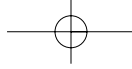


# Preface

WHY WORK WITH THE ELDERLY, PARTICULARLY THE FRAIL ELDERLY WHO reside in nursing homes? For me, it is not about the money (although nursing homes provide a fairly decent salary in comparison with other areas of social work practice), nor of course is it about the prestige, which has in the past tended to be minimal but perhaps may increase as this population continues to grow. It is all about those intangible aspects of the work that make social workers tick. It is about helping a population that is truly at risk, physically, emotionally, and spiritually, to achieve a decent quality of life. It is about the opportunity to help people who are at a fascinating stage in life where, in our culture, we seek to make meaning of our existence. This life crisis often brings with it the gift of creativity, and I believe that it is an honor to be part of that process, by bearing witness as elders tell their stories and, in the telling, actually relive their experiences as they fashion them into a form that they can accept. Working closely with people at the last stage of their lives provides a unique opportunity to learn from the wisdom that they have accumulated over their lifetimes; to find out, in the end, what has really counted as a success; to draw important life lessons from their regrets; and to learn what, at the end of our days, truly matters. Working with the elderly can help the helper to accept the fact of death and to celebrate life, and the sheer joy of some of its ordinary rituals. In my mind, the question is not why work with the elderly, but why not?

In this book, I will share with you some of the ideas, constructs, and practices that I have developed (with the help of my clients, colleagues, and mentors) and found to be useful, ideas that were not part of my graduate school curriculum. It is my hope that the reader will benefit from this writer's struggles. After all, one does not become seasoned by blithely sailing through uneventful workdays. Instead, one becomes seasoned by learning (the hard way) from one's mistakes and errors. If I can spare some of you the trials and tribulations that accompanied the development of this conceptual framework, perhaps you will be able to more quickly reap the benefits of a practice that is mindful of anchoring our decision-making practices on the best possible use of our professional selves and then expanding upon these efforts in ways that have not yet been considered.

Recent thinking about organizational culture indicates that in the current climate of managed care, "standardization dominates the mood of most social



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service organizations” (Yan, 2008, p. 318). A nursing home setting is unique both in its challenges and in its opportunities. One of the greatest challenges is figuring out how the various components of the institutional system work, and work together, and how the social worker fits in. Several enormous benefits of this particular setting are the ability to work independently, for that work to have an impact on changing the mores and traditions in the setting, improving the quality of life for the residents, and influencing the development of a community that is responsive to their needs. The small social service departments in nursing homes are one area where standardization of roles may be expected, due to the existence of a corporate ethos, but this standardization is not set in stone. Here, it is possible for the lone social worker or tiny social work department to carve out a social service role within the institution and to use this role to transform the dominant culture. The existence of an interdisciplinary team of care professionals greatly helps to facilitate our ability to negotiate a social work identity (*ibid.*).

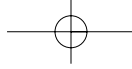
I strongly advocate for choosing an identity with its roots in the social work tradition of Jane Addams, whose myriad practical, cultural, and artistic programs were designed to meet the multidimensional needs of an impoverished community. Ms. Addams drew her inspiration from Toynbee Hall in England, the first settlement house, which provided comprehensive social services to a desperately struggling urban underclass based on the concept that “to help the poor, you must live with them and be available for all manner of daily needs and weekly crises” (Polikoff, 1999, pp. 53–54). Early community organizers such as Ms. Addams provide dynamic role models for the rich and fruitful professional identity that one can aspire to and even begin to approximate in our settings, with our “communities” of frail elders, where spiritual if not actual poverty exists in abundance. Almost paradoxically, the nursing home is a wonderful vantage point on which one can build an exciting and vital practice.

The ideas, constructs, and practices that I am referring to appear as themes throughout the book. A central concept is the importance of visualizing the entire facility in which we work as a sort of secondary client and the importance of engaging this “client” on many levels. Another important notion is that of maximizing our social work role by making full use of the wide spectrum of clinical skills that we have learned and continue to develop throughout our lives. A third emphasis is on using our professional judgment creatively to structure our role and activities so we can better address both the predictable and the unpredicted needs of our clients. Finally, another theme that is less prominent in the book but nonetheless important is for readers to keep in mind the need to take steps to monitor our efforts in order to maintain accountability for our work.

This book advocates for the social worker to seize the moment to make a difference. It is about the hand on the shoulder of a grieving family member or the supportive word to a stressed-out staff member. It is about seizing the opportunity to further the social work objective, whether that involves helping our clients to make social connections by organizing a cribbage game on the unit, having learned that two isolated residents love that game, or snapping a picture of a resident holding her great-grandson, surrounded by representatives from four generations of her family, and then presenting the picture to her to give to her daughter or have by her bedside, a tangible reminder of her identity outside of the nursing home. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the reader will find that a core theme of the text has to do with programs. One social worker alone, or even a department of several, cannot meet the needs of a large caseload. Strategic program planning and implementation make sense in terms of increasing our effectiveness. The ability to make creative use of our professional selves is a tremendous potential source of career satisfaction.

This is a practical how-to manual, but by no means a cookbook. Please borrow my ideas, innovate on them, and make them your own. The aim of this book is to offer ideas for systemic interventions and program development that may help individual nursing home social workers (or those working in related settings) to fulfill their social work mandate while continuing to follow the highest standards of accepted practice.

In order to facilitate the reader's ability to follow the text, I will explain a little bit about how this volume unfolds. Chapter 1 provides the reader with a contextual understanding of the nursing home system and the role of the social worker in it. This overview of the system lays the foundation for discussion of various programs described in subsequent chapters, which represent social work interventions to serve the various needs of clients in this environment, based on the assessment of the social worker in collaboration with other interdisciplinary professionals. This programmatic approach, I believe, represents a disavowal of the twentieth-century trend toward strict endorsement of narrow theories and a movement toward the adoption of a variety of approaches based on research related to the importance of specific common factors—in particular, the curative aspect of therapeutic relationships in successful therapeutic outcomes, as opposed to the efficacy of any one particular orientation. Chapter 2 introduces the concept of using the construct of the facility as client and sets forth some very specific ways in which the social worker can apply this thinking to specific aspects of the traditional social work role in nursing homes. Chapter 3 discusses why life review is key to elders' well-being and sets forth the strategy of program



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development to address the de-emphasis on client individuality that exists in a medicalized setting. Reminiscence groups are specifically used to inaugurate this discussion because a focus on the residents and their memories is key to helping them reclaim their identities, as well as to promoting a focus on resident-centered care. Chapter 4 details some applications of art-making as a means of furthering the objectives of the life-review process. Chapters 5 through 7 describe ways that social workers can efficiently and effectively address the needs of their caseloads. The order in which the programs are discussed represents a movement from direct practice (groups for residents) toward more indirect methods of influencing various components of the nursing home system to effect culture change in the service of our clients. Nursing home staff are considered before family members because, from the point of view of the nursing home social worker, they are typically part of the system that more directly influences the residents' daily lives than do families, who are highly important to the residents' well-being but generally less visible to social workers who may not be present during the hours that they visit.

Chapter 8 is a culmination of this trend toward broader facility-based social work interventions that can help us modify our settings to become more humanistic. The notion of community mainly includes what exists within the building itself. Some of the objectives of this section are to encourage the social worker to strengthen a culture of caring within the facility and to foster the residents' sense of belonging to, as well as participation in, this community. Chapter 9 is situated after the lofty goals of the previous chapter to remind the reader that while we aspire to higher things, we still exist within the confines of our current settings, and that it is important to meet all of the more mundane aspects of our professional requirements. Chapter 10 is an acknowledgment of the existence of evidence-based practice as an increasingly important aspect of social work practice and discusses some steps that we can take to incorporate this reality into our work lives. Chapter 11 discusses various ways that social workers can maintain their professional identities and is specifically included at this point to emphasize that in order to maintain a strong social work department (even if it is only one person), it is crucial to remain connected with a professional network that can help to sustain us in this work. Chapter 12, "Final Thoughts," concludes the book and hands over to the reader the job of writing the next chapter, either metaphorically through programmatic interventions or perhaps in the next book on this subject.