Doing the Right Thing: A Narrative Interview with Irving Miller

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Abstract: Irving Miller was a social worker and subsequently a professor at the Columbia School for Social Work from the 1940s through the 1980s. He was an expert on organizational behavior and part of a cohort of group workers at Columbia University who were influential in the development of this modality. The interview with him is a reflection on a career in social work during an important phase of its development and offers important historical context as well as sharing a story about a life and career.

***Keywords*:** group work, case work, disability, blindness, Judaism

Introduction

My father, Irving Miller (1918–2001), was a professor at Columbia University School of Social Work for most of his career. Many times when presenting at conferences, I have been stopped by former students or colleagues and told how he was viewed: "brilliant, wise, funny, sage." He was raised in poverty by his mother, who had been widowed at an early age and who suffered from Retinitis Pigmentosa (a severe, progressive hereditary eye disease), which both he and his sister inherited. (Had he lived in the present, there would have been many more technological supports for the visually impaired to support his career as well as more developed protections through the ADA.) Despite his visual handicap, he rose in the profession and played a role, along with other colleagues at Columbia, in the evolution of group work as a major modality of practice. According to his colleagues, his powerful and enduring influence was as an expert in organizational behavior, promoting high ethical professional standards and behavior and always asserting the primacy of clients in social work practice. Wherever he was holding court, at home and at work, his insights were always laced with humor, joke-telling, and an endearing and engaging style.

The following are edited excerpts of two interviews that I conducted with him in the early 1990s.

I interviewed Irving and edited the transcripts along with Paul Abels (who was an early editor and contributor to *Reflections*), and after his death, edited out my part of the discussion so that his answers flowed in a more engaging narrative. I have added contextual information in brackets when needed. Along with illustrating some of Miller's insights about social work education and practice, they describe his impoverished childhood, growing up in Brooklyn in the 1920s and '30s, working with gangs at a Settlement House, the impact of his visual disability on his career, the McCarthy era and social work, and the emergence of Jewish social workers in the profession.

Interview

[My father] died in 1924 when I was six. Under [New York Governor] Alfred E. Smith, we had a ADC [Aid to Dependent Children] program. My mother got a child grant, something like thirty

dollars a month for each child. They used to send investigators to see if they could get my mother to work. So my mother had a fixed income and then she had three of her siblings help her with flat sums of $25. We were poor, but she always had good food on the table—we were well fed. I wore hand-me-downs; so did my brother and sister, from the children of similar-aged affluent cousins.

We were living mostly in Brownsville [Brooklyn]. We had electricity and a coal stove and later steam heat. It was the slums, but it was a homogenous neighborhood [meaning, all Jewish]. And it was a stable neighborhood. That was the interesting thing about Brownsville where I lived. Everybody was poor. The neighborhood was loaded with Jewish widows whose men had died in the flu epidemic post-World War I. There were a lot of widows. I lived in a block where everyone knew each other. The neighbors looked after us. If you didn't behave, and your mother had to work or something, they turned you in, would tell your mother on you. So it was very tightly knit. We had a lot of friends—there was a closeness, a sense of people. People knew each other. You would leave your kids with a neighbor. My mother loved to play poker—penny poker. Like, she went to a neighbor's house and she took me along. I slept and then she would carry me upstairs [to our apartment]. My mother was well off in a sense and she could feed us and pay the rent, but we couldn't have any luxuries. I never went to camp in my life as a kid. My mother was too proud to send me to a social agency camp. We would play in the streets, like marbles or with fire hydrants and did various things like stealing potatoes. We used to climb up a hill and look through the opposite streets to see if we could catch a lady undressing. When I was twelve, I started to work.

[These experiences helped me with my career.] Those who know me say that I have physical courage; I am not afraid of much. I take my chances. I knew all kinds of things that were going on. I had a different perspective on life and when I went to social work school I met a lot of people, mostly very lovely young women, who had no adversity in their lives.

I went to work while I was in high school. I was a delivery boy delivering packages from the age twelve to age eighteen. I was seventeen and a half when I graduated from high school and then I started to work seriously [in the fur market]. My uncle was in the shipping department of a store. It was discouraging work, pushing barrels. I wanted to get out of it. I did have trade union experience. But I also wanted to go to college. I went to school at night because I aspired to have a degree, but nobody could afford to send me to college. I had to bring money into the house. I worked for eight or nine or ten years to get a college degree, going at nights [to City College]. As I was within sight of a degree, I was speaking to one of the psychology teachers, Gardner Murphy, and he said, "You know, it is hard to make a living in psychology—when you graduate, I think you could get a fellowship at the University of Georgia for a master's and doctorate degree." But I couldn't make a living at being a psychologist. He said, "You know, you would be a good social worker, working with people." I had just gotten married, I had a young wife, and I could not go to Georgia and live on $800 a year. I wanted to be a lawyer, but that would have been a full-time thing and I could not afford it. I think that careers are chance factors. They are not determined. You know that wonderful song, "When I am not near the girl I love, I love the girl I'm near?"

A fellow student, Herbie Rosen, advised me: "If you want to go to social work school, they won't take you if you don't have experience—you have to be in the field."

"So how do you get field experience?" I wondered. I didn't know anybody.

"Well you go down, and you go to a social work agency," said Herbie.

So, I heard of Greenwich House, and I went [there] and asked for a job. A woman named Mary Simkovitch said that they didn't have any work for me. She suggested to me that I try Madison House. So I walked from Greenwich House, on Barrow St. in Greenwich Village, all the way to Madison Street on the lower east side. It was mostly an Italian area at this time—Market and Madison Streets. So I came in and I said, "I would like to apply for a job here; I am interested in working."

I think it was about 1941 or '42. There was a shortage of men [due to World War II] and I was 4F [due to my visual handicap]. I met a man by the name of Norman Lurie who later became the head of the National Association of Social Workers and the head of welfare for the State of Pennsylvania. He was working then as the director—the "head worker"—of Madison House. They had just lost a [worker,] and he asked me about my experience. He became very intrigued because I had trade union experience when I worked in the fur market. When working in the fur market I had actually set up a credit union. I was an activist in the union and he knew some of the people that were the head of the union. It was not a very left-wing union. He was a very interesting guy—in the best sense of the word, a *tummler*. He was all over the place. That's a Yiddish word, *tummler*—a maker of things happening—and he said, "I'm going to take a chance and give you a job." So I got a job at $1,320 a year, very low salary, as the Director of Social Activities.

I used to work in the game room. There were very few men there at that time. Madison House employed me four nights a week. I learned a lot of things and attitudes and how to handle discipline problems with kids. I was very patient and accepting and naturally non-judgmental with some of these tough kids and I worked with a gang. I was patient and I was [also] tough. They did terrible things. They ripped toilet bowls out of their moorings—and this was a very nice place. They were tough and angry. They refused to leave the agency; they were defiant, all these young people, except with me and the psychiatrist. At first they called me "Douchebag" and all that kind of stuff. They called me all kinds of names and they tested me, but when they got to know me and like me, they [greeted me with] "Hey, Teach." I got to know these kids and I went with them to the pool halls. I was good at it then.

I took them out on trips. I wanted to venture out with these kids. They lived two and three blocks east and west—Madison Street, Water Street, Grand Street—those were streets east and west, and the fourth or fifth street up [North] was Delancy Street and then Houston goes after that. It occurred to me that they had never gone further than Delancy Street—it was dangerous for them because of other gangs. I said to them, "Let's take a trip, you like to play pool and I could take you to a pool hall." There was a pool hall on 14th Street above the Irving Place Theater. They tested me and said to me, "Would you bring your wife?" They were always jiving, you know,

kidding around, because I was married. (And they were 15-16 , Butch Connelly, Frank O'Neill, Tony Magaletta, Gabriel Pascucci [names changed to protect confidentiality] all these people—these kids, they ended up badly.) So [my wife, Helen,] came along and I took them up to 14th and I noticed that they were terribly ill at ease—in the bowling alley and billiard place—very ill at ease, tense as could be because they were about twelve blocks north of their territory. I realized that these were boys; these were young men—14, 15, and 16—who had more sexual experience than I, and they drank, and they did all these terrible things, but they suddenly became very frightened. And they said: "Hey Irv, let's get out of here, let's get out of here. I don't like it here. Let's go down back to Madison Street and we can have 'sheep's cheeks,' this is not for us. I don't like it up here." And we went back and then we did have something and went home. I lived on the Lower East Side then. But that was a very interesting experience for me—that these kids, with all their bravado—they were limited to two or three square blocks. They were terrified!

I told that to Bob Vinter [Group work professor at Columbia University]. He said, "I had the same experience." He told of an experience where he had done some excellent work trying to get kids summer jobs. Now this was at 103rd Street and Park Avenue—his agency. He said, "I would get them jobs, I have connections—good WASP [White, Anglo-Saxon Protestant]—you know with the East Side—rich people who sit on boards." And he got summer jobs for them and they never showed up to work. They would not take the jobs anywhere below 96th Street—seven blocks. I had the same problem. They [were] just scared shitless to go further.

I formed a club, "The Hustlers," and I had a very interesting classic experience. They wouldn't trust each other, so I was their treasurer. No professionally trained worker [would] think of confusing his role, to be their treasurer. But I was their treasurer, because they did not trust each other. So I held their money for them.

I was scared half of the time that I worked with them. My wife, Helen, observed it once. They refused to leave the settlement house at closing time and the women [who worked there] were scared. So I go out with this [gang member] Butch Connelly and he carries on and he marches around with a chair over his head. So I was leaning against the building, not seeing too well then, and I finally said, "hup, two, three" and I marched him back in and gave him a whole [military] routine. He marched all around Madison Street, holding a chair over his head, up and back with the goddamn chair, and finally he got exhausted and I marched him into the door and he laughed at me [and left]. [My] visual acuity was right there, my field [of vision] was not. The principle symptom that I had to cope with was night blindness; that is why I was scared on the streets. I had relatively good vision—I was not legally blind then. [But I was worried about walking at night due to my] retinitis pigmentosa.

They named themselves The Hustlers, so my supervisor, who was then my age—she was a young social worker, just graduated, and she said, "How wonderful, Irving, that their names are Hustlers."

So I said, "Helen, you don't understand that they are putting me on."

[She replied,] "What do you mean, they are putting you on?"

"*Hustlers* doesn't mean busy bees," I said. But they were very nice people and I really did like them and I have very kind feelings towards them.

There were very few Jews around [in social work]. When I was a student, there were a half a dozen Jewish kids. That was the New York crowd, and the whole New York School of Social Work [now Columbia] was the Protestant establishment—CSS, Congressional Women, Gordon Hamilton, Verna Lowery, and Clara Kaiser. These were these elegant women. It was the WASP establishment and there was one Jewish teacher, Phillip Kline, who was married to a very affluent WASP. One or two Jewish teachers and they were very, very acceptable Jews. They were not Jewish types. There were a few Jew boys, but we stood out. I was one of four or five lucky people who got into that School in 1941. Although I am clearly and unmistakably Jewish, I never was fazed by my superiors. They never would make me defensive.

I was not afraid of them and I was very direct with them. I got along well in school. I took the group work program and I really didn't find any of it very stimulating. I didn't have a high opinion of what they taught in group work—and I don't feel like mentioning names, but I was very underwhelmed by the level of teaching. It was sort of morally arrogant. They thought very highly of themselves. They thought that they had the answers all the time. I heard the most lavish nonsense from the teachers; I just didn't believe that shit. However, [in fairness to] Phillip Kline, he really believed that social workers are self-liquidating professionals—if you straighten people out, then they won't be in poverty. They taught things that I didn't believe were so, that if you straighten people out all the rest will follow. So it was a reductionist thing in a way. There were a few very good teachers and I used to admire the way they analyzed the cases, but in group work it was weak. It was all conceptual stuff. They didn't deal with the matter of skill. What will you do? Grace Coyle [Case Western University]—she was an intellectual, so she was good. There were straight Freudians, who taught personality, growth, and development. They had the real things, psychiatrists. They had a whole theory, a whole set of ideas.

Gordon Hamilton was the casework teacher. There was a little subtle rivalry between the psychiatrists and the caseworkers. [The psychiatrists taught the human behavior type of material, case work teachers taught practice.] I learned about welfare—I was a welfare buff. I took all the courses they gave on public welfare.

My first placement was in casework on the lower east side, a few blocks away from Madison House. They were beginning to try to develop placements in the Department of Welfare. It was a very interesting experience and I learned an awful lot from the workers there. I went to visit homes to check up on my clients. I wrote social diagnoses for these people. I had to write them all the time, because the object was to give the social diagnosis. I had a wonderful client that I used to like to see. She was a lovely woman, married to a Jewish gangster who was a Jewish nogoodnik, a hustler who used to forge ration stamps. He was in prison. She schlepped sacks of surplus foods and worked very, very hard. I said to my supervisor, "I think that we ought to arrange a special need; she ought to have a visit to her husband in Pennsylvania." I asked, "Can't we get three or four bucks together—you know, the price of a new hat—so Lillian could have a

new hat?" I wanted to send her with a new Easter bonnet to see her husband. She said [I would] have to go to the case supervisor, [and I would] have to write it up. They made an allowance for her to go see her husband.

Years later I learned from Mobilization for Youth that the rules are not bad; you have to know how to use them. It was a brilliant stroke [conceived of by] Dick Cloward and his ilk—wonderful ilk. They discovered that the Department [of Welfare] was violating its own rules, so they learned the rule book, and it was a very powerful weapon.

I think at that time I thought [that social work] is a worthwhile thing to do. One of my teachers said that you are doing God's work in practical ways and to be a social worker was to do good. Later I learned that it is important to be a good-doer as well to do good. Social workers were nice people. They tried, Lord knows they tried. They cared. But I also thought that there was a lot of foolishness. I still think there is a lot of foolishness—nonsense.

I graduated from school and my first job was in a group work agency, a Jewish agency in Brownsville and East New York. The program went well and I trained students there and worked there for five years. After five years, the students praised my work, and the word got back and I got a job as an assistant professor at Columbia University for $5,500. When they offered me the job I was thunderstruck. I grabbed it right away. Bill Schwartz [Group work professor, Columbia University] made a weird remark to me. He said, "You know, half of the social workers, young social workers who graduated from Columbia felt it was a fluke and felt that they should have gotten [the job]—so, about a hundred psychoanalysts know about your appointment." I think certain things about me helped me—like my personality and my attitude. I was funny. I told stories.

I felt that I came to Columbia University School of Social Work at a time when there was really a quota for Jews. No question about it. I came in spite of being Jewish. I was the second or third Jew on that faculty, I believe, or the fourth. I was always clear—I identified myself clearly and unequivocally as Jewish. I didn't conceal my Jewishness. M, my friend, said, "You are the only one who seems to be comfortable with your Jewishness." I celebrated the Jewish holidays and wouldn't come to school on these days.

I always was a strong believer on being able to do the work. So I would always say to [students] go where your practice will be. Get to know practice and where you can get good supervision. And I encouraged them to speak about their artistic abilities and their ability to write. I learned at school that a lot of it is just pretense, a lot of phoniness, it really is. It is in the market place of education, like any other thing. Considerations are always more important, such as money—bringing in money for the school. Faculty who have pretenses of objectivity I have always felt are really corrupt, and moral superiority is the greatest barrier and obstacle to change. They have turf and their own comfort to be concerned about. You can get faculty very excited if you want them to give up a perk. I find that as a teacher, I had to be loyal to what my job was, [not the institution]—that is a matter of personal ethics. It is a matter of personal ethics to me not to give students a shafting. My own feeling was you have an utter loyalty to do the job that you are supposed to perform; you have to be a good teacher. You try to give students a fair shake all

of the time.

When I first got there, I taught group work and I liked it. I really liked being a teacher and I did like the ambiance. There were funny things I had to deal with. The School of Social Work was at Carnegie Mansion. It was a lovely place. Offices were bedrooms, guest rooms, and the all-teakwood room was for seminars. The image was that the casework teachers had to have privacy—it was the most ridiculous thing[, so they had the better offices]. A good part of your load was [as] a field advisor; you taught two courses and had fifteen students in the field. Everybody had to carry students—all practice teachers. Most of the core social work faculty did not have doctorates; that was a later development. Many of them worked in the field.

Nobody taught me how to be a professor, but I had mentors. One, Virginia Bellsmith, was in the casework faculty in the psychiatric social work sequence. She was a firecracker, a tough-talking gal. She took an interest in me. She taught me how to survive in the system. She taught me that you have got to be student-oriented, not agency-oriented—the focus is the student. She said you have got to give the poor son of a bitch a break sometimes. So she kept me out of trouble. She was the director of fieldwork and helped me through another difficulty. I was carrying a group of students and a social work union was being organized at a Y—the largest Y in New Jersey—the Jewish Y. I had six or eight students there and it was a very good plum of a placement. So I called the students in and I said, "None of you are going into that agency; it is not an educationally good situation for you." I offended the agency a great deal and I pulled out all the students and I arranged some work for them to do. Neither the left nor the right supported me. I found the situation to be very painful. I was called, by some of the Jewish faculty, "The Westchester Marxist." The students were political and they wanted to picket and I said that this is not a field assignment—picketing. So I reassigned them to do other things and I told Virginia Bellsmith about it and she said, "You had better write that up and I will protect you—send me a note on what you did, but I think it is very good." The Associate Dean called me in to say it was very good handling, and it became the policy of the school. That was a very proud moment and I gained a lot of strokes on that.

There were not a lot of Marxists on the faculty. We knew who they were. During the McCarthy era, one of the people at the school was called down to testify. There was a lot of scary business which was hard to survive and a few of us refused to do certain things like sign a loyalty oath. New York State, the over-regulator of university, wanted everybody to sign a loyalty oath, and I didn't want to sign. There were no repercussions because the dean then, Kenneth Johnson, supported us. He was a very courageous man, a lawyer and a judge. When the Rosenbergs were killed, he volunteered to be their [children's] guardian, their legal guardian. All the Jews counselled him not to, that is the irony of it—the liberals—the so-called liberals. Three of us stood up against him [when he tried to have the school used as an air raid shelter during the Cold War], refusing to participate. He came to a faculty meeting and he said, "I heard that a few of you people don't want a shelter—have moral objections to it." And he said, "Alright, so we won't have it," and we didn't. He was a man that always surprised you—like Nixon going to China.

I kept teaching and then I took a leave and I went for a doctorate in social work in the late '50s.

The distinctions between casework and group work were eventually eliminated and everybody taught practice. I was a practice teacher. Everybody else [who were group workers], they did not want us to combine because there were eighteen casework teachers and [only] five group workers. "They will outnumber us," they said, and I said, "Yes, but they are not going to outsmart us."

I pushed for it and Bill Schwartz agreed with me and he said, "I don't think we are ready and I think we ought to wait a year or two, but I will go along with you—because in theory you are right, we ought to join up." He had a generic approach; he never liked, theoretically, the boundaries [between group work and casework], because it was *social work*. Social work was group social work with individuals. When I first started teaching, casework was very much the dominant modality and group work was small and marginalized. Later on, there became tension because group work grew.

When I came into the New York School of Social Work in 1951, it was in the midst of a struggle between the functional and diagnostic schools. The functional school of [the University of Pennsylvania] had become very influential in two or three of the agencies in New York, the Jewish Family Service, The Jewish Child Care Association, and a third agency. What Gordon Hamilton and the other caseworkers did absolutely floored me; they removed all students from [these agencies] because they didn't like what they taught—they were "contaminating the students, they had all these wrong ideas." And I had just come to the school and they got opposition from the one person who opposed them directly at these meetings I attended and it was Phillip Kline, who was social policy. Also, Edward C. Lindeman, the social philosopher, raised the question of academic diversity. [After the initial cut from the agencies] they worked out a compromise—an accommodation to each other—and they started to take students again.

This was really very interesting, terribly interesting to me and it went to the heart of all the thinking that I had to do. When I am talking about the diagnostic [school], they put the worker as the maker, shaker, breaker, and doer, and the functional [school] seemed client-centered, a different psychological approach. Carl Rogers was a [client-centered] psychologist and people used to make fun of him at Columbia. Everybody was Freudian, which bothered me. [The diagnostic school] made an enthronement of assessment—they saw it as a process and a product. That is different than what Alex Gitterman and Carol Germain wrote, where assessment is an ongoing process, an interactive process, from moment to moment.

Casework teachers were perceived by students (and me) as never teaching practice in casework. This is, I think, a big problem. The students protested that all they studied was diagnosis; treatment and practice you were supposed to learn in the field. The [casework faculty, such as Florence Hollis] really thought that if you teach diagnosis (it was called "appraisal") that practice will flow from it. It was almost mystical. Once you have an assessment, the rest follows. The group workers would say diagnosis is not really true—that you diagnose and assess constantly as you go along—it is a fluid, ongoing process.

[The caseworkers] accused us of being "functionalists." Harold Myer, a casework professor, was my friend—an ambivalent friend. We were tied to each other because we went through the

doctoral program together. He said, "You know casework because you are a good friend of Lucille Austin, but you will see, Irving, that there is a fifth column in here of functionalism." Bill Schwartz admired some of the work [of the functionalists] because it was a client-centered therapy—the relationship with clients and the process. He really believed in that, and I did too. Those were lively times and [the Casework faculty] were always on the defensive. Their senior members [Gordan Hamilton, Florence Hollis] always took us on and we always had debates and I thought we won. Bill Schwartz and others were formidable and forceful. So those were very exciting times. One of the things that I think comes through is the group work legacy to teach practice—[and ask,] "How do you do these things?" That became the strength for group work and the group work grew in prestige.

There was mutual influence. Group work had to learn something about the individual counselling model. There were two major directions in group work [represented by Bob Vinter and Bill Schwartz]. They both respected each other but from different positions. It was not as if there was a battle going on. Bob Vinter woke up one day in 1960 and he said, "The whole group work enterprise is not real because they don't pay attention to the details of what you do." [Vinter saw] the use of the group as an instrument for treating individuals—so he did pay attention to details of how you worked and it was really psychologically oriented, psychoanalytically oriented. And Bill Schwartz was a different kind of a person—interactional. He was an interactivist.

There was real activity going on [in the early '60s] and all kinds of interesting things; caseworkers became interested in introducing family work. But the caseworkers still really believed [if you were psychodynamic] that if you understand what you get from insight you move to action. But it works the other way—you can give all the insight and people can die. But from action [you gain insight]—you gain insight from doing what you have to do. "Let's do it, let's work on it." That, to me, is a powerful idea. [The caseworkers'] reliance was on the intellect and not the use of the scholarship. Their idea of scholarship was not to study the process, but it was to study scholarship. My friend Alex Gitterman used [this quote] three times in a paper, and it comes from [the philosopher] George Santayana—"The saddest thing to contemplate is a science or a person that is interested in itself and not in its subject." You have to also [learn] separate skills. How do you help clients to deal with their environment unless you know something about how to do it?

I think that I rubbed some people the wrong way—the traditional casework crowd thought I was brash sometimes. But the women on the faculty (of Columbia School for Social Work) thought that on the bread and butter issues of women and men, that I was very much concerned with giving women equal consideration. They said so to me, that I was less of a "pig" than any other man on the faculty, which was a left-handed compliment of sorts. I seemed to get along well with women. The women felt that I was very positive to them and respectful—not patronizing. I brought along the whole committee when I felt that a woman was hired at a lower rank than she should have been and I raised it immediately at her first probationary evaluation.

If I had to do it all over again, I would have stayed with casework, because I was a good caseworker and because there is a much larger constituency than group work. I had important

outside activities which enriched my teaching, like my work as director of Vacation Camp for the Blind. Casework has a constituency that is clear cut and you can't be a consultant to group work, unless you are Alex Gitterman. And casework has a more developed field of research.

I do want to say that along the way, I simultaneously carried on a whole career in work with the blind. I developed a camp for blind [sic] which turned out to be a marvelous thing. People praised it whoever saw it; it was really social work. Ira Glasser, the head of the American Civil Liberties Union [worked there as a dishwasher] and wrote a book—it was *The Problems of Doing Good*—and he gave me a copy of it. He wrote the book with two other people, including Willard Gaylin. At a meeting where he spoke, he saw me in the audience and he said, "I want you to know that I learned more social work from Professor Miller than any and since." All kinds of outstanding people [worked at the camp] and later became well known in the field. Sherman Barr worked there. He was the heart of that camp. He was such a brilliant, creative person. We had all kinds of good people there and we were different than all other camps. We showed up the other camps for the blind.

The Guild for the Blind: they were very casework [oriented], were a highly professionalized agency, and ipsy-pipsy—very precious and they caseworked clients to death—their model was the kind of thing I talked about, diagnosis, assessment, self-actualizing. My philosophy was that self-actualizing is not everything—that it is work, working with them, working with the problem, working with the task [that matters].

The Guild called me up once. They said, "Four of our clients are at your camp; I would like to have a report on it."

I said, "What do you mean, you would like to have a report?"

"Well, we want to know how they do for the record. Were they good campers?"

I said, "Did you tell them you were going to ask?"

They said that they did not know. "Why do they have to know that we are checking up on them?"

I said, "If you ask me I will do a professional courtesy, but I have to tell them. I'm sorry and I will not permit it unless they can be told that they are being inquired after." I said we don't do such things.

[My sense of professional standards and ethics] had nothing to do with being a social worker. My mother would have killed me if I did otherwise. It's not social work, it is [what is] honorable. My mother would not [tolerate] a liar, ever. People always said [to me], "You take all kinds of shit from people, but you can't stand the abuse of power." I always have had a sensitivity to being honorable about these things. My bosses used to say to me, "You have only one problem: you are too generous to people who are poor and incompetent." However, I would fire a person in an instant [for being disrespectful] to a client. [A group worker] was leading a

discussion and he criticized a client for being a Trotskyist or a Right Winger, in a group discussion, a very brilliant young worker. He attacked him, and I said, "You had better go and apologize and if you ever do that again, you will be fired forthwith—you have got to see that you have the power—you're the social worker, let them talk about their politics and let them develop them, but don't proselytize."

Somebody else said to me, "You have got to do the right thing." I will tell you a very central kind of experience I had. One of the most beautiful ladies that I knew, Dalia Scott, was a full-time professor. We used to have to write reports on students [whom we were advising, who appeared before the Academic and Fieldwork Performance Standing Committee]. The advisor had to collect data about the student's classroom work and we had to write our own report to the committee.

Dalia said to me one time: "I'm having a very hard time, Irving . . . I did share with the student what I said about him, not what other people said about him, and what I was going to say about him in the report," and [she told me the Associate Dean, Sidney Berengarten] said, "that's a privileged communication to the committee."

I said [that was bullshit]. "I tell students what I say about them to the committee and what I am going to say—the position I am going to take with the committee when I bring them to the committee as a field advisor."

So, I took it up at the next meeting of the committee on students. I said to [the committee]:

> I want you to know that Dalia told me about your position that the information is privileged. What you say about the student is not privileged! That is why administrations want secrecy—they invoke confidentiality—but it is to protect secrecy. You have it all wrong, Sidney. I have been violating that rule for years and you don't even know it, because it never occurred to me to keep it secret. Secrecy has to be used to protect confidentiality, but you cannot use confidentiality to protect secrecy—that is what administrators want—control.

And Sidney changed the policy. [The same kind of thing happened] when Mobilization for Youth used to go to the Department of Welfare and ask them to obey their rules, they would say, "I would like to look at the record."

[The response was], "You can't; it's privileged."

It was very clear that they wanted to protect the organization by keeping it secret. I would say I was nurtured by a distrust of organizations—a distrust that comes from my experiences [as a worker] that you can't trust the bosses [that I believe] to this day.

I learned that confrontation is always public—it is never private. The caseworkers always did it, pick you off [in private]. When I complained to [the Dean, Mitch Ginsberg, in public] the caseworkers said, "You were right, but why didn't you tell him privately and not in front of the three caseworkers on the committee?"

I said, "No, it is your property, you have to know it too."

I was very fond of Sidney Berengarten, conservative as he was. Sidney was a lovely fuddy-duddy. He really had a great deal of fondness even if people gave him a hard time. Years later I said to him, "You know, Sidney, I have an affection for you and you know everything I ever said about you was in public, I have never denounced you, all of my complaints of you were on the record where it belongs." (I had learned this from the group workers, it had been reinforced by people like Bill Schwartz—when you are playing things out on a public stage, you are in your formal role.)

And he said to me, "I have learned something from you—when you criticize me publicly I always believed that with you, only ten minutes later you felt very warm with me, after it was all over, but other people do it underhandedly."

When I [retired], I didn't have a high opinion of my teaching—some years it was very good, some years it was middling. I always had a very select group of [students] that always felt very strongly and positive because of my intellectual insights, but I always wasn't effective [because] I was kind of rambling, not always focused. What I was most proud of was [the respect that my colleagues afforded me].

I had trouble publishing. I did respectable things and whatever I wrote I got good feedback. People want to publish because they want to get advancement. I always felt embarrassed by what I wrote; I thought it was not very good the minute I finished it. Because I didn't write I tried to excel in (school) politics. I developed course materials and stuff like that. I really would have preferred to love to publish and get my status from that. I regret it because people later in my career, like Bernie Schiffman, would say "What you do write is so good, why don't you get a book out?" I found it very hard—the discipline of sitting down and writing, and had anxiety—that's a writer's block. Ann Hartman and others said that I tried to put too many ideas in one article[, and that] they could have filled five or six articles.

[Irving discusses his blindness and how it was pure coincidence that he directed a camp for the blind in the late 1950s and early 1960s. He left the position after suffering a heart attack at age 42.]

[When I was the director of the camp for the blind] I even drove a car around the camp for a while. But I almost killed somebody [that] I hadn't noticed. I was driving [my brother in law's car] and [apparently] there was a kid there by the road. I saw a mother running toward the car and wondered why and [my brother in law] said, "Didn't you see the child by the side of the road?" And I hadn't. I never again drove. My visual handicap put a blight on my career. It cut down my mobility. I couldn't read very well. I had trouble in the last five years when I was visiting students as an advisor. I would always wonder, "Please speak up because I can't see you." It blighted my life. I don't like excuses[, but] if I were fully sighted I would have done more scholarship. I would have had many more options. I did make a gambit for an interview to become a dean of a New England school of social work and they wanted me very, very much. But [when] I was interviewed I didn't present well, because I didn't see very well. And there

were a couple of people who didn't want me, because I was also strong, and I didn't get the job.

I was interviewed by the [University] President and I said, "What is it, my handicap?"

And she said, "I am ashamed to say yes."

I think if I was fully sighted, my life would have been very different. I would have taken other options. I would have driven a car, you know. It was a blight on my life[, but] I made good compensations. There are jokes about me bumping into people and I won an award two years in a row for making the best riposte [upon collision].

I have a good feeling about my career. I feel that I was useful as a teacher. I think that most people regarded and respected me. I was elected very frequently when I ran for the committee on academic appointments. It was a sign of trust as well as political connections; people wanted me there rather than other people. I was lucky to be the kid who worked in the fur market (and became an academic). I fell into it and I always feel forever humble about that.

Interviewer's Note: I am grateful for critical feedback offered by Alex and Naomi Gitterman, Abby Miller, and anonymous reviewers. Irving Miller kept a professional log for most of his academic career, which I have edited. They expand on many of the themes covered in this interview. If anyone would like for me to email them a copy, please contact me at jlmiller@smith.edu.

References

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