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SOCIAL WORK IN CRISIS VS. SOCIAL WORK IN PROGRESS

This reflected practical experience is a deeply personal one. Academically, it began in 1985 at The Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., where the writer received her BSW from the National Catholic School of Social Service. In 1992, a master's degree followed from the George Warren Brown School of Social Work at Washington University in St. Louis, where she specialized in mental health with a concentration in management. Five years later, this social worker began an eight year odyssey in a doctoral program at the School of Social Welfare at the State University of New York at Albany. Thus, her educational journey started at a school of "social service," then traveled to a school of "social work," and ended up in a school of "social welfare." No wonder we face questions of professional identity. The profession places varying degrees of emphasis on practice, research, and policy not only in the workplace, but in higher education as well.

In spite of a genuine interest in teaching, this writer chose to leave her doctoral program after repeatedly stalling at the dissertation stage. It was a difficult and costly decision, yet one that caused no regret. In fact, once the burden of dissertating was over, the writer was free to apply the lessons learned throughout the rest of the PhD program. First, the initial interest in teaching never wavered, it only grew. Second, having learned how to appreciate the constant critique of one's own ideas and writing suddenly seemed incredibly valuable "on the outside," where etiquette and natural constraints render so much constructive criticism untoward in the first place. Finally, alternating between the twin habits of working collaboratively and working independently turned out to be a secret weapon. Most people tend to work in one fashion or the other; the ability to experience both was a golden opportunity for what lay ahead.

Social Work in Progress (SWiP) was born in 2007, out of necessity and also out of love: love of the profession and passion for others. "People who need people are the luckiest people of all," sang Barbra Streisand. So it is now that the writer is running a social work business. The business is primarily a temporary staffing service specializing in geriatric and medical social work, but it offers several other services as well. Indeed, while SWiP was born out of a personal crisis, now it helps social service agencies navigate their own organizational challenges. A capitalist social worker is an odd notion, but this is exactly what the writer has become. Not bad, since the potential to eventually sell the business would presumably create more capital that could be used to further help disempowered individuals and vulnerable populations alike.

Social work is challenged by social, structural, and economic ruptures all around the world, not just in Europe. The aging of so many societies is well-documented, and poses unique opportunities for the profession to grow and assert its special expertise in dealing with changes in family structure, advances in medicine, policy issues related to income maintenance and pension reform, and new ways of thinking about death and dying. True, social work faces competition from other professions, especially in health care, but competition is healthy in market-driven economies. The larger issue facing social work is the public misconception of what social workers actually do. In the United States, for example, there is widespread belief that social workers work exclusively in child welfare. In truth, we work with people across the life span.

The field also faces enormous recruitment and retention problems, as well as educational dilemmas, credentialing questions, and professional burnout. Like many others, social work represents an aging workforce. The next generation of social workers desperately needs a more rigorous curriculum and intensive training if it is to succeed. Tomorrow's complex, chronic social problems

are not going away, and the devolution of power from central governments to local authorities is a well-worn tactic that places entire populations at risk. The responsibility of social work is mind-boggling: to carry on, to speak up, to listen, to organize, to research, to publish, to educate, to do all that it can to serve the vulnerable populations we see as individuals in our everyday work.