

# AN ETHICAL JOURNEY: DISCOVERING SOCIAL WORK – AN EXAMINATION OF MY HELPER ROLE

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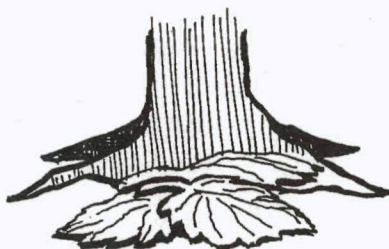
*The end of the author's graduate school experience was the beginning of his social work journey. This narrative describes his experiences working as a mental health crisis worker before returning to school for M.S.W. training, and his realization of how the NASW Code of Ethics is applied to practice.*

In the aftermath of comprehensives, a dissertation defense, and graduation, being finished with a Ph.D. was surreal. Earning another graduate degree was remote, especially in another field. My goal was to be a professor of sociology. The long work days with unpredictable schedules were now in my past. However, where past and present meet, the reality of one's journey becomes the future. My past was about to become my future. Gaps between real and ideal became my motivation for self rediscovery. In the months that followed my graduation, desire to be a professor of sociology was suppressed by meager academic openings. Reality took hold as the inner social worker stepped forward. This journey would take me down a curious path.

In late July, after a storm of job interviews and rejections, I accepted a position providing mental health services in the rural Northwest. It was a relief to be employed, yet unsettling not to be in academics. This would be the beginning of a hiatus from my intended career as a sociologist to practicing social service work and learning the structures of helping. The helping self would not be silenced as my journey led me through a year of social service work.

My days of academia seemed years away on Monday, my first day as a crisis worker. Fall marked a dramatic change in the color of the foliage. I would also change my

colors over the next year and my perception of what it meant to be an academician. I had embarked on a journey in a foreign world, ripe for new challenges but with no idea of how I would be tested. During my initial job interview, I was told that the position would involve mental health crisis work inside the county jail, crisis counseling in the field and in the office, and civil commitment investigations. With confidence in my abilities to master new tasks, I enthusiastically set out to conquer this foreign world of social services with individuals with mental illnesses.



Training began with the customary rituals: employee orientations, introductions to the office staff, review of policy manuals, sitting in on staff meetings, familiarization with community resources, reviewing cases, and finally meeting clients. My graduate training in sociology coupled with several social service jobs provided a foundation to build upon for professional helping. My work with families as a reunification worker, with juveniles as a group home worker, and with institutionalized



people with developmental disabilities as a quality assurance agent for the state, along with my own immersion in bureaucracy as a graduate student, had provided a broad experiential practice base. The colors of fall were beginning to show as my helping skills were emerging. Training concluded quickly as two Mondays had come and gone. Uninformed about the realities of helping in this role, but familiar with the procedures, I began.

The duties of the crisis worker included many rituals, responsibilities, and procedures. My job description was clear. The reality of being a crisis worker reflected personal beliefs, values, ethics, and norms of how to respond to those in need. I was provided with training on the state law of commitment to psychiatric institutions. Two licensed counselors provided me with helpful information on psychological assessments. Collaborating with a variety of professionals at the agency allowed me to view a range of professional behaviors. I found, though, that instead of these individuals being a source of explanation for my questions about how to help others, they only added to the enigma of how to respond to those in need of assistance.

My state certifications came after several months of probation, a request to the state from the director of the agency, and approval from the county commissioners. I now had authorization to perform my duties. Still, the job was unclear. The laws of commitment, definitions of persons with mental illness, and even how to determine who was at risk of self harm were all subjective matters. I felt both prepared and unprepared. I had mastered all the appropriate survival skills, job rituals (paperwork), and responsibilities (procedures). The rituals were not the crux of the job. The vagueness in my mind about the finer points would become a specter as I came to discover more about helping. What I would later discover, while obtaining an M.S.W. degree, were the ethical principles of social work. The following are reflections of ethical

encounters which illuminate the principles involved in my transition from sociologist to social worker.

### **The Principles of Ethical Social Work: A Quest with Structure**

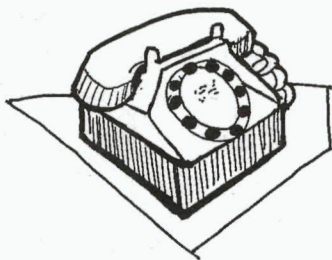
The role of a county crisis worker was clear: my primary role would be the investigation of individuals who were deemed by family, by law enforcement, or by the community to be a danger to self or others. This would occur in multiple settings including, but not limited to, the community, county jail, courts systems, social service agencies, and a state psychiatric hospital. The mission was also clear. I would protect individuals from themselves. The state and county certification authorized me to carry out the agency's mission. But, clear skies precede storms. That fall I felt the chill of a conflict mounting. I had more questions than answers: How should I treat others? What is my role in helping? What is my personal mission? Should I be acting in strict accordance with the law, or was there a higher level of action of which I was unaware? Past, present, and future were colliding in a psychedelic blur of purpose and direction. It was to be my personal autumn, a search for an ethical structure not yet found in the principles of social work.

### **Service: How Should I Help Others?**

I would encounter the meaning of service many times on my journey of self discovery. The incongruence between beliefs, values, and the treatment of others was at the heart of my struggle. According to the NASW (1999) Code of Ethics, the "Social workers' primary goal is to help people in need and to address social problems...a social worker should elevate service to others above self interests" (p. 4). My job description listed five distinct roles for the crisis worker. Service did not appear on this list although it could be found in the state commitment laws, the county job description, and the agency's interpretation



of this role. But, these were the safeguards for the agency, the county, and the state. Rather than elevating service, these documents elevated the agency interest above all else. I felt that there should be more to service than the black and white print of a job description. My inability to formulate a clear understanding of service became a sort of colorful foliage that became a distraction in my efforts to help others.



Nowhere had the lack of service been so poignant as in my first case as a crisis worker. I had been asked to assess the mental health needs of an elderly woman. The elderly woman's children made the referral, stating that she had exhibited signs of depression, hostility, delusions, and an inability to care for herself. After several phone calls from the family, their frustration had grown with the lack of attention given to their case. I had been on the job for less than a week and had arranged a home visit along with my supervisor and an adult services representative. We would be meeting the woman and her two daughters. As we left the agency, my supervisor stated this will be "baptism by fire." Our meeting lasted approximately one hour in which few options were discussed. We were there to observe and assess the situation, not provide services. The following week a staffing of the case took place with my supervisor and other members of the crisis team. I was astounded to hear comments such as, "They're on their own," "It's not in my job description," "The behaviors do not warrant further actions," "That is not how we have done it in the past," and "We cannot do that here." As solutions

were offered, each met with its fate, a lack of service.

The resolution came with the woman being turned over to adult services and the daughters becoming her guardian. This was the real wake-up call, because in my mind this was not service. I had just witnessed service being lost in the system, caught between the gaps, and just short of meeting criteria. This was unacceptable. This was a case that was opened and closed with little more than a facade of service rendered. Haunted by the silence of the void in service, I began to question this system's values and priorities.

### **Clarification of the Concept of Injustice**

Fulfilling the role of a pre-commitment investigator began to breed dissonance within my transforming self. It was my task to investigate individuals who were alleged to be a danger to self or others or who were unable to provide for basic personal needs. The social work value of social justice demands challenging social injustice (NASW, 1999, p. 5). One of my first thoughts during a civil commitment hearing was that the rights of an individual are lost in the process. It was not a grand leap from academia to the reality of injustice, but it showed the great divide I was to cross. One side of the divide was the recognition of injustice and on the other side, resolution. In the service world, I was confronted by the realization that an individual's presentation of self will not always fulfill the criteria for commitment, but being powerless will. Textbook pictures of antiquated mental health procedures raced through my mind. Social injustice and inequality were concepts discussed at length in the academic world. But in the real world of commitment, these concepts were momentary reflections that disappeared under the weight of bureaucratic rules and procedures.

Lack of clarity surrounding the meaning of social justice became apparent to me following one of several commitment hearings



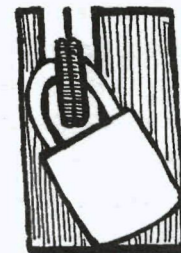
in which I was the investigator. As a pre-commitment investigator, I had prepared court documents and presented my "expert" testimony on an individual's danger to self or to others or inability to care for basic personal needs. I had exercised this authority within the letter of the law. As commitment proceedings came and went, the futility of my struggle over "the meaning of justice" became nebulous. If an individual were a threat to self or others or was unable to provide and was living in poverty, a commitment of up to six months would be the expected outcome. Was this justice? Legally justice was served. Individual freedom was a casualty. Society somehow had reached an odd equilibrium on the dichotomy between safety and freedom. I came to realize that issues of social status were the key, not some ideals about law, textbook justice, or equality.

Two cases accentuate this dichotomy. The first case was of a business owner and her private lawyer. On several occasions, she (the business owner) would have peculiar behaviors that would be reported to local authorities. She was observed wandering on the highway searching for aliens, standing in wheat fields waiting for space ships, and waving sticks and telling authorities that these were ray guns and "they better get back." This would lead to the involvement of the crisis team and a mental health hold. Her private lawyer would swoop in and gain her release. Thus, justice was served. The second case was of a pauper who walked the sidewalks of downtown and yelled at his hallucinations. The longstanding relationship between the community and this individual was one of commitment and release, a relationship that had placed the man in the state hospital, in jail, in drug and alcohol rehabilitation centers, or under the supervision of the county mental health. He was destitute, penniless, and powerless. His life was spent in and out of institutions. His commitments were routine and without incident. Commitment workers could

refine their beginning courtroom skills on this powerless individual. There was no justice for this individual. The man would continue to spend his life, far beyond this season, yelling at his hallucinations.

### **Respecting the Dignity and Worth of a Person**

My experiences working in the county jail provided ample opportunities to evaluate my respect for the inherent dignity and worth of individuals. As the social work value states, "Social workers treat each person in a caring and respectful fashion" and "Social workers seek to enhance clients' capacity and opportunity to change..." (pp. 5-6). Working for the county mental health agency required that I spend approximately 20 hours a week in the county jail providing crisis services. A new perspective on the meaning of the dignity and worth of individuals emerged from this time spent in the county jail.



The question of the dignity and worth of an individual is never more apparent than when freedom is taken away. Individuals suffering from mental illnesses who are incarcerated in a jail would often lose more than personal freedoms. They would often find their dignity and worth stripped away in the name of safety. The role of the mental health crisis worker in the jail is to make a recommendation to the jail staff concerning the inmate's safety based on an evaluation of mental health. If there were some questions of safety, the individual could be isolated, have all but the most minimal items taken from the cell, be deprived of clothing, and, as a last option, be



restrained to a bed. These individuals were literally in a fish bowl, observed by cameras and correctional officers every minute of the day. The loss of self became an indignity against the individual. Somehow, it was for his/her own physical safety. The individual and his/her psychological issues were not relevant to the process as long as everyone was physically safe. Dignity and worth were reduced to time served. I had become part of this cold equation.

### **Denial of Human Relationships**

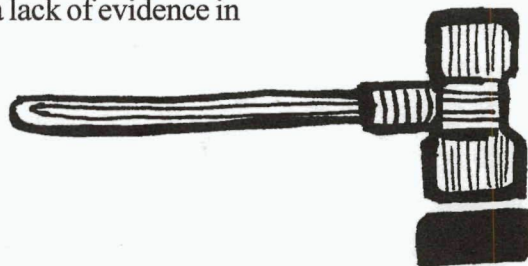
The questions of dignity and worth soon become interlinked with my growing understanding of the importance of human relationships. The NASW code of ethics states as an ethical principle, "Social workers recognize the central importance of human relationships" (p. 6). I would often spend time in the jail listening to the stories of inmates who craved human relationships. Inmate stories were compelling testimonies to the human need for relationships: a young man incarcerated for violation of a restraining order who carried a picture of his daughter, and was jailed for trying to see his little girl; an 18-year-old male charged with statutory rape of a 17-year-old, both with developmental disabilities, whose need for relationship was denied because of legal definitions and a need to protect those "at-risk" populations; a 30-year-old victim of domestic violence, who was isolated and estranged from her family, arrested for vandalizing a police cruiser after the officers failed to assist her; a young immigrant who had been jailed for trespassing in a train's empty box car who was looking for a means of transportation back to his family after laboring in the fields and orchards. During visiting hours, families and significant others connected to these inmates were seen huddled around small plexiglass windows struggling to maintain their relationships via a telephone receiver. To be jailed was to be denied contact, connection, and support. This was the

essence of punishment: the denial of relationship.

My job description did not call for establishing relationships. In fact, it was discouraged. My job was to ensure safety. Be that as it may, I was compelled to do more. I could not let individuals languish without relationships. Passions over the lack of meaningful relationships had brought them to the jail for "corrections," but "corrections" could not be made without relationships. My job became one of a listener, a small investment on my part in order to allow another to have connections through relationships. For better or worse I would not deny relationship, which would only promote further dysfunction and despair in the name of "corrections." Through response to human need, I had begun to initiate change in the climate of the jail, but there was still a long way to go.

### **Confronting the Meaning of Integrity**

The ethical edict for social workers to act with integrity would provide the insight necessary to complete my journey. As stated in the NASW Code of Ethics, the value of integrity is that "Social workers are continually aware of the profession's mission, values, ethical principles, and ethical standards and practice in a manner consistent with them. Social workers act honestly and responsibly and promote ethical practices on the part of the organizations with which they are affiliated" (p. 6). Confronting my professional integrity was never so poignant as on the day a defense lawyer acted the role of a social service provider. The outcome of a commitment hearing had been resolved with the individual's release. The hearing was a success, of sorts, for the young woman. Nonetheless, she was still unable to provide for her basic personal needs. There had been a lack of evidence in the case. Justice had prevailed and her rights were intact. I was not left to reflect on the





meaning of justice but on my own integrity. At the end of the hearing, I was plagued with questions of ethics. Should I have taken her to court? Was there a just way to meet her needs? Did this court proceeding violate her dignity? Would she seek services from those who had just tried to take away her rights? Her lack of ability to care for herself was the reason we had gone to court. She now refused an offer of voluntary mental health treatment. My job description prevented additional action. It was then that the court-appointed defense attorney began making plans for our client to have shelter, food, and transportation. I was left with a feeling of professional inadequacy. As I reflected on this experience, I knew that this was not the way I wanted to help others. I began to wonder if I would be the type of helping professional who turned my back on individuals in need, or if I would be the type to complete the range of services I had begun. I was at the periphery of understanding what I needed to accomplish to reclaim integrity. Spring marked a shift, a new beginning. It was time to challenge myself, the system, and my sense of dissatisfaction.

### **How Did I Become Competent?**

My job description as a mental health crisis worker had provided little guidance in the pursuit of ethical treatment of others. The answers were not to be found in my academic training as a sociologist but in my training as a human being. As a sociologist, I was competent in theories, concepts, understanding of society, human behavior, and the objective, quantitative methodologies of research. Becoming an ethically competent provider of human services to individuals in need or "at risk" required a subjective analysis of my past year as a mental health crisis worker and my collective experiences as a sociology graduate student.

The daily tasks of reports, data gathering, and paperwork were tasks with little challenge. My observations of those around me

engaged in the helping profession provided the data for my understanding of how others should be treated. Trying to infer meaning from others' actions or lack of actions proved to be a difficult way to find answers to questions concerning ethical treatment of others. I found myself conferring with psychiatrists, psychiatric nurse practitioners, licensed practical counselors, family therapists, and social workers to validate my observations and my treatment of those in need. However, it was in my consultations with social workers that I felt the most satisfaction. Their examples, both in word and deed, spoke to the nature of my quest. I felt an alliance with the social work perspective. This was the congruity that I had sought.

Summer was growing to a close and my year as a crisis worker with the mental health agency was about to end, and I had grown increasingly uneasy with my role. My questions about the system and feelings about the changes that would be necessary to ensure that service be conducted with justice, dignity, and worth had brought me to a crossroad. My values had changed. In order to ethically "provide for clients," more knowledge about the provision of social services was needed. Thus, I did not feel fully competent, but at the same time I was convinced of what I would be required to do. The NASW (1999) Code of Ethics calls for social workers to "...practice within their areas of competence..." (p. 6). I would return to academia to teach sociology and earn an M.S.W. degree. My role as a crisis worker was ending, but my personal and professional journey was continuing.

### **Conclusions**

A turning of the seasons came as my community mental health experience ended, and I returned to academia both as student and professor. As I adjusted to the world of academics, social work again called. In the year following my Ph.D. in sociology, I had be-



come aware of social work and ethical foundations of the treatment of others found in the NASW Code of Ethics. The code was an embodiment of how I aspired to treat others and advocate for their ethical treatment. As stated in the NASW Code of Ethics:

*“The primary mission of the social work profession is to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty” (p. 1).*

This opening statement on the mission of social work fit with my own discoveries of how others should be treated. The ethical dilemmas I had come to grips with in the year as a crisis worker now augmented the sociologist.

Three years after a Ph.D. in sociology, I received an M.S.W. The ethical principles of social work had provided me with a structure for my reflections on how others should and should not be treated. I continue to evolve as an academician. I have discovered that the quest for personal and professional service to self and others, justice, connection, integrity, and competency, faces recurring challenges from bureaucratic and institutional structures. My search for knowledge and awareness will continue as I reflect on my past, present, and future. I often reflect on my year as a crisis worker, knowing that it was the beginning of a new direction in a process of self discovery, not found in that year but in a lifetime of reflections, change, and growth.

• National Association of Social Workers. (1999). *Code of Ethics of the National Association of Social Workers*. Approved by the 1996 NASW Delegate Assembly and revised by the 1999 NASW Delegate Assembly. School of Social Work, Michigan State University.

## Reference

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