Social Work Practice in
Nursing Homes
Creativity, Leadership, and
Program Development

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Preface

WHY WORK WITH THE ELDERLY, PARTICULARLY THE FRAIL ELDERLY WHO reside in nursing homes? For me, it is not about the money (although nursing homes provide a fairly decent salary in comparison with other areas of social work practice), nor of course is it about the prestige, which has in the past tended to be minimal but perhaps may increase as this population continues to grow. It is all about those intangible aspects of the work that make social workers tick. It is about helping a population that is truly at risk, physically, emotionally, and spiritually, to achieve a decent quality of life. It is about the opportunity to help people who are at a fascinating stage in life where, in our culture, we seek to make meaning of our existence. This life crisis often brings with it the gift of creativity, and I believe that it is an honor to be part of that process, by bearing witness as elders tell their stories and, in the telling, actually relive their experiences as they fashion them into a form that they can accept. Working closely with people at the last stage of their lives provides a unique opportunity to learn from the wisdom that they have accumulated over their lifetimes; to find out, in the end, what has really counted as a success; to draw important life lessons from their regrets; and to learn what, at the end of our days, truly matters. Working with the elderly can help the helper to accept the fact of death and to celebrate life, and the sheer joy of some of its ordinary rituals. In my mind, the question is not why work with the elderly, but why not?

In this book, I will share with you some of the ideas, constructs, and practices that I have developed (with the help of my clients, colleagues, and mentors) and found to be useful, ideas that were not part of my graduate school curriculum. It is my hope that the reader will benefit from this writer's struggles. After all, one does not become seasoned by blithely sailing through uneventful workdays. Instead, one becomes seasoned by learning (the hard way) from one's mistakes and errors. If I can spare some of you the trials and tribulations that accompanied the development of this conceptual framework, perhaps you will be able to more quickly reap the benefits of a practice that is mindful of anchoring our decision-making practices on the best possible use of our professional selves and then expanding upon these efforts in ways that have not yet been considered.

Recent thinking about organizational culture indicates that in the current climate of managed care, "standardization dominates the mood of most social
service organizations" (Yun, 2008, p. 318). A nursing home setting is unique both in its challenges and in its opportunities. One of the greatest challenges is figuring out how the various components of the institutional system work, and work together, and how the social worker fits in. Several enormous benefits of this particular setting are the ability to work independently, for that work to have an impact on changing the mores and traditions in the setting, improving the quality of life for the residents, and influencing the development of a community that is responsive to their needs. The small social service departments in nursing homes are one area where standardization of roles may be expected, due to the existence of a corporate ethos, but this standardization is not set in stone. Here, it is possible for the lone social worker or tiny social work department to carve out a social service role within the institution and to use this role to transform the dominant culture. The existence of an interdisciplinary team of care professionals greatly helps to facilitate our ability to negotiate a social work identity (ibid.).

I strongly advocate for choosing an identity with its roots in the social work tradition of Jane Addams, whose myriad practical, cultural, and artistic programs were designed to meet the multidimensional needs of an impoverished community. Ms. Addams drew her inspiration from Toynbee Hall in England, the first settlement house, which provided comprehensive social services to a desperately struggling urban underclass based on the concept that "to help the poor, you must live with them and be available for all manner of daily needs and weekly crises" (Polikoff, 1999, pp. 53-54). Early community organizers such as Ms. Addams provide dynamic role models for the rich and fruitful professional identity that one can aspire to and even begin to approximate in our settings, with our "communities" of frail elders, where spiritual if not actual poverty exists in abundance. Almost paradoxically, the nursing home is a wonderful vantage point on which one can build an exciting and vital practice.

The ideas, constructs, and practices that I am referring to appear as themes throughout the book. A central concept is the importance of visualizing the entire facility in which we work as a sort of secondary client and the importance of engaging this "client" on many levels. Another important notion is that of maximizing our social work role by making full use of the wide spectrum of clinical skills that we have learned and continue to develop throughout our lives. A third emphasis is on using our professional judgment creatively to structure our role and activities so we can better address both the predictable and the unpredicted needs of our clients. Finally, another theme that is less prominent in the book but nonetheless important is for readers to keep in mind the need to take steps to monitor our efforts in order to maintain accountability for our work.