

## What a Long Strange Trip It's Been

*This paper attempts to examine and reflect on my experiences of being a beginning social worker and beginning teacher. I describe the similarities between the two processes. In many respects they were painful experiences, fraught with disappointments, frustrations, and, at times, loss, sadness, and anger. Yet, out of these painful experiences, there are many humorous events and many different, diverse, and interesting opportunities. All these experiences enriched my learning, and produce a worker and teacher who is able to draw on all these experiences for the benefit of his clients and students.*

by  
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### ITHAKA

*Keep Ithaka always in mind.  
Arriving there is what you're  
destined for.  
But don't hurry the journey at all.  
Better if it goes on for years so  
you're old by the time you  
reach the island, wealthy with  
all you've gained on the way,  
not expecting Ithaka to make  
you rich.*

-Constantine Cavafy (1975)

In late August of 1996, I received a call from the Social Work Department of Lehman College in the Bronx. "Der-Bronx." I conjured up the image of the Bronx from the Good-year blimp as it looks down upon Yankee Stadium, surrounded by high-rise apartments, narrow streets, congested traffic, graffiti, violence, crime, the subway, and noise. Having listened to the Yankees' principal owner, I was under the impression that the surrounding area was unfit for a major league baseball team, let alone the seriousness of higher education.

Yet, when I walked onto the campus at Lehman College, I found tree-lined walkways, gar-

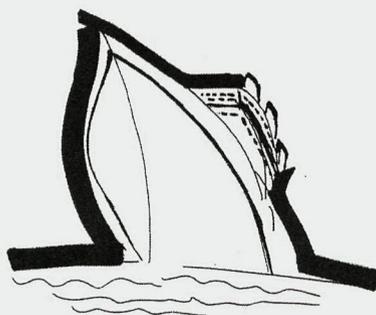
dens, flowers, birds singing, and one gothic structure that captured my attention and made me believe I was still in England.

The college in England where I had undertaken my social work training is located in an old stately home with spiral staircases, balconies, and beautiful rose gardens. So when the Lehman faculty asked me what I thought of the campus, I said I felt like I was back home.

But the recollection triggered sadness, feelings of self-doubt, and some painful memories. Above all, I recalled the fear of beginning, the fear of becoming an apprentice.

In both my social work training and beginning teaching, I undertook an apprenticeship. In both settings I encountered the same feelings, such as wanting to be liked, not wanting to make mistakes, or not wanting to do the work for the client or student, and the same feelings of fear, trepidation, and self-awareness.

This paper examines and reflects on the two experiences of being an apprentice, an extremely painful process characterized by both personal and professional change and growth.



## Fear of Beginning

Sitting on the seafront wall at Southend-on-Sea in England, overlooking the Thames Estuary, I stared out at the water and thought to myself, "What the hell am I doing?" My palms were sweating. I constantly rubbed my face and ran my hands through my hair, and I felt like I wanted to throw up. All I could keep thinking about was this first home visit which I was going to make within the next thirty minutes.

I kept going over in my mind all the things that could go wrong. In social work, I was told I had the power and the authority to make things happen, but now all I could feel was fear. The client would not like me. The client would slam the door in my face. The client would not be home.

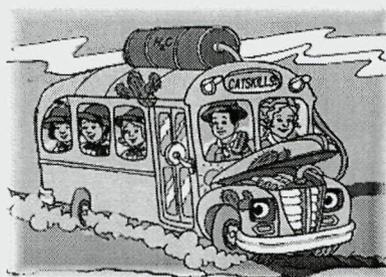
In beginning my teaching career several years later, I again went through a similar experience. I recall packing my bag and putting on a tie with pictures of kids on it, a souvenir of my child welfare work. It felt like Christmas morning, and I couldn't wait to get to school. However, as 2:00 pm drew closer and closer, I felt more and more nervous. Walking down the hallway to the classroom, my hands were sweating. As I got my materials out of my bag, I could feel myself shaking. I knew everyone's eyes were fixed upon me.

In both instances, I was so worried that I did not know enough, that somehow I should know more. I was the social worker, I was the teacher. Not

only should I have the answers, but I should also be able to resolve all the problems.

## Start at the Bottom

In 1981, I came to the United States for the first time. My first experience of New York City was being propositioned by a hooker on 42<sup>nd</sup> Street. As a twenty-two year old and having been in the country for only about an hour, I said to myself, "What a place!" This experience was soon to be replaced by a much more humbling and realistic one.



I was a summer exchange student working at a camp in the Catskills for the mentally and physically challenged. Busload after busload of handicapped people arrived. I was assigned two men, both in their mid-twenties, who required total assistance with feeding, dressing, and toileting.

No big deal, I thought. I would have a good time and the work wouldn't be too strenuous. By the end of the summer, no longer did I see them as handicapped. They were Keith, Joey, Paul, Herbie, Howie, and Steven. I don't remember how many bums I wiped, or how

many showers I gave, or how many meals I fed, or how many times I lifted someone out of a wheel chair. All I know is that I had to go back for more.

In 1984, before entering social work school, I worked in a residential program for mildly to moderately retarded adults. Once again I was wiping bums, dressing, feeding, and teaching daily living and social skills. If you will pardon the pun, by starting at the bottom, I really gained some first-hand insight into what it must be like to be handicapped.

I was also required to start at the bottom as a teaching assistant. Word had got around that I was somewhat competent in using computers, particularly SPSS and single subject research design. My responsibilities were, I thought, as follows: 1) To ensure that all the computers were on and were working; 2) To have the programs all ready to go when the students came down to the computer lab; and 3) To help the students with some data entry.

That all seemed simple enough. However, just as in the Catskills, reality was somewhat different. Each class consisted of between 25 and 30 students. But, there were only enough computers for 20 students. The noise was deafening. "Paul, Paul, my computer just crashed." "Paul, I just lost my data." "I'll never be able to do this!" "Why do we have to do this?" Some students would burst into tears, others would shout at me, others would accuse me of losing their data.

Now, these were master-

level students, future social workers. I kept thinking, "If I have to wipe away their tears here, how will they ever be able to help others in the field?"

I tried to look at the situation from their perspective. For me, the computer and research had come fairly easily. There had been a great deal of trial and error, and on numerous occasions I had lost data. However, for some of the students I was attempting to assist, their only encounter with statistics was on Thursday nights. They were genuinely afraid; this was the subject that could perhaps prevent them from graduating.

In the handicapped camp and in the classroom, I began to see what life was like from the bottom. The campers I came into contact with really gave me an insight as to what it was like to be handicapped and the day-to-day struggles and problems they had to endure. The students taught me that just because I understood didn't mean that they did. Their fears were real: I had to accept and respect them. To say, "Don't worry," was meaningless.

### Give Me Your Magic, Oh Master

Sitting like a puppy dog at my field instructor's side, I hoped her magic would rub off on me. She made the work and the decisions look effortless. Often I would accompany her on a visit, to observe her interviewing a client. She just made it look so easy and almost effortless.

Hence, I imitated her. I would ask questions the way she did. I would speak softly like she did. I would introduce myself the way she did. I found myself using her terminology and phrases. Hey! If it worked for her and she had been doing this for over twenty years, then it should work for me. I thought that if I copied her style, I was bound to pass.

However, over the course of the placement, it dawned on me that this was not working. When I asked a question, I would frequently receive strange looks. Finally, one client said to me, "You sound and act so like your supervisor." I then realized I had to ask questions in my own way. That I had to develop my own approach and style.

Later on, as a teaching assistant, I was able to observe first hand, two different professors with contrasting styles. What was alarming about this was if I was working with either one, I would begin to imitate their individual styles. I would talk like them, use the same phrases that they used, and even act like them. To use a social work phrase, I was mirroring them.

I became really conscious of this when a number of the students in the class started calling me "junior." I asked them what they meant, and they replied, "The only difference between you and Auerbach is that

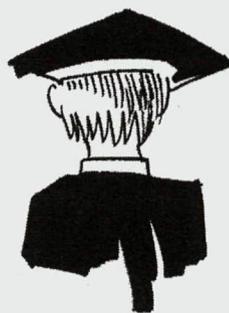
you have more hair."

Over a period of time I had to learn that it was all right to be me, to have my own style, my own way of saying things, and that I can connect with both my clients and my students by just being me.

### Try it My Way

During my first student placement, I worked with three mentally ill men, each in his late twenties to early thirties, who lived together in a community residence. Every Monday afternoon I would visit them with the intent of utilizing this or that skill that I had learned in the classroom. However, when I would get to the home promptly at two, I would be met with the following scenario. Peter, taking five minutes to come to the door, would say: "I didn't know you were coming." I was now confused and puzzled; just two hours earlier I had seen Peter at the day center and he would say: "See you at two."

I would then ask for David. Peter would say that David was upstairs sleeping. Twenty minutes later, David would come downstairs dressed in a suit and tie, smoking a cigarette. It was as if he didn't see me. He would stand in the middle of the room, rocking on his heels, laughing and talking to himself. He would then walk in and out of the kitchen about a dozen times.



Mark, the third member of the household, was the invisible man. He would come into the house with numerous plastic bags, saying that he had been out shopping and that he had to go out again. He also told me that he was extremely busy and that he would try to see me next week.

At times I thought I had dropped into "The Mad Hatter's Tea Party." The words that kept going around in my mind were "I'm late, I'm late for a very important date, no time to say hello goodbye, I'm late, I'm late, I'm late." (Carroll, 1946)

I was also aware that I had to demonstrate to my supervisor the social work skills we were discussing in school. In supervision, we had discussed some of the possible interventions: go out for a walk; attempt to get all three of them to sit down together. "I know," I said, "why don't we attempt to get them to clean up their flat?" Task-centered casework, I said!

Well, the harder I tried to get the men to undertake any task, the more and more distant they became. Perhaps I was asking them to do something that was really just beyond them. Eventually, I had to accept that seeing them on Monday afternoons and maybe getting them to interact with me was as far as we were going to get.

In my second-year placement at the local Social Services Department in the Intake Department, the team supervisor walked over to my desk one afternoon with a large grin on his face. "Paul," he said loudly so everyone in the office could hear

him, "I am assigning you DOLLY!" Everyone in the room started laughing.

Dolly's file was thick, and every worker's name in the team was also in the file. She was referred to as "Dolly with her dogs." On my first home visit to Dolly, I was met by two large dogs barking loudly and throwing themselves at the window. When I looked through the window, I could see dog feces all around the room. Then an elderly frail lady came to the door and invited me in. The smell! I thought I was about to throw up. All I could hear were the dogs barking and occasionally a thud, as one of them would collide with the wall. "I love my dogs," she said.

With my second-year assessment skills, I could see that Dolly required and was entitled to a host of services. I'll get right on it, I told her. Yet everytime a service provider came to her flat, she was not home.

I mentioned this to my colleagues. Once again there was laughter. "Try the shopping plaza," they suggested and indeed there was Dolly, talking to everyone who would stop and listen. When I walked over to her, she introduced me as her social worker and told everyone what I was trying to do for her.

An issue of my early teaching days was getting through the syllabus. In each class I was given a course outline; I was under the impression that I had to follow this religiously. I found myself doing most of the talking. I did not give my students enough opportunities to talk and ask ques-

tions. Or, if I did, I found myself cutting them off, and saying, "We need to move on." Or, "We will get back to that issue later." Of course, we never got back to the issue.

I now think of Dolly and wonder how the work would have developed if I had asked her. "How can I help you?" "Would you like a little air in your flat?" Dolly and my students have the same message for me: "Listen to us." I still had to realize that it was not necessary for me to impose my desires, priorities, or wishes on my clients or on my students. On the contrary: it was productive and meaningful *only* when I was able to listen to my clients or students.

### Listen to My Clients/Students

After graduating from social work school in Great Britain in 1986, I decided to immigrate to the United States. I had approximately \$500 to my name and two bags of belongings. I had to get a job. Eventually, I obtained a position with a program for the developmentally delayed, a fifty-two bed adult intermediate care facility. On my first day at the program, several of the staff asked me how long I intended to remain. Why had they asked? Over the past years two social workers had been employed at the program. One lasted two days, the other lasted one week. I soon found out why!

The program had not had a social worker in over a

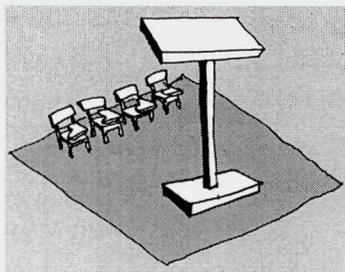
year; hence all their bio-psycho-social evaluations were out of compliance. In addition, the program was under state mandates to reduce the size of the population at the facility because it was "inappropriate" for diverse clients to be residing in one facility. For example, the program had mentally handicapped clients, physically handicapped clients, autistic clients, mentally ill clients, and dual diagnosed clients all under one roof.

The facility also had very involved parent associations that were extremely angry at the agency. They constantly complained that their sons or daughters were not receiving adequate care, that they were not receiving necessary services such as physical therapy, occupational therapy, speech therapy, and ADL skills. They also constantly complained that residents were being over medicated. Those clients who were mentally ill were physically abusing many of the severely handicapped clients.

I was no longer overwhelmed by all the problems. *I was* able to listen to what the different clients/groups and individuals were saying to me and, in a systematic manner, address their concerns and issues. On occasion I would have to tell them that I could not provide immediate results but that their concerns were legitimate and I would get back to them.

I realized I could not wave a magic wand. My work needed to be incremental. Problems were numerous, but little by little changes occurred. Some

of the mentally ill clients, who did indeed pose a risk to some of the physically handicapped clients, needed to be transferred to more appropriate settings. Though as a social work student I had many misgivings and ethical concerns about the use of psychotropic medication, I began to see the benefits of utilizing certain medications. I began holding parent meetings and established a neighborhood advisory council, a client counsel, and a sexuality awareness program in response to direct care staff complaints about the inappropriate sexual activity of cer-



tain residents. It was also necessary to establish groups with direct care staff and parents.

A year after I had been working at the residence, the program went through a re-accreditation process. For the first time in several years, the program was taken out of sanction. The auditors reported that the program was attempting to address issues of concern.

When I began teaching full time, I was also aware that I was able to listen to my students. No longer was I so preoccupied with getting through *my* agenda. Although I would always prepare notes for my classes, often I would use only a fraction of the material that I

had prepared. Frequently, students would raise questions in the class; this would then lead to another question or issue.

No longer was I dictating the pace of the class; the students were. This was particularly apparent in my social work practice class. For example, when we were discussing the ecological systems perspectives, the students themselves would raise practical examples. They would talk about their own families. They would talk about where they worked and how the ecological perspective could be applied to their places of employment.

When the class addressed the question of values and ethics, I presented the following conceptual framework: Preferred Conceptions, Preferred Instrumentalities, and Preferred Outcomes. I put forward the notion that if we thought about the client in a certain way, this would determine the way in which we would work with the client and affect the eventual outcomes and services the client would receive.

Again, it was the students that came up with the practical examples: abortion, the death penalty, substance abuse, assisted suicide, the elderly, foster care, the mentally ill, mentally handicapped, and physically handicapped. The way in which they viewed these populations really determined how they would work with them.

This was further reinforced at Lehman when I was teaching two classes of Human Behavior and the Social Environment. The syllabus for both

classes was exactly the same. However, both classes responded differently to what was being said. I would teach one class on a Wednesday evening and initially assumed I could teach the same material on Monday afternoons. However, the students in the respective classes would come up with different questions. Something that worked in one class did not necessarily work in the other.

In both instances I provided the framework, I used my authority, I was guided by my knowledge but not in the service of a pre-ordained specific end, but rather in a particular direction (re-accreditation, education), the content of which was supplied by staff/students. I was staying where the client was. But on this occasion, the client was not one individual, or a group of ten, but a class of thirty students.

I had reached a point in my professional development where the issues no longer overwhelmed me. Despite what was going on around me, I was able to actively listen to what my clients and students were saying. They were the ones who were directing my work; I was responding to their concerns and needs. No longer was I an apprentice.

### Journey's End?

What has this long, strange trip taught me? Well, it began with numerous fears and a great deal of trepidation. It also began with my focus being on my clients and students. I am

also aware that in many respects it has been a painful experience, fraught with disappointments, frustrations, and at times loss, sadness, and anger. Yet, out of these painful experiences there have been many humorous events, many different, diverse, and interesting opportunities by which I have been enriched.

Yet, this journey has not been about my clients' or students' changing, but about a parallel process in my own growth and professional development. I am the one who has changed and developed. I am no longer the nervous and anxious student, social worker, or teacher! I now have mastery and competence, I no longer feel overwhelmed by the situation, I am able to deal with the situations that I am confronted with. I am also aware that one does not have to have all the answers. It is more important that I am able to actively listen to what my clients or students are telling me.

In looking back, I have come to the realization that I am still on my journey and that I have not yet reached Ithaka. My journey has taken many twists and turns and I have experienced some exciting, stimulating, and rewarding experiences. It has occurred on two continents; it has involved diverse populations. The clients and students with whom I have come into contact have been from many different countries, each bringing with them their own values, creeds, and cultures.

Just over the horizon, however, there is another Dolly,

another student group eager to embark on its own journey. They continue to challenge, develop, and enhance my knowledge and skills. They provide the impetus for the journey to continue.

*Ithaka gave you the marvelous journey.*

*Without her you wouldn't have set out.*

*She hasn't anything else to give.*

*And if you find her poor, Ithaka won't have fooled you.*

*Wise as you'll have become, and so experienced, you'll have understood by then what an Ithaka means. □*

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