



DOCTORAL COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

Delivered by Dr. Gertrude S. Goldberg

Professor, Adelphi University School of Social Work

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About-to-be doctors, I am honored to share this moment of accomplishment with you and those who have helped you to be here—the family, friends, colleagues, teachers, mentors who bask today in the brightness of your achievement and your promise. Momentarily, you will have a new title, one that you have clearly earned. Occasionally it comes in handy—like the time when my mother was hospitalized on a vacation in Arizona. Rushing to her bedside, I must have questioned the cardiologist rather clinically. “Are you a nurse?” he asked. “No, a doctor,” I replied.

Moral Character and Sensitivity to the Suffering of Others

The philosopher Richard Rorty equates a person’s moral character as his or her “selective sensitivity to the sufferings of others.”¹ I won’t delve the meaning of “*selective* sensitivity” but will deal only with “sensitivity to the sufferings of others.” The women and men who have earned the doctoral hood today possess such moral character.

They have worked or are working in a group home for the mentally ill, as a school psychologist with lower-income Hispanic children, as a counselor in a methadone clinic, and as teachers of future social workers. Others are changing careers from professional musician, ghost writer, journal editor, lawyer, or occupations in finance or real estate. They are now providing psychiatric services in a prison, serving as a psychologist in a city hospital, counseling college students in the areas of trauma and abuse, teaching or doing research. Some of the graduates are going on for further training, a number will be engaged in research, and quite a few will combine practice, teaching and research.

Adding Theoretical and Empirical Knowledge to Sensitivity to Suffering

Their dissertation topics reflect a commitment *to add* to their sensitivity the theoretical and empirical knowledge that lead to more effective practice, teaching and continued research. They studied, for example, positive stepmother/stepdaughter relationships, drawing on the strengths perspective in social work; the impact of childhood abuse on adult depression of single mothers in a welfare to work program; maternal anxiety related to adoption disclosure, therapeutic communication in the treatment of Indian immigrants, attachment styles of second generation holocaust survivors, compensatory contribution of grandparents to their grandchildren’s psychological well-being (I think I like that one), adolescent responses to the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the implications for Western psychotherapy of Hindu psychology.

¹ Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 193.

Meaning of Doctoral Education: Their Own Words

When I was asked to speak at this hooding ceremony, I knew only the two graduates from the School of Social Work. So, I did a little survey of the Derner students to find out what they did before entering the Ph.D. program, what they plan to do and what their doctoral study has meant to them. I won't blemish this occasion with the shop talk of my sampling proportion, but it was very respectable, and I thank the graduates who took time to respond.²

Perhaps most gratifying to those of us who have mentored, taught or nurtured these students is what doctoral education has meant to them. They emphasize personal growth, pride in accomplishment, self knowledge, gratitude to those who taught and guided them, a thirst for knowledge both quenched and wetted, discipline, stimulation of their peers, support and encouragement of their families. Listen to their words:

One recalls that at the beginning of their studies, one of the deans remarked, "You are about to begin the journey of your lives":

I was indeed about to begin the journey of my life. Through this journey I have encountered great wisdom, self-exploration, and opened my eyes and soul to see truth about myself and others.... It has also inspired me to live life more creatively with constant emphasis on personal growth, critical thinking and learning as a life long process.

Journey is also the metaphor used by one of the social workers to describe her doctoral education:

Oh, the places I have been and the things I have learned!! Doctoral education has taken me to a place where learning is encouraged and opportunities to explore are within reach. I have learned how much I do not know and mostly how much more I want to learn..... Doctoral education has had no boundaries and learning will have no end.

Here are two more students who used the work *journey* or *travel* to describe their doctoral education:

... overall, doctoral study has been an amazing and intense journey toward emotional, personal and professional growth.

It provided me with many different keys to unlock my mind and to take paths of discovery, which I could never have been able to take prior to Derner.

Several thanked their mentors for helping them to see that it was possible to combine demanding, advanced study with family responsibilities:

... I clearly did not come this far entirely on my own. I am thankful to those mentors who helped me see that it is indeed possible as a woman to have a wonderful family and a successful career all in one lifetime.

These comments made me think of a response to my education of one of our children. In those days we had lots of note cards. Mine were piled high and omnipresent. At the same time I had a lot of trouble getting my son to put away his increasingly large collection of baseball cards. He would continue to shuffle them, procrastinate, dawdle. Not being a clinician it took me some time to realize he was imitating the mother who didn't put away her note cards and was taking too long to finish her dissertation.

Families of origin figured in the responses of a number of the graduates, especially so in this one:

I was born in exile...of young parents who were not able to attend college because they had to flee communism in Cuba. So although my parents haven't told me in words, I know that their daughter's receiving a Ph.D. will be the fulfillment of a dream that they had to give up for themselves but which...with hard work and a great deal of love—they were able to secure for their kids.

² I thank Derner Associate Dean Dr. Patrick Ross for his help in carrying out this survey.

Clients have also been their teachers:

I worked with clients who have taught me more than any textbook ever could. ...

The Function of Art for Psychologists and Social Workers

The women and men who are receiving their doctoral degrees clearly have the sensitivity to the sufferings of others that Rorty equates with moral character. They are poles apart from Mrs. Dalloway, the central character in Virginia Woolf's ground-breaking novel:

While Clarissa put the finishing touches on her party, her husband was off to the House of Commons, to his Armenians, his Albanians. But Clarissa cared much more for her roses than for the Armenians. Hungered out of existence, maimed, frozen, the victims of cruelty and injustice (she had heard her husband Richard say so over and over again.) No, she could feel nothing for the Albanians, or was it the Armenians [in fact she couldn't even get the nationality of those holocaust victims right,] but she loved her roses (didn't that help the Armenians).³

I'm not sure if the way Clarissa loved her roses did help them, but I think we need both in order to survive, thrive and to be better social workers and psychologists. Beauty and truth are not all we need to know, but they are important. Jane Addams, one of our authentic heroines in social work had this advice: "So to any young person who wishes to go into the social... field ..., I would say bring with you all that you can that softens life, all the poesy, all the sympathetic interpretation."⁴ At Addams' famous settlement Hull House, in Chicago, music and art and literature and theater were as much a part of the program as the discussion groups and the meetings where immigrants debated the social questions, unionized and organized for social reform. The same was true of Lillian Wald's Henry Street Settlement that still flourishes in New York City. Wald and Addams, I might add, were Eleanor Roosevelt's great mentors.

The function of art, wrote Addams, is "to preserve in permanent and beautiful form those emotions and solaces which cheer life and make it kindlier, more heroic and easier to comprehend; which lift the mind of the worker from the harshness and loneliness of his task, and by connecting him with what has gone before, free him from a sense of isolation and hardship."⁵ (sic for the masculine pronouns of even this social feminist!)

Addams in her day said the state should embody the "commonality of compassion."⁶ I stand before you unbowed by the withering away—not of the state—but of the compassionate state—of the repeal or retrenchment of policies and programs that I once criticized because they were not all I felt they should be but now defend lest we lose even more of that commonality of compassion. I am unbowed and still striving—not only because I am stubborn but because the Hull House formula sustains me. And I think, something else, ability to laugh and poke a little fun at spending so much time, apparently fruitlessly, in pursuit of a compassionate state. I do put humor right up there with food, art and sex, refusing to state a rank order—particularly in this audience.

It is not only respite and renewal but insight that we gain from art. You in psychoanalysis know what Freud had to say about the poets. Perhaps less well known is what he wrote to his contemporary, the Viennese playwright Arthur Schnitzler: "I have formed the impression that you know through intuition everything that I have discovered by laborious work on other people."⁷ Not surprisingly, several of the Derner dissertations explored poetic expression, artistic creation, musical performance.

³ Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* (New York: Harcourt, 1925), 120.

⁴ Jane Addams, "The Call of the Social Field." (1911). Reprinted in Jane Addams, *A Centennial Reader* (New York: Macmillan, 1960), 89.

⁵ Jane Addams, *The Spirit of Youth and the City Streets* (New York: Macmillan, 1901), 101, cited in Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Jane Addams and the Dream of American Democracy* (New York: Basic Books), 139.

⁶ Jane Addams, *Twenty Years at Hull House* (New York: Signet Classic, 1960 [1910]), 220. Addams and her associates at Hull-House who served as public officials held that the "commonality of compassion" represented by the State was "more comprehending than that of any individual group" and that it was obligated to carry on difficult undertakings for which private philanthropy is unsuited. See also, Elshtain (*ibid.*), 140.

⁷ Mint Theater (New York), Press Release for Arthur Schnitzler's *Far and Wide* (*Das weite Land*). Available at http://www.minttheater.org/press/pr_farandwide.html

Social as Well as Psychological Insights

The poets teach us about class, community, and culture as well as individual psychology. In *The Children of Dynmouth*, the novelist William Trevor portrays both a child of that Dorset village and a town that is *not* a community, that could clearly “leave a child-- or its children--behind.”⁸ Need I mention how many of our children we leave behind in a country where rich children are richer than anywhere else and poor children far too numerous. In the words of the prophet Amos, “We turn aside the poor in the gate *from their right*.”⁹ And where is the “mighty stream” of righteousness in this most religious of countries?

King Lear, said his daughter, Regan, “hath ever but slenderly known himself.” The knowledge he gained was not only that he was “a very foolish, fond old man.” He learned “that a dog’s obeyed in office.” These famous lines from *Lear* I had known for a long time, but it wasn’t until Christopher Plummer portrayed the King on the Lillian Beaumont stage last year that I really heard what else Lear learned from being homeless in the storm:

*Poor naked wretches, wheresoe’er you are,
That bide the pelting of this pitiless night,
How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,
Your looped and windowed raggedness, defend you
From seasons such as these? O, I have ta’en
Too little care of this! Take physic, pomp;
Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,
That thou mayst shake the superflux to them,
And show the heavens more just.*¹⁰

Shaking the superflux, sharing the wealth of the realm with poor wretches--reducing inequality--is the social message that Lear gained and what he realized a wise ruler should have done. Would that our leaders could learn Lear’s lesson before they leave office.

Literature can help us to feel as social science alone cannot. It can teach us, as Toni Morrison does, that apparently bizarre behavior becomes understandable in the context of oppression: even a mother killing her own children, as Sethe, the escaped slave did in order to save them from the approaching slave catcher and the brutal bondage she has narrowly escaped.¹¹

Preserving the “Commonality of Compassion”

The environment in which we practice is becoming even less compassionate. I fear we may lose or dismember what small protection we have against the *pitiless night*--the government program that most embodies the commonality of compassion, that offers a modicum of security to so many of us: the widow, the orphan, the disabled and, of course, the elderly.

Richard Rorty is a disciple of John Dewey, the philosopher who both taught and learned from Jane Addams. Along with equating moral excellence to sensitivity to the suffering of others, Rorty, like Dewey and Addams, holds that “the most distinctive and praiseworthy human capacity is our ability to trust and to cooperate with other people, and in particular to work together so as to improve the future.”¹² Improving social conditions as well as relieving individual suffering is part of the social work mission. We don’t do enough of it, particularly in times such as these, and, of course, we have no monopoly on it.

⁸ William Trevor, *The Children of Dynmouth* (London: Penguin Books, 1976). I am indebted to Professor Emeritus, Stephen Klass (Department of English, Adelphi University), for explicating Trevor’s treatment of the community.

⁹ *Amos*, 5. 12.

¹⁰ William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, c. 1606, iii, 4, 28-36.

¹¹ Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Plume, 1988).

¹² Rorty (see note 1), xiii.

The Best Is Yet to Come

That awfully overworked Roman god Janus belongs at what we wisely call commencement. The past has prepared you, but the best is yet to come. My 600-odd page dissertation was delivered on a wagon to the four distinguished academics who read it carefully. I try to remind myself of the burden I imposed on these mentors every time I grouse over the length of a paper.

My dissertation taught me unforgettable lessons and provided food for at least two courses and a long, two-part article in the most respected journal in our field. The lesson? That our professional methods can become ends in themselves. “We don’t serve the poor; we serve those who are responsive to social casework,” said the president of an organization established to serve the poor—the organization that I studied.¹³ The social workers were engaged in professional hedonism; they held to a particular form of casework that they enjoyed doing rather than what needed to be done. The method was choosing the clientele instead of being shaped to serve those most in need.

I learned a great deal from doctoral study, particularly my dissertation. Yet, my colleagues, students, further study, writing, social advocacy—and a joyous encounter with art, have taught me much more and have taken me on an even better journey than my doctoral preparation. And the same will be true of you. You have learned to learn and grow. I wish you well in your continued journey—more self and social knowledge, more joy and the capacity to share it with others, those whom you help and those whom you help to help others. My fellow “hoods,” the best is yet to come.

Gertrude Schaffner Goldberg

¹³ Gertrude S. Goldberg, “New Directions for the Community Service Society: A Study of Organizational Change,” *Social Service Review* 54 (1980), 184-219.