



A BROADER VISION **for the Social Work Profession**

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The good we secure for ourselves is precarious and uncertain until it is secured for all of us and incorporated into our common life.²

– Jane Addams

Recently I was reading an article about professional identities. It discussed both the “Great Traditions” and “Grand Narratives” that provide the knowledge base, value orientation, and direction for a profession. One author, in an article titled “The End of Social Work,”¹ claimed that social work has departed from its original groundings – and that our grand narratives have been split apart – that they now reflect only little traditions that overlap with other professions.

I believe each of us, without much thought, could still define several of our grand narratives. For example, we focus mainly on the social – not the biological, or the psychological, or the anthropological, or the economic. Our profession is called “social” work for a reason. We look at the person in their environment, we look at communities, we look at systems both large and small. When we determine the root cause of a problem, we look at all the facets and the interrelationships, but it is the “social” that drives our interventions.

Often, our clients are victims of imperfect systems. They are the disadvantaged, disenfranchised, invisible, and forgotten. As social workers, we stand squarely on their side. Given this, perhaps we can say that the greatest – the grandest – of our social work grand narratives is social justice.

Our belief in social justice is one of the things that sets social work apart from other professions. Social justice is described in the mission

statement of NASW, and it is written into our profession's *Code of Ethics*.³ Our policy manual, *Social Work Speaks*,⁴ contains 64 policy statements that are more than words; they are mandates; calls to action; a blueprint for a better, more hopeful and fairer future.

We all came to the profession of social work to make a difference – to bring about positive social change – to better society. We could have chosen other professions – psychology, psychiatry, medicine, nursing, or mental health counseling. We didn't. We became social workers and we have committed our careers to working not just with, but on behalf of, others. That's where advocacy, perhaps what we might aptly label "a great tradition," comes into the picture.

The *Social Work Dictionary* defines "advocacy" as "the act of directly representing or defending others – of championing the rights of individuals and communities through direct intervention and empowerment."⁵

Advocacy is the cornerstone on which social work is built. It is so important that it is framed in three sections of our *Code of Ethics*. Advocacy for individuals, communities, and systems is not just a suggested activity for social workers. It's not just a "do it if you have some extra time," or a "do it if the inequity and disparity are very great" activity. **It is a requisite.** Without advocacy, there would be no social work profession.

*I had already had a conviction, a "concern", as the Quakers say, about social justice; and it was clear in my own mind that the promotion of social justice could be made to work practically.*⁶

– Frances Perkins

Take one moment and think what this country and the world would be like if there were no more social workers. If the profession of social work ended this decade, what would the impact on society be? Who would fill our roles and work to help populations that are underserved and marginalized? Who would speak, like social worker and Congresswoman Barbara Lee, against war? Who would be in the front lines providing comfort and counsel when natural or other disasters occur? Who would take the place of social workers in schools and hospices, in nursing homes and mental health clinics, in prisons and in the military, in communities and in the legislature? The world would be very different — much less caring — and the future would be much less hopeful.

Hope is an important concept for our profession and for our society. We have just witnessed an entire campaign to the White House based upon hope. In his 2004 speech at the Democratic convention, then Illinois State Senator Barack Obama spoke to a national audience about the “audacity of hope.” He said, “I’m not talking about blind optimism here – the almost willful ignorance that thinks unemployment will go away if we just don’t think about it....I’m talking about something more substantial. It’s the hope of slaves sitting around a fire singing freedom songs. The hope of immigrants setting out for distant shores. Hope in the face of difficulty. Hope in the face of uncertainty. The audacity of hope! In the end, that is God’s greatest gift to us, the bedrock of this nation. A belief in things not seen. A belief that there are better days ahead.”⁷

Social work is the “profession of hope.” It is not simple “optimism” that defines us, but a grounded, full-bodied hope. In the face of even the direst situations, social workers remain hopeful. We know how difficult it is for people to change and maintain, how hard it is to overcome suffering, setbacks, disappointments, and just plain bad luck.

Even knowing this, we still don’t give up when trying to help those in poverty, those with chronic mental illness, those who are addicted, or those on parole. We believe that families can be functional; workplaces can be healthy; and communities can be safe. Despite threats of terrorism and world unrest, we believe that peace is always preferable to war, and that as a country, we have a global obligation regarding world resources and all other peoples. This singular capacity – to be hopeful about future change – allows social workers to practice in prisons, in drug rehabilitation clinics, in domestic violence shelters, in suicide prevention centers, in child protective services, and on the battlefield. It is hope that prevents the school social worker from giving up on the difficult child or the probation officer from giving up on an ex-offender. It is hope that encourages social workers to practice in Appalachia, on Indian reservations, and in inner cities where clients face unrelenting poverty. Because of hope, social workers choose to work in health and mental health care settings despite the prevalence of incurable diseases or conditions.

Social workers have a passion for social justice, for fairness, for making this world a better place. It is this purpose that forms the bedrock of our careers, but it is possibility that keeps us moving forward.

Hope transcends reality.

*The door might not be opened
to a woman again for a long,
long time and I had a kind of
duty to other women to walk
in and sit down on the chair
that was offered, and so
establish the right of others
long hence and far distant
in geography to sit in the
high seats.⁶*

– Frances Perkins

We do not live or work by denying the reality of the society of today. Instead, we recognize that hope transcends reality, and that our combined efforts will continue to improve the world in which we live.

As social workers, we recognize the importance of hope in our work. We are “holders of hope” for our clients, our communities, and our society, and the social work of today will be the legacy of the future.

If we ever doubt our impact, a quick look back at a few social work pioneers reminds us of not just our potential, but of our power for positive change. For example, the most recognizable face of social work, Jane Addams, was the founder of the settlement house movement in the United States. She worked with poor and oppressed immigrant communities offering education, clothing, meals, and training to “provide a center for a higher civic and social life; to institute and maintain educational and philanthropic enterprises; and to investigate and improve the conditions in the industrial districts of Chicago.”⁸ Addams also became a passionate advocate for the peace movement, writing *Newer Ideals of Peace*, advocating against World War I, and leading the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom. Addams’ groundbreaking social work, not only with the urban poor, but in advocating for world peace, was acknowledged by her receiving the Nobel Peace Prize in 1931. She was the first U.S. woman to receive the honor.

Secretary of Labor, Frances Perkins, was the first woman (and social worker) to be appointed to a cabinet level position. From 1933 until 1945, throughout the entire presidency of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and longer than any cabinet secretary in history, Perkins was the first woman in the line of succession for the Presidency. Perkins had worked with Jane Addams at Hull House before moving to New York City where she became a leading crusader for improved factory safety. She worked with Roosevelt when he was governor of New York. Before accepting her Cabinet position, she had gotten him to agree to support her agenda of a major unemployment relief program; large-scale public works; and workers' rights protections, such as minimum wage, maximum hours of work, and ending child labor. Adam Cohen author of *Nothing to Fear*, the recent book about the first 100 days of the FDR presidency, notes that "by the end of the New Deal, Perkins' entire agenda had become law."⁹ And much of this agenda was accomplished in the first 100 days of the Roosevelt presidency. She also served as Chairwoman of the President's Committee on Economic Security, which ultimately crafted the Social Security Act of 1935.

Most of the safety net we have come to rely upon today was fashioned by Perkins and by another social worker – Harry Hopkins. Hopkins was from Iowa, but moved to New York City after graduating from college. He worked in a settlement house on New York's Lower East Side and held numerous executive positions with city government and private organizations. Hopkins helped to draft a charter for the American Association of Social Workers, a precursor to NASW, and he was elected its president in 1923.

*Hopkins defined power
"as the ability to do a job, not
as the ability to dominate,"
something to be exercised
"within the limitations
imposed by representative
government."¹⁰*

*– John A. Garraty
New York Times*

Instead of conforming to exclusiveness, people ought to conform to inclusiveness. I hope that we will be able to create the kind of society wherein people will have to apologize for sameness – for an all-white school or neighborhood or church – because this would be an indication of their immaturity, their lack of sophistication and security. We want a society in which people will boast of diversity and the fact that their churches, their businesses, their schools, and their neighborhoods are like little United Nations. This will be an indication that they are mature and secure human beings.¹¹

– Whitney M. Young, Jr.

President Roosevelt chose Hopkins to head the first state emergency relief agency in New York during the early days of the depression. Soon after Roosevelt's inauguration as President, Hopkins persuaded Roosevelt to create a \$500 million federal relief program, which Roosevelt asked Hopkins to run. Cohen states, "Within months, Hopkins established something America had never seen before: a relief program that distributed federal funds to the states and imposed national standards."⁹ Eventually Hopkins pushed public works projects and became the administrator of them in the New Deal. Hopkins also served as Roosevelt's chief diplomatic adviser during World War II.

Another pioneer, Whitney Young, Jr., was an adviser to three presidents. He is credited with advocating for a Domestic Marshall Plan to provide African-Americans with special government assistance for a limited time to address the disparities between Whites and Blacks due to historic segregation. His ideas were the foundation for Lyndon B. Johnson's "War on Poverty." Young also transformed the National Urban League, using its historic mission and focus of training African-American social workers and improving living and working conditions for African-Americans to connect with key policymakers at the national and local level. These policymakers began to see the Urban League as an organization with ideas and solutions for many issues facing communities and the nation as a result of historic racism and segregation. The Urban League became a recognized and important player in the Civil Rights actions and changes occurring during those years.

What many people don't know is that Whitney Young was the president of the National Association of Social Workers when he died accidentally in 1971. He was leading NASW's efforts on behalf of Civil Rights. Whitney Young challenged everyone to work for a nation that lives up to its founding documents. His first book, *To Be Equal* includes many memorable statements. Whitney Young was a passionate supporter of the profession of social work and challenged social workers to be true to our mission and our ethics. "There is a lot to tell the public. The important thing now is that we can begin saying something as persistently as we can. The media and the government, regardless of their reasons, cannot continue to disregard the findings of current research and the knowledge of thousands of social workers who know as much or more than the so-called experts on the social problems draining the spirit and resources of our nation."¹¹ Whitney Young was a passionate supporter of the profession of social work and challenged social workers to be true to our mission and our ethics.¹²

Another pioneer, Dr. Dorothy I. Height is one of my personal heroes. At age 97, and as President Emerita of the National Council of Negro Women, she still works every day on behalf of those who are disadvantaged. Dr. Height studied at the New York University School of Social Work and began her career as a case worker with the New York City Welfare Department. Dr. Height led the YWCA, the Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, and has served as President of the National Council of Negro Women since 1957. She worked closely with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and was the only woman on the

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– Whitney M. Young, Jr.

We hold in our hands the power...to shape not only our own, but the nation's future.¹⁴

– Dr. Dorothy I. Height

dais during his “I Have a Dream” speech. Dr. Height has been awarded the Congressional Gold Medal and Presidential Medal of Freedom. It is certainly not by accident that we have named our social work bill the “Dorothy I. Height and Whitney M. Young, Jr. Social Work Reinvestment Act.”¹³ We have been very proud to have Representative Edolphus Towns and Senator Barbara Mikulski, both social workers, introduce the legislation for us.

This important legislation addresses the workforce challenges that are facing so many social workers including low salaries, high educational debt, and serious safety concerns. These challenges, if not addressed, will lead to a workforce that is not prepared to serve the aging baby boomers, not to mention the millions of Americans who will increasingly need social work services due to the impact of the economic realities we are currently facing. The bill will establish a Social Work Reinvestment Commission to develop recommendations and strategies to maximize the ability of America’s social workers to serve individuals, families, and communities with expertise and care. Furthermore, the legislation will create demonstration grant programs in the areas of workplace improvements, education and training, research, and community based programs of excellence. These programs will address “on-the-ground” realities experienced by our nation’s social workers. Together, these components, create a footprint for a larger reinvestment in the profession and are critical to providing a strong social safety net and ensuring that our social work workforce is prepared to care for millions of Americans, from all walks of life, who will need our services.

The historic social workers I mentioned, and others like them, have challenged apathy, ignorance, injustice and inequality. They have kept hope alive, often in the face of great adversity. We must do no less. Two short comments about hope underscore its importance.

Studs Terkel, the incredible observer of human behavior, said that “hope dies last.”¹⁵ What a remarkable statement that is. No matter how dire the situation, there is always something to hope for.

The second story about hope was one I discovered when I was preparing remarks to speak to social workers and other frontline responders for the Navajo Nation. I came across a beautiful paper by The Honorable Robert Yazzie, Chief Justice of the Navajo Nation. It is called *Life Comes From It: Navajo Justice Concepts*. In this paper Yazzie discusses the problems facing the young people of his tribe, and he makes the observation that “all of their problems stem from a loss of hope.” He also notes that “it is traditional knowledge that gives us power to survive in modern time.”¹⁶

As a profession, we have the capacity to prevent hopelessness, to restore hope, and to change society for the better. We have the potential—the social work potential—to make a great difference. However, to do so, we must collectively craft a bolder and broader vision – a vision of social work for today that will carry us into the future. We need to recognize how essential and important our profession is, and that there is a crucial need for social workers

*Hope dies last.*¹⁵

– Studs Terkel

*All problems stem from a loss of hope.*¹⁶

– Robert Yazzie

today. This is the time to redouble our efforts and expand our horizons. Instead of complaining about cuts in services, we need to formulate viable solutions. Instead of criticizing others, we need to assume leadership roles. Instead of worrying about encroachment, we need to foster collaboration. Instead of yearning for the past, we must craft the future.

The course and survival of our profession does not – in fact, cannot – depend on others. It depends on us – on you, and on me. Only we can make certain that the great traditions of social work – those of social justice and advocacy and hope – will be just as vibrant and just as strong 20, or 30, or 50 years from now.

A social work colleague recently said, “We are living in times when social workers can be their best.” I imagine each generation of social workers feels that way. What I do believe is true is that social work is the last best profession. We are all fortunate to be a part of it.

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