

The Value of a Social Work Education for the Religious Professional

Rev. Dr. Frederick J. Streets, M.Div., MSW '81, DSW '97, D.D.
Chaplain, Office of University Chaplain Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut

Peter Grumbacher, MSW '91
Rabbi, Congregation Beth Emeth Wilmington, Delaware

Thomas E. Taylor M.Div., LTSP, 81', MSW '06
Pastor, Grace Lutheran Church, North Bellmore, New York

Rabbi Moshe Bleich, MSW '96, PhD '03, LICSW
Director of Social Work Services. Legal Aid Society of District of Columbia, Washington, DC

A panel of alumni of Wurzweiler's interdenominational clergy program discussed the impact of their social work education on their professional practice at a symposium held at the school on March 22, 2007. Two ministers and two rabbis shared how their work as members of the clergy was enhanced by the social work education they received at Wurzweiler.

REV. DR. FREDERICK J. STREETS

My comments on the value of a social work education for the religious professional reflect some of my memories of my learning experience here as a student. These views are based on my practice as a clergy and social worker and my ongoing reflection on my personal, professional, and socially shaped values.

I entered social work school having served four years as a Protestant congregational minister, including two years of directing a social service support program for elderly persons who were confined to their homes or living in institutions. These experiences caused me to draw upon my seminary training in pastoral care and my academic interest in psychology and human

development, sociology, religion, theology, and community service. However, it was my conversations with social workers and participation in case conferences at the agency where I was a member of the staff in charge of the elderly Friendly Visitor Program that helped me consider what a social work education might offer me in my work as a parish minister. My involvement and interest in the program were expressions of my commitment to help others and to work for social change and justice.

My experiences as a student here opened up to me the relationship between social work and ministry. We were challenged to make the connections and to incorporate our social work education into our religious work. This task was aided by Wurzweiler's

distinctive approach and philosophy of teaching social work to students, some of whom came as accomplished exemplars of other professions. This approach deepened my appreciation for how complex a professional helping relationship can be, and for the many different conceptual, practical and interdisciplinary approaches one could take in the effort to meet human need.

I was attracted to a social work education also because I thought it would complement my sense of vocation (Cochran, 1990), increase my self-awareness and understanding of people, and augment my counseling skills. As a practicing clergyperson and social work student, I became increasingly cognizant of how some people seem to live with conflict, ambiguities, and contradictions regarding what they value and believe and the choices they make. This theme has continued to play itself out over the years I have been practicing ministry and social work. A clergy classmate and I were recently reminiscing about our student days here at Wurzweiler. He commented that a Wurzweiler social work education “works on you.” I resonated with his observation. My education here did indeed increase my self-awareness and enriched my sense of vocation. I am a religious and social work professional. My understanding of people was broadened and my counseling skills were enhanced by my social work education.

My perspective is that those who come to us do so as whole persons. We as healers seek to understand their experiences and needs and participate in rallying their own internal resources while trusting in our relationship. In the process we invite them to teach us what they consider is of utmost importance to them and how they deal with their concerns. Social work education provided me with a theoretical framework from which to consider the issues presented to me by those seeking my help, and it enhanced my counseling skills. The social work approach to helping others is broader in scope than some of those valuable help-

ing skills and insights offered in pastoral care education and training programs.

Social work and pastoral care, however, complement one another. The problem-solving orientation of social work is helpful in the religious setting. Pastoral work, however, is not always done in response to problems people have. It includes expanding their understanding of themselves, one another, and their community and world. This generic nature and focus of pastoral work provide a nuanced distinction between it and pastoral therapeutic care and social work.

Not all religious professionals are ordained or leaders of congregations. Social work education can assist us as religious professionals in developing our distinct sense of our professional self, which enhances our effective practice in whatever context in which we work. It does so in at least three ways: (1) helping us become more aware of how and why we use ourselves in service to others, (2) providing a conceptual framework in which to reflect on ways to assess and intervene, and (3) facilitating our engagement with both of these through an empirical base.

Some religious professionals who pursue further training through social work to do counseling are seduced in the process to value that dimension of their work at the expense of the religious dimension. Social work education encourages the religious professional to adhere to a more holistic approach and appraisal of his or her tasks. Social work education attempts to help religious professionals freely move in those directions that are consistent with their awareness of their professional self. The issue isn't whether a social work education will move us as religious professionals away from or toward our vocation and calling in whatever capacity we practice, but that our being there is authentic and intentional. There are other professional educational training programs that will help us to know ourselves and our professional self better. Social work, however, embraces a broader spectrum of human need and service than

many other helping professions. Social work education and training are useful in many settings. However, when either we as social workers or religious professionals use knowledge, values, norms, and skills we borrow from either religion or social work, we and our clients or members of our religious communities can become confused about our professional role. Therefore, knowing our professional self and practice context is a crucial mantra.

The knowledge and skills of social work and pastoral care often complement each role. The conscious use of our professional self minimizes our potential to undermine the unique contribution of each profession, blur our roles, and confuse those who seek our help. Social work speaks well to the variety of situations in which either the clergy-person or religious professional is likely to encounter people.

Once, a member of my congregation requested an appointment to meet with me. She was very involved in the congregational life of our church, participating in many of the church's programs and activities. She stated that her purpose for seeing me was because she wanted to ask me to pray for her. I asked her what was it she wanted me to pray for. She told me about a situation in her life that was causing her a great deal of stress. She was taking care of her niece, who was a teenager, and who had become pregnant. This was only part of the story. The father of the baby was her husband—the uncle of her niece. She also told me that she had been raped as a young woman and that over the years this had caused problems in her relationship with her husband. This incident with her niece stimulated her memories about her rape trauma along with feelings of anger, betrayal, and humiliation. She felt embarrassed by the fact that her husband was the father of the yet to be born child.

Here was a situation of incest compounded by long-standing marital problems and trauma from a childhood rape experience. And all she said she wanted from me was to offer prayer for her concerns.

Part of my task was to determine the nature of the issues she was presenting to me and how I could be of help. There were many different emotional and practical aspects of her experiences about which she was concerned; she was unaware of some of those aspects. I got a sense while listening to her of how she understood God, her sense of reality, and her inner world, self, or spirit. The process and content of our conversations gave me some clues about how to help her address her feelings and promote her resilience and capacity to make difficult decisions and choices. We met regularly over a long period of time. She felt that our meetings helped her cope with her unfortunate experiences. She derived from them new meaning for her life and the capacity to make choices that ultimately helped her and her family to move forward. Carroll Wise (1983) reminds us that “real change comes slowly and with effort at working on those parts of our selves that are causing us pain. God has placed the potentiality for change within us but we have to accept our responsibility in bringing it about. . . . Our past cannot be changed. What can be changed, or rather what we can change, is the character of our inner responses, our feelings and attitudes and patterns of relationship” (p. 267).

The casework knowledge and skills and self-reflective process I gained through social work education informed how I used myself as a pastor when meeting with this woman. Our time together also included praying and reflecting on her religious beliefs and on the impact of her painful experiences on her faith. I met with her individually and together with members of her family.

As a social worker in a secular clinical setting, I have explored the religious or spiritual views of clients when they have introduced them. I sensed that it was important to inquire whether they had a religious orientation. Prayer, meditation, and traditional healing and animistic practices are widely prevalent in the homes and commu-

nities of many trauma survivors like the woman in my congregation.

There are ways for us as social workers to overcome our fear of or reluctance to introduce one's belief in God or religious faith in social work education and practice. Professional helpers need to consider how their clients/patients can teach them about their painful experiences and ways of coping with them. The patient/client as a teacher represents a shift in the traditional understanding of the therapeutic helper/client relationship and dynamic.

The religiosity of a client may pose some difficulty for both the religious and nonreligious social worker when providing services. I suggest that we demonstrate interest in the client/patient's religious or spiritual orientation to life in a nonjudgmental way. This approach is one whereby we ask questions that encourage clients/patients to reflect upon how they choose to live their lives and what the resources are that sustain and give them hope and meaning for living (Canda & Furman, 1999).

It is well for social workers to explore this aspect of their patients' lives by asking such questions as the following:

Do you consider yourself to be religious or spiritual in some way?

What sustains and gives you hope?

Are you involved with any volunteer activities?

Do you have any hobbies or special interests or skills that you enjoy?

There are risks (Davoine & Gaudilliere, 2004) involved in our putting into words our traumatic experiences; we also take risks when we keep silent about our emotional and physical pains. Sharing these experiences with a social worker or clergy requires that those seeking help feel a level of trust and safety that will allow them to tell their story, and that the social worker or clergy person has the skills to listen, interpret, and guide the clients or parishioners along their journey toward health and well-being.

All behavior is language, some of which

attempts to speak of those things that give us meaning and purpose, as well as about those things that haunt and horrify us. Religion and spirituality are ways through which many people try to make sense and speak of their experiences, and to reconcile with what or whom they perceive as the enemy (Volf, 1996). The value of the religion and spirituality of those seeking our help is to be acknowledged in the assessment and treatment process. It is also worthwhile to explore ways of collaborating with the religious resources of the hospital, clinic, or surrounding community in meeting the needs of those whom we are attempting to help.

Exploring, as social workers, our client's religious beliefs and spiritual practices is not about what we as social workers or healers do or do not believe and practice as religion. We use our awareness of our own feelings, attitudes, and biases to facilitate a relationship with those we are assisting in order to promote their health (Matthews, 1998).

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

This vision of a holistic and collaborative relationship between (1) social work education and practice and (2) religion and spirituality has policy implications for the coordination and delivery of these services. Attitudinal, as well as professional boundaries that separate spirituality from social work will need to be crossed for social workers to effectively integrate a client's spiritual orientation with social work services. This means that the value of religion and spirituality in the care of our clients has to be reappraised and collaboration between social work and religious institutions fostered. Forman's (2004) observation is important to note regarding this task in the American context:

The modern scientific paradigm is a powerful shaper of thought and action. But the paradigm itself may be changing. Scientific and spiritual issues are converging in the healing arts. The pressure to change comes in part

from patients who are seeking to increase the sense of meaning in their lives, and to harness spiritual practices as a means to recovery and relief. Data, to some extent, drives the change: a variety of empirical observations point to a strange and wonderful link between the physical and the ephemeral (p. 154).

The growth of research projects, publications, and journals dealing with social work and religion (Canda, 2005) indicates the interest our society has in religion and the importance of religion in the lives of some of those who seek our help. Some social workers, regardless of their own beliefs, wish to avoid any appearance or implication of promoting religion in their practices. We have legitimate concerns about how religious ideologies and practices can be interpreted or used as a destructive force. The portrayal of God as a cosmic bellhop at our beck and call views the belief in God as something foolish upon which the believer depends. In spite of this and the fallen or questionable image we have of some clergy, ethical discernment, value clarifications and conflicts, and the desire we have to live a meaningful life often manifest as some people's religious or spiritual quest. This search becomes more pronounced as we attempt to anchor ourselves in a world that seems to have us moving faster than ever and where in we draw our values from multiple sources of authority—the least of which are our own experiences. Some have suggested that modern life leaves many people feeling they are “relational refugees” (Wimberly 2000), alienated from one another and from a community. We also live in a world that seems smaller as our knowledge of one another and the diversity of our experiences and knowledge of our need to better care for our natural environment expand. The goal of social work is not to promote or impose our own values and beliefs upon those who seek our professional help, but to affirm the functional value and contribution religion makes to the health and coping strength of some of the members of our congregations or clients.

A few years ago I visited a refugee camp

in Colombia, South America, that was home for entire families—women, men, and children. It included all ages from the very young to the elderly. The refugees were homeless, landless, orphaned, and separated from other family members because of the ongoing war in Colombia. They were a part of the two million people of Colombia who are referred to by the Colombian government as the “displaced.”

A Colombian man, Carlos (not his real name), invited the group I was with to meet his wife and children. His home was a two-room house, its roof and walls made of cardboard and tin, and an earthen floor served as their rug. They were poor, displaced from their own home, and had been traumatized by the war in Colombia. Despite their circumstances, they were exceedingly polite and hospitable to me and my companions.

I gave the oldest of Carlos's children a package of American chewing gum. Several children suddenly appeared in the house. I watched as all of them left the house in an orderly fashion, went outside, sat in a circle, and passed the package of gum around until each child had taken a piece. The oldest child, before putting the gum in her mouth, which also signaled to the other children to do the same, offered me the last piece.

I continue to reflect on this experience as a human being, a father, a clergy social worker, and member of a democratic society. In the midst of their harsh living conditions, they offered us hospitality and hope. Their generosity to me embodied the essence of what we call in the Christian community Eucharist—Communion. I saw demonstrated in the behavior of these children what it means to have resilience and be a community. These two concepts are important to social work practice in a variety of settings.

CONCLUSION

Social work is taught with an emphasis on our learning more about ourselves, the values we hold, and how to be intentional and

aware of our choices and the course of action we take in meeting human needs. I have not commented on other social work practice concentrations such as administration, policy development, community work, or leading an agency or organization. I have generally focused upon the importance Wurweiler gives to the personal growth of its students and some of the implications of this for students who are religious professionals.

This personal growth dimension of social work education is essential for the religious professional. Many of us see our work as a vocation, as a part of who we are and not just a career. What we do as practitioners is an expression of ourselves and not just the technical implementation of a set of skills we use to help other people. Our vocation is a part of our life's story (Cochran, 1990).

A social work education enables us to stand in our traditions of culture, ethnicity, and religion, while at the same time we engage and shape our modern-day living. The "conscious use of the professional self" taught in social work school (Rosenthal, 1979; reflective/scholarly practitioner is a similar notion) is an invaluable life-long process of critical thinking and reflection. It contributes significantly to the personal growth and professional work of the religious professional as well.

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RABBI PETER GRUMBACHER

Just yesterday I met a woman who was supervised for her social work degree by a Wurweiler instructor. We met by chance at a "Couples Counseling" seminar in the Philadelphia area. When she told me her connection to Wurweiler, I became excited all over again that I would be part of this commemoration of Wurweiler's 50th anniversary. So much might not have been possible had I not made the decision in 1989 to pursue my MSW degree here.

My presentation tonight is based on the practical rabbinate, on my 35 years serving as rabbi of my congregation. Everything I learned in my two years here was destined to be linked to preaching, teaching, and counseling. I was not a part-time social worker (although I do look forward to retirement when I will redirect my efforts in that direction), but rather a full-time congregational rabbi.

It might not have been possible to encourage congregants to seek psychological help had I not been a Wurweiler student. During the High Holidays, following my father's death in 1999, I delivered a sermon on the need to understand oneself in the quest for spiritual growth. The idea of "self" in the proper context was inspired by so many of my teachers, particularly Dr. Lloyd Setleis, may his memory be blessed, who taught me so much. My sermon prompted many congregants to thank me for giving them permission to seek help or to validate the decision they had made. I knew immediately that without Wurweiler it might not have been possible for me to speak the way I did on that holiday.

Counseling has been a major part of my rabbinate. I became certified in pastoral

counseling a decade before my Wurzweiler studies began. That course of learning was invaluable indeed, but how much the more so was my Wurzweiler experience! Very often I would refer people to others in the helping professions. Now, while I do know my own limits I feel far more comfortable seeing them through, as it were.

One incident comes to mind. We had been studying various therapies. I never thought I would ever have to think about behavior therapy, but a congregant came to me asking for help because he talked too much. His employer told him he was in danger of losing his job because of incessant talking. To make a long story short (so I am not accused of “talking too much”), whatever I did helped. It might not have been possible without Wurzweiler.

In another counseling experience, as a student, I was assigned a woman who worked for a major employer in my community. For six months or so we met weekly. By the time we were finished, things worked so well that the director of the Employee Assistance program of this corporation called me and offered me a job when I graduated. I already had a job, but I really couldn't reveal that to him. He thanked me profusely for helping this client. It was very flattering, and it might not have been possible without Wurzweiler.

There are other ways the school has helped me in the almost 17 years since I graduated. Suffice it to say I owe a great deal to Wurzweiler and hope that other members of the clergy take advantage of the education and experience they will have if they enroll. When I was a student I was the sole rabbi of a 700-family congregation, I had three small children, I had to travel from Delaware to New York every week—so no excuses from any of you!

REVEREND THOMAS E. TAYLOR

Religion and social work have always had a close parallel relationship. Both vocations have, at their core, compassion, empathy, hope, and a focus on relating to all peoples as equals.

The following are some of my observations since my 2006 graduation from Wurzweiler and my 26 years of being an ordained Lutheran pastor.

Clergy have always been on the front lines whenever a crisis or tragedy hits. From large national tragedies such as the Oklahoma City bombing, the Columbine High School shootings, 9/11, and Hurricane Katrina to more personal and domestic issues, people almost always turn first to houses of worship and members of the clergy or chaplains, long before they seek the help of mental health professionals.

Social work education can help provide the tools and framework for members of the clergy to minister to congregants on a more helpful level, when pastoral care is provided. I appreciate the holistic emphasis in relating to people, including psychosocial, support systems, and the strengths perspective.

What I found during my two years in Wurzweiler's Clergy Program is that clergy of all faith traditions basically have the same joys and sorrows, struggles and challenges. We also have to deal with very similar ethical and moral issues. Social work education helps inform religious professionals about these issues and helps clarify them as we minister to members of our congregations and communities.

In my two fieldwork placements I learned a very valuable lesson that again parallels my experience as a pastor. Clients continually teach us. Social work education reinforces that we are not experts imparting our knowledge to “fix” clients, but rather we are equals using our learning and experience to journey with them and to help facilitate their own personal growth and healing. At Wurzweiler, I not only became a social worker but a more effective pastor.

One of my favorite quotes applies to my being a social worker and pastor.

“Vocation lies in the place where your deep gladness meets the world's deep needs.”

Parker Palmer

RABBI MOSHE BLEICH

My colleagues have all spoken eloquently about the value of faith-based social work and how spiritual values can add a dimension to our work. However, I would like to share an entirely different perspective in regard to the religious professional. I would like to consider some significant roadblocks that can prevent the religious professional from being an effective clinician, roadblocks that social work education is ideally placed to address.

In the Orthodox community, clergy members are often frustrated that their parishioners do not follow their pastoral advice. A significant part of the issue is the role that Orthodox clergy believe they play. The traditional role of the rabbi is to be a *posek*—a halachic decisor. Thus, the role is to be prescriptive and definitive. Frequently, this spills over to how clergy perform their pastoral services. Congregants unburden their issues, and wearing their rabbinic hats, the clergy often prescribe solutions to their congregants' issues. In doing so, they often skip over the critical step of validating and empathizing with the struggle with which the individual, couple, or family is grappling. They often fail to begin with the first step that every social worker learns (and intuitively knows): one needs to start **where the client is** and only after that can interventions and solutions be suggested. The theme of starting where the client is and not where he or she should be should resonate with every religious individual. G-d judges human beings where they are at that point in time and does not judge them for what they will do in their future (Rashi on Genesis 21:17). Social work education helps sensitize students and especially the clergy to the fact that helping individuals with their issues is a process, and not merely a one-step problem-solving exercise.

There is a second value in social work education for clergy that also applies to individuals who have strong religious values. Frequently, when certain moral and reli-

gious values are breached, the religiously sensitive individual reacts with judgmental revulsion. How distressing is that reaction for the vulnerable person who has shared weaknesses and failings, and seeks an empathetic response! To illustrate, as a novice social worker, I presented a case to a group of religious colleagues. It concerned a sexually deviant individual who was also a *Shomer Shabbat* (Shabbat observer). After I described the work that I had done with him, one of my colleagues asked, How is it possible for someone to be deviant and call himself a *Shomer Shabbat*? To him, that was implausible. I responded by saying that individuals have pathologies and weaknesses, and being religiously observant does not mean that one cannot suffer and lapse in these areas. My colleague continued to voice the sentiment that such an occurrence is an oxymoron and the individual cannot be religious. This incident illustrates how strongly the religious bias can affect how one reacts to and judges another individual's pain and struggles. To my mind, the professional literature focuses on dilemmas around the conflict between individual religious values and professional values. However, the literature is silent on the more basic and common issue of how one's religious sentiments may conflict with the capacity to practice such basic social work skills as validation and empathy.

It is quite possible that even the talmudic Sages were aware of this phenomenon—that the judgmental attitude of religion prevents one from being an effective agent of change. The Talmud in *Eirchin* 16 relates that Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah wonders whether there is anyone in his generation who is capable of providing rebuke and thereby fulfilling the biblical mitzvah of *Tochacha*—rebuke. At first glance, the statement is puzzling as the mitzvah to admonish one who has transgressed is a biblical one. In general, the rules for all commandments are codified with all their details. Why couldn't Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah simply have been taught those rules? It would appear that to effectively rebuke one's friend,

it is not sufficient to simply follow some *halachic*—Jewish legal—verbal procedures; rather it is necessary to have empathy for the transgressor. Only then is one capable of rebuking one's colleague. Rebuking with empathy or *B'derech Kavod*—in a dignified fashion—requires empathy, which cannot be grasped simply by perusing a code of law. Rather it is an art of which one can be sensitized to only through developing counseling skills, which is a significant part of social work education.

Alumni of the clergy program have expressed how Wurzweiler School of Social Work has affected their work and how social work skills have enhanced their pastoral skills. The 1982 edition of the school's *Jewish Social Work Forum* is devoted to explaining the significance of this aspect of clergy social work education. The weekly group supervision that I received with other clergy members created and helped foster an atmosphere where we were able to safely process how our religious values affected how we reacted to struggles that our parishioners or clients had. It was only in this environment that we were able to safely explore our own religious principles, how to remain true to them, and yet validate our clients in an appropriate fashion.

Religious biases are not limited to the clergy but are found in many of our religious practitioners. As noted by Levy (1982) in that edition of the *Jewish Social Work Forum*, many of the issues faced by the clergy are also encountered by other religious professionals. However, as noted by Levitz (1982) in the same issue, there is a value to limiting the program to members of the clergy: "to create a learning environment where the clergyman, among his peers, can feel comfortable in exploring his self in relation to others, without the concerns engendered by his being a public figure" (p. 2).

It is my hope that Wurzweiler will apply and share with the entire program some of the unique characteristics and strengths that have flourished in the clergy component. Accordingly, I highly recommend that the school initiate a pilot program for religious students on a voluntary basis that would provide weekly group supervision to explore the impact of their religious sentiments on their practice.

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