



North American Association of Christians in Social Work (NACSW)

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"A Vital Christian Presence in Social Work"

ONE OF THE BROKEN

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Summary

Being a Christian in Social Work is more than a label. It pervades life 24/7. This session will explore the faith/social work integration through a “brokenness” paradigm (as opposed to a strength/weakness paradigm). Throughout history God has called out plain, broken people to advance His kingdom. Today, our society seems to place a premium on worshipping the idols of perfection, winning, beauty, sex, and power. As Christians in social work we are called to serve “the least of these...” But we are broken people also. This session will focus on how we can understand and accept our own brokenness as a fundamental pre-requisite in joining others to address theirs. There are good things that come out of it, but there are also pitfalls. Ultimately, God uses us because of, rather than despite, our brokenness. In that way, we become incarnational in our work and ministry as social workers.

Introduction

My presentation today is not a scholarly one, based upon an article. It is more a collection of my observations about, and experiences with, brokenness. Brokenness of people I have served, that of friends and colleagues, and my own. Hopefully two goals will be accomplished in the next 45 minutes: 1. Value the role our own brokenness plays in our lives, directly and through others; and 2. Better understand how our attention to our own experiences of brokenness is integral to our work as helpers.

Like you, I am surrounded by people who have been impacted by brokenness in various manifestations. They have been there my whole life. But I have not always noticed them nor appreciated them. Much of the time, I have been focused more on my needs and concerns – and success – than what those I served had experienced. Through the years I have become increasingly aware of them, including those in my family of origin as part of my continuing maturation. Also, like many of you, I was drawn, even “called” to be a social worker, due to what I saw, especially when I moved to Chicago to attend college. It was then that the scales began to fall off my eyes. It is very difficult to ignore the realities of people who live in Chicago and cities like it. That experience was one of the first major points when brokenness “invaded” my life.

Let’s fast forward to today. I want to describe two people with whom I am close now, who provide me with perspective on brokenness:

Maria is a therapist on our staff, just shy of 40 years old. She grew up during the repressive and personality cult of Nicolae Ceausescu regime in mid to late twentieth century. As a four-year old little girl, she was in a serious auto accident that left her without one of her legs below the upper thigh. She worked at a social worker in the grim orphanages of Romania and in mid-career, she was accepted as a graduate student at a Christian college in Illinois, where she obtained a master’s degree in Psychology. Maria is a skilled therapist, and a model of sensitivity and compassion.

Doug is a good friend. I serve as his legal guardian. It is much easier to describe what is “right” with Doug than to describe his ills – he is alive and enjoys life. But he has a 10 to 12 year old mental capacity; his legs, arms and hands are crippled from rheumatoid arthritis, keeping him in a wheel chair during his waking hours; he has a serious speech impediment, being unable to pronounce consonants; he has very small veins in his legs that restrict blood circulation; his kidney functioning is poor; Doug has no living relatives other than a half-sister who never visits him. And by the way, he’s been blind for ten years due to severe macular degeneration. When I take him places, people stare at him – children without awkwardness, adults out of the corner of their eye. But Doug is attuned to my infirmities. If I cough, he will ask me if I am OK.

Both Maria and Doug are joyful people. They significantly contribute to the lives of the people around them. But they are both affected by obvious infirmities. Neither is bound by his or her brokenness. Maria has been able to effectively integrate her experiences of brokenness in her work with clients. Doug’s limitations are normal to him, even his blindness. To draw comparisons about who is more broken is unfair; both are broken. We all are broken. It is a fact of life.

Then there is a third person - David. He has been blessed throughout his life by a loving birth family, a beautiful wife, two children and three grandchildren. His infirmities are harder to spot, but he is broken, too. Depression has pursued him throughout much of his adult life and affected his work. He harbored self-doubt even as a CEO of an agency. A cardiac emergency in his 50’s almost claimed his life. Causes were genetic and persistent job stress in origin. As he looks back on those experiences, he can see now how they helped to shape in a positive way, his identity as a person, as a social worker and as a Christian.

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What I am speaking about today is how we deal with our own brokenness as social workers.

- A. As Christian social workers, how do we make sense out of the concept of brokenness, in those we serve, our colleagues’ and our own, as a fundamental factor in how we see ourselves as helpers?

I consulted the dictionary to see how the term broken was defined. Among the variations I read, were several words in capital letters, such as SHATTERED, DISCONTINUOUS, INTERRUPTED, CRUSHED, BANKRUPT, AND DISCONNECTED. Almost all of the definitions were in the context of things rather than people. (Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary, Merriam-Webster, Inc., Springfield, MA)

When I read those words, I thought of the people that we as social workers serve on a day-to-day basis. So many could be described with those words.

During my career, I have had the privilege (the pious me), the challenge (the realistic me) and the bad luck (the burned out me) to work with the following populations – orphans; delinquents; chronically mentally ill adults; so-called “unwed” mothers;

adoptive families; divorced persons; emotionally disturbed adolescents; depressed, anxious people, etc. Earlier in my career I tended to see them as weak and myself as strong. After all, I was trying to help them be better people, more successful, better adjusted, happier. But my orientation was more about how I could be a good social worker than to attune myself to their needs and wants. It was more important for me to be successful, to look good in the eyes of others. As a result, I was not connecting with their broken spirits, relationships and lives. I had been missing the point of what it means to be a Christian in social work.

In his article in the Fall 2002 issue of Social Work and Christianity, James Allen cites Henri Nouwen's concept of the "wounded healer" as a way to look at ministry. Allen suggests that Nouwen's concept of "wounded healer" applies to social workers as much as people more traditional forms of ministry. Allen states "Just as the 'wounded healer's' own appreciation of the other is enhanced by reflecting on his or her own human experience, so also is the social worker's. By acknowledging their own experience of alienation, separation, isolation, and loneliness, social workers are better able to 'take on another's perspective.'" (Allen, Jr., James D., "Reflections on Henri Nouwen's "Wounded Healer as a Model for Contemporary Social Work Practice, Social Work and Christianity, Fall 2002, Vol. 29, No. 3, pp. 240-247).

Do you and I see our selves as "wounded healers?" I don't know what your experience was in graduate school, but very little time was spent by my classmates and me examining our own experiences of "alienation, separation, isolation and loneliness." We were training to become social workers, but we were not necessarily focused on becoming "wounded healers".

- B. What about my own brokenness? Am I a wounded healer in the Nouwen way of thinking? Or, am I the strong paternalistic/maternalistic social worker trying to help the weak hurting clients, even those I sometimes have to endure? For too long it was the second of those two, even as colleagues considered me to be successful by conventional standards. It is still a part of who I am even though I am further along on the journey.

For many years earlier in my career, I approached people without any sense of brokenness, my own brokenness, as a paradigm for ministry or service. I labored under the illusion that it was up to me to provide the people I served with the answers, the solutions, the hope. It was important for me to be a "successful social worker." I was an MSW, someone to be respected, someone who should have his act together, someone who was going to "save the world" in the name of Jesus Christ. In short, it was about me. Then God showed me through my own experience with depression what He had been trying to get across to me throughout my life. I came perilously close to leaving the profession. I did not see my self either as worthy or capable. Then I allowed a colleague to reach out and minister to me, not as his supervisor, but as a depressed person. I was not "one of them". And I began the process of being freed (not healed).

I have found it helpful to look at my own brokenness as a series of stages, like those of the grief process:

Stage	Role	Self-Talk	Result
1. Pretend (<i>Denial</i>)	Actor	"What problem? God has healed me."	Repression
2. Blame (<i>Anger</i>)	Victim	"If only this had not happened to me."	Deception
3. Strive (<i>Bargaining</i>)	Conqueror	"I'm going to overcome this problem."	Exhaustion; burnout
4. Honesty (<i>Depression</i>)	Survivor	"I can't do this on my own. I need help."	Hope is re-kindled
5. Relinquish (<i>Surrender</i>)	Released	"God can use it for good and me for His glory."	Freedom

It is a cycle because we go back through the stages several times during our lives, sometimes over the same issue as well with different issues. We are always "cycling." We may even be at two different point regarding two separate areas of brokenness.

- C. I believe that it is helpful to consider some ways that God has used brokenness in people through the course of history. In that way we can be assisted in allowing God to work through each of us amidst our brokenness.

The prophet, Jeremiah: Jeremiah has been described as a scrawny man with a high-pitched voice. He was poor and lived in deprivation most of the time. He spent time in prison and was thrown into a cistern. He was rejected by most of the people in his life. And his job was to deliver a difficult message from God. But - nobody listened to him and nobody acted on what he said. Jeremiah did not meet the conventional standards for being successful. But to God, Jeremiah met the test of success in that he was obedient to his call and faithful in living it. (Introduction to the Book of Jeremiah, Life Application Bible, New International Version, Zondervan Publishing House: Grand Rapids, MI., 1991)

Frances "Fanny" J. Crosby, as many of you know, was a hymn writer. Her hymns have been beloved for over a century; in fact, she wrote over 9,000 hymns during her life, among them *To God Be the Glory* and *All the Way My Savior Leads Me*. She was also a published poet. She sold her poems and hymns to support her work with the poor in New York City. Fanny Crosby was a social worker before there was social work. She was also blind. She lived in and taught at the New York Institution for the Blind. (The New York Institute for Special Education website, <http://www.nyise.org>.)

Jesus' disciples: These guys were handpicked by Jesus to be his companions during his three-year earthly ministry. What criteria did Jesus use in the selection process? None of them seemed to be people destined for greatness. In fact, it seems that they were very common men, not the type of people you would expect to be chosen to help change the course of history. He must have seen something that others didn't see regarding their potential. To be sure, they were not an easy group to lead. We are here today because of their obedience and faithfulness. Would you choose them for your executive council?

Jesus: What can be said about Jesus himself, except to repeat some of his statements? (from TNIV, Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, MI)

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble of heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." (Mt. 11:28-30)

"Blessed are the poor in spirit; for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." (Mt. 5: 3-5, 10)

"Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these." (Mt. 19: 14)

"But you are not to be like those (kings of the Gentiles), who 'lord it over' others). Instead the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves." (Lk. 22: 26)

"My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death." (Mk. 14: 34)

We can clearly establish the Biblical foundation for brokenness through these verses and many others. This is also true for people, like Mother Teresa of Calcutta and the Missionaries of Charity, who lived out those verses daily. Can you name specific people in your life, who have exemplified how God uses their brokenness to glorify Him? Maybe you are that person to someone in your life.

- D. Social workers work in an astounding variety of settings. I don't know how difficult your work is; I do know that it is difficult. Long hours, lower than average compensation, discouragement, risk to your health and sometimes your life. I am not over-dramatizing. Why would anyone want to do this as a life calling?

Some of us work in secular settings, many in the public sector. For us, brokenness may come in the form of clients who do not want us to be in their lives. It may be colleagues who persecute us for our beliefs. It may be attitudes of cynicism of those around us, or within us. Or, it may be venturing into neighborhoods and situations where there is substantial risk. Brokenness is a daily reality in such settings.

As a Christian, our faith is under constant stress within each of us and under the constant scrutiny of others. Our own brokenness may be the means by which they see the light of Jesus.

I work at a faith-based agency in Chicago and suburbs. I have previously worked in public sector agencies. The realities of working in faith-based settings are not unlike those in other settings. Issues related to faith may be ignored or trivialized in faith-based settings. We may be Christian in name only, indistinguishable from those organizations that call themselves Christian. To what extent do we see ourselves as broken persons that God is using to serve other broken persons?

- E. How can we as Christians in Social Work gain strength from our own brokenness and avoid some of the major pitfalls as we stay true to the ethical prerogatives of our profession? Each of us has discovered ways of integrating our own brokenness into our work without falling victim to pride, perfectionism, and magical or dogmatic thinking.

There are pitfalls in which we can become trapped. Over-identification with those we serve can lead to a myriad of challenges and which may result in ethical lapses. For example, we can fail to identify and address transference issues if they appear. We may be unaware of our counter-transference reactions to people. We are vulnerable to rationalizing the crossing of sexual boundaries. As social workers, we are vulnerable to losing sight that one of our fundamental objectives is to empower those we serve. Over-identification can inappropriately lengthen and intensify the services we provide. The dilemmas of self-disclosure also arise. If, how and when to self-disclose requires much wisdom and awareness, including awareness of the work of the Holy Spirit within us and in the relationship with the client.

Under-identification has its pitfalls. Dormant or unresolved issues may catch us my surprise. When is it necessary to withdraw myself from a case if a personal issue is likely to intrude? Is supervision used effectively in these situations? How vulnerable are we to insensitivity to the client's own situation due to our own issues. Remember that it is two broken people meeting together. Being in a professional capacity does not render one invulnerable.

I want to conclude by mentioning some key steps to consider in addressing how we deal with brokenness within and around us. I offer these not as "tried and true" from my own inconsistent use of them, but as tools others have used or recommended:

1. Stay grounded through participation in a worshipping community where brokenness is lived out and communicated in real ways. This may also take the form of participation in an intentional small group.
2. Practice prayer on regular basis. This may be individual prayer or small group prayer at your workplace, or both. The administrative team at our agency meets for prayer for 30 minutes at 8 am each day. It keeps us focused on Jesus and attuned to the needs of people around us. A side benefit is the molding of our

team into one that functions much more harmoniously. The issues we do struggle with are handled with much greater respect and grace.

3. Keep a "growth journal" so that you can document the spiritual formation process that is at work within you. (Staral, Janice M., "Introducing Ignatian Spirituality: Linking Self-Reflection with Social Work Ethics", Social Work and Christianity, Spring 2003, Vol. 30, No. 1, pp. 38-51)
4. Stay accountable through regular quality supervision and consultation in which you can be honest and transparent about who you are and what is going on with and within you.
5. Engage in regular (ideally daily) reflection on the day just past and the day ahead. Dr. Staral ("Ignatian Spirituality", pp. 45, 46) describes a model for doing this, called the Examen of Conscience, with the following steps:
 - Step 1: Relax. Find a comfortable setting. Pray for God's light on your experience.
 - Step 2: Review the day. What happened during the day? Pray in gratitude for God's gifts.
 - Step 3: Think about your response to the events of the day. Pray about your response to God's action...
 - Step 4: Consider changes / doing differently in the future. Pray for God's forgiveness.
 - Step 5: Anticipate the next day. Pray about the people and events of the next day.
6. Participating in spiritual retreats can provide the solitude necessary to intentionally listen to what God may be saying to you. Social workers listen to clients all the time; how much time do we spend listening to God? In retreat I can present myself to God in my utter brokenness and need.
7. Be intentional in looking for the reflection of Jesus in those we serve. If I don't look, I may not see. Jesus lived as a manifestation of the fullness and holiness of God even while living a life of brokenness. By looking for Jesus in the brokenness, we will find Him.
8. Seeking to be Jesus-like in how we serve. It is important for others to see Jesus in us. This may not be through what we say as much as what we do and how we do it. At first, it may not even be recognizable to others. It may even be hard to do in some situations and with some people. But our role as Christians is to reflect the Light from the Source of the Light.

Conclusion

This period of 45 minutes has been all too short to fully explore the concept of brokenness. I hope that I have at least scratched the surface in a way that can be helpful on the journey through brokenness. I encourage you to ask yourself the following questions as you continue your journey and lead others on theirs:

1. As I reflect on my experiences with brokenness, how has God used such experiences to mold me into greater Christ-likeness?

2. Where am I in the Cycle of Brokenness regarding specific issues? Am I willing to take steps to address these areas? Who might help me do that?
3. What pitfalls am I vulnerable to?
4. Which of the eight steps, as well as others, can I incorporate into my life now?

I started my presentation describing Maria and Doug. My relationship with them helps me to acknowledge my brokenness. They are each a source of inspiration to me that God uses my brokenness as His gift to me to be used for His glorification and to benefit others.

Does brokenness equate dysfunctional or damaged or not capable? Perhaps yes to all of these – if we have not made peace with our own brokenness. It's not the outcome as much as it is the process. As in the grief process we move through life at different stages at different time or in several stages almost simultaneously. I will visit the stages of brokenness several times in my life.

People tend to seek out Social Workers when something is wrong, often when they are in a crisis. They may not have a choice like involvement in the Child Welfare or corrections systems. It may be because of a broken marriage or a child on drugs. Perhaps it is the need for a living resource for an Alzheimer's patient or a student whose father was killed in an auto accident. The list of reasons goes on.

But who do *they* see when they come to me, especially if I am a Social Worker who calls himself a Christian? Do they see a seemingly uncaring bureaucrat who goes about his tasks without much thought to the client? Do they see someone who has his act together – the complete, self-actualized, integrated, healthy, aware person who tries to impress others and may instead intimidate them? In their own brokenness, do those we serve see us as a source of solutions, answers, or a way out?

Who do *we* see when they come to us? Do we see someone who is pathetic, needy, poor, intimidating? Do we see someone who may be interrupting our well-ordered day?

So what difference does it make to those we serve if we present ourselves as reflections of broken people?

1. Social Work, at its best, is an incarnational profession. We move in and among people in ways that connect them to us – not in a dependent relationship, but as the means of empowering them to live more fully. We are privileged to hear things from people that they may not have told anyone else – ever.
2. How do we walk the tightrope between the empowering process and protecting children from their parents/caregivers?
3. What is the basis of our compassion – pity, rescue or identification with others like ourselves, those who are broken in need of wholeness?

There are several cautions I want to make about how we allow our own fallibilities to be sources of strength rather than weaknesses or liabilities. I will mention these in the form of questions:

1. To what extent has the SW examined and resolved personal issues related to brokenness? If not, how might diminish the person's effectiveness? Might this lead to counter-transference problems? How do I know when to defer in serving case if I sense that my issues might interfere? In other words, How broken is too broken?
2. If I have resolved my issues (whatever that means), how does that make me a more sensitive or effective Social Worker? Does it lead to a sense of pride that I want others to see? Or does it create a humble spirit that allows me to empathize with others? Is it appropriate for me to disclose my struggle? How? When? How perfect or complete is too perfect or complete?

Learning Objectives (preliminary)

1. (Re)discover the Biblical basis for brokenness;
- 2.
3. Learn how brokenness empowers those we serve; and
4. Take steps to nurture spiritual formation out of brokenness.

Summary

- A. Re-affirming learning objectives
- B. A brief summary of the presenter's love-hate experiences with brokenness
- C. Biblical models of brokenness seem to suggest that God sees our broken hearts, our broken and our broken brains, not as crosses to bear, but as raw material out of which He molds our character and enables us to relinquish ourselves into His hands, thus freeing us to be incarnational in our role as Social Workers.

Joseph (OT), Mary, Jesus, Paul. All are examples of how God uses the underside of life as the norm, not the exception, in growing His kingdom.

D. What is my identity? – conqueror, victim, survivor, pilgrim, others

How I understand and respond to the difficulties of life shapes whether I am available to be used by God as an agent of healing to those around me. This can result in denial, judgementalism,

E. What are my sources of support and nurture?

Brokenness cannot be healed; it is an ongoing condition of life that requires lifelong attention. Accepting that state frees us to not just use, but to seek, the resources around us. The faith of the Social Worker has a vertical dimension (prayer, worship, contemplation, etc.) and a horizontal dimension (transparency, involvement in small groups, responding to brokenness in others, etc). Attending to these dimensions leads us toward wholeness. Perfection is not the goal.

F. Sharing personal experiences of brokenness

If time permits, opportunity will be given for participants to share in groups of two or three how God has used (or is using) brokenness in their careers. This type of vulnerability and transparency is essential to us as helpers.

E. How our identity as “broken ones” shape, inform and empower those we serve.

There are pitfalls to be avoided, such as inappropriate disclosure, making comparisons, and pridefulness. Compassion, humility and other character qualities grow out of a healthy response to brokenness.

Other comments:

Broken vs. dysfunctional

Healing as an event vs. a perpetual process

The self-disclosure continuum

Who we are is just as important as what we say

Helping is an incarnational process

The journey toward wholeness includes all

Don't wait to be whole – you'll never start

How do I deal with pride – can I get it out of the way (D. Carlson)

Magnifying brokenness can lead to pride: “I am more broken than you.”

Developmental stages of brokenness – similar to stages of grief:

Biblical models: Job, Joseph, Jesus

Contemporary models: Mother Theresa, Joni Eareckson-Tada

Personal models: Doug P., Paul E., Alpha House, Deicke Home

What the disabled teach us.

Session tasks:

Short presentations – 10 mins

Personal reflection by the speaker

Personal reflection by the participants

Group Discussion

Play a song or two that emphasize brokenness/wholeness:

“Will you let me be your servant?”

“O Let the Son of God Enfold You?”

A secular song that communicates despair/anger

So what how do I make sense out of this on a practical day-to-day basis?

Some principles (as opposed to a formula):

- Acknowledging my own brokenness and my struggles with it is a prerequisite to being an effective helper.
- Nurturing a daily dependency on God through prayer, meditation, worship, and involvement in community (i.e. 8 am prayer at ECFA)
- Developing a trust that God is converting my weakness into His strength.

Social Work is not necessarily renewing or invigorating, any more than it produces wealth. It is sometimes depressing, often exhausting, and burnout is constantly knocking at the door. It involves working in settings, both public and private, where you may be experiencing persecution from colleagues for your beliefs. Or you may not have the support of administrators. Trust may be in short supply. You are exposed to settings where you fear for your life. Lay-offs may be a frequent specter. Pay is low to begin with and subject to reductions with little notice.

But Social Work, especially for Christians, is incarnational. It is a calling. The fact that we are all here at the NACSW Conference is a reflection of all of the above. To do what we are called to do requires that we join together.