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**My Journey of Change, Loss and Empowerment and its
Implications for My Social Work Practice**

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The Journey

One day you finally knew
what you had to do, and began,
though the voices around you
kept shouting their bad advice
though the whole house began to tremble
and you felt the old tug at your ankles.
“Mend my life”! each voice cried.
But you didn’t stop.
You knew what you had to do,
though the wind pried with its stiff fingers
at the very foundations,
though their melancholy was terrible.
It was already late enough, and a wild night,
and the road full of fallen branches and stones.
But little by little, as you left their voices behind,
the stars began to burn through the sheets of clouds,
and there was a new voice
which you slowly recognized as your own,
that kept you company as you strode deeper and deeper
into the world, determined to do
the only thing you could do
determined to save the only life you could save.

- Maria Oliver

In 30, 40 or 50 years, I hope I will have the opportunity to conduct a life review of my personal journey. As a part of this review, I am sure I will recall the year of 2003 as one of the most significant and memorable of my life. It is during that year a turning point caused a major and lasting shift in my life course. This turning point has forced me to examine my past, present, future, who am I, what I value, and where I want to journey. My self-evaluation process is analogous to the shedding of the hard protective shell of a lobster as explained by Sheehy (1995) in her book *New Passages*. According to Sheehy (1995) passages, or turning points, “usher in a new stage of life, a crucial period of decision between progress and regression” (p.11). Like the lobster in order for growth to occur, each one of us must shed a protective shell or structure, which leaves us exposed and vulnerable, but also “yeasty and embryonic”. It is at this most vulnerable stage that we have a heightened potential for new growth or we can simply give up, lose ground and ignore the impulses to change (Sheehy, 1995, p. 11). My decision to grow has not come without months of tears, emotional pain, self-doubt, and depression. In my final analysis two vital themes have emerged for me. The first theme is I choose to move forward with my life and use this turning point as an opportunity for growth and change. The second theme relates to empowerment. I recognize that I have the power and resiliency to cope and adapt to change.

James Levine, the splendid conductor of the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra observes that “as you get older, and use your life experience more, everything means more than it did before” (Plotkin, 2002, p.2). I believe life means more to me now in my middle adult years because I know I must listen to my inner voice. Having listened to my inner voice,

I use this paper as an opportunity to explore my journey into empowerment. My journey is rife with change and loss as I simultaneously experienced the dissolution of a marriage and the physical and mental disintegration of an elderly parent, my mother. I have felt alone and isolated as I struggled with my own life choices and making decisions for my mother regarding housing, medical, and mental health care, finances, etc. I believe I am drawn to the field of geriatric social work as part of the reevaluation of my own personal values. I see there is a need for professionals who actively engage elderly clients and their families. Drawing from a strengths perspective, I have come to understand that I must help clients maintain control over their lives while capitalizing on what they can do and compensating for what they cannot do by building on a person's internal and external resources (Saleebey, 1997). Lastly, while I am a part time student and have not yet been assigned to a field placement, I use my own personal experience and values to discuss the practice decisions I will make and the professional values I will represent.

Change and Loss and Empowerment

In the face of a turning point and change in the life course, we as human beings are often forced to reexamine our values and what is important to us. In reflecting on my own values within the framework of the principles of social work I have always been concerned with living my life in a manner that held dear human relationships. I have involved myself in volunteer and social service activities where I could be of help to others. I have been mindful of each individual's worth, dignity and uniqueness. Finally, I have appreciated each individual's right to self-determination and empowerment. It was not until this past year, in light of the changes and losses I experienced would I come

to know how significantly these values, particularly self-determination, and empowerment would play a role in my future.

According to Sheehy (1995) “most of us face some crisis in our forties or fifties that will force us to rethink and reflect on how we going to live in the second half” (p.xiv). My crisis came last year with the culmination of my twenty year old marriage. My husband’s announcement he was no longer happy in a marriage that was dysfunctional for a long period of time was devastating but not entirely surprising. What was surprising was the extent to which this revelation sent me and my two young sons into an emotional tailspin from which we are still recovering. The entire summer became a blur for us as we experienced the disequilibrium and upset of our family system. Our attempts to regain homeostasis were shrouded in a myriad of raw emotions from anger, to fear, to sadness and to tears. I was so consumed by my own emotions I was barely able to function, let alone be a mother.

Not only was I confronting a crisis of change and loss in my marriage, but as the primary caretaker of an elderly parent, change and loss was again a predominant theme. Over the last 9 years that my mother Rose, age 87, has been in my care I have observed her physical and mental decline. Her chronic physical ailments included neuropathy, incontinence, congestive heart failure, basal skin cancer, and osteoporosis. Many of these physical changes impacted her mobility and left her wheelchair bound. Deterioration of the mental processes or dementia, likely the result of small strokes left her with short and long term memory loss. These physical and mental losses forced us to make changes in her living arrangements as she became more reliant on others to carry out activities that

she use to do independently. Over the past nine years, she has moved from an independent senior citizen residence, to an assisted living facility and at last into her current residence, a nursing home.

According to Butler (1997) “change and loss are predominant themes in old age and the stress that accompanies these changes and losses can be more severe and devastating than at any other time in life” (pp 225- 226). For my mother, the gradual loss of physical and mental capabilities, the reliance on others for activities she use to carry out independently, and the changes in housing were sources of tremendous emotional and psychological stress. I can only imagine the thoughts running through her head as she envisioned her loss of freedom, her loss of privacy, her loss of independence and her acknowledgement that she was probably on the last portion of her life’s journey.

My struggle with my mother’s decline was characterized by my own sense of change and loss as I became her primary source of support. Her deterioration meant that I had to make serious decisions about her housing situation, medical care and finances. I struggled with the fact that as she increasingly relinquished control of her life, I had to assume more and more responsibility for it. I found that I had no real support system to assist me with many of these decisions. The social workers and other professionals I came in contact with seemed more concerned with administrative issues or with just one aspect of her care than examining Rose’s case from a holistic and systems standpoint. As a result I often operated in isolation as I muddled about to find resources that could help with each of a slew of problematic situations.

Finally I came face to face with these crises and my choices when I was in my spinning class at a local gym. Spinning, which is a stationary bike exercise program, is usually accompanied by music. As I sat on my bike, I truly heard the words from the Stevie Nicks' song, "Landslide", for the first time.

"Landslide"

Oh mirror in the sky what is love,
 Can the child within my heart rise above,
 Can I sail through the changing ocean tides,
 Can I handle the seasons of my life,
 Well, I've been afraid of changing 'cause I built my life around you,
 But times makes you bolder, children get older,
 I'm getting older too.

- Stevie Nicks (1975)

It was as if the song was speaking about me and to me. I had built my life around my family and had been afraid of making the changes that would allow for my own personal growth and satisfaction. Was I bold enough and old enough to weather the changing tide and come to terms with what had happened with my marriage and what I now needed to do and to be? Could I allow myself to shed my protective covering in order to expand and grow? Could I reestablish the homeostasis that my family so desperately craved? And, could I somehow take the experience with my mother and use it to empower myself and other families?

So my new journey began as I attempted to find the answers to these questions and to listen to the inner voice I had so often neglected in my life. My challenge was to address "those components of self that were repressed due to conformity in earlier stages of adulthood" (Hutchison, 2003, p.352). I found through my analysis that there were certain components of self that were so pivotal in my personality that it was time to let

them emerge and become fulfilled. First, it became clear to me I had the need to serve and help others. At different times of my life I had been a physical therapy assistant, a special education paraprofessional, a synagogue membership chairperson, a social action volunteer, and a caretaker of an elderly parent. I recognized in my new life I needed to draw on Erickson's (1980) concept of generativity, the ability to transcend my own interests and provide care, and concern for generations to come rather than self absorption and personal stagnation. As a caretaker for my mother, I was challenged by the task of coordinating all the different aspects of her care. I knew if a professional had been available my efforts would have been less daunting. I needed someone who took a holistic approach to my family, linked us to services and resources and supported and helped to empower us as we faced problems and made choices. This experience caused me to reflect on my desire to serve and the necessity of helping families cope and adapt to the issues of aging

Second, my forty eight years taught me the value of human relationships and the importance of strengthening relationships to enhance emotional well-being. Well-being in later life is significantly impacted by relationships with spouses, children, grandchildren, siblings, and peers. As I observe my mother as of late, nothing more can bring a light to her eyes than hugging a grandchild, singing with the music therapist or reminiscing with her daughters and sister. This was not always the case. In the beginning of her bout with dementia, when her anxiety and paranoia was quite high, it seemed that the best remedy was throwing medications at the problems. While medications may have been necessary, there seemed to be little attempt at enhancing

emotional well-being and assisting my family in coping with these problems.

Additionally, not all members of my family agreed on this medical approach, which at times caused family conflict. In my view, what had been needed was a professional who could help strengthen the relationship among all family members and actively engage each one in examining the options that would serve my mother best. From this experience, I realized my future would only be meaningful if I could make purposeful efforts in promoting and maintaining healthy human relationships.

Third, as part of my introspection I knew that I valued dignity, self-worth, and self-determination of the individual. As I watched my mother's quality of life being reduced to nothing more than a list of ADL's (assisted daily living activities) and her independence and control over her life slip away, I was struck by the unrest and tension I felt to be part of the dynamic that allowed this to happen to her. If my support network had been different maybe my choices would have been different. Of course, it was also true that in my mother's circumstances, maybe I had no other choice. However this experience brought me to a realization best characterized by Fast & Chapin (as cited in Saleebey, 1997):

Older persons are better able to accept increased dependence if they are given authority to make decisions about the nature of the help needed and how it should be provided. The more older people feel in control of their lives by solving their own problems, the less the likelihood of unnecessary dependency and learned helplessness, two outcomes that are often the fate of older citizens (pp. 119-120).

I believe I serve my mother best, my family best and my future profession best by helping each individual maintain as much control over their lives as possible. This goal is attained through securing services and resources for individuals so they can capitalize on what they can do and compensate for what they cannot do. It is also important as a professional to provide clients with knowledge and skills to cope in their daily lives and be cognizant of their alternatives and choices.

Fourth and last, I reflected on my own empowerment, self-determination, and autonomy. In order to empower myself, I had to come to terms with change and loss and recognize “my capacity for facing adversity with a sense of strength, resiliency, and courage” (Saleebey, 1997). Acknowledging my personal value system meant I felt good about what I represented as a person. And last, I had to listen to my inner voice and use my personal power to identify and carry through with personal and professional goals. I knew in the field of geriatric social work I could use my life experience and values to help others. It was time to invigorate my life with a new sense of self and of freedom. The writings of Helson, Mitchell and Moane (as cited in Robbins et al, 1998), characterized my psychological shift toward “greater dominance, higher achievement motivation, greater interest in events outside the family and more emotional stability” (p. 214). My decision to enroll in the MSW program at Wayne State was empowering and began a new phase of my life.

Social Work Practice Decisions

In light of my own self-reflection and my experience with my parent, how can I best serve an elderly client base? I have thought long and hard about the vision I have for my

practice as a geriatric social worker. First, I want to serve my clients as a counselor and clinician by helping them to understand their feelings and cope with their problems (Shulman, 1999). Each client must be evaluated from a holistic and systems standpoint. I agree with Robert Butler (1981) the well regarded gerontologist who suggests:

Initiating a life review with elderly clients allows them to come to terms with their past, resolve lingering problems and feel they can face their current lives with greater wisdom and serenity. In some individuals, the process of a life review may lead to grief, sadness and fear as they contemplate the meaning of their lives, death and unrealized legacies (p. 414-415).

The life review is a means of acknowledging changes and losses. As a social work clinician, I must be cognizant of these changes and losses and how each individual copes and adapts differently based on his or her lifelong character and other social, economic, psychological, and biological factors.

Second, I wish to serve my clients by linking them to human services and resources (Shulman, 1999). I must understand the needs and abilities of the elderly through a client assessment. This effort must be a collaborative one involving clients and their families, if possible. Again, my sense of conviction tells me to capitalize on what each client can do and compensate through appropriate resources for what she or he cannot do.

Third, I envision serving my clients and their family as a teacher through imparting skills and knowledge that can increase their functioning (Shulman, 1999). Embracing the family of the elderly client and strengthening the ties between all members so they

can work together in ways that enhance problem solving, secure resources and cope with the day to day responsibilities of caring for an elderly member is vital.

Fourth, as a geriatric social worker I must encourage the self-determination and empowerment of every client. I defer again to Butler (1975), “one of the great losses of old age is the loss of choice. Choice exercised as freely as possible supports self-respect, when denied, it promotes helplessness” (p. 230). In the case of my mother, many of the decisions and choices relating to her medical, housing, and financial status were made for her because of risk and security concerns. But at the time, risk and security were not her concerns. Her needs for self-determination and independence were much more powerful. Ultimately, however, her judgment was determined to be impaired and I made decisions based on safety issues. I still struggle with what I felt I had to do in my mother’s case and my personal and professional value of self-determination. I believe that this personal experience weighs heavily upon me and will guide me in how I build relationships and care for my clients on a going forward basis.

Finally, I end where I started, with a journey. I am truly inspired by the words of Maria Oliver’s poem “one day you finally knew what you had to do and began” (Housdan, 2001, pp.9-10). I am beginning, again.

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