

"I WAS IN FOSTER CARE, TOO." ONE SOCIAL WORKER'S JOURNEY FROM *PROMISE* TO *PRACTICE*

J. Jay Miller, MSW, Social Service Clinician

This narrative describes one social worker's journey through the child welfare system and the use of personal disclosure in practice context. First, the author describes how he came to be in foster care and the experiences that led to the "promise" of being a social worker. Next, the author discusses the fulfillment of this promise and the beginning of his work in Child Protective Services. Finally, this narrative explores the positive and negative aspects of personal disclosure in social work practice.

Currently, approximately 510,000 children are in foster care (National Resource Center for Family-Centered Practice and Permanency Planning, 2008), all with stories as unique as mine, yet with similarities. Oftentimes I tell my story, and I can be heard speaking the words, "I was in foster care, too." I speak them every time I get a chance. I speak them to the children for whom I work and the professionals with whom I work. I use these words in earnest attempts to comfort others and, in a peculiar way, to comfort and compel myself. These words have therapeutic meaning. They give me hope that my practice decisions are making a positive impact on others. I do not ignore my past; I embrace my time in foster care and claim it as part of my identity, in hopes that others will do the same. Hear my journey, even as it continues: "*I was in foster care, too.*"

Birth of a Social Worker

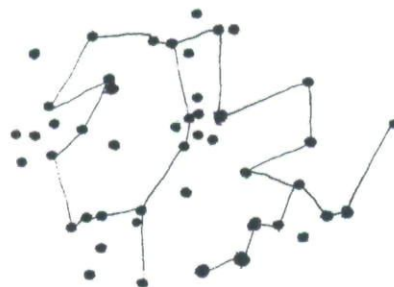
While my employment in its current human service context began only five years ago, my journey as a social worker began in 1981, the year of my birth. I was born in a small town in south-central Kentucky. The stigma of a "forbidden relationship" between my black father and my white mother brought a multitude of tensions. Facing a family with racist values and with limited other options, my mother decided to place me for adoption.

I do not know much about this early period in my life. As an adult, I learned that I spent a short time with a potential adoptive family in Nashville, Tennessee. To this day, I have not met any of my maternal relatives face to face; however, a few years ago, I had the chance to communicate with my maternal aunt. This opportunity came through a haphazard meeting between my aunt and one of my classmates. This classmate, a very dear friend, is from the small town where I was born. During this meeting, my aunt shared stories of how she and my mother drove to Nashville for visits. As I understand it, before the adoption was finalized, my mother had a change of heart. And, as my father now describes it, she "wanted you back." During one of these routine visits, my mother took me from the prospective adoptive home. This removal was not planned or arranged, yet my parents felt it was necessary. My mother, father, and I relocated.

My mother and father married shortly after the move; my two younger sisters were born from this marriage. I remember spending time with my mother and father. We often took family vacations and both of my parents supported our typical children's activities. But, contrary to outward appearances, my life at home was in turmoil. My father had violent mood swings and took the frustrations of life out on my mother. I began to think that domestic violence was part of a "normal

family." I vividly recall the helplessness I felt as a child because of these countless incidents and felt that I should have been able to do more; yet, I found myself powerless to stop the abuse perpetrated against my mother. I distinctly remember making plans to harm my father so that he could no longer hurt my mother.

When I was five or six years old, my sisters, mother, and I went into hiding at a secluded domestic violence shelter. My mother made the stay at the shelter sound more like a fun family vacation than the actuality. The time we spent there was hellish. Few kids were at the shelter and none of them were my age. As I recall, we never left the shelter; the days were extremely monotonous. However, my mother always managed to keep her positive attitude and never showed that our situation bothered her. She was always strong in that way. While her world seemed to be crumbling around her, she managed to hold things together for us. Eventually, my father convinced my mother that things had changed. We returned home. Things did not change. The beatings continued, but my mother stayed. In 1989, my mother died. Years earlier, we had been involved in a very bad car accident causing her a serious head injury. As a result, she began to experience epileptic seizures. One night while my mother and I were asleep on the living room couch, she had a seizure and passed away. I did not wake up. I never had a chance to say goodbye or tell her that I loved her. I was eight years old.



Journey into the "System:" Promises Made

This event was the end of my family as I knew it. Soon after my mother died, my father succumbed to a substance abuse problem that

had plagued him for some time. The drugs that he had been using did not numb the pain of my mother's passing. He became addicted to crack cocaine.

Thus, my journey in the "system" began. From ages seven to nine, I shared time living with a number of relatives and family friends; however, most of my time was spent with my paternal grandmother. Although those were mostly happy times in my life, those years were unstable. I never knew what was next. Would I be staying with my father? And if so, would I be left to care for my younger sisters? As I grew older, I started to hang with an "in," yet dismally misguided, crowd. I began to get into more and more trouble.

On one of the days that I happened to actually make it to school, I had an unexpected visit from a social worker from our local social service agency. The worker showed up during one of the many, albeit short, periods when I had moved back to live with my father. This social worker visit was a critical incident in my journey. I was called into the counselor's office, a common occurrence given my absences from and behavioral tendencies in the classroom. Entering this familiar office, I immediately noticed an unfamiliar young woman sitting in the corner of the office. She sat at a table with a small manila file folder in front her. Shuffling through papers, she began to speak as if she already knew me.

"How are you, Justin?" she asked. "Good," I replied. I asked her why she wanted to speak with me. Introducing herself as a social worker, she told me that she was there to "check on my well-being." As she and I began to stumble through very uncomfortable questions about my living conditions, I remember feeling overwhelmed with so much that I wanted to tell her.

I wanted to tell her about the times when I sat at home scared and immobilized because I did not know where my father was or when he would return. I wanted to tell her about my father's angry mood swings that often precipitated violent behaviors, mostly directed at me. I wanted to tell her the stories of being shuffled between family members and friends and not knowing where I would stay from night to night. I wanted to tell her of the sacrifices

that my grandmother made in order to care for my sisters and me. I wanted to tell her about my struggles in coping with my mother's death.

I wanted to tell her. But I couldn't. Not because I didn't want to, but because I didn't know how. The meeting with this social worker could not have lasted more than ten minutes, and then she was gone. I remember most vividly my feelings of hopelessness and helplessness as she walked out the door. I remember thinking that she must not really care. I remember thinking that I was a bother to her because she had much more important things to do than talk to me.

At that moment I made a promise to myself. I did not understand exactly what a social worker was, or even what one did. However, I did know that they helped people, and in this case, a child. I told myself that I wanted a job like that. I promised myself that I would do everything in my power to get one. Funny how one can make life-altering decisions at eight or nine years old; but I did. I promised myself that I would always try to hear what children had to say, both spoken and unspoken. I promised that I would help children in situations like mine. I promised that I would become a social worker.

Soon after the social worker's visit, I had several stints in out-of-home care: first with family friends; then, in a state foster home. My sisters remained in the care of my grandmother. But, by the time I was 12, my delinquent behaviors, coupled with the resentment that I felt for my father, meant that I was far beyond my grandmother's control. I ran away several times during this period, mostly staying with various friends. This way of living lasted until I was about 14 years old.

A Family

Fortunately for my sisters and me, my paternal biological aunt and her husband, who lived in Germany at the time, heard about our situation. They decided to adopt me and my sisters, bringing us to live with them and their two small children. To this day, I cannot find the words to express the gratitude that I feel towards them for taking us into their home and hearts. Honestly, I had almost given up

hope that anything good would come from my life. But they had not given up, and as I soon learned, they would not give up. It just wasn't in their character.

Aside from the obvious culture shock of moving to Europe, the transition into what I referred to then as a "real" family was extremely challenging. I remember starting at the new school as a gregarious teen. I excelled in athletics and my grades were decent. I found it very easy to make friends; yet I struggled with acclimating to the environment at home. For the first time in years, my life was stable. I had two caregivers who provided for the needs of my sisters and me. I was used to making all of the decisions, and this parental role was the source of many problems in the home. I was used to having all the power, which was an aspect that I was not willing to give up easily.

Soon after I enrolled in school, both of my "new" parents attended one of my sporting events. While it was obvious to others that they were both black, it was equally obvious that I was not. On the following school day, I was bombarded with questions like "Who were those people?" I wanted to tell the story, but it was complicated and difficult to explain. It seemed that the more questions I answered, the more questions they asked. When the inquiries became too much, I found it much easier to explain away the circumstances of my life by simply saying, "*By the way, I was in foster care too!*"

While I flourished in athletics, my classroom conduct left much to be desired. I often found myself in all sorts of trouble. At the beginning of my junior year, I was expelled for brandishing a weapon during a fight. To me, this expulsion seemed an opportune time for my "new" parents to send me back to the states. I expected them to give up; but they didn't. With their unwavering encouragement, and a few correspondence courses, I was able to graduate from high school with my classmates in 1999.

Promises Kept

After high school I attended college in Kentucky on an athletic scholarship. After my first two semesters, I sat down with my coach

to discuss selecting a course of study. I thought back to my childhood experience with the social worker in the corner of the office asking uncaring and awkward questions. I remembered the promise that I had made to myself.

I wanted to be a social worker. I wanted to help people the way that others had helped me. I wanted to talk to children about their situations. I wanted to listen to their stories of abuse, neglect, abilities, and dreams. I wanted to share with them my story of adversity and promise as a child. I wanted to instill hope in them and let them know that anything is possible. And if need be, I could tell them: "*I was in foster care too!*"

For the next three-and-a-half years I studied the various social work theories and practice models that are standard for many undergraduate programs. After graduation, I set on a personal quest to make a difference in the profession. This pursuit led me to accept a position with Child Protective Services. After training, I was promptly put into a position as an investigator. Among myriad duties and tasks, the primary focus of my work was to investigate allegations of abuse and neglect directed towards children.

Soon after starting this position, I received a rather serious referral that ultimately led to the removal of a child. I remember going to get the child from a local emergency shelter, attempting to explain to this child why he was being taken into foster care, and, furthermore, explaining what would happen after he was in foster care. I attempted to explain a "broken" system that I didn't fully understand myself. As I sat with the child and he began to cry, I struggled to console him. As I stuttered and stumbled over my own words, I considered my own experiences. As we sat together and talked more and more, we found common ground in a declaration that I had used so many times. I simply told him: "*I was in foster care, too.*"

The more I told my story, the easier it became to tell. Time after time, I recalled the events that led me to social work. I found my history often gave me a unique credibility, not only with the children, but with professionals as well. Soon after my first experience in

placing a child in out-of-home care, I attended a treatment team meeting related to another teenager with whom I had worked. This meeting was held to discuss the teen's progress and explore options for future treatment plans. However, the overall attitude of the team yielded little hope that this teen, in foster care at the time, would do "well." With fervent anger and empathy, I stood in place of and for this child. I advocated, trying to think of the words that he would use to implore the team members not to give up on him. During this meeting, one of the treatment directors questioned how I knew so much since I was so new to my job. I calmly stood up, looked squarely into his eyes, and made a statement that I was all too comfortable with: "*Because...I was in foster care too!*"

Personal Experiences and Practice Situations: Intersections and Boundaries

My personal experiences, particularly the time I spent in foster care, have an immensely positive impact on my professional practice. When inordinate importance is placed on more traditional, objective, forms of education, we risk losing the value of personal experience. I choose to look at my experiences not as a hindrance, but as an asset. These experiences give me a unique ability to truly empathize with the situations that I encounter in practice on a daily basis. Further, they offer another perspective to colleagues who may or may not have had similar experiences.

Personal experiences must be used as a discretionary tool for practice, not a directive blueprint. Recognizing the importance of personal experiences and using them to inform and impact practice is crucial. Even in early studies, the disclosure and sharing of personal thoughts and feelings to clients were recognized as important practice skills (Shulman, 1978). However, as Fook and Askeland (2007) assert, it is equally important to recognize the power in disclosing these experiences, which can have both a negative and a positive influence. I'm careful not to liken my experience to any other: that can be dangerous and disempowering. I choose to look at every situation differently. Likewise, I only

disclose personal experiences when I think that they can be of benefit to my audience, whether client or colleague. Every situation and outcome will be unique to the individuals involved, and should be treated as such. My personal experience informs and affects my practice; my practice knowledge helps me use these experiences most effectively.

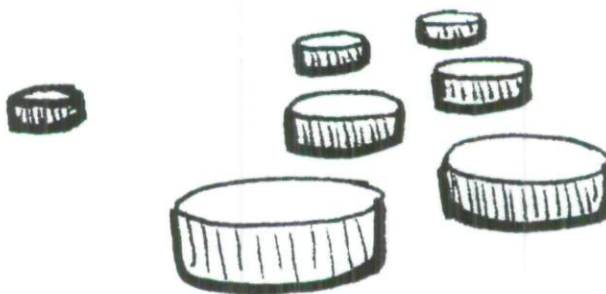
In closing, I hope that my narrative can inspire others to share their own. Personal experiences are important and can have a positive impact in any practice situation, no matter the context (Cain, 1996). My own experiences have had tremendous significance on the work that I do. These experiences are motivating: they let me know that in all circumstances, hope can be found. So, when my days are long and I feel fatigued; when I think I cannot make another phone call, or conduct another home visit; when I get frustrated by the bureaucracy of working in a governmental agency; and when the challenges of my duties began to take a toll, I stop, I sit back, and I remember..... "I was in foster care too."

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J. Jay Miller, MSW, CSW, is a social worker with the Kentucky Cabinet for Health and Family Services. Comments regarding this article can be sent to:

Jaymiller45@hotmail.com



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