HEART AND HEAD IN SOCIAL WORK:
OLIVE STEVENSON’S LEGACY FOR TODAY AND TOMORROW

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‘How best, in seeking to help others, to use one’s mind and one’s feelings together, has remained a central preoccupation of my professional life.’

(Memoir, p60)
'British child welfare practice has suffered from a lack of historical reflection: to acknowledge the distinctive and unique problems that we face today does not invalidate comparisons with the past.'

C and F Social Work, 1998

‘It is irresponsible not to look back and ask – how did we get here, what has been learned and what has been lost?’

Memoir p 98
From ‘problem families’ to ‘troubled families’
OLIVE’S CONTRIBUTION
BREADTH AND DEPTH

• History/ context – relationship between policy (politics) and practice.

• **Doing social work – Heart & Head.**
  - Values (relationships/ caring for and about)

• Art and science/ knowledge and intuition.

• Approaches/methods/ skills/techniques.

• Back to the lessons of history
  - where are we now?

A JOB WORTH DOING
‘Finally, the fact that 30 years on I remember this (and other such cases) with such vividness gives some indication of the intensity, pain and satisfaction inherent in the work. It was underpinned by an absolute belief that the job was worth doing.’

WHAT IS THE JOB THAT IS WORTH DOING?
‘I was never in doubt that the essence of social work skill lay in some combination of reflective and practical work WITH and FOR the person in need of help.’

(Memoir p78)
SOCIAL WORK AS A PUBLIC SERVICE PROFESSION

As far as I could see, having listened to or read most of her lectures, Olive was never in doubt about what is the job of a social worker. And the organisational context that is essential for the job to be done well by social workers and team leaders- in a range of settings, educators, researchers.
CONFIDENCE IN MOVING BETWEEN CONTEXTS

- Psychiatry / therapy / social casework / helping
- Income support / housing
- The socio-legal world / case reviews
- Inter-professional practice
- Social work across client groups / age groups
- Social work in international context – the impact of USA, China, Israel.
‘DOING’ SOCIAL WORK

• Values and relationships
• Knowledge and evidence
• Approaches/methods/skills

(Let’s not forget social change/ advocacy - the obligation to use what we learn about the lived experience of our clients to tell it as it is... ACO/ACCO/ BASW TCSW)
‘Client’ – ‘Service User’

‘In care’ – ‘Looked after’ (a LAC child?)

Welfare as in ‘Child Welfare’ and welfare as in ‘social security’
- (applicant - claimant – scrounger)

FROM UK SOCIAL WORK (psycho-)social casework-help/support- ‘intensive outreach’, social service

FROM ELSEWHERE  intervention; clinical practice; (family) therapy, coaching- social pedagogy
VALUES, EMPATHY RELATIONSHIPS
‘OUR PROFESSIONAL RELATIONSHIP IS IN ITSELF THE BASIC TECHNIQUE’ (CLARE WINNICOTT)

‘…the essential dignity of a truly professional relationship’ (Memoir, p97)

‘…an assumption drawn from psychoanalytic theory indispensible to good practice ‘Clients may have feelings about the worker (and vice versa) that derive from other (sometimes unconscious) unconnected experience.’ (Memoir, p79)
On lying

‘All of us (lawyers included) must acknowledge that, on occasion, when we do things that are wrong, we seek to evade the pain of the truth by deceiving ourselves or others. When one has said that, one can acknowledge the probability of such behaviour in abusing parents without in some way relegating them to an inferior status.’

‘One of the hardest tasks for social work educators and students [and social workers] is to balance negative realism, including a recognition of deceit, with positive realism, that clients often struggle valiantly to perform parenting tasks against intolerable pressures. It is realism without rejection that is the goal.’

(BASW CONF, 1988; BJ SW, 1986)
‘It should be an absolute duty of the organisations that employ social workers [and train social workers] to ensure that there are safe places for these feelings to be explored and managed.’

(Memoir, 2013:96)
'Everyone of us owes it to the children at risk to examine practice continually in the light of new knowledge.'

(BASW lecture, 1975)
THEORIES:
- FOR UNDERSTANDING - FOR HELPING

‘There has been much talk about ‘evidence-based practice’ in recent years. It is crucial however that we are clear as to what we consider to be ‘evidence’."

(Final paragraph of ‘Memoir’)

Key themes in her writing re understanding
• Insights from psycho-analysis and child development - attachment and loss
• Creative and proportionate justice
• Understanding organisations - and much more
‘I would like to think that we have come far enough to accept that the ideological battles, fascinating and important though they are, should not, and need not, divert us from the sensible use of psychoanalytic theories and...an understanding of the importance of moving between inner and outer worlds as one important element in the development of skills in social work’ ...

[I have argued for ‘a way of understanding people’s behaviour which takes us ‘a layer down’. This is not always necessary or appropriate: for example the widespread use of cognitive behavioural techniques in certain kinds of emotional disturbance is demonstrably valuable.’

(Memoir, 79-80)
THEORIES FOR HELPING
APPROACHES, METHODS, SKILLS
‘We prescribed textbooks from the USA most of which, at least in the early days, were powerful and well-written accounts of social work theory but did not fit the social, cultural and legislative context of our own country. ... The British alternative did not flower, despite some seeds sown. Most ‘micro’-theory which was taught was concerned with applications from other disciplines, rather than the development of social work theory for use.’ (Children and Family Social Work, 1998)

‘It became absolutely clear to me that we needed a range of theoretical insights for social work to develop. But this has always been and continues to be, an extremely difficult idea to put into practice.’ (BJSW Knowledge for Social Work, 1971)

‘...but not ‘a theory a week for 10 weeks...with predictably confused results.’ (Memoir p50)
MESSAGES FOR SOCIAL WORK WITH CHILDREN IN CARE

‘... the complex, sensitive work required in caring, or arranging care, for children in need and the influences, forces and fashions that have pulled it in various directions.’

(Child Welfare in the UK, 1999)
‘The point I want to emphasise is that in direct work with children there may be **precious opportunities to grasp the moment of hope**, even when it is presented in singularly awkward and unattractive ways.’ (Memoir p91) (see her wring on residential child care)

‘I am sad when I hear that children are taken to ‘contact’ meetings by those who can drive but are neither ‘bridges’ for the children in the sense of ‘knowing’ about their world, nor qualified to ‘hear them’ therapeutically. **Taking children to places in cars was so pivotal to my own relationship with them that I cannot imagine the work without it.**’ (Memoir p 94)
Jenny Molloy: Hackney Child

‘The absolute sadness, fear and anxiety that I felt, and continued to feel for much of my life for and against my parents, could not be underestimated. I loved them, yet feared their behaviours and consequences. They loved us – yet they were totally unable to view us as children who needed and deserved to be protected, nurtured and openly loved. Yet due to the love, affection and stability that I received in care, I was able to break that cycle of poverty, abuse, deprivation and degradation that addiction can bring.

In residential care, I was loved. This is not wishful thinking or naivety – I was. I knew where I would be sleeping, who would protect me, who would tell me off(!) and whom I could turn to when I needed a cuddle. My social workers, BOTH residential and field social workers, spent quality time with me, repeatedly reminding me that I was special and worthy of a future. They taught me that it was safe to trust and be trusted.’

(Scottish Journal of Residential Child Care, 2013)
MESSAGES FOR FAMILY SOCIAL WORK

‘The deeply contentious issue of a child’s separation from the parents and of their placement (at what age, with whom and with what contact) arouses passions and primitive emotions... It is inevitable that some of these feelings will be projected onto the social workers who carry the main responsibility for these decisions.’

Reflecting on impact of Colwell inquiry
‘An ideal of legal conformity fitted comfortably with a bureaucratic mode of operation, most notably in the development of child protection procedures. The improvement of procedures, rather than of professional practice became the driving force in child welfare activity within social services departments.’

‘Yet this remains to me a puzzle. The roots of British social work were in poverty and it has never drifted into quasi psycho-therapy and counselling activity as in the USA. ..... Yet the evidence seems to suggest that child care workers did not effectively integrate into their practice the implications of the poverty that they recognised as existing.’

(Child and Family Social Work, 1999)
‘The complexity and delicacy of work in which grave and life-threatening situations involve a network of people who are not professionally or organisationally accountable to each other. Perhaps we should marvel at how much goes well rather than focus on what has gone badly.’

(Child Welfare in the UK 1989 p112)
'Some of us have been feeling recently that the topic of co-ordination and co-operation in social work has become a little stale. Everybody agrees it is a good and necessary thing but the suggestions made to explain why it is only partially successful seem to have been for the most part superficial.'

(Case Conference, 1963)
‘It became apparent that rationality and goodwill alone were not sufficient. Consideration of agency function, of bureaucratic obstacles, of professional power, status, rivalry, insecurity and ‘role blinkers’, and much more besides, were to become necessary for the understanding of the processes involved.’

(Child Welfare in the UK, 1999:102)
About the Thatcher years (Memoir article, p97).
‘At a personal level they challenged my assumptions about social values and about the structures by which social values are transmitted. At a professional level, these years saw the beginning of a political attack on social work, which had been a pivot of my working life.’

‘We reform slowly. Do we also de-reform slowly? ... It is not to be expected that an Act for the dissolution of the Welfare State will be promulgated. Yet there are actions, including the enactment of laws and gnomic statements, which, in aggregate at least, point to the need for keen vigilance.’

(1980 Eleanor Rathbone Memorial Lecture)
‘How can we encourage a constructive dialogue between theorists and practitioners [and between both and policy-makers (JT)] so that policy and practice can be better articulated and the dangers of rigid, damaging policy applications avoided?’

(Child Welfare in the UK 1999, p212)
In 1998 (C&FSW) about post 89 Act ‘refocusing’ but could apply to post-Munro. Olive welcomed it because...

‘...it is once again acceptable to talk about professional judgements and how they are made. It is a chance to widen our view of the purpose of child welfare services and to reflect upon the implications of the substantial and significant research which is available for today’s practitioners. The need is for a ‘refocused’ profession (Initiatives grow stale).’

AMEN TO THAT!