

THE MEANING OF HELP

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Asistenții sociali reprezintă o profesie care demonstrează în mod clar atitudinea societății față de situația membrilor ei celor mai vulnerabili. Iar asistenții sociali din Republica Moldova sunt unici în lume, din câteva motive. În primul rând, ei împărtășesc un anumit număr de caracteristici cu beneficiarii lor. De exemplu, asistenții sociali din Moldova știu mai mult decât oricare alți asistenți sociali din lume despre familiile dezmembrate din cauza migrației economice. Ei au, astfel, un potențial de empatie și de înțelegere mai mare decât colegii lor din alte părți.

Profesorii de asistență socială au o misiune educativă cu atât mai specială cu cât ei transpun în act ceea ce predau. Valorile demnității umane și ale autodeterminării sunt predate la Universitatea de Stat din Moldova, fiind adoptate și puse ulterior în aplicare de către absolvenții ei. Facultatea de Sociologie și Asistență Socială de la USM este plasată strategic pentru a descoperi și a cultiva lideri, inovatori, reformatori, care vor forma asistența socială și o mai bună societate în următorii zece ani și mai târziu.

Thank you for the privilege and honor of consulting with the wonderful social workers of Moldova on the wonderful occasion of the celebration of 10 years of professional education. This development did not happen by itself. It required leadership to get here, and it will require new leadership in the future. So, please just take a moment to recognize the people you are sitting beside and realize that you are among a historically important group at a conference that will be referred to for many years in the future.

Please consider for a moment the question: What is so important about a decade of Moldovan Social Work. In other words, what is the cause we are celebrating? I will share an image of how it looks from my point of view.

Social work is a product of the society in which it exists. It is probably the clearest example of a profession that demonstrates what the society wishes concerning the condition of the poorest, the weakest, the most vulnerable, and often the most un-loved members of the society. We enact what we teach. While many in society would avoid or suppress the alienated „emo” youth and the unemployed person with a lifelong mental illness, to name just two examples, social workers turn toward them and seek to understand and to include them in the community and the benefits of society, without controlling them. Social work also represents the possibilities to seek a good life for all. There are both individual development and social development missions. Moldovan social work is worth celebrating for these qualities or characteristics that distinguish the profession.

Moldovan social work is unique in a number of ways. For example, Moldovan social workers perhaps know more than any others about families divided by economic migration, both voluntary and forced. There are, however, many things that are held in common with all forms of professional social work everywhere. It became clear to me in a very short time that Moldovan social workers share these characteristics.

Bravery is one characteristic that social workers display across the world when they are doing particularly good work. Social workers are found in very tough circumstances. You can find them where individuals personally and directly experience the social problems that most people work hard to avoid. Poverty, addiction, violence, and discrimination are very tough assignments. While social workers take on these difficult problems, there is a „secret” that is worth remembering: Social workers also see people at their very best, doing things for one another without direct benefit to themselves. One of the things about social workers that we must celebrate is their extraordinary ability to find the good in people and to feed and nurture it so that it has a chance to grow. Social workers not only have a front row seat in observing the human drama, we also participate in it. This is courageous.

The value of *human dignity* is taught at Moldova State University and enacted by its graduates. This value is shared among social workers everywhere. It means the belief and the actions that treat every person as important just for being a person. There are no exceptions. Even when people are angry, demoralized, defeated, even when they hurt others, people are worthy of respect as fellow humans.

We are also celebrating social work as a representation and enactment of a professional commitment to *self determination*. This means that we find ways for people to choose their own way of living. It means helping them to define what they want, how they want to live, and to work as partners in working to find how much people can have of these conditions that they value. This value also expresses the belief that trying to control others simply does not work in the long run.

How have Moldovan social workers been putting these values into action for 10 years? How does it happen? Social work often addresses the question with a helping process. It sounds so simple at first, but it is not simple in the details. Helping in a consistent, serious way requires consistent, serious study. I have seen a number of examples of teaching and studying at the Department of Social Work, and they are worth celebrating today.

What is the substance of the study of social work? It is learning to offer actions and material needs to other people in a way that allows others to use them. This is the meaning of help. It was first presented to me in the first course that I ever took that mentioned social work, 40 years ago when Alan Keith-Lucas introduced me to that simple idea: help is what is offered in a way that it can be used. It is a complex mixture. Helping means confronting difficult realities together with people. Helping avoids judging people and working with them from their own frames of reference. It means showing that their pain and hope are understood by another. This is what we mean by the study of the idea of empathy. Help means that we stand together with another to do what is possible, if they want us and can tolerate us. It is not something that we do to people to have them act in a way we, or the organizations we are associated with, might prefer.¹

This complex mixture is what is being taught, is being learned, and is being practiced today. In just three years our young students learn a great deal about this helping process. They u give back to society much more than money can buy, but they do need financial support. To attract, retain, and launch into the professional world people who can do this important and difficult work, it is essential to offer the same support that we would to others in critical roles in society.

What is the future of social work in Moldova? One way to predict might be to apply a bit of the social worker's perspective, and to look at the assets and strengths that are present. My impression is that there is a resource present now that holds much, much more potential than people seem to realize. The new Master's degree programs in children's rights and related topics are strategically placed to find and cultivate the leaders, the innovators, the reformers, the supervisors who will shape social work and a better society in the next ten years and beyond. It is essential that these students and faculty members learn a great deal about applied research as a tool in building the future.

I understand that some people are concerned that there are not currently places in the bureaucracy specifically for master's level social workers. My concern is not so much about this fact I am much more concerned that we may *expect much too little* of the graduates and the faculty. They will find the jobs for the state and the NGOs. This is already happening in many areas, as our consultants on children's rights across Europe confirm.

A process of recruiting exceptionally smart, caring people who know the meaning of help is extremely important for the future. This group could become an extraordinary national asset. Strong expectations, special stipends, and recognition are things that can be provided for them. They should be provided, for the good of the society and the many beleaguered individuals whom we will see within minutes of leaving the building. It will also be for the good of those of us in this room as we go through our own life cycles.

The investment will provide great returns. Remember, you are the leaders. This is your challenge and opportunity.

How can I thank you for allowing me to witness this wonderful celebration of a wonderful achievement? I do not know the answer, but I will try to offer a bit of help, if I can find a way and you will let me. Thank you I do, for making your lives part of mine. I salute you all.

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¹ These ideas are detailed further in: Keith-Lucas A. *Giving and taking help*. - Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1972.