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DON'T WORRY, SHE'LL SAY IT: A TRIBUTE TO FLORENCE LIEBERMAN

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ABSTRACT: This paper presents a tribute to Florence Lieberman, a significant leader in the field of Clinical Social Work, who has been and continues to be highly productive and vastly influential. Throughout her career Florence has published books and articles that result from her intense and accurate concerns about social work practice, and particularly about practice with children. Florence's academic career includes 20 years at Hunter College School of Social Work in New York. As an influential member of the Hunter faculty, she has played an important role in shaping the impact of social work philosophy on psychotherapy practice. Starting with her Charter membership in the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), she has been influential in the development of the Federation of Societies for Clinical Social Work (Federation), the National Academy of Practice (NAP), and the International Committee on the Advancement of Private Practice (ICAPP). Leadership, empowerment, and adherence to Social Work's mission are themes that Florence Lieberman has enacted throughout her stellar career. The author discusses his experience with her, which illustrate these essential characteristics.

KEY WORDS: clinical social work; education; empowerment; leadership; mission; organizations; professional development; transference.

During the past 40-plus years Florence Lieberman and the professional specialty of Clinical Social Work, have been on a rocky, adventurous, roller-coaster ride that is far from over. During this period: Psychiatric Social Work became Clinical Social Work; psycho-

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dynamic theory dominated practice, then faded into relative obscurity; clinical social workers gained parity with psychiatrists and psychologists, then managed care came along and leveled all three fiefdoms; professional practice philosophy shifted emphases from medical, to cognitive/behaviorist, to ecological, to feminist, to culturally sensitive, to fragmented, to diverse; nurses and counselors grabbed pieces of the traditional social work mission; social work education became increasingly organized around generalist, bachelor-level practice—and the endless war between the policy makers and administrators and the direct service practitioners, driven respectively by their Settlement House and Charity Organization Society historical roots, became less rancorous and more diffuse.

What provides for a necessary sense of continuity and purpose—for the profession, the specialty of Clinical Social Work, and for those of us who practice—amidst all this noise and disorganization? I can identify three related subjective and culturally shared realities that serve this purpose. They are *mission*; *empowerment*; and *leadership*. First and foremost, I believe that, Social Work's traditional and enduring *mission* serves this function. Specht and Courtney, in their disturbing and important book *Unfaithful Angels* (1994) suggest that our mission is "... to help poor people, to improve community life, and to solve difficult social problems." While our adherence to this mission often wanes, I believe that the profession is at its best when our attention returns to it. Clinical social work, in particular, has been criticized as being "unfaithful" to the mission in its scramble for status and standing among health care providers and its abandonment of poor and oppressed populations. While I think we must recognize that these complaints have some degree of credibility, we must also note that clinical social workers have, in most instances, remained "in the trenches" and have continued to help poor people, improve community life, and solve difficult social problems.

Also, continuity and purpose are facilitated by a consistent *empowerment* theme that has organized our practice philosophy throughout the profession's history. Initially coined by Paulo Friere in his influential educational essay, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, the concept is rooted in social work's earliest formulations. Freire's work, first published in 1970, was a theory of education developed originally in Brazil to attend to education of poor illiterate people of Latin America and the Third World. A basic principle of this theory is that the student must be *engaged* and must interact with the teacher in a meaningful way for learning to occur. In the social work field, empowerment roots can be traced to social investigation. Evidence for this appears long before Friere, and then feminist theorists, made the term fashionable. Mary

Richmond, who developed social investigation as the first scientific practice approach stated, "Individuals have wills and purposes of their own and are not fitted to play a passive part in the world; they deteriorate when they do" (Simon, 1994).

Finally, a *leadership* which models and demonstrates empowerment and adherence to our mission is the necessary relational enactment that causes us to experience some degree of stability and purpose. There have been few leaders in our field who have the capacity to facilitate professional and personal progress, while maintaining some foundational predictability and stability.

Florence Lieberman is one of those rare birds who in her everyday life demonstrates these three necessary attributes—adherence to our mission, empowerment, and leadership. Many descriptors applicable to true leaders of clinical social work also apply to Florence. She exudes credibility, clarity, intelligence, and a boldly purposive communication style that allows no confusion about her point of view. Her brilliant and expansive mind observes and critically analyzes the profession's strengths, weaknesses, and relevance. She speaks a language that is comprehensible to professionals and lay-persons at all levels as evident in her teaching, writing, presenting, and participation in more informal discussions. She has a striking ability to articulate, explain, illustrate, and educate, and an uncanny sense of timing. Her charismatic style demands attention, thoughtful listening, and respect. She expresses an enduring and unwavering commitment to the profession's survival, growth, and progress.

However, I believe it is her "truth telling" that sets her apart. My title for this tribute, "Don't Worry, She'll Say It," suggests this characteristic. It is a most enduring and reliable quality, always evident in my relationship with Florence over the years. I believe it is a central agenda in her relationships with colleagues, with friends, and with the profession in general. Florence starts most conversations with phrases like: "I couldn't sleep last night thinking about..." or "I have to disagree with you on that particular point..." or "We need to talk about..." or "The problem with that is..." or "What I'd like to know is..." If you are present at any conference that Florence attends, be prepared for her to provide a thoughtful and challenging invitation to discussion—whether she is a presenter, a panelist, or a member of the audience. Her participation inevitably brings an intense focus to the discussion. She can be relied on to say what needs to be said.

My experience with Florence has been individualized, idiosyncratic, and not comprehensive enough to describe her vast experience, influence, and contributions fairly. I determined soon after meeting her that she was a primary mentor, and this recognition has somewhat

organized and limited my experience with and knowledge of Florence. I was most fortunate to meet Florence early in my professional development. In 1972 I was recently graduated from the University of Chicago's School of Social Service Administration and was anxious to get connected with reference groups that would confirm and embrace my intensely felt and yet very tenuously established professional identity as a Clinical Social Worker—itself a newly coined and poorly defined professional social work handle.

I had heard that the Education Committee of the new and controversial Clinical Society Federation was meeting in Chicago in a hotel near O'Hare Airport, so I showed up uninvited. Interrupting the meeting, I announced that I was a new member of the local Clinical Society and was "interested in education." Florence, who was chairing the committee meeting, welcomed me, showed me to a seat at the table—then finished the sentence my entrance had interrupted. This was the beginning of a most important friendship and mentorship that continues today after 33 years of professional and personal development.

I came to understand this relationship as to some degree a re-enactment of an important developmental relationship I had with my grandmother growing up. Grandmother took me on as her project in my family, because she learned from Dr. Spock that middle children get left out. She made sure I felt confident and somehow special. I am sure my response to Florence's attention and interest in some ways reflected and reactivated that foundation and provided some additional grounding and traction as I struggled to define myself professionally. When I soon discovered that Florence had other ardent followers, I learned to tolerate sharing and was able to maintain a fantasy that I was after all somehow special.

She took an interest in my practice, my doctoral studies, my teaching, my wife Ellen, my children Dan and Rachel, and my garden. Today, after more than 15 years, I maintain an out-of-control perennial garden that Florence started on one of her early visits. On each visit she engaged our children, from their earliest months until both were teenagers, in lively and seriously playful discussions; and she did not hesitate to use her experiences with them as classroom "case examples." She encouraged my professional growth in both obvious and subtle ways. One day, out of the blue, she suggested I serve as Associate Editor on her *Child & Adolescent Social Work Journal*, indicating that it would not immediately involve a large time commitment, but "will be a lot of work when I retire and you become the Editor." Truth-telling, empowerment, adherence to our professional mission, and leadership were all apparent in this highly personalized interchange.

Florence's presentation in Chicago at the Children's Home and Aid Society of Illinois 100th Anniversary Celebration provides another illustration of her truth-telling. This large child welfare agency invited Florence to be the celebration's keynote speaker, because they knew of her professional interest in children. What they did not know was that she would use the event as an opportunity to bring their attention to some enduring problems in the child welfare field as yet not resolved. With some assistance from senior staff, she was able to find and retrieve the organization's first case record of work with a child. The case recording, almost 100 years-old, demonstrated a social worker's successful and effective engagement with a child and some real and currently relevant problems in work with the parents. The issues were discussed openly and directly. The celebration event became a highly effective consultation with the agency's leadership. The professional and administrative audience became deeply engaged in the discussion and used her presentation as a reference for some important programmatic changes in service delivery.

Florence Lieberman has been and continues to be highly productive and vastly influential. Her professional career, as she recalls it, was grounded in her early practice experience at the nationally recognized Jewish Board of Guardians in New York (now the Jewish Board of Family and Children's Services). Her admired mentors include Mary Gottesfeld, Phyllis Caroff, and Yonatta Feldman. Throughout her career Florence has published books and articles that result from her intense and accurate concerns about social work practice and particularly about practice with children. Some of her published article titles suggest her truth-telling agenda, e.g. "The Repulsive Client, The Pathological Therapist," and "The Witches: Mothers in Psychotherapy." Each attends directly to important and problematic experiences therapists have, which can profoundly impact practice process. Her books, similarly, address important practice concerns. The titles include *Social Work with Children, Clinical Social Workers as Psychotherapists, Before Addiction: How to Help Youth* (with Phyllis Caroff and Mary Gottesfeld), *Strategies in innovative Human Services Programs* (with Harry Gottesfeld and Sol Gordon), and more recently *Aging in Good Health: A Quality Lifestyle for the Later Years* (with Morris Collen).

Florence's academic career includes 20 years at Hunter College School of Social Work in New York. As an influential member of the Hunter faculty, she has played an important role in shaping the impact of social work philosophy on psychotherapy practice. She has consistently utilized agency, academic, and conference forums to bring clarity to a wide range of practice and practice-related issues,

including: child abuse in families, adolescent sexuality, drug abuse, and poverty. No important problem or issue related to practice with children and their families has gone unnoticed.

Throughout her career she has kept returning in her work to a particular, underlying theme: "Practitioner, pay attention to your clients and to yourself." No educator or author has given more attention to the constant necessity for the social work practitioner to manage what has been traditionally understood as "transference phenomena." This astute focus has facilitated her very effective capacity to discuss practitioner experiences that are not "politically correct." Her writings and presentations have persistently entered uncharted territory, such as hatred and disgust felt toward clients, sexual content in communication with clients, and hostility and anger. We have all directly or indirectly benefited by Florence's fearless invasions into these professionally frightening arenas. Her exposure of these experiences as ordinary has greatly facilitated our ability to tackle them ourselves.

Meanwhile, Florence has not been idle in the area of national professional organizational development. Starting with her Charter membership in the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), she has been influential in the development of the Federation of Societies for Clinical Social Work (Federation), the National Academy of Practice (NAP), and the International Committee on the Advancement of Private Practice (ICAPP). We all recognize the cultural need for organizational membership and connections that fit with, support, reinforce, and shape our professional identities. However, the clinical social work practice specialization initially had no such organization. Florence has been instrumental in creating the organizations that we now take for granted, belong to, and/or criticize. The Federation has served an essential role in our achievement of parity and stability as a professional group and has significantly influenced practice and educational standards. The NAP gives national recognition to social work as a participant in health care services and to senior clinicians who have significantly contributed to the field. It provides a forum for collaboration among health care practitioners and ensures that clinical social work is at the table to address health care issues. Florence has been instrumental in moving these organizations from ideas to operational realities.

Perhaps the title of this tribute should be "Don't Worry, She'll Do it." Besides being a truth-teller, Florence is a doer. She is empowered and empowers others in her realm of influence. Her important organizational, academic, and professional achievements demonstrate the effects of her actions, but they do not themselves demonstrate the actions that have produced them. I believe her uncanny effectiveness

is, in part, in her ability to engage those of us who share her concerns in a process of taking ownership and experiencing excitement about the issues we are grappling with. Her effectiveness is also, in part, in her consistent modeling of the possibility of solving complex, seemingly unsolvable problems and in a selfless attitude about her work. A long-time colleague, Gerald Schamess, said about Florence, "She's remarkably uninterested in advertising herself."

Examples of her action orientation abound, but certainly include her decision to write *Social Work with Children*. She recognized a significant deficit in the literature that beginning practitioners need to help them learn how to practice and developed a text that would fill the gap. This book has served for many years as a primary reference for students and beginning practitioners who plan to provide direct service to children. Similarly, she created the *Child & Adolescent Social Work Journal* to provide a forum for a wide range of knowledge contributions that would be useful to social work practitioners working with children, adolescents, and their families. It continues today as a widely utilized reference and incorporates practice, theory, research, and program description and evaluation reports that are submitted and read by an international audience.

Florence's stamp on the International Committee on the Advancement of Private Practice (ICAPP) is in some ways the most telling example of her influence. Though its development and maintenance are the result of the hard and creative work of several visionary people, the organization has Florence's fingerprints all over it. Its bi-annual conference utilizes a highly sophisticated structure and style, ensuring that participants will engage in challenging discussions rather than the numbing presentations one finds at many professional meetings. Participants are guaranteed the kind of engagement that produces learning and integration at the highest level. Participants are listened to, heard, challenged, and forced to expand their thinking. All this sounds much like an evening with Florence any day of the week.

Others who know Florence would likely construct a somewhat, or entirely, different story about their relationship with her. I am sure that if her husband, Larry, were here, he could provide a wealth of knowledge about Florence that supports and contradicts my story and that reveals many unforeseen complexities and nuances. My brief contact with him many years ago suggests that he was patient and admiring. Daughter Joanie, and son Paul, could also shed light on our honoree. I, however, am content with my story, as it describes a most unique professional and personal icon. I hope I have demonstrated that Florence has brought a degree of stability and sanity to me, and to the diverse and somewhat chaotic practice

field of clinical social work. Her adventurous leadership continues to provide many of us who travel in her wake a measure of clarity. For that we are most grateful.

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