"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.xxvi).

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 instructive. In these works, she was not writing primarily for or exclusively to her settlement house workers or to those engaged in doing "social works." Rather, she sought to reach the widest possible audience—"ordinary Americans everywhere" (Davis, 1973, p.173). Addams' example suggests that contemporary narrative 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 professional helpers. Narratives of professional helping, therefore, must help illuminate who we are, what we do, and with whom we work to an audience that seems increasingly skeptical, polarized, and alienated. In that way, powerfully written narratives may evoke in readers "sympathies rarely suspected" 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—particularly her long search to find a productive purpose and fulfilling direction 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 characters" (e.g. the neighbors and the residents of Hull House speak authentically about their own life experiences.

Addams' example suggests that contemporary narrative writers may need to become more comfortable with being the heroine 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 undertaken 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, however, we must take care to avoid so dominating the story, either as narrator or protagonist, that other characters cannot be heard. In Addams' autobiographical accounts, the strength and dignity of individuals and families facing incredible hardships are conveyed with vivid clarity. This example suggests that contemporary writers must take great care when depicting the narrative characters inhabiting their helping stories. When characters are turned into cardboard caricatures (e.g., clients portrayed as embodiments of dysfunction) the complexity and multiplicity of viewpoints 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 between 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 experiences 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, readers can live the experience vicariously and can connect it to their own. In doing so, narratives make the professional helping process more accessible and universal.

3. Jane Addams used stories about her life and her experiences 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, social 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' non judgmental 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 w hat 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. □

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