

The Power of Social Work: Pass It On*

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There is much about this year's slogan for social work month that appeals to me. The power of social work: Pass it on! I have been a social work educator since 1988. Passing on the values and potential for power, of a profession I've come to love, has been the motivation for my career. I believe that social workers have the potential for making a difference in this world; alleviating human suffering and furthering the cause of social justice. But, the slogan for this year also has meaning for me at a very personal level.

My daughter, Jessyca, will receive her MSW degree from the University of Nebraska in May. I am very proud of her and pleased that she is pursuing a career in a profession that I value so highly. In many ways she is like most of the students I have had the privilege of working with over the years. She is compassionate, bright, and passionate about wanting to make the world a more peaceful and just place. She also has been going to school while she works full time in the field, in her instance as a state child protective services worker. And, like many who pursue careers in social work, she is a survivor of childhood trauma and a former social work client.

It was a social worker who brought my daughter into my life in 1980 and social workers who provided support through the adoption process. I had not yet entered the profession myself. My daughter was just short of four years of age when she was adopted. She had been living in foster care for the previous two years. When I first met her she used to say "social workers are my friends!" Indeed. She had a child protective services case manager, a bachelor's level worker, named Theresa. My daughter was in a foster home with over a dozen other children. Besides shepherding her case through a judicial involuntary termination of parental rights, Theresa would pick her up on many a Saturday for special outings; a trip to the gym, an ice cream cone, and the extra individual attention a pre-school age child needs.

Judith Herman, a leading expert on trauma, maintains that survivors who are able to heal and transcend their trauma are often able to give meaning to the trauma through finding a survivor mission

(Herman, 1997). I've found this to be the case for many of the social work students I have gotten to know over the years. The trauma may have been childhood abuse or abandonment, rape, domestic violence, the death of a child or partner, an accident or life threatening illness, or neglect.

There was a controversial article in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1989 titled "Wounded Healers" in which the author alleged that many therapists have experienced maltreatment as children and bring to their practices resulting mental health problems that compromise their clinical competence (Maeder, 1989). What I have found to be more common in my career are students who have done a lot of work on their issues, usually in therapy, and then enter the field as a way of "giving back" in response to the help they received from others. I have also found them to generally be determined to impact the societal conditions that support the types of trauma they experienced. Rather than wounded healers I see them as healed heroes and heroines.

Recently, in a telephone conversation, I told my daughter that it was probably a good thing that I'd be sitting somewhere far from the stage during her graduation because I wouldn't want to embarrass her by crying as she walked across the stage to receive her diploma. She told me she expects that she'll be crying, too. She said when she thinks of all the obstacles she's faced, she can't believe she's made it to this point. For now, she plans on continuing to work in public child welfare with vulnerable children and families.

There are students in social work programs all across the country, including the one I teach in, with stories as touching and miraculous as Jessyca's. I think of how far they've come and I think of all the lives they will touch and bring change and healing to. All of us who are part of social work education, as faculty or field instructors, have the privilege of being part of this awesome process, as we pass on the power of social work.

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References

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