"THE SINGULAR POWER OF INFLUENCING DAILY LIVING"

This article offers suggestions about writing narratives of professional helping, using Jane Addams as inspiration and guide. Addams skillfully used autobiographical writings to reach a wide public audience. Her works helped create a sympathetic understanding for those receiving and giving help. Her writings demonstrated the singular power of narratives to influence daily life. Following her example may help contemporary writers learn new ways of writing narratives about professional helping.

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"I was conscious that all human vicissitudes are, in the end, melted down into reminiscence, and that a metaphorical statement of the basic experiences which are implicit in human nature itself, however crude in form the story may be, has a singular power of influencing daily living." Jane Addams (1916), The Long Road of Woman's Memories, NY: Macmillan, p. 25.

The purpose of this article is to offer some suggestions about writing narratives of professional helping, using Jane Addams as inspiration and guide. As the quote above indicates, Addams had a deep appreciation that reminiscence and stories have a "singular power to influence daily living." Indeed, several scholars have noted that Addams' primary method as a social reformer was essentially autobiographical (Davis, 1973; Lasch, 1965). As Lasch observed:

The shock of discovery and the reversal of conventional perspectives were the persistent themes of Jane Addams' works, and they were themes that could best be treated by recreating again and again, the experience of one who had felt the shock at first hand...Where the discovery of the poor was bound up with the discovery of the self, the result was a literature notable for its clarity, its immediacy, and its power to evolve in the reader sympathies whose existence...were rarely suspected" (p.xvi).

Although the subject of numerous biographies during and after her life, Miss Addams was the first to interpret her own life story. Beginning in 1905 (when she was not yet 45), she began writing a series of "narrative" articles for the Ladies Home Journal, at the time one of the largest magazine circulations in America. The articles were in response to the widespread public interest and admiration about her life as a social reformer. These articles, in turn, became the core of her first autobiography, Twenty Years at Hull House (1910), in which Addams drew on reminiscences about her childhood, young adult years, and the formative years at Hull-House in Chicago, one of the first American settlement houses.

As Davis (1973 noted, she organized her memories "into a pattern, reflecting upon incidents, even on dreams, that may or may not have happened as she remembers, but which then take on a new reality in writing and in the
brooding over the recollections” (p.157). It is this “new reality” — the social construction of her identity and the discovery of her purpose in life which characterizes Addam’s work as narrative. Using Addams an example, then, suggests the following ideas about writing narratives of professional helping.

1. Jane Addams wrote with her target audience clearly in mind, and her choice is instruc-
tive. In these works, she was not writing primarily for or exclu-
sively to her settlement house workers or to those engaged in doing “social works.” Rather, she sought to reach the widest pos-
sible audience—“ordinary Americans everywhere” (Davis, 1973, p.173). Addams’ example sug-
gests that contemporary narra-
tive writers must not only have other professionals in mind as potential readers, but also the audience of the public-at-large. More than ever before, the public of today appears profoundly mistrustful and ambivalent about profes-
sional helpers. Narratives of profes-
sional helping, therefore, must help illuminate who we are, what
we do, and with whom we work to an audience that seems increas-
ingly skeptical, polarized, and alienated. In that way, powerfully
written narratives may evoke in readers “sympathies rarely sus-
pected” both for those in need and for those providing the helping
services.

2. Jane Addams found evocative ways to make universal her own experiences (Davis,
1973). Readers could vividly imagine and vicariously live Addams’ experiences—particu-
larly her long search to find a pro-
ductive purpose and fulfilling di-
rection in life — and thus connect her experiences to their own
struggles. Although comfortable with occupying the role of central
protagonist of a story, Addams also knew when to fade into the
background, letting other “narrative charac-
ters” (e.g. the neigh-
bors and the residents of Hull
House) speak authentically about
their own life experiences.

Addams’ example sug-
gests that contemporary narra-
tive writers may need to become more comfortable with being the hero-
ine or hero in their own life story. We need to be willing to craft our
private experiences of success and failure into public narratives that
reveal the drama, tension, and
complexity of the helping process.
From the narrative perspective, it
does little good that we have
changed or been transformed as
a result of clients treated, students
taught or supervised, agencies
run, community activities under-
taken unless we vividly convey the
details of the experiences. We
need to give examples of our
work — what transpired, who
was there, when and where did it
happen, how it felt, and why
things unfolded as they did.

At the same time, how-
ever, we must take care to avoid
so dominating the story, either as
narrator or protagonist, that other
characters cannot be heard. In
Addams’ autobiographical ac-
counts, the strength and dignity
of individuals and families facing
incredible hardships are con-
veyed with vivid clarity. This ex-
ample suggests that contempo-
rary writers must take great care
when depicting the narrative
characters inhabiting their help-
ing stories. When characters are
turned into cardboard caricatures
(e.g., clients portrayed as embodi-
ments of dysfunction) the com-
plexity and multiplicity of view-
points embedded in the stories
cannot emerge.

Readers need to see the
helping process not only through
our eyes, but also from those with
whom we are working. Often,
there are unexpected parallels be-
tween ourselves and those with
receiving help — ways in which
their struggles ironically shadow
or mirror our own. Perhaps, we
missed these connections at the
time of the actual work. However,
writing a narrative often helps in
seeing the experience in new
ways. By sharing these experi-
ences and connections with both
the professional and lay public,
we invite readers to enter into the
story as well. By joining in the
process of mutual discovery, read-
ers can live the experience vicari-
ously and can connect it to their
own. In doing so, narratives make
the professional helping process
more accessible and universal.

3. Jane Addams used sto-
ries about her life and her experi-
ences at Hull-House creatively to
teach a point of view — the moral
of the story. The moral lessons
Addams had in mind were those
of a large order — democracy, so-
cial justice, peace, human rights.
Yet, Addams also made sure that
readers never forgot the intimate
connections between the need for
major improvements in external
social conditions and the internal
fulfillment of individuals’ growth
and potential.

The idea that this example
suggests — that contemporary
narratives should also strive to
teach moral lessons — at first may seem to conflict with professional values and ethics, particularly those emphasizing workers’ nonjudgmental attitudes toward clients. However, the moral lessons which need to be drawn are not judgments about clients, but judgments about ourselves as helpers. What did we learn — what meaning did we make — as a result of the experience? More importantly, what did we do differently? What do we hope readers will think, feel, or do as a result of the story we are narrating?

The example of Jane Addams also suggests that we must aim our moral lessons beyond ourselves — to the higher order of things. While it is important and necessary for narratives to describe our professional enhancements — theories revised, techniques improved, training programs transformed, agencies reorganized — this is not sufficient, if our aim is to produce narratives of singular influence. We must also begin to answer the larger questions: How did individuals or neighborhoods change? How did society benefit? How was justice served? In what ways was peace made? Where were human rights respected and enhanced?

If professional narratives are to have a wider scope — “to influence daily life” then our stories must be powerful, dramatic, challenging, uncomfortable, and compassionate. They must reach a wider audience. We must invite the public into to our world, and ask to be invited into theirs. We must willingly shed the comfortable robes of professional expertise — be it therapist, educator, policy maker, administrator, researcher, or community activist—and view our stories from the general public’s perspective. We must connect our daily work to the public’s daily life and link both together to the larger order of things. In the end, we must describe for ourselves and for our often skeptical readers what is universal about the experience of professional helping. We must pass on the moral lessons learned about how “ordinary people everywhere” have been helped to grow, heal, become strong, overcome internal and external barriers, and come together in community.

REFERENCES