Letter to a New Social Worker:
On Losing and Locating Our Selves[1]

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To be a social worker in the world requires us to locate ourselves in relationship to the environment and to others in that same environment, however differently we may experience such a space. But *how* do we locate ourselves in an overwhelming world, a world filled with the paradox of pain and delight? Surely this is what drew us all to social work: we locate ourselves in similar ways and have in common the connective tissue of shared values, "social work" values, namely. I fear, though, that oftentimes, as you work to survive in academia, these concepts become static or inert – limp – like the quiet eye-roll-inducing rubric that every student dreads when the professor launches into some Council on Social Work Education pressure point, and that the concepts then fail to take on the meaning that they truly embody.

Let's take the dignity and worth of the person as an example. No doubt what gets conjured in your minds as you reflect on this core social work value is the principle that our clients are free agents, with free will, whose lives are their own, and whom we can only hope to influence if we seek from them an invitation into their world, and convey to them our respect for their self-determination, rather than a theft of their identity or an imposition of meaning onto their fragile sense of things.

This all sounds lovely, of course, but what about doing all this in a world that prizes conformity and compliance above creativity and getting a little crazy from time to time? How do we manifest our own dignity and worth when we're being called on to manage impossibly large and invariably complex caseloads, with outrageous and sometimes even psychotic demands from chart auditors, administrators, and funding sources? I'll tell you: we do everything we can to know where we are. We stay located in the world, connected to the social work values that keep us vibrant and alive, bound up as we are to the fates of those around us. We often fail to think about how we as social workers ***embody*** these values in our lives, not just uphold them in our work.

I'd like to share this reflection by the poet David Whyte, which I think will help us shift our gaze from the exterior to the interior:

[1] Keynote speech presented at the MSU Denver Phi Alpha Social Work Honor Society Induction Ceremony, May 2015, Denver, CO.

> "COURAGE
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> Is a word that tempts us to think outwardly, to run bravely against opposing fire, to do something under besieging circumstance, and perhaps, above all, to be seen to do it in public, to show courage; to be celebrated in story, rewarded with medals, given the accolade, but a look at its linguistic origins leads us in a more interior direction and toward its original template, the old Norman French, Coeur, or heart.
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> Courage is the measure of our heartfelt participation with life, with another, with a community, a work, a future. To be courageous, is not necessarily to go anywhere or do anything except to make conscious those things we already feel deeply and then to live through the unending vulnerabilities of those consequences. To be courageous is to seat our feelings deeply in the body and in the world; to live up to and into the necessities of relationships that often already exist, with things we find we already care deeply about: with a person, a future, a possibility in society, or with an unknown that begs us on and always has begged us on. Whether we stay or whether we go – to be courageous is to stay close to the way we are made."

Take a moment to chew on that last phrase: "…to be courageous is to stay close to the way we are made." This leads me to think that what is important isn't what we *do* but who we *are*. We – our *selves* – are all that we have to offer our clients; in a sense, our selves are the product that we are selling, if you'll please forgive the unfortunate metaphor. This means, then, that it is in our *selves* that we contain the values we hold as such important lights in the darkness, though I would argue that darkness gets a bad rap, to say nothing of its concerning connotations around how we locate difference in the Other, often employing that very language of darkness. I'll say more about that later.

So in our selves we find our values, and from our selves these values are given shape and voice. If that's true, then where does this concept of "self-care" come from? I apologize for being such a contrarian but I really hate fluffy language like that; it so often devolves into superficiality and truism. Let me say more about what I mean: self-care is not something that you do; it isn't an activity. Have at your yoga, red wine, and Walking Dead marathons. These are not self-care. Self-care is a *value*. It is a *value*. Just like social justice, integrity, service, and the importance of human relationships. We might even call it a superordinate value; care for that which embodies all the other values is too important to relegate to a throwaway cliché.

We have strategies to cultivate this value in our lives, to be sure, for instance the strategy of physical wellness or exercise, of which yoga or joining the softball league are activities. Leisure and pleasure are other important means of cultivating our value of self-care, so add Walking Dead marathons or whatever they're airing on TLC these days back to your list. Just don't call it your "self-care" for the week, because it isn't. It's a TV show. Self-care is a value. Knowing what self-care means, and how it functions, and the larger cause that it serves – and being precise in how we think, talk, teach, and supervise about this – is really quite vital. Let me show you why.

The values of social work, of which care for self should be considered an essential part, are all reciprocal and mutually necessary, meaning they all exist in the relationship between self and other. Service, justice, integrity, relationship – they all say something about how *I* regard *you*. Follow me on this little thought experiment, if you will: if the values we hold for our work with others are embodied in our selves, and those values exist to allow us true service to others, then the distinction between self and other begins to dissipate. Here we have empathy. But empathy isn't the same as compassion. Not at all, in fact. I can hate one of my clients in my bones – and believe me, I have – and I would contest that my hate is the deepest form of empathy I can have for that person at that moment in time. Sometimes what we discover when we find ourselves located in others fills us with disgust, rage, torment, and yes, deep hate. What do these feeling states have in common with the more pleasant ones we're inclined to seek, like compassion, love, amusement? They emerge from the same stuff, and that stuff is in our *selves* just as it's in the others that we serve. Compassion can get fatigued. Empathy, on the other hand, is only absent or bruised when we fail to really look into ourselves. As the scholar Robert Williams said, "The road to interiority passes through the other." I take this to mean that only when we allow ourselves to be lost and then located in the other can we truly find ourselves. Self-care, then, means to value this level of attention to ourselves, as we exist in relationship to the world around us, so that we can continue being in the world in a sustainable way.

Hate and contempt, like heartbreak, can be empathic, but only if we let them. First we have to be willing to locate ourselves in others, which might feel risky…because it is. To find yourself in another, to say, "Oh there I am!" means that you might lose yourself, or maybe worse yet, be relocated anew but with a dent or a dimple or a scar you'd been working to ignore and keep hidden. There is a loss in this, and that loss is the demise of our fantasy of control and heroism, the first kind of courage David Whyte writes about in his poem. I challenge us all to surrender to this loss. Its value is immeasurable, but only if we really *see* and *feel* its service to our ever-growing selves. We must take off our capes. These are the moments that help to make a good-enough social worker: when the false dichotomy between personal and professional selves

begins to crumble, making way for an integration of a truer, more whole, and more sustaining identity, one that is closer "to the way we are made."

One of the important lessons I have learned in trying to stay close to the way that I am made, a lesson I have come to cherish for its value in my life far beyond simply being a social worker, is as follows: I must always hold in my mind a paradox. My power affects everything and everyone, and that nothing that I do matters. That is the paradox – I will forever carry the power to change things, and after I die the universe won't bat an eye. Please understand, I'm inflating these two poles as an illustration, simply because we are all at risk of getting trapped on either side at times in our work with clients. When I get cross-wise with my own grandiosity on the one hand, or despair and fatalism on the other, it's time to step back and work to restore balance.

I think what we often fail to consider when talking about burnout, and I'm speaking from experience, is what it communicates about how we feel dislocated in the world. Burnout is another one of these concepts that sometimes misses the mark in what it represents, speaking only to the exhaustion or sense of futility that often accompanies the work we all do. What I have observed in myself and in colleagues that share their sense of burnout with me, is that it manifests in reaction to that sense of loss I was speaking about, the discovery that without my cape I'm ordinary and flawed, that clients will run off and do crazy things despite all my efforts to guide them toward health as I define it, that the systems with which we all must work often move at a glacial pace and without any human conscience. These are the realities, and burnout may be the appropriate reminder alarm when I get all "up, up, and away!" with how I regard myself in the world. Sometimes we're supposed to be burned out, and it doesn't necessarily mean we should jump ship and change careers. It means, "Slow down and get right with yourself." Burnout also signals that we probably haven't been listening to our clients clearly, and that we're getting in our own way.

This is what I believe to be true: the trauma of this world can feel like an affliction, something that is being done *to* us. That's fundamentally how I interpret an idea like vicarious traumatization, or VT as the literature would have it, because God forbid we not abbreviate everything. And don't get me wrong, I know that we often feel "done to" by the horrors we witness and hear about from clients that have been disenfranchised and abused. Of course we do, particularly if we can't find ourselves in them. But here's the thing, and let me speak simply for myself here: if I can locate myself in my traumatized client, and find that part of me that shares in her trauma, to emotionally dwell with her, as the psychoanalyst Robert Stolorow calls it, I'm responding to a reality, painful though it may be, that none of us can ever escape. I should thank my clients for the disturbing facts that they force me to see in the world, rather than bury my head in the sand and say, "that's not me." It's in the "not me, not mine" reaction that I get lost or I get burned, because it's *false*.

This gets us back to what I was reflecting on earlier about the language of dislocation and difference, that unfortunate conflation of "darkness" with being lost or bad, and the problematic associations that this can create in our minds. When the Other also becomes associated with darkness and difference, yet another "not me" dynamic takes place, and at least unconsciously we find ourselves propelled away from that which feels negating. Fundamentally, this is the nature of bigotry: the fear that one's own story will somehow be erased or go untold by the presence of the Other.

Unfortunately, social work is far from exempt from this in its own development; in fact, we have an awfully lousy history around what gets called "cultural competence," and have understandably reacted to that in the last couple decades with significant changes in curricula and academic values, and I think a lot of that is enormously positive and important. The critique that I have, though, and this is certainly directed at the core value of "competence," is how this can perpetuate the self/other divide, like many of the other phenomena I've been exploring. Let me quote the psychoanalyst Anton Hart, because he says it much clearer than I can: "Competence still keeps people who are different from you as Other, like they're a commodity we have to get better at dealing with." He goes on to promote the imperative of "learning how to be so radically undefended that you can be open to the Other, open to the person who's different from you in a profound way, in a deeply personal way, rather than, like, 'learning to speak the language.'"

So competence might get us into trouble when thought of in this context of commodification, might it not? What's needed above all else, then, is empathy and curiosity, not conquest; not simply a location of oneself in another, but an openness to the idea that who I have been, am, and could become is reflected in and enhanced by who you and yours have been, are, and might be. In case this sounds like its own fluffy universalism, avoiding the nature of difference, please hear otherwise. My sense is that commonality must be located before difference can be recognized, let alone celebrated.

Okay, I'm going to change direction a bit, lest this all be too clinical. One of the sexiest things about social work, I think, is that we are the professional integration of dozens of different disciplines and fields, all cuddled up next to one another under the social work tent. Think about it! We intersect with all branches of medicine, from pediatrics to psychiatry to end-of-life care; public health administrators and researchers; as well as political science and policy makers; psychologists; anthropologists, who taught us how to do proper data collection in the field; urban planners, with whom we share one of our great Mothers, Jane Addams, and with whom we must know how to collaborate to address our growing affordable housing crisis; their cousins, architects; law enforcement, attorneys, judges, and others in the criminal justice system; educators, obviously; and I could go on. A familiarity with this

range of different disciplines gets grown throughout one's career in social work, so that in one moment you can be working with, say, the dynamics of a client's traumatic history and how this manifests in an addiction that's haunting them, while also advising a policymaker who's trying to get harm reduction legislation passed in the state rather than sticking with the Draconian criminalization of the last eight presidents' racist and reckless War on Drugs…for instance. Isn't that marvelous?

At our core, then, the field of social work is all about locating ourselves in the identities of different professions as well as in our clients. We are effective for clients because we help them navigate through all these different systems, which requires us to know the systems intimately, even though we may not be from them ourselves. Social work is an integrative practice, whether at the micro, mezzo, or macro levels, all dynamic concepts, mind you, overlapping and never static. That's what makes a social work degree so valuable, really. There's always some new challenge in the world that being a social worker will grant you access to.

Let me come back down to earth and talk about survival, because I'd be remiss if I didn't acknowledge that some days, that's just what this all boils down to. So here are some strategies I've come to cherish in my own life. Write your notes the same day, like, *that day*. Don't leave until your paperwork is done. Try not to procrastinate on the banal minutiae of this work, it only becomes burdensome if you let it, and really, there are so few things we can control in this world; writing your stupid progress notes is one of them. Return your emails promptly and succinctly; don't get into a battle over email, and avoid strong affective language in your emails, except for the occasional exclamation point in a greeting, for instance "Howdy!" Tone matters, and it'll save you a ton of time in needless backpedaling.

Next, and this one may be the most important thing I have to say this evening – get into your own psychotherapy. Budget for it, make time for it, and let it become part of your lifestyle. It's daunting, it can be a pain in the ass, and it can be expensive. But it might save your life.

Finally, and this is a significant one as well: have a handful of important friends that are in this field but cultivate and keep as many friendships as fit you with people who are *not* in this field. Learn from them, get interested in what they do, find yourself in what they feel passionate about. Be humbled by their commitments to things that you might find dull. Be modest in your own achievements, and let these friends be an anchor for you when you're at risk of excessive pride or martyrdom. Also, seduce them to our common values, especially the inconvenient ones. We need all the advocates for justice we can get.

I hope that being in the world as a social worker proves for you as scary and affirming and fabulous as it continues to prove for me.

References

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