

## Commentary on "At the Edge of Discovery: A Year in AIDS"

*"At the Edge of Discovery: A Year in AIDS," by Robert Neubauer, appeared in Volume 4, Number 2 of Reflections in our "Special Series on Teaching and Learning" (Spring 1998, pg. 45).*

by  
**Alex Gitterman**

Alex Gitterman, Ed.D.,  
Professor of Social Work,  
School of Social Work,  
Columbia University,  
New York, NY



Professor Robert Neubauer engages the reader with a thoughtfully crafted narrative. He poignantly describes his difficulties in practice, namely integrating his professional and personal selves at the very same time he is forging his own personal-sexual identity. His forceful writing brings the reader "inside" this struggle. He deserves our appreciation for his willingness to share his narrative. Professor Robert Neubauer also is worthy of special recognition for using his sabbatical to return to practice in order "to test the currency" of his skills (sadly a rare event among academics). His candid reflections on his experiences as a volunteer-staff person at an AIDS agency offer us an opportunity to revisit and examine important practice issues, such as the inherent tensions between bureaucratic imperatives and professional processes, and the place of feelings and physical contact in professional practice.

Before examining these practice issues, Professor Neubauer's essay must be placed in a historical and social context. His practice experience takes place eight years ago, at a time

when the diagnosis of AIDS represented a death sentence. Stigma, shame, ostracism, isolation, hushed voices, despair followed the diagnosis. There was no hope for surviving the epidemic; one's choice was to prepare or not prepare for the inevitable. For professionals and volunteers working in this context, the experience was wrenching. They faced daily the dying, debilitation, and death of beautiful and talented people. Within a three to four-month period, more than half of Professor Neubauer's caseload died. The practice issues were complex. Social workers reached out and engaged new applicants/clients while also confronting the death of other clients. They had to cope with their own grief and mortality and, at the same time, they had to have energy for the work. The boundaries between professional and personal reactions, between transference and countertransference were blurred.

Professional education left these pioneering social workers unprepared for how to practice in the midst of an epidemic. Within this historical context, Professor Neubauer,



married with two children, came out two years prior to his sabbatical. He felt "scared, anxious, excited, determined, full of both regret and anticipation." His family and personal transitions also shape the narrative. Hence, one sees how historical and social contexts profoundly affect his transformative experience as a volunteer-staff person and his ensuing narrative.

### **Tensions between Bureaucratic Imperatives and Professional Processes**

Professor Neubauer presents three cases from his work as a case manager. The cases reflect some inherent tensions between organizational imperatives and professional processes. How a client should be inducted into an organization illustrates this tension in action. Reimbursement policies and professional emphasis on a biopscho-social intake assessment often generate lengthy intake forms. These forms require that clients disclose personal and historical material to a stranger. Clients often resent and resist this intrusion into their lives. Social workers habitually feel caught in the middle between organizational demands and sensitivity to clients' feelings.

Professor Neubauer visits this professional dilemma in the case vignette of Perry. He writes, "I skillfully began the assessment, not in the order of the intake form, but as our focused conversation unfolded." Unfortunately, Professor Neubauer does not provide the actual transactions in the exchange

so that we can learn and generalize how this difficult task can be accomplished. Such illustration would make a significant contribution because the power of an agency's agenda is not easily overcome. While I am confident that Professor Neubauer made a serious effort to be responsive to client wishes and to integrate agency and client agenda, I suspect that he may be evaluating his effort more by what he intended to do and less by how the client experienced the effort. Perry's responses suggest that Professor Neubauer's effort to navigate the organizational intake demands were only partially successful (e.g. "he wearily gave me the details I asked for"; "fatigued in voice and gesture, he asked if we could finish this in the bedroom so he could lie down").

A specific exchange with Perry illuminates the complexity of the task. In response to Professor's Neubauer's request for the name of a person to be notified in case of emergency, Perry tearfully responds, "I suppose I have to put my mother down." Perry's response intimates that he has a painful narrative to share about the relationship with his mother. Professor Neubauer seems to focus on gathering data ("If your mother is the person you want notified, her name should be in the case record,") rather than on Perry's painful narrative. At this moment, I wish Professor Neubauer had more fully explored whether he felt constrained by the organization's intake form. Or did he make a conscious professional decision not to open up

this emotionally loaded area at this time? Or, did he possibly avoid Perry's pain for more complicated personal reasons? A critical reflection on this moment would help us understand the complexities and subtleties of simultaneously dealing with bureaucratic imperatives and emotionally charged material.

### **The Place of Feelings and Physical Contact in Professional Practice**

Professor Neubauer's narrative helps us explore two additional complicated practice issues - the place of feelings and physical contact. As Perry shares the loss of his family's love, Professor Neubauer states, "I remained distant in my chair next to the bed. At no moment did I break faith with my early training and hold him in my arms." This is an obviously painful moment for both worker and client. For Professor Neubauer, this moment is lodged within his historical and social contexts. He experiences an either/or dilemma: either to remain distant or to embrace Perry. No middle ground is accessible. Professor Neubauer states that he "sat there, professionally empathic, but impassive and distant, as I thought I'd been taught." I doubt that one can be both emotionally distant and empathic at the same time. All of us have experienced the feeling of being stuck at a particular moment in practice, immobilized by a practice bind in which neither of the perceived alternatives seems appropriate. At these moments, we may mute



our affect and put on a professional mask.

Professor Neubauer attributes his emotional distancing to his professional socialization. I do believe this is a partially valid explanation. Professional socialization can stiffen and formalize our practice and we learn to be threatened rather than challenged by ambiguity. We become socialized to a practice theory and learn to fit people and their situations into its explanatory system. The theory becomes our conceptual security blanket. We become bound by our theoretical view — too often more committed to the belief system and its promulgation than to its differential application. Professor Neubauer reminds us how professional socialization can detach us from clients at the very moment they need us. Too many "Perrys" suffering with physical and emotional pain come into contact with professionals who are hiding emotionally. Professor Neubauer cautions us that a social worker with a professional mask inhibits rather than facilitates the healing and recovery of clients. By hiding behind a poker face, we unwittingly encourage clients also to hide within stereotypical roles, e.g., patient, student. An artificial and false communication takes place in which neither party says what he or she really feels or means.

Professional socialization, however, is only a partial explanation for our practice difficulties. We also need to learn much more about what accounts for workers' attraction to differ-

ent theories and why some transcend their initial socialization while others do not. I wish Professor Neubauer were more curious and reflective about what made it difficult for him to "break faith" with his professional socialization. Contemporaries originally trained to remain neutral and impassive (to protect against countertransference and to encourage transference) moved to forge a more effective synthesis and integration between professional and personal selves. Professional socialization is only a partial explanation and perhaps in a future article Professor Neubauer could examine additional forces which restricted an emotional connection with Perry.

Through my own professional experiences, I have found helping people to deal with dying and death is extremely difficult. Most professionals have their own unresolved personal issues over the loss of loved ones. One way to cope is to develop emotional distance and even numbness. In Professor Neubauer's essay, Patrick reports that his doctor informed him that he had multi-site lymphoma and that he had refused further treatment. His poignant statement understandably overwhelms Professor Neubauer: "He couldn't talk; I couldn't talk. We said goodbye." This moment needs to be placed under a microscope. Its exploration can provide us with rich insights into the experience of a professional dealing with taboo content and emotions. Professor Neubauer has deep feelings for Patrick; however, he could

not express them and withdraws. In our careers, most of us have experienced this uncomfortable and lonely moment. We remain inside ourselves, preoccupied with our own losses, our own pain. How do we access and use our own vulnerability and emotionality at these moments rather than retreat into ourselves? I suggest a first step is to retrospectively examine these moments in depth as they provide us with the opportunity for reflection, learning, and growth. Learning to use our spontaneous reactions rather than to flee moves us further into the work.

Professor Neubauer also introduces the role of physical contact in practice. He retrospectively questions why he had not begun the encounter with Perry at first contact in the hallway with an embrace. I suggest a caution. An applicant/client may experience and react many different ways to being held in the arms in the very first interview by a professional stranger despite the good intentions of the worker. The place of physical contact requires greater specification—with whom, under what conditions and the meaning it may carry for the client.

### Conclusion

I would like to conclude by commenting on the totality of the essay. The volunteer experience was truly transformative for Professor Neubauer. As a teacher, he more readily offers praise than criticism — "I narrow the distance among us as much as possible without di-

minishing the differences in our roles." This is a wonderful principle for all teachers to heed. As a person, he has developed much greater comfort and acceptance with himself. To accomplish this self-acceptance, he had to dive into uncharted and rocky waters. The stakes were high and the risks enormous. Yet, he had the courage to face his own demons and did so with dignity and sensibility.

Over the last decade of my teaching, I have become increasingly attuned to the pain and courage of gay and lesbian people. Professor Robert Neubauer's essay further deepened my knowledge and sensitivities. And for that I am most thankful. □



Copyright of Reflections: Narratives of Professional Helping is the property of Cleveland State University and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.