



Why I love social work

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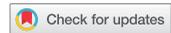


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COMMENTARY



Why I love social work

Well.....uh.....hmmm..... This is going to be harder than I thought.

Maybe I should start at the beginning.

My mother was a caseworker at the Cook County Department of Public Aid in Chicago. Her best friend, my calabash auntie, was the Associate Director of the agency. My parents were very progressive, “parlor pink” members of the Communist Party in the 1930’s. So, I had a very liberal/progressive childhood, full of tales of fighting oppression and concern for those who had to struggle to survive. Chicago was very oppressive to minorities in those days, so I attended some demonstrations while I was in high school, commonplace today, but so atypical then that I never talked about it with my friends.

I decided I was going into social work one day when I was walking across the campus of the University of Illinois, Urbana when I was a sophomore. I cannot recall the exact circumstances; maybe I was hit by a bolt of social work lightning or something. But that afternoon I made up my mind; I was not only going to be a social worker in order to help people who were discriminated against and had to struggle their whole lives. I was going to be a social work **professor** so I could spread “the word” many times over.

And I did.

My first real job was as a caseworker at the same Cook County Department where my mother had worked; I then received my MSW at the University of Illinois in Chicago; I worked for three years as a clinical social worker for the Veterans Administration in San Francisco; I spent three years earning an imaginary brain tumor and a doctorate in social welfare at the University of California, Berkeley; and I completed my career as a professor for 40 years at the University of Hawai’i, Manoa, School of Social Work.

It ain’t that easy, loving social work.

It’s kinda hard to admit, but over the course of my career, the disappointments about social work far outnumber the times when I felt proud about our profession.

Take my first disappointment. My first job was as a caseworker at Cook County, where my mother also had been a caseworker. In those days—the good old days—we had almost no technological support. We were supposed to write our notes about each client meeting, and then bring them down to the typing pool and dictate them into a primitive recording machine so they can be typed up by the workers in the typing pool. This, of course, required a briefing.

Accordingly, on the first day of my new job, there I was talking with a woman who had been working at the typing pool for many, many years. She asked me my name, and of course, I told her: Joel Fischer. She paused, then looked around with her eyes turned up to the ceiling in what I now know was her trying to remember something. Turns out, she was trying to remember ME! Back down to earth, she said, “We used to have a woman in the pool, over 20 years ago, whose name was Ruth. She had a baby while she was working here, and we all went over to her apartment to see him. I’m pretty sure his name was Joel, too. What a coincidence.”

My eyes got bigger than hers. “That was my mother,” I exclaimed! “I’m that Joel!”

So, my mother was a caseworker, huh? She was so enthusiastic about social work even though she was only a *fake* caseworker!

Well, that typing pool supervisor and my mother had a grand old time getting together again. I loved it that I had caught my mom in a fib, and we all thought it was hilarious. But, still...

I worked at that place for a year and a half; it was a learning experience, which I almost always define as something awful.

We were dealing with the poorest of the poor, General Assistance clients. I learned that most of my colleague caseworkers were not only unsympathetic to the clients, many were downright hostile. Once I heard another worker being unfairly harsh—brutal I thought at the time—with a client, and I intervened to ease the situation. Other times, I wanted to intervene but resisted the temptation.

The best thing that happened to me in that place was in my first evaluation. My supervisor said to me “Mr. Fischer; we are concerned that you are identifying with the clients.” Horrors! I took that as the best compliment I ever had in my entire career.

I knew I was going to have to leave that place and become a “real” social worker. I applied and was accepted to the MSW program at the University of Illinois, Chicago.

Unfortunately, another learning experience...Oh, was it ever!

We, the students, were pretty much treated like children which was related, I think, to the predominant operating theory at the time, psychoanalysis. We had to see our in-school advisors once a month for...something. We students were very naïve, but we all agreed we were being “psychoanalyzed.” I had a few run-ins with the system, but compared to later years’ run-ins by thousands of students, over civil rights, and student rights and free speech, mine were pretty mild. My first-year practicum placement was at the VA. I think my supervisor liked me because I once was attending a ward meeting at the VA hospital, and when I returned to my office, there she was, singing, “Oh where have you been, Joey boy, Joey boy...”

My second year placement was at a psychiatric hospital, where my supervisor was living in dread because his 7-year psychoanalysis was about to end. This is neither a joke nor an exaggeration. I once confided in him my concern about the faculty at the School who preached about “relationships,” but were so cold to the students that the faculty seemed unable to develop said relationships. The next time I was in school, my school advisor called me in, and said, “What is this hostility, Mr. Fischer?” My practicum instructor had squealed on me.

The curriculum in my MSW program seemed to me to be juvenile, unsolid practices built upon unsolid theory. Our practice course went like this—and I mean for an entire year: The teacher would read a passage from some canned case record, and then say, “And what should the social worker say in return?” We would volunteer all kinds of possible responses—many of them as wacky as they possibly could be—guessing “correctly” in about 1 in 10 tries. Usually the instructor would answer her own question, and say whatever SHE thought was the “CORRECT” response. Boring and stupid and absolutely non-replicable in real practice unless your poor client said exactly the same thing the canned client had said, and THEN you would be superbly equipped with the absolutely RIGHT answer.

The ultimate betrayal of the idea that social work had special knowledge, or maybe ANY knowledge, was the insistence that first year MSW students go into their field placements in their second week of being in the program, and start seeing clients immediately. What does that say about a field? It is either that we don’t care if we hurt clients when our students are completely unequipped by any professional

education, or we don't have essential professional education to offer anyhow so we might as well have students see clients at the very beginning of their so-called education....or both?

I still remember my very first client in my first year in the MSW program; I even remember his name. The VA had us dress up in long, white clinical coats which somehow, instead of providing me extra security in my frightening new role, increased the pressure on me to act like a "professional," which I did not know how to do. I had no clue what to say or how to proceed, so I just went up to the ward he was on, and asked the nurse to ask him to come out. Well, he did just that; he came out, and in a very loud voice, kept asking, "Are you my shrink? Are you my shrink?" Well, his "shrink" wanted to get the hell outta there, but managed to hold his ground even though I was clueless about what I should do or say. Luckily for me, my first client was a really nice guy, nurturing me through my first professional encounter, without ever saying what an obvious boob I was. But does ANYTHING say more about what little technical skills and knowledge social workers need to see their clients than actually sending out a first year MSW student to see a client without a single course, not even a single minute, spent in educating that student about what to do?

Yet, I still love social work.

But, it REALLY ain't that easy to love social work.

After I graduated with my MSW, apparently professionally certified that I was a successful helping professional, I moved out to San Francisco, and secured a job with the VA as a "clinical social worker" in a mental health day treatment center. What a great job. We had a psychiatrist, clinical psychologist, occupational therapist, a very therapeutic secretary and me, the professional social worker. We had our own building, a redone wooden barracks way out in the woods near the Golden Gate Bridge. The mental health clinic was right across a small road from us where our fearless leader and overall supervisor, a shrink, was said to reside, but he almost never came across the road to see us. In fact, the only time I can recall a visit from the boss was the time we tried to smuggle in a coke dispenser one of our clients got for us. That sent him over like a bullet out of a gun to tell us we couldn't do it. Then he was gone.

In this job, I was able to play ping pong and shoot pool, and soon became very adept at both. Of course, most of the clients I played against were loaded with psychotropic drugs, and as the youngest one there, I was also the fastest, sort of like the Flash compared with normal humans.

In this job, which I enjoyed for almost three years, I had only minimal contact with the other social workers employed by the VA. I was the only male on a staff of 25 social workers. We had staff meetings every month in which several of the other workers complained about the doctors and shrinks not respecting them. I had then, and have today, no comment. OK; maybe I should say this: I was not impressed. The standards were very low at this agency, something I have found replicated in most other social work agencies with which I am familiar.

Never once in those three years at the VA did any social work function other than "clinical" get discussed in those staff meetings. However, I was an active member of NASW and tried to do our *Code of Ethics'* bidding, but progress was slow and rarely forthcoming.

After about six months on the job, at a staff meeting of only the Day Treatment Center personnel, I said, "We have been seeing most of our clients for months.

Shouldn't we have some criteria to see whether we actually are helping them, and maybe some criteria for deciding when they are ready to be discharged from our center?" The shrink in charge said, "Joel, you do ask the difficult questions." Apparently, they were, indeed, difficult, because we almost never addressed them again. Like, what are the criteria for deciding when one's ping pong skills are good enough to be released into the community?

At another Day Treatment Center staff meeting around the same time, after some soul searching, I confessed, "I doubt if I am helping any one. I realize now that I never learned one thing in my MSW program that had to do with specific techniques or procedures for helping others. And they told me in school that I was a really good student, with A's in both years in my practicum certifying that I knew....well, something." No one responded. I was thinking that after an MSW and some experience, I literally knew nothing that I could use to demonstrably help my clients. I was skill-less. But this insight helped frame the rest of my career, not counting the fact that I was pretty darn good at ping pong and shooting pool.

This was my first inkling that something was wrong, maybe just with me, but I was betting it might be the whole social work education establishment. It was right around then that I decided I wanted to get a doctorate.

In those days, almost all social work doctoral degrees required two to three years of practice experience. So, I had to wait. While I waited, I started to read a lot of social work literature on how to help others. I found most of that literature to be absolutely meaningless, vague, and unhelpful when it came to prescription of specific interventions. To some extent, it still is. But I wanted to try something that could be useful, so I started a group that met once a week. The group consisted of veterans who lived at home and their parents.

I deemed this group successful from the day we started because the parents and vets actually came in, some for two years until I left. Despite not knowing much, if any, intervention knowledge, I was able to maintain interest and enough of a hope of help, I guess, for everyone to stick around.

Based on the group, I wrote and was able to publish my first article in a professional journal, the then-mighty, *Social Casework*. The article was entitled, *Group Treatment of Families with Schizophrenic Sons* (Fischer, 1966). It was actually one of the few articles at the time on the topic of treatment of families in a group, and it made me a leading expert in the field in my own mind. I still remember the excitement I felt when I received the letter saying I was going to be a published author; what a thrill!

I wonder to this day if that article helped me get into the doctoral program at Berkeley. I assume it did, but I also had some really good references telling the School of Social Welfare how nice I was and how smart.

VOILA. I was accepted and started at Berkeley, even though I had completed fewer than three years of full-time practice. It turned out that I was the youngest student to have ever started that doctoral program at the time, although, within a year, Berkeley started accepting students who had no practice experience. Maybe they figured, like me, that if you don't know how to *do* effective practice, we might as well just move you into our program where you can, at least, learn how to *study* effective practice.

The first day of my back-to-school experience was a killer. I started out feeling funny that I was a student again, but excited I was starting. I ended up having to go to the University hospital with a high fever. The doctor told me that I had the flu, but I was thinking it must have been the pressure that got me hospitalized. When I returned to

school in a couple of days and told my advisor, Henry Miller, what had happened to me the first day, he said, "Wait'll you see the second day."

Oh, that program. I went from a staff of 24 women and me to a faculty of maybe 24 men and one woman. The faculty always were talking about their books and their articles instead of complaining that they weren't being treated fairly by the shrinks. It was complete culture shock for me, and reinforced my belief that my hospitalization was school-pressure-related. It was about then that I realized I had an incipient brain tumor that would cause symptoms until the day I graduated, when it miraculously disappeared.

I cannot muster very many negatives about my three years at Berkeley, other than that annoying brain tumor. I had the most amazing faculty there, from whom I learned just about everything I know, academically. Included among these academic gems were Henry Miller, my advisor and dissertation chair (who uttered these immortal words after reading my first draft: "Joel, Chapter Two is brilliant; throw it out!"); Scott Briar, who taught me the crucial differences between intervention theory and causal theory; Lydia Rappaport; Henry Mayer and several others who were so important to me that I have forgotten their names.

Except for studying seven days per week, the chance to live in Berkeley and hang out on the campus a little was one of the greatest opportunities of my life. I was there from 1967 to 1970. There was plenty of turmoil at Berkeley (and of course, elsewhere in the United States) during those three years. At the end of my second year, my class had our oral exams. I was lucky to go early in the morning because, after I was finished, Governor Ronnie Reagan ordered the campus gassed. Most of my classmates had to reschedule their exams because of that. It was all over what was called Peoples' Park, a fight to stop developers from putting in a parking structure where there was a little park. They had National Guard troops guarding the space, and that very day, I took my 2 year old daughter to the site, held her up in the face of the troops' rifles, and yelled at the poor kid that she should never forget what was happening there. Once she got home and climbed onto her hobby horse, of course, she completely forgot the incident, thank God.

My third year, while I was working on my dissertation, I was lucky enough to teach a 1-year MSW course creatively called, *Social Casework*. That year, the entire University went on strike, as I recall because of the seemingly endless and brutal Vietnam War, and several complaints about bias toward minorities. I taught my course off campus, scrambling around to find venues, which included coffee shops, apartments and who knows what. Turned out, those were very positive experiences that I ultimately continued at the University of Hawai'i.

In retrospect, despite the turmoil of those years, except for when the students organized protests, meetings, and demonstrations, there was never, ever, any discussions in any of my classes about justice issues, how the environment shaped human behavior, or issues of that sort that shape many class discussions today. But since I had a brain tumor, and was handicapped by my fear of the doctoral faculty and program, I was too paralyzed to analyze or speak up about it. This program really was pure ACADEMICS.

But, still, I loved social work. The day I finished my doctorate, I felt like I could change the social work world all by myself. Change to what never really crossed my mind...at that point.

Loving social work in Hawai'i.

In my dissertation year at Berkeley, I applied to a few academic programs around the country. One was at the University of Hawai'i. Whoever could have imagined in those

days that there was a chance to live in Hawai`i, AND be a professor? I guess I did, although it was really only a fantasy. But still....

Well, after a few weeks, I heard from the Associate Dean at the University of Hawai`i (UH) School of Social Work that he was coming to Berkeley, and hoped to meet with me at my home. I had bolstered my Curriculum Vitae with a few publications and in-press articles, so he must have thought I was some kind of hot shot. In fact, he was so impressed by me that he uttered these famous words (I am not making this up), “Our faculty is calcified. You’ll fit right in.”

I was invited to do a recruiting trip to Hawai`i, and it was very successful. In addition to watching the most beautiful sunset I have ever seen, I was offered an Associate Professorship, and a sparkling salary of \$17, 000+! I accepted. Man, they really must have been hard up, in addition to being calcified. Back home, I happened to mention my deal to Harry Specht, future dean at Berkeley, and he said something like, “Hey; that’s more than I make!” I was very pleased.

Ah, Hawai`i.

I will not dwell on the glories of life in Hawai`i that were brought to me courtesy of being a social worker, except to say one thing:

It was in Hawai`i where I met the love of my life, Renee, to whom I have belonged for over 32 years at this writing. We have enjoyed our life together in ways I could never even have imagined. But it wasn’t so easy at the start. I asked Renee to marry me on a Christmas Eve, going down on one knee and giving her a ring. She didn’t say “yes,” and she didn’t say “no.” (What she actually said was, “I don’t know whether to laugh or to cry.”) But she did take the ring. Three months later, and still no response UNTIL: Well, my mother called Renee from California and said, “Why don’t you want to marry my son,” despite the many and obvious reasons why Renee should not. Under pressure and not thinking very clearly, Renee said to my mother, “I guess I will.” And with that tremendous vote of confidence from my future wife, the marriage was a go.

That’s the good news. And now for the bad/mixed news: What I learned about social work and social work practice on the loveliest floating outpost in the world.

I started out on this faculty excited as one could be, and soon learned that the Associate Dean’s assessment of my colleagues (in which I would “fit right in,”) was pretty accurate. There was an excess of conservatism and resistance to change and a deficit in scholarliness and interest in social change. I am sickened by admitting this, but, while the deficit in scholarliness changed for the better with several excellent hires over several years, the lack of interest in social change—based on actions, not words—continued and still is predominant at my former school today. As in so many human organizations, the culture was strongest on self-preservation and weakest on taking actions that are reflective of social work’s Code of Ethics. I base this judgment on decades of organizing and participating in social justice demonstrations, and many, many years of testifying in the Hawai`i State Legislature on social justice issues. In 40 years, virtually the only social workers who ever showed up for these activities were my wife and the former Executive Director of NASW-HI.

As I write these words, I still feel sick about the lack of interest my academic and practitioner social work colleagues had for active participation in social justice activities. Such feelings do not engender more love for my profession. They, instead, at times, made

me question my own deep affection for social work. However, without trying to sound like some kind of social justice martyr, I did have plenty of support from faculty and community people *outside* of social work. That was key; I cannot express strongly enough how much support like that can mean to a person.

So, I pretty much gave up on social work's actual *participation* in social justice activities, but I never gave up on our profession's *goals* of social justice and fairness for all. That was something, I guess.

I was very active in NASW for over 40 years. For about the past 20 or so years, I was a member and/or chair of the NASW-HI PAC. We were an independent wing of NASW, not responsible to the Board. Sadly, even that changed recently when NASW revoked the independence of the PACS, and made them just another committee of the Board. I hate to say it, but I resigned from our PAC as soon as I found out about that change on the grounds that the PAC seemed about to become a bunch of people appointed by, and responsible to, the President of our local chapter, rather than an independent group. The changes meant to me that decisions would be politicized and become lowest-common-denominator recommendations. It was hard for me handle.

I did some community-based research during those years. It gave me a fair amount of insight into agency practices. I was not impressed. In every project in which I was involved, and in large projects that my colleagues were running, I found wide-spread resistance among social work staff to research, especially evaluative research. This was not just annoyance expressed by the staff; in many cases, there was outright sabotage, with staff simply not collecting the data that they had prepared for months to do. After several studies falling through, either completely or partially, and whether mine or my colleagues,' I must admit I gave up on agency research. Very frustrating.

On the other hand, one of the best things about the School of Social Work during my stay there was virtually complete freedom to do scholarly work. I cannot say it was ever really appreciated; I CAN say that by the end of my stay there, the last ten years, it not only was not appreciated, it was thought to be irrelevant to the job of a social work faculty member by an anti-intellectual administration at the School. But, again, I was able to be pretty productive over those years, completing a fair amount of published material, some on my own, and some as co-author with wonderful colleagues from all over the country.

Oh, the stories I could tell about being a social worker and a school of social work faculty over those years. There were so many anti-social-work-values-actions by social workers, on my faculty and in the community, that I more and more found my sources of support outside all social work organizations. Two examples:

My wife was chair and I was one of five other members of the coordinating group for Hawai'i Committee for Africa, an anti-apartheid organization. For three years, we lobbied, held demonstrations and testified in the state Legislature to get the state to divest state and retirement funds from companies that do business with South Africa. After three years of frenetic activity, we achieved one of the five largest divestments in the US, 1.1 billion dollars! And two weeks after our divestment was announced, Nelson Mandela was released from prison. Since I taught research, I understood the difference between cause and effect and correlation. But who's to say in this case, right? During those three years, not one other social worker, except for a few of my students, ever attended a single activity!

The second example was the fight to keep the University of Hawai'i from starting a Defense Department funded military research organization—called a UARC—at our University. It started when a few UH faculty including me, several (non-social work) students and a few key community activists took control of the University of Hawai'i President's office to protest the UARC. WE stayed there for seven days and nights, sleeping on the floor like we had just come from a war zone. It was the best pajama party ever.

We commanded the headlines for those seven days, conducting negotiations with the President and Board of Regents. We won many of those points, and after seven days, we proudly left the President's office, singing songs of liberation. We did a huge amount of work in order to testify at the Board of Regents. We basically succeeded in delaying the UARC for two years when a watered-down UARC was approved. The most important point that we had negotiated was that no military research would be conducted on campus and that was part of the final agreement. We also made several predictions about the long term success or failure of the UARC, and some years later, virtually every one of our predictions was validated.

I held a class in the President's office on about the sixth day of the occupation. Not one of the students said anything about the location or the struggle. I was really taken aback. Nothing? Needless to say, apart from the students who attended that class, not a single social worker, over that week and the following two years of struggle, ever attended a single event, meeting, or activity opposing military research on campus.

All in all, this was not a very good 40-year record for social workers doing much to actualize their own values.

All you need is love.

So, after all that, how can I say I love social work? I suppose, in the first place, it's hard to say you don't love something that you were voluntarily part of for 50 years. Maybe that explains it.

But I DO love social work, and I do not want my personal disappointments to take anything away from that. I think I love social work as a profession and as a field because of the PROMISE of social work. Far from perfect, social work has what no other profession or field can even come close to: A commitment to the service of others unlike all other professions; a commitment to understanding and changing ENVIRONMENTS that no other field professes; a commitment to serving the poor, again, alone among all the helping professions. Take a look at the NASW book, *Social Work Speaks*. It is a collection of policy statements that I used for the many years of my work in the Hawaii Legislature and as Chair of the NASW-Hawai'i PAC. It's not perfect, but as a compendium of the commitments of social work, it is without equal among all the professions.

Another reason I love social work is the people I have been privileged to meet and love. Some are former students, many are my co-authors over many years, and others are people with whom I have had the pleasure to work or meet at social work conferences. Email makes it possible to stay in contact; airplanes make it possible to travel around the country and get together with these friends. Oh, I am SO grateful for the privilege of working with and/or hanging out with these social workers.

One other example. I was lucky enough to be selected by NASW Hawai'i as the Social Worker of the Year for Social Justice about 10 years ago, honored in the State Senate and

at the NASW annual lunch. I was wearing one of those rubber band thingies sold by NASW like the ones that said “LIVESTRONG,” except ours says “STAND UP FOR OTHERS.” I had the audience repeat it with me over and over. *Social work stands up for others*. Oh, man, do I ever love that.

Reference

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