



North American Association of Christians in Social Work (NACSW)

PO Box 121; Botsford, CT 06404 *** Phone/Fax (tollfree): 888.426.4712

Email: info@nacsww.org *** Website: <http://www.nacsww.org>

“A Vital Christian Presence in Social Work”

WHAT I WISH I HAD KNOWN WHEN I BECAME A SOCIAL WORKER

By: Patricia A. Boyer, MSW, LSW

**Presented at:
NACSW Convention 2009
October, 2009
Indianapolis, IN**

What I Wish I Had Known When I Became a Social Worker

First let me tell you about my journey to becoming and staying a social worker.

When I was finishing high school and deciding on future career there really were not too many career opportunities for a female who wanted to pursue some type of after high school education. The ultimate goal for a female at that time was to choose a career that they could do until Prince Charming came along, they fell in love and they lived happily ever after. The expectation was that the man would be the bread winner; the woman would stay at home, care for the home be a good wife and mother. The career choices for the young women was teaching and nursing.

Lesson number one: The best made plans can go astray. I entered college at a time when we were told go into English and/or Social Studies. There is shortage of teachers and you will have your choice of many different positions. That is what we were told. Wrong!!! Everyone else must have heard the same advice and chose the same fields. As a result, there was not a scarcity of teachers in those areas; in fact, there was an overabundance. So there was not the teaching positions, I had expected. So what do I do next; exploring my possible choices for careers I sought the advice of a political person I had met while attending a state-wide intercollegiate governmental conferences; she recommended I take the state civil service exam which if I passed and scored high would qualify me for a state civil service position. I did so and passed.

Then began my career as a caseworker/social worker for the Commonwealth of Pa in the welfare department.

I had no idea I would be beginning my life's career as a social worker. I did not know what a social worker does. Fortunately, I had excellent supervisors, mentors, and role models who encouraged me to consider social work. Things have change over the years but that was perhaps the golden age of social services and the state actually valued social workers and had plans to utilize them in their programming. So they enabled me to get my MSW degree through a state funded program paying for my schooling and paying me a reduced salary. All I or anyone who went through the program owed the state was two years service. What a dream.

Lesson number2: Even with a degree, you may not be doing true social work. Over, the years I did very little true social work until left the welfare department and became a home health/ hospice social worker. I whatever setting you work in, you may find that what you consider to be social work and what your employers consider to be social work are not the same. My answer to that is that whatever you are asked to do remember the social work code of ethics and those aspects of the profession and hold on to them no matter what. Even when not practicing what you think is social work if you are relating to people and helping them improve their situation whatever the setting you are practicing social work.

I have been blessed the last few years to be working as a hospice social worker. I am able to relate to persons in many different ways and provide a variety of social work appropriate interventions.

Moving on:

Lesson 3 : Importance of peer relationships. In the welfare department and certainly in the home health/hospice agencies I was until recently the only one. Social workers reactions to problems and patient client situations are different than other professionals with whom the social workers work. It can be difficult to maintain your ability to make good decisions when those around you have differing opinions. So, look for other social workers. If you work with others establish a mutually supportive relationship with them. There are times when it is good to be able to discuss situations with a colleague or a peer.

Lesson 4: Join professional organizations. These organizations help you establish and maintain your professional identity, keep you current with new developments in your field, and also provide source of excellent free continuing education programs

Lesson number 5: Achieve highest level of professional certification. Being licensed is mandatory in many states. Even where it isn't being licensed shows those with whom you are working that you are a professional and that in addition to having already met licensing requirements you will be continuing to take courses in your areas and are keeping current on changes in practice techniques. I wish I had achieved my ACSW; I chose to not do so because the year I graduated was the first year a test had to be taken. I wasn't going to take a test. Big mistake. As you follow your chosen career path, you will be given the opportunity to become certified in your area of expertise. Do so. Specialty certification is very important.

Lesson number 6: Remember you are a social worker. You became, I hope, a social worker because you have certain values and a high ethical standard. Those values and ethics define who and what you are. Hold fast to these values. They define you, say who and what you are. When presenting yourself to others present yourself with these ideals and standards. You cannot help people by trying to be as they are. Those you help must understand who and what you are. Maintaining professional distance and respect is important,

Lesson 7 As social worker, others respond to you as a social worker and judge you on how you respond to and interact with others. Be caring and kind but be sincere, don't put on an artificial act of caring. People can see through that. Also, because you are a social worker, you are expected to react differently to conflict and troublesome situations. Anger is not acceptable behavior. You are always on; social workers are judged by their actions whether with clients, patients, co-workers or others

Lesson 8: Sometimes even giving your best isn't enough. There are some, perhaps even many, that no matter how hard you try you can't reach and can't help. Don't despair.

Lesson 9 Sometimes your reward is immediate but more often it may come many days, months, years after the actual helping event. When you least expect it a person from your past may appear and tell you what a positive influence you had in their life.

Lesson10: Have a mentor; do not hesitate to seek out help and advice. No one expects a new worker to have all the answers.

Lesson 11 In your work place, learn who it is that runs the office; most usually this is a manager not necessarily the supervisory personnel. This is the person who will help you get the materials and supplies to do your job; help you with projects, and generally helps you.

Lesson 12: Social worker is a learned hand on experience. Learning how to be a social worker comes from actual experience. Book learning is important but learning how to apply that learning only comes from doing do.

Lesson 13: Have a sense of humor; don't be too serious; enjoy life. Find time for diversion.

Lesson 14: Practice what we preach; realize need for self care. Make time for down time, vacations, leisure activity. Know how to say no and set time limits

Lesson 15: You will make mistakes; you are not perfect and cannot always know all the answers. That's all right. Admit making mistakes. The only person who doesn't make mistakes is someone who does not do anything.

Lesson 16; remember the first Social Worker. Follow His example; take time for prayer and maintaining your spiritual connections.

In closing looking back, I know I followed the direction the Lord meant for me to take. I have no regrets. My hope for you is that at the end of each day you know you are doing what you do for a purpose. Despite problems sometimes in the work place I have always been recharged and revitalized when I am face to face with someone needing help. I have been blessed to be a person who has made a difference not all the time but sometimes and not always in the way I wanted but in a way that made the client/ patient better because of my intervention, May you find that same satisfaction

GOD BLESS YOU and good luck to you in your future endeavors.

Patricia A. Boyer MSW/LSW