

On Being Bold, Valuing Process, and Cultivating Collegiality

Keren Ludwig
Priska Imberti

SUMMARY. Professor Roselle Kurland's use of self was exemplary; she was bold, valued process, and cultivated collegiality. In this paper, the authors examine these qualities, which they seek to emulate, and which contribute to excellence in social work practice. Examples from Roselle and the authors' practice are used to illustrate these behaviors. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2006 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

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One of the authors was posthumously visited by Professor Roselle Kurland in her sleep:

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I walk into the back of a classroom. The students have their chairs in a semi-circle with their backs facing me. Roselle is in the middle of the circle and is talking with the students about their groups. Roselle is very engaged; she waves her hands and, as she speaks, her voice rises and falls to punctuate the details. She might be talking about “equifinality” or “staying in the mess.” I am thrilled to see this. This is what I have been longing to experience with her again. Suddenly I am struck by the ephemeral nature of this life-after-death teaching moment and I start to cry. Roselle looks up and, without distracting her students, she shushes me. Then, in a half whisper, and with a smile, Roselle tells me to keep the fact that she is dead to myself. Roselle returns to teach the students and I watch.

Roselle’s message to us is that it is still possible to pass on her vibrant legacy, and that in her teachings, she is alive. Her message, teaching, and writing are gifts that she leaves to all of us. We can share these gifts with others even if we never knew her. We feel this is her mandate.

Having said that, Roselle did write volumes but there are three very unique lessons that she gave through her “use of self,” which we aim to emulate and would like to share in this paper. They are: being bold, valuing process, and cultivating collegiality. These purposeful uses of self will be explored and illustrated with examples from our own and Roselle’s practice.

Use of self, or professional use of self, are terms often referred to but rarely defined. In this paper, the act of using the self can be understood as the following:

[a worker] is aware of himself as an agent, aware of self as personally involved, aware of the need to discipline the personal involvement, and is able to own and maintain awareness of the self and professional self, making conscious use of the latter. (p. 21, William Rosenthal as summarized by Lewis, 1991)

In addition to being aware of reactions and selective about which to demonstrate or act on, Lewis (1991) adds that as an educator, his conscious use of self helped students achieve learning goals. This is definitely something that we saw in Roselle and an aspect of her that we try to internalize. In our practice, conscious use of self facilitates our being available to clients, our ability to make institutional change, and to work effectively with peers, supervisors, and supervisees.

BEING BOLD

“Be bold!” said Roselle, “Just say it!” If and when we would complain about our internships, jobs, or even a policy we disliked, Roselle would listen but also direct us to take the complaint back to whom it belonged. This is not easy.

As workers, we know what is right and just for our clients. Yet we also know that the environments we find ourselves in may not always be hospitable to client needs. We know that when we express ourselves we may face consequences ranging from dirty looks to putting our jobs in jeopardy. Being bold means that it is better to express oneself and face the consequences than to be only half a social worker, an automaton, or a bureaucratic rubber-stamper. Yet workers know that to survive agency life they must choose battles wisely. We often wonder if Roselle the worker was as bold as Roselle the professor. Since she has died we feel that we must be even bolder because she is no longer here to debate whether a particular situation calls for boldness or not. The following is an example of one of us deciding to be bold:

As a school-based Spanish-speaking social worker, I was recently sought out by Elena, a twelve-year-old immigrant from Central America. Elena spoke no English and showed a speech delay in Spanish that had yet to be diagnosed by the school. The school district had taken the stance that a monolingual, immersion-based English language environment would best help immigrant students learn English. Elena approached me and said, “I want to borrow books from the school library but I don’t know how to and I don’t know where the library is.” I took Elena to the library and helped her to register for borrowing privileges. Elena asked for a book in Spanish or a bi-lingual book. I translated this request to the librarian who responded that she had been “strongly encouraged” by the district not to stock any foreign language books. The librarian offered Elena some picture books with no words at all. These books were meant for babies. I felt this was a moment that called for boldness and told the librarian, “Well, I would like to take you and ‘the district’ to China with no knowledge of the Mandarin language and immerse you into the culture without any signs or anything at all to help you. Let’s see how well you do!” I pursued the matter further and discovered that there is a library in the district with foreign language books. The librarian has agreed to bring

them to our library through inter-library loan, and they are now available to Elena.

Being bold means recognizing that we have something to say and that there is no one else who is responsible to say it for us. It also means that we take a strong stance and own it. In the above example, the worker took a strong stance and advocated for the student. She also communicated that the librarian was responsible to advocate for the needs of children rather than serving the district's mandate. The worker made a demand that the librarian be bold as well.

In "Not Just One of the Gang . . ." (1993) Roselle and Robert Salmon have written of the importance of teachers and supervisors modeling behavior for students:

Since students will, to some extent, model themselves after the teachers they respect, perhaps one of the most important characteristics for the teacher is that of passion—passion for the subject and learning to be connected to the work with clients. (p. 166)

When Roselle was bold she effectively modeled passion; wild horses could not get her to be silent on an issue she cared about. The effect of Roselle's boldness was paradoxical. On the one hand it meant that it was not always easy to be with her because she held us accountable in ways that could feel uncomfortable. At the same time, one could always be sure of how she felt, which made for a very secure feeling.

Roselle was clear about wanting to be "challenging with an arm around the shoulder" and she blended these things well. There is an art in this: she challenged the things we said or did while supporting us as people. She did not analyze us or diagnose us with pervasive or fatal personality flaws. Since she never held anything back, including the times that she celebrated us, we could be confident that we knew how she felt in the moment.

VALUING PROCESS

Valuing process is something Roselle would refer to often when she spoke of "staying in the mess." This means that she was less interested in outcome than she was in truly grappling and engaging with the matter at hand. Roselle's interest in "the mess" was made very clear in her and Robert Salmon's elaboration of John Dewey's problem solving ap-

proach (1910) in which step three—exploration of the problem—is given most page space:

The problem is explored. As it is explored, additional information may be gathered from the individual about the situation. Group members need to really listen to what the individual is saying. They may ask questions about the problem and about the feelings of the individual. As they listen and question and come to understand the problem through the eyes of the individual who has raised it, they develop empathy and communicate that along with their understanding, concern, caring and support. (p. 9, 1992)

When we spoke with Roselle she would put this third step into practice. She would ask us questions to help her, and us, to really parse out what we had in mind. She would not accept platitudes or jargon; she needed to know exactly what we meant. In exploring and seeking to deeply understand what we had to say, and by telling us directly to do so, she demanded that we “be specific!”

This process oriented, non-judgmental stance was very alien for many of us who studied with her. One of the authors was particularly moved:

I grew up in an environment that valued outcomes and accomplishments; particularly in higher education. I never felt I could measure up to what was expected of me in this arena. Being given permission to struggle was miraculous for me because so much of my time was spent doing just that.

Roselle’s valuing of process made it easier for us to really open up our practice to her, and our own, examination. This is a gift we retain today. It allows us to become better workers.

The authors try to replicate this stance in their own practice and extend it to others. One of the authors reflects on her role as a new field instructor:

I am a field instructor to a student for the first time and I have been thinking about the fact that I have very high expectations of her. When I consider these expectations I realize that my hope is not for her to perform or to “get it right.” Rather, my wish is for her is to fully engage in the struggles inherent in learning to be a social

worker and discovering new and genuine ways of interacting with people.

One of the ways the author encourages the student to be in touch with her struggles is through modeling that it is okay to do so. The author is transparent about her own faults and struggles while also showing competence, confidence, and ability.

Being transparent about strengths and faults was something that Roselle did. She had no problem taking credit for what she knew and what she could do. She was open about her shortcomings as well. This quality is illustrated by the following vignette that comes from a class designed to help students write scholarly articles:

A student decided to write about the psychosocial effects of lipodystrophy and social work intervention with those who experience it. Lipodystrophy refers to physical changes in the bodies of people taking a particular set of HIV medications. This student wanted to use his own experience of lipodystrophy, particularly the radical transformation of his face, as a way to connect the reader to the experience. When he presented this in class, Roselle talked about how important it was for workers to share their experiences. She also said to the student, “You know when we first discussed this privately in my office, I had difficulty sitting with it. The first thing I said to you was ‘I don’t see what you are talking about. I would never know you had HIV if you didn’t tell me. There is nothing wrong with your face.’ I think I was rushing to solutions because it was hard for me to stay in the mess.”

Hearing that an admired professor struggled in this way was profound. It let us know that having difficulty with the painful things others faced was normal and that if we failed to stay in the mess with them we could own up to it and come back to it again. Roselle showed, by example, that we all have ordinarily faulty and extraordinary parts of ourselves. They co-exist together and we use them as workers—whether we like it or not.

COLLEGIALITY

Roselle once complimented the authors on their collegial relationship saying: “You can have classmates, you can have friends, but to have a

colleague is very rare.” Elsewhere, writing with her colleague Andrew Malekoff, they have written:

We need to seek out and then value true colleagues—those who will listen, understand, share, accept, challenge, affirm, validate, support, disagree, respect. . . . True colleagues are, indeed, rare. We need them. We need to seek them out. And when we find them, we need to treasure them. And in the work that we do, that is so very demanding, difficult, moving and special, we also need to be real colleagues to others. (2002, pp. 6-7)

The authors consider themselves to be colleagues. This is so in spite of the multiple differences between them. Like Kurland and Malekoff (2002), one of us lives in Long Island and the other in New York City. One of us loves to converse by e-mail while the other can’t stand it and prefers the telephone. One of us is casual and the other formal. One of us is romantic and long-winded (or thorough), the other is neurotic and curt (or to the point). In spite of these differences, we experience that, like a group, the whole of us is bigger than the sum of our parts. As a team, we can accomplish things that we cannot do apart. It is also more fun for us and takes some of the agony out of things like writing or putting ideas together for presentation. Yet at times, the agony is increased because we have to confront disagreements with each other. We rely on our history and track record together at these challenging times to help us put forth our best efforts and give each other the benefit of the doubt.

The authors find that the most basic ingredient of their collegiality is a generosity of spirit. This means first and foremost being generous with time; time on the phone, time on the dreaded e-mail, time on the Long Island Rail Road, time on the Brooklyn Queens Expressway, time at conferences, time with each other’s families and time at the mall or at the movies. Like all other social workers, we are busy but we have made a conscious choice to invest in each other and ourselves by nurturing our relationship with time. Being able to “accept, challenge . . . [and] disagree . . .” (Kurland and Malekoff, 2002, p. 6) is not easy, but these aspects of a relationship will never develop if they are not fed by the gift of time.

Another way we see generosity of spirit being important is in flexibility of roles and a willingness to accept criticism. We are in awe of all that Robert Salmon and Roselle Kurland have done together as partners in terms of writing and being leaders in the field of social work with groups. We have always been very interested in the nitty-gritty of their

partnership which spanned many years. We would often ask Roselle questions like—how did you meet Bob? where did the ideas come from? how did you write? One day Roselle told us the following story:

Bob and I always wrote separately but at one time he wanted to write together. I thought this would be very difficult but I said okay and he came to my office at the appointed time with a notebook and a well-sharpened pencil. Bob and I talked and then he wrote down some things in his [imagine her voice start to groan] very big long handwriting [Roselle had short concise handwriting]. He showed it to me and I said, “Bob, that sucks!” Bob was unfazed. He said “Okay,” crumpled up the page, and we started again.

We like this story for many reasons—not the least of which is the fact that they wrote on paper with pencils! This story shows how Bob and Roselle were different from each other, that they accommodated the differences by being flexible, how they checked ego at the door in order to work and how they each put their best foot forward. It also shows a very pedestrian moment in their partnership. We find this very encouraging because the bulk of our experience is composed of pedestrian or mundane moments (the deadline for this paper is soon and we have nothing! . . . remember that you have to justify the abstract . . . how do I get to the BQE from here?) As seen in the example above, having these moments and struggling to create does not preclude the achievement of the beauty and genius to which we aspire to.

CONCLUSIONS

Group workers are unique in that they know that every moment is significant. We do not distinguish between exalted “clinical” moments and mundane moments with clients in our practice. We know that every moment is important; we don’t need to be sitting in a circle, staring into each others eyes and passing a tissue box for the group to have started. The group starts when the doorbell rings and in the waiting room.

Conscious use of self then is especially important to group workers because it is something we benefit from practicing all of the time. Roselle had much to offer us in terms of modeling practices that we can make use of in our own work. By being bold she was authentically herself, by valuing process she was able to truly connect to others, and in

cultivating collegiality she was able to relish her professional life and accomplish much more than she would have alone. Having put this on paper we hope that this teaching of hers can be incorporated into the work of other social workers—even those who never knew her. In our work, we are conscious of being bold, valuing process and cultivating collegiality first and foremost because they are good practices. In addition, when we practice this way, in our hearts, Roselle continues to be alive.

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