



Quantum Philosophy

A Tribute to Social Work

Social Work at the End of a Rainbow

(Adapted from the article of the same name published in 'The Crowndale Jewels', September 1997)

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More than a week after leaving the employment of a statutory social services department a social worker found himself attempting to tidy up residual matters arising from three years of work. His tasks included a trip to a Chemist to collect photographs recording the lives of children in care shot long ago which had been hiding unprocessed in his camera; and also the transcription of cassettes, long overdue for recording.

We may ask questions. What made these overdue pieces of work, seem so hard to complete before s/he left compulsively enjoyable once employment ceased?

Jung (1916) writes of ghosts which haunted his house. They were very noisy bothering himself, his wife and his children. In the vernacular of a social services duty room it might be said that the members of the household expressed themselves as if 'round the bend'. If you get your epistemology wrong then you may experience seemingly crazy phenomena and Jung was going through an epistemological crisis. Jung sat down at his desk and started to write'. Thus exorcised, the ghosts never bothered him again.

One of the set of case notes transcribed by the social worker in question concerned a young person who had been diagnosed as suffering from Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD). This condition is sometimes thought to develop into Oppositional Defiance Disorder (ODD). We may wonder if it was this condition rather than Jung's 'ghosts' which disabled the social worker from concluding their work on time and then made it

compulsive, just at the time when a logically they could simply walk away and leave it to others to put together the story from the few fragmentary recordings left behind.

Gregory Bateson asks: "Why do schools teach almost nothing of the pattern which connects? Is it that teachers know that they carry the kiss of death which will turn to tastelessness whatever they touch and therefore they are wisely unwilling to touch or teach anything of real-life importance?" (Bateson 1979)

The potential conflict between the need of the individual employee, and the organisational system is referred to in organisation theory (Etzioni 1966). Could the social worker's problem amount to simple role conflict? I doubt it although role conflict doubtless played a part.

I suspect a solution to the mystery rests in social services departments increasingly becoming what have been described as 'People Processing Organisations (Adams and Hill 1982). I long struggled with this aspect of Social Services life when employed in statutory agencies. Statutory safeguards exist to protect the general health, and ensure education rather than exploitation of vulnerable people. Administrative structure helps when addressing such issues as child protection. I wonder, however if the laborious and repetitive systems imposed by the DSS are the best way forward to ensure the implementation of child care plans? Would not creative space, a culture of success and the encouragement of casework flair do the job better? Such an idea is far from revolutionary, to quote Maslow (1954):

"I have seen a few cases in which it seemed clear to me that the pathology (boredom, loss of zest in life, self dislike, general depression of the bodily functions, steady deterioration of the intellectual life, of tastes, etc. were produced in intelligent people leading stupid lives, in stupid jobs. I have at least one case in which the appropriate cognitive therapy, (resuming part time studies, getting a position that was more intellectually demanding, insight) removed the symptoms."

The sad fact is that the direction of social work prior to the Thatcher administration might have brought this about. Adopting Thatcherite principles and to selling off all but the most controlling' elements of Social Services may now provide a creative way forward. In this new world social work organisations, (or more probably innovative branches of old ones), may have the freedom to develop within what the physicist and philosopher Fritjof Capra (1982) refers to as a rising culture.

Many who have worked exclusively within statutory services might find such a policy disturbing, even naive or destructive. My experience both within such agencies as well as in voluntary organisations revealed though that the application of theoretical models once central to social work (Payne 1991): Psychodynamics; Crisis Intervention; Behavioural; Systems and Ecological; Social Psychological and Communication; Humanist and Existential; Cognitive; Radical and Marxist; and, Agency and Empowerment are more likely to be implemented congruently as voluntary agency models than in pressure torn statutory agencies. In such agencies training reflects the agency's bias and quality assurance embeds itself into the casework supervision process.

With adequate funding the result of privatisation could offer a greater choice both for purchasers and consumers. Criticism of social work, social workers or social work managers, (especially those striving to maintain a sense of value in their work within statutory agencies) damages workers and client services. I argue with the way in which the institutions which one might expect to protect and nurture the profession BASW, CCETSW, ADSS and the press have created a culture which not only fails to protect the vulnerable; but also those who society through its political institutions has set up to protect those same vulnerable people whilst failing to deliver the resources to do the job.

Whilst social work has become unfashionable and reviled in some quarters the British Association of Counselling (BAC) and The United Kingdom Council for Psychotherapy (UKCP) have gained ground. It seems that there is public demand for intervention skills. Why then do social workers seem bogged down' in complex bureaucratic procedures meetings and forms, just when industry seeks to develop a paper less office?

I suggest the system needs not simply overhauling, but rebuilding to once again reflect core values. BASW went to great trouble and expense during the 1980s to create a Code of Ethics for Social Work. This code might have left the general public confident that every time they met a social worker, they met a professional acting out of knowledge and integrity. Why did BASW fail whilst BAC and UKCP succeeded in just such the same endeavour? Are Local Authority social workers have become too identified with issues of control in the public mind? Might the laborious local government bureaucracy stultify the potentially creative force of social work? If we simplified, (or shredded) forms case files could provide a narrative, designed to add meaning and purpose to the work of worker and client alike. As manuscripts they would speak to present and future generations of the care and respect with which society through social workers engaged with people at the beginning of the new millennium.

Mindell (1988) suggests, (when writing of the public service agencies of Switzerland), that "...social workers frequently feel inferior in training and importance to the psychologists and psychiatrists you work with and feel your position is not respected enough. And you are right, but this is partly your own doing, Many of you did not want to the long and arduous training offered to analysts, psychiatrists and psychologists. But perhaps you were right; some of the training is not really as useful as it could be! I recommend you redefine your role. Your job is a mixture of all the abilities needed in the client's situation, as well as the ability to switch roles as the situation demands. Since your job deals with the entire city you are like a mind in the midst of a body. A problem in one part of the body demands that you make contact with that part and examine the entire situation surrounding it. As a general rule, the organisation of the entire body must change so that the troubled part improves. Your client is the city's identified patient, ' the part identified as being ill or troublesome. But the city's tendency to identify him will have to change,...both the individual client and the city are your clients. Both your individual client and your city are in the midst of change. What a difficult, impossible and exciting job!"

Once social services have been sold off I would propose a new social work model based on the contemporary scientific paradigm which sees the universe as a seamless mass of quantum events, connected acausally with each moment pregnant with meaning. This would develop once social workers had ceased to serve mechanistic social institutions with the implied value that problems may be fixed through operations such as social surgery or economic mechanics. The new paradigm would demand that events rather than people be processed through a sharing of 'awareness'. The diverse roles of social work would be underpinned by 'field theory', similar to that suggested by Ken Wilber (1987) in his ideas of 'spectrum psychology', or when referring to physical phenomena by Geoffrey Chew (1968) in referring to a 'bootstrap hypothesis'. Of crucial importance to understanding how such a model may be developed is the notion of 'logical levels' and how these relate to each other for the purpose of 'co-constructing' (McNamee 1992) or 'dreaming-up' reality (Mindell 1985).

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