came to Chichi by bus. Maria was welcomed by the Sisters. She had dinner and a bed for the night and left the next day to return to her home with clothes and toiletries donated by our students. She will most likely try to get to New Jersey again." Chödrön teaches the practice of tonglen, "Whenever we encounter suffering of any form, the tonglen instruction is to breathe it in with the wish that everyone could be free of pain" (2005, p. 109). We were able to breathe in Maria's suffering, developing compassion for her and for all of the Central Americans who have attempted to make a better life for themselves in the United States.

At the very end of our trip I had the opportunity to put together all of the teachings, developing "maitri", the Sanskrit word for loving-kindness or unconditional friendliness, with myself. After our 3-hour van ride from Chichi to Guatemala City, we arrived at the airport for the trip home. Donna and I got everyone through check-in and security, relaxing in the belief that we were "home free." About 30 minutes into our breakfast, I was suddenly violently ill. I spent the next two hours in and out of the bathroom with what can only be described as a movie-quality case of food poisoning. As our departure time ticked closer, I became aware of my anxiety that I would not be able to make the flight. I felt humiliated as a bathroom in a developing country was closed down due to my illness. The more anxious and embarrassed I felt, the sicker I became. Then it occurred to me, I became mindful, that I could accept this situation just as it is. I did not have to like the fact that I might not be able to get onto the plane, but I could accept it. Once I accepted my situation, I was able to have compassion for myself, even starting to see the humor in my

dilemma. My mind even grasped how lucky I was that this was happening at the airport rather than on the plane or in one of the worksites with more primitive plumbing. "The instruction is to relate compassionately with where we find ourselves and begin to see our predicament as workable" (Chödrön, 2005, p. 174). Telling myself to accept the situation as it is, my stomach started to settle. With the help of some medicine, I was eventually able to board the plane. My instinct would typically be to let no one know what happened in that airport. Thus, even writing about this embarrassing incident is a powerful step in gentle friendliness with myself.

## Conclusions

"The world is always displaying itself, always waving and winking, but we are so self-involved that we miss it" (Chödrön, 2005, p. 159). A ten year old girl called to me, "Professora! Come quick, a hummingbird, it's hurt." On seeing the beautiful, fragile being, I was awed. It was barely breathing, eyes drooping, seeming to be nearing death. What could I do? I wondered. A dozen Guatemalan girls and U.S. college students huddled around the bird, anxiously debating how to help. Remembering that hummingbirds need a lot of energy, I asked one of the girls to get a bowl of sugar water. I gently took the bird to a patio away from the throng of girls and the hungry cat. Without much hope, I placed the bird's bill into the sweet water. It dipped its tongue in the water, swallowing tiny sips, becoming more alert. I held the hummingbird out in my open palm, letting go and flap, flap, it buzzed away. My experience with the hummingbird symbolizes many of the aspects of my experiences on the service trip to Guatemala. Both required my heightened awareness of myself and my surroundings, my acceptance of both beauty and pain, and my ability to let go.

Contemplative practices are a natural fit with service learning experiences. Usually the students who volunteer for service learning are altruistic students with some spiritual or religious practice. Our students were very comfortable with journals and prayer. Many of them were also able to share freely

their reflections with the group. Like me, the students were struggling with the "full catastrophe" of Guatemala. I believe that our students would have been open if I had shared some of Chödrön's teachings with them. I wish that I had spoken with the students about my attempts at mindfulness, acceptance, and compassion throughout our shared experiences.

One of the many things that I learned from advising in Guatemala is that I can risk sharing my authentic self with students as I did when we shared the song. When I advise on trips in the future, I will apply the "maitri" that I am developing for myself, taking the risk to incorporate more of myself and my contemplative practices in each phase of the service trip. I will share my intention to refrain from my usual distractions from the present moment, encouraging students to do the same in order to "let the energy of that emotion… pierce us to the heart" (Chödrön, 2005, p.18).

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# Reflections on the Process of Evolving from a Student of Literature to a Social Work Instructor of Humanism

Heather Catherine Pizzanello

**Abstract**: An Instructor of Social Work explores the origination of her love for literature and the humanities. She discusses how and why she infuses the humanities and various forms of literature into her clinical social work courses and what she perceives to be the pedagogical implications of this interdisciplinary approach.

*When you begin to write you're in love with the language, with the act of creation, with yourself partly; but as you go on, the writing-if you follow it will take you to places you never intended to go and show you things you would never otherwise have seen. I began as a profoundly apolitical writer, but then I began to do what all novelists and some poets do: I began to describe the world around me…Come with me, the writer is saying to the reader. There is a story I have to tell you, there is something you need to know* (Atwood, 1982, pp. 15 &348).

It was my first year of high school and I had been cloaked in the insular world of homogeneity (racially/ethnically and socioeconomically speaking) that both my immediate and larger social context afforded me. Harper Lee's (1960) novel, *To Kill A Mockingbird*, in its' light purple jacket was laid out before me, our class room desks arranged in a circle. Our charismatic and demanding teacher who embodied what it meant to be passionately enthralled with and immersed in the world of literature attempted to transmit this state of ecstatic adornment to us. She provocatively and imploringly stated, "English and literature needs to be your lives!"

Our instructor was animatedly beckoning us to enter into this world of language, poetry and literature. It was within this world that we would become enticed, engulfed, and transfixed by the juxtaposed elements of beauty and horror that comprised the human condition, or in the words of novelist Margaret Atwood (1984), the reality that the "writer" is beckoning the "reader" to "come with me, there is a story I have to tell you, there is something you need to know" (Atwood, 1984, p.348).

It was my teacher's infectious love for language coupled with the curiosity and pain that Harper Lee's novel evoked within me that heightened my descent, in a manner similar to what novelist Margaret Atwood speaks of, into this world of literature. My descent into this literary world gave way to the teeming and exhilarating experience of intellectual stimulation that subsumed me. However, this stream of exhilaration was also at times blunted by the anguish and disillusionment that overcame me, as I was forced to confront the harrowing revelations that underpinned the metaphoric image of the mockingbird.

As my love for literature compelled me into this transcendiary state of "flow," a sense of consciousness, humanity and justice was incited within me, indelibly and irreparably punctuating my view of myself and the world that surrounded me (Csikszentmihaly, 2008). At the time I searched for but could not find the words to describe this profound, yet, intangible process. It was this process that paralleled in many ways what Atwood depicts as her own evolution in relation to language and writing:

> But as you go on, the writing-if you follow it will take you to places you never intended to go and show you things you would never otherwise have seen. I began as a profoundly apolitical writer, but then I began to do what all novelists and some poets do: I began to describe the world around me (Atwood, 1984, p. 15).

In my final year of high school I was fortunate enough to have this teacher who initially incited my entry into this world where language transported me "to places (I) never intended to go, showing (me) things (I) would never otherwise have seen" once again. A central piece of my work that year involved my completion of a thesis on "The Role of the Female Artist in Society." After receiving my thesis back from her, I noticed that two pages of her hand written comments were attached. Amidst her feedback were these two statements that particularly resonated with me, as they began to capture and make real what I had struggled to capture within the vernacular of words. "Of all the works and characters you discuss in your thesis the voice of the paper becomes the most intimate and passionate when you discuss the character

of Mick in Carson McCullers (1967), *The Heart is A Lonely Hunter*, it seems as though there was something about this character that really spoke to you." (Later followed by) "I was right about you, Literature opens up a whole world for you and I will miss you!"

It wasn't until many years later when I was introduced to what Martha Nussbaum (1995) described as the essentialism of humanity that associative links began to take shape within my mind regarding what my English teacher's closing comments to me had begun to capture. Nussbaum defines 'humanity' as the capacity, "to recognize the worth of human life wherever it occurs and to see ourselves as bound by common human abilities and problems to people who lie at a great distance from us" (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 354). Nussbaum asserts that "an ability to see (oneself) not simply as citizens of some local region or group but also, and above all, as human beings bound to all other human beings by ties to recognition and concern" is pivotal to the development of humanity (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 354). She (Nussbaum) also describes how the capacity for humanity is facilitated through the engendering of what she defines as the "literary imagination." Nussbaum shares how the cultivation of the 'literary imagination' or "the ability to imagine what it is like to live the life of another person" through the medium of "literary works" which "typically invite their readers to put themselves in the place of people of many different kinds and to take on their experiences" creates a sense of humanism (Nussbaum, 1995, p.5). She elaborates upon this concept by writing that:

> In their (literary works) very mode of address to their imagined reader, they convey the sense that there are links of possibility between the characters and the reader. The reader's emotions and imagination are highly active as a result. Novels speak to an implicit reader who shares with the character's certain hopes, fears, and general human concerns, and who for that reason is able to form bonds of identification (Nussbaum, 1995, p. 7).

It was indeed this transformative process of unleashing my "literary imagination" that had sent me spinning and careening head long into this new and intermediary world of literature that my teacher had recognized in her closing commentary to me. This transcendence into a parallel universe involved a journey that was often eclipsed by the disparate evocations of reverence, horror and awakened

feelings surrounding the need for humanity and social justice. It worked to irreparably shatter my insulated world of pacifying illusion, rendering me into a state of anguished disillusionment or in the words of Nussbaum literature became "disturbing because it summons powerful emotions, it disconcerts and puzzles. It inspires distrust of conventional pieties and exacts a frequently painful confrontation with one's own thoughts and intentions" (Nussbaum, 1995, p.7).

Leaving high school behind and entering into college, I grappled with questions surrounding what areas of study I wanted to focus on in college. I saw the intersections that existed between literature, psychology and law. I ultimately double majored in English Literature and Psychology. Through literature I was brought more affectively into the psychological worlds of the characters in various novels. This offered a perspective that breathed life and 'humanity' into the technical and often reductionistic components of my psychology textbooks.

After graduating from college, I agonized over what direction to move in for graduate school. I ultimately decided to pursue a Masters of Social Work (MSW) degree which was interrelated with psychology, issues surrounding social justice and essentially engagement in the personal narratives of my clients. I vowed, however, to never abandon my love for literature. Following the completion of my MSW degree I worked in the human services field as a Clinical Social Worker and then entered into a doctoral program in social work. My doctoral program was small and heavily focused on clinical social work and psychodynamic theory which gratified my analytical mind. The Co-Director of our program had been a literature major as well and prior to graduating from our course work I met with her to discuss how to retain my passion for literature and how it might be infused into my writing and teaching.

It was a few years after this discussion that I received my position as a full time instructor of social work. I began teaching courses that were often laden with technical and formalized criteria that at times felt dehumanizing to individuals struggling with mental health issues. In response to this 'felt' element of dehumanization, I felt it was incumbent upon me to bring the course material alive in a manner that breathed facets of humanity into the assigned curriculum. I wanted to incite feelings of passion, humanity, intellectual curiosity and critical thinking in my students, in a manner similar to what my high school English teacher had done for me. I attempted to achieve this by challenging my students to take an

interdisciplinary approach to learning. I facilitated this interdisciplinary approach by asking them to make connections to bodies of knowledge that on a more cursory level appeared to be disconnected, such as, a piece of poetry and social work theory and practice.

One of the courses that I have taught adopts a microscopic paradigm to understanding the process of clinical diagnosis. In this course I have utilized assignments that challenge students' to think critically about the clients they are working with and how our larger social context influences the various clinical conditions that clients encounter. This pedagogical approach is intended to dismantle a solely myopic view of the human condition.

An assignment that I have used in the spirit of this pedagogical approach involves reading the poem "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" by Thomas Stearns (T.S.) Eliot (1917). The protagonist in T.S. Eliot's poem laments over the question of "Do I dare disturb the universe?" "Do I dare Disturb the Universe? Should I... Have the strength to force the moment to its crisis?" The protagonist is able to discern and critique the oppressive forces of his world that are subsuming; yet he questions his ability to "force the moment to its crisis." By the close of the poem the protagonist "drowns" in his inability to feel as though he is capable of impacting the world around him or to "disturb the universe." The protagonist in essence is subsumed by his own futility. Reading this poem and asking students how it relates to social work theory and practice exemplifies an activity that I have brought into the classroom. The protagonist in the poem agonizes over whether he should continue to live on the periphery of life, feeling ineffectual yet safe in the position of the passive observer. He does not take risks nor does he dare to leave his mark upon the world. He languishes on the proverbial 'sidelines' of life. By the close of the poem he drowns in feelings of remorse, regret and self-loathing regarding his own inaction (Miller, 2005).

As an instructor I value and strive to create a culture that does not leave students feeling as though they are passive observers who are treading along the periphery of the classroom. I invite them to enter into the heart of their learning, to question, to challenge, to take risks, to make an impact upon their clients' lives, and the larger social world or to, "dare to disturb the universe" and to indeed "force the moment to its crisis." My facilitation of their "literary imaginations" in this manner occurs in an

environment where students are encouraged to become co-actors and creators in their learning process (Nussbaum, 1995).

This teaching philosophy that is grounded in the tenets of co-constructionism can be conceptualized as having postmodern underpinnings. "The postmodern perspective rejects the idea of an objective reality and emphasizes the intersubjectivity of human experience" (McQuaide, 1999, p. 412). Postmodernism emphasizes the paradigm of social constructionism. It privileges the notion that there are multiple realities regarding learning and knowing which we are constantly shaping "intersubjectively" in tandem with one another. "Reality is knowable-its elements and workings can be accurately and replicably discovered, described, and used by human beings. Knowledge arises within communities of knowers – the realities we inhabit are those we negotiate with one another" (Freedman & Combs, 1996, in McQuaide, 1999, p.20).

In an effort to engender a postmodern approach that embraces multiple realities, I have utilized material from sociology and specifically Erving Goffman's (1961, 1974) written perspective of mental health to challenge the 'reality' offered in many text books that mental illness is solely a result of individual pathology. I believe it is imperative when course material is centered in a myopic and medical model paradigm to both challenge and question what is being offered as proverbial "truth(s)" through a juxtaposed sociological lens. Other mediums that I have used are literary in nature, such as, Kay Redfield Jamison's (1995), autobiographical work, *An Unquiet Mind*. In *An Unquiet Mind*, Jamison eloquently and poetically recounts her struggles with Bipolar Disorder making her experiences with the disorder quite palpable from a humanistic standpoint. This level of palpability and evocation transmits an understanding to students that permeates beyond the limits of the criteria listed within our assigned diagnostic manual. I have also introduced passages from Susanna Kaysen's (1993) autobiographical novel *Girl Interrupted*. My integration of Kaysen's work is intended to illuminate the intrapersonal struggles of emotional dysregulation endured by an individual with a mental health issue. In addition, drawing upon this autobiographical account encourages students to both think critically about and to deconstruct the diagnosis of Borderline Personality Disorder from a macroscopic lens.

This literary integration has been met with varied responses from students over the years. The overall tenor of student responses has been positive. I have had students exclaim, "I love this!" and it has

generally entered into my student evaluations positively. Students have written that they appreciate the level of "creativity" that I bring into the classroom. However, on one occasion I had a student write in my evaluation that she felt it was an unnecessary component of the course. I have also infrequently had students voice their anxieties surrounding their feelings of "incompetence" regarding the analysis of poetry and literature. When this concern emerges, I assure students that this is "ok." I also assure them that I am aware that the integration of literature may not resonate with everyone and that it is not a classroom activity that they are going to be graded on, additionally clarifying that a lack of verbal response to this material will not impact their classroom participation grade.

Based upon my own culmination of experiences with integrating literature into my clinical social work courses, I would advise that the provision of preparation and context is crucial. I always let students know ahead of time that I am going "to do something a bit different in class today" before introducing a poem or a short literary piece.

I provide them with my reasoning and rationale for integrating literature in this manner, recognizing that on the surface it appears disconnected to the course material but why upon closer scrutiny I view it as connected. I also provide students with a few open ended questions to guide them in their thinking about the literary piece so that they feel more anchored as they descend into what may feel like unchartered territory.

In addition, after writing their thoughts or responses to the guided questions down, I have students create small groups where they can freely exchange their thoughts with one another before their group is asked to voluntarily share their discussions with the rest of the class. This alleviates the anxieties of students who do not feel as competent in this area, because they know they are not being "singled out," as they have become members of a voluntary group process.

Perhaps, most importantly, I have also found that it is essential for me to 'know' my students and to remain attuned to the ever fluctuating 'pulse' of my classroom. If upon reflection and evaluation I find that the integration of literature is not pedagogically effective and meaningful for a particular student group, as with any other mode of instruction, I will elicit student feedback and revise my approach based upon student input. If the integration of literary pieces continues to feel ineffective, I discontinue it as a pedagogical approach.

My passion to infuse various literary works into my teaching in this manner also compelled me to enter into curriculum development with faculty members from two other disciplines. Together we created an interdisciplinary course entitled, "Humanities for the Professions."

This course development was probably the most challenging curriculum work that I have been tasked with to date. It involved the joining of materials from various areas of concentration that initially felt disconnected and I was challenged with discovering how they could become interconnected. I worked to develop assignments from this material that incited the capacity to think critically and to garner a sense of humanism in undergraduate students whose education was preparing them for a professional field. It was while I was reading and considering the integrative use of materials for sections of this course that I was charged with creating that I came across Martha Nussbaum's (1995) work entitled *Poetic Justice*.

Ironically it was my reading of *Poetic Justice* so many years later in my capacity as an instructor that provided me with the words (literary imagination and the cultivation of humanity) that had eluded me as an initial student of literature so many years earlier. These words described what had been awakened within me by my own instructor who had set me on an indelible path of transformation. It was this indelible path that cultivated a passion for literature, a sense of humanity and a commitment to social justice that drove me to become a teacher who strives to incite what Nussbaum defines as a capacity for "literary imagination" in my own students.

It was the development of my literary capacities that facilitated my own profound sense of humanism. The use of literature in my own teaching reminds me of what inspired and excited me about learning as a student. It continues to fuel me with feelings of intensity, passion and exhilaration as an instructor that I hope to infectiously transmit to my students. It breathes 'life' into me, in essence providing me with what I need to be able to "supply oxygen" to my classroom and "to create an inspiring, challenging environment that enables learning to take place."

It is through the creation of this environment that I strive to embody and elicit what I hold to be the most essential facet of an 'education,' "the awakening of a

human being" (Rawlings, 2015).

*Good teachers 'supply oxygen' to their classrooms. Professors need to inspire, to prod, to irritate, to create engaging environments that enable learning to take place. Genuine education is not a commodity, it is the awakening of a human being* (Rawlings, 2015).

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