

BEGINNER'S MIND

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The following narrative discusses the Zen concept of "beginner's mind" in relationship to teaching the introductory course in social work. It is a meditative reflection on the author's application of this philosophy. Useful in both education and practice, it encourages a fresh, imaginative approach to the daily challenges of professional helpers.

"In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert's there are few"(Suzuki, 1989, p. 21).

Introduction

During our mid-fifties, my husband and I took a mid-life career sabbatical. I welcomed the opportunity to devote more time to writing, community action, and travel. I began to write poetry seriously and pursue this as my vocation. I can now reflect on my teaching career as a professor in a small state liberal arts college in Shepherdstown, West Virginia, from various angles. This narrative is a meditative reflection on my teaching of an introductory social work course; the thoughts are organized around the theme of the "beginner's mind," a quality important for both poets and social workers.

Teaching Philosophy and Supporting Materials

Shunryo Suzuki (1989) discusses the beginner's mind in regards to the practice of Zen. He emphasizes the importance of an "original mind" that is not dualistic, including everything within itself. He states:

All self-centered thoughts limit our vast mind. When we have no thought of achievement, no thought of self, we are true beginners. Then we can learn something. The beginner's mind is the mind of compassion. When our mind is compassionate, it is boundless. (p.22)

He also mentions that "...the most difficult thing is always to keep your beginner's mind... This is also the real secret of the arts: always be a beginner" (p.22).

Such a philosophy applies to both teaching and practice of social work. As the saying goes, when we think we have all the answers we do not know the questions. Of course, professionals need to draw on a body of knowledge, but we do not want to get trapped in it. The task is to develop necessary knowledge and skill and yet maintain a beginner's mind to help refrain from becoming too attached to our professional roles and losing our compassionate mind.

The work *Zen in the Art of Helping* reinforces such an idea: "Helping and Zen are not separate processes. They come from the same human drive to reach out to others, to make meanings and patterns out of our experiences" (Brandon, 1976, p.14). Brandon asserts this as a way of recognizing that we are all human beings who suffer and share many of the same experiences and feelings as part of being human. Brandon presents the way of Zen as:

...a journey through an acceptance of full humanity not a denial of it. The height of Zen is a selfless compassion, a genuine love for both individual men and all mankind. Not man in an abstract disguise but in the distinct shape of

the homeless man, the orphan, the lonely and the sick (p. 35).

To me, that was the most important lesson in Introduction to Social Work, because if we do not recognize our common humanity, we can be of no use to others. Many students who chose a social work major already instinctively recognized this; others were on the verge of discovery. Beginner's mind is more receptive to such genuine love.

I found compatible texts. One of my favorites was *How Can I Help?* (Dass & Gorman, 1985). It is a book of stories about the essence of helping and students loved it. More challenging was a meditation exercise. "I tried doing that in the dorm. And man, you can't do that there." Yet as professionals we need to find places in a noisy world to be still so we can hear ourselves and our clients. The text includes a discussion of "a natural compassion" that human beings have to reach out to those in trouble.

To help students grapple with various existential questions, I employed exercises in Donald Krill's *Practice Wisdom* (1990). His basic premise, with which I agreed wholeheartedly, is that "the most successful, most spontaneous and alive form of helping depends upon the integration of theory, religion/philosophy, and subjective experience" (Krill, 1990, p.15). Many social work students come to the profession with a strong religious orientation, perhaps even a desire to be missionaries. Jane Addams appreciated the importance of examining the subjective experience. Another heroine of mine, Gisela Konopka, also had a beginner's mind of compassion and encouraged us "to embrace the world like a lover."

Part of who I am is a feminist. After using Morales and Sheafor for years as a text that supported a beginner's mind, I switched to Haynes and Holmes *Invitation to Social Work*. I especially liked the feminist perspective. It initially distressed some

students as the perspective is presented in the first chapter without apology. They asked, "Why are we using this feminist book?" Fair question. I explained that it was fundamental to my belief system as a social work professor who came of age during the second wave of the women's liberation movement. I used it as an example of how our time and place in history influences theoretical orientation and practice modalities. The students became more comfortable once they saw that it reflected "a global view in which everything is interconnected, and everything and everyone is ultimately interdependent" (Haynes & Holmes, 1994, p.20). For Haynes and Holmes, feminism integrates: holistic, nondichotomous thinking; analysis of power; relationship; reframing and reclaiming; the personal as political. This is a sound foundation for social work practice and the receptive beginner's mind of nondichotomous thinking.

The concept of beginner's mind combines a number of qualities that were important to me as a professor: imagination and intuition. It is crucial to imagine the impossible and to use intuition as a way of listening to the self and being aware of knowledge that is not visible, but there nonetheless. This appeals to my poetic bent. There was something of a haiku in this course—the grasp of "a larger world in a raindrop." The heart-mind connection. The introductory course was a big raindrop that lent itself to a constructivist approach that encompassed many ways of knowing.

The Introductory Course

Each time I hung a new calendar on my faculty office wall in January, I sensed the new year fresh and crisp as a Dakota winter day. This was the same exhilaration as that first day of school; each new semester on a college campus, the air is charged with the electricity of the possible. The new beginning that each semester heralded was one of the things I liked



about the rhythm of the academic year. As a way of being it resonated with me.

When I entered a classroom I saw beginner's minds. Everyone was wondering "What is this class going to be like?" "Is it going to be a lot of work?" "What is social work about anyway?" "Why am I here when I could be at the beach?" All classes have such elements of wonder, fear, or concern, but none quite as much as an introductory course when students are not even sure they want to commit to the subject. This was a first date. First dates are important—a time of intense sizing up. Such questions lurked in the background as subsets of: What *is* social work and what *do* social workers do? The course addressed not simply *where* social workers worked, but the foundation for our practice beliefs.

Introduction to Social Work was a large Sunday buffet of intellectual offerings. This reflected both who I am and how the profession operates in the real world—there is always too much to do in social work and in our lives. (We could apply another Zen concept: simplify.) The first course provided students an opportunity to get a sense of the big picture—knowledge, values, and skills. Some knew immediately that they did not want to work in a place where teenagers call them "bitch" or worse. Our clients are not always voluntary or pleased with needing assistance.

This was a difficult course for both students and professor because it required an overview of the whole scope of social work. I wanted them to understand where we came from historically and also to keep an open mind about the future and their roles. At first, it was easy because they *were* beginners. Everything was new. Even if they were nontraditional students who had raised families and been in the workforce, they were on a new path.

Application of the Beginner's Mind Philosophy

I believed it necessary to use creative approaches to material to help students develop the love of learning that has served me so well. I remember the thrill of learning things for the first time in grade school. I skipped off to Irving Elementary School that first day of kindergarten with a huge beginner's mind. I wanted to learn everything: how to read, paint, draw, and sing. So many possibilities in that bright room with the bulletin boards, piano, and books to be read. My teachers read to us from Laura Ingalls Wilder *Little House on the Prairie* books. We lived across the street from Augustana College where my father was a student on the GI Bill. I thought life was all about going to school and learning. My mother read to me and the campus was my playground. It has remained so throughout my life. The campus is the ideal setting for a beginner's mind because it provides sustenance for inquiring minds and a space to explore. I wanted to create such an atmosphere in the classroom.

Teaching the course felt a bit like jazz to me—improvisation being key. A given structure with refrains from the Code of Ethics, such as respecting diversity, confidentiality, and other fundamentals, social workers often need to riff, to improvise. One dimension of professionalism involves knowing what to do in a situation where the rules do not apply. The beginner's frame of mind fosters flexibility like the music making of jazz. There is also joy and hope in the related blues tunes. Blues music makes people feel better about themselves because they sing their sorrow to others who might listen and understand. The heart of social work (and any helping profession) is listening to people's stories—many of them a form of blues. We hear and see that people feel better about sharing their suffering stories. It is not a cliché. A beginner's mind is a shield against judging and unimaginative closure. The blues singer swings

to his tunes. And if we can swing with the music and poetry in the lives of clients, there are more possibilities.

No doubt I frustrated students with my improvising: classes were not entirely predictable. I knew professors who plowed predictably through the semester. To quote poet Edgar Lee Master's *Fiddler Jones*: "What do you see a harvest of clover? /Or a meadow to walk through to the river?" If there was an interesting speaker like Julian Bond on campus or a community event such as a town meeting about "town and gown" conflicts, I convened the class at the event. Social work is about the person-in-the-environment, so we need to be responsive to changes in the environment, integrate them into our classes.

Of course, there were the basics to learn, like the social work alphabet soup. Another one was the importance of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. I learned early about basic physical needs as a nurse's aide at Sioux Valley Hospital. We are all human animals. Sometimes I showed a Mother Teresa film—not because I agreed with everything she did, but because it showed her cleaning out the refrigerator of an elderly woman as well as bathing and feeding people who were skin and bones. Beginning where the client is. The scene where the nuns threw out the carpet in their housing units and insisted on living a very poor existence was a bit hard on the students. "I can't be a nun. I want comfort." I assured them that they were not expected to shun all the advantages of living in a country that affords creature comforts. Yet aside from the basics, I wanted them to know that "the poorest of the poor" need compassion and attention to needs.

A major class assignment was to write a five-page essay on the topic of "Why I Want to Be a Social Worker (or not)." It sounds trite, but I read wrenching stories of severe abuse and early losses of parents to mention just a few. Many social work students had

been deeply wounded and sublimated this into wanting "to help." Often this helping impulse is derided by others as wanting to be "do-gooders." But it is larger than that. These students express an interest in using their lives and their experiences to benefit others, quite genuine, quite noble in fact. One of the characteristics of the resilient is to use their own pain as a means to understand and help others who suffer. There is a similar dynamic in many other guilds, like medicine.

We each teach from our own unique perspectives and value systems. It is useful for students to see how professionals do this without imposing it on others. My students saw me as a human being as well as a professor. One of my favorite lighter moments involved a hair dye that did not work out too well: a student asked, "Dr. Soule, did you use Kool-Aid on your hair?" It was something that students were doing at the time, but that I had not tried. Another student suggested that it might not be good form to ask professors such questions, but I thought it was hilarious. Humor is essential in both the classroom and practice. As is not taking ourselves too seriously. The introductory course was fun partly because I wanted students to see work as something they could enjoy. One way to do this was with a field trip.

On a slightly cool morning in the fall or spring, before most students were ready to be up, we met in the parking lot across from White Hall. I brought treats from the Ye Ole Sweet Shop: cream-filled donuts, crullers, chocolate éclairs. Students brought coffee or cokes and their tired bodies, dragging in at the last moment. They could sleep on the way. Washington, DC, was not far, so a trip to the Capitol was easily arranged and helped to demystify the whole world of policy, which students usually wanted to run as far away from as they could. Senator Byrd often made policy enjoyable with a fiddle tune. Or if he was not in, students were allowed to sit in his desk chair. Elected officials were usually

delighted to have constituents show up. Students could also attend Congressional hearings or visit the national offices of NASW. They enjoyed field trips although there were a few who were terrified of going into the City. One student said her mother stayed home from work to be near the phone "in case anything happened." Of course, any urban environment is different from rural West Virginia, but it was hard to imagine what a mother was afraid of with a grown daughter on a bus trip with 20 other people that involved a visit to a Senator's office. The fear was, no doubt, related to the fear of people who are different. Granted, we sometimes took the metro system from the suburbs (another new experience), but part of social work is leaving your comfort zone. You are required to do it often, frequently without guides.

To foster support for leaving this comfort zone, I also used learning journals and take-home exams. I wanted learning to be an exploration that opened the mind to various ways of organizing material—not a regurgitation of presented material. I wanted students to integrate their learning—the text, the experiential, and the personal—so they could practice as whole human beings, not technicians.



Conclusion

Beginner's mind helped me maintain a fresh-eyes approach to social work as each semester I again began to guide students toward an understanding of the profession. This meant asking "who am I" on a regular basis. Who was I as a social work educator? What did social work mean in a constantly

changing global practice world? How could new social workers best learn the meaning of social work for themselves? The role of the social worker expanded enormously from the time I began teaching in the 1970's. Programs, agencies, policies, and conceptual frameworks all changed. Had I not kept a beginner's mind, I would have persisted in the old and not moved forward into new thinking, new opportunities, expanded horizons. Our world is a large one and I wanted my students to see this—to keep open minds and hearts so that even when mired in a stifling bureaucracy there could be a vision of the possible with all its doubts and rewards.

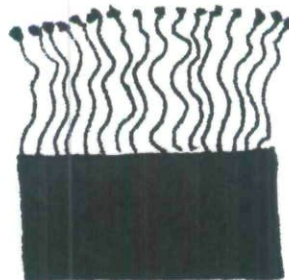
We all hope that the wisdom we seek to impart takes hold. One of the advantages of teaching was that social work faculty maintained contact with students who practiced in the community where we taught. At continuing education workshops and NASW events, I encountered students who talked of challenges in the work setting and ways of looking at them other than "the way we've always done it." They talked of going to graduate school, becoming involved in their communities to bring about change, and maintaining an interest in learning. One former student now teaches Introduction to Social Work at Shepherd and sees the challenges of a new role.

Over the years we become the courses we teach—one of the well-known truths in teaching. The teacher remains a student. We teach what we need to learn. I am forever the young student who skipped off to kindergarten on that golden treasure of a day. Now, nearing sixty, I am an older student in an MFA in Writing Program at the University of Nebraska. I hope at some point to do more with combining writing and social work, which I believe are good companions. Beginner's mind.

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