

Values: My Process and Practice

Barbara Clewett

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Wayne State University

School of Social Work

Most of my values, both personal and professional, have come to me naturally and without apparent effort on my part; however, living them out is another matter, for the variables of daily life at home and at work present ethical dilemmas which are sometimes difficult, if not impossible, to resolve satisfactorily. Metaphorically speaking, it sometimes seems as if the innately life-sustaining trees are asked to grow and perform their natural balancing act of conversion without enough sun, water and space to survive, let alone enough to flourish. I feel this conflict both as a human being and as a budding social worker. However, even though I do feel this conflict acutely, I still continue to work at living out my values because I have no choice but to seek wholeness for myself and for others. That is my root value.

I have always been aware of the presence of the Higher Power in my life and in the lives of others. I can recognize its presence by a movement towards wholeness within individuals and in their relation with each other and with society. Since working towards wholeness with individuals and social institutions on all fronts, economic, social, emotional and mental, is the essence of social work (as embodied in the NASW Code of Ethics), I see a nondenominational God and social work as intimately bound together in their values and purposes.

My life reads as a study of the struggle to live out in this human world the values that flow from my spiritual awareness. This struggle parallels that which is created in trying to live out the values of social work amidst the constraints of actual practice settings. My spirit side always accepted and knew I was good and strong and capable of much good service work, but the more densely human part had trouble feeling at home in this world which seemed so full of compromises, including that of keeping a young girl in her place, however insightful and capable she might be.

Living out the consequences of the mixed messages given me by my family and by society about the acceptable role of women has led me inevitably to want to work for and with other women who have shared the confusion and peculiar pain which comes from being valued as significant for some reason and yet simultaneously regarded as an object from which independent thought or action is neither expected nor desired. This pain is, of course, not women's alone. Anyone not in power, a majority of the world population, understands variations of this unfortunate mentality. I may not fully understand these other peoples, but it is easy to identify with the dilemma

of the many who are not treated as living beings with basic needs which include respect and equal opportunity as much as food, shelter, sleep and love. It is easy to want to be of the process of changing these situations. Having gone through so much struggle with living out the values of the Spirit in my own life, values for me which are synonymous with those of social work, I appreciate the need for process-consistent, steady effort in working towards any goal of note, including those of social work.

Other values close to my heart which also coincide with those of social work are open-mindedness, continual learning (informal as well as formal), patience, listening for the unspoken as well as spoken, respect for all humans and all living non-humans (seeing everything as interconnected), working closely with colleagues toward a common goal, loyalty, pursuing the truth (seeing behaviors and situations in the larger context), resourcefulness, self-determination, perseverance, responsiveness, integrity and compassion. These are the values on which I base my life. Most of them seem to have been inside me all my life but in retrospect, I can trace the development of most of them to my family's influence, as a positive model or a negative one against which I reacted in self-defense with opposite values.

It is easy enough to see that one reason I value wholeness so much is because of the fragmentation I experienced in my family as I was growing up. Both parents had their version of imbalance, complementing each other in an unhealthy dependence. As a result, my brother and I grew up with our own emotional imbalances that we have spent the greater part of twenty-five years trying to redress. From the initial conflicted childhood experiences and the later adult ones spent learning how to become balanced and fairly healthy, I formed an allegiance to a myriad of more specific values that encourage balance and growth.

I do not mean to suggest that my parents had only a negative influence on me. On the contrary, I can cite many laudable qualities I gladly try to embody which I learned from their positive presence in my life. However, it was the mixture of these constructive aspects with the undermining ones that confused me and kept me from truly being able to flourish until recently. This I can now do because I have managed to sort out the wheat from the chaff. Now I am largely able to live out the values of my parents that are life-giving and let go of the life-denying ones.

My father was a teacher, by inclination, as well as by trade. A typical dinnertime with him was a nontraditional affair from the perspective of most people, but one that I accepted as the

norm while growing up. My mother, brother, and I were usually offered portions of my father's latest class lecture along with the edible food, or his ideas about current issues or the latest articles he had read. We were not, however, allowed to be idle listeners, for we were questioned about our views on the subject, sometimes quite relentlessly. Though I didn't realize it at the time, I might as well have been living in a home governed by yeshiva training. I knew better than to have my first response accepted, for I was fully expected to back it up with some attempt at critical reasoning or astute observation, even at age 8. Uncomfortably, I remember mealtimes punctuated by the inevitable question, "But what is your opinion?" Was I, as a child, supposed to remind him that even if I could reason out a response, I was supposed to still be a child who might not want to spend my time becoming an intellectual parlor wizard? While I valued, then and now, the emphasis on perpetual learning and independent thinking, I resented his virtual crowding out of my emotional and nonintellectual mental abilities.

Just as we children were trained to think for ourselves about any given topic, words that we did not understand were to be looked up in the dictionary right then, during dinner. While I can support the habit of curiosity which my father's actions encouraged, and the method of learning he trained us in, I do regret the loss of child time spent simply being in the moment, without words, or at least without words used as linear, categorizing tools. I had to learn for myself, over time, that intellect is neutral in itself and can be used as a weapon to destroy life or a shield to protect one from the sometimes painful but growth-inducing aspects of life all too easily. Only with a conscious effort to integrate emotions and mind can knowledge become wisdom and enable one to live from a place of wholeness rather than analytical one-sidedness. This is a crucial insight for any social worker.

While my father inadvertently taught me about the need for a balance between mind and heart through less than pleasant repeated experiences, he also, in a few hours' effort, quite effectively demonstrated the beneficial and enjoyable experience of patience employed in working together as a team toward a common goal. Some thirty years ago, during my first year in high school, I was panicked about writing an essay for my honors English class. I had ideas that seemed good to me, but no systematic way of putting them together, and my anxiety about making sense kept me from writing as much down as was crashing around in my head. I knew my father would welcome a request for help, even though busy preparing his own class-work. From his calm instruction, I soon found myself understanding clearly the realities of outlines, transitions, logical progression, and all the other basics of composition that had never sunk in before. My father used

what I did have down on paper to ask questions and provide examples that guided me steadily in the right direction so that understanding at my own rate and way was inevitable. I may not have lost all anxiety about writing from those few hours of teaching, but I have never forgotten the method he led me through, or the warm camaraderie and expansive sense which working together that way, with faith in ourselves and in the process, provided. Other positive values relevant to social work which I absorbed from my father (even though he may not have always lived them out) are an extreme open-mindedness about all subjects, respect for everyone, regardless of achievement, class, color, etc. and a deep spiritual faith independent of any religious affiliation.

Many of the values I learned from knowing my mother were in reaction against the situation in which I saw her, not in imitation of it. Up until I was six years old, she lived mostly in a state of withdrawn depression, punctuated by periods of physical illness and moments of spontaneous warmth. These latter I valued highly, but her inconsistency was very unsettling and certainly did not help my self-confidence. While my father did what he could for her, being a very dependable stand-in mother doing the cooking and other household chores along with his teaching at the university, my mother never did receive any professional psychological counseling. As a consequence, she suffered more and longer than she needed to and I developed my own depressive withdrawal. My experience with her emotional imbalance and my own subsequent one has given me a strong belief in the need for early intervention in matters of mental health and for prevention. It has also guided me towards that area of focus in my own future practice. I can easily recognize and identify with conditions and issues of mental health and illness. I know full well that problems of this sort will not simply go away, nor can someone be expected to deal with them all alone.

From my brother, three years my senior, I have learned the stabilizing value of quiet presence and patience over time. His reliable embodiment of these qualities allowed me to learn how to talk about myself for the first time when I was fourteen. Before that, I had been adept at asking others questions about themselves and making observations about their situations but could not seem to endure focusing attention on myself, let alone gathering words together about myself quickly enough for anyone besides my brother. He sensed that my slowness in this matter was not intentional avoidance or lack of intelligence, but rather a matter of too much emotion swirling around at once, rendering linear conversation impossible. His consistent patience and loyalty allowed me to slow down inside and find the way of putting words together in a linear progression that would faithfully reflect my internal situation at the time. About twenty years later a

gifted social worker used the same basic approach with her own elaborations to bring me back from a place of virtual non-functioning to a land of health and balance I had never experienced before. Thus, I learned, irrevocably and in my blood, the value of patient, consistent, warm attention with anyone, particularly people in need of finding mental/emotional balance.

Values which I consciously and unconsciously developed as a corrective measure in response to my childhood situation are self-determination, resourcefulness, self-assertion, and responsiveness. Compassion was mine all along, but I had to work at learning how to express this quality in the world of confusing humans in which I found myself living. My habit of contemplative analysis of situations and behaviors, of trying to understand them and see them in a larger context, to find their meaning, was developed in self-defense because I was so confused about the nature of "reality", given my home situation. I needed to make sense of it as best I could. When so much emotion is unspoken, what is real becomes unclear and very necessary to track down, for simple sanity's sake. This habit of placing events and people in a larger context is my version of the ecological perspective of social work.

Another value that I employed in self-defense was surrounding myself with art and beauty, and consciously creating it in my life. I found the effect of emotions given form in such a way is healing and conducive to growth. My pain is acknowledged and transformed simultaneously. My recognition of this undeniable effect leads me to want to use music therapy and creative writing therapy in my own practice of social work. Companion animal therapy enters into the realm of alternative interventions that I have found inestimably useful. How many times in past years was my cat companion the true reason I was present at all in this world? How simple a source of unconditional love and responsibility, of connection with another living being. Altogether, my experiences have led me to understand the value of having an underlying vision on which my life is based. This view parallels the social work notion of needing an overall theory on which one's practice is based.

The last value I want to mention was the hardest for me to learn but is certainly a crucial one for a healthy and effective practice of social work. It is the value of taking care of myself, of my basic needs, of giving them at least as much attention as I give anyone else's, including my clients. I have truly had to struggle to understand and accept this idea and learn the means by which to live it out in my everyday existence. To recognize my basic needs and meet them while tending to appropriate social work interventions designed to meet other people's needs has

become a critical goal of my life. I realize that no matter how compassionate and skillful I am as a worker, I will quickly become ineffective and less than human if I do not give my needs the attention they deserve. An equally essential lesson in my life was that of recognizing an inherent conflict that exists in the practice of any social work. The many fine values that the NASW Code of Ethics espouses frequently encounter opposition in the many settings of actual practice. This poses not only an ethical dilemma, but a painful situation for the dedicated social worker. I felt this conflict acutely first hand this year in my fieldwork as a social work intern in discharge planning at a hospital. I worked mostly on the diabetic ward. This consists primarily of geriatric patients who suffer from the many complications of long term diabetes as well as conditions associated with long life: failing vision, amputations of lower limbs, heart problems, and dementia, to name a few. After a few weeks working there, it became clear to me that it was more common than not to have a patient whose individual needs or rights seemed violated in one way or another by the demands of DRGs, physician bias, or limitations of staffing. This observation agrees with the findings of Proctor, Morrow-Howell and Lott (1993) who state "social workers can expect to encounter dilemmas frequently" (p.170).

One of the most frequent ethical conflicts present on my ward arises when there is a need for a medical procedure or a nursing home placement and the mental status of the patient involved is unclear enough to make his or her voice in the decision-making process questionable. Here we have the eternal hospital dilemma of patient self-determination versus the patient's best medical interests. Take the scenario I encountered recently of the 70 something gentleman who, according to the surgeon, needed a surgical procedure to remove an abdominal obstruction in order to remain alive. The patient in question, however, refused permission for the procedure, on the grounds that he did not want anyone else poking or prodding him intrusively, for any reason. This refusal of medical treatment is a patient's right, if he or she is deemed mentally competent. Was he? The psychiatrist said no while the social worker said yes on the crucial issue of whether he understood what he was saying. The social worker went to court to testify to the same in an attempt to prevent a guardian from being appointed, believing the guardian would agree with the physician's request, on the assumption so frequently made in medical settings that length of life is more important than its quality. Again, the study by Proctor, et al (1993) testifies to this general hospital dilemma (p. 173) and to the particular one encountered by older patients: "Workers were troubled that some medical professionals were quick to assume that elderly patients were too confused to communicate or to participate in planning for post-hospital care" (p.172).

It is hard to see patients become lost in the hospital shuffle of ethics, and it is clear that there is often no really satisfactory or satisfying solution. I have found, from observing my field supervisor at work and from my own experience that the social worker must, nonetheless, go to whatever lengths he or she can to give the patient dignity and attention without directly crossing hospital or physician policy. If taking time to talk with the patient, family, physician, nurse, or other relevant professionals is necessary to ensure some balance of patient rights and medical welfare, then that time must be spent. While some compromise is inevitable, it is the social worker's responsibility to keep it within certain limits.

An area that does need to be addressed in many social work contexts, but often is not, is the spiritual dimension of the client. I have come to this realization both from my personal experiences and from my professional ones. Assigning meaning to one's life and placing that life in a larger context of some sort of Higher Power does seem to be a basic human need. Dudley and Helfgott (1990) propose the necessity of training social workers while in school about the different spiritual traditions engaged in by their potential clients so that they will be better able to understand and serve their particular needs (p.288). I would agree with this, but I would go one step further, in agreement with Cornett (1992) who believes that the rational, ego-centered model of therapy often used in clinical practice is harmful because it can "diminish the tremendous growth that clients could achieve through exploration of the spiritual aspects of their lives" (p. 101). I would also agree with his point that the 12-step recovery model understands this human need for the spiritual, not religious, dimension of recovery from any imbalance, not just substance abuse. It is an understanding which I value highly and that I want to use in my future social work practice. We must not wait until clients are about to die before we grant them the right and opportunity to grapple with deeper meaning of their lives. This too, is an essential field for the social work that claims to be both compassionate and practical.



## References

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