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A life review: The evolution of a social worker

Angela D. Taylor Arche

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Life review is typically a concept that comes to mind when one thinks of older persons. For the purpose of this paper, I am calling the necessary reflection on my life a life review. I invite you to join me on this journey as I share some of the events which I feel have contributed most to the development of my personal and professional values and subsequent experiences with value conflicts.

I grew up in a house with my parents, sister, and, for a few years, my stepsister. For whatever reason, the expectations my parents had for me always seemed to exceed those that they had for my siblings. My life revolved around doing those things which pleased my parents, especially my father. Their expectations included going to college and becoming a teacher because that was what my dad wanted me to be and what I believed I wanted for myself as well. In an effort to please my parents, I got a jump-start right out of high school, enrolling in summer classes at the local community college. However, my enthusiasm for higher education was lacking and I spent much of the next six years taking classes on and off with little direction. One thing I had managed to do was change my major. I decided that I would be a nurse. This adventure lasted only long enough for me to realize that I really do not care for the sight of blood and certainly couldn't imagine poking people with needles. Aimlessly, I wandered and struggled with the goals I set for myself or had been set for me.

In the winter of 1994, my life took a drastic turn. I discovered I was pregnant. Although the circumstances were not ideal—I was not married—I was both apprehensive and excited about being a parent. I busied myself making plans for our future and all the adventures I hoped we'd encounter. Prenatal tests indicated abnormal results and an amniocentesis confirmed that my child had Down's Syndrome. As I was trying to cope with this reality, all of my hopes and dreams were brought to an abrupt halt with the premature delivery of my son in my sixth month of pregnancy. My son, Evan Michael, died shortly after birth. Never in my life before or since then have I known such pain.

Of all times in my life that I had believed to be dark, this time conjured up some of my darkest days. I found that all I knew or valued was tested and believed that my future would never again be bright. To complicate matters, Evan's death was not a topic open for discussion. These were not my rules, but those of the family and friends around who did not want to bring it up for fear of upsetting me. Yet, all I wanted to do was to talk about my loss so I could deal with the screaming person inside.

I got tired of and angry at people saying that I was young, and that I could have more children. Their insensitivity was incomprehensible. Despite the passage of time I felt stuck in a dark and lonely place. Yet, bit by bit, I began to come out of the dark, acknowledging the potential for brighter days. "And the day came when the risk [it took] to remain tight in the bud was more painful than the risk it took to blossom." Anais Nin (in *Ban Breathnach*, 1995:216) This did not occur easily. As a matter of fact, it took a trip out West where, for two weeks, I peacefully reflected on the events of my life. I decided it was time to make some changes in my life, and a voice from within told me it was time to return to school.

I made an appointment with a counselor and we discussed my interests. She asked me if I had ever thought about social work. I told her that ironically I had, however, I had always been discouraged. We talked about it some more and I agreed to enroll in the Mental Health/Social Work program, primarily to see if I could commit to an education. While I had always valued education, my motivation was lacking. After Evan's death, my education became an adventure. I soaked in my learning like a sponge.

I also began looking at life in a different way. Before, it had always seemed so complex; now, somehow, it seemed to be more manageable. I began to set goals and to realize them. Amazingly, I changed from being a person who allowed the weight of the world to hover on my shoulders to one who is able to look at the future, lightly walking one day at a time. I have learned to absorb all that life offers—both good and bad—and appreciate the lessons learned from all of my experiences.

What I did not understand then was the role these events, especially the birth and death of my son, played in the re-evaluation of my values. Longres (1995:5) identifies values as "statements of worth, good or bad, that people either reject or accept and place their faith in; they may inform practice and should infuse it." Unknowingly, I had rejected those things in which I no longer had faith, and accepted those which became important in my life. My values, which were at one time difficult to identify because they were so enmeshed with those of my family, seemed much more clear. I also became aware of how my inability to clearly identify my values earlier in life stunted my potential for growth. In my efforts to refine the values to which I subscribe, I have been able to appreciate how they guide my behavior, are constantly evolving, and are shaped by a multitude of life experiences. This recognition has contributed to the development and

understanding of my personal and professional value systems. Furthermore, as a student in the social work program, I am shaped by the values and ethical standards we uphold in our profession. This awakening also has prepared me to confront the value conflicts I may encounter along the way.

It is through my education and field placements that I have come to realize how the personal value system, by which I try to live, overlaps and intertwines with the professional values of social work. Our core values stress service, social justice, the dignity and worth of the person, the importance of human relationships, professional integrity, and competence (NASW Code of Ethics, 1997:1). While each of these values have become standards for guiding my practice, the dignity and worth of the person, and the ethical principle of self-determination have become values with which I have personally struggled. I explore the impact of this struggle in my personal and professional life below.

Social work underscores the dignity of human worth, and stresses the goal of promoting socially responsible self-determination. According to the NASW Code of Ethics (1997:3) "Social workers seek to enhance clients' capacity and opportunity to change and address their own needs." Furthermore, social workers have an ethical responsibility to foster self-determination whereby "social workers respect and promote the rights of clients in their efforts to identify and clarify their goals" (p. 4). As I reflect on the important role that self-determination played in my life after my son's death, I am overwhelmed by how such a simple idea of having the freedom to choose or to make decisions can change one's life so immensely. I am reminded of Robert Louis Stevenson, (cited in Ban Breathnach, 1995:29): "To know what you prefer, instead of humbly saying Amen to what the world tells you to prefer, is to keep your soul alive." I continue to explore the value of self-determination in my life, testing the boundaries and better understanding its power. As soon as I was able to identify the importance of this value in my own life, I was empowered to see it's significance for clients. However, frequently I am reminded of the conflicts that self-determination can create not only in my personal, but professional, values, as illustrated in the following example.

Mrs. X is an elderly female who has been married for more than 40 years. She reports a long history of abuse by both her husband and son. Mrs. X has no direct access to household funds and has not had access during her entire marriage. Until recently she held a part-time job, which gave her a sense of economic

independence. Her husband has several chronic illnesses, which prompted a home health referral in the spring last year. The initial referral and her reports of abuse led to an Adult Protective Services (APS) referral and full investigation. After this investigation, the two options presented to Mrs. X were: 1) leave your husband or 2) place your husband in a nursing home. Both options were problematic for Mrs. X because of long-standing promises she had made to her spouse. Her ambivalence with the alternatives led APS to conclude that, since Mrs. X chose to remain at home, there was nothing they could or would do to assist her.

In an attempt to gain some control over her life, Mrs. X pursued obtaining legal power of attorney over her husband, but was unsuccessful due to questions regarding her husband's mental competency. A specialist's opinion of Mr. X stated that he was mentally incapacitated and unable to make decisions for himself. It was suggested that petitions for guardian and conservatorship be made, but efforts to obtain these failed. Mrs. X still remains at home, which she now is unable to leave because she could be charged with neglect. In addition, her own health and safety have been jeopardized. On several occasions in the past few months, she has presented in the clinic with injuries, which her physician indicates are most likely the result of abuse.

For me, this case has served as an excellent example of the conflicts values can create. Initially, I had to acknowledge the abuse in the home and identify the dynamics. Then, I had to think about the APS response, "she chooses to stay." Quite frankly, I did not see it to be so cut and dry. That is when I really began to think about the gray area that self-determination presents. So many issues came to mind as I thought about why this situation exists and why Mrs. X "chooses to stay." One issue was raised by something I read in a doctor's note: The doctor was unsure if Mrs. X was able to understand the potential harm she was in. A second issue regards uprooting someone from a way of life that is all she knows. By staying, she continues to use the coping mechanisms which she has found to be effective. By leaving, she would give up everything she has acquired in her marriage. A third issue is a cultural one, which focuses on accepting the beliefs and values that underlie clients' decisions. These issues are factors that have contributed to Mrs. X's decision not to leave. Although as a social work professional in training I can understand them, I have found myself struggling with inner conflicts. As a professional, I want what is best for my client. However, as Brandl and Raymond (1997:65) suggest: "Sometimes case managers and other professionals

providing services unintentionally control access to information and develop goals and expectations for clients. Case managers and other professionals may unwittingly become like the batterer as they attempt to manage the older woman's life using influence, power, and control within their system."

While thinking about my interactions with Mrs. X, I was struck by a conversation I had with her when we were discussing the petition for guardian/conservatorship. She informed me that the lawyer from the court said that it was likely an outside party would be appointed as a guardian/conservator. Frustration and perhaps fear were evident as she spoke adamantly against having an outsider involved in her situation. She tearfully told me that she did not want to answer to an outsider since she had answered to and been controlled by her husband for more than 40 years. She had had enough. As I hung up the phone with her that day I distinctly remember the wave of guilt that surged through me, and the uncertainty I felt. Had I somehow manipulated her life in a way that benefited my needs? At first, I wavered between yes and maybe. I again recounted my interactions and interventions with her and discussed my feelings with my placement supervisor. Together we reviewed the role of social casework, and came to the conclusion that I had not. According to Perlman (1967: 9):

Social casework is a process used by certain human welfare agencies to help individuals to cope more effectively with their problems in social functioning... The nucleus of the casework event is this: a person with a problem comes to a place where a professional representative helps him by a given process.

Mrs. X came to me and requested information, supportive counseling, and assistance in her preparation of papers for her petition of guardian/conservatorship. I did what she requested and respected her wishes not to pursue guardian/conservatorship, despite my concerns for her safety. Dubler (as cited in Capezuti, Brush, & Lawson, 1997:25) indicates that the:

Protection of an older person's rights also includes the right to make decisions that may be viewed by others as wrong or eccentric. Decisionally capable older adults have the right to refuse treatment even if doing so is potentially harmful.

Such is the power of self-determination, a right that we, at certain trying times like the case example illustrates, have to take measures to preserve. For it is in honoring the right to self-determination that we are better able to empower others. Further, efforts to maintain social work

as a unique profession, while adhering to its core values, will undoubtedly result in not only the client's autonomy but also my own.

I have learned from extenuating life circumstances just how consciousness of one's autonomy can empower a person. It may be difficult to understand, but Evan's death was both the best and worst thing that has ever happened to me. The best, because I believe there is no greater gift than that of a child, and the worst, because I was only able to physically hold that gift for a short time. It's been said that when one door closes, another opens. Until Evan's death I never saw the open door. In learning how to cope with my loss, I opened the door, subsequently learning how to identify my personal and professional values, and the potential conflicts they may create. I welcome the challenge, and I am grateful that I was able to turn a devastating situation around and utilize it to motivate me. As I embrace the future and all that awaits me, I thank you for joining me on this life review, and look forward to the journey that lies ahead.

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