

AASW 1987 ANNUAL CONFERENCE

Wrap-Up Comments

On

"Conflict: The Challenge in Social Work Practice"

**Bonavista Room, Westin Hotel
Saturday 1987-03-21**

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The real conflict during the Conference took place outside of the meeting rooms.... the Oilers and the Flames played back-to-back games on the two evenings of the Conference....

The arrangements and facilities for the Conference were very good, and the food was excellent and plentiful.... our gratitude goes to Bob Chatwin and Lisa Branconnier for Registration... Ruth Lewis and Wendy McConnell for Program... Mark Nicoll for Public Relations.... Norm Bilodeau, a Past President of AASW, for chairing the Planning Committee... and the Council of AASW, who also arranged for the presence of the Minister of Social Services. Our gratitude goes, too, to those colleagues who, because of cutbacks in their agencies, had to take their holiday time to be present with us at our deliberations.

Impressions of the Conference

The theme of conflict, struggle, and disequilibrium was maintained throughout with more emphasis, perhaps, on its application in intrapersonal, individual, interpersonal, and small-group situations, than on policy, program, provisions, and political issues.

The program brochure carried the quotation by Krishnamurti, which was the key to the content of the Conference sessions:

"It is only through conflict, and the understanding of conflict, that there is integration."

This is not a new concept to social workers and, indeed, it is but another way of saying what we have believed about reciprocity, as a profession, and what we have been teaching social work students. It is another way of saying:

"Truth can only be achieved in conflict with its opposite."

"You need your enemies as much as you need your friends."

"You value consensus only when you know conflict."

Rather than choosing between opposing views, social workers have always preferred to draw a circle around it all; we have not drawn a line between opposing factions, believing rather in the strength of linked opposites. Some have called it closure... or balance... or a "pan view"... or "the big picture". It is why most systems-perspective social workers have always had trouble with role theory.... to them, a role is only a half-assed relationship.

This kind of linking occurred throughout the workshops so that, taken together, we had a whole. One could not have...

of Doctors McKeen and Wong, the emphasis on "inner space trips", and the long journey to maturity

WITHOUT ...the spectre of budget cuts, privatization, and a value base that says it may be OK to transmute the eternal concept of the deserving and undeserving poor, to the "deserving sick", and now, vis-à-vis the issue of adoption, those "deserving" the status of "parents", based on socioeconomic status...

families

WITHOUT ...legal triangulations and issues for social workers in their interventions in families, or the triangulations described by Mrs. Osterman trying to relate to us, her Cabinet colleagues, & consumers...

view that our perception of reality IS the only reality; that finding meaning in life is an existential pursuit, and the anti-scientism of that approach,

WITHOUT ...self-evaluation of practice, and the harsh reality of employer/employee or union/professional relationships, or of rural practice in Alberta...

group

WITHOUT ...its giving birth to its counter-part, a social policy interest group....

And, in keeping with the themes of the Conference and of the closing speakers, McWhinney and Metcalfe, the message is that only myth is large enough to help us make sense of our current reality, i.e., to provide a framework for understanding it. This was part of their reasoning, I believe, in choosing Martin Luther King's 1963 speech with which to end their presentation ("I have a dream....").

These things, at first glance, so opposing...so divergent... are, however, valid parts of our field and, taken together, make the whole. No part of the total picture, in and of itself, represents TRUTH in our profession. Our personal preoccupations are inextricably linked to our political preoccupations... and we, in this room, have chosen "the dangerous profession", for we have chosen never to enjoy the luxury of focusing solely (to paraphrase Dr. Shanti Khinduka, Dean of the George Warren Brown School of Social Work) "on the plumage and to forget the (dying) bird".

So... "thank-you", Norm Bilodeau and Margaret Dewhurst, for arranging to help to remind us, on this annual occasion... and on others... of what it is to be whole, for we shall need all of our mutually reinforcing parts in the lean and mean days ahead.

Let us take our leave, now, by listening to the words of a man wise enough to have married a social worker.... a man who speaks to us of peace:

"...peace without development is not peace...peace without racial equality and harmony is not peace...peace without a reasonable quality of life is not peace. It is, therefore, the fullness of Canada's programs--from development assistance and active support for human rights to the protection of the environment and the promotion of a better standard of living for people across the country and, indeed, throughout the world -- that constitutes a meaningful contribution to peace."

Douglas Roche, Canadian Ambassador for Disarmament, in notes for an address to public forums, as reported in the Globe and Mail, 1986-04-29