

CASW National Award Presentation

Banquet Address

“Thinking and Doing”

By

Gayle Gilchrist James, MSW, RSW (Alberta)
President, IFSW

Associate Professor, Edmonton Division
University of Calgary, Faculty of Social Work

Friday 26 June 1992

7:00 p.m.

CASW Delegate Assembly
Delta Brunswick Hotel
24-28 June, 1992

President Dewhurst... Members of the CASW Board... Delegates to the Assembly... Presidents and Executive Directors of Provincial and Territorial Associations... Colleagues All... and friends.

First of all, thank-you for inviting me to “come home”... and what a homecoming it is. In whatever part of the world I may speak on behalf of our colleagues in 54 nations, there is no place from which I welcomed an invitation... and an award...more than from my own colleagues in Canada, with whom I came of age. It is in this country that I forged my lifelong link with my chosen profession; it is in this country that I have chosen to live the majority of my days; it is to this country and its professional social work community that I owe the biggest debt for the gift that being an international president is. For this, I am unabashedly grateful...and unashamedly loyal. Thank you.

IFSW: BEING PRESIDENT

When I first truly contemplated in my mind’s eye what it would be like to be president... or that it was possible, was at the 1988 Alberta Association of Social Workers (AASW,) annual meeting and conference, in response to their warm reception. This may seem surprising, given my having declined formal and informal nominations on three other occasions, and given that I had served 1978 - 1984 as Vice-President for the North American Region (which comprises NASW and CASW). My “campaign” was largely out of my hands and in the safer hands of Dick Ramsay, with the costs for posters being borne by two AASW members: Donna Hamar and Gweneth Gowanlock. In all of this, I learned some things... and I have some people to thank.

First, I learned that no one comes to this position alone, in the short-haul, or the long-haul. There are “turning points.” When I was 28 years old, I was nominated to the CASW National Board on a motion made by Mary Morrison Davis and Harold Doxsee, of AASW. I remember it so distinctly because I was so amazed... but not so amazed as to decline the honour. There have been many other turning points since..., each of them clear, important, energizing and, yet, in some ways a surprise. The point, if indeed I am making one with any clarity at all is that events and opportunities do present themselves but, likewise, one cannot force the fates to give one what one wants. One has to be simultaneously deeply involved in one’s existence and, at the same time, curiously detached.

There is one perfect moment when you are named President in front of the assembled nations, at the opening ceremony of a biennial symposium. It is perfect because your term all lies out in front of you... and you haven’t yet made one mistake. Not one. It is all perfect. The first meeting of the “new executive” changes that... and you are a social worker in the trenches, again.

Thirteen year ago, at the Alberta Association’s Annual Meeting, I became President, and in 1981- 1983 the President of CASW. It is not incorrect to say that you made me the International President, as well..., and I was grateful for the presence in Stockholm the summer of 1988 of Margaret Dewhurst, and, again in Buenos Aires 1990, for the presence of Monique Robin and Eugenia Moreno, as well as Margaret.

There are so very many of you to whom I am unendingly grateful, for your involvement in the profession I fell in love with... so many of you who contributed to my development in ways of which you are probably unaware... and by thanking a very few, please do not construe that there were not others who go unmentioned this night. My nearly quarter century of service, if you call it that, will end soon.

My special thanks go to...

Dr. Albert Rose, University of Toronto Professor Emeritus, Faculty of Social Work, and a CASW Past President, for persuading me in the Fall of 1965 not to abandon my M. S. W. and the profession..., to Dr.

Bill Kirwin, who believed I could teach and hired me as an academic... to Gweneth Gowanlock and her successor, Eugenia Moreno, who showed me what a small national association could do on the international stage if it had an executive director with intelligence, purpose, and love..., to Bob Myers, (again) Albert Rose, and Ed Pennington for forming Myropen Publications and rescuing” our professional journal, to the great Presidents of CASW, like Don Karst, Dick Splane, Glenn Drover, Madeleine Rivard-Leduc, Marian Walsh, and Gail MacDougall whose joint and several commitments to excellence have expanded consistently CASW’s sphere of influence, to Dick Ramsay, for his capacity, anywhere he finds himself in the world, to make meaning out of people’s struggles, including my own, and to John Mould, for the same reasons... and to those colleagues, named and un-named who, in the practice of their profession, are among “the disappeared,” the tortured, the persecuted and prosecuted, the murdered and the missing, in many nations.

And, if it seems to you that my list includes the names of more men than women, then, I ask you to consider two things:

- 1) my age and the period in which I was educated; and
- 2) that my profession has always had in it androgynous males in good numbers... and good mentoring is not same-gender specific.

President Margaret Dewhurst has asked me to talk a bit about what may happen between now and the Year 2000... about what challenges we face.

So I will talk about **our greatest challenge: namely, how we think about challenges.** Our propensity for cause and effect thinking, our allegiance to the old dictum “Seeing is believing”... and, in short, our unexamined assumptions, must be explored. Our minds also must go to what is unseen... we must perceive the patterns of events (the inter-relationship of events as opposed to drawing a straight line between two events and attributing causality)...we must learn that “believing-is-seeing” is the lost half of “seeing-is-believing.”

And, I want to thank Geoffrey York of today’s *Globe and Mail* for helping me prepare for this tale (“Poverty to worsen in 1990s: family breakdown cited as main cause” June 26, 1992, A1 & A3). More of this later.

Finally, I want to argue for the expansion of our person-in-environment perspective and especially for the expansion of our concept of environment to a universal one... or, a “universe-full)” one.

**“I don’t know if I can
Cry hard enough
For you to hear me now.”**

Cat Stevens

Part of this tale is devoted to explaining the link between what we **think and do**, as social workers, and the new physics. We simply cannot do what we do...think the way we think... and believe what we believe... without taking into account that science and religion, or science and philosophy, or the physical and the metaphysical, are headed toward a reunification in this last decade of the 20th century. How we fight repressive policies depends on our manner of thinking, not just about those policies, but about everything else in our environment, and in the universe. This is no time to surrender our perspective on person/environment transactions. What if the chaos of our lives, our families, and our social services, our

political and economic structures, operates by the same principles as does chaos in the organic world...and there is a pattern that we could understand and shape? Is that too much to postulate?

“If at a particular moment, we are in a position where we must choose a particular model we should probably choose the most dramatic one -- that is, the one that imparts to the event being studied the greatest possible significance.” (Peck, 1983: 38)

“If everything in the universe depends on everything else in a fundamental way, it might be impossible to get close to a full solution by investigating parts of the problem in isolation.” (Stephen Hawking, 1988: 11)

There are other lessons we have “learned” from the so-called “hard sciences,” about how the world works, and I suggest to you that the challenge for our profession is to figure out how these principles may be used in social work. I am not alone in believing that we either make the paradigm shift or we become a profession that lived for a century and is of interest, in the 21st century, only to historians of the past cultures (Ramsay, personal communication, 1989). Paradoxically, we are probably better equipped and better situated than any other helping profession to make that paradigm shift.

What we see depends a great deal on what we are looking for. As K.C. Cole has commented, “We assume that if we see a face looking out of a window that there is a body attached to it...” (Cole, 1985: 66). This is, perhaps, a startling way to begin to examine our assumptions, and our perspectives.

The perspective we take on a problem... how we perceive it... the assumptions we hold, will all contribute to the way we self-determine the solutions at which we arrive. Ivan Illich sounded the warning many years ago when he said that we can abandon certain solutions “as we let go of the illusions that made them necessary.” What he means is that we can surrender some of our problem-solving behaviours if we change our definition of the nature of the problem, or our relationship to it, or its relationship to us. For example, we make submissions to the Minister, Health and Welfare Canada, on the assumption that he sets Health and Welfare policy. But what if our assumption is wrong, and it’s really the Minister of Finance who makes Health and Welfare policy?!? Such an approach is familiar in family treatment, where it is referred to as “reframing” the problem or the question. A larger question is whether, in the process of that reframing, we are also prepared to change our mental style of thinking about problems in general.

As westerners in the world, and as North Americans, we are reasonably adept at cause and effect thinking and, indeed, have made some progress with this thinking style that we learned in our higher (and lower) educational institutions, a style we inherited largely from Newton. We know how to systematically attack a problem; attacking it systemically gives us a great deal more difficulty. Our mechanistic view of the world derives from Newton, and his laws of motion attached to the physical universe; concomitantly, if the “universe was, indeed, one huge mechanical system, operating according to exact mathematical laws” (Capra 1982/83: 63), then everything had a cause and an effect. [We know a lot about unintended effects].

And while Newton’s insights were great, indeed, they fell to two other theories in physics: Einstein’s general theory of relativity (GTR), and quantum mechanics (QM). Respectively, these two theories helped us understand the world in terms of very large galaxies (and gravity), and very small particles, atoms, electromagnetic forces, and nuclear forces (T. Sasitharan, “The World of the Big and the Small,” *The Straits Times*, Singapore, Monday, 28 August, 1989: 2).

The next great mind, and one of our time, is that of Stephen W. Hawking, born on the anniversary of Galileo’s death. He holds Newton’s chair as Lucasian Professor of Mathematics at Cambridge University,

and his landmark book, *A Brief History of Time: From the Big Bang to Black Holes*, has been on the non-fiction bestseller lists for months. What it means--that thousands of ordinary people are intrigued with such questions as the finiteness or the infinity of the universe, or whether time had a beginning--one cannot be certain. But one thing it may mean is that our culture, as we know it, has reached what Capra refers to as a "turning point" (Capra, 1982/83), and what many have called a "paradigm shift." Hawking says that "the eventual goal of science is to provide a single theory that describes the whole universe" (Hawking, 1988: 10), and his most recent work describes a beginning link between the general theory of relativity, and quantum mechanics, raising the possibility that a theory can be developed which will lead to the unification of physics (T. Sasitharan, "The World of the Big and the Small," *The Straits Times*, Singapore, Monday, 28 August, 1989: 2).

We have come to an understanding of quantum physics through the vehicle of general systems theory. General systems theory has taught us about the inter-relationship of parts and wholes...that the principles of organization, reciprocity, complementarity, interdependence, and integration of interlocking parts and wholes are inherent aspects of any living system (Finlay, Freeman, and Stolar, CASSW: 1974). What this means in real life, is that there is complementarity between the parts of a whole system, and that you cannot "fiddle" with one part without its effect being felt on another part of the system. You cannot de-index family allowance rates, and then "cancel" that program, and not expect children to show up at the chain of food banks across Canada (and my province--Alberta--invented what I bitterly call "fast food for the poor"). You cannot expect child welfare workers to "make do" with less and expect a competent level of service to children, when physics tells us that energy can be neither created nor destroyed, but can only be "borrowed" from other parts of a system.

And while it may be true that we can "borrow" energy (as defined by Einstein, Hawking, and others) from other parts of our physical universe, we who are charged with looking after the interests of clients have tended to look at "borrowing" energy only from the social systems of one country--Canada. By this, one means that we have viewed energy--not incorrectly--as money, ideas, and people, but in an attempt to meet the energy needs of one part of the system, we have taken it from another. We de-index and "clawback" and subsume family allowance, not to redirect these monies to the poor, but to reduce the national debt, acting as though there will be no negative effect on women and children...acting as though there is no connection between tax policy and family policy. Causality, in the Newtonian sense? Likely, No. But, as Weisskopf, Professor Emeritus at M.I.T. would say, "There are connections" (Cole, 1984/85: 311).

If the best minds of our generation can give up the Newtonian view of the universe, i.e., a linear one, and decide that Newton's (and Descartes') mechanistic vision of the world as a giant clockwork was incomplete at best, and probably dead wrong at worst, why can't we apply these insights in our own lives? In our way of thinking about things, we seem to prefer to stick to "cause and effect", or to theories of causality, because they give us the (false) security of "predictability."

"The search for underlying causes is innately and powerfully appealing--not the least because it implies the ability to control: if you know what makes things happen (or not happen) you might be able to make them happen (or not happen) again. Above all, people like to think that there are causes. It is disconcerting to think that events are random, that the things we see around us do not conform to an understandable (if still not understood) body of natural law." (Cole, 1984/85: 298)

As Cole points out (1984/85: 199-200), when people "talk about cause and effect...rarely do they know *if* the effects are really caused by the causes...it's all too easy to link two events in the time and then say that one was caused by the other... but you do hear educated people say that welfare causes poverty, or that family planning causes teenage pregnancies, or that the paucity of decent television programming is

caused by people's poor taste." One could add that people also seem to believe that it is our health and welfare system which has created the national deficit, that the availability of unemployment insurance creates unemployment, and that welfare causes teenage girls to avoid work by getting pregnant.

Today's *Globe and Mail* (op. cit., Geoffrey York) informs us, in the same vein, that family breakdown causes poverty, that UI and social assistance "were not conceived with the current situation in mind," and that governments "are beginning to reform the safety net" but are "moving too slowly." In case you remain unimpressed with this example of linear/cause and effect reasoning, I ask you to consider George Bush's explanation that the L.A. race riots were caused by the War-on-Poverty programs of the 60s. Another fan of Newton, I say.

Again, as Cole said (1984/85: 301), "The truth is that we rarely understand what forces are at work...only in quantum mechanics--in the physics of sub-atomic things -- do causes spring out of nowhere, or at least out of chaos, which is much the same thing" (1984/85: 305).

Disorder and chaos are interesting subjects; let us turn now to the recent, and tremendously exciting "science of chaos."

Many researchers, and those replicating the experiments of others, have had the experience of having what appeared to be random and unpredictable findings appear in their research results. These errant findings have usually been rationalized away ("I've made a mistake," or "the computer has a bug in it"). For some, it was finding that very small differences, like rounding out numbers to the eighth rather than the fourth place, over time, made a phenomenal difference in their outcome. As Cole comments, "as in foreign affairs and personal affairs, one small unseen effect can be enough to change the entire configuration of events...on the surface, causality and randomness may seem to be mutually exclusive; but, on closer inspection, they must be seen as complementary facets of a larger reality" (Cole, 1984/85: 311, 313). [This might be a lens through which we could understand the rapid and turbulent changes in Eastern Europe.]

Chauncey Alexander, a former president of the International Federation of Social Workers, states in his keynote address to the Arizona chapter of the National Association of Social Workers, 23rd September, 1988, "That studies in recent years of chaos, of randomness, have yielded discoveries that suggest a science of 'chaos'."

Alexander puts it in a dramatic way: "If a butterfly flaps its wings in Los Angeles, does it have an effect on the weather of Tucson?" (Alexander, 1988: 3). The answer is "yes." Both Alexander, and the popular PBS film in the *Nova* series, "The Science of Chaos," detail the experiments of Ed Lorenz, which prove the above *connection*:

‘.. Lorenz (studying weather patterns in an attempt to predict them) computed the fixed points of three variables... he found that underlying the randomness of the relationship of the three variables showed a dynamic pattern that, when recorded graphically, resembled a butterfly's wings or an owl mask... the Lorenz attractor with its butterfly effect became recognized as the 'sensitive dependence on initial conditions', demonstrating the fact that a system in a chaotic state could be altered through the magnification that could arise from small changes.” (Alexander, 1988: 4, citing Gleick, 1987)

What this means is that, in the linear world of Newton, we believed we could have predictability. *In the non-linear world we know that predictability can never be absolute.* We can speak only of probability, and prepare ourselves to expect the unpredictable. The "sensitivity of initial conditions," or the "sensitive dependence on initial conditions" means that a small initial condition difference can have an outcome

effect out of all proportion to the original difference. It can lead a system into disorder... but the absolutely compelling news is that this “disorder”, too, forms a pattern. In other words, “there’s order in the ensuing disorder” (Ramsay, personal communication, 8 October, 1989). We have a choice between what we thought or perceived were utterly random events, to be ignored (as it turns out, at our peril), or we can count into the order of our dynamically diverse living systems the disorder and randomness, which allow us some measure *of probability*, and *will give us* a new appreciation of the value of unpredictability. Our social safety net is in a totally and utterly chaotic phase; it’s turbulent. It also offers the first opportunity since 1971 to transform it into an entirely different model, which could be more accommodating, more just, and more suited to the socioeconomic/cultural realities of Canada. We do know, from both the “hard sciences” and the “soft sciences” (which are rapidly becoming one science), that negative feedback holds something in a fixed state, while positive feedback results in an amplifying or expanding state. In other words, what we are now able to demonstrate as amplifying waves on a computer screen when physicists map non-linear dynamical systems, like weather patterns, is what the behaviourists have told us for years, i.e., that punishment (“negative feedback”) of certain behaviours exhibited by children simply is not a workable way to extinguish undesirable behaviour. Is there a bit, a piece in our safety net that *we* can amplify (for example, if we gave up universality, how and what might we target?)

We do know that there is an order in chaos. What we do not know, in any given situation, is what it is that confines the disorder to “acceptable” levels, i.e., what is the “force,” “attractor,” or “strange attractor,” as it is sometimes known? The critical questions for us, as social scientists in what Ramsay now calls a “design science profession,” is “how do we, in our personal and social systems, manage to gain the contained and patterned randomness of chaos, as opposed to utter randomness?”

Social workers are faced, as Alexander says, “with overwhelming social and individual chaos in the milieu in which we must function... chaos is not novel for us since it appears as symptoms of deficiencies in societal institutions, of class conflict, of psychological disorder” (Alexander, 1988: 2).

We also know that all living systems, not otherwise curtailed, proceed from order to disorder... and from disorder to order...but, over time, always in the direction of increasing complexity. In these matters, *direction is very important*. There is not inevitability in this process, *if we understand the process and we understand the world in which we are living and if we work with the great forces which move the world*. The great forces which move the world go on... our only choice is whether we recognize them, or not... whether we count them “in,” or count them “out.” Who, among you, is the “strange attractor,” not eliminating chaos which, as we currently understand it, is impossible, but acknowledging it and working *with* it to embrace its richness and complexity?

Cole says (1984/85:327) that “...the biggest mistake people make in trying to create order out of chaos is to do it in one fell swoop... the truth is that large-scale cosmic order is built on small-scale local order. Stars don’t appear out of nowhere, but accumulate by collecting clumps of matter over millions of years...social or economic order can’t be imposed on chaos, but must be built up by many small simultaneous efforts over long periods of time.” Sounds like community development to me.

You here, have an opportunity, to understand the patterns of the universe, as best we know them in 1992. You, here, have the opportunity to think of how Newtonian physics has led you to where you are, and how a non-linear wholistic perspective (which includes the new science of chaos) can lead you to a different perspective on all social problems...it might even lead to a different perspective on problems you are trying to solve in your personal and professional lives.

As a profession, we’ve long held to the importance of “the environment.” It’s been part of our heritage...even if we didn’t yet know fully that we meant galaxies, gravity, particles, atoms, EMG forces,

nuclear forces, and *the patterns* which bind it all together. We didn't fully comprehend what we meant when we said we wanted the sun, the moon, the stars for our clients... but our blind intuition was not wrong.

We've always said too, that "one person can make a difference" ... and now physics confirms that turbulence and chaos can be modified by a "strange attractor" or even, a "periodic attractor." You, too, can effect a small change in "initial conditions," at a moment in time, which could effect a major difference at a later... point in time.

As we come to the end of the century, we see the possible (*not predictable*) and probable unification of myth and reality, science and religion, the physical and the metaphysical. It is not easy, as individuals or as a profession, to change our way of thinking about the way we think, the way we perceive, the way we act. But we've had a longer run up to this take-off than any other profession. And, while Earth as a living organism sets limits on economic development, it sets *no* limits on social development, save those we set in our heads. We have to know "the right time, and the manner of yielding, what is impossible to keep" (Queen Elizabeth, 1976).

Only myth can guide our reality now, so let me end with the statement of Tolkien's King Elrond in *Lord of the Rings* 1965: 353).

The road must be trod but it will be very hard. And neither strength nor wisdom will carry us very far upon it. This quest may be attempted by the weak with as much hope as the strong. Yet such is oft the course of deeds that move the wheels of the world: small hands do them because they must, while the eyes of the great are elsewhere."

Thank you for this moment in time.

Endnotes

1. The origins of the reference to Ivan Illich, page 6 is, quite simply, lost somewhere in the author's rudimentary filing system.
2. The quotation by Queen Elizabeth, page 13, is excerpted from her speech, 6 July 1976, on the occasion of her presentation of the Bicentennial Bell to the people of the United States of America ("Let Freedom Ring").

Bibliography

- Alexander, Chauncey A (1988). "Chaos: Finding the Future in Social Work." Keynote address to the Arizona Chapter of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), 23 September 1988.
- Capra, Fritjof (1982). *The Turning Point: Science, Society and the Rising Culture*. New York: Simon & Schuster (& Bantam).
- Cole, KC (1984). *Sympathetic Vibrations. Reflections on Physics as a Way of Life*. Toronto: Bantam New Age Books, 1985 (or William Morrow and Company).
- Finlay Donald, Freeman David, Stolar Elaine (1974). "Unifying Behavioural Theory and Social Work Practice." Presented to the Annual Congress of the Canadian Association of Schools of Social Work (CASSW).
- Gleick, James (1987). *Chaos: Making a New Science*. New York: Viking.
- Hawking, Stephen (1988). *A Brief History of Time: From the Big Bang to Black Holes*. Toronto: Bantam.
- Peck, M Scott (1983). *People of the Lie. The Hope for Healing Human Evil*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Sasitharan, T 1989). "The World of the Big and the Small," *The Straits Times*, Singapore, Monday 28 August 1989, p. 2.
- Tolkien, JRR (1965). *Lord of the Rings (Part I: The Fellowship of the Ring)*. New York: Ballantine.