THE NEW ICONOCLAST: ADDRESSING A CURRENT IDEOLOGICAL CHALLENGE IN SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

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Introduction

It was sometime after I returned from the 2005 Bachelor Program Directors Annual Conference when I decided I would put a paper together with the strong title that I used for this presentation. It is a strong and provocative word, "Iconoclast". But it seem to describe precisely the way I was feeling about a response to the particular lecture to which I am now responding and seems to convey the strength, depth and passion of what I want to offer in this brief presentation. The term, according to Webster means "One who attacks and seeks to overthrow popular or traditional ideas or institutions". This presentation will attempt to provide a brief examination of how we need to respond to what I have come to view as an alarming movement in our profession to redefine social work values to accommodate the postmodernist environment in which we live and work. The idea that Christian social workers have needed to mobilize to create an organization such as the NACSW in order to have a voice in this caustic environment, is

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evidence of our growing disenfranchisement from our secular colleagues, who appear to desire to completely secularize the profession.

Postmodernism and Social Work

British social work scholar, Richard Hugman states that the "postmodern turn" has serious implications for social work. He quotes Delanty to support the notion that although postmodernism has been an important movement in the development of western social theory, it is, by it's very nature self-defeating, because, while it is over-emphasizing the idea of "difference", it does it to the point of relativism and subjectivism so that it is unable to choose between social values and so becomes prey to nihilism (anything goes) or solipsism (only my own view of the world is knowable). He argues that these constructs applied to social work values has serious implications because of the focus of the profession that is to intervene in society, and if this postmodernist view is maintained in the practice of social work, then the "goals" of social work become ambiguous due to the loss of legitimacy in "universal perspectives and asserts the flexible, floating, plural, contingent and uncertain nature of social life." (p.1026) His analysis of the future of for an ethical social work in light of postmodern perspectives "appears to be lonely, ambiguous, hazardous and fraught". His prediction for the profession is ominous: "Indeed, do not these analyses point the ethical question of the dissolution of social work as it has grown over more than a century?" (Delanty, 1997, Irving, 1999, Hugman, 2003) Hugman's question begs an answer. And it is to his question that this presentation now attempts to address.

The Christian Antecedents of Social Work

There is little disagreement that social work and social welfare have, at their roots, a Judeo-Christian tradition. Karger and Stoesz's social welfare policy text, **Social Welfare Policy, a pluralist approach** provides an excellent analysis of the religious antecedents of welfare statism. The authors state emphatically,

> "**While there are other traditions of compassion that could be related to the development of welfare statism, the dominance of Judeo-Christian compassion and community is without peer as the source in Western societies. The eventual dominance of the Christian tradition in Europe, and the near-identification of church with state government during the medieval period, led to the gradual assumption of government responsibility for social welfare.**"
> **(Karger & Stoesz, 2006)**

Social Work Values or Virtues?

Traditional social work values appear to be in the center of the struggle. In his very excellent presentation given at the 2006 CSWE conference in Chicago, Paul Adams from the University of Hawaii suggested that we replace the term "values" and instead concentrate on "virtues" as they relate to the social work practitioner's own character traits in relationship to the use of the ethical self in professional practice. His argument concerns the struggle between what has come to be a linear view of "values" taught as part of the social work curriculum, but are, in reality, simply the practitioner's responsibility to clients. (Adams, 2006) The idea that social work students can be taught these values in a linear fashion in the classroom, such as being able to regurgitate what is the meaning of cultural competency on an exam, and not be able to practice cultural competency as well as other social work values when they finally enter the field is the issue at hand, in my own mind. I was intrigued by the presentation, and found myself in lockstep with his premise where he cited the social work literature on ethics that emphasizes principles, rules, and dilemmas as the focus of education that may not

provide adequate opportunity for critical thinking beyond the level of understanding the importance of the principles, rules and dilemmas themselves and how to "apply" social work "virtues" to the resolution of them. The model relies heavily upon philosophy to provide the framework for ethical decision-making and practice. (DeTocqueville, 2000; Aristotle, 2002; Aquinas, 1985, 2005) I do believe Adams was on to something but by the presentation's end, I was more inclined to believe that he had crystallized a larger issue by his suggested remedy to the dilemma of how to consider teaching social work values and ethics absent the linear process. And was that possible at all? The idea that social work values were to be redefined at all, if the replacement Adams suggested seemed esoteric enough to take the study of them out of the realm of linear teaching, even if for just a while, was even possible.

Some Context and Questions

I had just accepted the position of Program Director of Social Work at the campus in Arkansas where the school is a part of the University of Arkansas system. The program was struggling with accreditation issues and I discovered shortly after I arrived that I would need to complete a restoration report to address the accreditation issues the Council on Social Work Education had cited in their response to the self-study that had occurred just before my arrival. It was a baptism by fire. Although I had practiced social work for nearly 20 years, and taught at several colleges as universities as an adjunct, I had not participated directly in a self-study process necessary to maintain their accreditation until I arrived and was made responsible to address the concerns. By the time I completed the restoration report last August, I found that I had learned much more than just how to put together a document of this kind. I discovered that the issues I had

been addressing had everything to do with what I am presenting today. Our program had been suffering from the practice of teaching the social work curriculum in the linear fashion I have described, while the behaviors and character of the students had not been a great deal of concern. As a result, I surmised, students had failed to learn, for the most part, even the most basic elements of social work and appeared to be in a constant struggle to understand just "what" they were supposed to know as graduates. When the site visitors came to the campus, for example, to interview students regarding their understanding of generalist practice; students were unable to define generalist practice, and also they were unable to differentiate between qualitative and quantitative research methods. I had to ask myself about how this could be possible.

I discovered after I arrived, additionally, a great deal of back-biting, gossip, rudeness, disrespect, and a general attitude of complacency among students although there were a few students who were serious and motivated to learn. Some students had such a serious attitude of entitlement that they demonstrated open defiance in the classroom. In the social and behavioral science department, where we are housed, many faculty members verbalized their disdain for the social work program openly and referred to the students as ignorant, disrespectful in the classroom and undisciplined. One faculty member, over the course of the year, made so many negative references to the social work department and the students that I finally, out of frustration, spoke to him openly about his remarks and asked him to simmer down. The field director, who had been there for three years before I arrived was somewhat inexperienced, and appeared to enable the disrespectful behaviors by not enforcing the code of conduct for students, but rather attempted to befriend students, which led to the inevitable enmeshment that occurs with

such practices. In short, I felt the atmosphere had not been conducive to learning. And the assessment for contributing factors to this problem became clear: that students were not able to incorporate values and ethics into their lives just by memorizing what they were, even if they could for a test (which they were later "forget" as evidenced by the site visitors' report). That the values and ethics, and even the other seven core curriculum content areas they were required to master by CSWE were not being learned perhaps due to the chaotic atmosphere that prevented serious study. What was more; students had not been required to comply with the rigorous behavioral component required for participation in a professional program of study that holds the potential for them to hold licensure in that profession upon graduation, providing they can pass the examination. As a clinician, I had seen, particularly in the years I had spent as a school social worker, that students learn best in a structured atmosphere where the rules are clear and accountability is practiced.

Let the Issues Be the Issues

I began to see at that time, and it was made even more clear in the months ahead as I attended conferences and read, that the lack of focus on the values that have provided the foundation for social work practice since the birth of the profession has been, over the last decade or so, appeared to be in danger by their replacement by specific "issues" or personal values which are socio/political in nature. The replacement of the traditional values encoded in the NASW Code of Ethics that identifies "what" the values must be, appears to have gained strength within many social work educators and practitioners presently. These social work professionals appear to have adopted postmodern values to replace social work values. The fervor associated with this phenomenon appears to be

reflected in professional conferences that can sometimes appear reminiscent of the kind of meetings conducted by gifted religious zealots, whose charismatic and persuasive presentations illicit emotional outbursts from the audience. This was certainly true last year during the excellent presentation made by Tina Hancock for the Ron Federico Memorial Lecture at the 2005 Annual convention of the Bachelor Program Director meeting held in Austin. Her lecture, "Come the Revolution: Human Rights, the Far Right, and New Directions for Social Work Education" was exceedingly interesting, well-crafted and appeared logical on the surface. But I felt the lecture was also troubling, laden with inaccuracies, and intellectually dishonest at its core.

I had attended the lecture, looking forward to it in the hope that I might here cogency from a fellow social work educator that could assist me in my own struggles with how to approach sincere social work students who needed to examine and adapt their own views of the world in the context of ethical and culturally competent social work practice. Instead, I found myself in the middle of a revival meeting for the new social work "doctrines" that were masked as values; complete with the emotional outbursts reminiscent of a "camp meeting" atmosphere. Hancock's lecture was so solicitous of emotion that if I had not been so disturbed at a visceral level, I would have joined in the handclapping and jumping around myself, the atmosphere was so electric and contagious. Indeed, I had become so disturbed by the lecture's content that by the end of it I managed to find my way to the President of BPD, with whom I am acquainted, following her into the ladies room with my rant about the offensiveness of the lecture's apparent premise. Not having any sort of relief for the angst I felt with her, (notwithstanding my own impropriety of usurping such personal space of the president in

which to verbalize these misgivings I posit here!)and finding another Christian educator from Alabama whom I had met in an earlier workshop, in the vestibule area who displayed a similar expression of bewilderment I had encountered in the ladies room on the face of the president when I had shared the angst I was feeling. Of course, at this point, I do understand that what I was feeling was simply a level of discomfort that I have felt many times as a practitioner when I knew I had to "act" on behalf of a client who had been caught in some precarious situation, and knew equally well that my action would cost me dearly. And it always did.   But I did not recognize those feelings then. I was just upset and confused about the direction I sensed the profession was going. I was grieved that I would not be able to find consensus any longer with my own colleagues where I should feel the safety net of collegiality where the honest exchange of ideas is valued. It was quite a death that transpired in me that day. And the only way I knew to address the pain I was feeling was to perform what I had asked so many of my students or clients to do in times when they felt the kind of pain or anger I was feeling. That is to sublimate it into action.

I had been upset on several levels. I was upset by what I saw as the red herrings attached to the new "norms" that discourage and punish intellectual scrutiny. I was equally as upset by the apparent consensus I observed in the lecture auditorium that day, and felt that I had become dreadfully out of touch with that group. I felt sad that there was not an apparent understanding of what this all was going to mean to our profession in the further polarization of people of faith because the issue had really stopped being the issue, in my mind. That is, the work we do on behalf of those unable to speak for themselves and the importance of that work was being hijacked by an ideological view

that itself was to replace the "work" of social work. And this fact sent a chill through me.

Hancock's eloquence had not been in question in my mind that day. But when she

repeatedly attacked the Bush presidency, for example, and accused his re-election team of

"extreme partisan tactics" by using the favor of Evangelical voters to sway the election,

accusing the Bush campaign of "overstepping of boundaries between church and

state. . .helped to ensure the election results of 2004" (Hancock, 2005) she became a

pundit rather than a scholar in my view. The question of the separation of church and

state, for example, has been a controversial topic for the "right" and "left" to discuss for

decades. Much has been written on the subject, but there appears a stance some have

settled into reflected by Hancock in her speech, that is neither supported by the

constitution nor constitutional scholars. Her utilization of the social work values of social

justice and human rights orientation appeared equally hijacked with their attachment to,

as in the attachment of an issue that can make or break the adoption of policy, known as a

rider, the idea that only the left is capable of those values rather than discerning the

difference between the various personal values held by Christians and non-Christians

alike, but who share allegiance to the integral principle and value of allowing client self-

determination in the course of intervention.

Hancock presumes, additionally, that "conservative activism, a term which to

most social workers presents an inherent contradiction" will eventually lose ground

because of, as she states, "internal weaknesses including economic selfishness and the

need to socially control others in order to further these ends." Her assertion that the

influence of students' values and attitudes needed to be revisited by social work

educators as a primary goal of social work education, but adds that "students may be too

closed-minded to benefit from the kind of values education strategies we have relied on in the past" suggesting that the use of moral development theory that exposes students to arguments and logical positions that represents "higher levels of socio-moral thought" is not possible for these "closed-minded", Christian students who exist in a culture unlike the one in which this kind of reasoning was made possible by the "openness and tolerant political climate" that characterized the 1980's". (Hancock, 2005) In fact, the 1980's was fraught with difficulties and political upheaval, namely the racial unrest highlighted by the inception of the AIDS epidemic in America, the racial unrest, problems with the economy, the heated debates about abortion, skyrocketing teen pregnancy and suicide rates, just to name a few social problems present during that time. Ronald Reagan's conservative approach to social problems was laced with his own Christian world view, and one that appear to reflect a consensus with a nation who some would now call "Far Right".

This mischaracterization, in my view, of the political climate of the 1980's in order to support the idea that the "religious right" have somehow created a hostile environment today that is devoid of serious discussion on controversial issues, and the disparagement of the Christian students whom Hancock serves as being "too closed-minded" to benefit from her enlightened views that she considers representative of all social workers was frankly elitist and condescending. In the last year, one instructor at my university whose personal views appear to mimic those Hancock presentation, stated flatly that "Christians should not seek social work as a profession" because she felt social work principles and Christianity are so antithetical. When, during a series of discussions with this faculty member, I offered the counter argument that she would then be

practicing religious discrimination in order to keep Christian students whom she felt were so "closed-minded" that they would not be able to support homosexuality, abortion, or euthanasia; issues which she characterized as the true "social work values". This instructor initially agreed that she would be using religious discrimination to keep Christian students out of the program on the basis of their personal religious views, but later apparently changed her mind, labeling me as homophobic, emotionally abusive (because I disagreed with her), and accused me of imposing my religious views on students. Notwithstanding this, it had been during these discussions with the faculty member that I began to realize what may be happening to the traditional social work values in the minds of some of the postmodern generation of social workers. That is, that the first generic principle of social work as the value of self-determination, believes in each individual's ability to decide what is best for herself or himself, (Segal, Gerdes & Steiner, 3) appeared to be in the process of replacement. Further, it appeared that as a profession we were being asked to adopt these views as the only legitimate view on the issues, rather than to allow the principle of self-determination to work on behalf of all individuals and groups. If this was to be in effect, personal choices such as what will be a person's sexual orientation, or the decision to end a pregnancy or the life of their loved one, or themselves, or any number of other issues was to become the "values" of social work. These "values" are then either spoken about openly in classrooms or covertly embedded in professional papers and presentations as illustrations. When these references are made, they are done without the professional tradition of disclosing biases in the context of the presentation of their papers.

This is illustrated, for example in the 2004 Ron Federico lecture that I accessed to prepare for this presentation, where author and CSWE President Dean Pierce premise that political discourse's "persistent, vitriolic strife" where "people talk at and past one another" in an atmosphere where there appears to be no necessity to explain a person's personal convictions. (Pierce, quotes Lipkin, 2001) Pierce posits that words have be redefined in the present political atmosphere because some "Americans want to retreat from or avoid reality while shielding themselves from risk" and reduces the need to think critically about issues, substituting the "accumulation of information for the application of intelligence".(p. 4) His arguments were presented and illustrated in the initial stages of this paper very persuasively with examples to illustrate how descriptions are masked to hide the "real meanings" of an issue such as when "the other white meat" is used in media advertisements to refer to "food in a plastic wrapper, not a living animal that has been slaughtered". He becomes an iconoclast and pundit however, as he proceeds through his paper to explain examples of "The language of conversion" that is intended "to control political discourse by reinforcing the opinion or ideology of the speaker". The legitimacy and cogency of his argument comes in to question in my mind, however, when he illustrates how the concept of *assertion*, defined as a component of political discourse utilized to "emphasize or assert that an opinion is correct or a course of action is successful in spite of what an examination of the evidence might reveal." He illustrates the concept with the following "examples of comments such as "We will prevail,' or 'We are winning', or 'We will stay the course'" (p. 6). Since there is conflicting evidence in the reports about how well the war in Iraq is going depending on a person's political persuasion, it will take history to conduct a "complete examination of evidence" in order

to make the kind of determination about the success of the war, as the paper's premise presents. As a scholar, Pierce should understand that, although he is certainly entitled to his opinion on the war or any other issue, he cannot impose them even to illustrate a concept such as this, particularly since he holds the power of his executive leadership on the Council on Social Work Education. The use of a "hot topic" for this sort of purpose misdirects the discussion entirely. These kinds of "assumptions" that social worker's are on the same page (or the elitist view that they ***should be on this particular page)*** concerning personal values, as mentioned, is another example of this iconoclastic view that attempts to replace the traditional social work values with personal ones, even if there is consensus around a particular personal value among a large constituency of social workers. These "values", once considered personal convictions possessed by individuals who have the right to have them with or without anyone's adherence to them themselves; appear to now actually being offered as ***the*** social work values and appear to have taken center stage in social work education while the ***core values of social work*** still listed on the first pager of the NASW Code of Ethics of: ***service***, ***social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence,*** appear to be mentioned only as they relate to specific population groups*.*

A New Religion: We Don't Need God to be Good

This is how I saw it during the Hancock Ron Fedrico lecture in Chicago that I mentioned at the beginning of this presentation. This terrifying trend is accompanied by the disparagement of those who disagree with the assignment of what the new definitions of social work values have become and are then essentially any serious discussion is "shut down" that can facilitate the ability to coexist as professionals who may differ in

their own personal views of the world. This is very dangerous. And the void that is left

with the removal of the traditional value base we have described as having been rooted in

the Judeo-Christian traditions which are now apparently tossed out, and considered

residual, is now being filled with a new religion that is characterized as uniquely social

work in nature:

> *"Sermabekian suggests there is a spiritual component in social work: 'our professional spirituality could be defined as the collective   inspiration   derived from the ideal of human compassion or well-being that drives us to advance our cause' ". (Shriver, 2005)*

The suggestion that there is really no need to have specific spiritual underpinning

for social work as a profession is, of course implicit in these statements and beliefs. But

more importantly, it appears to be representative of the consensus among these new

iconoclasts that it is within the **human capacity** to possess the depth of spirit once

thought only possible for those who had been regenerated by conversion to Christ.. The

view that it is humanitarianism that springs from philosophy and human kindness can

replace the need for regeneration because at the heart of all humankind is kindness.

Christians do know the fallacious nature of this kind of reasoning. But this is

truly what is at the core of this new iconoclasm, in my view. I believe that these new

iconoclasts do truly believe that they capable of the attributes needed for the practice of

social work without the need for God, though many of these iconoclasts claim to be

religious. It is my view that it is not possible, further, to simply coexist with these

iconoclasts, because the very nature of their disturbance with Christianity has to do with

the essence of what Christianity is. They must destroy it by diluting the nature of it and

elevating all religious and philosophical views to equal status with it. There will be no

co-existing, no community spirit, and no agreement to disagree because the agenda for these social workers appears to be that we all move into this "enlightenment" that embraces these new social work values that replace the traditional social work values. What must we do then, as Christians in this precarious time where our very existence has now become such a threat to the iconoclasts that we are threatened in the classroom and in conferences, maligned and marginalized in social settings and the workplace, in textbooks, and journals? We must discontinue our defensive stance, our apologetic, and passive attitudes in academia that are perceived as weakness by the iconoclasts, and stop practicing the "community denial" that we have all practiced. We have believed that we must "turn the other cheek" , that the "truth will prevail" in the end, as though we have no responsibility to speak it in our spheres of influence, and stand up for our own Christian values that are encoded in the Code of Ethics. We need to "take the gloves off" and fight for the truth, and we must mobilize and present a united front in these times. We need to stop placating the rude and iconoclastic colleague.   We must speak into the noisy clutter with boldness and confidence, without the fear of reprisal by presenting our views in journals, presentations, books, lectures in the classroom, and every in informal setting in which we have opportunity, because we will not be afforded a place in this new order if we don't fight for it. We must wake up and reclaim ourselves and what part of our profession that has not already been lost.

Recently, my own integrity was brought into question to my employer in a potentially damaging way by an adjunct instructor who voiced her objections to my views on issues formally to my employer because my views on several social issues did not mimic her own, which she considered the "true social work values". Her utilization

of labels, innuendos, and false statements belied her true motives, but the issue which this presentation is attempting to address was graphically illustrated by the incident. The instructor appeared convinced that she held the high ground because of her personal views that were represented as social work values in her complaint. I had already begun preparation for this presentation when this occurred and the incident provided further impetus for the preparation process.

Conclusion

In the President's address at the 2006 CSWE Annual Program Meeting held in Chicago, Kay Hoffman described social work as "a fractured profession in which in-fighting is nearly a foregone conclusion and a profession that prefers not to confront issues but instead to form new organizations rather than collaborate". She calls upon the entirety of social work professional educators to find a way "to unify under a loosely woven tapestry. . .where the rich diversity and the many layers of social work education can flourish, talk to each other and figure out what are the next steps". (Hoffman, 2006)

The question remains whether we can heed her call to unity and further whether we can professionally coexist with those who would ask us to replace our personal convictions with their own while insisting that this is the new order of social work education and practice. Shelby Steele, in his beautiful, thoughtful work just published entitled, *White Guilt,* offers the idea that it was because whites have felt guilty about past oppression of African Americans that they are attempting to make up for the discrimination by giving them a pass on real competitiveness that results in equality based on merit and structural opportunity. He uses Affirmative Action to illustrate this, and demonstrates that with policies such as Affirmative Action, it is still places whites in

the position of being responsible for the elevation of African Americans, and is not a result of their own efforts. He states that white guilt is about the passive bigotry of low expectations.

While I was reading this book, it occurred to me that perhaps Christians in social work may suffer "Christian guilt" because we have dominated the cultural landscape for such a long while. We have given up so much in the past few decades because we have wanted to appear Christian, that is, loving, kind, longsuffering, patient, and gentle. But it just seems to me that we have missed the other side of the Christian message that was the fuel that ignited Christianity at its beginning: that there is no other name by which we can be saved, except the name of Jesus. And that to live for Christ is not the "easy path" but the "narrow one" by which many cannot go. That there are no cheap seats in this struggle. And we cannot be in a popularity contest. We have forgotten, I think, that getting along in the world is not compatible with Christianity, and that we have called not only to believe in Him but to also suffer on His behalf. (Philippians 1:29) Understanding accepting this can put us in a position to stop the nonsense of trying to make our message acceptable to those who will continue to oppose our personal views because they have made choices of their own that will not allow them to ever accept our views, no matter how sincere are our efforts to demonstrate our own acceptance of them as people, or how collegial our own attitudes may be. Perhaps in time, we can return to a consensus about just what are the values that social workers can all share. Because I believe that it is our adherence to those values that will permit us to allow God to be the judge of whether their personal values and lifestyle choices are at issue in their lives. After all, He is the one that gave mankind the gift of the free will and stated in Deuteronomy: I set before

you today life and death, blessing and cursing. Therefore, choose life that you may live.

And that, I think, is where the principle of self-determination was born.

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