Expressing Our Truth, Expressing Our Care: A Collective Reflection on Humanizing the Social Work Classroom

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Abstract: The social work classroom calls us to consider topics of societal and personal relevance, including identity, oppression, and trauma. Which qualities and actions enable this process to challenge us and also affirm our and others’ humanity? This question guides the following reflection by nine social work master’s students and one faculty member. We narrate experiences that have shaped our understanding of and approach to transformative, humanizing interactions. Our narratives interweave experiences from the field, personal life, and the educational process. We relate our stories to social work education and pedagogical concepts, including safe and brave spaces and transformative learning.

***Keywords*:** education, pedagogy, transformative learning

Our, the authors’, reflective journey begins unconsciously and organically. My second year as full-time social work faculty member begins, and I (Siddhesh) notice that my heart and mind are increasingly guided by a question: How do we respond resolutely to the challenges of our time without replicating the dehumanization that underlies them? This question is permeated by a persistent, exhausted disenchantment … disenchantment with stances that seem passive in the face of profound suffering—rampant systemic inequalities and oppressions, an anthropogenic climate crisis that impacts all life on Earth, devastating wars fueled by greed and hate … and disenchantment with demonizing, polarizing narratives that seemingly imply that our collective transformation could occur without mutual understanding and action.

Unconsciously, I carry this disenchantment with me to the Human Behavior in the Social Environment course that I am facilitating at the University of Vermont over the 2021 academic year. I notice that my exhaustion seems to lift as I learn with this group of master’s students who so palpably care for each other and the world. They listen to, challenge, encourage, feel with, and comfort each other. Energized by our time together, I find ways to share my guiding question with this group, growing from their experiences and insights.

Organically, a collective reflection process unfolds in which we support each other to consider how we, as social workers, may simultaneously express our truths (i.e., bring our lived experiences to bear in service of direly needed social change) and our care (i.e., affirm our and others’ humanness). This value manifests in classroom dialogues, written reflections on course readings, and our general mode of interacting with each other. Noticing the emergence of this theme, I invite students to collaborate on a piece of reflective writing.

Narrating Truth and Care

An outcome of this collective reflection, the following stories narrate experiences that have

shaped our approaches to transformative, humanizing interactions. We, the authors, identify ourselves throughout our examples. To provide context for our perspectives (i.e., positionality), we note that we, as individuals, embody multiple identities that include (in alphabetical order): Autistic NeuroQueer who has birthed a child into this world, bi-cultural/racially liminal, Buddhist, cis man, cis woman, ethnically European/White, first-generation immigrant, from a low-income background, from a middle-class background, Jewish, LGBTQ+, mother, retired Air Force veteran, single parent, South Asian, trans woman, and USA-born. Our writing uses pseudonyms to protect the identities of persons in our stories. We relate our stories to the social work classroom with the intention of supporting other learner-practitioners on our journey of collective transformation.

Expressing Empathy

Empathy is a powerful tool for communicating truthfully and carefully. I (Brooke) imagine empathy not as walking in someone's shoes, but rather the willingness to be present in someone's pain and believe their emotional experience even if it does not match my own. Below, I share a professional and personal story about losing a child, which may elicit intense emotions.

When I reflect on empathy in my practice as a child protection worker, "Donna" comes immediately to mind. Donna personally identifies as someone who was experiencing homelessness and opioid addiction. Prior to the conversation highlighted below, we had been working together for three months with her child at home. Donna came to meet me to discuss her child entering state custody for the second time the night before.

Donna walks into the office with a hoodie over her head and tears rolling down her face. She makes no eye contact with me as she falls into the chair and places her head on the table. I wait to see if she will start talking. A moment passes, and I say, "Hi Donna. Do you want to talk, or would you like a moment in silence to gather your thoughts?"

Donna picks her head up from the table, glaring into my eyes as she yells, "You're never going to give him back to me, are you? All you do is ruin families. Brooke, I am desperate for my son! He is all I have!"

I'm brought back to sitting on a hospital bed. I am anticipating seeing my baby for the first time on the ultrasound monitor. The radiologist comes in and, after a few minutes, her face turns gray. She tells me that my baby has no heartbeat and the pregnancy is not viable. Desperation comes over me as I try to convince the radiologist that my baby is viable and can survive.

My consciousness comes back into the room, and I turn back to Donna. I ask if I can touch her hand on the table. She nods yes. I gently place my hand on top of hers and look into her eyes. I say, "Donna, I understand this feeling of desperation, and I want you to know that you are not alone right now. I want to work with you to help your family be together again." We sit, in silence, with my hand over hers as tears roll down her face. After a few moments, she looks up at me and says, "Thank you. When can I see my son?"

From this moment, Donna speaks to me with a different tone and collaborates with me and her team on how to overcome the obstacles facing her. Eventually, this leads to reunification with her son, a moment that was sealed with her hugging me in the courtroom and thanking me for being there with her.

Empathy does not mean that we must identify with every experience. I have no lived experience of losing custody of my child or experiencing opioid addiction. But I could identify with the feeling of desperation. I knew that, when I felt desperate, I needed someone to hold me and tell me we would get through it together. Though we have different experiences, we can sit together with our shared humanness. It takes practice to find the balance of not living in people's shoes but being present in their experiences. Since empathy provides a bridge to our shared humanity, it is relevant to practice in every setting. The social work classroom is a setting to practice these skills because most of our classmates are also exploring how they wish to show up in their practice.

Being Aware of Our Emotions and History, Calling Others In

Similar to many, I (Kathleen) have experienced hurt and difficulty, and the memories of these experiences can trigger unexpected emotional responses. When I feel strong emotions, I acknowledge their validity and their ability to impact others. Although this can be difficult to do, allowing myself time and space to process my feelings, rather than being reactive, usually enables me to express myself well and not cause others harm. As a social work student, I am reminded of a situation with a colleague that required me to process and resolve my emotions in the face of a triggering event. In the words that follow, I discuss sexual violence, and I encourage readers to take care while engaging with my words.

"I want you to read this," my colleague said. "I helped a survivor with a relief from abuse order last night. Take a look." I opened the document and the details jumped off the page—a graphic account of rape and child sexual abuse numbed its way through me. I mustered up a "Wow, this is really terrible." An understatement. She agreed and asked, "Do you have any questions?"

"No," I said. Thankfully, it was Friday.

Over the weekend, the images returned. Fragments of sexual violence invaded my mind, and my stomach cramped in a familiar pain. I began scanning my memory, "Why am I feeling this way?" My thoughts landed on my colleague's request, "I want you to read this." A rage rolled through my abdomen and up my neck. "How could she? She knows the statistics. She had no right to show me that without warning!" I had worked hard to heal from my own lived experience with sexual assault, and I was convinced she put me in that pain again. "I will confront her," I thought.

After some time, I knew I was misdirecting my anger. Seeking the appropriate response, I asked myself, "What do I truly want?" The answer was, "I want to feel better, I want to feel seen and understood, and I want to prevent this from happening again." I decided that, instead of confronting—or "calling out"— I would "call in" my colleague and share my feelings in an

honest and caring manner. When we sat down to talk, I started. “I want to thank you for going out of your way to offer me teachable moments. Last week, you asked me to read an affidavit. The content of it was really difficult for me, and I wish you had given me a content warning because it stayed with me all weekend.”

Her response was immediate. “I’m so sorry. I’m really desensitized to this stuff, and I definitely understand what you’re saying. I’ve forgotten to give warnings before, and it’s something I really need to keep working on. Thank you for bringing this up.”

I felt relief. “Of course. Thank you for listening and receiving my feedback.” With that, we moved on.

As a social work student, I have been, and will continue to be, exposed to difficult subjects that may trigger valid, intense emotions. Feeling these emotions is essential to healing and can also be a catalyst for important personal growth. Expressing these emotions with others must be done with care. “Calling others in” when feeling strong emotions allows me to show myself, my classmates, instructors, and colleagues how I feel, while maintaining respect and dignity for all involved.

Respecting Others’ Emotions and History

Individuals embody unique histories, built of countless interactions and relationships that shape their experience of conversations. Since I (Siddhesh) may know only a fraction of what another human has experienced, I wish to live my truths in a way that treats others’ emotions and histories—even when I am unaware of them—with care.

Reflecting on this value now, as a social work faculty member, I recall a phone call with a classmate from several years ago when I was a student. Our recent class discussions had focused on socioeconomic status and income inequality. We all knew that this classmate lived in a wealthy neighborhood, and I worried that some of my statements during those conversations may have felt personally directed. I dialed my classmate’s number intending to apologize.

When she answers, I begin, “I’m sorry that our conversations have been heated lately. I have strong feelings about affluence because of my class background and belief system. Buddhism tends to advocate against financial wealth. I know that you live in an affluent neighborhood, and I didn’t mean for my comments to feel personal.”

I notice that her voice sounds friendly and patient when she replies, “Yes, it’s obvious that you feel strongly about this. I agree, actually. I don’t like it when people inherit wealth and then don’t do anything for anyone. It’s different when someone has worked hard for what they have.”

I pause, losing myself in a wave of memory and emotion. I momentarily dissolve into a remembrance of Mumbai, where I was born, where I often felt disdain as I watched socialites drive luxury cars through corridors of people with no food, no clothes, no medicine, no roof. Reverberating through my mind, drowning out all else, is the Gandhian maxim, “Live simply so

others may simply live." In what must have been five seconds, I disappear in an ocean of my history, sadness, and anger.

My next words are, "Well, I think it's unethical to live in affluence. Even if someone 'earned it,' I still think it's unethical." She waits. Her voice is different when she speaks again. "Ok. That's a judgment. I feel judged." A few seconds pass. "You know, we don't have to be friends," she notes before stating that she needs to go. The phone call ends, and our relationship ends soon after.

I failed to see her as the embodiment of a unique history built of countless interactions and relationships, as someone eager to serve humanity in her way, who wants her daughter to see a mother who exemplifies success, who feels pain and anger when judged. I regret the loss of the humanizing conversations that didn't happen. I wish I could have been a friend, emphasizing her strengths and ability to contribute to a better world.

A humanizing social work classroom is sensitive to emotions and histories. Social work compels us to reflect on complex issues of identity. Tuning into the rich historical-emotional nature of lived experience reminds us that, while we embody identities, we cannot be diminished to them. And we dare not diminish another human whom we value as an ever-changing world of emotion and history.

Allowing Ourselves to Apologize When Needed

The experience of being human is messy, especially when in community with others. If I (Maverick) express only what I know and do not acknowledge what I do not know, I disempower those around me and do not stand fully in my own power. Emotional honesty is a powerful anti-oppressive skill because it dismantles hierarchical methods of centralizing power, and apologising is an important form of emotional honesty. Apologising requires critical reflection, introspection, and self-compassion. When we observe our mistakes with detachment and non-judgmental acceptance, we can allow ourselves to apologise.

As I reflect on this value as an MSW student, I recall an encounter with a client. I was doing case management at the start of my first-year field placement. I had no idea how to navigate systems, which resources existed, and how to access them. I had a client, Jay, who faced challenges accessing healthcare. They needed transportation, did not speak English, and were a trauma survivour. They had an important procedure at the hospital coming up, and we spent a few weeks preparing for the visit and setting supports in place.

After the procedure, we had a follow-up appointment. As I talked to some of the healthcare professionals during Jay's appointment, I realised there were things I could have done to better support them. I wanted to apologise. Due to COVID, all appointments were via phone, so I dialed Jay's number at our appointment time. After a couple rings, they picked up. "Hi Jay, how are you today?" I begin. "Doing good, as usual," they answer. We check in around their ongoing social work needs, and then I transition to address their recent procedure. I feel nervous, with a quickened heart rate and tight chest. I begin, "I've written down the social work needs you have

expressed, and we will circle back to them. I'd love to switch gears and check in about your appointment last week."

"Yes, it was really good, and you helped a lot with the transportation," Jay says. I pause, confused. Questions race through my mind. Have they thought about the ways in which I could have given better care and are trying not to make waves? Are they holding back feelings? I take a moment to connect information and consider each of our positionality in that moment. I proceed, "I'm sorry, Jay, because there were ways I could have supported you better during your appointment, and I didn't realise them until after your appointment had ended. I realised I should have written a note for your daughter to send an Uber driver at 4:00. That would've kept you from being in the position where you were embarrassed. I also didn't know that there were taxi vouchers and medical social workers at the hospital to help with transportation. Now I know for future appointments that I can ask about these possibilities." Jay answers, "That's not your fault. The mistake was the nurse's."

Again, I pause, surprised that Jay did not have more misgivings about how my ignorance affected their medical care. I know that my lack of experience contributed to their feelings of embarrassment and hurt at this appointment. At the same time, I must find a way to express my own truths without dishonouring or dismissing their truths. I take a couple of grounding breaths and say, "Even though you don't feel it's my fault, I know that there are ways I could have better supported you, and I want to acknowledge that. I know how to better support you moving forward and will do that." Jay gives a verbal acknowledgement and moves the conversation forward. I follow their lead.

The social work classroom is a place to practise self-compassion and reflection so that we may allow ourselves to apologise. This is crucial because the classroom is full of people with many different worlds of meaning. If we do not accept the likelihood that we will make mistakes; if we do not reflect on the many worlds of meaning each person holds and how our words may be received; if we do not sit with the discomfort of mistakes and imperfection, then we cannot allow ourselves to apologise, and we will hurt others. Relationships are the heartbeat of social work, and allowing ourselves to apologise is a critical component of maintaining a healthy heartbeat. It teaches us self-compassion, self-reflection, and empathy, and the classroom offers an environment to lean into these growing edges.

Providing Context for What We Share

Context is one of the most powerful tools that social work students have when sharing our truths and lived experiences in the classroom. Below, I (Joseph) offer an example of when I contextualized an important point in a class presentation by sharing the personal circumstances that frame my viewpoint. Providing context in the classroom setting can be emotionally laborious. Yet, it can transform our learning experience.

I fondly recall a presentation that I offered on youth homelessness. As I entered my Policy II classroom, I felt hesitant to share what I had prepared. While working on this presentation, I went back and forth about whether I would add a photo of myself during a time when I faced

housing instability to contextualize a key point on youth homelessness. As I began my presentation, I knew there was no turning back. I felt nervous, almost sick to my stomach, as I relived this terrible period in my life in front of a group of people who only know who I am currently.

To elaborate on a point, I stated, “I am discovering through my research and field placement that many think of people experiencing homelessness as folx you see on the street asking for change. I would like to show that this is not always the case.” I flipped to the next slide, which displayed a picture of me smoking a cigarette at a time when I faced housing insecurity. I had people’s attention for much of the presentation. But in this moment, I saw everyone lift their heads from their notepads and devices. I was not looking for sympathy, but I could detect it in others’ facial expressions as I continued to present. At that moment, I found myself feeling shocked. My voice began to shake as I pressed back emotions that came up from a time when I was most vulnerable. When I faced housing instability, I felt that no one around me cared. All of that changed in this moment. I recognized that there are people who care and that housing instability is a community concern. Thinking about that time, I wonder what could have happened if I’d had a case manager who cared for me the way my cohort does.

The photo in my presentation showed that there is no stereotypical person experiencing homelessness. In the moment, I felt exposed and concerned that my oversharing would annoy my peers. But I simultaneously knew I was making a point that had the ability to last a lifetime. I recognized that sharing context puts more weight behind words offered in the classroom. There is no deeper way to understand an issue than by experiencing it first-hand and learning from others’ lived experience.

As I begin the second year of my MSW program, I realize that a sense of healing can come from contributing context. When I share experiences, I feel a deep sense of comfort knowing that people truly care. My heart fills in a place where I thought there would be no emotion available. I learned from this experience that healing comes through the ability to share our experiences with people who have genuine interest in and compassion for them. Providing this context in the classroom helped me realize the importance of healing from the experiences I have faced to best serve current and future clients.

Allowing Ourselves to Circle Back When Needed

Expressing truth and care takes many shapes. What has become apparent to me (Lily) is the beauty of collaborative truthing and caring, mutual acts that elicit empathy between parties, shared instead of simply taken. To allow oneself to “circle back when needed” is such an act. The need to revisit a moment suggests the feeling of something left unsettled—a misspoken sentiment, a lingering silence. To return to that moment illustrates a quality I find potent in social work practice: the notion that realities are fluid and their capacity for progress lives in our own abilities to try something new.

Presently, I am approaching the end of my first year as an MSW student and have been reminding clients at my internship of my imminent departure. This reflection is about one such

conversation with a client—I'll call him "Farid"—whom I've worked with for most of my internship. I am his case manager at a mental health agency. He does not speak English, so the entirety of our relationship has been facilitated through dozens of faceless phone interpreters.

Recently, I had been helping Farid navigate the complexities of starting a microbusiness. He has maintained what I perceived as a certain distance in our work together. He is polite, generous with gratitude, but rarely what I consider emotionally vulnerable. As such, I assumed the news of my departure would be just another detail. This, I would find, was a harmful assumption.

We had just finished discussing the latest details of his business plan. I glanced at my notepad and noticed: "Remind F you're leaving soon." Feeling that our conversation was ending and realizing I had five minutes before supervision, I said, "Before we go, I wanted to remind you my internship is ending soon and someone else will be stepping in." After a brief silence, I quickly followed up with, "Don't worry, I will fully brief my replacement and we can all speak together if you'd like me to introduce you." More silence and then, "Okay, I understand. Goodbye." Click. Immediately, I knew something was wrong… He always thanks the phone interpreter before hanging up our three-way call.

I was left unsettled into that evening. Despite not having a call scheduled, I decided I would try him the next day. When he answered, I knew this was a rare opportunity for us, separately and together. "I didn't feel good about how our conversation ended yesterday. I'm afraid I didn't leave us enough space to talk about my leaving. If you're open, can we revisit it?" He responded, "I didn't have the words then, but you have become like family to me. No one has been there for me like you have. I will miss you very much." For the next hour, we spoke about all we had done together. I learned more about him and myself as a social worker during that phone call than all of our previous conversations combined. "Thank you for calling me back, Lily. This was good." Then he thanked the interpreter for her time and hung up.

The collaborative care of circling back was realized. Yes, the box had been checked once I had told Farid I was leaving, but my responsibility toward him and myself remained unfinished until that second call. To circle back with him was to honor my instincts, to care for a human—not simply a client—and to trust that he would hold my authenticity with his own. It may not work like that every time but, here, circling back opened a door to a room neither Farid nor I knew had been there. For that, I am grateful to us both.

While this particular experience occurred in the field, allowing ourselves to circle back is a practice I believe has the potential to enrich any interaction. In the classroom, allowing ourselves to circle back means allowing ourselves to demonstrate humility and curiosity and an opportunity to expand the perspectives of those present. If my social work education has taught me anything to date, it's that knowledge is not finite, especially in the realm of understanding human experience. When we allow ourselves to circle back, we invite a larger story into the room.

Mindfulness of Tone and Energy

Human communication is a complex process involving words, gestures, facial expressions, and other body language. Additionally, we all have experiences and emotions that affect the energy with which we convey information. These can have an additive effect, and the tone and energy we bring to a conversation can have as much or more of an impact than the words that we use. Consequently, I (Maddie) must be mindful of these aspects of communication when speaking with others. Please be aware that the following narrative mentions self-harm and may be triggering for some readers.

While working as a residential counselor, a resident, “Amy,” voiced that she felt trust and safety in my presence and confided that she could not stop from physically harming herself despite making progress in therapy. I found that she had never looked at this behavior through the lens of addiction, individually or with a professional. I told her how Buddhism and meditation practice had been monumentally helpful in my healing journey with substance and process addictions, and she showed great interest in approaching her self-harm recovery from the standpoint of addictive behavior. With her permission, I visited the alcohol and drug counselor to suggest adding his group to her schedule.

My prior interactions with this counselor had not been particularly pleasant. He did not like to hear suggestions from others and had turned down my requests to host a meditation group focused on addictions of any type. I approached the conversation with negative energy and a defensive tone.

I sat down and said, “Amy has confided in me that she has been attempting to harm herself, and I told her that approaching this behavior from an addiction standpoint might be beneficial. I think you should join her support team and allow her to attend the addiction group.” I was visibly uncomfortable, pushy, and without humility. “If I felt that she would benefit from my group and assistance, then I would have already done this,” he replied. “This group is for residents with substance use issues. Her presence and discussion of self-harm could trigger other members to relapse. You are just a residential counselor here, not a case manager or therapist. You should leave these decisions to those staff members,” he continued. I felt angry, dismissed, and increasingly tense. The stored energy of past invalidations swirled throughout my mind and body. Realizing that I could easily get verbally defensive or say the wrong thing, I felt my heart and mind clench. I stood up and muttered, “Sounds good, thanks,” walking out of his office. I decided that I had to reassess my approach to help Amy.

I approached him again a week later with different tone and energy, with vulnerability, curiosity, and the humility of a learner. “I’d like to revisit our conversation from last week. I feel that I may have come across as defensive and pushy. Do you think that Amy might be able to sit in on a group with you and see how things feel for both of you?” I asked questions and shared my own history, and he revealed some of his. “It seems that we are both quite passionate about recovery, huh? I admire your willingness to help and advocate for Amy,” he said with a smile. My heart and mind were open, and I became mindful of the unique feeling that arises when I feel heard and understood. “Thank you for allowing me to revisit this conversation with you

today," I said, reaching my hand out to shake his. With my defenses down, I was able to express what I wanted to say with an energy and tone that invited curiosity from the listener. He admitted Amy into his group.

The importance of tone and energy is also evident in the social work classroom. Every student brings their own histories and emotions about topics discussed. Some may feel insecure, wondering where, how, and why they fit into this new learning environment and field. These factors can lead to tensions within the individual and between us all. Remaining mindful of our tone and energy in this setting is a powerful way to ease this tensity and to create an environment that welcomes all ideas, emotions, and truths.

Trying on Ideas

In social work classrooms and in the field, we are exposed to diverse perspectives. Absorbing new knowledge invites the opportunity to try on different ideas and discover how they feel. The beauty of this concept is multifaceted. First, it allows us to name where an idea comes from, honoring whoever gifted us with this new frame of mind. Additionally, trying on ideas is accompanied by flexibility and choice, with permission to experiment, reflect, and discover. When we name to ourselves and others that we are trying on an idea, we normalize that our perspective may evolve. We are not bound to defend this idea rigidly, and it is okay if we end up detaching from it entirely. Finally, as we try on ideas, we can consider our intention. Perhaps we are interested in exploring a lens that differs from our own to see how it might open our heart and mind to new perspective. Or maybe we are trying on an idea we find attractive and wish to adopt, with the freedom of being in fluid relationship with it.

As I (Molly) conclude my second semester as an MSW student, I feel how this concept has shifted my presence in group discussions over the year. It has encouraged me to loosen my grip on ideas that I am just dipping my toes into instead of pretending that I am an expert. An example that comes to mind is the way I spoke in class of an idea relatively new to me: community care. I had been introduced to this concept by a colleague as a more expansive way to think about self-care. Infatuated by the idea, I took it on as my own, holding it tight and leaving little space for exploration.

Fast forward to my first semester of graduate school when a colleague referred to self-care in a classroom discussion. "Here is my moment to sound smart," I thought as I raised my hand and announced, "I prefer community care, as it highlights our interconnection and removes the sole onus on the individual." Nods trickled throughout the room, and I could feel walls building around this idea in my mind. Though I believed what I said, by not acknowledging that this was an idea I was still trying on, my words felt definitive. In reality, I had not yet spent extensive time sitting with the nuances of this concept and what exactly it meant to me. Further, it sounded as though I was expressing an original idea when, in fact, it was one I was borrowing.
As I dug my heels into community care, my ability to reflect on the complexity of this idea became limited. I am brought back to an email I received from my professor, in which he asked me about a comment I had made suggesting to our class that the term self-care perpetuates a culture of self-reliance. Earlier that week, this professor had held a self-care workshop for our

class. As I read the email, my cheeks burned and my mind fired off questions. How could I have missed this connection? Why wasn't I more intentional with my language? Did my words cause harm? This was immediately followed by the thought, "I actually benefited from the self-care workshop, so what exactly was I trying to communicate? What does community care encompass for me?" It wasn't until this moment that I paused to look at my relationship with this concept. New questions flooded in as I recognized this was an idea I was still trying on, and I felt those walls start to crack. I asked myself, "Are self-care and community care in opposition? Is this a binary, an either/or? Is self-care a form of community care? How might community care look and feel across different contexts and communities? What makes a community?"

My new openness to explore prompted me to be more transparent in classroom discussions about where I had learned of community care and that it was an idea I was "trying on." This shift has helped me play with my definition and deepen my understanding of what it means to me. "Trying on" ideas has allowed me to speak with truth and permit perspectives to evolve. Along with naming where an idea originated, I have found that saying, "I am still discovering what this idea means to me" has led to richer discussion and learning. If social work classrooms are to invite growth, perspective-taking, and holding multiple truths, then let us welcome trying on ideas into these spaces.

Giving Grace to Ourselves

In our endeavor to express ourselves with care, we sometimes come up short, words do not form correctly, and harm occurs. Any of us, no matter how experienced, may negatively impact someone during a careful conversation. This creates opportunities for grace. I (Alistair) understand grace, in this case, as a combination of patience and forgiveness that recognizes that we are all learning and that calls us to forgive ourselves and others when, while learning, things do not go to plan. Grace softens regret and perseverative negative thought. These, while valid and important, can become unproductive to learning when we find ourselves walking on eggshells for fear of messing up.

I recall a group experience from my undergraduate work. Our group was secluded in an unairconditioned conference room of a residence hall where we would be doing diversity, equity, and inclusion training for two weeks. Every member of the group was White-identifying except for one Cuban-identifying person (whom I refer to as "T"). As usual, a generic icebreaker was put forth. "Can everyone go around in a circle and say their names, their pronouns if they are comfortable doing so, and who your hero is? It can be anyone alive or dead," the facilitator began. Another group member (whom I refer to as "H") stated, "Fidel Castro." We all looked at him. "But specifically, when he was younger and a civil rights lawyer."

The facilitator quickly moved the conversation on. T stood up soon after, seemingly holding back emotions, and left the room. We all silently knew why, and H looked ashamed. Harm had occurred. During our lunch break, H expressed shame and regret. He said, "I should apologize to T. I didn't realize that it would cause harm." At this time, many of us realized that it is a privilege to be able to divide someone who oppresses into different chapters and tease out the positives.

We rejoined as a group. T expressed, "My family suffered a lot because of Castro. We had a lot taken from us because of him, so hearing you say he was your hero was a lot."

H was both receptive and racked with shame. His head hung low, and his eye contact was nonexistent. In the following weeks, we often reminisced on positive memories from training. Inevitably, the incident would come up and H would express shame and regret. Months later, H, another colleague, and I were out to dinner when the incident came up. H still voiced regret, but his face wasn't consumed with shame and his head did not bow. He had given himself grace.

Giving grace to oneself matters in a classroom because it allows us to interact more bravely. This can look like asking questions that push us as social workers to have difficult conversations. It allows us, after unintentionally causing harm, to forgive ourselves and empowers us to be part of a generative classroom, benefiting others with our participation.

Giving Grace to Others

Along with the grace we give ourselves, learning to give grace to others allows for continued dialogue and deeper understanding of others' viewpoints. Conversing in a way that humanizes and expresses care can be especially difficult when we are offended, hurt, or deeply disagree. However, the essence of expressing truth and care is to center relational connection in the context of discussion. We recognize that we are speaking to another person who, as a fellow human, is worthy of dignity and respect, who shares our desire to feel heard and understood. Similarly, we realize that, just as we might make mistakes unknowingly, others also make mistakes. By offering grace to others, we choose to encourage respectful communication and offer a bridge of understanding.

I (Melissa) can't hear anything the other person is saying. My defenses are fully alert, and my mind races to guard myself and counteract what is being said. My first thoughts are, "Why do I feel like I'm personally being attacked? Why am I feeling offended?" I had just begun my MSW coursework when a friend came to visit. We had always loved debating various issues, but the past few years of political disagreements highlighted by the COVID pandemic had strained our friendship. Still, this moment feels comfortable and like old times as we talk face-to-face. As the discussion moves toward my classes, she starts criticizing my future profession: "What a bunch of bleeding hearts. The only thing social workers accomplish is making people feel entitled and victimized." I feel incensed, and I think to myself, "I'm not going to waste my time trying to defend myself to her." The feelings and thoughts become so big that I'm unsure if I have words to express them in a way that she can hear. Then I remember, "This is my friend. I want to be a voice in her life that offers different perspectives." I muster up an attempt to humanize myself and the profession, chuckling, "Hey, you realize that I'm one of those bleeding hearts who hopes to solve societal problems, right?"

With a few weeks of classes under my belt, I saw social work as a profession that seeks to effect change both on an individual and systemic scale. To make such transformational changes, would I commit to speaking and listening in a way that encourages future dialogue and influence? As I sit struggling between my natural instinct to dismiss my friend and the head knowledge that I

am "othering" her because of her differing perspectives, I feel this is the moment to choose to engage instead of dismiss and shame. I recognize that it is easy for me to want to humanize myself in her eyes, but it is a struggle to want to hear and give weight to her voice. I dread what she might say next and how that might further alter my opinion of her and our friendship. I take a difficult step—I ask inquisitive questions: "What are things that social workers can accomplish? When is someone a true victim? Why don't you think the government has a role to play in helping those who are forgotten or left behind?" I feel such relief when I find that our conversation takes a pleasant and constructive turn. Some of her answers even surprise and challenge me as I listen to the heart of her concerns. She, in turn, hears me with greater openness.

I realize that not everyone will be open to dialogue when offended. Nor does every conversation need to continue. However, when I think about how polarized and separated in our understanding of the "other" we are, it seems more important than ever to offer grace and to fight dehumanizing those whom we don't understand. In some ways, I find it easier to offer this respect and care to my MSW peers, who I know come from a place of care, than to people who offend me and to whom I feel either unrelated or, conversely, the closest. The social work classroom is a perfect environment in which to grow these muscles of offering grace to others.

Conclusion

We, the authors, hope that our stories will serve other social work learner-practitioners as we consider how to respond to difficult realities while humanizing ourselves and others. Through our individual and collective reflection, we have come to a better understanding of some of the qualities and actions that humanize us, others, and the social work classroom. While this reflective process is never-ending, the stories that we have shared represent tangible steps on our journey of expressing truth and care—bringing our lived experiences to bear in service of direly needed social change while affirming our and others' humanity.

Such steps are critical for social work learner-practitioners because, as indicated by the field's primary professional organizations in the United States, responding to oppression, identity, and trauma is a non-negotiable commitment in social work education and practice. The Council on Social Work Education (2015) states in its *Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards* that social workers must understand "the intersectionality of multiple factors including but not limited to age, class, color, culture, disability and ability, ethnicity, gender, gender identity and expression, immigration status, marital status, political ideology, race, religion/spirituality, sex, sexual orientation, and tribal sovereign status" (p. 7). The National Association of Social Workers (2017) points to a similar constellation of identities in its *Code of Ethics*, which calls social workers to "obtain education about and demonstrate understanding of the nature of social diversity and oppression" (p. 1). The importance of centering these issues in social work education is unambiguous.

But the question of how to engage these topics is a matter of interpretation. One way in which social work thinkers have interpreted their process is in terms of "safe" and "brave" spaces. Holley and Steiner (2005), for example, write that the "safe space" metaphor describes "a

classroom climate that allows students to feel secure enough to take risks, honestly express their views, and share and explore their knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors" (p. 50). They also note that this does not imply a classroom free of discomfort and struggle. Extending this argument, Simon et al. (2022) point out the subjectivity of "safety," which may have contradictory meanings between members of a classroom. What feels safe for one person may feel oppressive for another. Thus, Simon et al. and Shelton et al. (2019) state that the classroom experience must instead be "brave." Shelton et al. (2019) assert that brave spaces move past "polite, surface level conversations, [and] confront both the implicit and explicit ways in which inclusion and exclusion, dominance and subordination, and belonging and alienation manifest for people with different identities" (p. 113).

Our, the authors', stories suggest that courage and safety are not mutually exclusive but, rather, mutually supporting. We grow from experiencing and expressing challenging truths. Yet, this growth occurs in the context of humanizing care. Indeed, humanization is an essential condition for what bell hooks (2014) describes as "border crossing," (p. 131) where worlds of meaning can exist in dialog with each other and, thus, provide fresh possibilities for learning and growth. Learning experiences that we may call "transformative" necessarily integrate challenging truths and humanizing care. Fook and Solomon (in press) state that transformative social work education encompasses values of non-violent perspective sharing, collaborative learning, humility, and a critically reflexive exploration of identity. These conditions encourage classroom experiences in which challenges serve as the catalyst for ongoing, vital meaning making (Christie et al., 2015; Mezirow, 1997). We, the authors, believe that our stories, while compelling, are but a snapshot of the many transformative experiences that occur in social work classrooms. Our hope is that our sharing will spur further exploration—including personal narratives and broader empirical inquiry—of how transformative experiences and the social work classroom co-create each other, and of how the dialectic of truth and care may enable "a shift of consciousness that dramatically and permanently alters our way of being in the world … and our sense of possibilities for social justice, peace and personal joy" (O'Sullivan et al., 2002, p. 46).

Undoubtedly, the path toward social justice, peace, and joy is never-ending. It is heartening, though, that this reflection begins with an account of disenchantment and ends having demonstrated the human potential for connection and growth. Our stories illustrate that the journey of transformation, while nonlinear and endless, comes alive precisely at the meeting point of challenging truths and humanizing care.

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