

Our Social Work Imagination: How Social Work Has Not Abandoned Its Mission

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ABSTRACT. The aim of this article is to present the case for social work, the case that the old truths and fighting spirit of an earlier day—*our social work imagination*—live on, even in the face of uncaring economic forces and resurrected punitiveness. Sustained by an idealism as old as human-kind, members of the profession continue to advocate for the poor, the sick, and the oppressed. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <getinfo@haworthpressinc.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2002 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

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Where there is no dream, the people perish. (*Proverbs 29:18*)

In their refreshing and iconoclastic *Unfaithful Angels: How Social Work Has Abandoned Its Mission*, Specht and Courtney (1994) correctly take the psychotherapeutic field to task for having fallen captive in many

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instances to popular therapies such as “codependency work,” excessive individualism, and the like. They also take the social work field to task for bestowing professionalism, prestige, and respect singularly to clinicians. Still, as one who has engaged in clinical work in private treatment settings and yet has opposed privatization in the United States and abroad, and as one who fled the empiricism of sociology and arrived upon the social work scene late, I wish to make the negative case. Social work is alive and well, and so is its mission. Such is the major argument of this paper.

The original twin missions of social work, according to Simon (1994) are those of relieving the misery of the most desperate among us and of building a more just and humane order. These intertwined missions, as Simon further suggests, continue to command the allegiance of members of the empowerment tradition. Two years later, NASW echoed these sentiments in the Preamble to the Social Work Code of Ethics, NASW (1996:1): “The primary mission of the social work profession is to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty.”

This article will briefly review the power-to-the-people tradition, a tradition that began with a motley crew of individuals who rejected paternalism (or was it maternalism?) to commit themselves to discover and call upon latent strengths of clients and communities and to work toward change in individuals and the social structure both.

Our point of departure for this discussion is Specht and Courtney’s thought-provoking thesis that social work has abandoned its mission. To bolster my arguments against this thesis, I will draw on the focus of the literature of the profession, studies of our social work students, professional mandates for multicultural social work education, radical feminism, and outreach to the global community. The final section of this article will draw on the concept of the social work imagination. *Our social work imagination*, the psychic and creative energies generated by people we now call social workers, has existed in some form or another for the better part of a century. *Social work imagination* is defined here as a kind of suspension of disbelief in clients’ capabilities, a kind of faith that, if they work at it, the most disreputable or downtrodden of clients can find some meaning in life. Such imagination challenges all our creative resources to discover in collaboration with the client what countless others may have overlooked, some obvious solution to a problem, perhaps, or some new way around a difficulty.

A CENTURY OF SOCIAL WORK

Society's prevailing ideology—whether it is more on personal troubles or public issues or somewhere in-between—is reflected in the priorities of social work and its methods of treatment (Franklin, 1990). The belief that poverty perhaps could be eliminated was a theme of the liberal Progressive Era, for example. And the settlement house movement which began in England in the late 1800s with the establishment of Toynbee Hall, echoed the contemporary sentiments. In contrast to their friendly visitor counterparts, settlement house workers regarded themselves as social reformers rather than charity workers. With their goal to bridge the gap between classes and their emphasis on prevention rather than treatment, these workers lived side by side with their urban neighbors and worked together with them to improve social conditions. In actively participating in the life of the neighborhood and of their poor and immigrant clients (in the United States), these upper- and upper-middle-class young men and women (mainly women) sought to raise the cultural, moral, and intellectual level of the community. The settlements provided a day nursery for working mothers, health clinics, and classes in dance, drama, art, and sewing. Gradually, as a result of their intimate knowledge of their charges, the settlement workers became politicized and pursued social reform through legislation and social policy change. These reformers helped bring about changes in child labor laws, in women's labor laws, and in the institutional care of the disabled and the "feeble minded" (Johnson and Schwartz, 1994). The establishment of child welfare services and juvenile courts, likewise, had its inception here. Rather than looking down upon the poor or seeking to impose their way of life upon them, settlement workers geared their efforts toward the needs and desires of those with whom they were working (Trattner, 1994). Clearly, as Simon (1994) summarizes, the first era of practitioners and theorists contributed indispensable elements to the emergent empowerment tradition within the social work profession.

We will return to this history under the section, "the feminist influence." Suffice it to say in short, that the history of social work is a proud history, the story of strong women and gentle men in many ways ahead of their time who worked for social reform or to help individuals in distress. There were, of course, some low moments—conformity under Hitler's Germany and under McCarthyism in the United States, and the dominance of psychoanalytical theory in the 1920s and 1950s. The intransigence of the radical right of today is similarly worrisome. Nevertheless, the spirit of the foremothers of social workers lives among us now, critical and irrepressible.

PROFESSIONAL WRITINGS AND POLICIES

The National Association of Social Workers is a politically viable and dynamic organization with a membership of over 150,000 (keep in mind that only approximately one-fourth of social workers are official members). With membership, subscription to *Social Work*, *NASW News*, and a chapter newsletter are automatic. NASW lobbies extensively for improved social welfare programs as well as for its own professional representations in health care, mental health treatment, etc. As an academic discipline, the political involvement sets social work apart from other related areas of specialization. Graduates of nationally accredited programs are able to benefit from having a credential that is regarded as professional (applied) rather than as strictly academic, or a degree which qualifies the recipient for a specific job.

Headlines from *NASW News* reports from 1999 concern such issues as: backing curbs on managed care; taking a lead on HIV; curtailing the ill effects of welfare reform; and standing up for affirmative action. These headlines say a lot about social work's continued social action on behalf of the poor and oppressed.

Among journals in the field devoted specifically to human rights and poverty issues are: *Afillia: Journal of Women and Social Work*, *Journal of Gay/Lesbian Social Services*, *Multicultural Social Work*, and *Journal of Progressive Social Work*. As the earlier editor-in-chief of *Social Work*, Hartman (1989: 388) proudly acknowledged her faith in the vitality and relevance of the profession:

It is just this position, our attention to person and situation and our refusal to retreat from mounting social problems by redefining them as personal defects, that creates the special character of social work. Such a position creates both dilemma and opportunities.

THE IDEALISM OF SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS

What brings students to major in social work? Why do people choose social work as a career today? Has their motivation shifted in the last ten years? In a random survey of 73 BSW and 72 MSW students at the University of Pittsburgh school of social work, Csikai and Rozensky (1997) found that overall, idealism ran high among all students, while altruistic reasons were reported as more important than professional reasons in their career choice. Similarly, in a survey of over 700 Midwestern undergradu-

ate social work majors, Hanson and McCullagh (1995) addressed these questions. The purpose of the study, conducted over a ten year period, was to determine if monetary rewards and prestige surpass altruistic motivations as reasons for pursuing social work as a career. Although men scored slightly higher than women on the self-interest factor, for both genders, service to others emerged as an overriding reason for choosing the social work major. This was a motivation, moreover, that did not change significantly over the course of the study. The predominant reason for entry into social work was to make a contribution to society.

Compared to undergraduate students, as one would expect, graduate social work (MSW) students are more inclined to seek career opportunities and autonomy in the relatively lucrative area of private practice (Specht and Courtney, 1994). A survey of NASW members (97 percent of whom have MSW degrees or above) indicates that only 18.6 percent of the members are engaged in private solo or group based full-time practice (Ginsberg, 1995), a 5 percent increase from 1988. Many other social workers engage in private practice part-time in addition perhaps to an agency job. Social workers, as shown in the 1995 membership survey, are primarily employed in mental health, family, and child practice areas, with most working in agencies, hospitals, or clinics. These data do not offer much support for Specht and Courtney's (1994: 149) statement that, "As social work has drifted into the field of psychotherapy, most schools of social work have drifted along with it." As these authors concede, recent surveys of MSW students do indicate that students express a desire to work with at least one of the disadvantaged groups traditionally associated with social work practice. In fact, the social work constituency is diverse. According to the latest statistics available, of students who received BSW degrees in 1997-1998, 29.2 percent were members of minority groups, the majority being African American (CSWE, 1999). Of those awarded master's degrees, 21.9 percent were minorities. This figure is up slightly at the doctoral level. Of social work faculty, 24.7 were minorities in 1998, and for doctoral degrees, the minority figure was 13.5 percent. These figures are strikingly high compared to the figures for other occupational groups. Women are even more disproportionately represented in the social work profession. Of those receiving master's degrees, 84% were women as were approximately two-thirds of those receiving doctorate degrees.

In light of the cultural and gender diversity of the profession, the keen attention to social issues of the literature, and the continued idealism of students, one can only conclude that social work has not abandoned the mission of its foremothers. Yet, given the forces of the radical right, the market economy, managed care, and the media campaign launched

against the recipients of aid, the challenges to social work are formidable. To what extent the budding social workers of today can maintain their idealism and enthusiasm under the circumstances remains to be seen.

MULTICULTURAL SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

Due to the importance of accreditation to university social work programs—graduates must have degrees from accredited programs to be considered professional social workers—the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) fulfills a vital, if at times intimidating function. On the other hand, a negative aspect is the often rigid standardization of the social work curriculum (see Markward, 1999).

People of color and other diverse groups constitute a large proportion of the clients social workers serve. In recognition of the need for multicultural competence, the CSWE mandate is for social work course curriculum to include content on ethnic minorities, women, and sexual orientation, ideally infused throughout the entire curriculum. Racially integrated accrediting teams monitor the programs to ensure that course syllabi and textbooks are geared toward human diversity. The importance of the recruitment and retention of minority and female faculty and students is emphasized. In a systematic analysis of leading social work journal and practice textbooks, however, Lum (1996) challenges the notion that attention to minority aspects of practice has been adequate. Although his quantitative analysis reveals a steady progression in emphasis on multicultural material in textbooks and journals from 1970 to 1995, his overall conclusion that cultural diversity is still largely neglected in the social work literature is well taken. In any case, social work is far more minority-oriented than other comparable academic fields (I base this observation on a survey of the literature of psychology and professional counseling) and the popularity of books such as Lum's (1996) *Social Work Practice and People of Color* and Gutiérrez and Lewis's (1999) *Empowering Women of Color* portends well for the future.

Although the United States may not lead the world in its social welfare policies, in the area of antidiscrimination legislation, it has paved the way. Paralleling national legislation, North American social work has moved from a reactive to a pro-active stance. In social work education in most of Europe, in contrast, a multicultural, pluralistic approach is espoused. The aim has been to be gender blind and color blind rather than pro-active. According to Lorenz (1994), this tolerance perspective does not address racism and discrimination as realities. Belatedly, the United Kingdom took a

decisive lead when the accrediting body directed social work educators to teach not only the skills for ethnically sensitive practice but the skills for challenging institutional and personal racism as well. Since the publication of Lorenz's text, unfortunately, this process of infusion of multicultural content has suffered a set-back stemming from reactionary government legislation, as we will see shortly.

America's Council on Social Work Education requires that five areas be covered in all social work training institutions: human behavior and the social environment, social work practice skills, research, social policy, and the field practicum. Additionally CSWE also requires that course content include attention to social justice, ethics and values, diverse populations, and populations at risk. The combination of macro- and micro-level offerings reinforces the person-in-the-environment conceptualization of the profession. Thus, while social workers may engage in community organization work, they may draw upon the basic counseling and interviewing skills in community activism and negotiation. Similarly, social work clinicians ideally will be aware of the external policy issues impinging on their clients' lives and of the importance of political advocacy on behalf of the disadvantaged and vulnerable.

Ethnic-sensitive practice raises social workers' awareness of racism in wider society, and of how social conditions related to powerlessness are integral to the experiences of persons of color. To be effective, social workers must be aware of their own prejudices and fears before they can help their clients achieve self-awareness. By identifying and building upon existing strengths, the worker empowers the client to get involved in mutual aid groups for social support as a first step in the change process (Gutiérrez, 1991; Gutiérrez and Lewis, 1999). In Canada, the British Columbia Association of Social Workers is pursuing initiatives to promulgate multiculturalism through cross-cultural immersion activities (Seebaran and George, 1990). In British Columbia, where over 22 percent of the population is now foreign-born, the establishment of a specific committee for the development of training programs and policy initiatives was essential. The CASSW (Canadian Association of Schools of Social Work) has fallen short of its U.S. counterpart in backing off from initiatives requiring gay and lesbian content to be infused throughout the social work curriculum, however (Maccoccio, 1998).

THE FEMINIST INFLUENCE

Just as the African and gay/lesbian lobbies within social work have been well-organized and effective in shaping CSWE and NASW policies, feminism has also been a major influence in the field. Feminist social work, the aim of which is to remove oppression due to sexism, has its roots in the women's movement of the 1970s. Yet as we know from the history of social work, strong women have shaped the profession from the start. The antifemale bias of psychodynamic theory which has been widely noted (Payne, 1991) can be viewed as a bit of an anomaly within social work history. In any case, when the psychoanalytical therapies were dominant in the 1920s and again in 1950s, the special needs of women clients and therapists took a backseat to protect men from women who might otherwise undermine them. Typically viewed as denying their feminine role and as "frustrated," women in leadership positions became fewer and fewer in the 1950s and 1960s. This trend was true for the social work profession as for society as a whole. The dramatic decrease in female authorship of policy and planning publications was a tangible indicator of women's declining role in policy leadership during this period (Brandwein, 1995).

Thanks to the grass-roots feminist movement that reemerged in the 1970s, awareness of women's needs and issues became paramount once again. Women's problems were depathologized and then politicized. Founded as a field of strong women (most of whom remained unmarried by choice) and gentle men who stood alongside them, social work stands uniquely among the professions as woman-centered, as Chambers (1986) notes. The fact that writers of the feminist school today decry the underrepresentation of females in top administrative positions shows that the feminist voice in social work is alive and well (see Andrews, 1990; Chambers, 1986; Dominelli and McCleod, 1989; Payne, 1991).

In both its history and approach, then, social work is fundamentally feminist in nature (Collins, 1986; Andrews and Parnell, 1994; Stere, 1986). Parallels between feminist thought and social work are found in their mutual belief that: the personal is political and vice versa; the problems lie in the structures of society rather than in the fault of the disadvantaged; the perpetration of poverty in women is systemic; and violence inflicted against women and children is an instrument of power (Andrews and Parnell, 1994). Both perspectives—feminism and social work—seek to bridge the gap between the personal and the political through the process of empowerment. Both perspectives challenge all forms of institutionalized oppression. The generalist model in social work, the predominant approach which incorporates ecosystems concepts and directs interventions at all levels of the system—the individual, the family, the

community, and society—also guides feminist practice. This multidimensional formulation belies the presumed dichotomy between psychotherapy and community organization and neatly bridges the gap between them.

Although the majority of social workers may not have the kind of ideological commitment to call themselves feminist therapists and to employ a systematic feminist methodology in their work, many therapists have come to question the highly normative views of the family that earlier had been *de rigueur* in family therapy. A proliferation of workshops, papers, and conference sessions focused on women's issues and gender sensitivity has given credence to the female voice and experience (Hartman, 1995). In light of developments since the mid-1980s, Mary Valentich (1996) fully expects that feminist perspectives will become more influential for all social work practitioners and their clients. Gutiérrez (1991) and Turner (1991) find feminist practice especially amenable to work with women of color.

Social work practice with women has developed in the last two decades from a concern about sexism and woman's issues to an emerging model of practice grounded in feminist theory, scholarship, and action (Bricker-Jenkins and Lockett, 1995). So, far from arguing that social work today has abandoned its mission, one could much more accurately conclude that social work, on the contrary, has expanded its horizons, moving into new directions without losing sight of the old. One cautionary note: A right-wing backlash against victims of society in conjunction with the economic dictates of managed care has created a barrage of criticism against the entire therapy field and against feminist therapists, in particular. This development with important consequences for all members of helping profession will be discussed more fully later.

THE NEW IMPETUS FOR GLOBAL AWARENESS

In a recent issue of *NASW News*, NASW President Josephine Allen (1998) calls on the membership for assistance in strengthening of the profession's effectiveness in the broader global arena. Allen calls, furthermore, for an enhanced international exchange of social work knowledge and practice experience. Although American social work textbooks are still embarrassingly "Americentric," the conjunction with CSWE's International Commission, Healy and Asamoah compiled *Global Perspectives in Social Work Education: A Collection of Course Outlines in International Aspects of Social Work*. The profession's growing international

commitment is evident in current initiatives such as the NASW Child and Family Well-Being Development Education Project; the link between regional NASW chapters with social workers in other countries (twinning partnerships); federal funding of a three-year NASW Development Education Project on Violence to examine the causes, impact, and solutions to violence internationally; and the existence of the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) of which NASW is a member, and of the International Association of Schools of Social Workers (IASSW) in which the United States is actively involved.

In recent years, the perspective of social work had broadened to challenge widely-held assumptions of industrial society, assumptions equating nonsustainable economic growth with progress. The sustainable development model, a central theme of such books as *Social Development* by Midgley (1995) and *The Global Environmental Crisis: Implications for Social Welfare and Social Work*, edited by Hoff and McNutt (1994) and *Social Welfare: A World View* (van Wormer, 1997) integrate environmental concerns and ecological principles. What is needed now, argue Hoff and McNutt, is nothing less than a complete re-thinking of our relationship of natural world. An understanding of the interplay between poverty and environmental degradation is central to the social development model. The imminent threat of global environmental collapse compels the social work profession to adopt a truly comprehensive ecological framework and to take a pro-active stance toward the depletion of resources and the promotion of policies toward sustainable social development.

Yet American social workers are just at the crossroads of assuming a world-wide and environmental focus, and of grasping the fact that social problems are becoming more interconnected and nations more interdependent in a global economy. May and Morris (1994) urge social workers to get involved in some of the many international exchange opportunities available through their professional membership.

Excellent resources are now available for social workers and researchers to learn of challenges, problems, and solutions in other lands. The *British Journal of Social Work* and *International Journal of Social Work* is the official journal of IFSW and IASSW. The *Journal of Multicultural Social Work* is an exciting addition to the literature. *Social Development Issues*, like the *Journal of International and Comparative Social Welfare*, focuses on nations of the South from an international social work perspective.

AN EMPOWERMENT PERSPECTIVE

The final source of knowledge for the argument that social work has not abandoned its mission is drawn from what Simon (1994) terms the empowerment tradition in American social work. This tradition is closely aligned to the feminist approach discussed above. Since the 1890s, as Simon informs us, “empowerment practitioners, in each era using different language to characterize their work, have viewed clients as person, families, groups, and communities with multiple capacities and possibilities, no matter how disadvantaged, incapacitated, denigrated, or self-destructive they may be or may have been” (p. 1).

Within the social work practice literature, a focus on client strengths has received increasing attention in recent years. Unlike related fields such as psychology or counseling, moreover, the term *the strengths perspective* or *the strengths approach* has become standard rhetoric in social work practice. The strengths perspective, as Kirst-Ashman and Hull (1997) note, assumes that power resides in people and that we should do our best to promote power by refusing to label clients, avoiding paternalistic treatment, and trusting clients to make appropriate decisions. Two popular textbooks, for example, *Generalist Social Work Practice: An Empowering Approach* (Miley, O’Melia and DuBois, 1998) and *The Empowerment Approach to Social Work Practice* (Lee, 1994) incorporate the principle of strengths into every phase of the helping process. Although the literature consistently articulates the importance of a stress on clients’ strengths and competencies, however, we must all be cognizant of the reality of standard clinical practice built on a treatment problem/deficit orientation, a reality shaped by agency accountability and the dictates of managed care. Third party payment schemes mandate a diagnosis based on relatively serious disturbances in a person’s functioning (e.g., organic depression or suicide attempts) and short-term therapy to correct the presenting problem. Furthermore, the legal and political mandates of many agencies, the elements of social control embodied in both the institution and ethos of the agency, may strike a further blow to the possibility of partnership and collaboration between client and helper (Saleebey, 1997).

A major challenge, according to Franklin, is how to integrate the social treatment technologies with social work’s knowledge of social change into one coherent strategy. For only through presenting a united front can social work prepare for the besiegement from conservative and punish-the-poor forces which have carried considerable sway since the 1980s.

The strengths perspective has been applied to a wide variety of client situations: work with the mentally ill, child welfare clients, homeless women in emergency rooms, the elderly, and African American families. The concept of strength is also part and parcel of the growing literature on

empowerment, feminist therapy, narrative therapy, client/person centered approach, and the ethnic sensitive model.

A presumption of health over pathology, a focus on self-actualization and personal growth, and a recognition that the personal is political, and the political, personal: These are among the key tenets of the strengths approach. Pertaining to groups and communities as well as individuals, the strengths perspective can help reveal the light in the darkness and provide hope in the most dismal of circumstances. As informed by strengths theory, the therapeutic goal is to help people discover their areas of strength so that they can build on them in an ever spiraling movement toward health and control. Effective social work practice is both an art and a science; the linking thread between them is the creativity and persistence and breadth of vision we can call our social work imagination.

OUR SOCIAL WORK IMAGINATION

Our social work imagination, a term comparable to C. Wright Mills' concept of the sociological imagination, refers to that combination of empathy, suspension of disbelief, insight and resourcefulness that makes for exceptional social work practice (van Wormer, 1997). The pronoun *our* is used to provide a more personal touch, a shared enterprise. Social workers need to be intermediaries, to open up the world to another, even as they gain a new or altered perspective from the same source. The energy of mutual discovery feeds on itself, recharges itself. Social work imagination makes it possible "to perceive the congruities in the incongruities, to discern the false dualism between the private and the public, to experience the beauty of social work against the bureaucratic assaults, and to see the past in the present" (van Wormer, p. 205).

A mark of greatness, writes Kendall (1989), is breadth of vision, a concept related to imagination. In her portrait of three extraordinary social work leaders of the 1930s—Alice Salomon of Germany, Eileen Youngusband of the United Kingdom, and Edith Abbott of the United States—Kendall stresses their deep commitment to international concerns. Every social work graduate at the University of Chicago in Abbott's day, for example, was exposed to a view of the field and the profession that encompassed history and comparative study. Salomon and Youngusband worked with the League of Nations and the United Nations. In their international vision and flexibility, these female pioneers personify what I mean by social work imagination. As Kendall (p. 30) concludes, "In embracing the necessity to join social reform with individual help, they long

ago settled the question of whether social work should be equally concerned with therapeutic action and social action.”

Recently at the 1998 Biennial Social Work Education Conference of the Midwest (not exactly a hotbed of radical thought), the social work imagination of the profession soared to new heights. Or maybe it was because I was looking for it. In any case, here was Ruth Charles of Winona State helping us to feel empathy for Hmong people as an immigrant population “beyond the culture shock.” And Tom Walz of the University of Iowa demonstrating the fiction and poetry to sensitize social work students to diversity issues and cultural richness. And Pat Kelley of the same university somehow managing to integrate narrative therapy with the requirements of managed care. Karen Kirst-Ashman of University of Wisconsin-Whitewater, provided us with a sample of exercises and role plays for the teaching of macro content. Katherine Byers of Indiana University, similarly, excited us with her description of innovative projects for students to influence state legislation and policy analysis activities. I could go on and on. The wealth of ideas exchanged at this regional conference makes a sharp contrast to some of the dreary empiricism that dominates the conferences of our sister professions, and if we are not careful, which will seep into our own.

In June, 1998, the theme of the Canadian National Social Work Conference was “Social Work—Our Roots, Our Future.” The Native or Aboriginal contribution to this event, for example, The Tree of Creation workshop on prisoner treatment echoed themes on cultural interconnectedness provided by the powerful keynote addresses at the start of each day.

CONCLUSION

In summary, social work has not abandoned its mission merely because some members of the profession are practicing clinical social work. A truly “Renaissance woman,” Bertha Reynolds was a psychiatric social worker, union organizer, and writer/commentator on the McCarthy era. In all her endeavors, her major contribution was to the mission of social work. And what was/is this mission? As Hartman (1991: 195) defines it, “The profession’s mission is to improve the quality of life of its clients, enhance social functioning, and intervene to make the environment on all levels more supportive and enabling.” This perspective is consistent with understanding the individual needs of clients and in addressing much broader issues impinging upon their happiness. Yet a critical issue for the profession as singled out by Hopps and Pinderhughes (1992) is its need to

come to grips with its dual obligation to social justice and the amelioration of individual problems. To build on an ethos of justice, schools of social work must help students integrate political-economic dynamics into their chosen fields of practice. Policy and practice, and community and individual work, must be seen in mutual interdependence.

The quest for *our social work imagination* reaches back to the world of our inheritance, to our foremothers—Addams, Konpka, and Reynolds—and forward to a burgeoning New Age of ecological awareness. By ecological awareness, I mean a sense of the synthesis, connectedness of things. Everything is connected: future to the past, the parts to the whole, the biological to the social, the inner to the outer (body, mind, etc.), personal to political, the local to the global. The future of potential social work lies in our grasping the essence of this awareness, this almost spiritual sense of beingness and relatedness. Perhaps, in this way, we can recapture some of the psychic and creative energies which have gone into making the field of social work what it is today.

The major threat to social work today, and this is true worldwide, does not come from *within*, it comes from *without*. It is the thrust toward privatization associated with subcontracting out of services, declassification of job requirements, the threat of agency layoffs, and a reduction in pay, benefits, and job security. The political war on welfare combined with a decline in skilled employment is also an assault on the profession most closely associated with social welfare. Meeting this challenge and still surviving as an established and respected profession will require tapping into the reservoir of *our social work imagination* (collectively and individually, historically and contemporarily) to salvage our integrity and our truth.

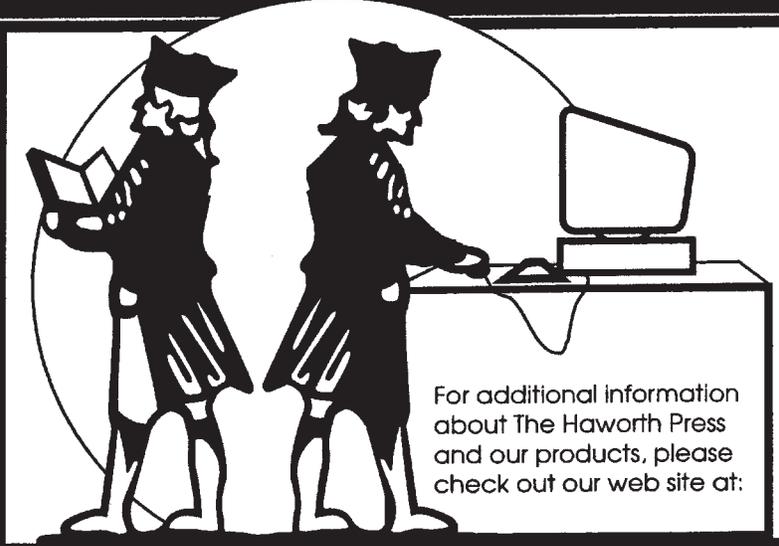
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The illustration depicts two figures in traditional academic regalia, including gowns and mortarboards. The figure on the left is holding an open book, while the figure on the right is standing at a desk with a computer monitor and keyboard, appearing to be using the computer. The background behind the figures is a large, stylized globe.