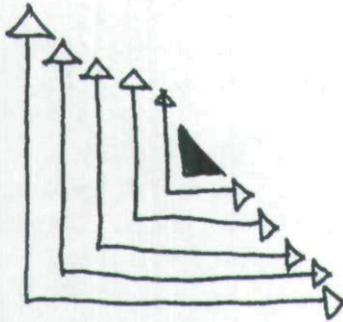


SOCIAL WORK AT SEA

By Daniel J. Molloy, D.S.W.

This narrative focuses on five critical themes the author has abstracted from his 30 years of work with U.S. Merchant Seafarers at the National Maritime Union. The themes are illustrated through case presentations and commentary. The author concludes with a discussion of how relevant these themes are beyond the time and place from which they emerged. The work strongly suggests universal applicability.



Introduction

Attending to the panic and courage of a dying former client and friend in February, 2010, brought back a flood of feelings and memories about the population and organization I served for almost 30 years. I directed a social services program for American merchant seafarers, both active and retired, all of whom had affiliations with what was then the National Maritime Union. My dying friend was James M., who led an extraordinarily active life up to his mid 80s, when respiratory issues profoundly affected his stamina, energy, and mobility. He felt that sailing in the engine rooms of countless vessels over 40 years, with exposure to toxic pipe insulation materials, was a contributing if not causal factor to his condition.

In the last decades of his life he would have an annual winter bout with pneumonia, but always bounced back. He continued to be a bit of a community activist in the Chelsea section of New York City. He grew up in the Great Depression and sailed through American's conflicts from World War II through Korea and Vietnam. He was proudest of three components of his life which he felt were intimately connected: he was a trade

unionist, a seafarer, and Irish. In his own mind, each of these bound him in solidarity with all marginalized people who would struggle in a world that tried to exclude them. Jim was, of course, his own unique person, but he did capture much of what propelled and energized many of the men and women I met and served all those years.

Like many retired social workers, I have a long parade of clients marching through my heart and mind who raise smiles of appreciation and affection, as well as memories of frustration and disappointment because together we could not quite get it going or sustained for long. However, serving a discrete occupation with a heightened consciousness of itself with its own heritage and tradition has something unique and important to offer social work. In my years of serving this population, I became increasingly aware that it had generated its own sense of what is most compelling about work and life. From my academic days I remember—and am still motivated by—an adage from a good social work research class. It went something like this: If there is a good and rich story to tell from practice, then find a way to tell it. Well, here it is. I hope I do it justice.

It is challenging to present both clients and the reflections on practice they elicit covering an extended period of time in a coherent and organized fashion. To help both the reader and myself, I have elected to do so around a series of themes emerging over many years of both interviewing and relating to many merchant seafarers. Although I may illustrate a theme by presenting one or several clients, I assure you that each person presented stands for a

host of others who expressed similar feelings, hopes, frustrations or disappointments. A social worker in a union or occupational setting has a dual role in that one must both blend in and stand out. The highest compliment I ever received at the NMU was when after about ten years some seafarers asked when and if I had ever sailed with them. They conjectured I must have been a seafarer who came ashore to study social work. I was not. On the other hand, seafarers came to me with the expectation I had the skill to render competent, professional service beyond the natural help that members of the maritime community often generously exchange with each other.

The themes from this discussion are presented as five critical elements a social work practitioner needed to weave and incorporate into work with this occupational community. The first theme is the need to note and accept the client's bottom line and appreciate the reason for its centrality. Second - the need to master the work setting's occupational welfare framework. Third - the need to identify with the client's individual and collective sense of mission. Fourth - the need to cultivate the *occupational community's* natural helping and healing capacities. Finally - the need to recognize the importance of work in life.

The Bottom Line

I still remember my first client at the NMU. It was late summer 1976. I was a social work student in my second year. Francisco was a retired seafarer who had sailed in the Steward's Department. I can still see his large, brown, clear eyes and was immediately put to ease by the sense of comfort he had with himself, coupled with a friendly, nurturing quality. He told me he sailed with the NMU since the 1950s and before that with another union. He came to New York in the '40s from Puerto Rico. His presenting problem was an extraordinarily large utility bill, which had climbed over the last few months to several hundred dollars. Since he lived a somewhat austere life residing in a low to middle income housing complex across the river in New Jersey, I agreed quickly that something was wrong.

By this time several other seafarers had arrived outside the door to my office, and would knock and stick their heads in to indicate that they, too, were waiting to see me. Up to then, the National Maritime Union's Personal Service Unit was a demonstration project and joint venture with the Hunter College School of Social Work, staffed exclusively by student interns. The office had been closed for the summer and union members were eagerly waiting the reopening. Francisco offered to leave and come back at a more convenient time. I was tempted for a moment to accede, but decided that would not be a good way for either of us to begin.

I asked Francisco two questions: first, did he contact the utility company himself to ask why the bill was so high; and second had he brought the bill with him. The answer he gave to both inquiries was yes. He had called the company and quickly got frustrated by what he felt were irrelevant questions and hung up. Then he showed me the bill. The charges were extreme. I reviewed the fine print which gave phone numbers for making billing reviews. I contacted the appropriate department, identifying my client as a union member and myself as his union social work advocate. It was clear to both Francisco and me that our leverage in questioning the bill had gone up exponentially. The company agent quickly agreed to arrange a visit to the meter site to explore the validity of the charges the next day. A few days later both of us were notified that the investigation had determined the lines had been crossed (accidentally or on purpose) and that Francisco had been paying for his own electric as well as for several other residents. His rate had been adjusted to customary use and the wires connected correctly. There was an apology and entitlement to a substantial refund or credit. Well, I could not have had a better P.R agent than Francisco. Word spread quickly after our triumph. Even union officials stopped by to express appreciation. Most importantly, though, my relationship with Francisco was on a strong foundation that would allow us to go much further and which would become instructive for hundreds of relationships to follow.

My relationship with Francisco continued for many years. In a trade union setting there is no termination strictly speaking. Both active and retired members have frequent contact, especially at the NMU in those days with a Hiring Hall, Benefit Plan, Upgrading School, Cafeteria, Gymnasium, local and national union offices all housed in two connected impressive buildings at the same site on the corner of W. 17th St. and 9th Avenue on the West Side of Manhattan. Francisco in the years to come would share with me many details of his life that were troubling to him. Estrangement from an adult daughter and granddaughter was a primary concern which we were able to work on and plan some overtures toward reconciliation. The separation was fueled by alcohol abuse when he was younger, but by now he had been sober for many years. His daughter ultimately proved responsive to reconnecting with him. Since he stopped drinking he lived a somewhat isolated life, but with mild encouragement he was able to connect with a group for retirees at the NMU started by Joan Barron and Kathleen Mulligan, who were also social workers. There was also a Senior Center across the street from the Union Hall, and a group of other active retired Latino seafarers who were also in recovery from addiction used the union's facilities to hold meetings. Francisco taught me a critical lesson. The key to working with and relating to him and many union members to follow was to take seriously their overwhelming sense of living on a financial margin. In Francisco's mind, an unpaid utility bill could lead to turned off energy, garnished pension, or possible housing eviction. Real or imagined, working class people live with constant apprehension about their financial vulnerability. They live on a margin where, if even one domino falls, they will tumble into poverty. That would mean they had slipped into an even deeper realm of vulnerability, one that they had constructed their whole life around trying to avoid. Once Francisco felt I recognized that fear, took it seriously, and would work with him towards reestablishing some financial insulation, he was willing to unlock the doors to past disappointments in his life. This client—who also became a friend—gave me the outline to

a story that would be repeated hundreds of times over for years to come.

My work with Francisco and others put me in touch with other important elements of a backdrop in serving this unique population. As mentioned, the union buildings were impressive and state of the art for this day. There was a school with the capacity to deliver advanced maritime engine, deck, navigation, and food preparation courses for students from across the country. Students had their own rooms, far superior to college dorms even today, in an upscale residence section of the building which was very much like a hotel. There was a Medical Unit, Benefit Administration and Data Processing offices, gymnasium, swimming pool, and spacious auditorium. There was also a large cafeteria and dining hall, which was the major gathering spot in the building, outside of which our Personal Service Unit was located.

It was a facility to be proud of, and they were. Since every seafarer knew that some combination of negotiated employer contributions for his/her work built all this, my clients were really welcoming me into their homes. They wanted me to take note and appreciate that I was being welcomed into a family that had made something of itself; if I took note of how they had struggled to build this home, I could be part of their family. And so they came to me on an even footing, with none of the meekness sometimes associated with a client to professional relationship. The other impression I had from these early days sadly turned not to be true. Like all humanity, NMU members believed that the sturdy organization they had built would live on for the ages. It was transgenerational survival. It was here to stay and get even better. That would not be. Even in the 70s there were gathering forces which would lead to the decline and ultimate dissolution of the NMU, which merged with the Seafarer's International Union early in the 2000s.

Through my years at the NMU I encountered many seafarers who had achieved or were on the way to establishing financial security. They sailed in advanced ratings and were compensated adequately for job skills in demand. They would come to me

with a large variety of issues they wanted to work on like declining health, addiction, possible disability, marital-family issues, landlord-tenant complaints, and a whole host of paralegal concerns. They came steadily enough, and I was glad to see clients who weren't in acute and pressing crisis, though they were not the bulk of my work at the union. The seafarers who came in greatest numbers and whose situation demanded most time were those in high magnitude stress from living on the financial edge. Such seafarers for the most part fell into two categories: those trying to break into the industry, and those trying to maintain themselves in the industry until they had enough sailing time to claim full union book status for advanced skill ratings and/or sit for Coast Guard administered exams for advanced skill ratings. Sailing time led to many more opportunities for work at much higher pay in the union hall's hourly job calls and rotary shipping systems. Since many seafarers came to me looking for help in climbing this mountain, it soon became clear to me that I had to find a way to help them stick around until things began to break their way. I was also aware it would not be easy. Entry rating jobs were few in number. The small amount available were sometimes clung to by established seafarers who because of language or reading difficulties could not pass upgrading and retraining courses needed to move up the job skill ladder. And yet, I had an intuitive sense that a considerable number of these more recently arriving seafarers had the potential to be skilled and dedicated workers. Certainly it was not true of all, but it was true of many.

Two seafarers in particular come to mind as dramatically illustrating this point. Both were black; one from New York by way of the south, the other from the West Indies. I first noticed Fred sitting in the job hall day after day and shaking his head and sighing after he was outcompeted for job after job. He had been laid off from jobs in building maintenance, which seemed to be a shrinking market at the time in New York City. Noting his frustration, I made eye contact with him one day saying it looked like things were getting rough. He told me it had gotten so bad that was now living in a shelter. He wanted to give the maritime industry

a good shot, because he thought that running a building boiler room was transferable knowledge to a ship's engine, and that if you were able to break in you could find steady work. He did not realize it would be this hard, but he was not ready to give up. He exuded a sense of decency, a capacity for hard work and, although I was hardly one to judge, a mechanical aptitude. He also seemed to be growing more desperate by the day.

By the time I encountered Fred I was able to connect with and influence the development of certain resources which could ease his dilemma. His Unemployment Insurance had run out some time ago, and Fred made it absolutely clear to me he could never pursue public assistance. While it was in the back of my mind that we should never say never, I told him we were not necessarily to that point yet. Up to then the little cash he had was supplied by a daughter who was in a troubled marriage and facing job loss herself. I contacted two agencies on Fred's behalf. The first was a maritime agency associated with the Episcopal Church. In shutting down a residence for seafarers they'd once operated, they had set aside and created a fund for seafarers with housing issues. We discussed ways of accessing that fund that would underwrite lodging and short term cash needs for seafarers who had some real chance—with emotional and fiscal support—of making it in the maritime industry. I was able to secure about six month's lodging and a weekly stipend for Fred to keep him going. I met with him almost daily, working with him to keep his body and spirits up. I had advised Fred, as well as other seafarers in these circumstances, not to leave the hall after the last job call, but to wait until the Union's Port Agent Office actually closed down. One day it worked. An employer contacted the Agent after closing because of a personnel shortage due to a seafarer's sudden illness. No one else was in the Hall. It turned out to be a long voyage. The captain was thrilled to get him. He was gone for months.

Fred went on to become a very successful seafarer in high demand. One year I was shocked to learn he had accumulated about 330 days at sea between steady and relief

work, which must have been a record for that year in the U.S. fleet, but had one bump in the road. Like many in the maritime industry, but perhaps no more than other occupations, success was celebrated with the chemical most associated with mood change: alcohol. Fred was thrown by this and very willing to take a good look at it. He had enough sailing time for full health care eligibility, so we were able to get him in to a residential rehab and aftercare group, which I ran for a consortium of unions in New York for many years. In the 12 or more years I still had contact with Fred he maintained his sobriety post rehab. He was now able to help his daughter and grandchildren financially. I should add that two years after my initial intervention with Fred, I received a call from a Lutheran Church agency also dedicated to assisting seafarers, which ran a hotel for them. It was the place Fred had stayed when I was first able to secure lodging. The agency told me Fred had returned all the financial assistance extended to him and had made a substantial donation to the fund in my name for seafarers in need.

The other seafarer who stands out as someone who just needed a boost to get himself over a hump was Dexter. He already came to the NMU with a strong maritime skill base, as he had sailed in the British Merchant Marine when living in the West Indies. While he had the skills for better jobs, he needed help to get by until his union book status allowed him to compete for jobs in a higher grouping. He was also separated from his wife, who had greatly exaggerated his income to the courts in seeking child support for their two children. I was able to find a lawyer who ultimately helped him prevail before the courts and NY Department of Social Services, but it took his attorney years to reach a determination in his favor. Meanwhile, Dexter feared that he would go under from the financial stress, and even had some concerns of incarceration after hostile court bouts.

Like Fred, Dexter held down the Hiring Hall for months and put some time on his shipping card. This is time, accrued while a member is registered at the hiring hall, is time which moves a member up in terms of ability to be hired off the shipping board. He also

picked up enough relief work to be eligible for Unemployment Insurance. However, even this was no easy matter for merchant seafarers. The NMU had contracts with many shipping companies scattered across the nation with employers located down the East, West, and Gulf coasts; even along the rivers and lakes. Inter-state claims and claims combining several states could take weeks and even months to establish in those days. Before the NMU Personal Service Unit studied, grasped, and organized to address the problem, most seafarers gave up in frustration unless they had a simple claim against a single employer residing in the same state in which they lived. Further complicating the matter in those days was that the computation system for establishing eligibility differed from state to state. Even beyond that, some states insisted that wages be spread over two or more quarters of a work year, with different percentage equations between high and lower quarters. It took us a while both in New York and in New Orleans (where the Union had approved engaging another social worker, Michael Dover and later Henrietta Porter) to tame and understand all these variables. Once we did, we had another meaningful resource for maintaining seafarers who were less senior in the industry and even for more established workers, whose vacation benefits had run out and whom the industry needed to be available for work, but was not yet ready to hire. This became critical in winning the full confidence of the membership. They felt we took seriously and could address the absolute base issue in their pyramid of concerns: the financial insulation keeping them from falling into poverty.

When the time arrived to file Dexter's first Unemployment Insurance (UI) claim, the usual complexities arose with several employers each in different state jurisdictions. Beyond that, employers had reported his wages in the payoff quarter and had not demonstrated that his earnings from actual work were spread more evenly over time. He was depressed and panicking as he showed me the ineligible determination. I assured him it was not the last word and helped him file and fax all the documents necessary for a

redetermination. The process took three months from start to finish, by which time he was already back to sea. He did return home, though, to UI back payments in addition to wages to satisfy his debts. He also had a valid UI claim established to help him piece together income over the coming months for periods he was not working. Dexter went on to be a seafarer in high demand and able to secure steady work, with diminishing to no need for unemployment benefits. He was able to resolve issues with the court and happily remarried. He joined a growing cadre of skilled seafarers I would see in the Hiring Hall whom I knew whom would not be there if social work intervention had not begun by taking their bottom line seriously.

At times the income stability apprehension was centered not around the presence and absence of work, but on the viability of retirement as seafarers aged and confidence in their ability to keep up with the rigorous demands of their occupation waned. Many also felt it was time to try to make up for all the time spent away from home and family. Hassan comes to mine as both typical and unique in illustrating this point. He was from Yemen, sailed in the steward's department, and was considered a fine chief cook. Culinary skills are highly prized at sea, as on long tedious voyages food is an important form of gratification. Hassan was in this mid-60s and had over 20 years of sea time. Several weeks earlier we had arranged for an S.S. retirement estimate, as well as a union pension review. He came in with the figures for both and was clearly disappointed, saying that some of his life's hopes and deepest aspirations seemed dashed. He shared with me that he had always wanted to make the once in a lifetime Hadj to Mecca. I knew that he supported a spouse and children back in Yemen, and was in the process of bringing his family to America and helping them secure work and citizenship. He could not work forever, but his retirement income fell short of expectation. In reviewing his work history, I could see that it was well documented from his mid-30s on, but there was nothing before that. I asked where he lived and worked as a young man. It turned out that he had worked about 10 years in Great

Britain in the steel industry and road construction projects. Like many workers he had saved documentation of those years as a history of and tribute to his work life. I was able to copy them and send them to the U.K. for an eligibility inquiry, along with application forms that British Social Security had forwarded to me. I responded to a few telephone and letter inquiries over the next few months while Hassan went back to work. I began to feel it was not a lost cause. Finally, when Hassan returned he came in with a document he'd received from the U.K. but was afraid to open. We did so cautiously together. He had been awarded a pension and back payments not only for himself, but for his spouse as well. Hers would go directly to her in Yemen, which was fine with him since she and his children were the main drive for his efforts and affections. The money would be most helpful, but he seemed even more pleased that this portion of his work life would also be recognized and appreciated. He left work content that all he had done truly mattered; not only to himself, but to those he loved.

At times advocating for a seafarer with income, work, and retirement issues was actually done within the union's organizational framework itself. Such was the case with Albert. He was an extraordinarily tall black seafarer from Alabama who sailed as an electrician. Shipmates would joke about his ability to change light fixtures without the assistance of a ladder. I had first met him years earlier when he came to me about having to leave the union and the industry. Within two years his wife and later his sister had died. The sister had been assisting him with child care after his spouse's death so he could continue to go to sea. Now he was alone and had no option but to return home, work ashore, and raise his two children. It was a sad parting but in his mind, as well as mine, it was the right thing to do. We exchanged occasional notes, but I did not expect to see him again. However, when his children were grown the notion of returning to New York and going to sea gained increasing ascendancy in his mind. He contacted me telling me he had decided to return. He indicated his child rearing had

known both peaks and valleys. His oldest child, a daughter, was in college and would go on to medical school, while his son had been in and out of the criminal justice system and was presently incarcerated. He felt he had done what he could for them, and that it was time again to make a better living.

As it turned out, there would be some obstacles to deal with that would make it more difficult to return to work through the NMU. Since he had not been to sea for years his grouping status had slipped. Additionally, he would have to start anew in accruing pension credits. By federal law (the ERISA statute), he had been out of the industry for a longer period than he had been in it. Therefore he had incurred a break in service which would disqualify his prior work time. In spite of these disappointments Albert still wanted to return. Since he did have a key job rating he did obtain some work. Meanwhile I helped him formulate an appeal request explaining his history to both the Union's Governing Board and the Pension Plan trustees. While I anticipated some flexibility in regard to his grouping status, I was much less optimistic regarding his pension, since breaks in work service were hardly ever tolerated. In the end Albert prevailed on both fronts with, his worker and pension status fully restored, much to my relief and elation.

Albert did have one other bump, which only he and I knew about. He, too, was held captive by a long association of celebrating the end of a long voyage with heavy drinking. While he had been sober for some time, he seemed to have progressed well along the course from abuse to dependency even through his shore side period of abstinence. Once he picked it up, it was as if he had never stopped. He had enough sailing time by now to be quietly sent off to rehab. Fortunately, like many seafarers I worked with, he needed just one convincer. With rehab, aftercare, and 12 step participation, he maintained sobriety. He put together a life where work achievements and aspirations were in proximity to each other. Through his recovery group he was able to express and seek support with a remaining deep sadness in his life: the pain his son was in and that no one had been able to reach him.

While the union, benefit plan, and employers were almost always overwhelmingly supportive to social work's efforts on behalf of seafarers, at times that relationship was strained. I recall one intervention that was particularly difficult. It concerned Jose, a Cuban seafarer in his late 50s, who claimed that he'd been detained for many years and pressed into the Cuban Merchant Marine when he had returned for a visit. Even though he had been gone from the industry for many years, he wanted his shipping and pension rights fully restored. He had an angry edge to him and struck a militant pose. In interviewing him I thought that years of deprivation and limited capacities to communicate in English were the source of his frustration. The Union, on the other hand, thought he was engaged in a hoax and hustle, feeling his years in Cuba had been voluntary. I contacted the Benefit Plan's Claims Director, sharing my take on it as well as the Union's apprehension. She was more sympathetic and suggested I compose a memo to her describing the situation, which she would present to the Trustees. She warned me that the appeal was not likely to have much success if the Union trustees opposed it, as the Employer trustees would almost certainly be less sympathetic. He was my client, and I felt ethically obligated to do my best, so I constructed a memo presenting his side in the best possible light. The appeal, as expected, was denied. My client and I were informed. Upon seeing me, he indicated my effort was weak and I was just part of an unjust system. I responded by telling him I disagreed. It did not seem wise or appropriate to share with him that I had already taken some grief about representing him. Frankly, he did not seem to care. He was locked into his hostility, and I was certainly not going to be the person he trusted to ease him out of it.

So we parted, at least shaking hands, and I said was sorry for the rejection. I thought that was the end of it until a few months later when I was called into the Plan Administrator's office. He was not happy. He informed me that my memo in the seafarer's file had been the basis of overturning the Trustee's determination in a lawsuit filed by

my client. It was also quoted by the judge in a somewhat humiliating lecture he delivered to the attorneys representing the Trustees. It was obvious that he had taken some flak for it, and in this case he was glad to share it with me. We parted not quite on the same wave length as to what I should do when my obligation to clients ran contra to my organizational client. Such conflicts through the many years at the NMU were rare. I had developed a strong positive relationship of mutual respect with the Plan Administrator and many union officials, which got us through this and other bumps. I remember this incident, though, as a tension which could never be completely resolved. One day I saw Jose and told him I had heard of his good fortune. He acted aloof, intimating that his attorney had put me and this whole organization in its place. I left it there, shaken, but still believing I had done the right thing.

Occupational Welfare Framework

The next point or theme I wish to draw out of the cases I've already presented is that a social worker in a union or other work setting must become expert in connecting clients to an extensive occupational welfare system. Work based entitlements involve every major human and social service need. These include issues like health care, unemployment, disability, retirement, job retention, and behavioral health problems, to name just a few. Programs addressing these needs are based in an extensive continuum ranging from federal, state and local government, through a host of voluntary and non-for-profit agencies, all the way to religious and faith-based institutions that may have a stake in assisting a particular population. Social workers in an occupational setting must come to move over this whole horizon with care and make the appropriate connection at the right access point for their clients. I sought to cultivate and develop liaisons with all the departments and agencies to which I referred our members. The places to which I referred our members appreciated the information I had already gathered for them, as well as the pre-screening which assured eligibility or the identification of the issue that would need to be worked through to try to get there. I frequently wrote accommodation

letters for good service which insured that my clients would get good service when they arrived.

As a social work student in a world of work track I remember being encouraged to pay special attention to this occupational welfare framework surrounding work and employment. It took some time to master a system that, until the day I retired, I was still learning. The system itself is not static; in its entire network there are hundreds of access points and mazes to negotiate. Later when I had exposure to the then emerging world of Employee Assistance Programs, its literature stressed this same theme, but in the more concentrated focus of job performance. As part of the EAP core technology, the ability of practitioners to make micro-macro linkages for clients was stressed as a key competence. EAPs are more rooted in work performance issues per se, but they stress a point certainly akin to an industrial social work concern. For me that is a critical point. The more skillful I become in negotiating this system, the more confidence my clients had in me. Even more importantly my welcoming of clients was deeper, fuller and more genuine because I was convinced I could shed light on situations and circumstances in their lives. Together we could see better where we could go.

The Occupation's Sense of Mission

As mentioned earlier, many seafarers I worked with—especially in the first half of my years at the NMU—had lived through the Great Depression and the Second World War. Mingled with that life experience was their own sense that in establishing their Union they had succeeded in raising a stigmatized occupation into the very mainstream of American work life. They had come from virtual indentured servitude to become workers with quality health care, progressive and generous retirement benefits for their day, and had become major players in the American labor movement. Presidential candidates, Cabinet secretaries, and movers of social change all addressed their conventions. With all of this the central metaphor for many of them, both individually and collectively, was that they were advocates and participants in a

Cause. They felt they were playing their part in a grand march of formerly marginalized people in the drive to achieve social justice and fuller participation in the American economy. Bertha Reynolds did pioneering work with merchant seafarers in the 1940s while the war was raging, and first noted this theme (Reynolds, 1975). Reynolds saw clients who were NMU members of this same union under the auspice of a voluntary agency (United Seaman's Service). In her book she reflected on her own practice and felt that every social work intervention in this occupational community was orchestrated around the theme of social justice. I caught on pretty quickly that seafarers saw social work as a natural ally in this proud heritage. It contributed strongly to why I was increasingly well received and welcomed warmly into the fabric of this occupation. The more I aligned myself with this overall sense of Cause the more I was accepted as an integral part of their organization. The Personal Service Unit I directed was not an appendage, but in large measure a part of whom they were.

George was a seafarer whose personality and life story captured much of this phenomenon. By the time I met him, he was in his early 70s and already retired. As a younger man in the war, his ship had been torpedoed in the South Atlantic. He was the only survivor able to mount the launched lifeboat and spent some 30 days at sea trying to make landfall. He came ashore on the West Coast of Puerto Rico. He could still produce (with little prompting) a picture taken by a local newspaper of him emerging from the sea with a long flowing beard. My initial contact with him was around a drinking episode which had left him badly shaken. Detox was arranged at the U.S. Public Health Service Hospital, which then was still open and at which seafarers had the highest priority patient status. George's reputation as a rough, tough, and ready drinking seafarer was legendary in the Chelsea neighborhood. However, he had curtailed his drinking in more recent years as he came to the realization that it was destroying any chance he had at having some good years in the remainder of his life. This binge would turn

out to be his last, and he would spend the last 12 years of his life in quality sobriety.

George and others came to rely on the Personal Service Unit as a new bar. He would drop in each day to discuss his life, politics and the news in general. He became increasingly arthritic and the frustrations of aging were also increasingly on his mind. Like most seafarers and working class people, he needed to tell his story. The way he told of his life, past and present, made it clear that he saw his life as orbiting around a cause. The cause centered on the generational achievements of seafarers and other working people and the fashioning of America into a nation that would be more responsive and appreciative of workers. As a young man, he had become a socialist; Marxist ideas had gotten him in trouble and helped him wind up in jail. As an old man, his heart went out to some of the young immigrant families in his neighborhood trying to find work, and he would slip them a few bucks when he could. He was generous, but was never taken advantage of. George was a great patriot who loved America, but each day he would come into our office ranting and raving about the Reagan budget cuts and insensitivity to people trying to make it.

George was certainly unique, but many of his views on life matched those of hundreds of men and women I knew and worked with in those days. The depression, war, and the extraordinary journey of their own occupation instilled in them a sense of solidarity with all people who were excluded and struggling to hold on. Surviving all that and even advancing their cause gave them a sense that we were all on the march to someplace better. As a social worker I had to make it clear that I was glad to be a partner on the journey. In that time and place, it was an easy choice.

Perhaps the best illustration of social work involvement in a major effort to secure just participation and access to a benefit system was the drive by the American maritime labor community to secure veterans status. Seamen had played a crucial role in supporting the nation's military in every overseas conflict. This was especially true of World War II when they formed the supply line for troops and

machinery, and at times were even the conveyers. In fact, merchant seamen had the largest per capita rate of mortality in World War II, going down with their vessels in both the Atlantic and Pacific fronts. Presidents Roosevelt, Truman, and Eisenhower issued proclamations praising the American merchant marines, stating frankly that the war effort would have failed without them. Yet, almost forty years after the war, they had not received the recognition that mattered most to them: U.S. Veterans status.

The Personal Service Unit helped its clients organize, kept generating letters to elected officials, and even obtained some support from state legislators urging the Congress to act. Meanwhile, the unions in their own lobby efforts presented the case for veteran status in the more formal and higher level policy departments and military secretariats actually responsible for making the decision. It was argued that while it was true that merchant seafarers were paid civilians who had not directly participated in combat, other civilian groups much further removed from imminent danger had long ago been recognized and awarded such status. Finally, the effort prevailed, with recognition and status granted in the mid-1980s.

And so a long effort was initiated, of carefully documenting each and every seafarer who actually sailed for at least 90 days during the period of conflict (1941—1946). This meant documenting service which had taken place 40 years earlier. To our delight and surprise, more than half our clients had actually saved all their discharges throughout their entire careers. We helped each of these seafarers fill out the appropriate forms and attached copies of the documentation. Within a month or two, honorable discharges and veterans status designations began returning to each seafarer who applied. Over these many years though, many seafarers had lost their discharges and all evidence that they had sailed during this period. In these cases, many strategies had to be employed. It was a shot in the dark at best. The Coast Guard's own records had been destroyed in a fire at the Federal Depository. We learned from the U.S. Maritime Administration and War Shipping

Administration records that the logs of vessels participating in the war had been dispersed to various National Archive Record Depositories around the country. From the seafarer's memory of where he sailed from, we could make an educated guess as to what Archive branch to contact. They considerately agreed to waive fees for such searches and were often able to locate and send us crew lists with our client's name documenting that he sailed on a ship registered with the War Shipping Administration during the time in question. It was an exciting time to work with these men in this grand pursuit, as every time a door would close we would find our way to another we could unlock. Veterans Status allowed access to the Veterans Administration health system, which was not insignificant, because in 1981 the federal government had dismantled the United States Public Service hospital and clinic system. Yet it was never about actual benefits; it was about long overdue recognition for contributing to our nation at great cost in a dark hour. It meant a great deal that service be honored. This was brought home to me again years later. I was in the Battery Park Water Front for the dedication of a memorial to World War II seafarers. The memorial was set out in the choppy tidal waters and depicted a seafarer on a raft reaching into the ocean to a partially submerged shipmate about to go under. It was based on a photo taken during the war. In spite of the temporary rescue, I was told the seafarers represented there did not survive. The crowd assembled was made up of government, labor, industry, and church officials, along with many retired seafarers. They liked the memorial, gazing on it with a sense of triumph and moist eyes. Once again, I was glad to be there as a social worker who had played some small part in their lives and the telling of their story.

Assisting 2,000-3,000 seafarers through their discharge application process also had an unintended beneficial consequence. Most of them were retired by the mid 1980s, but the interviews gave us a chance to see how they were doing. Most seemed to be doing well enough, but there were a number who had not quite gotten used to the loss of work or were having difficulty stretching fixed income

dollars. By now we had a social worker on staff, Joan Barron, and later Fiona Lamb, who concentrated their efforts almost exclusively on retirees. They ran reminiscence groups, didactic focused senior health education groups, a women's group for female retirees, and support groups around aging and mental health. They also started a retirees club. In addition our Alcoholism Counselor, Carmine Guastella, organized three 12-Step meetings a week, two in English and one in Spanish, in which many retirees also participated. We were also able to align ourselves with Sailors Snug Harbor, which had a healthy two hundred year endowment to assist retired seafarers. As fewer and fewer seafarers sought admission to their residential retirement home, which had moved from Staten Island to rural North Carolina in the early 1980s, they began an initiative to assist seafarers in their own homes and communities. They became interested in financing one discrete element in a seafarer's life that could move income problems from being marginal to being manageable. This could be rent, a health care insurance premium, dental problems, utility bill, mortgage, etc. The NMU Personal Service Unit became their primary finder and intake provider for eligible candidates. Through the program many retired seafarers moved from life on the fringe to a sense that they could now live with some security and contentment. The best part was the real connection this benefit had to their life and work at sea.

The Occupation's Natural Healing and Helping Capacities

Any full relating of my time at the National Maritime Union and work with seafarers would not be complete without taking up one of our most consistent concerns, the various threats to the work itself. These concerns included chemical dependency, disability, and various mental health issues.

For seafarers who were otherwise in good health and who had successfully maneuvered themselves into the industry, the most persistent threat to work was the progressing illness of chemical dependency. There were many reasons why the maritime industry was a high risk setting for problem drinking. Two of the

most consistent factors that occupational literature associates with heavy alcohol use were both present in the seafaring workforce of the 1970s and 80s. Since the Union was under contract with multiple employers, there was inconsistent supervision. Dysfunctional seafarers could be passed from one employer to another. Some literature suggests that workers interested in supporting a long-term drinking pattern actually consciously or unconsciously seek such occupational settings. Also, fairly or unfairly, the maritime industry is almost universally associated with a culture of drinking. The unfortunate stereotype of the drunken sailor speaks for itself. Again, some research suggests that workers who value work settings with such a heritage and folklore will gravitate towards them. Many industries have similar high risk factors, some of which I have worked with as well. My own sense through the years was that the maritime industry was not better or worse in regard to this issue.

What became increasingly clear to me as I studied and reflected on the issue of chemical abuse and dependency in the seafaring community, was that while there were many seafarers falling victim to this illness, there were also a significant number in stable, long term recovery. Here I had the advantage of collaborating for many years with a seafarer who was both an alcoholism counselor, and who was in recovery himself. He introduced me to a steady stream of seamen, both active and retired, who had maintained and grown in quality sobriety over extended periods. It dawned on me that they could be a great resource for both intervention and support with seafarers still actively and destructively drinking. Of course, these seamen were already doing this as part of their own 12-step activity and traditions, but I began to look for ways to formalize it and implement it as a programmatic strength for identification, intervention, and support. The long standing conventional wisdom in the Employee Assistance field had identified supervisory intervention applying the coercive force of constructive confrontation as the most promising strategy in identifying and assisting workers with performance issues. While some

of this applied to the maritime industry, the nature of work in this setting would not allow this to be the central strategy. I knew that seafarers were strongly and deeply invested in each other for reasons of solidarity, camaraderie, and practical safety. And so, in chemical dependency and beyond, we moved toward the other side of the continuum from supervisory intervention: peer concern and the occupationally appropriate ways to express it.

Thus, we began to conceive and plan a Peer Training Initiative; the details of which are covered in much more depth elsewhere (Molloy, 1986, 1989). It combined features of didactic presentations and group exploration. Three sessions, each a day long, took up chemical dependency, stress and mental health at sea and the helping traditions of the seafaring community. It combined elements of planning, implementing and evaluation. Participants were selected through a screening instrument that aimed at measuring interest and enthusiasm for the project. We also tried to have participants represent diversity along racial, ethnic, gender and job responsibility divisions (deck, engine and steward department employment).

In brief, it quickly became evident to all of us that what we were trying to do was to create a strong alliance and productive bond between the formal helping program (the professional helpers) and the potentially hundreds of seafarers with a high sense of shipmateship (the nature helpers). Could it work? Or could formalizing the relationship impede it in some way?

I had developed a brief curriculum to work through with the Peer Committee participants around a variety of alcohol, drug, and mental health topics. The group found this engaging, but it soon became clear they had a great deal to teach me. What was most intriguing was how working people watch out for and reach out to one another. Many had embraced and cultivated some helping strategies and incorporated them deeply into their work persona. Jack, a white seaman in recovery, would watch out for shipmates when ashore. He knew when drinking was going out of control and checked to see if that person was leaving money around, losing his wallet, or

being cheated and price gouged. He would make sure the seafarer got back to his ship. The next day he would approach him while he was still a bit hung-over. He would return lost money and possessions to his shipmate and gently suggest that putting yourself in such compromising situations should be looked at to determine if drinking was moving from recreation to danger. The seafarer, relieved at getting back crucial identification and money, was usually ready to take a look at himself. If daring returned, at least a seed was planted.

Santiago was a Hispanic seafarer also in recovery. He had made it a habit to volunteer to take food trays to an ill or ailing shipmate's room when he was too sick to get to the ship's mess hall. Frequently, a shipmate's feeling-out-of-sorts had to do with a rough night before or even closet drinking, an absolute prohibition aboard vessels. Again, it was a vulnerable moment touched by an act of concern. Alex, a senior seafarer of Slavic background who was well respected and skilled, now had many years of recovery. He was looked up to by many who had seen him rise, fall, and rise again in the industry. He told the Committee his passion was to help shipmates see that chemical dependency was a descending elevator stopping at many floors steadily downward. He wanted to create a work setting where, on every floor down, someone was there to suggest you could get off. The Peer Committee group was roughly divided evenly between those who had had episodes of problem drinking and those who had not. The non-chemically dependent, though, had a new appreciation of the progressive nature of alcoholism. They seemed to intuitively grasp Santiago's sense that drinking moved for many seafarers from a celebratory agent to expand camaraderie, to a medication agent to treat disappointment, to the very air one needed to breathe.

When the Peer Committee turned its attention to mental health concerns, the plots of the stories changed, but the themes remained very much the same. Carol sailed as a Chief Steward, with the responsibility of planning and overseeing the preparation of every meal throughout a vessel's voyage; complicated by the fact that a ship is in 24-

hour operational status. The job requires culinary knowledge, heavy lifting, and being highly organized. She was valued highly in both the union and industry, and had the reputation of consistently providing both tasty and healthy meals. She also took pains to be sensitive to ethnic and cultural diversity, attempting to accommodate a wide range of food preferences and to make everyone feel at home. She made it a habit of sitting down with shipmates in the mess hall after they read their mail from home. She knew from years at sea that it could be a tough moment. An ill parent or spouse, a truant child, a threatening family crisis, etc., could leave a person with a sense of powerlessness while heading for the middle of the ocean. She wanted to be supportive and, if desirable, help devise a strategy for getting through it. She was also in a good position to help mediate conflicts when seafarers had a misunderstanding. Harry, who sailed as a Deck Engine Mechanic, had suffered from bouts of anxiety and depression for which he had gotten help and was now feeling better. He frequently saw similar symptoms in others, especially on long, tedious voyages. George would try to put such a shipmate at ease, suggesting that such feelings do change, and that if they linger he should talk to someone about it at the Union's Personal Service Unit or at the Public Health Hospital. Miguel sailed as an Able-Bodied seaman and he was particularly sensitive to the one person on a vessel or voyage who seemed to be scapegoated for everything that went wrong. He was such a person once, and he remembered feeling terrible about it. He did not like to see someone else in that position, and would reach out to the individual and try to get others off that shipmate's back.

In taking up the helping traditions within the maritime community, the Committee confirmed what I was virtually assured was the case. Many of the Personal Service Unit referrals already came from these and other natural, informal helpers. The link I was formalizing was already there, but certainly could be cultivated further. This was best expressed by a young, black seafarer from Brooklyn, who said that he already considered himself a Personal Service Unit scout trying

to bring us to those we might be able to help, or bring them to us. The relationship between the natural and professional helpers in the NMU was based on deep, mutual trust. The group felt it had actually been informally operational for quite some time. Nothing would be lost and much gained by deliberately cultivating and organizing program activity around this occupational strength.

The Loss of Work

The final issue I want to raise in these reflections on practice in this unique occupational community is that of serious, long term disability. Seafaring is a dangerous and demanding occupation where serious injury or illness precludes the possibility of work. There is no such thing as reduced or light duty aboard a ship. Seafarers need to be physically strong, mentally alert, and perform demanding job tasks while being tossed about on the high seas. They also need to be healthy. They can be thousands of miles and many days away from medical care. In serious cases of disability, social work intervention comes down to managing what has been lost, not what one can be helped to gain or regain. At times, I could help a seafarer toward a career change. The Personal Service Unit also got better and better in its effort to protect income. We were able to help clients gather and present their evidence to support disability pension awards from the Union's Benefit Plan and from Social Security Disability Insurance. Often we did this in collaboration with the Union's Medical and Legal Department. Still, it came down to managing loss, not gain. In addition, there was the real clinical dilemma of helping clients dramatically present their limits to others while encouraging them to embrace and articulate their strengths to themselves. Of course it was gratifying to help such men and women see that economic disaster need not follow, but an overwhelming sense that only a shadow of their former selves remained. Retirees faced this sense of loss too, but they left on their own terms, often with a sense of triumph and accomplishment. It was different to be forced to retire due to disability. I never resolved this issue beyond just being there to note and support my clients in the real grief of loss of

work before one was ready to throw down the anchor.

This dilemma came to mind whenever I think back to Roberto, a diabetic, disabled, Honduran seafarer in his early 60s who had been turned down for Social Security Disability. He and his wife were struggling to make it on just his union pension plus part-time work as a night guard, which he was having increasing difficulty performing and which I felt hardly met the substantial gainful employment capacity of the statute. His diabetes had advanced to early renal failure and had attacked his legs so that he needed to walk with a cane. The cane was the major assault to his sense of self, perhaps because he saw himself as having lost his sea legs. Working with him around why he did not need to see himself in this way, I was taken aback at a disability hearing when a vocational rehab expert suggested he could continue to be a night guard. I had to decide between letting the suggestion stand, or asserting that I did not feel a man with a cane would scare away too many intruders. My client looked at me with a smile to see which way I would go. We both knew he needed income to survive. I reluctantly chose to re-assert his disability, with the issue of his loss of sea legs to be dealt with between the two of us at a later time.

Conclusion

As I bring this narrative to a close, an intriguing and legitimate question arises. Do the five themes I have extracted from practice stand up over time, or were they conditioned by and locked into that unique time and place, the seafaring occupational community in the last three decades of the 20th century?

My first thought is that social work was an almost perfect match with this world, as a profession well suited to serve the needs of this special population. Its environmental, situational perspective, plus its commitment to match strengths with needs in all program planning, was exactly what membership organizations of working people require. It was a natural alliance, and it worked well in both New York and New Orleans for a long time.

As far as the first theme, appreciating the socio-economic bottom line as a point of

access, I still contend that is a valid concern and principle for social work to address. True, my clients emerged from the universal socio-economic catastrophe of the Great Depression and World War, but many potential social work clients are struggling to emerge from their own particular worlds of horrors and apprehensions. Today, immigrants, those caught in the present economic downturn, and those without healthcare are just a few populations coming to mind. They all have much to deal with, but their hierarchy of need dictates that their bottom line must be addressed first for healing to commence.

The occupational welfare system is as important now as it was then. As our nation still struggles with its backward health care financing system, it is the absolute foundation of the delivery of almost all health, mental health, and behavioral health care in the United States. It appears it will remain so for some time. Toward the end of my time at the NMU, I was able to influence the Union's Benefit Plan to adopt all features, in the spirit and letter of the law, of the Mental Health Parity Act. As a private Benefit Plan, there was some wiggle room, which I helped convince the Trustees not to take. The Personal Service Unit was also assigned the utilization review function for all mental health and behavioral health claims submitted to the Benefit Plan across the country. It would seem that helping clients negotiate this system is now more critical than ever in days of managed care, increased deductibles, co-payments, and worker contributions. Affordability, accessibility, and exclusions are even bigger issues now than they were then.

Identifying with a cause or movement (I would think) is a diminished concern today. In maritime work life and in all work in general, the mindset has shifted from poetry to technology. The modern seafarer goes on board a vessel with laptop and manuals, after hours of training on simulators and consoles. He or she has had long training and mastered a sophisticated set of skills and is paid adequately for a competence in demand. Of course, the size of the crews and the industry have been dramatically reduced, making strong technical capacities even more necessary.

There is still a place for social work here, but a better model would be a worker who had industry based skills along with social work skills. More technical competence would be required to marry both worlds together successfully now. Education and re-training are so intermingled with human service in the world of work today that a helping professional in the workplace must know both how to motivate workers and also have a strong hold on the inner workings and competencies the workplace demands.

Identifying and cultivating natural helping capacities in work organizations and membership groups has been addressed to some degree in network theory and self-help literature. However, I think it has been underappreciated and utilized as an organizational program strategy. My work with Peer Committees at the NMU was exploratory, but it did offer tentative promise. I had hoped it would be more utilized across the world of work. Work life, of course, dramatically changed, moving toward fluidity instead of the stability that characterized the 1970s and 80s. I still believe that cultivating natural help is a viable strategy in stable work communities, and is well worth further exploration.

Finally, the importance of work itself has been well noted in social work literature as well as in other professions. Within social work literature on work and disability, the publications stemming from research and study done by Sheila Akabas and Paul Kurzman are particularly noteworthy and helpful in this area. I would single out for further consideration the dilemma of helping clients forcefully document their disability on the one hand, and re-establish a sense of wholeness on the other hand. As the earlier example of my work with Roberto shows, this is not an easy task and, to my knowledge, not sufficiently attended to.

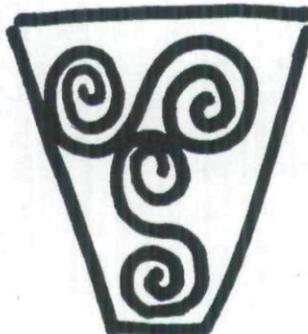
Let me end by returning to my friend Jim. We put him to final rest on a sunny, cold, breezy, February day, 10 years into the new millennium. Knowing him, he would encourage all to look forward. While gazing over the horizon though, he would insist just as strongly to never forget. He wanted people to honor their past and the struggle to get to their goals.

In these reflections I have tried to honor what he and others did and stood for. I have tried to incorporate their legacy into my own sense of practice: to look ahead while valuing what you have passed through. It is good advice for life and key to a lifelong reflection on practice, which always rests on an ongoing capacity for reconfiguration.

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