



Lessons from the Journey

Dear Social Work Practitioners,

As we commemorate Singapore's bicentennial year, we take time to remember Singapore's history and the people and events that have shaped our lives to be what it is today. As we reflect, we gain a better understanding of our present, we learn from mistakes made, and we build upon what was done well in the past. Reflection is, and should be a big part of our journey as social service practitioners in order to continually improve ourselves and our society. In this letter, I will share some of my reflections and observations throughout my journey in the social services which, I hope will serve as learning points for your own journey as well.



Continuous Learning

Through my years in the sector, I cannot emphasise enough the importance of continuous learning. Often times, we may think of education as simply passing a major examination, obtaining certain qualifications or a means to the end of getting a job. However, these views are narrow and miss the call of education. Education is the process of learning and equipping oneself in order to give back and contribute to the individuals and society we serve. With this end goal in mind, we can see why education is something that is lifelong and is a commitment that we make to pursue.



This is particularly important for social service practitioners. Social issues have been becoming increasingly complex, and we are called to be able to handle a variety of cases and complexities ranging from mental health, persons with disabilities to family violence. We need to be properly equipped to be able to handle a whole range of cases. Beyond classroom education or training, one can take initiative in equipping oneself through talking to older and more experienced colleagues who often have tacit knowledge to share that is not always taught in classrooms.

As we advance in our careers, some of us may consider specialising. Specialisation has its benefits as it allows us to go deep in a particular area of work that requires deep expert knowledge and skills. However, I would like to highlight that opting to specialise does not mean that one chooses depth versus a breadth of knowledge. The deepening of knowledge in a certain area should only happen after a certain breadth of knowledge is present. The danger of specialisation is to become too narrow in knowledge and exposure in one's specialisation, without having the know-how in broader issues. It is helpful therefore to take a step back once in a while to evaluate where we are and how we can develop both in depth and breadth of knowledge.



Courage

As social service practitioners, we are often called to exercise moral courage to pursue what is right despite the cost of doing so. This could mean going against the flow at times and not simply accepting the choices we have been handed. To do this, we need to reach down into the desires of our heart and the passion to do what is good and right, and to revisit our own definition of success.



Being morally courageous could mean rethinking a particular programme design and challenge our own assumptions about clients or partnership; it could mean taking the initiative to collaborate with a partner on a particular case notwithstanding the challenges anticipated; or it could mean taking time to pause and rest when you find yourself overly caught up with tasks and losing focus of the purpose of your endeavours. Whatever it is, we should always consider what the best interest of our clients is and have courage to pursue it even when faced with great difficulties. Such moral courage must not be impulsive but should be tempered with deep reflection, critical thinking and analysis.

Take Time to Remember

1. Humility and Gratefulness

There is a Chinese phrase 饮水思源, which means “when you drink water, think of its source”. It is a phrase used to remind us not to forget one’s origins and to be grateful for the blessings that we enjoy. This is an important principle to uphold as one journeys and progresses in one’s career or job.

Remembering helps us to be humble as we recall that who or where we are is not merely a result of our own achievements or hard work, but a product of the opportunities that have been given to us and the foundation that was laid by others. Nestled in humility is a sense of gratefulness that others have contributed to where we are in the present, and a sense of awareness of how small we are in the larger scheme of things.

2. Keeping true to your calling

Remembering also helps us to stay the course and to remain faithful to our calling. Many of us enter the social service sector because of a particular passion, conviction or mission. It may be the desire to help others, to better the lives of the vulnerable, or to stand up for the marginalised. Whatever it is, it pushed us to enter the profession and it is that which will keep us going when the work gets tough.



3. Remember the giants

“We are like dwarfs sitting on the shoulders of giants. We see more, and things that are more distant, than they did, not because our sight is superior or because we are taller than they, but because they raise us up, and by their great stature add to ours.” – John of Salisbury (Goodreads, Inc., n.d.)



As we continue to reflect on our journey in being professionals and specialists, it is useful to be mindful that we are often standing on the shoulders of giants. The work of pioneers and giants could be likened to seeding the ground and paving the way forward for growth and development. The operating environment of pioneers and giants were often demanding and there were less resources. The conditions demanded creativity and tested imagination. What was created, developed and tried gave form to what could be charted and directed today.

Moving Forward

We should continually develop our brains, courage, soul and heart wherever we are on our journey in the social services. Whether we have 5, 10 or 20 years of experience, let us keep in mind the following:

- **Brains:** We should develop a deep knowledge in our area of work and stay updated on the current research on what works and how various elements or factors contribute to or influence outcomes. Good professionals will want to ensure that they remain competent and continually refresh their vision.
- **Courage:** We should have good nerves to be bold and able to move toward our vision even with incomplete information or risky odds after deep thinking and analysis.
- **Soul:** We should be clear about the values that we stand for. Good professionals should lead with a compass and not by radar. While aware of the world around them, good professionals are oriented to a true north that does not waver. In contrast, a professional who makes decisions by radar will be constantly changing in response to external stimuli.
- **Heart:** We should be passionate about what we believe in and show compassion. Passion and compassion will root our decisions in concern for others.

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As the issues of our clients become more complex, our challenge is to stay focused on what the people we serve need and require of us to make their lives better, be it in protecting them, giving them hope or helping them to reach their potential. Let us also acknowledge with gratitude those who have helped us grow in our professional development, nurturing our strengths and honing our rough corners to be a better professional.

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