

A CLIENT'S REFLECTIONS ON INTERNATIONAL SOCIAL WORK "BY THEIR FRUITS SHALL YE KNOW THEM"*

I have been traveling the road of professional social work practice for more than thirty years. Along the way, numerous of my co-travelers—my clients—have stopped to give me feedback on how my interventions had affected their lives. In this narrative I stop to reflect upon my own relationship as a client of an international social worker in Greece. My reflections make clear my deep appreciation of her personal qualities and professional craftsmanship. From where I now stand, I also allow myself, with whatever objectivity I can muster, to view her professional practices and the efficacy of her interventions critically.

By Agathi Glezakos

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IN THE AFTERMATH OF A CIVIL WAR

I am a middle aged woman. I am also a social work educator, a social work clinician, and a social services consultant. I practice these facets of my beloved profession in America, far away from the source of the idea to become a social worker.

This narrative is a very personal story, and the first time that I choose to tell it. My purpose is to give the reader a glimpse of how international social work was practiced, at least by one social worker, almost half a century ago. That was when an American social worker entered my life and changed its anticipated course. I did not know anything about social work nor the profession's jargon. In ignorance, I became a social worker's client.

It was, 1949, the post-civil war era in Northern Greece; a mountainous region mercilessly ravaged by a war that turned daytime neighbors into nighttime enemies. Our status as "war refugees" ended the day military trucks returned us to our small village, Lefkohori (white village), from which guerrilla atrocities

had forced us to flee 3 years earlier.

I go back to that time and selective memories:

Human chaos as trucks hurriedly unloaded families collected from several villages; wild berry vines that had taken over covering the roads, pathways, and yards; of the large gray rats, that in the eyes of bewildered child, appeared ready to attack to protect their exclusive territory; the food distribution lines; and life in a three room house we shared with two other families.

We returned in spring.

Repatriation had pulled me out of the third grade. I spent the spring and summer months cutting weeds, helping carry stone and mortar to the construction workers, and fetching water from the village's only water fountain in the central square. I missed the classroom environment and longed for a book to read, any book. But books were unavailable, and even if they had been, taking the time to read, instead of work, would have been unthinkable.

On a Sunday late in August, a government official visiting the village announced that a



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teacher would be coming in the Fall. The prospect of being a student again obsessed me.

A TEACHER'S INFLUENCE

The teacher was an older, soft spoken man. He converted the small office of our one-room schoolhouse into a bedroom and an impressive library, and set out to become acquainted with the sixty young students that would comprise the first through sixth grades. Soon after classes began the teacher announced that students were welcome to borrow books.

I became a regular borrower. He had a good selection of books by Greek authors, translated classics, fiction, biography, travel, mystery and suspense, et. al. ; delicious food for the "starving" mind of a young student I discovered a world far beyond the narrow horizons of Lefkohori.

A few months into the school year a jeep carrying Americans and their Greek translators appeared regularly in the village. The current rumor was that they represented an American relief program (the Congregational Christian Service Committee,(I learned later) searching for villages to adopt.

One Saturday afternoon when I came in to check out a book, my teacher introduced me to an American

couple, William and Ione Mendenhall, and their Greek interpreter. While he discussed the best selection, the others observed in silence. Before I left, the Americans asked the interpreter to translate our dialogue. The teacher, generous in his praise, told them about me and my interest in books.

A SOCIAL WORKER'S INTERVENTION

The following Sunday a jeep drove up to the front of my house and the same trio, accompanied by the teacher, came to the door. The American woman spoke to me through the interpreter. She handed me a small package wrapped in the prettiest

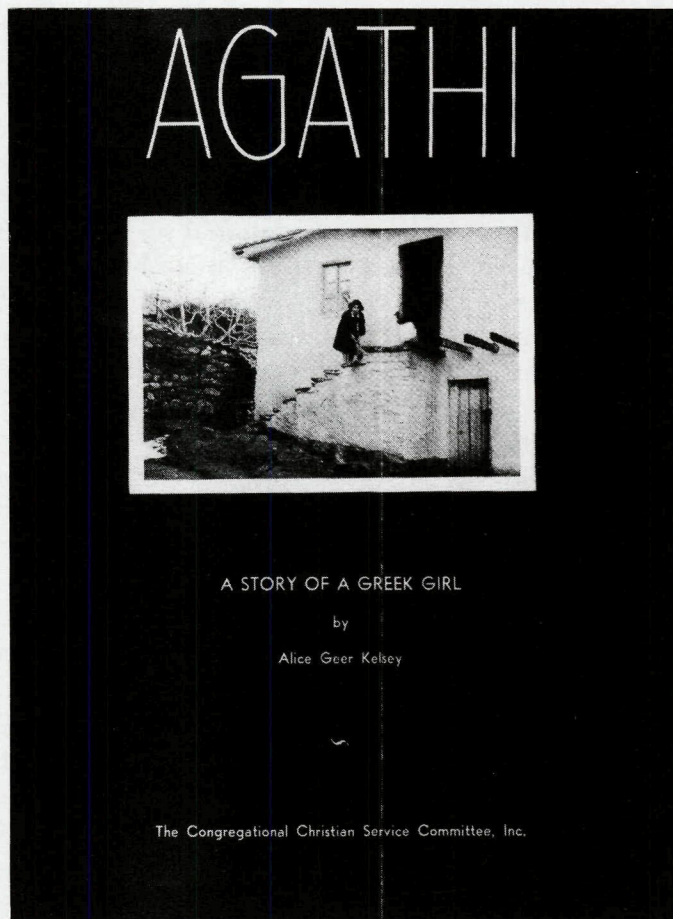
paper and ribbon I had ever seen. "It is a book" the interpreter said, "from Mrs. Mendenhall to you."

I knew nothing of the book— a translation of *The Story of My Life* by Helen Keller. Mrs. Mendenhall summarized Helen's life, and talked about the relationship she had with her teacher, Anne Sullivan. I was overcome with emotion from what Mrs. Mendenhall was telling me, and what she had done. That three strangers had driven from the city on a Sunday afternoon to see me, and present me with a gift, was mind-boggling. In my world this was alien behavior.

Shortly after it was announced that the Congregational Christian Services Committee had adopted our village. From that day on, I watched an array of Americans of all ages and genders, with diverse skills and expertise, come and go. Some came once to take photographs, and were not seen again. Others visited regularly, bringing the happiness of games, food, clothing, and books. Others stayed for weeks to improve the school grounds and build a community center.

Mrs. Mendenhall was my special visitor; coming to my house with more books, telling me about America, and showing me on a US map her own city, Ithica, NY. I looked forward to her visits, and the time she took to be with me.

One day, she



asked how I liked the book *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by H.B. Stowe, that she had given me. I answered (through an interpreter) how I was affected by the story. Looking at me intensely she asked: "If you had the opportunity to go away to school, what would you want to become?" (The word "away" was used because the closest high school was 37 kilometers from the village). "A grammar school teacher." I replied without hesitation. My teacher, who selflessly gave of himself to educate us was my role model, and I wished to be like him

After an exploration of the reasons I wanted to become a grammar school teacher, she emphatically said, "I believe you will be happier if you became a social worker." "What is a social worker?" I asked. She explained that social work was her profession, what they did, and the process by which she had become a social worker. I was astonished that students in America went to the university to learn how to help others. As puzzling as this was, however, I took what I heard seriously, because judging from Mrs. Mendenhall, this training worked

The months went by fast. The village began to lose its "ghost town" appearance; the fields had been cultivated and the first harvest of wheat, corn, and lentils was good. I was now in the fifth grade. I had a burning desire to pursue an education beyond grammar school, but the chance of this ever happening seemed nil. I knew the reasons, but had a hard time accepting them. Financially, it was impos-

sible. Culturally, it was not condoned. No female in the history of the village, settled by Greeks in the early 1920s during the Greek Turkish population exchange, had ever left to pursue an educational objective beyond grammar school. My destiny, as had been the destiny of my oldest sister and that of hundreds of other young women who preceded me, was determined by strong cultural norms. Grammar school provided females with basic skill in the three R's; anything more was superfluous. A 6th grade female graduate was expected to work for five or six years, help her family build her dowry, and then submit to an arranged marriage before she entered young adulthood. The prospect of this collective destiny depressed me.

Mrs. Mendenhall expressed concern about my future educational plans. She vigorously implanted the idea for high school education without, it seemed then, thoughtful consideration to my circumstances. The more she talked about how my "good mind" would be wasted if I were to stay in the village, the more became depressed I became and began to feel a growing resentment toward her. One day when

I no longer was able to contain my helplessness in the context of my economic and cultural reality, I shouted out "shut-up and leave me alone." My mother reprimanded me later, and the interpreter lectured

me on the spot. They found my emotional reaction abhorrent. Mrs.

Mendenhall's response, however, was different. "I understand the reasons for your anger" she said. "In your position, I would have felt the same. I know you want to go to high school and I wish to help you arrange for it" she continued. From that point on we became partners in a joint effort to make the impossible possible. I soon discovered that Mrs. Mendenhall, in addition to compassion and resourcefulness, possessed the knowledge and the skill of her helping profession.

RESOURCEFULNESS AND THE POWER OF OPPORTUNITY

She knew why I believed that I could not attend high school, but was determined to find a way to remove these obstacles. She began with the economic factor, and as I later found out, convinced the Board of the Congregational Christian Services Committee that my educational expenses could be covered through implementation of a plan that she had devised.

She introduced me to her



friend, Alice Kelsey, an American journalist. Over a period of weeks, I spent many hours with Alice Kelsey, who had begun to write a brief story about the village, and about me. The story, in the form of a pamphlet (a copy of which I still hold dear), was read to Sunday-school students in America who were then asked to contribute towards an educational fund. The early generous donations convinced the Board, and they committed themselves to supplement the monthly contributions if a deficit occurred during the six years that I would be in high school. These assurances were very important in securing my parents' consent, as they were concerned about my well-being if I were ever forced to discontinue my schooling because of the lack of finances.

Mrs. Mendenhall worked to surmount the more sensitive cultural barrier. She made good use of the teacher's support, a man whom my parents had come to revere and whose ideas they valued. He became the intermediary between my parents and the social worker. Halfway into the sixth grade it became apparent that the obstacles had been overcome, and I was instructed to start preparing for the high school entrance examination in June of 1952, which I subsequently passed.

During the next six years I met more social workers from America and American-educated

Greek social workers. I took classes in English and struggled through two social work readings that Mrs. Mendenhall gave me when she returned to America: *Interviewing: Its Principles and Methods* by Annette Garret, and *Theory and Practice of Case Work* by Gordon Hamilton. Now, having had social work role models and a better understanding of the profession, I wished for an opportunity to study social work.

The opportunity presented itself the day I received a letter from yet another friend of Mrs. Mendenhall's, Dr. Margaret Stewart, a visiting professor at the Department of Social Welfare at Pierce College, the American college in Athens.* She wrote, prompted by Mrs. Mendenhall, to inform me of a scholarship available to a qualified freshman student for the Fall of 1958. I immediately prepared the necessary papers and the following month flew to Athens to take the qualifying examination for the scholarship. For four years in this undergraduate program, I gained social work knowledge and developed basic practice skills while completing three different internships. In the summer of 1962 I left Greece to enroll in the M.S.W. program at the School of Social Work, University of Southern California on a Fulbright scholarship supplemented by other forms of financial assistance.

On my way to the West Coast, I accepted Mrs. Mendenhall's invitation to spend a week with her and her family in Ithica. She and I did not discuss then, or at any other time, how instrumental she had been in making what I was experiencing possible. She

minimized the magnitude of her contribution and, instead, attributed my progress to numerous sources of financial support, my family's and teachers' encouragement, and to my own motivation and aspirations. Her response to my apprehension about my success in American University was: "Just believe in yourself and remember that obstacles should become your challenges." Mrs. Mendenhall died in 1982, and I felt her loss deeply. I expressed my gratitude to her in an obituary that was read during her memorial service.

FROM A CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

In the years since these events took place, I have repeatedly scrutinized my client-worker, mentor-friend relationship with Mrs. Mendenhall. Though I clearly acknowledge the art and skill of her practice I remain troubled about her application of two professional tenets.

The first is the tenet of client self-determination. Did Mrs. Mendenhall respect my right to self-determination when, going beyond an explanation of options and of resulting consequences, she insisted that I pursue a high school education? Was her intervention premature when she introduced the idea for a career in social work, rather than accept my expressed preference for the teaching profession? Was it ethical that she proceeded to devise and implement a plan for financial support without informing me of what would be involved in the process?

Woods and Hollis (1990)

*Dr. Stewart served as Department Director and President of Pierce College before returning to the U.S.

ask that social workers recognize that the concept of self-determination is a relative one. Its application, the authors state, requires "...a casework relationship that fosters mutuality [and] techniques for drawing out the client's own reasoning and decision-making capacities" (p. 27). This definition had not yet been developed when Mrs. Mendenhall studied social work. However, the importance of self-determination in practice was acknowledged.

As early as 1934 Bertha Capen Reynolds wrote: "Naturally the philosophy of self-determination for the client, relatively little tried as yet, and obviously difficult in application, presents a challenging opportunity...." (p. 43)

The second tenet is worker objectivity. Was Mrs. Mendenhall crossing the boundaries of professional objectivity when she drove to the village on her own time to bring me books she would purchase with her own money? Or when she chose to remain actively involved with my future educational and career plans long after she left the agency that brought her into my life?

The social caseworkers of Mrs. Mendenhall's time were instructed to make continuous attempts to sustain disciplined ways of thinking and feeling (Towle, 1946). In later years the role of objectivity in practice was more specifically described by Helen Perlman (1957) when she stated that "...if he (sic) remains involved in his (sic) own feelings, the case worker is in no position to perceive with any clarity or judgment the feelings and needs of his (sic) client or his client's dif-

ferences from him (sic)" (p. 81 - 82).

Was Mrs. Mendenhall driven by the fact that "the most important area in which they (Greeks) need outside help is in social welfare education" (Pauley, 1946, p.536), or by knowledge that financial assistance would only be available if I were to go into social work? Or was she driven by a desire to enhance her own professional standing in her agency by making me her "success" story? Was she seeking personal satisfaction or was she struggling to meet some other personal need of hers?

IN SEARCH OF AN UNDERSTANDING

During my graduate studies, I learned to define the social work client as a person who is experiencing a breakdown in his/her capacity to cope with a situation due to either factors within themselves or to external forces beyond their control. My professors, American and Greek, were educated in the United States sometime between the 1930s and the 1950s. Social casework was the basic method for all fields of practice, with little of the confusion that the methodological pluralism created in later years.

Numerous formulations of the goals of social work were developed, but at the core of each there was "...implicit the assumption that the social caseworker's aims or purposes are directed toward helping the individual to develop his (sic) capacities for achieving a more personally satisfying and more socially produc-

tive life through bringing about a different relationship between him (sic) and his (sic) social environment." (Lowry, 1942)

In my own training, I learned that the social worker's intervention should be centered on the internal factors which caused the breakdown in the individual's coping capacities. Although the contribution of environmental influences was acknowledged, the person was still the system targeted for the social work intervention. While this approach made it more difficult for me to understand Mrs. Mendenhall's entrance into my life, slowly I came to attribute this emphasis to my professors' psychodynamic theoretical orientation rather than to my occupation of the position of the "dysfunctional" client.

I still remember how during those early years, I would often pore over some passage of a book or of a lecture note, looking for answers to the question "where did I fit as her client?" Was it my poverty or lack of resources? The first was the result of a brutal war, while the second was due to a combination of economic factors and cultural beliefs. Both were external, environmental problems. During my high school and college years I perceived Mrs. Mendenhall as my great benefactor. I thrived in the learning environment that her persistence and resourcefulness afforded me, but I nevertheless kept wondering why she had "chosen" me!

In graduate school I studied the evolution of the social work profession in greater depth. Although the program at the Uni-

versity of Southern California favored a psychodynamic approach, my concentration in the social group work method enabled me to gain a deeper understanding of, and appreciation for the impact of environmental factors on individual social functioning and on realization of human potential. At the graduate level, I expanded my knowledge base and through well supervised internships I refined my practice skills. Never, however, did I cease to wonder why I had been a social worker's client.

I had, on occasion, posed the question to Mrs. Mendenhall as over the years of my residence in America and before her death, our relationship became more personal. Her customary response was to first present me with a list of "promising" qualities that she had seen in me, then to state that it was her expectation that others might benefit from my training, and finally to end with "...and my belief that human beings respond to opportunities which, as a social worker, I must strive to create for my clients." It was not until much later that I realized how profoundly her belief system, as expressed in this rather routine answer, had affected my own approach to practice; especially her unshaken conviction in the power of possibilities and opportunities.

The fact that so many years later I have written this narrative might be a renewed attempt on my part to better understand her practices in the international arena by placing them in a macro—historical context.

FROM A MACRO HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Mrs. Mendenhall completed her social work training in the early 1940s. She was a student during an era when philosophical differences between two schools of thought, the diagnostic and the functional, created a professional schism and divided social workers into "diagnostics" and "functionalists" (Smalley, 1967). The diagnostic school was influenced by Freudian psychoanalytic theory and practice. It approached clients from a psychology of illness. The word "treatment" was used to describe the nature of the caseworker's work (Hamilton, 1940, 1948; Reynolds, 1942, 1934; Lowry, 1938, 1942; Richmond, 1922; Towle, 1941, 1946, 1948).

The functional school, on the other hand, was influenced by the teachings and writings of Otto Rank and worked from a psychology of growth. The term "help" was used to describe a relational process between the worker and the client and was defined by an agency's function (Pray, 1947, 1949; Robinson, 1930, 1942; Taft, 1937, 1944).

Mrs. Mendenhall had a diagnostic orientation; nevertheless, her practices seem to have been more representative of the functional school. From my current perspective, that of a seasoned social worker, I am able to ponder her application of method and use of technique with greater insight and a better understanding.

Mrs. Mendenhall was a generalist, one whose practice

went beyond the definition Mary Richmond gave the term at the Milford Conference in 1929. She used the psycho social model before Florence Hollis conceptualized it. She focused on client strengths rather than on individual pathologies; by doing so, it seems, she departed, consciously or unintentionally, from the practice principles that she had been taught. Her interventions were goal directed, however unilaterally these goals were set during the early phases of our relationship. Her respect for cultural practices surpassed the significance accorded them in the literature available to her. Belief in the client's self-worth and in his right to be treated with dignity; advocacy on the client's behalf; and, above all, ingenuity, foresight, and resourcefulness characterized her practice.

There was efficacy in Mrs. Mendenhall's practice but some aspects of it, as stated earlier, raised questions. These may have been inevitable, given the profession's evolution at the time. In my eyes and heart, she delivered what Hamilton (1948) asked all of us in this field to believe in; the idea that "...the greatest gift anyone can offer is to enable another to realize his own capacities for change and growth" (p. 294). And while this was the outcome of her interventions with me, I have been unable to ascertain with certainty whether there was violation of professional tenets in her practice or whether experiences like mine call for an ongoing evaluation of professional principles.

From my personal perspective, Mrs. Mendenhall's prac-

tice in the arena of international social work and within a historical context made all the difference in who I am, and what I do and value. And thus I am led to ask: Can it be that for the benefit of our clients we need to assign relative rather than absolute meanings to basic professional tenets and principles within differing socioeconomic, cultural, and other human contexts? And, can it be that this becomes a critical question for current and future social workers challenged by increasingly more diverse client orientations, behavioral practices, and outcome expectations. What paradigm shift would we need to make? □

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