

REFLECTIONS ON THE BEGINNINGS OF THE CENTER FOR SOCIAL WORK PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION¹

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INTRODUCTION

It has been twenty-one years since you invited me through Professor Arvydas Žygas from Vytautas Magnus University and Sister Albina Pajarskaitė, from Caritas of Lithuania to come to Lithuania. After I arrived in September 1991 I gave seven lectures, cosponsored by the University and Caritas of Lithuania, discussing a vision of social work as a profession, as a powerful instrument of change in society and in human social relations, but also as an instrument of loving relations between people. I wanted to illustrate social work as a profession which assisted people to re-create social relationships, and to re-create the ways of caring for others in the face of the collapse of an entire ideological system, which made people into *political* objects. The extreme alternative offered by the West, radical capitalism, which made people into *economic* objects, was not much better. Social work

1 This paper is dedicated to Sister Albina Pajarskaitė, a great and courageous Lithuanian woman, a true friend to social work in good times and in bad times, without whose wise counsel and constant support the program never would have been developed. Our thanks will never be adequate to balance the profound contribution you have made to the development of social work in Lithuania.

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was meant to be different. It was a value-based professional response to a radically changing society. Social work offered a set of methods, which could be flexibly utilized to meet the unique situation of post-Soviet Lithuania.

Social work's focus on the worth and dignity of each person, on reconstruction of families as the basic welfare system, on our obligation to care for one another also matched the concerns of Catholic social teaching. Catholic social teaching, especially as clarified over the last Century, emphasizes solidarity, human dignity, the need to support families in their care for each other and the respect for human life in its fullness at every stage of development (Constable, 1997, 2007, 2012). The work of the social worker was close to the heart of the Church and the mission of Caritas of Lithuania. This was one reason for the support of the program by the Church amidst so many other priorities. Each person is not simply a bundle of nerves and chemicals, but a child of God with an eternal destiny. Such ideas ran counter both to the soviet culture and to radical, individualist materialism found in the West. The Soviets had used all values to fit their ideological agendas. On the other side an ascendant radical individualist materialism had little real use for moral, communal or spiritual values. However, on January 13, 1990 at the television tower people died for certain moral, communal and spiritual values. In this there was the dilemma of post-Soviet Lithuania. People wanted to live in certain ways, which belied the lives they were actually living. People wanted to believe in something, but could not trust it. All the bases for life and belief seemed to have been destroyed.

THE CONTEXT OF THE PROGRAM'S BEGINNINGS

Twenty years later with all the development of social work in Lithuania, can you remember those days? The program grew out of the collapse of the structures and ideological belief systems, which made persons into political objects. The system was totally unsustainable. Any helping efforts had to be the business of the state. And then

with the state in control, it was also burdened with impossible expectations. Power and control had to be the basis of any individual helping as well. The family had become a subsidiary institution to the state. The state had paradoxically relieved it of the need to be much other than a temporary context for people who work. Divorce had become the common experience. Work, not parenthood, was the most important social role. Indeed, the state had to be the *parent*, albeit an abusive one. Persons with any special needs were removed from family and institutionalized. There was almost no development of family-related child welfare services, such as adoption and foster care. With institutions the norm, there were few, if any, services available in the community. The solution to problems was to remove them from sight. When everything was converted into power and control, nothing constructive could take place.

With the collapse of the abusive parenthood of the state, the situation had to become worse, because even abusive parents serve certain functions. Now each person might become that abusive parent, making his or her surroundings into his or her own *soviet* (until the subjects would finally revolt). There was now little to restrain high rates and even growth of family violence, alcoholism, divorce, abortion, and suicide in Lithuania of older people and of younger people, together with the soft suicide of drug and alcohol addiction. During our time in Kaunas the local child caring institution was filled with children abandoned by their parents. The growing concerns of Lithuanians for their society would create greater awareness of the needs of society to help families to reconstruct themselves in a more functional way and for communities to develop services to deal with problems. Such problems were now becoming obvious. An alternative extreme ideology, radical capitalism masquerading as “democracy”, made the person into an economic object. It would prove to be as bad or worse than its predecessor. Power and control would shift for a time to corrupt mafias, rather than to the common good of citizens. The confusion of a society in transition is related to the need to identify clearly a value base (not ideological base) for what we do with and for others and for social services.

The nature of social work's tasks and the nature of its human subjects has demanded a free, secular value base built on the worth and dignity of persons (Constable 1995). This value base is most attractive for people looking for a deeper way to care for others, which would be compatible with the eternal destiny and spirituality of every person. In these seven lectures this was the heart of our discussion. To ears which had listened to empty ideologies throughout their lives these values would appear to be tired and flawed ideological statements. Nevertheless they were existential statements about real life and about hope. Peoples' real dignity and their relationships had to be respected amidst the real world of deflected and failed human aspirations. These values were statements about the *only* ways any person would be able to use help. Even when values failed, they were statements about peoples' real but failed aspirations for dignity. They were ironic statements about failures of the real worlds people inhabited, and what they aspired to.

WHAT WOULD SOCIAL WORK OFFER TO THIS SITUATION?

I will use citations from some of our original working documents to bring you back to those days. No development can proceed without points of reference. I would like to outline and cite the explicit points of reference for the social development task of assisting in the development of a Lithuanian social work.

The social work model of practice developed in those beginning years was different from the American model with its focus on clinical practice, although we did use, among others, many American professors and many ideas, which had been developed out of the ferment of American social work. But it was not strictly speaking an American model of practice, indeed it was not even a Western model. It was an *abbreviated* model of social development, meant to draw on other models and to be reconstructed in its own way according to the conditions, the culture and the people who would eventually develop Lithuanian social work.. We believed that it was first of all

necessary for Lithuanians to reconstruct totally their system of caring for others' needs, in families, in communities, and on the national level. When this gradually took place, our graduates would develop a Lithuanian social work suited to Lithuanian culture and conditions, but the early years had to be built on faith that this eventually would take place many years after we had finished our work of beginning the program.

We were conscious of the need for clear criteria which would support Lithuanian social work and social development. In the remainder of the paper, using the references from our original documents, I would like to discuss the foundational concepts of the Vytautas Magnus University program needed to make the bridge between social work and Lithuanian culture. Social development needs points of reference and guidelines to remain rational and sustainable. Any practice model would fail without rational criteria for what it does and why something is done. To be sustainable it must be based on essential institutions of community social life, particularly the family. There must be a basic *understanding* of the normal needs and lives of those with whom we work. Without these criteria governing practice and social development, both would become political manipulation, something Lithuanians have long memories of. Social work builds on and refines the natural social institutions of civil society. The experience of the Soviets was that these efforts became unsustainable, as they attempted to *substitute* what persons and families could do with and for each other. The family was undermined by these efforts. Since family is the basic social welfare system, if family deteriorates, there would be no development at all. Nor would social work and social development be sustainable if they did not operate within the other natural institutions of society – health care, education, justice, work and family and child welfare. Thus social work had to assist such normal transactions that take place in a normal world of persons, families, communities, and social institutions in a way which respects the worth and dignity of each person and the obligations we all have to care for each other and support the good development of generations.

THE SCOPE OF THE PROFESSION

The first point of reference had to be the scope of social work and its activities. It was important to proceed from a fundamental definition of what is distinct about social work. This would allow social work to relate continually to the social development needs of Lithuania, rather than being confused with a *method*, as in the English-speaking world, or with a political orientation to the *provision* of social welfare, as in Western Europe. Both were important, but would not subvert the possibility of developing a distinctly Lithuanian approach. As I review the articles in your Journal, *Socialinis Darbas Patirtis ir Metodai* (Social Work. Experience & Methods), it is clear to me that you have developed a foundation for many fields of practice. You have a flexible sense of appropriate methodologies and you are well grounded in professional values and ethics. You understand and are able to use research to guide this development. I am not seeking to add to any of this, but to bring you back to your own roots, which now may be like an underground stream over which people walk unaware. Indeed some of your development may have taken you to a different place than these fundamental points of reference. This is legitimate in any conversation.

The fundamental objects of social work concern are the relations between individual persons and between individual persons and social institutions. Social work focuses on the transactions between people and their environments that effect their ability to accomplish life tasks, alleviate distress, and realize individual and collective aspirations. This powerful focus on social relations and human action (transactions) places the scientific, artistic and professional focus of social work directly at the most creative place where persons through communication (intersubjectivity) create new and workable structures of love and value of human beings.

With Whom do Social Workers Work? Social workers work with individuals, families, small groups, organizations and communities, helping them to prevent distress and utilize resources. Such resources are personal or environmental, found in people's intrapersonal and interpersonal capacities or abilities as well as in social services,

institutions and other opportunities available in the environment. Social workers work with the transactions between persons and the transactions between persons and social institutions. The resulting focus rests on persons, the associations they form, particularly family, and an environment of social institutions in interaction. These institutions of civil society would include health care, family and child welfare, education, justice, and work. If we are clear on what we are and what our purposes are, methodology becomes less important. In any case we can use a broad range of methodologies, based on the full range of human transactions. The methodologies are not *our* methodologies, as in Soviet times. They became a part of the normal work of the person, the family, the institution and the community, and each in relation to the other. Methodology and political ideologies are secondary to the work done. The work is primary.

Do social workers work with public policy, the design of social welfare services and the design of basic social institutions? Social work includes policy development and implementation of social policy, services and programs, legislative advocacy and political action. Policies need to support the operation of larger units of society, particularly family, in sustaining themselves and in meeting needs, which are too complex to be met by government alone. This is most important because it addresses civil society and the worlds of human social institutions. Without the bridging function of social work, every social institution is capable of diminishing and disqualifying the very efforts of people and families which they should be encouraging. The social worker is flatly in the middle of all of this, playing an important mediating and policy generating role.

What is the Goal of Social Work? The goal of social work is for human persons to become *agents of (their) own development*. Becoming an *agent* or *subject* takes place, not in the abstract, but within relational frameworks of family, school, work groups, justice system, health care system, etc., social institutions of society, without which none of us can survive, but which are capable of destroying human initiative and creativity. This would be a revolutionary concept in a post-soviet society.

What Does the Social Worker Do? The social worker is a *coach* for the human activity (the “work”) illustrated above so that it respects human dignity and aspirations. The social worker cannot *act for* what another person or institution can do for themselves, but can help the person or unit to act appropriately with others.

The institutions of society are the contexts for many different forms of social work in education, in health care and mental health, in child welfare, in schools, in work and employment, in recreation and in family. Each one of these fields of practice has its own development, theory and needs for particular types of training. There is even specialization within a particular field, such as work in the health care institution with the dying, work with unmarried parents, work with people experiencing renal failure, severe diabetes, cancer complicated birth, loss of a child, foster care, adoptions, severe mental illness, release from prison, probation, etc. Each of these areas also denote crises experienced on an institutional, familial and personal level. Each of these crises contains personal, relational familial and institutional tasks where social work methodology may be used. It is in these tasks, not in methods alone (which are abstracted tasks) that the success or failures of social work may be measured.

What Are Basic Principles of Social Work? There are basic principles of social work underlying all of these fields of practice. These principles exist prior to their development in each field, that is they are *generic* to specific practice carried out in different fields. Social work education is then a blend of the *generic*, that is what is common to all fields of social work practice, and the *specific*, that is what is specific to a particular field such as school social work, work with families, etc. This is why the doing of social work in field instruction, where the social worker, with the assistance of a field instructor, integrates all of this into a working, personal, practice model is the heart of social work education.

SOCIAL WORK VALUES AND ETHICS

How Are Values Different from Ideologies? Values are a source of great confusion. They are different from the ideology of the previous Soviet

society as well as from ideologies of radical capitalism. They are not simply ideologies, or belief systems, because, more than beliefs, they demand something of each social worker. Values need to be put into practice.

Social work professional activity is constantly dealing with people's efforts to create and develop relations within which they may discover *Freedom, Justice, and Caritas* (Constable, 1983) as valued ends. Professional relationships are built on honesty, on their regard for human worth and human dignity; they are furthered by mutual participation of people in helping themselves, acceptance of people as they are, without judgment, but seeing the possibility of what they *can become*. Confidentiality, and responsible handling of conflict are essential characteristics of professional practice. They are essential, not simply because they are good ideas, but because people doing the work above, *cannot do it without them*. As such they become principles of practice (Biestek, 1955).

How Do We Deal with Human Suffering? Social work must deal with human suffering in a very personal way, and this is most difficult for students. The tasks of understanding suffering, and developing a personal language to discuss suffering with others who suffer are profoundly spiritual tasks (Reich, 1989; Constable, 1995). The student needs to discover an ability to listen to and respond to human suffering in a productive way. In this sense all the actions of social workers are profoundly value-based, not simply powerful "techniques" to "manipulate" people. Work with the personal and social tasks faced by persons who are dying (Salnaite, 1997) is a good example of this.

How Would Social Workers Respect Individual and Group Differences? Social work respects the religious convictions, ethnic differences or any point of personal difference of every person that, in turn, respects the rights of others to their own integrity. This is particularly important where such differences otherwise can lead to hatred, or even a patronizing approach which does not respect the uniqueness and differences of each person. Such respect does not mean agreement with a person's perspective or lifestyle choices, only an understanding

and acceptance that this is their choice, and that choice may have consequences. In any case two persons can work together effectively while remaining different.

Religious beliefs are a traditional sponsor for social work practice. There is for example an excellent fit between Roman Catholic social teaching and the values of social work (Constable, 1997, 2006, 2012), as there is also an excellent fit between the traditional charitable values, and religious obligation to others associated with Jewish culture and philosophy, for example as developed by Maimonides. In any case we serve everyone and it is in the nature of social work values to be *secular*, although peoples' *personal* pathways to these values are often religious. In this sense there is also a profound basis for social work practice under public or non-sectarian sponsorship.

Professional Social Work Education at Vytautas Magnus University. Every professional degree must prepare for a *praxis, a doing*, that involves not only for a knowledge of theory, but also for an ability to integrate theory into actual and personal practice – to develop a *personal practice model*. For this reason field work and field supervision are the most important parts of social work education. This is not always well understood on a traditional university level and demands constant explanation and adaptation so that the integrity of professional education is maintained (Constable & Kulys, 1995). This was perhaps the most difficult educational struggle in the beginnings of the program.

In the context of Lithuania the first purpose of the Masters degree level became the *development of leadership in the re-creation and reorganization of helping services to meet the needs of the Lithuanian society in radical transition*, that is social development. Thus the education needed to be both broad and deep, with a notable focus on research and policy. Even in the early days of my memory such research and policy development led to the development of a Lithuanian foster care system, the movement of some persons with disabilities out of institutions and into society, intergenerational solidarity of persons in need, such as persons aging (grandparents) and adolescents raising children, the developing of helping roles

in mental health care, education and with families experiencing alcoholism.

The masters degree level and the doctoral level were meant to be research as well as practice degrees. The beginnings of scholarship in a new area would be to describe a situation (the problem and effects of institutionalization on children) and/or a process (the process of a Lithuanian family accepting a child from another family in adoption or foster care) or an innovation in helping (the dynamics of assisting dying persons to deal with their personal and social tasks). Using adoption and foster care as examples, I believe such research has had a powerful effect, simply judging from the assessments carried in the Vytautas Magnus University social work journal.

From May 1997 until now I have not personally experienced your development. From the pages of your journal I am impressed that you have made a good connection with European Social Work as well as your connections with social work in the English-speaking world. Indeed, we invited key figures in European social work, such as Walter Lorenz, to come to Lithuania in 1995 and you have had long and deep connections with Poland, Germany, the Netherlands and the Scandinavian countries. I am impressed that you have a sufficiently clear picture of who you are to largely create the many different fields of social work practice in Lithuania and then write about it in the journal and in other places. In short I am very impressed with your vitality, your ability to innovate and your passion to write about what you are doing. You have seen enormous changes and taken charge of your own destiny.

WHAT LIES AHEAD?

What tasks do you face in the future? You must first of all believe in yourself and your ability to create and not attempt simply to copy a model from some other country. In our experience your confrontation with the personal and social turmoil of a society in transition drew forth from each of you tremendous cultural vitality and creativity. You were breaking and reconstructing the molds, which had shaped

you. In this gradual, relentless, and often painful reconstruction, you became the teachers and the masters and we became consultants. We felt privileged and awestruck as we watched this process emerge. You inspired us.

The purpose of this paper has been to assist you to recall where you started. Now thirteen years have elapsed since most of us left for our homes and passed the program over to fully Lithuanian supervision. During this period it was best that we be absent and that you work out, indeed hammer out, the form of social helping which would be best fitted to deal with the needs of a post-Soviet Lithuanian civil society and culture. I have followed your work on the Vytautas Magnus University social work web page, and now I am eager to see personally what you have done and are planning to do. Such is your task. I believe in your capabilities.

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