

SYMPOSIUM

MAKING A DIFFERENCE:

**Current Trends and Future Directions in
Social Work Practice**

**On the occasion of the Fiftieth Anniversary of the
Faculty of Social Work, University of Manitoba**

and

The Baird Poskanzer Memorial Symposium

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Preamble

Like the Faculty of Social Work at the University of Manitoba, I grew up in the West... only, I had a three-year head start. And, if the sociologists and psychologists are correct in their cohort theory, then I was exposed, by some osmotic process, to the beliefs and behaviours of those seven years my senior and those seven years my junior; that is, a time historically between 1933 and 1947. It means I lived with parents who were professionals and whose memories of the Great Depression were real and omnipresent ... and it means that I lived through remembering World War II, through the double lens of having my big brother go to war and return, while an endless stream of parents of other painfully young adults arrived at my parents' door, bearing the dreaded telegrams which began with the same words: "We regret to inform you ... "I may have been exposed at too young an age to adult grief and peace and war... but the difference, for me, was that these bursts of acute pain were felt from the vantage point of a child wrapped in the security of loving and articulate parents, and a community that was a cohesive entity. And, because I grew up in a predominantly first-generation German-Russian community when my family had already been in Canada in excess of one hundred years, I grew up "exceptional," if not "privileged," to paraphrase the old Talmudic legend. Put simplistically, no one had to impress upon me the importance of what are now termed "systemic variables": I was too busy living them. My Canada was one Canada ... this childhood impression having been aided and abetted by Sunday afternoon visits to the home of my family's best friend, a direct descendent of Madeleine de Verchere, who would translate *Le Devoir* and/or *La Presse* for the WASP kid, so that I should not grow up ignorant.

I confess these things to you, not to prove that I could not find an adequate self-help group in Edmonton in which to bare my soul and share my pain but, rather, to explain my reverence for those who, in the period Post-War to the Sixties, and based on many of the same memories (personal and inherited), crafted a social safety net so that what we experienced at the personal level could be ameliorated through political and governmental action. One cannot be faulted for (as Matthew Arnold said in his bleak poem, "Dover Beach") trying to stem "the turbid ebb and flow of human misery" ... even if they, personally, did not see it, long ago, on the Aegean. It is, also, to explain my natural devotion to history and, especially, to its importance in our profession.

Better writers than I have stressed the presentness of the past... Social worker Elaine Brody (1977) said, "The well-being of the generations is interlocked individually and collectively." Clarke Chambers, likewise, claims, "Social work, like every other profession, must be possessed by a sense of history or else drift without direction or purpose." Margaret Atwood, not even a social worker, stated that "the future is a continuum of the past." Many social work historians feel that those unfamiliar with our particular history are doomed to repeat it. But, just maybe, the problem is that by teaching our history, we are dooming future social workers to learning a framework that fit the 20th century and has no meaning for the 21st century. Maybe our future is discontinuous with our past. If we pass a kaleidoscope around a group of people, and we pass it very carefully, we shall all agree on the one pattern that we see. But, should one among us not be scrupulously careful in the passing, the elements in the kaleidoscope will have re-arranged themselves in a new pattern, and earlier and later viewers will disagree vehemently on the pattern they, themselves, all witnessed accurately.

It is my business, here, to change the pattern, while keeping the familiar elements. Who saw what, last, is probably irrelevant; history may not help us now. We can still honour our traditions and revere our ancestors...but the tree trunk has already bifurcated and we are a new branch. Historian William Irwin Thompson says it best:

We will have to come right up to the edge to find out where we are, and who we are. At the edge of history, history itself no longer can help us, and only myth remains equal to reality. What we know is less than what we are...The future is beyond knowing, but the

present is beyond belief. We make so much noise with technology that we cannot discover that the stargate is in our foreheads. But the time has come; the revelation has already occurred, and the guardian seers have seen the lightning strike the darkness we call reality. And now we sleep in the brief interval between the lightning and the thunder.

A DECALOGUE: OLD ELEMENTS | NEW DIRECTIONS

"Move then with new desires,
For where we used to build and love
Is no man's land, and only ghosts can live between two fires."

C. Day Lewis

Nineteen days from today, and in this City of Winnipeg, we will have achieved the eleventh anniversary of University of British Columbia Professor Emeritus Dr. Richard Splane's "Decalogue" of "Recommendations and Exhortations" to Dennis Dawson, M.P. (Parliamentary Secretary to Lloyd Axworthy, Minister of Employment and Immigration), delivered on the occasion of the Canadian Association of Social Workers' Biennial Conference (17 June 1982). Having thus acknowledged my impending theft of his intellectual property (or did this model begin with Moses?), I will attempt (shamelessly) my own decalogue of "Recommendations and Exhortations" (Second Edition). In this exercise, you must be aware of my assumption that social work, wherever it is practiced on this planet, must deal with four elemental and interlocking realities or environments: geographic, political, spiritual or metaphysical, and social (including socioeconomic/sociolegal/cultural) ... a model for which I am indebted to Professor Dick Ramsay.

Three further assumptions are of importance:

- a) Elemental to social work is the concept that context is what gives meaning. One can never understand "the whole" by an in-depth study of one of its parts. Social workers are only too happy to adopt a person-in-environment perspective to explicate human behaviour, but are less enthusiastic about its reciprocal, paired-opposite notion: environment-in-person.
- b) In both simple and complex systems, everything is transactive. Everything arises in mutual relation to everything else, so you can't blame "any-body" for anything ... or "every-thing." Our demand for leadership may be a plea for validation of one's wish to be a "follower;" only hired assassins and their employers/payers are sufficiently linear in their thinking to believe that "killing" the boss, the enemy, the non-believer changes the basic direction of a living system. Any system which permits the development of a dictator will give birth to a succession of clone dictators upon the disappearance of the first one.
- c) We must deal in probabilities, not predictions. What we have learned from the new science of chaos, and what we have witnessed in our own field and in world events, is that "sensitive initial conditions" may be amplified over time so that chaos ensues. As it is impossible to know, with certainty, the "sensitive initial conditions" of any enterprise, the predictive element of cause-and-effect is lost, and we are forced to deal, instead, with "the balance of probabilities" in all multifactorial situations.

1. Do Not Underestimate the Breadth/Depth/Length Of Cuts in Our Social Safety Net (or, "The Day the Music Died").

The present is beyond belief, especially for those who, dramatically and incrementally, from the 40's to the 70's, created Canada's social safety net. This evolutionary process has been replaced by what the Globe and Mail (24 July 1992) calls "Michael Wilson's quiet revolution." Since 1984, every major social program has been de-indexed, capped, collapsed, cancelled, and/or eroded by inflation, most of the action having occurred since the Spring 1989 budget.

Cuts are in two major directions: programs (and associated personnel), and independent advisory agencies:

<u>Programs</u>	<u>Advisory Agencies</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clawback and "disappearance" of Family Allowance • Clawback of Old Age Security • Elimination of federal contribution to Unemployment Insurance (UI) and changes in eligibility plus 3% cut (to 57% from 60%) in benefits • Capping at 5% (1990-1991) Canadian Assistance Plan (CAP) expenditures in Alberta, B.C., and Ontario • Cuts in social and co-operative housing (C.M.H.C.) • Reduction in Extended Program Financing (EPF) funding, ending in elimination of federal contribution by about 2008. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Science Council of Canada, '66 - '92 • Economic Council of Canada, '63 - '92 • Canadian Institute for International Peace and Security, '85 - '92 • Law Reform Commission, '71 - '92 • Canadian Employment and Immigration Advisory Council, '77 - '92 • Charter Challenges, '78 - '92 • Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SHRRC) & Canada Council, MERGED (This was nullified by the Senate, June 1993) • National Council of Welfare & National Council on Aging, To be MERGED

[My province and, perhaps, others recently announced a round of mergers, too. One involves a film marketing enterprise and an agricultural marketing enterprise, which caused an acerbic Alberta legislative reporter, Don Braid to comment that, in Alberta, we could finally have sensitive films about hogs.]

2. Realize That All the Aforementioned Program and Advisory Agency Cuts Occurred With No Participation in Decision-Making by the Groups Most Affected, and With No Public Discussion (except of the reactive sort).

3. Realize That the Traditional Role of the Senior Civil Servant Has Gone From One Of Specialist And Expert in The Matters at Hand to One of Manager and Generalist, A Model Misappropriated From The Corporate World (where it has worked little better). Robert Samuelson, in a recent piece in Newsweek (10 May 1993), declared:

We are now witnessing the death of management. By management, I mean the peculiarly American idea (still taught at many business schools) that a "good manager" should be

able to manage any enterprise, anywhere, anytime.... With hindsight, we can see the absurdity.

4. Realize That Government Cannot be Run Like a Business and a Business Cannot be Run Like the Government. Business, in quasi-capitalist democracies, runs to make a profit, while "the final end of government is not to exert restraint but to do good" (Choate). Governments are responsible for the well-being of all of its shareholder citizens; business has the luxury of appealing to and advancing the interests of a part of the citizenry, without reference to the universe of Canadians. Even William Gold, Calgary Herald columnist, declared (27 April 1993):

(The Finance Minister's) rummage through the federal purse was a true product of its time. Cut here, retreat there, diminish this, eliminate that. It had so much to do with the national debt; so little to do with the people...social and economic issues all over the public sector spectrum are being addressed in separate compartments by people who do not aspire to reform or even see the whole of society. This is all profoundly scary. Our society is splitting into rich and poor economically, into ethnic groups tribally, into special-interest factions politically. Will anyone come forward to lead us all into a brave new world where new solutions count for so much as bankers' books?

5. Realize Two Paired Ideas:

a) We do Not Have a Deficit/Expenditure Crisis; We Have a Revenue Crisis,

And

b) It is Not Our Social Safety Net That Has Created Our Deficit.

What we spend is a meaningless figure unless it is seen in light of what we take in, and revenue forgone is money as good as spent. Statistics Canada (1991) has noted that fully 44% of our \$400 billion national debt has accrued because of tax breaks to individuals and corporations. Add to this revenues foregone through the \$100,000 lifetime capital gains exemption, an absence of inheritance taxes, and increased RRSP limits (from \$12,500 in '93 to \$15,500 in '96).

You may forgive my sarcasm, if I suggest to you that these are "targeted programs," rather like the Child Benefits Program; they are simply targeted at a different part of the socioeconomic spectrum. How can so many believe that the way economic resources are distributed is a function of inexorable economic laws and not a function of political--that is, human--choices (Eisler)? And, the next time someone scoffs at your suggestion of a fair and equitable tax system by telling you there aren't enough rich to be taxed to make one iota of a difference in our deficit, ask "What is your definition of 'rich'?" (My definition of "rich" is anyone who makes in excess of twice the national average individual or family income.)

And, if I may be permitted one more piece of sarcasm: government expenditures on health, as a percentage of the GDP, rose from 5.8% in 1984 to an "alarming" 6.2% in 1990, while in the same period, government expenditures on social programs "rose" from 26.2% to 26.3% of the GDP. Put another way, expenditures on social programs, as a percentage of total government expenditures, "rose" from 55.6% of the budget in 1984 to 56.7% of the budget in 1990 (StatsCan, Canadian Social Trends, Winter 1992 & Summer 1993).

I refuse to accept or believe that our social safety net should be dismantled because of cost increases in the order of one-tenth to four-tenths of one percent over a period of six years, or even an increase of 1.1%! You should refuse to believe it too ... and you should stop acting as though you believe it.

6. Learn a Third Language; It's Easy for Social Workers, Who Are Accustomed to Listening With the Third Ear. You Can Learn to Translate the Coded Language of Our Decade:

"Jobless recovery" = You may never have permanent, full-time employment again in your lifetime, while those who control financial institutions, investments, and can trade globally will be able to recover from the current global recession.

"We have to be competitive" = I know I will win, and I know you will lose.

"Targeting benefits" = The loss of the anonymity of universal programs and the reintroduction such classic concepts as the deserving and undeserving poor, the deserving and undeserving ill and disabled, the deserving and undeserving unemployed, and deserving and undeserving immigrants. Those with more than twice the average national income are, by definition, "deserving."

"Job training for welfare recipients" = Work for welfare.

"Down-sizing," "right-sizing," "restructuring" = You're fired.

"We cannot saddle our children with this burden" = We can't think of a thing to do for today's 1.2 million children living in poverty (1991) except change the poverty line so there won't be so many.

7. Realize That Sexual and Gender Inequality is Not Human Nature, That Diversity Does Not Need to be Equated to Either Inferiority or Superiority, That Just Because Some Practices Have Endured Does Not Make Them Adaptive, and That Singular Competitiveness Never Produces the Exponential, Synergistic Transformations Engendered by Co-Operation (Eisler).

8. Realize That There is a Model in Pre-History for Co-Operation, Peace, Caring, Productivity, and Equality (In Crete and Catal Hayuk/Turkey) Which Existed for 1500 Years, Free of Domination and Oppression of Any Kind, Where Practically All Material and Social Technologies Fundamental to Civilization Were Developed.

9. Accept That, Given the Totality of the Needs of the Peoples of This Good Planet, All of Us Will Have to Make-Do With Somewhat Less ... Including You and Me ... But in Such a Venture, Equity Need Not be the First Thing Sacrificed.

10. Learn, as Some Multinationals (e.g., the Reichmans) Have, That There Are Limits to Growth, and That "Sustainable Development" Does Not Mean, and Cannot Be Made to Mean, "Sustained Development." The Good News is That There Appears to be no Limit to Social Development. As Vaclav Havel Said (Summer Meditations): "People Need to Hear That It Makes Sense to Behave Decently or to Help Others, to Place Common Interests Above Their Own, to Respect the Elementary Rules of Human Coexistence."

Conclusion

To return to William Irwin Thompson...we can discover "the stargate is in our foreheads."
Hopefully, the revelation has occurred. We are at the edge of history, where history no longer can help us,
and only our myths of dignity and equity remain equal to our current reality.

"Move then with new desires,
For where we used to build and love
Is no man's land, and only ghosts can live
between two fires."

C. Day Lewis

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Related Letter:

The University Of Manitoba
Faculty Of Social Work
Winnipeg, Manitoba
June 14, 1993.

Professor Gail Gilchrist James,
University of Calgary,
Faculty of Social Welfare,
Edmonton Division,

Dear Gayle:

A special word of thanks, both official and personal, for your contribution to the Poskanzer Memorial Symposium on the occasion of the Faculty's 50th Anniversary. Your paper was challenging and thought-provoking, and a number of people have asked for reprints. Denis will be in further touch with you with respect to this issue.

Once more, on behalf of the Faculty, I'd like to express our appreciation for your generous response to our request for your contribution to our Anniversary symposium and to its success.
Sincerely,

Addie Penner,
Chair,
50th Anniversary Committee.