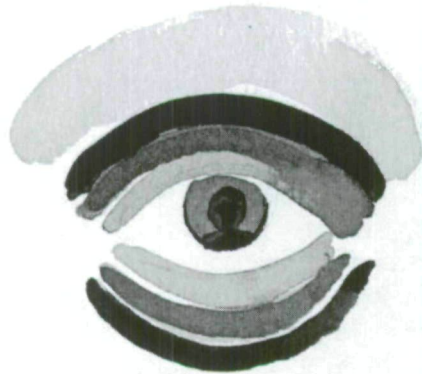


THERE'S A RAINBOW UNDERNEATH: A REFLECTION ON HOPE

Staci Jensen-Hart, M.S.W., Idaho State University

In the midst of professional and personal stress, we may question why we have chosen to become a professional helper. In this narrative, the author reflects on a lesson learned from a seven-year-old child. Lessons imparted by clients can open doors to hope and possibility, and rejuvenate professional careers.



"In your own experience, what is the success rate for your clients?" The pointed question hovered in the suddenly still classroom. Twelve senior social work practicum students waited for my response.

I found myself stammering, searching my brain for figures, and then explaining to the students that when I was in graduate school (albeit two decades past) the "third" adage was the percentage often referred to: a third get better, a third stay the same, a third get worse. Before I could get to the day's more promising research on evidence-based interventions, the student intent on having *his* question answered, stopped me. "No, I mean, you personally. . . in your own experience."

I then listened more carefully to his question, the need behind his words, his longing for reassurance after being exposed to a horrible entry week of seeing client pain and being unable to do anything but administer a Band-Aid to a gaping wound. His question was really, "Give me hope. . . why should I even think about entering this field?" He wasn't looking for theory or evidence from research-based studies. He was looking for certainty,

for confirmation of his chosen field, for something that at times in my own career as a social worker, I could not have honestly given.

In light of his deeper question, I realized the flimsiness of the "third" adage, or of even citing current evidence-based research. Responding with an academic statement, "It depends on how you define success," would simply be a delay. I often wondered myself how to define success. Is it only when our clients meet their goals and no longer need our services? *Or* is it that glimpse of an "aha" moment when we know something has shifted internally? As helping professionals, what fuels our desire to work in a field fraught with hurt, pain, and trauma? We understand that success is pivotal in serving as a motivator and instilling hope. But how do we impart hope to the hopeless when we ourselves are not certain of success?

I stumbled through the class discussion and perhaps relayed some helpful information. However, back in my office, the student's question continued to gnaw at me. How do *I* determine success? I have spent my life career as a social worker—has it been worth it? Have I really made the difference reflective of my dreams when entering the field at age 21—bright, eager, hopeful?

I looked at the framed finger painting hanging on my office wall. To a casual observer, the frantic swirl of raging black, tinged with deep purple, may appear to be a desperate mess. However, when I viewed this painting in light of my questions, I remembered Jess, the slight feisty seven-year-old who had profound insight.

When I met Jess, I teetered on burnout. I had been working in the social work field for 17 years. My working days were spent primarily with people experiencing struggles in their lives. I had witnessed extremes of the human condition: personal triumphs against impossible odds and spiraling falls that clipped everyone standing on the sidelines. My home life was stressful to say the least. My mother was seriously ill with heart problems. My son struggled with acute episodes of asthma to the degree that we had scheduled a ten-day hospital assessment in hopes of finding answers. Working part-time as a school social worker in the district's second-largest elementary school meant that, in reality, I put in full-time effort and adrenalin in exchange for part-time payment, heart palpitations, breathing problems, and stomach upset. My purpose in working part-time in order to have energy for my own two elementary-age children was defeated. I was exhausted and irritable. I seriously contemplated leaving the field of social work and applying to be a checker at a big-box store.

And then Jess came to school.

Jess was referred to me by his classroom teacher. Actually, "referred" does not describe the panicked call that came from the well-seasoned, first-grade teacher. Mrs. C. alerted the office that help was needed immediately. The secretary punched my extension and notified me of the crisis. By the time I arrived, Jess, wild with rage, had already scattered papers and tipped over a desk. Mrs. C. and I managed to get him out of the room while the class of first graders stared wide-eyed in fright. Once in my office, Jess finally exhausted his agitation. Emergency meetings for the multidisciplinary team were called, Jess's mother made an appearance, preliminary behavioral plans were drafted, and an experienced aide was hired. With appropriate supports in place, I was able to focus on my role of counseling Jess.

Initial sessions centered on gathering data through observation, play assessment, and listening. Jess's play was haphazard. He tossed aside toys which did not interest him and became easily frustrated with games requiring even a modest amount of

concentration. However, he was particularly creative and gravitated toward the art materials.

Jess often chattered as he played. His words gave clues that gradually congealed to form a picture of his daily life. "Mom sleeps a lot. She yells at us if we wake her up." "My brother is in *big* trouble again." "We got kicked out of our house." "I watched TV all night." "I didn't have breakfast." "My uncle is kind of scary."

Jess's issues were all too horrifyingly common to an experienced school social worker: probable fetal drug effects, physical abuse, neglect, suspected sexual abuse, chaotic home environment with frequent moves, bouts of homelessness, and exposure to strangers wandering in and out. Not that we, as helping professionals, become calloused in the sense of hardened, but perhaps calloused as in a thickening, a toughening of the skin. Jess, however, managed to seep under my coarsened sheath. How could I hope to make a difference in my measly two hours a week with him when the other 166 hours a week, he lived with chaos, confusion, fear, and survival-mode hypervigilance?

Then Jess painted.

Several weeks into our work together, Jess spotted the paints high on my shelves. I reached for the bottles reluctantly, questioning my own motivation for the inevitable clean-up. Digging a stained paint shirt from my supply, I handed it to him. Jess ignored my offer. He touched each of the colors—red, blue, yellow, green, purple, brown, white and black—as I spread the waxy, freezer paper on the table. Together we opened the bottles. Jess did not ask for a brush like some children do, children who don't like touching the messiness. Instead, he asked for a pencil.

Gripping the yellow No. 2 pencil, Jess made wispy curving marks on the rectangular sheet of paper. He paused briefly, keeping his eyes on the faint marks before carefully laying down the pencil. Shifting his focus, Jess attacked the paint. He squeezed gushes of red, blue, black, and purple paint from the bottles. Fingers spread wide, palms open and flat, Jess furiously swirled paint on paper with purposeful vengeance.

In silence, I witnessed Jess's work. Expendng a final burst of energy onto the paper, Jess suddenly stopped. He stared at the now blackish, purple goo for a long moment. Spent, he raised his head, his brown eyes gazing intently at me. His lisp momentarily gone, his words profound, wisdom cutting through chaos to answer my own questions, "Remember, there's a rainbow underneath."

And that is why I keep Jess's painting on my wall. I may not be able to quote statistics of therapeutic success rates off the top of my head, but I can tell my students that the messiness that comes with a field chosen by compassion is worth it—there is a rainbow underneath. After all, I received this piece of wisdom from a very reliable source.

Staci Jensen-Hart, M.S.W, is an Assistant Professor of Social Work at the Idaho State University Department of Sociology, Social Work and Criminal Justice. Comments regarding this article can be sent to: hartstac@isu.edu.

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