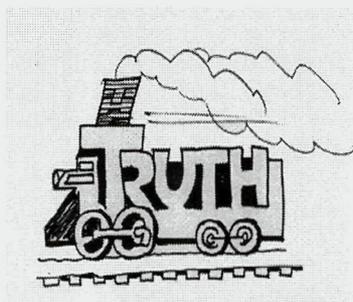


The Truth: From the Trenches

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by
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I have this quirky habit (and annoying one my friends say) of picking up on a line or phrase and then delightfully repeating it over and over. And then, a few weeks later, I find a new phrase and so on and so on. Well, remember that movie a few years ago with Tom Cruise and Jack Nicholson, *A Few Good Men*? For a few weeks after that movie the line "You want the truth, well you can't handle the truth" was on my lips constantly. The waiter at my favorite restaurant: "How do you want your eggs?" Me: "You want the truth, you can't handle the truth!" My partner asks, "Do you want Italian or Chinese tonight?" Me: "You want the truth? Well you can't handle the truth!" I guess you get the idea.

And now, again, I ask the question, "You want the truth?" Well, you CAN handle the truth. You can, because you have to, because you are a social worker. So let me share my truth with you. But before I do I absolutely must address my own pet peeve. You see, pet peeves are just like truths. We all have one, and it is a little different from everyone else's. And, like a good social worker, before I can get to the issue at hand, I need to vent a little. Social workers are so good at venting. We love it because we are so ar-

ticulate and, hey, our clients get to do it all the time, so we want our chance too.

My pet peeve is simply put in the form of a question: What is up with the term "social worker"? What I do is not very social; I mean, it is no tea and crumpets; and San Francisco Police Department taking the kids to the child protection center. Come on. And worker? That is about as bland and generic as it gets and just another example of white washing what is a difficult and emotional job. So let me quickly propose a few other options for the title of our grand profession (I really will get to writing the article, I promise).

- Bad parent receptor inhibitor (biopsych perspective)
- Anti-abuse, family destructor/repairer device (a little pentagonish I admit)
- Conus wrapus aroundus protectus childus (this title for a social worker was borrowed from the ancient Greeks)
- The new sheriff in town (social workers in the Wild West)
- The best all around, you make 'em, we take

'em, slapdash, drive through, hustle and bustle, on your feet therapists/helpers/healers that you can find just about anywhere. (This title is my personal favorite but difficult to get on business cards.)

Let me contextualize my truth vis-à-vis my curriculum vitae. I worked as a counselor and a volunteer and had other social work jobs from 1992 – 1995. In 1995 I began study at the School of Social Welfare, Haviland Hall, UC Berkeley. I applied to Berkeley because of the philosophy of the school and the writings of the late Dean Harry Specht. The commitment to the public sector and civil service was firmly in my mind. And then along came a single sheet of colored paper with my acceptance materials – the Title IV-E application. But it was not the title that got my attention. No, it was the five numerals at the bottom of the page. Honestly, I had no idea what the IV-E program was all about or that this single sheet of paper would plot my professional course for years to come.

After graduation in 1997 on a blistering hot Berkeley day, I began working for Alameda County Child Protective Services to repay my two-year commitment. I began my illustrious career as a paper shuffler, data entry technician, meeting attendee, and occasional social worker. O.K. Just kidding. I worked in the “front end” in the court unit. After approximately one year, I transferred to San Francisco County, where I completed my IV-E requirement in the summer of 1999.

It is now spring 2000 and here I am, working as an emergency response child welfare worker. If a report of suspected child abuse made to the child abuse hotline is assessed to be serious enough to warrant investigation, it is my job to meet with the family and assess the situation. Always, I am the first one and often the only one on the scene. This job requires bravado, guts, insight, and the ability to keep your ego out of it. As I like to live by, just the facts ma'am. If I sound like a B grade, noir film, well, I feel like that sometimes. My 1950's two-ton metal desk, puke green carpets and generic water color paintings in the “take a number” waiting room contribute to the atmosphere.

So here goes that truth I was talking about. The truth is that Child Protective Services is only a reflection of the society we live in. In other words, we live in a bureaucratic, mass democracy. Just go to the Department of Motor Vehicles to get your license renewed and you get a quick lesson in alienation. Child welfare is no different. As a society, we solve our problems through litigation and the court system. Child welfare is no different. Our “system” is a reflection of our selves. The child welfare system is not an oasis, a wonderful, hidden refuge from the problems of society. America has the highest rates of incarceration in the industrialized world, the highest rates of gun violence. Our caseloads reflect it. We, as a society, generally punish criminals instead of rehabilitating them. Child welfare is no different. So, before one criticizes or

blames the child welfare system, one must consider society as a whole. One must understand the historical development of child welfare and place it in societal context.

But what are different are the social workers. We work in a structure that is dictated to us. But what we do choose are our own ethics and professional point of view. Our job is to implement the community standards dictated by political process (state and local laws) and the judicial process (the courts). We negotiate and educate. We look, listen, and learn. We engage the families in a dialogue about values, childrearing, culture, and viewpoint. We protect, we heal, and, sometimes, we create hurt and anger. But we are no worse, or no better, than the larger organism that we live in. And in the body that we call society, I often feel that the child welfare system is the white blood cells. Our job is to keep the body healthy and ready for the future by protecting our children. But we are created as well by our collective hearts and minds.

Thank you for listening to my truths and this viewpoint from the trenches.

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