

Under Their Thumb: A Social Worker's Oral History *Prose*

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Author's Note

The following is distilled from a 48-minute interview with retired clinical social worker and retired UNC clinical assistant professor, Jodi Flick, to create the script for a 3-minute performance in Social and Health Systems 3: Performing Medicine, at UNC. It is re-printed here with Ms. Flick's gracious permission.

Ms. Flick's own words were transcribed via "ethnopoetic transcription." From the description offered by SHS 3 course instructor, Dr. Marie Garlock, "Ethnopoetic transcription communicates pauses, emphases, tonality and rhythm of a speaker's insights more clearly than paragraph prose. Ethnopoetic transcription seeks to attend to interviewees 'as they are, not as who the researcher wants them to be' (Trujillo 75)." The resulting script forms the basis for a dramatic, embodied interpretation of Ms. Flick's oral history. Theater and performance offer rich modes of inquiry and storytelling of lived experiences that we can use to better understand and empathize with patients and colleagues.

Works Cited

Trujillo, Mary Adams, et al. *Re-Centering Culture and Knowledge in Conflict Resolution Practice*. Syracuse University Press, 2008.

[Social work does not have many gestures that are highly specific to the field. The following gestures, used throughout the performance, seek to embody the spirit of social work.]

"The System" - The forearm is positioned in front of the body, as if resting upon an invisible desk, before the elbow is raised 30-45 degrees from neutral and the fingers of the hand clench into a fist, save for the thumb. The arm makes a motion from elbow to thumb as if the thumb is grinding down—one piece of an enormous, immovable machine grinding down onto something very small. (Variation: the grinding motion is conveyed through the whole body at the start, then gradually focused until the motion is isolated to elbow and thumb.)

“Put on the Blinders” - Forearms are raised so that hands are at the level of the head, as though placing an empty cardboard box on a shelf or forming the sides of a tunnel. It is a gesture signifying presence in the immediate task at hand; undivided attention; focus—directed, purposeful energy. It is the kind of gesture Ms. Flick used when she said, “When I stepped into the patient’s room, I was ON.”

“Stepping Up” - One foot steps firmly forward, then the other, so feet are aligned; then, take a beat before repeating the “Blinders” gesture. It is the action of choosing to meet the demands of a task in a forthright, attentive way.

“Drawing Out” - Draw hand-over-hand towards yourself, as if patiently and methodically pulling someone by a rope from the precipice of a cliff, or gently extracting sensitive information from a vulnerable stranger. Ms. Flick used this gesture when describing her ability to quickly establish authentic rapport with patients in crisis.

“Sick to My Stomach” - Draw arms in towards your stomach and double over, as if there is a dull, chronic pain of which you are only intermittently aware until the memory returns again, unbidden.

“With Open Arms” - Arms outstretched, then moving inwards towards chest, as if grasping something precious, drawing it close to your heart, and carefully holding it there.

The bureaucracy.
I did what they told me to...

*[whispered or spoken quietly, as if from far away
with back to audience, while performing
“The System”: Full body grinding...
to focused grinding in arm and thumb...
to “Sick to Stomach.”
Beat. Use “Stepping Up” to rotate to gradually face audience.]*

This was in East Tennessee.
I had been working as a hospital social worker
and a young girl—
I think about 14 or 15—
came into the Emergency Room
because she had an abscessed tooth.
Or maybe more than one—
This was a very poor family
They lived up in the Appalachian Mountains,
had NEVER been to a dentist
and her teeth were rotting out in her mouth.
And she was BAWLING.
and so they gave her pain medicine in the ER.

They didn't want to tell her family
that they couldn't do anything

So they told ME...
to tell her family
To take her HOME
and WAIT
until the abscess got systemic—

Because it was only an infection
But-when-the-infection-spread-to-her-enTIRE-body
and she was about to DIE
THEN
they could treat 'er.

And I spent hours
and HOURS
trying to get somebody to—
(get a local dentist to)—
take her pro bono,
on some kind of a sliding scale,
on Medicaid
or-SOMETHING-right?

And I couldn't GET anybody to do it.
Tried to talk to administrators—
I lost it
with the people who were making this decision

I did EVERYTHING I could

...A, a part of me even said
I'll pay for it
You can take it out of my salary
Just—just—

TAKE. CARE. OF. THIS. CHILD.

“Sorry, THAT's the protocol.”

[*“The System”*]

SO
this child
is in AGONY

And I did what they told me to—

[*“Stepping Up,” “Put on Blinders”*
“Sick at My Stomach”]

I told her family
to take her home
‘til she got even SICKER

[*Force self to stand in place, then “Put on Blinders.”*]

and then they could pull her tooth.

Afterwards, I went back to my office,
Told my two colleagues
“I'm going home”
“I can't—
talk to anybody else today
I can't do it.”

[*Gather a purse or other personal things.*]

[*Walk away, as if exiting stage right,
then turn to audience midway.*]

I'll never forget that, as long as I live...
Even that I...participated in it felt
unETHICAL and IMMORAL
And it was one of those times
when the system—
the bureaucracy—
just

[*“The System”*]

-y'know.

Even now, it makes me angry.
It was probably 25 or 30 years ago,
And it STILL makes me angry.

[a rueful laugh]

I WANT the damn politicians to do something about universal health care
So that no one ever has to
Turn somebody away like I had to do

[Beat. Slowly return things to table. Starting facing stage left, resume "Stepping Up" paired with "Drawing Out," rotating slightly with each "Stepping Out" to face a different part of the audience—the Social Worker walking endless corridors to see many patients over many years. Stop when facing center stage.]

My husband and I were out in the mall one day
And this woman

Saw me
And ran up to me
And THREW
Her arms around me

*["With Open Arms"]
["With Open Arms"]
["With Open Arms"]*

And she said,
"Oh My God.
You will

["With Open Arms"]

NEVER know
How much what you said to me that night
in the Emergency Room
meant to me...

*["With Open Arms"]
["With Open Arms"]*

You SAVED my life."

*["With Open Arms"]
["With Open Arms"]*

And I was like,
[higher register] "Oh, that's so wonderful!
I'm glad you're doing so well!"

[A flustered, fluttering hand motion]

And then, and she walked away,
and my husband looked at me
"You have no idea who that was,
Do you?"

[Turns left, looking down.]

And I said, "No. NONE."
I couldn't have picked that woman
Out of a lineup...

[Turns up, looking right.]

I probably DID see her in the ER.

But I saw

8 people a night, you know?

And maybe I DID say something, really,

that was exactly what she needed to hear...

Social workers don't make a lot of money

[*considering*]

And they don't get fancy job titles.

But lots of times

You did something that was REALLY valuable

But...

You don't know about it

Sometimes

until

weeks

or months

or YEAARRRS later

...if you EVER, if you ever know about it.

Y'know, I LOVED my job

[*"With Open Arms,"*

then "Sick to My Stomach"]

The burnout was,

aGAIN

More around the sort of,

Bureacracy, y'know?

[*"The System"*]

...

I LOVED my job.

a b o u t • a u t h o r

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Mary Gainer Mariyampillai is a second-year medical student at the University of North Carolina. She received her M.B.S. in Biomedical Sciences from Rutgers University; and her M.S. in Medical Physiology, her B.S.E. in Biomedical Engineering, and her B.A. in English from Case Western Reserve University. She has served as co-president of Beyond Medicine Reading Club and she is the recipient of the 2023 Cross Social Medicine Paper Award at UNC. Mary is a student in the Humanities and Social Sciences scholarly concentration at UNC School of Medicine, where she hopes to explore the intersection of medicine with performance and other modes of narrative inquiry.