

THE GIFT OF STORIES

By Paul Abels

An anthropologist wrote about a group she had worked with that wanted to give her something when she had to leave suddenly. They were poor and had no time to prepare a present for her departure, so they told her a story. The story was a gift. I had not realized that stories could be gifts, but I should have! Shahrazad gave the gift of life to numerous maidens by telling stories for one thousand and one nights to the king that was to have them beheaded. Those wonderful stories are still gifts to all of us. As are the fables and the many stories we give as gifts to children by reading to them each night.

How many times have you told people stories of how you became a social worker, or nurse, psychologist, teacher. Sometimes the story is just a sharing with others, just something you do, sometimes it is in response to the question why did you ever become a....? In this rather extraordinary addition of the journal, we are the beneficiary of some interesting life histories, gifts of social workers, for our use. In it we see the power of the narrative as an indicator of how stories have shaped, and still shape our lives. We see also, how the telling of these stories is an important part of our reaffirmation of

who we are. Glezakos tells of a childhood experience that recruited her into social work, she still wonders on the ethics of it. Johnson wonders if her observations of a drunken man when she was seven, was what recruited her into the profession. Goldstein narrates his contacts with psychiatrists over the years, and how they shaped his attitudes to that field and shaped the direction of his work. There are common threads here, and in the other narratives in this issue, not only reveries, but how these stories admittedly shaped persons' choices and enhanced the contributions that were to come. There are also morals here. For them and many of us, it was chance that shaped our lives. A meeting in a taxi, a snow storm in Mississippi, a move to a foreign land. We can't always "reauthor" our stories in ways we would prefer, at least not until later in our careers.

It was chance too, that brought Katherine A. Kendall into social work, and later into leadership positions on the international scene. In this interview we learn about the Council on Social Work Education, social work in the UN, and about some of leading educators who were part of her life. A creative life that spans the blossoming of the social work profession, Social Security, the war on poverty, the explosive expansion of social work education, social



work on the international scene, and which also introduces us to the camaraderie of a smaller visionary profession. The interview of her by James Billups is a special gift to us, in that it brings to life an important part of our professional narrative.

What was there about our young profession that permitted Deans to put on skits at National Conferences, to write one liners, to don costumes and perform skits before hundreds of social workers? When was the last time that happened at our professional conferences. When was the last time we were able to laugh at our own foibles in a public way?

Are these stories of the old days, just nostalgia, twice told tales of honored founders, or do these narratives carry important lessons for the social work profession? Narratives not only shape individual lives, but organizational life as well. What are the stories that students and young social workers are hearing. Yes, we have our living legends, and perhaps everyone can think of one or two...at most. But from the past only the name of Bertha Capen Reynolds still seems to be alive in practice. All have heard of Jane Addams and Mary Richmond, but do we know their stories? If we lose their narratives, we have less to base our new ones on.

At the conclusion of her interview, Dr. Kendall tells of the social development work of Sattereh Farman Farmaian, once the Dean of the School of Social Work in Iran, forced to flee, and now in the United States. She is a person Kendall sees as having embodied the professions commitment to the poor. In the "its a

small world department," our stories miraculously entwine.. As a Fulbright lecturer in Iran, I recall Dean Farmaian calling me into her office on the first day I was to teach, to welcome and brief me. I was free to teach anything, with one exception, no criticism of the Royal Family. A warning appreciated, but not necessary (I wasn't about to be an ugly American in the land of Shahrazad). Then she added, that there might be operatives (not her word) in the class who could report my words to the authorities. The warning was doubly appreciated, no difficulties ever arose. The teaching experience was extremely positive, the students' eagerness to learn, memorable. One indelible memory was that every day at lunch, students and faculty would sit and eat together; a meal of Persian rice topped with a raw egg (all provided free). These contacts created excellent learning/teaching experiences, and stories of each other's visions were shared. May all schools be blessed by similar opportunities for student and faculty interaction..

Dr. Kendall's story of how she entered social work school also provides an important "moral" she was interviewed one day, accepted the next; no references, no written statements, etc. Her value was recognized and "rules" individualized. In contrast, I once heard about an applicant whose material was all in except for one reference which arrived postmarked a week late, and who was denied consideration that year because of that fact. Both stories are part of our history, and offer fruit for thought; and both may reflect their times. Dr.

Kendall's experience reflecting a humanistic metaphor, the other, a treatment metaphor. Have we become too obligated to follow rules, regulations, and written prescriptions rather than liberating persons from internalized rituals, to more reflective thinking, and adhering of their own lives? Does the new NASW Code of Ethics reflect our times?

The reluctance to offer prescriptions, led teachers in some traditions such as Zen and Sufiism to present the student with puzzles or stories to be pondered. These were often individualized according to time, context and student need, they were rarely written down, which permitted easy modifications. A favorite, narrated by Indres Shah who has written a number of fine books on the Sufis and their stories, goes....

A cat teacher was talking to other cat teachers in the hall one day. "I don't know what is wrong with those three rabbits in my class," she exclaimed. "Today I gave a wonderful lecture on catching mice, and none of them paid any attention."

There ought to be a moral here, somewhere! □

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