

# Social Work as Encountering

DAVID WEISS

*Executive Director, Baron de Hirsch Institute, Montreal, Canada*

THE existentialist social worker affirms that real or true human existence requires of each *being* that he become involved and "at-home" with others; others who, as human beings, own a common condition and situation, and who must learn to be "at-one" with themselves as they partake of the anxieties of human reality. Without such involvement, people struggle to achieve dubious physical and emotional balances on external wavelengths either from Big Brother or synthetic heroes or other manipulative mouthpieces. Such people lose their energy and strength, retreat passively and cannot truly get involved in *belonging*, which enables *being* to achieve fulfillment. In today's age of electronic eavesdropping, the privacy of being is now a legal as well as an ethical dilemma!

Social workers who offer clients, groups and communities real experiences in encountering may thereby also realize their own humanity. When a person's beingness emerges and relates appropriately to others, both belong to mankind. From such belonging among related beings, group formation, group solidarity and group identification arise. From shared activities and common aspirations arises the shared fate that is called community.

Such belonging-together also creates mutual aid which is at bottom the root-source for the larger shared fate that sparks the creation of nations. Mutual aid is at the heart, as well, of social welfare policies. Such belonging sustains and nourishes the human community in which the It-ness of existence (that is, the transacting mode of life) is seen as the means towards the ends of I-Thou (or the revealing mode of life).

It is the same in the social work situation: The It-ness of helping lends itself to, and leads into, the revealing Thou-ness of the helping process which acknowledges and bestows on the other his sense of being an I, in response to a Thou. The story of Adam below will illustrate these concepts as he struggled to achieve a sense of at-oneness with himself and at-homeness with significant others.

In encountering experiences with others, the social worker enables them to light the candle of their own being in the darkness of their given human reality, thus filling with meaning the empty dark spaces of existence which deprivation, pain and conflict engender. He enables others in relationship to take on, share and thus to surpass the dreadful threats to existence. If the worker does otherwise, or fails in this task, he confirms for others their weakness, dependence and uselessness, tied to object-subject relations of asking for ceaseless advice or guidance. Such monologues result in placebos that perpetuate being's retreat from selfhood to nothingness. Without true dialogue in everyday and professional relationships, we experience absurdity and irrationality.

Social work as encounter confronts and recognizes that the ontic innate anxiety of life and its sequelae form the substance and the processes of its programmes in each field of practice. At the very center of this *engagement* lies the human condition, in which the essential nature of man must be understood if he is to be helped and freed from dread. In this way social work also will free itself from (or transcend) its own

dread of being imperfect, uncertain, even though it can only relate to specific men or groups of people. It will accept that it is essentially a human art or skill. Social workers will then forego yearning for omnipotence. Social workers will be contaminated; they will be of humanity and for humanity, and will treat humanity as human beings. Then will they be authentic, real.

But this view is ever-precarious, since there is no absolute or standard system of techniques or formulae by which one travels and accompanies others on the road of life. Perhaps the day will come when such computers will be devised that can particularize, partialize, feel, intuit, empathize, compathize and *care-for-others!* Until then human encounter with its infinite possibilities is the only available way.

Our problem, therefore, is to understand men by more than their behavioural symptoms and roles. Social work must encounter human beings in all of their existence. This ontoanalytic approach is, as Martin Buber says, "to understand the essence of man in terms of the dialogical relation between men, and between the individualistic psychology which places all reality within the isolated individual, and the social psychology which places all reality in the organic group and in the inter-action of social forces." In encountering the agony of the other's existence, social work always dares to walk "a narrow ridge" when it deals with concrete human reality. By doing so, the potentiality for joy, work, love and fulfillment arise and may be experienced.

But a gaping schism, that between joy and dread, confronts every North American city-dweller, as yippies, hippies and dissident forces threaten established attitudes, patterns and structures of services. Will men share their fate or prey on each other? When social justice fails

or when human dignity is demeaned, chaos arises and oppressive social control enters the scene.

In *The Empty Fortress*, Dr. Bruno Bettelheim plumbs the depths of self-hood's torments and despair. Dr. S. A. Szurek, discussing Bettelheim's impressive work with autistic children notes, "Autism derives from the conviction that one can do nothing about a world that offers some satisfactions, but in frustrating ways, and not those satisfactions one wishes."<sup>1</sup> As in the individual, so in the group which comprises individuals.

The phenomena of protest, dropout and violence often suggest this social autism of a withdrawal-violence syndrome by individuals and groups to a world that offers little or no satisfactions, and which they cannot influence in any way or trust. The French teacher, E. M. Cioran, in his book, *The Temptation To Exist*, notes, "It is from self-hatred that consciousness emerges. I hate myself: I am absolutely a man." Social workers need to grasp the meaning of such despair and its opposite of courage when encountering such regression and despair.

When social work embraces this dimension of the human condition—that whenever I-Thou fails, the terror and violence of autistic I—Neuter arise—it will grasp the underlying existential anxiety which marks every social situation. It will at the same time enrich and deepen the healing and revealing potentials of professional practice and the training for social work.

Social work as an encountering experience enables the other *to be* and *to become* a human individual, at the center of which is his irreplaceable and unrepeatable self. This approach posits

<sup>1</sup> S. A. Szurek, *Social Service Review*, Vol. 42, #2, June 1968. Another name for autism is anomie. Whatever the name, the horror and despair of violence and anarchy compel us to reply.

that the essential nature of man is in his total existence. This is in opposition to the view that man's existence is reducible to essence. Social work encountering stresses the careful description of all a person's existence, in all domains of experience without regard to traditional knowledge or epistemological questions. Existentialism in social work declares that there is no difference between the external world and the internal world of the mind.

Social work as an encountering experience is engaged in helping the other to confront the denial and affirmation of ontic anxiety. Adam's conflict about his bastard birth illustrates this point. In the real choice between denial or affirmation, social workers practice their delicate skill. As Paul Tillich explains, there are three fundamental anxieties that attend human reality. These are the anxiety of fate and death, the anxiety of emptiness and meaninglessness and the anxiety of guilt and condemnation.

Helping the other affirm his self is ontologically the very opposite of the "reduction of being," or retreat into neurosis or psychosis. Self-affirmation is the essential nature of every being and as such is the highest good. This issue is touchingly dramatized by Albert Camus in "The Stranger." When Adam accepts that a bastard is both socially and personally determined by himself alone, he is able to accept who he is.

The root to the understanding of being is based on the reality that if being is interpreted in terms of life or process of becoming, non-becoming is as basic as being. Let us reflect on this duality. It means that in life we are in death, and death is in life.<sup>2</sup> For example, the

verb, "to be," offers us much "insight" in its declension: "being"; "has been," etc. These suggest the various states of mind that can be heard in every social work relationship. Being-in-the-world, or future outlook, also suggests health or *dis-ease* if one denies being.

Loving and hating, wanting or not wanting, introjecting or projecting, sublimating or acting out—under and over these mechanisms is the existential dilemma. Perhaps this is the answer to the Riddle of the Sphinx. Filtering into awareness and raising pathological defences and retreats, unresolved ontic anxiety forces the individual into relative or absolute "adjustments," in all the varieties of human expression, from neurosis to psychosis to death. To feel and perceive these ontic dualities challenges every social worker in every practice situation.

Tillich tells us that courage is the key to unlocking the threats to being-itself. If nothing else, social workers by definition must have the courage to risk themselves in every unknown new moment of every client's need or demand. When courage opens the door to being, it finds at one and the same time the strength to face being and the negation of being and their actual unity. . . . I affirm my being despite my knowledge of my non-being or certain death, and, by embracing this unacceptable part of my being, I conquer it and achieve existential or ontological authenticity. I can be "in spite of." I "own" myself. I am I. . . . And what I get I have, to give and, in sharing, to keep, my centred self.

In such moments of shared revelation between worker and client, the truth of human experience enables the I and the

<sup>2</sup> See my essay, "The Existential I-Neuter," *Viewpoints*, Montreal, March 1968, for discussion of these ontic fears and their relation to being and nothingness. The description of ontic anxiety

here closely follows Paul Tillich's ideas in *The Courage to Be*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1960.

Other to be themselves. When I behave like a bastard to him, Adam can move beyond frustration to a moment of deep truth.

What does non-being threaten? It threatens man's ontic self-affirmation, relatively in terms of fate, absolutely in terms of death. Non-being threatens man's social self-affirmation, relatively in terms of emptiness, absolutely in terms of meaninglessness. Non-being finally threatens men's ethical self-affirmation, relatively in terms of guilt, absolutely in terms of condemnation. These anxieties threaten every being throughout life.

In relation to the anxiety of fate and death, pathological anxiety produces an unrealistic search for security; in relation to the anxiety of doubt and meaninglessness, to an unrealistic search for certitude; and in relation to the anxiety of guilt and condemnation, to an unrealistic demand for perfection. Out of this search arises the magical role given by clients to their social workers which they truly cannot fulfill.

Such mutual frustration of magical wishes lead to the negativistic, hostile and painful transference reactions experienced in the casework situation by both client and the social worker. Too often some practitioners yield to the other's magical wish for them to be puissant and are bound in an interminable feeding relation to their clients. Eric Berne describes such games in *Games People Play*, as do Lawrence Shulman and Alfred Kadushin about interpersonal strategies in treatment and supervision (*Social Work*, July 1968).

The onto-analytic approach to, and understanding of man, however, sees that his ability to be and the courage to affirm himself are incomplete without the courage to be a part of, through social participation, of his family, his group, his community and his world. To move out

effectively into social relationships, to function within each role one has to bear, requires that the subject of self-affirmation remain the *centered self* of being of each person. A centered self, is an individualized self. It can be and often is destroyed, as the Nazis proved.

But the individualized self cannot be divided. Nor can it be exchanged: its self-affirmation is directed toward itself as the unique and irreplaceable individual that being affirms. The contemporary scene illustrates the opposite retreat. When self-affirmation is denied, attacked or blighted, then various patterns of anomie occur, usually in *disorder*. That is why the encountering social worker affirms the centre of his efforts is man and his need to imbue his existence with meaning.

The existentialist social worker believes that every person is literally "sent" into the living world, rather than "thrown" into it. That is why man seeks to reveal the unfinished portion of his existence by authenticating it by the stamp of his own identity. Perhaps this is the spiritual sense in which Biblical man is sent into the world to respond to the address of his Creator.

By responding to the challenges of life, by the answering reply of "Here I am," man discovers who he is: an "I to the Thou" of his Creator. This is symbolized by the story of Abraham's near sacrifice of Isaac in the Old Testament. The life of dialogue, of responsibility, is the alternative to the life of neurosis and psychosis.

Thus every social work encounter has the potential of more than a "contact." To the social worker, every casework, group or power elite "contact" becomes the challenge as to whether he shall be merely *sympathetic*, or a contacting participant in the clinical or group process; *empathetic*, or transacting in those processes; or *compathetic* and en-

countering in the revealing aspect of helping—healing participation. The sympathetic and empathetic modes of relationship refer to the I-It forms of meeting. The compathetic affirms the I-Thou, the true “between-ness” of relation. The latter mode constitutes true encounter.

In the social work encounter of relationship, the distance of the objective mode of sympathy and empathy is reduced, and the other affirmed as an authentic being. This compathetic attitude overcomes the tendency to abstract and classify the other into an It, or thing, so that the other can become a specific Thou, however bound and finite he is by fate, enabled and freed to determine himself as *cause* and *will* for existence.

Gian-Carlo Menotti in *The Consul* weeps the despair of the refugee refused a visa to safety, singing the refrain, “my name is a number, my story a case.” In the sympathetic, transactional modes of social work, this refrain echoes the despair of the client as an object or thing. When impersonal distance is bridged between the I and the Thou, encounter leads to compathetic affect and experience. When Adam feels that he counts and can be a bastard if he likes, he gives up the distrust he has that he will be only another case to me. He does not have to con me nor I to double-talk him.

Compathy is based on sympathy and empathy, but is over and above it. It is, as Thomas Hora calls it, transcendence. It is what Viktor Frankl calls the noogenic element. It is what Martin Buber calls “between man and man,” the *zwischenlich* of authentic human intersubjectivity. It is the existential affirmation of being as such, and as such, it actualizes the moment of truth, which reveals as it heals, when both the I and Thou are present to each other.

Social workers who accept that all liv-

ing is meeting or encounter will discover in the relationships between practitioners and clients that the professional helping process is enhanced by compathetic sensitivity in “seeing and hearing.” Willingness to encounter the other as a being in need of self-affirmation encourages the social worker to move out to the other, to recognize the “Thou” in pain without losing his own centeredness or ground of professional and personal self integrity.

The following story (*or his-story*)—may illustrate such an encountering relation between the existentialist practitioner and the client who are present to each other in the process of healing-revealing.

Adam B taught me the interrelatedness between existential and pathological anxiety of fate, against which he was searching for certitude and security, with unrealistic expectations of himself and others; who denied that life had purpose and who felt quite empty despite his many love-affairs and adventures.

The setting for this contact began by a telephone call Mr. B made to me after learning who I was from the receptionist. He had been adopted through the agency 20 years earlier, and wanted to know who his real parents were. I gave him an appointment and through clearance with the files learned that several years ago I had replied to a volunteer worker in another city where the boy lived, at a time when he was showing symptomatic behaviour difficulties. He had discovered some time before to his dismay that he had been adopted. He was then 14 or 15 years of age. Naturally I refused to reveal any information regarding his background and urged that he be referred to a child psychiatrist in his home town. I noted then in the record that “I must say that in reading this record, I am appalled at the mechanical way in which this boy was placed and the lack of apparent follow-up in helping the adoptive parents understand and anticipate the problems that might arise. By 1954 at the age of 14 or 15 this boy has been struggling for three years with the knowledge that he had been adopted and felt rejected by his adopted parents. While this might be part of his adolescent struggle for identity, it

certainly was aggravated by these fantasies regarding his background."

Adam, who asked me to call him by his first name, was prompt. He is a medium-sized, suave person, sharply and fastidiously dressed, with a cherubic oval face and narrow head. His nails were bitten to the quick; he smoked a great deal and though he very quickly warmed up to me, he was obviously a salesman.

He sized me up and I stunned him by saying that I had been waiting about seven years to see him. Expecting to be told that it was against the rules to be given background information (he had known this already), instead of showing him to the door as he later told me he expected, prepared to sell me a bill of goods and try to force an issue—instead, I accepted him. More so, it was as if the voice of fate was willing to turn back the clock of time to restore to him the original facts of his existence. In response, therefore, he gave up his facade of conning me.

Though he was accustomed to being a "Peck's bad boy," and relished the stories of his misadventures, he also told me of how he had discovered in his father's safe the fact of his adoption and was overwhelmed. He decided that life was aimless, meaningless, that the only thing to do was, in effect, to stick one's tongue out at it. That is why he had wanted for years to find out who his real parents were. The magic wand might set all straight. A few months ago he came from his home town to work in this city; he had debts to make good, having tried a nightclub operation which failed. All along he had wanted to find out who his real parents were. Then he'd "know."

A great deal of material came out in this so-called intake from Adam—how he had lost interest and quit high school, his many checkered experiences or "escapades." He felt his adoptive parents had betrayed and robbed him of his birthright. He had been told lies all along. The child psychiatrist had listened to him for two and one-half years and all Adam did was talk and get nowhere. His father ran a furniture store and he had very little opinion of his acumen. At 16 he went to Israel for a year and lived in a kibbutz, fooled around with women and got into public relations work. He came back to Canada and still things did not work out right. In an upstate New York town he met a wonderful girl, Lynn. Just when it looked like this would be the girl for him, he got

picked up for passing cheques. His parents had to bail him out: he got away sans a prison sentence. He went home, ran a nightclub for beatniks and teenagers and when that failed, and his family would not pay his debts, he came to Montreal. Here he was. He will do anything and try anything. He let me know that he was now involved at the age of 22 with Eve, a 38-year-old woman who has been separated and has two children, 14 and 10 years old, whom he liked, and who might even become his stepchildren. He was "thinking" seriously of getting married to this woman, if she secured the divorce she planned. His folks might not like this, nor his friends. It was a juicy dream—he'd have a home, children.

His references to his adoptive parents was as his "Ma" and "Pa," and I was unsure whether he was a psychopath, or a person literally seeking identity. Along the way he told me that five years after his adoption, his parents had a natural child, a girl now 15. Until her death two years ago, his grandmother was wonderfully warm and loving and he missed her. His cousins were close to him until their recent marriage. . . . I acknowledged my own confusion at his contrasting picture of sophistication and achievement, of a person who knew apparently what he wanted yet was dissatisfied, of a person who always seemed to be sticking his neck out, as if he wanted to hurt himself. His attachment to Eve and its perilous consequences made me wonder why. What was he looking for? His response was not that of a psychopath. His yearning was for love and understanding, but he feared calamity and kept finding it. He frustrated every real possibility to get a family. It was as if, as a child, what he had experienced had been wiped out when he discovered the secrets of his adoption. Regardless of the universality of boys wanting independence and rejecting their real parents who are human beings rather than heroes, he was searching for something which he could only express in wanting to know his real parents.

I told him that I felt he knew who he was, he was Adam B. But he did not want to be this kind of a person, and therefore I sensed his confusion regarding his expectations of life and his part in it. His response was as if I had simply picked up the thoughts in his own mind and put them into words for him. That was right, he did now know what was right for himself, what to expect. Yet against this was his attitude of never giving a damn for

anything except for Lynn whose lost love, he felt, would have restored and made him a human being. He lost it, or it was taken from him—never mind his cheque business. . . .

Our discussions considered the two parts of his self which conflict and deny each other, and still I had not gotten beyond an empathetic feeling with and about him until once, when he challenged and tested my interest in him, and my apparent difference from everyone he claimed he had met. (Even the child psychiatrist had never been willing to respond, to think aloud with him.)

When he then returned to his initial quest: "Who am I?" I asked him if he really wanted to know and he affirmed this with some show of fear. I suggested he go behind me to the cupboard and open the door, which he did. There on the door was a mirror, and all he saw was his own reflection.

In this episode, which became the turning point, Adam decided to be hostile and I accepted his right to be angry. He burst out, after playing with the clips on my desk and smoking incessantly, staring me up and down, "damn," he had known all along who he was, but this was not what was bothering him. What is it all about? . . . I said what he needed to discover was who he was, and was to be. I did not blame him. I know he was faced with questions that very few of us who had not been adopted could appreciate. I told him about his past, he had no parents prior to adoption, he was a foundling. His mother had not been married, it was an affair of the night, and the worker had suffered and struggled to get him out of the foundling hospital, was glad a couple had come to town, wanting to adopt. Perhaps in similar circumstances I would have done the same 20 years ago. I admitted that there was some cause for his feeling about the way his adoption had been handled. Our failure then as social workers was to forget to interpret the need to share with the child, to follow up and to be available for the uncertainty and dread which adoptive couples have. Nevertheless, I reaffirmed that adoption had given him a human bond, he belonged to a family and by the miracle of adopting him, his parents had become a father and mother and even conceived another child. . . .

Following this encounter, Adam had several crises one after the other with respect to Eve, who threatened to name him as a correspondent in her husband's divorce-action! He shifted to a 17-year-old girl whom he idealized

as his soul-mate, and then his solicitous attentiveness frightened her and her family. She, her father and he went through several periods of clarification as to what was right and what could and could not hold for them. He gave her up, and she wanted to spare him her pain. She needed help, and was offered it.

Along the way we have come to the core of his inner problem, namely, that being born a bastard is socially defined or imposed condition for we are all born the same way as human beings biologically. It is how we feel about ourselves as bastards which color and distort our view of life and our relationships. I have become someone who brings him back to the question of who he is to be, rather than what was. I believe he has learned to accept what he is, an adopted person. He has re-experienced in retrospect the values and benefits of adoption. He does not need to reject and deny the goodwill his family and relatives still have for him and he feels for them. Adam has moved beyond the dilemma of adoption. He is now trying to achieve in accordance with his capacities and to find a place within himself for himself, and therefore in the larger social group of which he is part. He has many problems, and the precipice is still there.

I hope that the synopsis of Adam B's story will indicate the practitioner's efforts to reveal as well as heal the problems Adam presented through the dual mode of encountering. In such a situation, the practitioner must be able to be part of, and yet above, agency structure and services. He is also concerned about the eligibility processes by which services are administered, and the procedures governing confidential material. The worker is aware of the limitations which surround and permeate every particular situation owing to the client's own perception of himself and his problem, and his perception and expectation of the agency and the worker. The worker's own ability and capacity to participate in the other's dilemma without loss of his own integrity are also involved in the relationship.

Moreover, the practitioner must be keen and sensitive to the life-design, or

intentionality of the client in terms of his energy or lack of energy in relation to a goal that has meaning and purpose for himself. Adam presented very evident patterns of retreat or withdrawal, pain and blocked or stalled energy. Would Adam reorganize his outlook on life, his own world-design by which his emptiness, insecurity and guilt could be resolved? When Adam can resolve this dilemma as he does, then he feels free enough to change his attitude about himself and others and becomes a responsible person.

Though Adam has been in touch with the agency on several occasions following his original major crisis, these visits have been in relation to temporary assistance to tide him and his family over until he could return to work. Adam has married a working-class girl, and with her father's help has purchased a taxi licence. Though he has continuing problems in managing his earnings in relation to his aspirations, he has no more doubts about his identity as a person, or who he is. His wife reports that he is a good husband and father to their two young children. Encountering Adam was to experience fully the anxieties of his assumed guilt for the nature of his birth, and his almost total condemnation of living, in relation to which he pursued

a self-destructive series of behaviours. In taking responsibility for his behaviour and the direction of his life, Adam converted his monologue of the victim into a dialogue by which he could own himself, his origins and future.

In presenting the potential of social work for encounter, I do not wish to suggest an apocalyptic image of man. What is offered in this view is the advocacy of the rights of each unique man to achieve self-actualization within a human community that cares. It requires a struggle, but one worthy of every social worker.

### Bibliography

Viktor Frankl. "The Concept of Man in Logotherapy," *Journal of Existential Psychiatry*, #21, Fall, 1935. *Man's Search for Meaning*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1962. "Dynamics, Existence and Values," *Journal of Existential Psychiatry*, #5, 1961. *The Doctor and the Soul*, N.Y.: Knopf, 1965.

Gordon Allport. *Personality and Social Encounters*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1960.

Max Siporin. "Private Practice of Social Work, Functional Roles and Social Control," *Social Work*, April 1961.

Solomon Spiro and David Weiss. "The Role of the Rabbi and Social Worker in Adoption and Conversation," *The Jewish Social Work Forum*, Yeshiva School of Social Work, Vol. 2, #1.

Paul Tillich. *The Courage to Be*, Yale Press, 1963.