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My personal journey to a lifetime of social work

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In response to being selected as Social Worker of the Year by
The National Association of Social Work—Santa Clara County Chapter
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Why I became a social worker? Right out of high school where I was totally turned on to math and science, I majored in physics and chemistry. Yet, as I watched our nation's lead in the arms race, Silicon Valley's role in development of weapons with the eventual goal of space-based warfare—I became very disenchanted in the use of science not to benefit humankind, but rather to kill more effectively.

I sat in my classes thinking about our war against Vietnam, napalm bombs trucked through our freeways and my friends who chose not to go to college—already in Vietnam after three months of basic training. I had a crisis of conscious and cognitive dissonance. I was very unhappy learning physics, knowing that my education would serve the military-industrial complex that would likely destroy humankind and our beautiful planet.

My physics professor suggested I go to the Counseling Center for help with my dilemma, where I was given tests for educational and occupational interests. A number code concluded social work as a possible occupation. At the time, 1967, SJSU did yet have a BA in social work, so I changed my major to Philosophy and minor to Sociology--Philosophy because just as Physics seeks to understand the very basic reality of matter, Philosophy seeks to understand the very basics of thought. I selected Sociology as my minor because I sought to understand how societies create governments eager for war and manipulate citizens to kill others for ideals such as patriotism and religion transmogrified into armies that attack other nations, kill civilians, and follow orders to torture and commit genocide.

In the 1960s student activism became a major part of our generation's unofficial education outside the classroom. Everyday there was a rally, teach-in, demonstration against the war, ROTC, corporate, military and CIA recruitment. At our Seventh Street Quad, nightly news reports, professors and fellow students, marches, rallies, the music of the time was where I worked out answers to the questions in my mind about "what's goin on" and what is *my* place and role this crazy world.

In 1969, at a classroom forum with folk singer/peace activist Joan Baez, she was asked to sing. She demurred, stating she had not planned to perform, and had not brought her guitar. When the audience begged for a song, she offered to sing just one song, *a capella*, if someone would burn his own draft (Selective Service) card, in support of all who like her husband, David Harris, were incarcerated for refusing induction into the U.S. Military. I immediately offered mine, passed up to the stage. People cheered as she read my name and asked which song would you like?

Unexpectedly, I stuttered, Bob Dylan's "With God on Our Side." Listen to it, and you will understand why this was one of favorite ballads about the futility and tragedy of all war.

What Social Work means to me? When I finally graduated with my fresh BA in Philosophy I looked in the Mercury News employment classifieds for a resident philosopher. Neither Lockheed Corporation the valley's largest employer, nor any of the emerging high tech companies, government agencies were hiring philosophers. So my

plan B was to hitchhike to Big Sur, camp out on the beach and philosophize on man's fate (the title of a book I read in one of my favorite classes, Philosophy in Literature). Andre Malraux, the French existentialist author of Man's Fate, concludes that our fate is that we must take responsibility for our lives and make our own choices rather than any outside force--be it the state, religious leaders, political party or any leader. Bob Dylan sang the same truth: "don't follow leaders..."

So what are we to do during our short or long life? My conclusion: Make of this Earth the mythological Garden of Eden, not in the Biblical past but in our near future. So, what social work means to me is that together as individuals, communities, as a society, nation, and indeed as one world where we are all Earth citizens, our only legitimate and humane task is to improve everyone's present life and the lives of our children, and **all children are indeed *our* children**. If we work toward that end, we all, now seven billion of Earth citizens just might avoid the ecological collapse that we are approaching.

Social work seeks to improve people's lives in the present and it has been my great opportunity to engage in this most honorable work in the fields of social work practice in child welfare, family violence prevention by parent education, gang intervention, poverty reduction by employment services, public information, substance abuse treatment, refugee services, social marketing and ombudsman services at the Santa Clara Social Services Agency. Quite en-expectedly when I was hired as a Social Worker I forty years ago, I was able to become the activist and resident philosopher-sociologist that I dared to hope to be at the age of 24. I know that I did make many clients' lives better--even as I challenged parents, teenagers, school administrators, landlords, police and probation officers, and my own supervisors, agency directors and elected officials to advocate for better lives for children, the impoverished, refugees from poverty and injustice. My advocacy was always for more humane and effective social services for all.

When did I know that SW was the vocation for me? Almost the first day on the job, I knew that Social Work was my lifework as I entered the lobby for my first day of training. There were sad looking people in the lobby, waiting to apply for assistance, mostly for food stamps, cash grants, or health services. We were the public agency set up to provide such assistance, and I was eager to serve human needs. I was happy to not be selling cars, insurance, or any other job that took advantage of the poor, under-educated, immigrants, or anyone else in what we called the under-class—now called the 99%. A great benefit for this job was the many smart, honorable, kind-hearted co-workers it was my privilege to work with, including a young girl from New York that became and still is my wife, Lynn.

Social Workers matter in our society because we are a profession dedicated to implement what is written in the preamble to our Constitution: "to promote the general welfare." Without exception, we seek to improve the lives of all who are insecure, unsafe, and unable to care for themselves for whatever reason. But we are much more than re-actors to inadequate social infrastructures, tragedy and human frailty. Rather, we are advocates; even brave warriors for social justice in all arenas—local, state, national and global. As activists chant at demonstrations: "Injustice anywhere is injustice everywhere, and there cannot be peace anywhere without justice everywhere!"

I was destined for this profession as a five-year-old immigrant child from Mexico who began first grade not speaking a word of English before San Jose resident Ernesto Galarza initiated the concept of bilingual education. My confusion in the classroom did not impel me to give up or act out, but rather to pay close attention to everything in my surroundings, and by fourth grade I was excelling in all academic subjects—not because I was smarter, but because I loved learning.

Another childhood experience that I value greatly was working summers in the fields of our Valley of Heart's Delight, picking string beans from 5 am paid at two cents a pound, and earning $13 by the end of summer, enough to buy the least expensive sleeping bag to go camping at the Camp Stuart Boy Scout camp in the Saratoga foothills, a beautiful nature preserve that just two years ago, to my amazement I discovered was the final home of Mary Brown, widow of the infamous John Brown, the anti-slavery abolitionist hung for his attack at Harper's Ferry—one of my favorite historical mentors.

But the most important experience that led me to social work was growing up with my family of Graciela and Gilberto Villagran, immigrants from Mexico, who came to the U.S. in hopes of giving their five children a better life with the promise of a good education. My father worked two full-time hard labor jobs all his life so that my mother could be home when we came home from school. Everyday she had a snack—often quesadillas with leftovers snuck into the tortillas as we all did our homework on the kitchen table. Eventually we each had a friend who came home with us and they too learned to enjoy Mexican food and had to do their homework. Our home became a homework center 30 years before that idea was conceptualized. We had friends who were not as happy at their homes as we were, and my mother would listen to them and offer her own version of counseling. Our family also took in eight teenagers at different times —some cousins and others the children of non-kin family friends who needed time away from their own homes and families for a much as a year at a time to ensure their personal and educational success.

Additionally, my first encounter with a social worker was when our family adopted my brother Paul when he was three months old. The adoptions social worker came to our home to interview each one of us five siblings to ensure that we could accept our baby brother as our *real* brother. Our family passed the social worker's interview and we got our beloved brother weeks later. I was impressed with the social worker's role in enriching our lives with our new brother.

But the most critical experience of my childhood was working with my father in the meat packing plant where he worked for 30+ years packing boxes, using machinery, loading and unloading quarters of beef, and making deliveries to stores and restaurants all over the bay. After school I would go to work with my father to enable him to finish early enough to be home for a late dinner. Of course all these jobs were totally illegal for a 12 to 18 year old kid. But the owner, foreman and USDA inspector looked away—knowing they were benefiting from my free labor. On Saturdays my dad and I did landscaping for his bosses, definitely who are now called the 1%. (One boss lived in Atherton, next door to whom I later learned was the three story home of Patty Hearst.) On Sundays our whole family cleaned offices after church services, which we never missed. But Sunday supper was a special time because my father, who loved to cook, would prepare delicious meals, barbeques in the summer, and we always had extended family and our childhood friends who went from making fun of our Mexican accents and food to loving our family and sometimes wishing their families were as loving as ours.

But working with my father in the factory, in his bosses' homes, and in the fields, I learned about the inequity in our society. The harder, dirtier and more dangerous the job--the less the pay. The more people have, the more they want.

I learned these truths on the job so that years later when I read Charles Dickens, Karl Marx, George Orwell, Saul Alinsky, Ernesto Galarza (one of my SJSU mentors), Upton Sinclair, John Steinbeck, Frances Fox Pivan, B. Traven, and others who raged against the injustices inflicted upon the working class—I knew their truths to be accurate if not worse than people can imagine unless they live them daily.

Yet even then, at the age of 26 I had further truths to discover when I traveled to India, Nepal, Pakistan and Afghanistan. I had focused much of my philosophical studies on Eastern philosophy; remember it was the end of the 1960s and Alan Watts, as scholar-in-residence here as SJSU lectured weekly on Buddhism, Hinduism and other Eastern wisdom. So after reading everything I could find on the religions of the East and after a childhood immersed in Catholic teachings, I realized that I could read every book, listen to every lecture, practice all the traditions and it would be like reading every recipe book and menu—but never tasting the actual food. So to really understand Eastern philosophies and religions, I must go to the lands where they developed and are practiced. So I journeyed on a pilgrimage to the east seeking to discover the truth of why there is war and injustice, just as the Buddha sought to understand why there is suffering.

It did not take long to discover at least one ignoble truth to the human condition as I experienced it. Ironically, I discovered, realized, concluded that religion itself is a major cause of the vast grotesque suffering, injustice and violence in the world! One afternoon, sitting in a chai café, listening to a blind teenager playing music on a harmonium, he chanted beautifully as he sat on a blanket on the street, people passing by would drop coins into a basket and light an incense stick, just as I often lit candles in our church as I prayed to the Virgen de Guadalupe. I tried to reach ever higher levels of consciousness as I meditated on the sounds of the harmonium, the youth's chant, the sound of cows meandering through the street, bicycle rickshaws, food vendors in the street market, the thick hashish smoke in the café, and most powerful of all these perceptions—the smell of animal, human and vegetable raw sewage!

Like satori, the instant infrequent enlightenment experienced by Zen disciples, I experienced instantaneous realization that the truth of human suffering is the blind adherence and subservience to religion itself. That is, the world does not need another temple, cathedral, mosque, meditation hall or inquisition. The world and the blind young man chanting in the street needs sewage treatment! The outcastes in rags, the weathered old people begging, pregnant women with half a dozen children of all ages living on the street, those disfigured by leprosy or polio, those with an amputated hand and foot—punished for theft—all need infrastructure! All humans need the infrastructure of sewage treatment, healthcare, education, housing, food, sustainable jobs and old age security. I realized that the whole world needs a New Deal! And it could be paid for by the taxes of those well paid because they are well educated, as well as humanity realizing that we must stop wasting Earth's vast but finite resources on very expensive religious architecture such as mosques, cathedrals, temples, as well as prisons, sports complexes and of course the weapons of war that are most expensive—a waste if we never use them, and if we do use nuclear and other modern weapons: god help us for we will make our beautiful Earth uninhabitable.

So that is my life journey as I complete my fortieth year of social work practice and teaching. I have three daughters that have fulfilled my parents' Mexican Dream and my and Lynn's American Dream—each with excellent educations. Julie, a nurse coordinator at Stanford Hospital and mother of three-year-old twin girls; Jenny, a website developer at the Exploratorium Science Museum and mother of a nine-month old baby girl; and Becky, graduating in June from Stanford University in teacher education, hired to teach history and global studies at Berkeley High School. Their success is due to their hard work and love of learning. I must say that my three daughters and three grand daughters are the extreme joy that overwhelms my heart everyday.

Now about being named Social Worker of the Year, it is indeed sweet to have this recognition, and I humbly accept it, but let me assure you that I have not done

anything more extraordinary that most of my colleagues at the School of Social Work have done and are doing, nor the hundreds of social workers at the Santa Clara County Social Services Agency continue to do everyday, nor the thousands, yes thousands, of our graduates since 1968, many of which are still social working, advocating for social justice and helping humankind in many ways.

I humbly thank you for this sweet honor.