

THE REVELATION OF SELF-DETERMINATION

by Chauncey A. Alexander

Chauncey A. Alexander, ACSW, LCSW, CAE, is a faculty member of the Department of Social Work, California State University Long Beach. He served as Executive Director (1969-1982) of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW).

Reflection, [fr. LL reflexion-, reflexio act of bending back. 4: something produced by reflecting; a: an image given back by a reflecting surface b: an effect produced by an influence*]

What "influence" reflected a single-incident image from 55 years of social work learning and practice, a neural pathway among billions to a single case incident? Why not last month's hassle before Orange County's Board of Supervisors (California) to obtain more funds for indigent medical services and community clinics? Perhaps the 1969 NASW Delegate Assembly conflicts — for financial accountability, for ethnic minority and student representation, for new direction in the profession — a landmark in the profession's history.

Why not reflect on career missions, the expose of patient conditions in mental hospitals and what happened? Maybe the incidents of change in the cardiovascular field, or community organization events. Or, the penetrating feelings that emerged from unsuccessful ventures.

Perhaps reflections of significant interpersonal relationships would be more appropriate, with social work pioneers as Harriet Bartlett, Max Silverstein, Whitney Young, Corinne Wolfe, Bertha Reynolds — so many others known and unknown,

hundreds of incidents telling of great work gone untold.

Could it be personal conditioning to begin at beginnings? Pride of success? Or hope to substantiate some social work conception or principle, a pride of authorship?

I was happy to be released from years of factory work, from shoveling clay to operating engine lathes, to make it through high school and college. I reveled in the excitement of beginning work in the California State Relief Administration in Los Angeles. Every day escalated my excitement of discovery in this new chaos of clients' reactions to their disasters, of sorting the pressures of administrative demands.

Fortunately, I had two strong women social work supervisors that guided my enthusiasm. They moved me into social work courses at the University of Southern California (U.S.C.), and inducted me into professional association life, which became a lifetime parallel career. After a year's stint as an employee counselor at wartime Lockheed Aircraft, the fervor of learning to be a social worker in a state mental hospital brought me to a summer field work placement.

This is the "reflection" which, for me, was a breakthrough, a glimpse at the power of self-discipline, and the

* From Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary, Barnes and Noble: New Jersey, (1994, p. 1206).

strength of the idea of "self-determination."

As a first year social work student at U. S. C. in summer field work placement at the Family Service Association of Los Angeles, I anxiously waited for my first official client, Mrs. Carter, 33 years-old, the mother of two sons, 9 and 11.

Startled by the telephone ring while reading about the Family Service Agency, my apprehension escalated with the words in my ear, "Mrs. Carter, your client, is in the waiting room." What would she be like, what would she want, and would I know how to answer her requests?

I felt increasingly awkward as I strode down the hall to the lobby, trying to look at ease, but flushed of face with a thumping heart. As I greeted Mrs. Carter, introduced myself and led her to the office, I couldn't miss her hesitant manner and smeared mascara that told me she had been crying. A small hat held on precariously to a field of uncombed hair. Her lipstick was awry, her dress wrinkled and her shoes scuffed. Her application said 33, but I thought she looked much older; although she might be pretty with some attention to looks.

I told her I was a social worker in training, awkwardly describing the agency's services while cribbing from the brochure on my desk. She listened patiently, but appeared distracted until I reached the point of asking how we could help her.

"I'd like you to place my

two sons in a foster home for a while. Just until I can get on my feet and have them back with me." Panicking because I didn't know much about foster homes and what Family Service could do in placing children, I asked her why she wanted to do that.

As she twisted a handkerchief in her hands, she told me she had been out of work for several weeks, had been unable to pay rent, and she and her boys had been living in their car the last two weeks. They now had no money for groceries. She was desperate!

When I said she sounded desperate, her tension softened. However, when I asked why would she want to be separated from her children, she responded with just a flash of irritation. "I don't want to be. Of course, I want my boys with me." Then, in what seemed to me to be an accusatory tone, she said, "When I lost my job before, Family Service helped me to place them in a foster home so I could get where I could take care of them. And I did. So I came here."

How had that happened before? She had lived in Kansas City, Missouri, when her husband left her and the two small boys. She managed to find clerical work, but after two years she lost her job. Cornered by her lack of finances, she finally sought Family Service. When she had asked for help before, the social worker had been very kind, suggesting temporary foster home placement until she was "on her feet." That had taken some 13 months, but she had finally recovered her children. It all sounded

logical to me.

"That must have been difficult for you and for them. That's a long time to be separated." I hoped she recognized my empathy. But, I was chagrined when she answered defensively.

"Well, the second time I was able to get them back after only 10 months." She and the boys, now 9 and 11, had come to California two years ago. She had steady work as a clerk until five weeks ago, had used all her savings, and was now hoping Family Service would help her.

I asked how she had felt about having to place her children again and received a weary repetition of feeling badly about giving them up, but she knew it was necessary. In a pressured tone, she tried to make me understand. I didn't know where to go. Should we start working on finding a foster home, I wondered? I would have to leave her and find out what the agency did in such situations. I felt ignorant that I did not know, and would have to break off our exploration and start again when I came back.

My mind flashed for an answer to my current class with Dr. Jessie Taft, she had come from the University of Pennsylvania to teach a summer course. In our discussions, we the students had been trying to solve the problems of a case she had given us, telling about our diagnoses and just what we would plan for the clients. After questioning us for a considerable period on what we would do and say, apparently we were missing the point. She said, "What

makes you think you have the power to make all these plans for this client? If you believe in self-determination for people, and recognize its power, then you must be sure that the plans come from the persons themselves and not from you." She continued, "No matter what you do, clients will handle it in their own way, and the result can be negative or positive for them, dependent upon the degree to which they have been free to utilize what resources you have had to offer."

This was Mrs. Carter's plan, wasn't it? She had come to us with it. And, here I was questioning it. Or, was I testing her commitment to it? I felt very shaky about what to do next.

I took a chance! Somehow I felt I had Jessie Taft on my side "But, what would you really prefer to do?" She looked at me as though she didn't comprehend that question and that I must be stupid for not recognizing her request.

"Mrs. Carter! Perhaps there are some alternatives we could consider, since you have only talked about one, foster care." Was that an expression of fear that crossed her face? She slumped in her chair, shuffled her feet and finally looked up at me. What could I expect? Plaintively, she said, "I want to have my children with me and take care of them. And, if I can just have them placed in a good foster home for a while, I can probably take care of them eventually."

"Is that what you really want?" I asked her, feeling as though I was repetitious and a

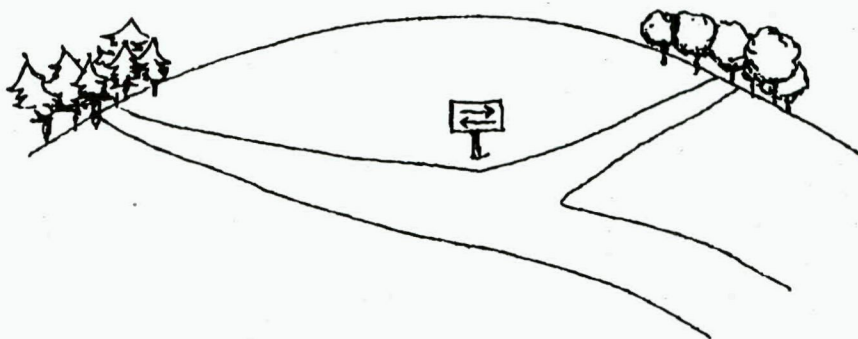
roadblock to her plans. I had to wonder, was she trying to get rid of her boys, or possibly just wanting relief from all of the pressure and responsibility. I could feel how that might be important. A look of irritation flashed across her face, then melted into a look of hopelessness as her shoulders drooped further. A little frightened by her look of helplessness, I scrambled to figure out what to say next "The Family Service Agency is here to help you, Mrs. Carter." It sounded quite formal the way it came out. "I'm trying to be sure about what you would like best so I can suggest ways the agency can help you." That look of puzzlement combined with weariness came again as she said, "Placing my boys in a foster home will help me have them with me eventually. I am sure I can get a job sooner or later and then we can be together. It has always worked out before."

"Mrs. Carter, if that is what you really want, we will try to help you. But, if what you really want is to have your children with you right now, then our agency will work with you on that to figure out how to do it."

She stared at me. And stared! And stared! What had I said, or done? I didn't know what to do or say next, as I tried to keep from wriggling in my chair. Her wide-eyed stare came at me for at least four minutes, just looking at me. It seemed like I had created a catastrophe, and I knew I didn't know how to correct it. Then, she burst out crying. She cried and cried, for several minutes, while time lost all meaning for me. What had I done?

After an eon of time she gradually stopped, wiped her eyes and looking straight at me and said, "No one ever told me that before!" I repeated it. "Mrs. Carter, if you want to keep your children with you why don't we plan to see if we can do that."

We worked on how much money she would need for rent to get a place to stay for at least two weeks. Then, there was the cost of feeding three for the next ten days. We considered where the best possibilities for jobs might be, and estimated gas money to get around. We talked about preparing for school for the children, and what they would need. Checking with my



supervisor, I arranged for Mrs. Carter to receive money to carry her for ten days, and set another appointment time, giving her a phone number in case she ran into more problems.

In eight days she called, made an appointment and returned to the office. Her clothes were clean and pressed, hair combed and shiny, makeup on neatly. She was attractive, and she walked with a brisk air as we went down the hall to my office. She was a different person! She had found a small apartment where the landlady would keep an eye on her children for a couple of hours after school. She had used part of the gas money to get a tire fixed on her old car. She had the radiator fixed, too, with a small down payment and agreement for future payments.

She starts a job tomorrow. Not a good job, but one to tide her over to something better. Her children would start school next Monday. We worked out expenses to take her to the first payday. She looked me straight in the eyes as we shook hands on her leaving.

That experience is etched in a vivid "reflection" in my mind. It revealed to me the power of a transaction based on helping the other person, or family, or community obtain their own capacity for handling their own problems. For me, it acquired a special lifetime tagline: "Give self-determination a chance!" ☐

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