Liberating the Bee in Social Work Education

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The author's encounter with a former student is presented along with a related classroom vignette about liberating a bee. The link between liberating the bee and transformational learning in social work education is discussed and demonstrated by narratives from the social work classroom.

I recently attended a statewide social work conference, where, once a year, I have an opportunity to visit with students whom I have taught and who are now working as professionals in the field. At the conference this spring, I was speaking with a student who had been in M.S.W. classes with me five years ago and who was now a social worker in child protection. I remember her as an unusually sensitive and kind person who was eager for knowledge that would help her work effectively with her clients. I recall that she wept in class over the suffering of a client and that she met individually with me several times to begin to filter her own life experiences through the practice theory we were learning in class. After a few moments of catching up with each other at the conference, she looked at me and said, with a big, warm smile of appreciation on her face, "What I remember most about your class is the bee." I felt uncertain and must have looked at her quizzically and she said, "You know, when you liberated the bee."

Then I remembered. One warm fall day a bee had flown into the classroom. Several of the students began to chase the bee to kill it. I was sitting in a circle with the students and I asked them to wait to see if I could just take it outside and set it free. Just then the bee landed on the floor right by my water bottle and feet. I put my hand down and the bee crawled right into my hands. I cupped my hands together and got up and walked outside with the bee crawling on my hands and placed it in the grass. When I walked back into the classroom, the students were smiling for reasons that I suspect ranged from thinking that I was crazy, to a kind of bemused appreciation of their strange professor. As I sat down at my place in our class circle, a male student said, "The course is over then, you just taught us all we need to know." We laughed a bit and settled down to finish the class.

I initially felt taken aback when my former student told me that the bee incident was what she remembered most from my classes. She had been in my classes for two semesters. In that time we had studied social construction and phenomenology as foundations for a multicultural practice as well as engagement, assessment, and practice with individuals and families at the advanced level. The discrepancy between my perception of weeks and weeks spent together working with complex material and her shining memory of a moment spent liberating a bee was worth exploring.

In the months that followed, I continued to teach with the awareness of the salience for this student of the bee incident. I began to contemplate the ways in which liberating the bee is a metaphor for teaching. What I believe now is that, for this student, the liberation of the bee was an image that condensed and symbolized aspects of learning that the class and I shared during the two semesters that we were together. In this paper, using examples from the classroom, I will explore
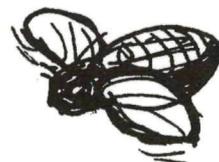
learning as liberation in social work education.

Transformational Learning

I think it will be helpful to ground my discussion of liberating the bee in the social work classroom in a brief discussion on the literature on transformational learning in the field of adult education. In writing about the humanistic approach to education, Carl Rogers (1969) described two types of learning: one is primarily cognitive, and the other experiential. Rogers thought that the role of the teacher was to facilitate experiential learning and thereby encourage personal change and growth in the student. More recently, Jack Mezirow (as cited in Imel, 1998) has expanded upon Rogers' theory of learning and describes transformational learning as a process by which learners change their "meaning schemes (specific beliefs, attitudes, and emotional reactions)." Mezirow (1991) emphasizes the role that critical reflection plays in liberating learners from their assumptive constraints so that they can create new, more expansive understandings.

Robert Boyd (1989; 1991) has offered a critical response to the emphasis on rationality in Mezirow's work in which he suggests the role that intuition, creativity, and emotional awareness play in transformational or emancipatory learning. From Boyd's perspective, transformational learning challenges the student to move beyond a primarily ego/cognitive engagement with class material into the realm of the heart or soul. Boyd suggests that the process of transformational learning is psychosocial in nature and requires the learner to recognize the authenticity of alternative perspectives. Students are then to engage in a process of modifying and even relinquishing old perceptions and old constructions of reality that are no longer useful while moving to construct more integrative ones. With this background, I would like to move on to narratives of learning as liberation in the social

work classroom.

Liberating the Process in Social Work Education: Beginnings

The first opportunity for liberation in the classroom group presents itself the moment the students and I settle into the classroom the first day of the new semester. I begin immediately to sense the tone of the group. Are they excited, bored, resentful, open, closed—a bit of each? Each group of students has a distinct feel. Then I get in touch consciously with my own reaction to what I am experiencing in their presence. In the first class of the semester, I find that intense feelings of appreciation for the students arise in me and I speak to them of my respect for their choice of social work as a profession. I have done this with students at all levels, from B.S.W. to a new doctoral level class. I may sense that several members of the class are resentful for having been, for example, required by their employer to proceed with a graduate-level education after years of working in the field. In that event, I express my gratitude to them for working in a profession whose very existence is a reflection of the forces in the collective that have the courage to turn toward rather than away from people who are suffering. That they, as students of social work, have chosen to be a force of caring and healing in this world continues to move and astound me. Sometimes, when I share this with the students while looking at each one of their faces, tears well up in my eyes. I ask them to work with me to create a classroom that becomes a holding environment – an environment of safety that will support the difficult work of filtering what we study and learn through our own diverse life experiences so as to increase our open-heartedness towards self and others. I let them know that I hope that learning for them and for me in this class becomes personal rather than impersonal and conscious rather than dissociated, as is so much school learning.

In my first years as a professor, I was embarrassed and reticent about being so open with the students about how warmly I felt toward them. However, my reticence vanished as, in class after class, I continued to experience the profound nature of each student's commitment to being a force of healing in this world, and as I received feedback from students that their natural instincts were supported by my emotional openness. I am also clearly offering the social work students a parallel between my feelings of welcoming and honoring them and their approach toward the new clients they will soon meet in their field placements. The core characteristic of this offering is the genuine versus the prescribed surfacing of feelings of respect and acceptance. Rather than modeling a predetermined set of behaviors, the students sense my attitude toward them in my tone of voice, body language, pace, and silences.

Respect, acceptance, and empathy become the ground that, I believe, transforms course reading material, case material, class discussions, and assignments into an experience of learning as liberation. When the material of education is approached within a container of empathy and respect, the learning experience benefits from the cognitive/emotional/cellular integration that characterizes embodied learning. "Transformation" and "liberation" describe the effects of a classroom process that involves a widening of contexts in which to experience and interpret self. One effect of such self-expansion is the experience of empathy—a softening of the heart through which to engage and embrace oneself and the world beyond self—a palpable quickening of our inborn resonance to the world (Macy & Brown, 1988).

Recently, a student challenged me in a way that resulted in a mutual empathic softening and expansion that affected the entire class. In the first class session of a course, after welcoming the class, I began to speak about the political nature of social work practice with reference to the short-term treatment timelines dictated by for-profit managed-care companies. A male American Indian student raised his hand and in a very hostile and defiant voice said, "Define political." I was somewhat shaken by the angry tone of his voice but commended him for wanting clarity on meanings. I stated that, on one level of analysis, I used the term "political" to refer to power, but then suggested that we talk about what the word means. He began talking about welfare and how he thought it made people dependent and lazy, thus decreasing their sense of power. Other students began to disagree vehemently with him. As the course proceeded, this man often made statements that were delivered in a hostile tone and seemed to have little relevance to the topic under discussion. I could see the other students raising their eyebrows and shifting in their chairs, and I sensed the beginning of a process of rendering him a scapegoat. In my analysis of the situation, I believed that the class was too newly formed and the student too vulnerable for me to undertake an in-class discussion of the group dynamics. Acting on my intuitive response to the class dynamics, each time that this student spoke out, I made a conscious effort to slow down, track his comment, and explore with him its relevance to the current class topic. He and I often traveled a winding road to connect his ideas to the current topic. However, we usually succeeded in doing so, often with great benefit to the level of class discourse as he was obviously well-read in disciplines such as political science and sociology. At times, though, I could see that the class was impatient with my reaching so hard to include his ideas into our discussions.

The first assigned paper in this class was on engagement with clients. The students were asked to demonstrate a working knowledge of the core conditions of relationship, e.g., respect, empathy, genuineness, and congruence. This man turned in a paper that was, to me, alarmingly judgmental of his client who was a 20-year-old woman whose baby had been removed from her due to neglect. The student's apparent lack of empathy for his client worried me, so I asked that he meet with me so that we could go over the paper. He came into my office three times, and we went over each contact that he had with his client with the goal of developing an empathic feel for his client. I asked him to rewrite the paper with the purpose of developing and expressing empathy for his client. He did quite a good job on his rewritten paper, and, with the first glimmer of interpersonal warmth that I had observed, he spontaneously reached out to shake my hand and thanked me for taking time to work individually with him.

Over time, the student began to speak more in class, and eventually I felt that I did not have to reach so far to connect his comments with the classroom topics. In the second semester of class, he chose to present on the "humanist/experiential" models of practice and did a superb and quite critical presentation covering the history of this approach, its major principles, and their translation into practice. Over the months that I tried to bring this man into the flow of the class, he and I engaged in a process of expansion and inclusion that was more complex but ultimately more integrative for the entire class than if we had succumbed to judgment and exclusion and the temptation to squash him. The inclusion/exclusion dance was particularly charged when considered in the light of the societal marginalization of American Indians. In retrospect—like the unchoreographed experience of liberating the bee—a fundamental teaching of the first semester for the students and me resulted from this student's challenge to us to create room for him until he was able to relax into the flow of the class.

Diversity

Diversity textbooks often focus on multiculturalism as content rather than process. M. Knowles (1984), an expert in adult education, articulates a theory of andragogy in which she suggests that adult learners benefit from a shift in the educational emphasis from content to process. In my teaching experience, paradigmatic epiphanies occur in the classroom when the content of cultural diversity gets spontaneously transformed into an in vivo experience of the process of diversity. During such an experience, the students are propelled beyond ego/cognitive engagement with the class material into the mythopoetic realm where their imaginations and hearts come alive. Lesson plans and didactic material can actually inhibit such paradigmatic epiphany by filling up the empty spaces of uncertainty and not knowing from which it emerges.

At the university in which I teach we are blessed with a multicultural student body that usually includes members of several American Indian tribes. The Indian students continue to raise my consciousness both about the cosmological (worldview) biases inherent in social work literature and practice and about the radical curricular alterations required to transform the often lifeless pedagogy of diversity into a personal, experientially based transformation of self. The student who recalled the liberation of the bee was in a class composed of about ten people self-identified as Hispanics, about eight people of non-Hispanic western European ancestry, three traditional Navajos from the reservation, and one traditional Apache. Our multicultural treatment textbook that year had chapters on the characteristics of numerous ethnic groups. The class had discussed methods of cultural genocide used on the American Indian tribes

and current reverberations of such genocide in the incidence of alcoholism and family stress on reservations. We had also discussed the fact that, in our class, we had cultural descendants, if not actual genetic descendants, of people who had tormented and killed the original inhabitants of North America as well as the descendants of the people who first experienced the oppression.

One of the American Indian members of the class stated that she felt that the Spanish were as culpable as the Anglos for the Indian genocide. An Anglo (non-Spanish western European background) man spoke up and expressed that he was sick and tired of being blamed. An Hispanic man said that he thought that the Anglos were far more responsible for Indian torture than the Hispanics and that Anglos have since oppressed Hispanics. In almost every discussion such as this, students who feel that they are being portrayed as perpetrators of violence become defensive and begin to express their resentment either verbally or through emotional withdrawal. I believe, and often remark in class, that this defensiveness reflects our individual and collective terror of feeling emotions stimulated by grief and guilt. In this particular class session, I remained silent after the discussion of blame. Then a middle-aged American Indian woman, Mae, who was usually very silent in class, asked to tell her story.

Mae described being taken from her family one day when she was five years old and being placed in a boarding school run by the federal government. She remembered her mother standing at the door crying, not being able to understand the English language explanation of why her little girl was being taken to a school that was inaccessible to her parents. Mae believed that she would never see her mother again. She described having her long hair cut off and being forbidden to speak her native language with the other children. She told of her stomach aching with homesickness so that she couldn't eat and thought she was going to die. She cried and cried at night for her mother. She worried about her mother and how much her mother missed her. She reported that nothing was ever the same—of the lifelong effects of having to harden her child-soft heart in order to survive. Her survival brought with it the reality of biculturalism that then prevented a seamless return to her origins. She reported that she never again felt a oneness with her Indian-ness or with the world of her parents. Her homecoming into the arms of her mother and the communal ethos of the reservation were from that moment tainted with her identification with the other, the oppressor. She had internalized the "badness" of her language, the "inferiority" of her culture. Mae was weeping and could not continue to speak.

Many of the students began to weep, as did I. After a silence, an Anglo student spoke of imagining Mae as a five year old as she was talking and that the pain of that was almost too much. Other students expressed what it would have felt like to them to be wrenched from their mother, father, and culture at five years of age with no understanding or expectation of reunion. Several of the female students pulled their chairs near Mae to offer comfort. The prior class focus on constricting our engagement to the cognitive dimension addressed by the textbook and on defending ourselves from feeling the devastating effects of our national policies toward Indian tribes was transformed into a direct experience of sorrow, empathy, and humility. We now understood that the quiet beauty and strength of this woman, with whom we had been in class every week, incorporated such loss and sorrow. When the

class was over, Mae continued to weep, as did several of the other students. No one left the classroom. I thanked Mae for sharing her story. I stated that it took courage for the students to move from their defensive position in relation to oppression to softening in light of the sorrow of it.

Writing about educational process, Chris Bache (2001) describes transformational learning as being characterized by:

> *. . . precious moments of self-illumination, those rare times when students do not want to leave the room at the end of the class session, preferring to linger in the afterglow of some breakthrough.... An experience of transformational learning leaves the students feeling more real, more fully alive to life's possibilities. " (p.3)*

Writing specifically about learning and knowledge constriction in social work, R. Imre (1994) writes:

> *In social work as we find our way past that chunk of ice, the ubiquitous knowledge base concept in our driveway that has a tendency to freeze our brains as well as block our progress, the way is opened for new insights leading to new directions. (pp. 3-4)*

An advanced social work practice class that I was teaching had an experience of knowledge base thawing that involved an Apache M.S.W. student who was presenting a case of a Navajo high school student with whom he was working. His client, a 16 year-old boy, had recently developed symptoms that included deteriorated school functioning, feelings of depersonalization, intermittent hallucinations, anxiety-producing dreams, social isolation, and deteriorated hygiene. The

psychiatrist had diagnosed his client as having schizophreniform disorder and had recommended antidepressant and antipsychotic medications. The social work student felt concerned by the treatment recommendations and, with the permission of the adolescent's school, contacted a traditional medicine man from the client's tribe. A time was set up for the medicine man to visit with the boy and to do ceremonies that involved a sweat lodge. After his visit, the medicine man reported to my social work student that, from his perspective, the adolescent boy's symptoms were characteristic of those of an incipient traditional healer.

Some members of the social work class expressed their disbelief of the medicine man's belief system. They expressed their belief that schizophrenia is a genetic disorder and that its victims should be medicated and that not doing so was an ethical violation. A Navajo student described that what Western society conceives of as schizophrenia can be, in her tribe's cosmology, the result of a person disturbing a specific animal habitat. The Apache student then spoke of his grandfather's life as a healer, which included doing ceremonies for all kinds of problems that in non-Indian cultures are treated with talk therapy and/or medications. Another Navajo student spoke of how her family had ceased treating her mother's diabetes with insulin in favor of treating it with ceremony. We were challenged to face a juxtaposition of belief systems such that the high school boy could be envisioned as being on the threshold of an initiation into the metaphysical mysteries of healing or on the threshold of mental illness. I remarked that making personal and interpersonal room for contrasting cosmologies is the mind-altering challenge of diversity. Experiences that soften the rigidity of paradigmatic certainty usually have an unbalancing and thus liberating effect in the classroom.

Liberating the Content in Social Work Education: Multidisciplinary Literature

Social work happens across cultural edges, whether those edges be ethnic, class, age, sexual preference, or gender (Rose, 1990). A primary challenge of teaching for me is to find reading material that addresses cultural edges from an open-hearted and compassionate stance.

I have often assigned a chapter from a book entitled "God is Red" by Vine Deloria, Jr. (1994). In this chapter, Deloria addresses time and space in American Indian cosmology and spirituality. He writes:

> *The question that the so-called world religions have not satisfactorily resolved is whether or not religious experience can be distilled from its original cultural context and become an abstract principle that is applicable to all peoples in different places and at different times. Context is therefore all-important for both practice and the understanding of reality. The places where revelations were experienced were remembered and set aside as locations where, through rituals and ceremonials, the people could once again communicate with the spirits. Thousands of years of occupancy on their lands taught tribal peoples the sacred landscapes for which they were responsible and gradually the structure of ceremonial reality became clear. It was not what people believed to be true that was important but what they experienced as true. (p. 67)*

One class in which I assigned this reading was composed of 23 people, ten of whom were self-identified as Hispanic, eight as Anglo, four from various Navajo tribes, and one Apache. During the class discussion, many of the Anglo and Hispanic students stated that this article was difficult and incomprehensible to them. The Apache student began to explain that this article was meaningful to her. Then a Navajo student stated that much of the assigned reading in the class made little sense to her but that this one article addressed her experience. The other Indian students agreed. The Anglo and Hispanic students asked the Indian students if they would explain it to them, which the Indian students did. A few of the Indian students, who rarely spoke in the class, articulated beautifully the meaning of the article to their lives—especially in terms of the ways in which the nature and meaning of time and place in their worldview contrasts with that of western philosophy.

This recognition of difference was enlightening. No longer would the non-Indians amongst us who were in the numerical majority be able to assume that our belief systems were fundamentally similar to those of American Indians we might work with on the reservation or in the large cities. The experience offered all of us a chance to be liberated from potentially oppressive assumptions about "reality" and "truth." That the Indian students had to reach as far to engage with all of the other readings in the class as the non-Indian students did for the reading by Deloria (1994) has revolutionary implications for what a multicultural curriculum in social work actually entails. For example, could it mean that the advanced practice classes might include transpersonal theory and Sweat Lodge intervention and/or drumming ceremonies on an equal footing with cognitive theory and intervention? And, if that were possible, is it appropriate from the Indian perspective to share these healing rituals with outsiders? The goal would be to liberate the "multicultural" curriculum from its focus on an examination of the static content of culture to include multicultural experiences that challenge

us to recognize the relative nature of our ethnocentric assumptions about truth and reality. In such learning, what was assumed to be universal becomes just one cultural figure in a much altered and expanded ground.

Social Work Literature

After grounding a course in multidisciplinary material, I move to more traditional social work content that I choose, in part, on the basis of whether it challenges the students to engage in transformational learning.

In addition to textbook readings, I assign journal articles that give examples of relationship building from the field. One such article by Jeree Pawl (1995) presents a case in which the author worked as an infant/parent therapist over five years. In the article, the author proposes that babies who have received reasonable care develop a sense of being held in their caregivers' minds. Pawl (1995) writes, "When a child is held in mind, the child feels it, and knows it. There is a sense of safety, of containment, and most important, existence in that other" (p.5). The experience of being held in another's mind results in an existential sense of being personally intact and interpersonally connected. This existential sense of intactness and connectedness permeates a person's entire life course. Pawl describes how she had once remarked to a client that she had been thinking in between sessions about something the client had told her. The client was startled and then visibly moved that Pawl would have remembered between sessions that she even existed. Pawl makes the point that the opportunity to experience and provide the experience to another of existing in someone's mind presents itself throughout our lives, although if not experienced in infancy and childhood, reparation becomes more difficult. Pawl (1995) writes, "But this only develops if you truly are consistently in the mind of someone, so that you are noticed, spoken to over a

distance, rescued, protected, appreciated, and tethered across space and out of mutual sight" (p. 5).

In class after class, students express how deeply this article affects them and continue to bring up the central notion of "being held in another's mind" throughout the entire academic year. One student, who was also an art therapist, reported in class that she was working with a client who was basically mute. The client appeared for her weekly sessions, but felt too depressed to express herself through artwork and was unable to speak for complex reasons involving fear of not being understood and existential shame. The social work student reported that she was feeling frustrated and did not know if she could continue to meet with this client. Then she thought of Pawl's idea of emotional holding and began to breathe softly in tempo with the client. The student began to relax immediately and over a period of about a month, the client began to express her appreciation of the student's willingness to just "be" and to not make demands on her. Eventually, the client began to draw and talk with the student's ability to just be with her and not make demands.

Self-psychology (Elson, 1986) is an advanced practice theory for social work that draws upon the core conditions. Self-psychology integrates a theory of human development with a depth approach to social work practice. From a self-psychological perspective, optimal infant and child development occurs in an empathic environment in which the child experiences merger with caregivers who anticipate and tend to his/her needs and in which the child receives reliable and realistic affirmation of his/her worthiness. In such an environment, the child develops a sense of being seen and valued and develops into an empathic adult who is able to develop and express his/her talents in the world and find satisfaction in relationships. In every advanced practice
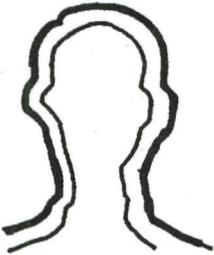
class that I have taught, the students are hungry for a practice approach that integrates a theory of human development. The phenomenological quality of self-psychology excites students in that it seems to explain what they already have experienced in their own lives and with their clients in the field. The students are relieved by what they feel is its basis in the commonsense idea that if you do not receive adequate nurturing in infancy or childhood, those needs will persist into adulthood and, quite likely, complicate life. This theory presents specific tools that social workers can use to help adult clients understand what they have lost and how to begin to come to terms with what they can never retrieve. Self-psychology offers a rationale for helping clients move through a grieving process within the containment of a corrective relationship so as to become free from the grip of the past.

Self-psychology challenges the students to move their practice beyond engagement and relationship building to help the client develop a level of self-understanding and self-acceptance that will encourage emotional growth and even spiritual development. In one advanced practice class, an Hispanic student gave a presentation on the parallels between the traditional healing practices of Curanderismo and the self-psychological notions of restoration of the traumatized self and the importance of grieving. Several students have noted the similarity between the notion of "soul loss" or "susto" familiar to Curanderos and self-psychological notions about the empty self that result from trauma and narcissistic injury. A Lakota student wrote a paper on the similarities between the developmental perspective of self psychology and the Lakota Medicine Wheel perspective on life-span development. These integrative efforts support the notion that theories that have a phenomenological grounding often have pan-cultural relevance.

Conclusion

The class material that I have discussed is chosen to provide a foundation for a type of learning that is personal and thus has transformational potential. Just as the liberation of the bee that fall day in the classroom became a salient memory for my student, liberated learning is encouraged when students are challenged by classroom process and content to develop clarity of mind and a softness of heart in a learning environment that is both empathic and reflective. I would like to end with a quotation that I often hand out to my students. It is from a book by Chogyam Trungpa (1984) on the human condition and human potential from the perspective of a wisdom tradition of ancient Tibet. He writes:

When you awaken your heart in this way, you find, to your surprise, that your heart is empty. You find that you are looking into outer space. What are you, who are you, where is your heart? If you really look, you won't find anything tangible and solid. Of course, you might find something very solid if you have a grudge against someone or you have fallen possessively in love. But that is not awakened heart. If you search for awakened heart, if you put your hand through your ribcage and feel for it, there is nothing there except tenderness. You feel sore and soft, and if you open your eyes to the rest of the world, you feel tremendous sadness. This kind of sadness does not come from being mistreated. You don't feel sad because someone has insulted you or because you feel impoverished. Rather, this experience of sadness is unconditioned. It occurs because your heart is completely exposed. There is no skin or tissue covering

*it. It is pure raw meat. Even if a
tiny mosquito lands on it, you feel
so touched. Your experience is raw
and tender and so personal. ... You
are willing to share your heart with
others. (pp. 45-46)*

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