

How I Learned Community

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Abstract

The three poems provided were initially written for a hip-hop and social justice class. The project was about community in social work and the conciseness of social work values. These values include service, dignity, and worth of a person, the importance of human relationships, and competence. Service involves the overall attention and treatment of the client. In providing treatment, a social worker should ensure that the dignity and worth of the client are maintained reminding them that every journey is important and deserves attention. Dignity and worth and worth of the client can be categorized as competence, which can translate to awareness of self and awareness of the client.

In the three poems, I express thoughts, feelings, and emotions that have shaped me into the person I am today. Love Thy Neighbor is to show how community was present in my childhood and highlights my innocence of not being highly aware of the chaos of life. It illustrates my thinking as a child and explains how this point of view influenced my adulthood perspective. Curiosity Raised the Cat describes how I became the young adult I am. It touches on the transition from everything I did not understand as a child to those experiences making sense. It poses the question of ‘what if I had never experienced the things described in Love Thy Neighbor. Finally, Love Thy Self culminates the choices and experiences I have made toward the social work profession. It concludes my story by having a full circle moment from being the scared child to being the comforting professional. These three poems shine a light on my childhood from ages five to 20 years old. It begins with discovering my dad’s diagnosis of cancer in late 2007 and ends with me reaching my goal of becoming a social worker. The poems will gradually walk the reader through a devastating life experience that fueled my passion for social work and helping others. To submit these very personal poems, I had to allow myself to be vulnerable. It is important for social workers to reflect upon their firsthand experiences and values that influence their work with clients which may sometimes include being vulnerable with yourself. To encourage the client to do the same, a social worker must have the competence to create a safe and vulnerable place for the client to express dignity, self-worth, and self-determination.

Love Thy Neighbor

Competence, confidence, connection, caring, and character

All things I didn’t know existed at the time

But things that matter to me now.

I had my first lesson on community when I was five

Louder Than Words, Volume 2, Issue 1, 2022

Mother, father, sister, and brother
Sat around the room
Fear in our hearts as the word is dropped like a bomb
Cancer.
Terminal.
I figured this was our downfall
Losing my father had to be what tore us apart
Heartbreak ripped through time and the space around me
Shattered pieces scurried to the floor
I felt alone
Heart racing
Blood thrashing in my ears
It wasn't long
It never felt long
Until...
The evil leech death was clinging to my father
Any moment now the world would go quiet, and the sun would go dark
And one year later,
it did
My lungs filled to the brim with tears that couldn't escape me fast enough
The room was closing in on me
I cannot breathe

I cannot see

I cannot...

There's a knock at the door

Freshly seven years old I wipe my nose on my sleeve

A casserole with a bouquet of flowers marked

Thinking of you

No name

I didn't know how a casserole would bring my dad back

But I understood sometimes it's all people have to offer to others

I was thankful I wouldn't be hungry

I added it to the other casseroles in the fridge

Doorbells ringing! My brother would yell

Why are the phones always ringing?

Why do my ears always feel like they're ringing

There are people always inside of the house

They always whisper

They always hug my mother and kiss my forehead

They always tell my brother he's the spitting image

Alone

Why can't they leave us alone

But I am older now and understand

They were there to hold our hands

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To lift us up when we had fallen
They kept me fed
They kept me warm
They kept me distracted
They kept my mother from wrapping herself in the familiar smell of my father's shirt
And burying her head
to then never come out

While I was confused and annoyed then
I understand now

They were just being a part of the community
The community my family had built
The community I had gained because my mother and father lived

Community...

Without them
Without the doorbells chiming
Without phones always ringing
If my home were to have been empty
I think we would still be alone
I thank those who sacrificed their time

To help heal ours

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For what is a mother of three supposed to do alone

When her first reason for living

Dies

I remember the friends who stayed the night

The neighbors who helped clean house

The teacher who gave me no homework

The classmates who wrote us letters

The counselors who helped me cope

To peers who helped me through school

You were my first lesson in community

For there is always a lesson to be learned

In unity

So, I thank you

strangers and friends

Those who held my hand and taught me healing words

I'm studying hard to do the same

To help comfort those children and families

Whose sun may have gone dark

Whose lungs are spilling out with grief

I'm studying to help heal the heartbreak

To pick up the pieces of shattered time and discouraged hearts

If it weren't for the character and care of those around me when my world went dark

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I think the chances of finding this kind of light

Would've burned out

You helped us with confidence

you spoke to me with competence

you showed me a true connection

you showed me what it looks like to care

not because you have to

but because you want to

that to me

shows character

and that to me

taught me community

Curiosity Raised the Cat

In a funny way

Sometimes I think

Did it take losing my father

To eventually find me

Would I ever have gone to therapy

Would I have ever been this soft

Would my skin still bruise at the words people throw at me

Would I still find comfort in the dark and twisted

Would I still scrape my knees to remind me to get back up

Would I desire healing families

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Would I desire protecting children
Would I surround myself with the people I do
I would like to think so
But in a funny way
I know
I know it's because of therapy I can talk about my feelings
Partially anyways
My mother may be to blame
I know it is because those who ran to our aid
When the air ran cold
And the sun cast only shadows
That I grew to heal others
I know it is because the flowers gifted were not just flowers
They were an act of character
An act of community
Telling us we're not alone
A casserole on the front door was not just a casserole
It was a concerned teacher, hoping I wasn't hungry
I know the letters written by my cheer team
Weren't just letters
They were an extended hand
Telling me my family would not do this alone
It was acts of character like this
That made me want to go to school

So, I could do the same
It was the connection
The connection I felt with others
The connection I feel with my mother
When I feared I would never feel that way again
It was the connection that kept me grounded
I want children to feel safe
I want to be a safe person
I want to be the one they want in the room with them
I want to be the person they can call when they don't know where to turn
Social work and its learning
It's changing my life
I feel a sense of belonging
A sense of duty
To protect my younger self somehow by trying to protect these children
But alas I must learn
You can't save everyone

Love Thy Self

“You can't save everyone”
That's the first thing I learned when I switched my major
Part of me understood
But the other part of me didn't believe it
There were so many times in my life

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Where I thought I couldn't be saved
Yet someone proved me wrong
I thought my life would end in flames when my father died
Or when my mother got sick
As illness was associated with death in my small mind
The same mind that had hoped they would always get better

Yet my community, my peers, my friends, my family
Never abandoned me
Instead, they embraced my tears, let go of anger, and spoke to me
They spoke to me
like I mattered
like I was the sun and that was the only way to feel it upon their face
and they listened
like my words moved oceans
and they held me
they held me like if they let go the ground beneath them may crumble
but even in weakness
I felt grace

Like I was going through this to be strong enough
Strong enough to make a difference
One moment I am a five-year-old girl being comforted by people in suits
And the next moment I am a woman in a suit comforting a young girl
Oh, how life is a continuous loop

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Sometimes I wonder if my dad dying is what it took

Would I have been open to learning about community had my family shut everyone out

Would I be thankful for the tears

Had I not learned about connection

Would I be soft like a rose

And my voice often like honey

Had my mother not had to teach me of loss

Would I fight with my brother

Had I not been taught to understand his anger

Would I reach out and offer a hand

Had my friends not done it for me

I often thank some divine force for getting me through what I have been through

But I often don't take enough time to think of those who got me through it

Emotionally in tune

Emotionally aware

Utterly

Annoyingly

Self-aware

All tools of benefit in social work

All things I let people weaponize against me

All things I have learned

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Throughout adolescence, connection strengthens in the brain

I think mine strengthened in my heart

It is chaos

But I remain certain I am home

I think this life chose me

I never understood why all the other kids used to cock their eyebrow when I told them I wanted

to be a therapist when I grew up

Well, I'm not a therapist

But I am damn close

I have learned from every moment of my life so far

I don't plan on stopping now

Competence, confidence, connection, caring, and character

All things I didn't know existed at the time

But things that matter to me now

I had my first lesson on community when I was five

Mother, father, sister, and brother

Sat around the room

Pride in their hearts as the words are dropped like a rose on water

I want to be a social worker