

## **See the Ball. Hit the Ball.**

### **One Social Worker's Real-Life Adventure with the Strengths Perspective**

Lori Madrid

So, this chapter is likely to be unlike others you read in Social Work books, mostly because the way I do things tends to be unlike the way most social workers do them. I firmly believe one of the most powerful aspects of social work is incorporating the personal use of self into our craft. An MSW research paper I came across defines this perfectly as "...authentically bringing all I'm made of into the therapeutic relationship for use as a therapeutic tool" (Daley, 2013). Some of the "all that I'm made of" includes the incorporation of humor into what I do. I believe this is one of my core strengths and research supports me on this. Laughter and use of humor have been linked to self-care and professional quality of life (Bloomquist, Wood, Friedmeyer-Trainor, & Kim, 2016). Fortunately, I'm predisposed to chortle. You might call me odd, or you might call me eccentric. Or, if you are strengths-based, and of course you are strength-based because you're a social worker, you could call me "innovative." Yeah, "innovative," that sounds better. Let's stick with that.

Sure, sometimes my staff says I'm a living cartoon, but don't write me off yet. Just like you wouldn't write off a client. Hang in there, because there's a lot of good stuff to follow. I take my work extremely seriously. I honor my clients. I learn so much from them. I work tirelessly to change whatever systems I can for the greater good. I teach at universities to help guide the next generation of social workers. I learn from my mistakes.

This chapter is designed to help you reflect on how to use the Strengths Perspective in assessing your own work. I will chronicle my personal journey first, and while you

read this, I'm sure you will draw parallels or pass judgement. (It's human nature, so feel free.) Then, in the end, there will be an opportunity to reflect on your own path. What is your personal use of self? What strengths do you bring into your interactions with clients? How have you changed over the years? What is your long-range plan? What things, if you tweaked them right how, might launch you into connecting even more powerfully with the people you have been lucky enough to serve?

Let's get started. I'm taking a big risk here because I'm going to share with you the enormous mistakes... whoops, let me reframe in a strengths-based way. I'm going to share with you the times in which I might have strayed from making the best possible choices throughout the years. We can celebrate those times because those choices taught me lessons that have landed me in my current social work sweet spot. Throughout this story, I'll share some thoughts on how events in my life can be framed from a deficit perspective or a strengths-based perspective. For example, let's reflect on how I started this chapter:

DEFICIT-BASED	STRENGTHS-BASED
This is getting off to an odd start.	This is getting off to an innovative start.
Hm, is she taking this seriously?	Hm, humor will make this learning fun.

### IN THE BEGINNING

Alrighty, Social Work 101. Whenever we start with a client, we do an assessment, right? Sometimes a lengthy assessment, sometimes something simple. This varies across the board, but in general, it's important to know where someone is coming from. At least a little bit of history. Something that paints a bit of a picture of what came before. Let's use this same strategy in reflecting on ourselves. How were we raised? What biases were we taught? How did we learn to communicate our needs? What experiences molded us and landed us in whatever situation we are in that we are suddenly reading an odd, ahem ... innovative, article in a social work book? Personally, when assessing any situation, I resonate with Grant and Cadell's premise that,

It is vital that we not consider health and illness dichotomously, but rather understand than one can, actually must, experience both strengths and needs simultaneously. To recognize one's needs does not negate the presence of strengths, and so it is not necessary to downplay the struggles someone faces. Conversely, by being present with someone's pain we are not forgetting or minimizing their strength.(Grant & Cadell, 2009, pg. 429)

Let's proceed with this mindset. In my case, I like to joke that when I was born prematurely the doctor turned me upside down, smacked me on the bottom, and announced to my mother, "Oh, look, you have a social worker!" And I'm pretty

sure that while I laid in the incubator, the nurses probably talked to me about their relationship problems and I gurgled responses that somehow made them feel better. You might be chuckling right now because chances are, you are a bit like that yourself. When you go to an event suddenly people you just met are talking to you about their very intimate problems and you are in a weird way feeling honored while also just wanting to sneak away and get some more chip dip. But that all being said, yeah, I was born to do this work.

My mother was not married when I was born - which wasn't okay back when I was born. She raised us all as a single parent. We were on food stamps when food stamps were actually stamps, a coupon book the mailman would leave in the mailbox. Even as I'm typing this, I remember sitting at the window with my nose pressed to the glass looking for that mailman. I can feel how cool the glass was and how my breath would fog it up. I must have thought if I just looked harder for him, he'd show up more quickly. We needed those stamps. I was hungry.

We also received free lunches. We lived in a very small town and I know that only one other family also got free lunches. I knew this because the free lunch kids had to stand at the end of the lunch line with a red ticket so that the lunch lady would know our lunch was free. I didn't fully understand what that all meant but it did not feel good. Standing at the back of that line with that red ticket made me feel icky in my stomach. And not just because it was hungry.

This was my indoctrination to the "shame" of poverty" and it wasn't until I entered school that I recognized what Ali, et. al (2014) refer to when stating that "globally, there is growing evidence that shame is experienced as a consequence of poverty." I'm pretty sure that's what that icky feeling was.

When I was in college getting my BSW, I was walking along the quad when I overheard a guy sitting under a tree strumming his guitar and belting out the chorus to a song he'd obviously written, "Reagan cut the cheese for the poor." I burst out laughing, he looked up at me with a conspiratorial grin saying, "You grew up on welfare didn't you?" And I proudly stated "Yes, I did! Reagan cut that cheese and I ate it!"

As I got older, I knew there was something different, maybe even wrong, about me, but I couldn't put a finger on it. In fourth grade, I spent a lot of time at my friend, Johnna's. I liked being there. They always had food. One day we were walking through her living room and I saw a man sitting there reading. Every time I was at Johnna's that fella seemed to be around. I finally asked her, "Hey, what's that guy always doing here?" She looked quizzically at me, pointed at the man and asked, "Him?" I said, "Yeah," And she simply replied, "That's my dad." I was 10 years old and didn't know that houses came with dads.

Now we're all smart enough to know that, growing up poor doesn't necessarily have a negative impact. Lots of people who grew up poor do just fine. It's when we

look at other indicators of childhood events, such as those outlined in the often-cited Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES) study that we see childhood stressors having a lifelong consequence. That groundbreaking study exposed the correlation between negative experiences in childhood, such as parent divorce, family member incarceration, childhood abuse and so forth, with negative health conditions later in life (Felitti et al., 1998).

I score high on a rating of adverse childhood events. Consequently, I have a number of poor health conditions. I was diagnosed with throat cancer ten years ago. The doctor was confused. I never smoked or drank alcohol. I did admit that I was an avid user of profanity. He laughed and said that dropping the f-bomb does not cause cancer.

I started out at a disadvantage, but I turned out pretty well under the circumstances so in college I researched resilience because I was eager to find out why I'd done kind of okay. The research I came across pinpointed a number of factors affecting resiliency. Resilient people have some type of strong spiritual belief, it doesn't matter which belief - Christianity, Hinduism, believing in unicorns and fairies, just something to believe in. A growing body of research supports this connection between spirituality and resilience (Peres, Moreira-Almeida, Nasello, & Koenig, 2007) and therapists recognize the importance of considering the social and spiritual contexts of a client's life (Graybeal, 2001). Resilient individuals also have at least one caring adult they can trust. So, I lucked out. I did believe in God. His son and I hung out. As a six-year-old, I could belt out "yes, Jesus loves me," with the best of them. I also kind of dig both unicorns and fairies, so I've covered all of my bases on this.

My speech coach was the guy who believed in me. I remember a time he told me I'd need to sub in for a debater who'd called out sick. I had no time to prepare. I was scared. I told him, "No. I can't." He said, "You can, and you will." And I did. And I did great. Now I hear his voice in my head. If someone tells me I can't, I tell them, "I can, and I will." And I do.

As for humor? A social worker, priest and monk walk into a bar ... just kidding.

I've emerged as a practitioner with a resilience perspective, and I believe, as Benard posited back in 1993 that people have a "resilient nature" (Benard, 1993). So, how did this negative yet resilient start serve me as I started becoming my amazing social working self? Read on.

## THE BSW YEARS

I remember being called into my counselor's office as a junior in high school and he asked me where I planned to go to college. I just stared at him frozen. I didn't know how to answer. I didn't know what college was. No joke. I had no idea what he was asking me.

I have no recollection of what I said to him, but he explained things about ACTs and SATs and LMNOPS. I just took whatever test I was supposed to take and subsequently aced them. Suddenly, in addition to our monthly food stamps, letters also started coming in the mail from colleges all over the country. I was confused and excited but mostly sad because all of these schools cost money. We didn't have any money. We had nothing. Zero. Zilch.

So then, my counselor helped me learn about the wonderful world of student loan debt. I got some scholarships and then I needed my mom to sign papers so that I could get loans. She refused. The thought of me going to college made my mother very angry. The thought of me going to college, whatever college was, scared and repulsed her. I have no memory of how I finally convinced her to sign those papers, but I distinctly remember as I was packing, she came to my room and yelled at me that I was only going to college because I thought I was better than them! Who did I think I was?? Yell, yell, yell. We were enacting a truth noted in the 2015 report on Child Poverty and Adult Success that, "the educational achievement of one generation [or lack thereof] can also ripple through to the next." (Ratcliffe, 2015, pg. 9).

Eventually, I ended up at a rural state university in the BSW program, and this is where I finally started to learn about my personal strengths. I went there knowing I was the poor girl whose family members behaved badly and had poor reputations, but this was a fresh start and I loved learning and loved being away from my family chaos.

In one of my first social work classes, I had a professor with whom many of us were less than thrilled. Of course, I can't remember why now, but we were all 18-year-old geniuses, and this educated woman with decades of experience just wasn't living up to our standards. My classmates asked if I would be the one to confront her regarding our extensive list of her failings. I was confused about why I had drawn the short straw on this. One of them gave me probably the best compliment I've ever received. She said, with a tone of admiration, "You're able to tell someone to go to hell in such a way that they think they're going to enjoy the trip".

Hmm. Okay, I'll admit it, she was right. So, let's use our Strength-Based lens on this. I had, what? The gift of diplomacy? Tact? Finesse? Whatever it was, I had it in spades, and this is still one of the strengths I use on a daily basis. Let's pause for another reflection:

DEFICIT-BASED	STRENGTHS-BASED
Thinking she "knew everything" is a recipe for disaster.	She was entering the field with a lot of confidence.
Being able to "call someone out" shouldn't be considered a strength.	Being able to articulate concerns in an honest and kind manner is a tremendous skill.

Back to my story. I continued to let these people who I've decided aren't nearly as smart as I am educate me. And I earn my BSW. And then I became really smart. I pretty much knew everything.

## THE MSW YEARS

Oh my god! I knew nothing. Zero. Zilch. I arrived at Graduate School.

Here is where the regrettable mistakes come into play. During these two years, I come face to face with my ignorance and recognize it immediately. It follows me around and taunts me. It wants us to get matching tattoos. It thinks my blunders are very funny.

I decided, having gotten my BSW in one of the most sparsely populated states that I wanted to go where the real problems were for my MSW training. Remember I knew everything, and I wanted to face danger and angst and affliction, so I applied to schools in New York City. This city needed me to come and solve its problems. I was the genius hero who would right the wrongs. Yeah, I know how this thinking violates, "self-determination of the client", "seeing the client as the expert" and so forth. I know that now ... back then... not so much.

A series of garden variety miracles led to my moving from small rural town to an Upper East Side apartment across the street from the Mayor's mansion to work as a nanny for an actress who was in the middle of a divorce from her also famous husband. My room overlooked the East River and maids cleaned up after me every day, so I took care of the children and the maids took care of me. You know, the basic way that everyone goes to grad school.

I lived with them for about eight months until graduate school started and then moved into a teeny apartment with a roommate I never saw and built up a clientele of uber-wealthy people whose children I would watch on evenings and weekends so that I could pay for said super teeny apartment.

I magically ended up getting into one of the top-rated social work schools. I basically got in because I was so naive that I didn't realize I should have been very nervous during the admissions interview. There were 15 students in a group interview, and I was so relaxed and happy. They were not. I was talkative and open. They were not. I was confident. They were not. They all knew that this school admitted only 100 students a year. I did not.

Ignorance was bliss and I was awarded one of those 100 coveted spots. The books we read were written by our instructors. At my first internship, I was trained in person with Salvador Minuchin, the preeminent Family Therapist. On Friday nights, my classmates and I would go and watch Albert Ellis demonstrate Rational Emotive Therapy on the upper west side, where for \$10 students could observe the master

doing actual sessions on a stage, take copious notes and dream of the day we would change the world by slaying the countertransference dragon and finally figuring out how to successfully write treatment notes.

This time was simultaneously exhilarating and angst-filled. I lived in a bizarre world in which my time was spent juxtaposed between working with families struggling with homelessness in Spanish Harlem and providing outpatient psychotherapy to foster children in the Mott Haven section of the Bronx (which at that time had the highest per capita homicide rate in the nation), and spending summers in the Hamptons and school breaks with a family in Austria skiing or on the pristine beaches of Hawaii.

I loved the children I worked with as a social worker and I loved the children I worked with as a nanny. The poorest in the city and the richest in the city. Pinging back and forth between such divergent spectrums I learned that despite all the differences, ultimately everybody just loved their children and were doing the best they could to get them food in one case or into the preschools that would put them on an Ivy League track in the other case.

One of my biggest “learnings” during this time is that rich people aren’t evil. They aren’t even “bad”. Having grown up poor, I was indoctrinated into what might be considered a reverse prejudice, that “rich people are bad”, and was a living testament to the idea that American attitudes about wealth connect to “deep-seated, complex, values and beliefs about morality and equality” (Kornhauser, 1994, pg 120)

One of my biggest “ah-ha” moments came when I was nannying, and we’d gone to visit the grandfather. I was walking up the fancy staircase with the boys and the mother was following behind me. I marveled at how smooth the hand railing was. I turned to the mother and asked with I’m sure an accusatory tone, “Oh my god, is this staircase made out of marble?” She looked at me pleadingly and said, “I don’t want to answer that because it will only make you mad”. She was a lovely woman who deeply loved her children who just happened to have a grandfather with a marble staircase. No one was evil. They were just rich. It was no more her fault that she ate caviar than it was my fault that I’d grown up eating government surplus cheese.

In my second internship year, I had a supervisor who studied some ilk-of-Buddhism. He was serenity incarnate in a setting that exuded chaos. The Council on Social Work Education identifies field education as the profession’s signature pedagogy (Council on Social Work Education, 2008) a global perspective, respect for human diversity, and knowledge based on scientific inquiry, social work’s purpose is actualized through its quest for social and economic justice, the prevention of conditions that limit human rights, the elimination of poverty, and the enhancement of the quality of life for all persons. Social work educators serve the profession through their teaching, scholarship, and service. Social work education—at the baccalaureate, master’s, and doctoral levels—shapes the profession’s future through the edu-

cation of competent professionals, the generation of knowledge, and the exercise of leadership within the professional community. The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), and he ticked off all the boxes for supervisory excellence.

I was in a cohort with three male interns under his tutelage and he worked diligently (although it looked effortless) to ensure that we were doing the requisite introspection to be the best practitioners we could. Some nights after a day of stumbling through sessions we interns would convene at a local pub and play dueling errors, outdoing each other by recounting our blunders. “How could I have said, that?” “What was I thinking?” And ultimately my classmate, who had come to social work after being a professional frisbee player (no, I’m not making that up), made a very salient point in commenting, “Man, I wish I was studying accounting because at the end of the day they know there is a real final correct answer - we’re never going to have that.” He was right.

During one group supervision, as the four of us interns sat at the feet of our some ilk-of-Buddhism clinical supervisor discussing challenges, my frisbee playing intern buddy was talking about a case that was convoluted and chaotic and felt hopeless. Our supervisor decided to use a sports term to explain what frisbee boy should do. He said the thing that has guided all of my clinical work since that day. Actually, it’s guided all of my living in the world choices and thoughts and actions. He said, “See the ball. Hit the ball.”

“Huh?” the four of us asked in unison. He repeated “See the ball. Hit the ball.” In his modulated wisdom he explained that basically there is a whirlwind of things happening here that are swirling around the issue and taking our attention off what is important. Take a moment - look through the swirling, then find what the real issue is and address the real issue. “See the ball. Hit the ball.” Simple. Perfect.

These two years of training created a huge shift of understanding. Beginning to see that I ultimately know very little although I have a lot of knowledge, was simultaneously startling and grounding. I was, for the first time, really understanding that the clients are the experts in their experience. This reflects back to Graybeal (2001) touting the belief that the client holds the clues and creativity that lead to solutions (pg. 214). I can help guide, I can offer a safe space to talk, I can listen and comment if asked, but I’m not actually the superhero here, they are.

I would marvel at the bravery of the 16-year-old girl who’d witnessed a shooting, the four-year-old who used dolls to play out a time in which his mother’s boyfriend molested him, the 11-year-old girl who admitted she’d made up the story about her foster father inappropriately touching her because she thought that would make it so CPS would move her to live with her siblings in their foster home. These kids were strong. These kids were fierce.

Nothing was black and white. Nothing added up at the end of the day. There were no right answers. It was essential to be able to embrace ambiguity as is discussed in the present day Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, so that when obstacles inevitably appear on the journey one is not “being blown over by them, but holding on to what is true, like a reed in the wind, with flexibility and without rigidity” (Bennett & Oliver, 2019, pg. 56).

This was hard, but I knew what to do. I had amassed a mountain of student loan debt. I had learned from the masters. I had the honor to work among brave and powerful children and it had been worth every penny because I walked away from those two years knowing this:

See the ball. Hit the ball.

DEFICIT-BASED	STRENGTHS-BASED
Rich people are selfish and maniacal, and they create all the problems.	We all exist somewhere in the economic social structure. This does not need to define our worth.
I’m going to save the day.	People are experts in their own experience.
My Master’s Degree is evidence that I know so much more than everyone else about social work, and people and life.	I’m lucky to have a master’s degree as the first step in a lifetime of learning.
This is too convoluted.	See the ball. Hit the ball.

### IN THE TRENCHES

And so, after I’d earned my illustrious MSW and began in the field I was confident that: I have a lot of knowledge but I don’t really know all that much; I have a lot to offer clients while I learn from them; and I’m considered an expert, which I kind of am, but not really. The list goes on and on and kind of spirals out of control, just like this paragraph. I begin to understand that work is a process.

Then I spend a gob of years in the field.

I started out working for a foster care agency at a place in Brooklyn that was in a very difficult to get to location. I wrote that sentence in a difficult to read way because it mirrors how hard it was to get to this place. It was odd. And I can’t change this up and “strengths base” it by saying it was innovative. It was odd. And far. And hard for parents to get to. You took the regular subway to a bus and then had to take a special shuttle bus with an unpredictable schedule and this was just odd.

This bore out the assertion made in a 2013 literature review that transportation barriers negatively impact healthcare access for people with low incomes, (Syed, Gerber, & Sharp, 2013) delayed care, and missed or delayed medication use. These consequences may lead to poorer management of chronic illness and thus poorer health outcomes. However, the significance of these barriers is uncertain based on existing literature due to wide variability in both study populations and transportation barrier measures. The authors sought to synthesize the literature on the prevalence of transportation barriers to health care access. A systematic literature search of peer-reviewed studies on transportation barriers to healthcare access was performed. Inclusion criteria were as follows: (1 and this was supremely frustrating. Anyway, I only worked there for a very short period of time until I was offered a much better paying job in the illustrious (and dangerous) South Bronx at the same place I'd done my internship, and I had major learning during those few months.

### **Relationship, Relationship, Relationship**

I was working with a little girl who was the girl that caused everyone to cringe when she entered the building and came down the hall. She was six, and too loud, and couldn't keep her hands to herself and she crawled under tables and she was .... well... difficult. I was new. My heart beat fast when I heard her enter the building. I didn't know what to do except "See the ball. Hit the ball." So, the ball equaled "too loud" - we practiced "quiet voice." The ball equaled, "hands all over the place" - we practice - "intertwine your fingers". And as for "crawling under the table", we practiced, "I'll come under the table with you." She liked that and eventually, we didn't need to do that anymore.

Her mother would come to meet with me too. I liked her mom. I was impressed that she could figure out the subway, bus, weird shuttle. She came from far. She was tired. She loved her "difficult" little girl. She was trying hard. The desk was stacked against her. She came to every meeting. She came this far weird way to sit across the desk and talk to a neophyte social worker who didn't know what she was doing. She was patient with me.

When I told her, I was leaving for a different position I saw tears start to form in her eyes. They hung in her eyes not quite ready to fall. Her chin wrinkled as she said, "But what about my little girl? You understand her. She needs you." And then the tears fell out of her eyes and I think we both knew that what she meant was, "What about me? You understand me. I need you."

I was a social worker and I had an MSW so I didn't cry when she said that. I reassured her. I told her there would be someone who would follow me who would understand her daughter and help her daughter. She didn't look convinced. Frankly, I wasn't convinced either. But I was a good social worker, and I didn't cry. Until I got on the shuttle that led to the bus that led to the subway, and I cried the whole way home. And even remembering that, twenty-four years later, I cry a little because

this work touches our clients and ourselves in very profound ways. I remember this event entirely. It changed me.

I left that position and went back way uptown to work as an outpatient Psychotherapist in the South Bronx. I was so excited about this until I went into my office the first day and saw the DSM III – R on my desk. (Okay, don't laugh, there really was a time when the DSM was in just its third iteration!) I thought, "Oh, my Lord, they are going to let me diagnose people." Gulp. I am going to be the one who decides the diagnosis. Did I learn this? Sure. Do I know how to do it? No way! Yikes! Ok, breathe. This will be okay. Remember, you still have a supervisor. Your supervisor will help you with this. It will be fine. It was.

### **Race and Culture**

Next, I moved on to work as an outpatient psychotherapist in the South Bronx. I had so much to learn, not just about the work, but also about what it meant to be a white woman working in the Bronx. And here was my major error. I didn't think it mattered. I made the mistake of thinking I was "color blind." I didn't care about, take into account, or pay attention to race. I prided myself on this. My boyfriend was from Haiti. My friends were the color of the rainbow. This was wrong, wrong, wrong, but I thought I was right. Again, my naiveté lead me to miss so much of the nuance of what my clients were facing. Some specific errors surrounding culture, race and socioeconomic status started to become apparent.

When talking to the receptionist who scheduled my appointments, I asked her about Mexican food. She was furious! She was Puerto Rican. Which was different from Dominican. Which was different from Spanish. Which was different from Mexican. I knew nothing about this. I was from a rural white community. I learned this fast. I did a lot of apologizing.

A Latina colleague was talking with me one day about how similar she and I were because we both came from middle-class backgrounds. I told her I wasn't middle class, that I was raised in poverty. She said, "No you weren't," as though that were a fact. I explained that I was. I explained that I grew up on food stamps. I told her the Regan cut the cheese for the poor joke. She wouldn't believe me. She said I was middle class. End of discussion.

Then the most startling example happened when I had worked there for about two years. One of the case managers and I traveled down to Brooklyn on the subway to a court hearing regarding children on her caseload for whom I provided therapy. We were both going to be testifying. It took almost two hours on a crowded stuffy subway to get there. The courthouse wasn't air-conditioned and the cases were running long so we spent the day sitting on benches in a semi-sauna waiting for our case, which was finally heard at four-thirty in the afternoon. On the way back we were both tired and sweaty and emotionally drained from the stress of the hearing. She looked at me very seriously and started to cry saying that she felt so badly because

ever since I'd started working there, she'd told people she didn't know what that "f-ing white b\*tch" was doing there! Today was different. Today she realized that she had been wrong about me. I did care about the kids. I did work hard. I was so shocked. It hadn't occurred to me that for the past two years I wasn't welcome or that people felt that way about me. Had I paid more attention I would have done better.

I loved that job in the South Bronx so much, but I didn't make enough money to live in New York. I made less money each month than I needed to pay my bills and went deeper and deeper into debt until I realized I would need to leave. I was broken-hearted about this, but I headed back to my small home town to work with children in a psychiatric residential treatment center. Now even more learning kicked in! Here's where I learned the power of the team approach.

### **The Power of the Team**

At this facility, all of the children we served had DSM IV (see, time is passing) diagnosis. They all see a psychiatrist for medication, and we managed their living environments and education. This is a terrific model and the therapy team is outstanding. I realize we all have our niches. The categories included the Substance Abuse Program, the adolescent girls and boys, our EMDR and sexual trauma specialists, and the youth minister among others. I landed with the younger kiddos. I'm blessed with the ones from the age of 6 to 10 who communicate most adeptly with their play. Remember, I'm a fan of humor. I'm a human cartoon. Sometimes we literally see a ball and hit it. I am at home here. I love it.

I marvel at the expertise of my colleagues and as often as possible seek their advice. Our clinical director is a genius. For real. She knows everything. She remembers everything. I want to be just like her.

During this time, I witness an amazing transformation in one of my clients whom I'll call Sara. Sara was eight and was in placement due to long-standing sexual abuse. She was deeply depressed. I found her to be brave and smart. We'd worked together for about four months and she'd made steady progress but suddenly everything plateaued. Her mother had attended all the family session and things were going well, but the treatment seemed to be at a standstill. We'd identified that Sara had this sick feeling in the pit of her stomach all the time. When I'd asked her to tell me more about it, she said that it felt like there was a ball in her stomach with worms and bugs crawling around in it and there were boogers and "yucky stuff" and it just felt gross. I'd used all the tricks in my toolbox to get rid of that ball. I could see that ball, but I couldn't hit that ball.

I felt lost so I reached out to the EMDR specialist. I didn't fully understand how EMDR worked, but my intuition, even back then was that this would move her forward. Later, In 2013 the World Health Organization recognized Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing as an effective psychotherapy for treating PTSD

in children, teenagers and adults (WHO, 2013). This was at least a decade before much research had been done, but my own belief was that the therapist down the hall had this great skill that could help. That therapist agreed she'd do a few sessions with her.

I still did my weekly sessions and Sara would also do EMDR with the other therapist. After a few weeks, I went to pick Sara up from class for our session. We were walking down the hall to my office and something seemed very wrong. Sara was looking up at me and talking to me, but I was confused and actually kind of scared. Something was different. Something was wrong. And then I intentionally changed the path we were taking so that we were walking by more staff in case something bad happened with her and I needed staff assistance. I couldn't pinpoint what was wrong. She looked weird. Then I realized I could see her teeth. I'd never seen her teeth. Then I realized I could see her teeth because she was smiling. I had never seen her smile. I thought something was wrong because she was happy. What? She was happy? So, when we got to my office, I asked her about the ball in her stomach and she smiled and said, "It's gone!" "Wow!" I said, "It's gone? What happened to make it be gone?" And she said, "Jesus took it!" "Jesus took it?" I asked. "Yes, every morning I go to chapel and I prayed and prayed that Jesus would take it and he did!" And I believe that the combination of the Youth Minister and the EMDR Specialist and Sara's own strength saw that ball of worms and hit that ball.

Observing these skills in my teammates inspired me to get further training. I learned play therapy and loved the premise that you trust that the child has the capacity to solve their own problem (Kool & Lawver, 2010). I learned equine therapy because I'd seen the power of the work my colleagues did with this. The evidence is promising in support of this modality (Selby & Smith-Osborne, 2013) Intervention, Comparison, and Outcome (PICO but even without their research I'd seen it work with my own eyes, I was learning that a part of my strength was learning more, but also learning that this whole process is not about me. Clients solve their own problems.

Eventually, I ended up moving to Arizona - where I got married and adopted two children from foster care. Everything changed. Because the girls had experienced trauma, I decided to stop working at that time and tend to their needs, help them settle in, get them on a positive trajectory. Once the youngest started school, I took a job as a school social worker so that I would have the girls' same schedules. A few weeks later I got throat cancer. Later that year I stopped being married. I do not recommend doing those last two things.

The field has really begun to recognize the need for self-care in a salient way. Becoming nearly immobilized, as happened in my case, brings that need to the fore. I was thrust into a situation in which I had to seek help on every level. I was a woman who helped "heal" people with her words, and suddenly I was basically silenced. My friend, Debbie, stood in the "old people" aisle for me at the store (I was on the little scooter thing because I didn't have the energy to walk) and helped me pick out the

best quality adult diapers. I couldn't work for at least a year, my financial situation was tenuous, and my health was dismal. But remember, I knew how to see the ball. The ball, in this case, was my daughters, and my friends rallied to help me with them until my health slowly improved and then I was back to work in the schools.

I gave up being a school social worker and instead ran the afterschool program. I felt it was my ethical obligation to stop practicing as a social worker until I had my strength back and my mind cleared. This work lacked the challenge of the hectic New York City streets and serious mental health issues of the children in residential care but it was the right work. My "self-care" was making sure that I was still helping kids but in a different way. I moved more slowly. I thought more slowly. But I kept on keeping on.

A few years later I was back in full swing, working as a social worker in the schools, adjunct faculty at several universities, raising my totally perfect at all times adopted daughters and learning, learning, learning. I built strong relationships in the school district. I sought out talented practitioners to learn from and grow with. And then I started to see some serious issues with children not getting the help they needed. I saw children who needed therapy but were not getting it. The hurdles included poverty, lack of insurance, poor transportation, parental fear and not enough of me to go around. This was not okay. These kids needed help and they weren't getting it.

Then stakes rise for me. I'm so fed up with children not getting what they needed due to bureaucratic nonsense that I walk around with my own ball of low-level rage in my stomach. Finally, driving across town, seething, I have my aha! moment. I remember Einstein saying you can't solve a problem with the same thinking that created the problem in the first place. I know how to solve this. I'm going to use new thinking. I'm gonna knock down these hurdles. I'm gonna fix this! I see that ball of rage and I hit that ball.

I'm gonna quit my job and start a non-profit so I can solve this problem myself.

My friends all say, "We love you. We get why you want to do this. But don't do it! Don't jump off this cliff! For God's sake, don't quit your job!"

And I love my friends. They are smart. They are giving me great advice. And just like when I'd earned my BSW, it's all come full circle and I feel really smart. I pretty much know everything. And I ignore them and I quit my job.

## **FOUNDING A NON-PROFIT**

Oh my god! I know nothing. Nothing. Zero. Ziltch.

Geez, macrimeny. Let's take a beat here to figure out what brought us to this place. What makes a social worker of reasonably sound mind and judgment commit

what might be viewed as career suicide? What level of desperation - or perhaps more aptly described - inspiration - led to this?

I'll admit, I knew this would be rocky. I had two adolescent daughters who were counting on me as their mother. Taking this step made our financial situation even more tenuous. It made my stress level dramatically increase. It made my ability to give the time and devotion they deserved dramatically decrease. I talked to them about it. I told them the negative ramifications. I told them the risks. I told them this made me kind of afraid. Then with the lack of wisdom and selfishness of all teenaged girls, they said, "This is the right thing. The kids need you. You have to do this."

What? It stops a parent in their tracks when they see their children take the impeccable right action. My daughters did this right before my eyes. I cried.

These girls are wise. They had been in foster care and swept out of it when they came to live with me and my husband. They had been "saved." They still struggled with the pain that comes from a non-Disney like early childhood. They had compassion and I was proud of them. And as it turns out, they were kind of proud of me too.

So, the die had been cast. It was time to regroup, focus on my strengths and go back to my social work roots. See the ball. Hit the ball. Here the ball is: I am outnumbered by the needs. Easy solution, the way in which I would save the world is to do what everyone laments needing to do - I would clone myself! I would train social work interns to go out and meet with those students who couldn't access support and to do exactly what I did with them because I knew we could get positive results.

I convened a Board of Directors, I filled out a gazillion forms, I talked to the local university, then with the ducks all soundly lined up, I prepared to have a courageous conversation with my school district boss, Kim, to let her know I had figured out how to solve all the problems in the world and that I was quitting my job so I could go do that.

Kim patiently heard me out and then said, "No. I'm not letting you quit."

"Huh?" was the best reply I could muster.

Kim said, "No. You're going to stay here. You're going to solve all of the problems in the world right here. Now get out of my office, so I can figure out how I can make that happen." It turns out Kim is strength-based too, and I can only imagine the mountains she had to move to clear the way for the nonprofit to be launched. Within about two weeks she had gotten "yesses" from "no" men, had gotten school principals clamoring to be involved and had even found funding. That's a whole lot of social work mo-jo from a non-social worker.

I had become a “student” again and needed to learn about leadership, program management, fundraising, marketing, the whole gambit. So much to learn! So thank goodness for the team perspective.

The program flourished. Interns learned so much from this robust internship experience and the school children made huge strides in their social-emotional development. We discovered some very important secondary gains. For example, a grandmother who worked at one of the schools commented that her grandchildren loved our program. I reminded her that her grandchildren aren’t in our program. She replied, “Oh I know, but the kids who are mean to them are, and they aren’t being mean anymore!” This is a direct testament to Systems Theory and the ideology that once you change one element of a system, it changes the entire system (Janchill, 1969).

One of the School Resource Officers in a school we served demonstrated a textbook example of Bandura’s Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1986) when she came to tell us that she was being honored by the Anti-Defamation League as the Educator of the Year! We were so excited for her and then she explained that “your program is the reason I won the award.” This was confusing because we hadn’t even worked that directly with her, but she continued saying, “Watching the way you all work with the children and treat people, changed everything about the kind of police officer I am!”

Rave reviews poured in from teachers and principals and parents. Kids were getting better and they were getting better fast. Three years into the program other districts reached out and it was time to expand. I really did need to quit my “job” to do this expansion. It was less scary now. We had credibility and there was at least a little funding. I was able to hire some of the previous stellar interns as staff and they’ve done outstanding innovative work. And that’s where I sit today. And I know a whole bunch of stuff. I’m really smart. And I’m smart enough to know I know very little.

## **FOCUS ON YOU**

So, in the spirit of seeing the ball and hitting said ball, let’s wrap this chapter up by focusing on top strengths you have in your personal arsenal. Examples from mine include:

I was fortunate to have a challenging upbringing which taught me compassion and resilience.

I understand and honor the power of a strong team. I welcome learning from mistakes. I am becoming better at focusing on self-care. I willingly seek honest feedback even when it doesn’t feel flattering. I engage in courageous conversations.

And now, to you. Let's reflect on your journey. How were you raised? What biases or strengths were you taught? How did that history play out for you? How does it propel you forward or hold you back? What did you learn from instructors or colleagues that create the strengths you have? How has your practice evolved over the years? How do you see the ball and hit the ball?

## **CONCLUSION**

Our evolution as individual social workers is our own very delicate personal journey. We've all overcome unique challenges and drawn from distinct strengths. It would be silly to believe that there is much more overlap than "we are all in the field to help," but this consistent thread also binds us as practitioners. The more we individually hone our craft, the stronger the field becomes. And as we learn to embrace both our foibles along the way and the wisdom we've gained from them, we gain compassion and insight. And ultimately we learn to mindfully see the ball and hit the ball.

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