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# The Poet/Practitioner: A Paradigm for the Profession

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*This article explores a new paradigm or model for the professional social worker: The poet/practitioner. The training and practice of the poet are congruent with many aspects of social work practice. An examination of the practice of the poet, and the congruence of these practices to social work, reveals a paradigm with the capacity to focus social workers on the essential values of our profession. This paradigm, which highlights the humanistic, creative, and socially conscience role of the social work practitioner, may be particularly important today given the medicalization of social problems and the conservitization of society.*

*Keywords: poet, practitioner, social work, social work practice*

## Introduction

The social values of a professional group are its basic and fundamental beliefs, the unquestioned premises upon which its very existence rests. Foremost among these values is the essential worth of the service which the professional group extends to the community. The profession considers that the service is a social good and that community welfare would be immeasurably impaired by its absence (Greenwood, 1957, p.52).

Throughout its history, social work has grappled with its professional role and identity (Arkava, 1967; Berlin, 1990; Dziegielewski, 2004; Kolevzon & Maykranz, 1982; Meyer, 1973). The search for professional identity may be essential to professional life and is engaged in by numerous professions. Defining a profession is a dynamic, evolving process deeply linked to shifts within the society the profession serves (Payne, 1997). Social change exerts pressures upon a profession to adapt to society's evolving needs (Kreuger, 1997). When a profession fails to adapt to its social context, professional drift occurs (Shulman, 1991). In such instances, members of a profession lose touch with the profession's mission, its values, and its modalities for meeting its aims. Postman (1992) has noted that social means of production have changed faster during this century than during any other millennium in history. Professions now exist in a state of flux and must engage in a constant process of creating and re-creating their role vis a vis society. This process has special currency to a profession such as social work, which is not merely a passive player in the process of social change, but itself is a change agent acting upon the forces that simultaneously act upon it.

The purpose of this article is to explore a new paradigm for the professional social worker: the poet/practitioner. The training and practice of the poet are congruent with many aspects of social work practice. Examining the skills, attributes, and values of the poet, and their congruence to social work values, skills and knowledge, may lead to a paradigm

with the capacity to focus social workers on the essential features of the profession. This paradigm, which highlights the humanistic, creative, and socially conscious role of the social work practitioner, may be particularly important today, given the medicalization of social problems and the conservitization of society.

This paper will achieve its aims in several ways. First, a discussion of historical paradigms that have guided the profession will be presented. Second, the nature of poetry and the poet will be addressed. Third, a historical account of poetry and the poetic in social work practice and education will provide an additional historical context to the discussion. Fourth, a new paradigm for the profession, the poet/practitioner, is proposed.

### Historical Paradigms For Social Work Practice

Proponents have advanced various paradigms for the profession of social work (van Wormer, 1997). According to Goldstein (1990), social work has traveled down two distinct epistemological tracks, the positivist and the humanistic. These two worldviews are apparent in the different paradigms that social workers have adopted as guides to professional action. Various historical trends and innovations within the profession have led to shifts between offshoots of these two early positions. The scientist/practitioner became a popular paradigm stemming from the influence of logical positivism and advances in the biological influences in human behavior. The roots of this paradigm can be traced to Flexner's (1915) infamous admonition of social work. He stressed that social work was not yet a profession, as it did not possess its own discrete, communicable body of knowledge. The reeling young profession, in its quest for status, respectability, and perhaps efficacy began to veer from its previous path of compassionate social humanism exemplified by the early proponents of the rank and file movement (Axinn & Levin, 1975). Shortly after Flexner's admonition, Healy (1917) advocated for a scientific paradigm for the profession, while Southard (1919) explored the possibility of the medicalization of individual and social problems. Perhaps the most significant early movement

towards the adaptation of the scientific paradigm was the publication of Richmond's (1917) classic text *Social Diagnosis*, a thesis characterized by causal descriptions largely adhering to a medical model of assessment and treatment. This paradigm continued to thrive during the middle to late twentieth century. In large part due to the early successes of psychotropic medication in treating the mentally ill, large segments of the profession became increasingly aligned with the scientific model. These ideas continue to permeate social work research, education, and practice, despite strong criticisms regarding its congruence with the profession (Heineman, 1981).

Between the World Wars, two competing schools of social work came into prominence: the functional and the diagnostic schools. These two perspectives differed markedly in how they viewed the purpose of social work and the nature of individual change (Yelaja, 1986). Partly continuing the tradition of Richmond, proponents of the diagnostic school viewed human problems as diseases caused by intrapsychic conflicts. The functionalist eschewed pathology-based paradigms and focused on the individual's capacity to transcend psychological and social obstacles.

Competing with the diagnostic school's scientific conceptualizations, the functional school adopted practices congruent with the humanistic approach (Robinson, 1949; Taft, 1939). Expanding the work of Otto Rank (1945), an artist who broke with Freudian orthodoxy, the functionalists eschewed positivistic notions and instead advocated for a more humanistic, holistic understanding of the human experience (Pray, 1949; Smalley, 1967; Taft, 1958 & 1962). Many maxims and principles of practice wisdom, such as "start where the client is," and the centrality of client self-determination, are functional principles that have been subsumed into generic social work practice.

Dissatisfied with what he saw as a move toward arrogance and omniscience in social work, Krill (1986) explored the notion of "the beat worker." Influenced by existential themes, Krill critiqued the scientist/social worker paradigm as a myth, based not on an understanding of the essentials of human behavior, but on the desire for power, control, and prestige. Echoing functional themes, Krill implored practitioners to work in partnership with their clients towards reaching their

self-defined goals and to eschew the arrogant role of expert.

While highlighting the importance of the social worker as scientist, Sheafor, Horejsi, & Horejsi (1997) also assert the need for social workers to use both head and heart when interacting with clients and providing services. By adding the component of heart to the classic paradigm of the scientist practitioner, the authors acknowledge the importance of the intuitive aspects of helping to social work practice. The strengths perspective has also advocated for a model of human behavior based upon resiliency, strength, and wholeness (Maluccio, 1981; Weick, Rapp, & Sullivan, 1989). Proponents of this perspective affirm the importance of human intuition, and recognize the centrality of the creative, life affirming will of each individual (Saleebey, 2000). The client is viewed as the expert and author of her own experience (Lewis, 1996). Still, the scientist/practitioner remains the dominant role in social work practice. Social workers now seem more concerned with notions, such as evidence-based practice and billable hours, than with self-actualization, community development or empowerment.

### The Poet and Poetry

What is the nature of the poet and her craft? Poet Timothy Liu helps focus this exploration by rhetorically inquiring: "What about poetry as a soulful experience? What about poetry that can teach us how to live?" (Hennessy, 2004, p. 4.). The task of the poet is far greater than the mere writing of words that rhyme or comply with a pattern or scheme. Jane Hirshfield (1997) described the role of the poem as the "clarification and magnification of being." The poet's task is to document and clarify her existence and the existence of others through the medium of language. Baraka (2003) explores the social aspect of the medium in his contention that poetry is both a reflection of and commentary on society. It is this dialectic that provides poetry and art currency, relevance, and power. The poem is both personal and social, in the same manner that the personal is political. Poetry challenges poets to understand themselves and their world. The poet is called upon to develop the requisite skills to make connections between the simultaneously separate and connected domains of her intrapsychic and social

selves.

To define a poet as anyone who writes a poem is akin to defining anyone who helps people as a social worker. Like social workers, poets have learned time honored skills that aid them in their practice. To use the term "professional" in the traditional sense is problematic; very few poets earn their living solely from their art. What distinguishes the *poet* is a dedication to the *craft* of poetry. The dedicated poet is as or more concerned with the aesthetics of a poem as with the content or the message of a poem. The poet does not rely upon extraordinary events alone in her quest to make powerful poetry; through various linguistic tools she seeks to highlight the significance of everyday existence. Wordsworth (1979) asserts that the remarkable feature of the poet is her sensitivity. The poet hones her sensitivity to develop a keen understanding of human condition. In addition to the interest in the social world, the poet is also concerned with the nature of the human soul.

The importance of sensitivity, a concern with the relationship between the individual and the social world, a need to comprehend the psyche and the soul, and a belief in the inherent beauty and goodness of people, are some of the attributes that social workers and poets have in common. Perhaps it is for these reasons that the arts and humanities, poetry, and the poetic have held an important place in social work history.

### Poetry and the Poetic in Social Work Education

The liberal arts and humanities have long played an important role in social work and social work education (Goldstein, 1984 & 1999; Lowe, 1985; Pumphrey & Pumphrey, 1961. Reid & Peeles-Wilkins (1991) implore social work educators to renew the historic commitment of educating social workers in the liberal arts tradition. The Council on Social Work Education requires that social work education be based upon a liberal arts foundation in the humanities (CSWE, 2002). The functional school, so central to the development of generic social work practices, was largely based upon the ideas of the artist, Otto Rank (Rank, 1945). Social work was viewed more as an art than a science for much of its early development. While social work has lost some of its connections to the arts and humanities,

they continue to strongly influence the profession. This may be largely due to the influence of culturally sensitive models of practice. Such models recognize that practice methods must be syntonic with ethnic groups whose worldviews differ markedly from that of the scientific paradigm (Langer & Furman, 2004). As such, poetic and narrative ways of knowing and helping may increase in their importance as ethnic minorities become larger segments of the population.

Devore & Schlesinger (1977) explore the value of utilizing literature to lend insight into the complexities of urban life. The use of literature in practice and education, also known as bibliotherapy, relies heavily upon poetry as a means of educating and healing (Rossiter & Brown, 1988). Poetry therapy has become an important discipline with many practitioners drawn from the social work profession. Poetry has been utilized in social work practice with children (Mazza, 1981, 1996 & 1999; Mazza, Magaz, & Scaturro, 1987), the elderly (Edwards, 1990; Goldstein, 1987), as well as with poor and oppressed populations (Edwards & Lyman, 1989). Poetry has also been used clinically in various practice contexts, such as hospice (McLoughlin, 2000), medical facilities (Genova, 2003; Leedy, 1987), and schools (Wright & Chung, 2001). Poetry has even made its way into social work education. Mazza (1987) explored the use of poetry in various courses throughout the social work curriculum, noting that poetry can: 1) help sensitize students to emotional practice issues; 2) illuminate key dynamics of human behavior; and, 3) add value teaching social work practice skills. Furman (2005) demonstrates how poetry can be a valuable aid in teaching empathy and can also aid in the process of self reflection (Furman, 2003/2004).

Poetry has been used by social work practitioners from a variety of theoretical frameworks. Furman, Downey, Jackson & Bender (2002) explore how poetry is used when practicing from a strengths perspective. Poetry has also been used as a tool in existential (Furman, 2003; Lantz, 1997) and cognitive (Collins & Furman, in press) social work practice and has even found its way into social work research. Poindexter (2002) uses the research poem as a means of exploring the relationship between HIV infected people and their caretakers. Langer and Furman (2004) employs poetry as a means of exploring



issues related to Native American identity, and Furman (2004) has utilized poetry for the studying the impact of cancer on families.

### The Poet/Practitioner

In this section, a new paradigm for practice is considered: the poet/practitioner. It should be noted that the practice attributes highlighted are not new; they form the core of good social work practice. Also, a simple definition of the poetry/practitioner is not provided; it is defined through various value considerations and is not easily reduced. It is meant to serve social workers as a guide to focus their growth, development, and work. The goal here is to demonstrate the congruence between the poet and the social worker. This new paradigm can help refocus the profession on humanistic values and practice that have been important aspects of our history and may be threatened by the for-profit environment many social workers now operate within.

#### *The poet/practitioner: connecting the head, the heart, and the world*

The outstanding poet is able to draw connections between thought and feeling. The poet who possesses a mastery of her craft avoids sentimentality. To avoid sentimentality, she relies upon concrete and specific images. She eschews abstract generalizations and focuses on sensory data. As the poet develops her skills, she reaches out to the natural world for images and metaphors that universalize her personal experiences. These images drawn from the external world serve to concretize poems in "real-life." By so doing, the poet creates a work characterized by intense, emotional experiences without having to *tell* the reader what to feel. The poet allows the reader to experience whatever emotions are triggered by her subjective reactions to the images conveyed through the poem. By so doing, the poet fuses the affective world with the external world, thereby contextualizing human emotion in the social environment. The poet respects two seemingly contradictory aspects of human emotion. Feelings are simultaneously deeply personal and essentially universal experiences that occur within social contexts. The poet understands that the human

condition must be understood through the lens of the individual and the social context in which they live. The poet understands that it is through our minds and our hearts that we meet with and join our social worlds.

As with the poet, the poet/practitioner must understand human emotion and cognition within a social context (Werner, 1986). The poet/practitioner processes a deep appreciation of the importance of ecological factors on clients' lives and on the centrality of working within this context to insure change (Dietz, 2000). The poet/practitioner looks for connections between the selves of their clients, many of whom are isolated and alienated from others, to the external world. In spite of the desire to find a unifying theory of human behavior that explains all human phenomena in a neat, reductionistic manner, the poet/practitioner understands the complexity of being. In each encounter with a client, the poet/practitioner attends to the hearts and minds of individuals who live and function in social worlds. In spite of the desire of corporate managed care organizations to treat the individual as a set of symptoms to be reduced into predictable treatment protocols, the poet/practitioners respects the inherent wholeness of each client. As with the poet, the poet/practitioner respects what is different and the same about us simultaneously. The poet/practitioner not only seeks to understand diversity, but is acutely attuned to the similarities of human beings and human behavior. Both poetry and practice demand the capacity to observe and utilize patterns. In practice, recognizing the patterns that occur in the life-course of individuals, families or groups allow us to contextualize presenting problems, and seek solutions of appropriate depth and meaning. Treatment plans that result from this holistic view of the person include interventions from the biological, psychological, social, spiritual, and creative domains. The poet/practitioner doggedly resists pressures to medicalize clients. Instead, she responds to her clients' right to choose from among various strategies, allowing her clients to be self-determining and to maximize their values.

*The poet/practitioner: possessing the spirit of playful child*

Writing poetry encourages an attitude of play. Through playing with words, the poet knows that she must

experiment. Rigidity is the enemy of poetry. Through engaging in the creative process, the poet strives towards flexibility. Each poem presents its own dilemmas. Through a sense of play that demands diligence and persistence the poet works through moments of being stuck. Think of children building a bridge with blocks. They struggle mightily to arrange blocks in just the right manner. Left to their own devices, they may spend hours in their arrangements, allowing their creative sense and fantasy to sweep them away. Through their play, they learn to create, think in new ways, and perhaps most importantly, to innovate.

Poetry also encourages this playful innovation. The poet experiments with combinations of words, new images, strange and varied syntax to help a poem transcend *what it was*. To do so, the poet must let go of her sense of what is known. In the moment of creation, the poet attempts to let go of all she has learned, trusting that she has integrated previous lessons into her being. While she never turns her back on the conscious use of her skills, the poet understands that truth, beauty, and innovation often occur precisely when she suspends her rational, problem-solving functions and adopts an attitude of play.

As with the poet, the poet/practitioner has learned a great deal of knowledge and skills. Her professional training has taught her valuable lessons in regard to assessing and treating clients. Yet, individual clients are as different as individual poems. As each poem is a new combination of words and structures, each client presents a new constellation of experiences, feelings, beliefs, and social realities. Each client seeks to be understood for who they are. Approaching each new client with the sense of wonder and play that the poet brings to the page allows the poet/practitioner to partner with each client in the co-construction of the helping experience. The poet/practitioner seeks to learn from each client; she adopts a sense of wonder and curiosity that helps her clients feel valued. To encounter the client and truly *know* them, she must let go of all her perceptions about who they might be. While listening, the poet/practitioner lets go of what she has learned in the same way that the poet or child experiences the world with a sense of wonderment.

The poet/practitioner does not neglect her training. Skills

of observation are essential to this process. The poet/practitioner uses all of her skills to attend to clients' words, how they are being said, and attempts to see the world through her clients' eyes. The poet/practitioner is flexible, adaptable, culturally competent, and understands the importance of holistic assessment and intervention.

Perhaps most centrally to the concept of play is the notion of fun. Social work practice can and should be fun (Furman, 2001). Fun does not imply frivolity; clients present real problems that are serious and cause them much pain. Yet, the poet/practitioner works hard at enjoying her work in spite of having to contend with the pain and suffering of others. She chooses to infuse humor into her sessions, and can learn to appreciate what she actually does; gets paid to be of service to others. The poet/practitioner brings this attitude to her work with colleagues as well. In so doing, she is sought out for inspiration and encouragement. She feels increasingly connected to others who in turn enrich her life.

*The poet/practitioner: respecting subjective and deep knowledge*

To be a poet means to live in the world of the subjective. In some ways, this constitutes a paradox, in that the poet seeks to observe and document observable features of the external world. Poets pay attention to details. In the process of writing a poem, the poet observes the small details that make up an individual, be that "individual" a leaf, a crack in the wall, or a person. On the other hand, the poet understands that what makes a poem unique is the poet's subjective experience of the external world. The poem is simultaneously a document of realities external to the poet and his or her own internal world. The poet values and appreciates the differences.

Poet/practitioners use a variety of techniques to begin to understand the hidden meaning of a client's words. Paraphrasing and reflecting both content and meaning are certainly not among the least of these skills. Encouraging clients to think in terms of metaphors, which shall be discussed in depth in another section of this paper, is sometimes useful because it allows some distance from the issue. Gaining distance is an important aspect that poetry brings to a difficult situation. So too, the poet/practitioner must engage in

self-reflection, an important tool of social work practice (Schon, 1983; Ringel, 2003), in order to insure she is providing clients with accurate reflections of emotions, beliefs, and experiences.

*The poet/practitioner: seeking the truth*

Poet James L. Smith (2003) refers to the creation of the poem as "the distillation of the essence of being." The poet seeks truths about the self and others that not only hold truth for the individual, but offer a glimmer of truth for all humanity.

Seeking the truth is perhaps the ultimate goal for the poet/practitioner. Clients must sometimes gently, sometimes painfully, face difficult truths if they are to make lasting changes. Since truth is a relative term, understanding truth from the client's perspective is essential. The importance of an accurate assessment cannot be overstated. Fact and truth are not always interchangeable concepts. As a poet continually seeks the right words or phrases, the poet/practitioner must help clients sift through a multitude of potential meanings in order to find the one that resonates with a client as truth; the direction they believe is their live path.

In helping clients seek their truth, the poet/practitioner helps clients to explore their own constriction of meaning in their lives. Helping clients explore meaning potentials in their lives is an important and neglected aspect of social work practice (Krill, 1978); too often practice is overly focused on problem solving and symptom reduction. While problem solving and symptom reduction certainly have their place and can help clients in the short-term, developing a sense of meaning and purpose may be the most essential task of living (van Deurzen-Smith, 1997; Willis, 1994; Yalom, 1980).

*The poet/practitioner: facilitating the development of meaning*

In the act of creating poetry, the poet works toward gaining self-awareness. She explores the relationship between the self and the world. In so doing, she must be able to understand her own sense of values. The poet asks herself: what is it I care about? What is it that gives me meaning? The poet writes to make sense of the world, and in turn, creates a world of meaning and purpose. The poet imbues the world with new meanings that she creates, new meanings that she explores about what it

means to be alive, and what it means to be human.

While the poet strives to create a personal meaning for herself, she also seeks to illuminate meanings to and for others. So too, the poet/practitioner seeks to maximize an individual's self of meaning in the world. The insights that can be discovered in the therapeutic process are similar to the insights one gains while writing poetry.

The poet/practitioner must be very self-aware and must consistently develop this self-awareness. The therapeutic relationship is dependent to some extent on a high level of self-awareness. The goal of the relationship is to enhance the client's sense of meaning and purpose in the world. Since poet/practitioners are frequently in the profession "to help people," they must guard against feeling as if they are the ones who liberate the client, taking credit for the work the client has done. This is not to say that the poet/practitioner does not also gain from the therapeutic relationship; personal and professional growth is certainly an important aspect of the helping process. However, it does mean that the practitioner is much more limited in ownership of outcome than is the poet in rejoicing at a finished work.

#### *The poet/practitioner: reflecting upon practice*

When asked to define the type of poet he is, Mark Doty (2003) referred to himself as a "meditative narrativist," that is, one who reflects upon and gives voice to a story. The process of reflection is essential to both poet/practitioner and poet. The poet creates from a place of nothingness. The page is blank and full of both emptiness and possibility. Through various written and imaginative processes, the poet reflects upon his/her experience and seeks new ways of understanding. One method, called automatic writing, is particularly useful (McKinney, 1976). The poet writes for five minutes about a topic, person, or situation without censoring her thoughts. She writes as quickly as possible. After, the poet reads what he/she has written and seeks connections between tangential thoughts, feelings, and events.

The poet/practitioner engages in a similar process during interviews with clients. Clients often come to us with ambivalent or conflicted feelings and disjointed stories that they have

difficulty sorting out. Through active listening, reflection and interpretation, the poet/practitioner helps clients bring order to their experiences by valuing the stories clients share, searching for patterns, peering through the disjointed parts, and eventually helping clients make sense of their meaning.

So too, the poet/practitioner must develop the capacity of self-reflection as a means of understanding her own emotional responses to clients. The capacity for reflection is essential for the professional poet/practitioner (Brennan, 1973), as the self is the vehicle for change. What we often refer to as practice wisdom is dependent upon a practitioner's capacity to deeply engage upon her experiences. De Roos (1990) defines reflection in practice, or reflecting-in-action as "the conscious evaluation of action during the course of action" (p.283.) Chan (2003) recognized the importance of utilizing poetry as a means of self reflection and as a tool to help her survive the strains of doctoral work. Furman (2003/2004) explores how social work students may utilize poetry as a means of expanding their ability to be self reflective.

### *The poet/practitioner: using metaphor*

Metaphor lies at the heart of poetry. Metaphor, the symbolic use of language where an object or event represents another object or event, allows the poet to evocatively explore the human experience. By exploring experiences metaphorically, the poet allows for the subjective feelings and perceptions of an individual to represent the universal. By utilizing metaphor, the reader is able to project her own experiences onto the written metaphor she is reading. In a very real sense, the poet encourages the reader to enter into her world and make it their own. They seek to connect to their readers' humanness: to their authentic selves. In so doing, the poet encourages empathy and normalization by demonstrating that individual human pains, while personal in their experience, are indeed shared by many.

Not only are metaphors important to the process of connectedness, but to the process of growth and change. People hold core metaphors that represent their images of themselves, their lives and their futures. Metaphor is central to many systems of helping, including various family therapies

(Carter & McGoldrick, 1989; Nichols & Schwartz, 1995), narrative (Freedman & Combs, 1996) and constructivist practice (Franklin, 1995; Laird, 1995).

By speaking in metaphoric language, clients are able to safely discuss issues that are often too painful to address directly. For example, it may be easier for a couple to explore their "broken vessel" than for them to discuss their broken marriage. By allowing time for the couple to describe their "broken vessel," a poet/practitioner can gently move to help them make "repairs" to their "vessel."

Metaphors help the poet/practitioner understand the patterns of life as they are manifest within the individual. By understanding patterns that occur within the lives of clients, the poet/practitioner can help clients understand their own behavior more fully, and place them within the context of the human condition. By helping clients see the metaphorical or even archetypal patterns of their own behavior, the poet/practitioner helps clients reduce guilt and blame. Once these immobilizing feelings are reduced, clients may work on changing routinized, problematic behavior less defensively.

#### *The poet/practitioner: advocating for social change*

While some might think of the poet and poetry to be concerned only with personal and private concerns, a great many poets have been catalysts for social change. Since the practice of poetry is predicated on developing a relationship between the external, social worlds and internal personal perceptions, the conscious poet becomes aware of oppression and inequity. Whether sensitive by disposition or training, poets possess the observational tools to comprehend the causes of systemic barriers in their environments; many poets have become involved in working towards the amelioration of such barriers. For instance, poets have stood on the vanguard of various revolutionary movements throughout the world, most notably in Latin America (Cardenal, 1982). The minister of culture for the former Sandinista government of Nicaragua, the poet/priest Ernesto Cardenal, implemented a literacy campaign utilizing poetry as a means of educating the poorest Nicaraguans. In the United States, *Poets Against the War* (2003) organized poets against the most recent war in Iraq. Over five thousand



poets have posted poems protesting US intervention in Iraq. Poetry has also been used in ways that more closely approximate social work macro practice. For example, poetry groups have been conducted to validate the ethnic heritage of Puerto Ricans who have been discriminated against (Holman, 1996). These groups sought to help members become aware of the impact that oppression has had in their lives, and transcend the effects. Poetry has also been used as a valuable tool in community organization and the development of intergenerational community spaces (Furman, Riddoch, & Collins, 2004). In a qualitative study of community organizers, Community Arts Network (2002) found that using stories, metaphors, and narratives were important tools in the practice of community organization and empowerment. They found that community organizers used narratives as a powerful way of connecting people to each other within their communities. Narratives are valuable means of helping people from diverse backgrounds make connections between their often very different experiences. In short:

the expressive, interpretive and creative aspects of the arts and humanities carry special utility when dividing lines have been etched deeply in communities. Often with greater power than other modes of human discourse, collective engagement with art can heal wounds, break logjams and build bridges (Community Arts Network, 2002).

Social work is rooted in social change and social justice (Estes, 1997; Healy, 2001). As exemplified in the work of early social work pioneers, who worked to ameliorate the deleterious effects of industrialization on the urban poor, a primary purpose of social work has been to alleviate or eliminate social problems through social action and advocacy. The poet/practitioner must work to develop and maintain her social justice orientation. This is particularly difficult given the oppressive, reactionary forces at work in society. The poet/practitioner seeks to stay connected to the social issues that are important to her and her clients through observation and personal awareness. The poet/practitioner always seeks to place

individual problems into the context of the immediate social environment, as well as the larger global community.

## Conclusion

It may seem to the reader that the paradigm being advocated in this article is a throwback to another time, a time when the medical model was seen as merely *one* practice framework (or perhaps before it even existed). The reader may notice that this paper does not measure the efficacy of practice principles advocated herein. In truth, the authors of this paper are convinced that too much focus has been paid to evidence-based practice and other outcomes-based models. Often, such models are overly reliant on social work knowledge to the exclusion of social work values. This notion is especially important to consider, given that empirical studies have called into question the degree to which social work practitioners utilize theory as their primary practice guide (Cocozzelli & Constable, 1985). Social work values are essential guides to practice. They are central to our profession and our professional identity. We are as concerned with preferred instrumentalities, or preferred ways of treating people, as we are with outcomes (Levy, 1973). In his seminal article, Gordon (1965) asserts that when social workers base decisions upon knowledge when values are called for, their interventions will be misdirected. While the authors of this paper advocate for the paradigm of the poet/practitioner, this is but one that may guide practice. It is essential that social workers adopt metaphors, paradigms and models that are as informed by social work values as they are social work knowledge. Without clear guidance from social work values, we are at risk of becoming a technocratic profession of social engineers, instead of the champions of the disadvantaged and oppressed.

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