

**WHEN RELIGIOUS VALUES AND SOCIAL WORK VALUES
CONFLICT: FINDING RESOLUTION**

by

Marilyn Peterson Armour, Ph.D., M.S.W.
University of Texas at Austin
marmour@mail.utexas.edu

CSWE Presentation
February 26, 2002

Copyright 2002 © This material may not be reproduced without written
permission of the author.

WHEN RELIGIOUS VALUES AND SOCIAL WORK VALUES CONFLICT: FINDING RESOLUTION

Social work has repeatedly faced issues that split the profession into opposing, even warring factions. Although the issues were substantive in and of themselves, people would be judged as more or less committed to the profession, more or less rigorous in their work, or more or less concerned for the poor on the basis of their position. Many of the issues reflected contradictions and paradoxes endemic to the profession. The decades old debate about cause versus function targeted clinical work as suspect because its' focus on personal change blamed the individual for circumstances caused by social conditions. Since the 1960s, a charge of "unfaithful" has been levied against those who choose private practice with the worried well as a means to earn a substantial income instead of committing themselves to help poor and disenfranchised populations. The current debate focuses on rigor versus relevance. Those who support evidence based practice tend to view clinicians that advocate practice wisdom as stuck at an earlier stage of development. Clinicians retort by accusing researchers of promoting practices that are not relevant to the real world of practice.

Although some of us might wish that these debates would end, most of us recognize that these contradictions are part of social work. We don't expect them to resolve. Indeed, the tension between polarized positions can be useful, although frustrating, since it sharpens the core issues for each side.

The conflict between religious values and social work values is particularly

painful because it pits values against each other in ways that threaten treasured social work principles. How can you believe in non discrimination and work in a setting that discriminates against people who are gay or lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered? How can you believe in self determination and insist that religiously conservative social workers change their beliefs to "fit in" with the liberal tenor of the profession? How can you believe in free speech and social justice and be part of a group that discriminates against those who are socially oppressed? How can you advocate free speech and the acceptance of differences while you suppress and marginalize those, within the profession, who represent 'the other side'?

It is natural that we would yearn for resolution. Holding differing values, world views, and positions related to divisive issues threatens the cohesiveness of professional institutions and organizations. Holding differing values, world views, and positions related to divisive issues generates feelings of betrayal, anger, and deep disappointment because the issues define, in part, who we are as people. They are part of our inherent worth and dignity that the profession has promised to revere. I would propose, however, that the goal of resolution is unrealistic. It assigns rationality to a process that is basically emotional and an emotional process is not conducive to a rational solution. It asks people to solve a dilemma that the larger society has not, as yet, addressed with a satisfactory conclusion. It makes the absence of discomfort or pain the real objective.

Indeed, I would argue that the real challenge to us, as educators, is to support a process that keeps students in the middle of the painful realities generated by the discrepancies in values. My own experience as both clinician and academician has taught me to value process and the riches that come from my willingness to wrestle with my own discordant behaviors and beliefs. The challenges have, at times, deepened my understanding of the human condition, led to new insights, and compelled new behaviors. Letting myself be pulled by opposing forces has also resulted in realizations that clarified internal struggles and strengthened my character.

In order to support such a process, we, as educators, have to drop our own need for certainty as well as challenge students to stay in the middle of the ocean rather than climbing on shore. The drive for certainty is powerful. It reduces anxiety. It gives direction. It gives power over the chaos and ambiguity that problems engender. However, like any form of protection, our certainties may shut down our openness to the other side or sides in ways that narrow and simplify the complexity of the human condition. The drive for certainty may also steal or seal off another vital process which is the ability to understand by immersing oneself in the experience of another. Fromm said, "...man has an intense need for certainty; he wants to believe that there is no need to doubt that the method by which he makes his decisions is right." Shore said, "the temptation to transcend uncertainty and make articulate the inarticulate parts of the self...to see the world beckoning with meaning, these are the things most of us devoutly desire. But when this yearning is governed by urgency, we need to be

uneasy, "conscious of how such longing can shape perception and color understanding."

Staying in the middle of the painful realities generated by the discrepancies in values requires a faith or belief in the fact that people can grow through their pain as long as you allow it to work on you. You are not allowed, however, to know the road ahead of you or its destination. Let me share with you some current situations that keep me in the middle of the pain.

1. The first story is about a teacher's behavior in a cultural diversity class that was team taught. During the early weeks of the class, the students participated in an exercise which gave them the opportunity to proudly identify and claim membership in different ethnic, religious, and cultural groups by standing as one of the teachers called out the names of different groups. The other teachers joined in the exercise to show the students that they too are life long learners relative to issues of diversity. As each group was named, participants in the exercise stood briefly and sat down. When it came time to recognize those who claim membership as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender, the lead teacher first commented that for some groups, it may not be safe to identify openly as members. Having given permission for participants to stay in their seats, the lead teacher then named the group and waited briefly for the people who so identified to stand. I paraphrase the teacher who was one of the participants: "I noticed

out of the corner of my eye that two students made a slight move to stand and then settled back in their seats. At that moment I realized that I had to risk myself in order to help the students who identified as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender to feel empowered and okay about who they were. How could we want them to step forward if we weren't willing to ourselves? What did I need to do to make this setting safe: I stood. Once I did so, the other students who had made the slight moves stood up too. What happened in this exercise gave those students the courage to begin to come out. By the end of the semester, each of them had talked to their families and had begun to break through the debilitating attitudes that had kept them hidden." When I heard this story, I related fully to the gift this teacher gave to the students. It was clearly a courageous act on her part that was not done without fear and trepidation. How would the rest of the students see her? What had she forfeited by what she did? How would she be criticized?

Several weeks later, I heard the other side. Another teacher who had not taught this class was approached by several of the students who had been present when the teacher stood up. They explained that what had happened had made them extremely uncomfortable. They had no qualms about recognizing the students who were gay, lesbian, bisexual, or

transgendered. Rather they expressed concern that while the students in the minority had felt empowered by the teacher's act, those who were religiously conservative felt disempowered. "This is a class where we're suppose to explore ourselves and our attitudes toward different groups. If I say what I really think," they said, "How will the faculty member view me? Afterall, she's the one who gives the grade." The teacher who told me this story said, "How does faculty present themselves? Do they take a neutral stance or stand up? What effect does it have? Might it be seen as imposing your beliefs on others? The students said to me, "The school claims respect for diversity but we are told there is only one way. We respect liberals, gays and those of color but nothing is said about males, religion, or conservatives.

2. Some of the dynamics that are in this story replayed themselves in another situation. I teach a course titled Interventions with Families. I am committed to presenting a variety of family structures to help students think outside the parameters of the nuclear family that is white and heterosexual with 2 parents. I therefore take great pains to ensure that the readings and videotapes that I use as well as the role plays I develop have content about being gay or lesbian, coming out, the developmental life cycle, and same sex relationships. This year, several students

acknowledged their homosexuality in family of origin papers that were handed in using a code in order to maintain the student's anonymity. Moreover, some students were highly verbal in the class about being in same sex relationships. In the interests of normalizing these family structures, I found myself responding to these disclosures in ways that invited these same students to share more.

I didn't think twice about any of this until a colleague shared a story about what had happened recently at her religious based institution. "We had a faculty development session that was suppose to focus on working with religiously conservative students. One of the faculty brought in some students to speak to us about their experience. They told us they felt disrespected, discriminated against, and blamed for having views that are unacceptable to the profession. They couldn't understand how this could happen in a field that teaches students to "start where the client is' and practice non discrimination. They felt silenced by comments from teachers that ridiculed those who are religiously conservative. They worried that speaking out might make them targets."

As long as I could hear this account as just another story, I was fine. My discomfort came when I applied the students concerns to myself and began to reflect on how I had structured the course on families. How had

students who were religiously conservative responded to my emphasizing divergent family structures. What would have happened if I had initiated a discussion about students' comfort or discomfort in seeing families that were "different"? What would have happened if I had created role plays that focused on issues in religiously conservative families? Its not that I felt I had done something wrong in how I had structured the class. Only that I had not considered my own impact on the students and the implications of my position.

3. The third story that stretched me was told by another colleague. At my school, we ask students, at the beginning of their first year as graduate students, to accept and agree in writing to adhere to the NASW Code of Ethics. We usually encounter no resistance. Several years ago, however, we had a student who refused. By rights, the school could have asked him to leave since acceptance of the code is a prerequisite to practicing in the field. This particular colleague realized, however, that the student who refused truly wanted to be a social worker but could not reconcile his religious beliefs with the mandates of the code. He began to meet regularly with the student to help him sort through the conflict. While I was not privy to the details of how he did it, my colleague shared that after two years, the student had finally reconciled the conflict between his profession's values

and his personal beliefs and felt ready to sign the paper that indicated his willingness to follow the code. I found myself in awe of my colleague who cared enough about the integrity of the student's struggle to invest two years of his time. How many students, I wondered, find themselves in a similar dilemma? How often do we expect students to "get it" fast? How frequently do we judge them as unfit rather than recognizing that the students' ability to answer such fundamental questions takes time and requires a mentor who will both understand and challenge them to sort it through for themselves.

These stories reflect the discrepancies that pull us in several directions at once. It's tempting to move quickly to the shore and react based on what you would do or what should have been done in each situation. For me, however, these stories are painful because I can identify with the truth, the honesty of the struggle, and good intentions in each person's story. I can feel the terror for both sides of exposing who you are when who you are is unacceptable to others. I can relate to the similarity between being condemned by some of society and judged as unfit by the profession. I can understand the agony of not being able to show in society and feeling you have to hide in the profession. Although the struggles are not equivalent, hearing each one fully deepens my understanding and stretches me to grow beyond the comfort of landing safely on one side or the other. Although the reasons advanced for each person's struggle may not be mine, my willingness to understand

helps me respond less personally to issues that might otherwise incite me.

I would argue that we, as teachers, need to help students stay in the middle too. How do we do that? One way is to help students move away from polarized positions. Students too often engage in a classroom discussion by sharing opinions that suggest a right and wrong dichotomy instead of expanding awareness. To encompass a both and position, students have to get beneath their intellectual positions and share the experiences from their lives that others can relate to. I am not advocating group therapy. Rather, I ask students to reflect on and share that, which informs their position. This affective learning develops understanding and undermines the need for certainty. Another way to help students stay in the middle is to regularly confront them with contradictions in ways that do not resolve or judge the issues that comprise the dilemma. In my class on clinical assessment and differential diagnosis, I regularly remind students that 92% of professional social workers are white. Yet research shows that ethnic matching helps ensure that clients from different ethnic groups will stay in counseling. In my class on family interventions, I describe how the development of gay and lesbian adolescents is a contradiction when the tasks for normal adolescent development are reviewed. Specifically, peer identification is stymied by the fact that gay and lesbian youth feel different, as if they do not fit. The ability to develop social skills is thwarted by their social isolation and society's prohibition against openly exploring same sex relationships. The opportunity to define who they are as different and separate from those around them is curtailed by the fact that their

differentness is unacceptable. In my class on professional ethics, I ask students to reflect on and identify the kinds of clients they might discriminate against outside of the groups listed in the NASW Code of Ethics. Answers like borderline clients, men who have abused children, or fundamentalist Christians begin to confront them with the fact that while they may pledge allegiance to the code, what is required is far more personal than they had realized.

Why is staying in the middle so important? If students can learn to value their own growth process, they will be more effective with their clients. Instead of being reactionary, they will be more understanding. Instead of having unrealistic expectations, they will celebrate movement over solutions. Instead of looking for purity, they will be more comfortable dealing with the complexities that require a both and approach. Indeed, they may find that they can openly comment on the painful contradictions that exist in our profession without accusing it of being hypocritical or discriminatory. They may also grow the maturity to recognize that entering the profession of social work is not without danger. That is, since the profession's mission is to help those people who are oppressed by social conditions, social workers run the risk of seeing the world from the vantage point of the victim. It is easy, therefore, to begin to identify as a victim or to identify others as victimizing you. This position imperils social workers because it renders them impotent and cultivates their reactivity. Students, who become our future social workers, need ways to understand conflict, endure discomfort, and grow from being stretched emotionally. Our willingness to do this

ourselves helps ensure the health of our profession.

I suggest that creating conditions that keep students in the middle of the contradictions fosters understanding and helps them manage their reactivity to the situations they will encounter as professionals. Students who are religiously conservative, for example, may more easily sort through their personal conflicts when they encounter a gay or lesbian parent whose partner wants to adopt his or her child or a lesbian couple who are considering artificial insemination. They may more readily recognize that they have to place the client's needs first and ahead of their own when they are challenged to help parents who have recently discovered that their child is homosexual, same sex couples who seek guidance for their sexual relationship, a client who wants to explore his or her sexual orientation, or an adolescent whose suicide attempt is related to his being gay. Likewise, students who have negative reactions to religiously conservative people may respond more sensitively when they encounter a wife whose religious beliefs do not allow her to consider divorcing her unfaithful husband or parents who are threatening to expel their adopted adolescent from the family because he or she refuses to follow the dictates of the family's religion. The child's rejection of their religious beliefs is perceived as the road to eternal damnation. They may more readily recognize that they have to place the client's needs first and ahead of their own when they are challenged to help a family whose child has joined a cult, a father who 'preaches' at his children, parents whose religious beliefs forbid them to seek medical attention for their children, or clients who regularly invoke the name of God, Jesus, or the

Holy Spirit in their conversation. Indeed, normalizing and not pathologizing contradictions and paradoxes may help students appreciate that each situation has to be considered for itself, conflicts are ongoing and not solved once and for all, and decisions have to be made over and over again. Indeed, the strength of the profession is in the tension between differing

perspectives. If one side has to do away with the other, we have lost. Consequently, the final challenge becomes to not denigrate staying in the pain of contradictory positions by judging that action as cowardly, middle of the road, or limited. The conflict we are addressing today is immense. Our job is to find a way through it that takes us to a higher ground.

References

Fromm, E. (1968). *The revolution of hope: Toward a humanized technology*. New York: Harper and Row.

Shore, B. (1990, September 8). Indiana Jones blows his mind. *The New York Times Book Review*, p.37.