

The Equilibrium of the Social Worker

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3. *The Advancement of Maturity**

Equilibrium means maturity, a harmony and balance of tensions that comes from intellectual, emotional, social and spiritual maturity. Clearly the first essential is professional competence, the possession of those varied techniques and skills which can give a sense of adequacy. The social worker is often in a certain sense a lay spiritual adviser whose role, at its own level, is comparable to that of the confessor and spiritual director. For that reason a deepening knowledge of techniques and skills must be accompanied by a corresponding desire to appreciate the importance of moral and supernatural means. In this connection we may adapt the words of the famous physician and say that the social worker tends the wounds of the psyche but it is God who heals them. One can never leave out of account the working of God's grace, and must remind oneself again and again that one's role is secondary and subordinate. To do otherwise is to fall into the heresy of good works.

Intellectual maturity also implies a true humility. By this I mean a serene acceptance of one's limitations with the corollary that one is not ashamed through vanity or human respect to seek from others the knowledge that one lacks. But at the same time humility also means a sense of security in one's strengths. Humility in the face of the mystery of this person, my client, who confronts me here and now, is essential if I am not to be overbearing and patronising, and consequently insecure because I seek security in my attitude of superiority.

There are many difficulties which arise in people's lives today, not so much because they do not know what they should do, but because they are so emotionally disturbed that they fail to do it. People who are suffering from emotional confusions and conflicts may need information and knowledge, but much more they need to be led to

*The two previous sections of this article appeared in BLACKFRIARS, January, 1964.

take the right steps, to be helped over their discouragement and their tendencies to compensate by immoderate and unreasonable satisfactions sought elsewhere. For this, advice in itself is not sufficient. Good advice of itself does not produce virtue; it is more likely to produce resistance. What is needed is counsel, the first stage of prudent action. Is not one of the spiritual works of mercy to counsel the doubtful? But here I wish to give it a technical meaning. It 'aims directly towards the greater independence and integration of the individual rather than hoping that such results will accrue if the counsellor assists in solving the problem. The individual and not the problem is the focus. The aim is not to solve this problem, but to assist the individual to grow, so that he can cope with this problem, and with later problems, in better integrated fashion. If he can gain enough integration so that he can handle this problem in more independent, more responsible, less confused, better organized ways, then he will also handle new problems in that manner'.¹¹

Counsel cannot be handed out neatly packaged in the same way as money, clothing, food or medicine. It is intensely personal, involving as it does another person in the way of moral virtue. Everybody, St Thomas tells us, to be normally happy and virtuous, needs the virtue of action, prudence. Prudence means understanding the steps that have to be taken here and now to reach a desired goal.

This may all seem rather abstract and far removed from the daily routine of casework, but it is not. A recent writer speaks of 'emotion-tinged difficulties not grave enough to warrant psychiatric help, yet puzzling enough to resist the resolution which will-power and supernatural aids would ordinarily effect. One should be slow to presume that most human problems are resolved by purely logical and common-sense solutions. Often even the most intellectual difficulties have deep emotional underpinnings which can best be dispelled by the non-directive listening process'.¹² The role of the social worker is to act as a non-directive counsellor in order to help the prudential judgement of the client, to help the client to overcome the obstacles provided by the compensation mechanisms which impede it.

It seems to me that indirect counselling, while being one of the best ways of respecting the personality of the client, is at the same time more likely to assist the equilibrium of the social worker in his personal relationship with the client than some more positive didactic approach

¹¹Rogers, Carl R. *Counselling and Psychotherapy*, pp. 28-9.

¹²Hagmaier, G. & Gleason, R. W *Moral Problems Now*, p. 35.

which would attempt to force a ready-made solution on him. It is not the social worker who sets the pace, but the very dialogue itself.

We return now to the dialogue, to that personal relationship between social worker and client which is the crux of social work. In this the self-knowledge of the social worker is of supreme importance as the way to emotional maturity. Without necessarily accepting any particular theory in its entirety, it can be said that depth psychology has given us certain insights, consonant with Catholic principles of freedom and the maintenance of the principle of *entelechy* in the personality itself, which help us to know our own motivations better. In itself this should help us in many instances to deepen our compassion towards the client. 'By the grace of God I am what I am. . . .' To return to the analogy which I used earlier, the very fact that we have had to learn to swim in the swirling currents created by our own psyche should mean that we can understand the struggle of the client, and see how to help him to learn to swim himself. Self awareness is bound to enrich the worker-client relationship, and I would go so far as to say that the emotional equilibrium of the social worker can never be successfully established without a certain minimum of knowledge of the unconscious as well as the conscious roots of one's own affective life.

This presents particular difficulties for many social workers whose birth, background and upbringing are exclusively Catholic. The traditional Catholic emphasis on the intellectual and volitional aspects of human life and action seem to deny any importance to the affective and emotional aspects. Perhaps this would have been even more true twenty years ago than it is today. Already there has been somewhat of a breakthrough, but sufficient weight is still not given to this element in our make-up. And here I am not speaking of its application to social work as such. It can happen that what we accept in the textbooks as being applicable to our clients we do not think of applying to ourselves. Yet this is all part of our personal growth towards maturity.

A further essential for emotional stability is a normal social or family life. This background may come from living at home, from living in a religious community, from living with fellow members of a secular institute, or from a rich social life with congenial friends. The type of community life is not important—what is important is that it should exist and have its effect. Otherwise the social worker may become solitary, introspective, even afraid of having a personal life.

It must be emphasized that for everyone, layman, religious and priest, unless they have a vocation to an eremitical existence, their personality development and emotional satisfaction must come through some form of community. They must 'belong' to a community where the bond is love and friendship, and where they can be accepted as truly themselves. The richer and deeper this social life, the more it will flow back into the dialogue with the client, to the mutual benefit of both him and the social worker.

As well as this, the social worker must be conscious of belonging to Great Society. His exclusive concern must not be to shape and refine the techniques of dealing with the states of dependency that he finds in his various clients. He must become conscious of the causes of some of them, as they exist in the economic and political societies of which both he and the client are members. Ten years ago the retiring president of the American Association of Social Workers had this to say: 'Is our function as social workers limited to the treatment of pathologies, or do we also have a positive or preventive function to perform? . . . The early development of social work gave emphasis to . . . social reform. (But) the pendulum has swung far over to the other side until today the greater emphasis is on the treatment of individual illness'.¹³ Can we honestly say that there has been much change in the past ten years? It is natural for the social worker to see himself as a professionally trained expert whose first responsibility is to ameliorate the immediate situation in which a client is involved, rather than as a social reformer concerned with remedying the ills of society. A recent writer on the subject is optimistic—social work is now undergoing a sea change. 'Especially in its newer garb of group work and community organisation, (social work) is becoming a catalyst, bent on releasing human potentialities imprisoned by poverty, social fear, ignorance and sloth. No longer does it think exclusively in terms of cure or even of prevention. The newer social work, while still accepting the framework of society, is becoming more concerned with mobilizing the community's resources to promote the well-being of all individuals. By identifying the needs which emerge in society with changing social conditions, and by seeking, through its professional organisations, to exert pressure on those with authority to implement those needs, social work is becoming more and more concerned with improving the social institutions through which the individual functions. In this role, it can have a

¹³Youngdahl, B.E. 'Social Work at the Crossroads', *Social Work Journal* (July, 1953), p. III.

more positive and constructive part to play than ever before'.¹⁴ One must recognize however that in those countries which are in process of economic development a different situation may arise. In those countries the problems are so enormous that the social worker may be tempted to abandon any attempt to help the individual, feeling that his role is to work for large scale changes in society. This can cause intolerable tensions which can only be resolved by a clear distinction: the immediate distress of a person, a family or a group is the job to be done here and now, while the large scale change of social institutions is the responsibility of many people, among whom the social worker has an important part to play.

Finally, we arrive at that maturity which for the Catholic social worker is the most important of all: spiritual maturity. Here I would make three points. First, a social worker is a *social* worker, dealing with man in society, trying more often than not to overcome exaggerated individualistic, even anti-social, traits in others. He himself must have a truly balanced spirituality, one which is deeply rooted in the social worship of the Mystical Body, in the liturgy of the Church. This must colour our view of all the sacraments, of our approach to Christ in the confessional and at the table of Holy Communion, in our appreciation of Confirmation which has conferred on us adult status in the Church. Without this social side of our belief and practice we are in danger of preserving our religion at an infantile level, or of regressing to it. Secondly, we must realise that through our incorporation into Christ and our animation by the Holy Spirit we are endowed with supernatural gifts which can assist us powerfully in our work. Especially valued should be the gift of wisdom whereby we see things as it were with the eyes of God, and also share something of the peace of God. It is the awareness of things in all their concreteness, seeing them as ordered and intelligible in God, banishing anxiety and worry. I am assuming that the virtue of charity is already present, and my third point is that one of the fruits of charity is joy. This is needed for a balanced outlook. It would be superficial to say how important to the social worker is a sense of humour if one is to preserve one's equilibrium. But it is true—and I would found it on something much deeper than a sense of the ludicrous—on charity itself which makes us joyful to serve Christ in others, and makes us communicate that joy to them.¹⁵

¹⁴Woodroffe, K. *From Charity to Social Work in England and the United States*, p. 205.

¹⁵Cf. Welty, E., *Op. cit.* pp. 352-7.

To sum up, if the social worker is to maximize the possible equilibrium of tensions which are inevitable I would suggest that he must concentrate on two points, in the natural order: first, a deepening of self-knowledge in order to arrive at an inner harmony through recognizing his motivations for what they are; second, a stimulation of the desire to see the structure of society changed in accordance with justice and charity. In this connection I would quote a speaker at last year's National Conference of Catholic Charities in the U.S.A. 'We have to make people aware of the social problems that result in so many individuals seeking our help: the broken families, mental illness, alcoholism, illegitimacy, neglect of children, economic dislocation, low wages, slums, substandard housing, ill health, unemployment, old age dependency, and others. . . There is no primacy of charity without justice. Catholic Charities is not true to its mission unless it is involved in social action and the formulation of public social policy. This applies not only to priest directors, but also to lay boards, lay and religious administrators, practitioners and volunteers'.¹⁶

We must remember that religion cannot be used as a substitute for certain personal qualities and commitments that are essential. If these are present, then equilibrium can be found, rooted and grounded in faith, with a motivation far superior to anything that the secularist or humanist can provide. But grace must build on nature, and the balanced personality has both, the one enlivened by the other. Equilibrium can never mean settling down to a fixed position. Like freedom it must be won each day afresh. But in doing this the tensions that produce disequilibrium can be made creative, and the aggressions and underlying anxieties that are involved can be transmuted into something productive and effective, namely the work of helping God's creatures to grow in His image and likeness.

¹⁶Reese, T. J. 'The Primacy of Charity', *The Catholic Charities Review*, January, 1963, pp. 11-12.