

MSW Orientation speech

Pat Springer Shoemaker

Indiana University South Bend, 3rd year MSW student, June 11, 2009

I am a 3rd year MSW student – living proof that you can survive at least the first two years of this MSW graduate program. I am also a counselor at the Center for Cancer Care in Goshen where I work with cancer patients and their families and where I receive much fulfillment and satisfaction.

A couple of months ago, when I was initially asked to speak this morning, I was in complete overload. As I stood there trying to decide whether I could actually accept, I literally could not remember the month I was in. This is true. I do not tell you this to scare you... it is just the reality of being a graduate student at times. Since I began graduate school, I have been known to look at my neighbor's inflated yard ornaments to orient me to what month I am in. Though this may sound grim, it is not meant to be. It is simply a reminder that you are going to have to view your world the next three years with a sense of humor: and if you can, you will not only survive, but also thrive.

Two years ago, I was sitting in this same orientation. I arrived early, as is my style because I am directionally challenged. I always allow plenty of time to get where I am going for fear I will lose my way. (Not unlike my pursuit of an MSW) Clearly, even those sitting in the back of the room can see that I am an older student... possibly even an AARP card-carrying member. And perhaps you are wondering, "WHAT took that woman so long!!!?"

Well, in between getting my Bachelor's degree in Social Work 30 years ago, and raising three sons (all of whom are currently in college, I might add...) I supported my husband many years ago when he attended IUPUI for *his* MSW. My life has been one filled with a rich and varied employment history, which can make for a messy resume... (I don't always mention that truck-driving job I had)... I have chosen to view each of these jobs as an asset rather than a detriment to my professional career. Some of you are very clear about why you are here. Some of you less clear. However, what IS clear to me, after hearing your introductions of yourselves, each of you have a passion for Social Work, and it excites me to have you join us.

Whatever your intent, I have been asked to speak to you about my experience in the MSW program and offer you some advice and tips... RATS! I sure wish I had taken notes from that ever so smart woman who spoke at my orientation two years ago..... I could have just whipped that list out and read it to you. But I do not have those notes, so here goes a couple of things that seem important to me:

1. **My first word of advice:** Support one another in your cohort... look around... you are the ones who are going to be there for one another when no one else will understand. Just know, there are going to be times when you are strong, and a classmate is crashing and burning. Be there for one another! Call. Email. Meet for coffee or something. Help each other get through this.

It is a challenge... and there will be days you are going to need someone to help you stay with it... I have had classmates threaten me when I have said, "I can't do this... I'm dropping out". I have had classmates pray for me, cry with me, eat with me, laugh with me... all the basics in life. I have done the same for them. In the course of two years our class has seen three babies born; a classmate donate a kidney to her husband; deaths of family members and friends; sadness; children have married; children have graduated; children have gotten sick; parents have become ill; jobs have been lost... and found... and more. Life goes on. Allow it, honor it, accept it, and support one another through it.

2. Let your family know you are going to try your best to be civil and kind, but there are going to be days that really are not good days. Ugly days. Grouchy days. Tired days. Just give them a heads up... not that that will solve the problem, but you can at least think, "Well, I TOLD them this would happen!!"
3. Ask for help.... As Social Workers, being the Helpers-of-the-world, this can be difficult to do. If you haven't figured out how to ask for help in life yet, figure it out before you leave this room today. According to author Anne Lamott, life's first, most profound prayer is "Help me, Help me, Help me" (Lamott, 1999, pg.82). So..., pray or ask for help... or both. And...
4. Ask for help from these fine professors here as well..... They are your teachers... they want you to succeed. You will reflect their hard work. They are here to teach you... as well as, I believe, you will teach them.
5. Each of us has ways we cope when we are distressed...Try to be healthy about it *most* of the time.
6. Rest. Enjoy. Take a day or so off every once in awhile. Laugh. Squeeze in a light summer novel every now and then... I actually had a teacher tell me to literally observe a "textbook-Sabbath". He recommended I read only for pleasure on Sundays...or watch a movie that allows a complete checkout.
7. Now this next one is for you perfectionists out there. You know who you are... and if you do not qualify ignore this one. I am sorry to say, I am the last person to talk to about not doing every assignment.... Not that I encourage you to skip out, or slough off an assignment, but if there is one paper that you simply cannot meet your personal standard ... don't. Do what you can. Talk to the professor. It is OK.... Just do your best.
8. Organize your materials. KEEP everything... I am not kidding on this one. Get a filing system... and soon... one with hanging folders labeled with class titles, and class numbers. KEEP YOUR SYLLABI (you may need these someday for verification). Keep your registrations, your important papers, your grades. I found it best that it be an open file crate.... I even found it too hard to open a drawer in a filing cabinet. Too much work. I needed a quick and easy system.
9. Have a space in your home... even if it is just one corner of one room. PUT everything there. Even if you cannot organize it, if you drop it there, you will eventually be able to find it if you need it.

10. Apply for scholarships.... and keep all that information. Scholarships are out there, but they take time. I still recommend that you apply for them... just not the ones for which I am applying.
11. Forget cleaning your house. And if you are someone who is able to keep up with that at all times... please see me after this.... I want some tips from *you*....
12. Though I did not mention this first, this one ranks right up there on what I recommend. You might think about reducing outside commitments... I hate to tell you what to do, but REALLY.... Examine your commitments to social clubs... church responsibilities ... community obligations... committees. Just a suggestion....but, I think you will find this to be a smart thing to do for three years. The best gift a friend gave me was to say, "Pat, I know I may not see you for a while, but I know in three years our friendship will be the same as it was before you went back to school, so I know it will be OK when we do meet again in three years. I will keep you in my thoughts." So... take a break. I can guarantee, those opportunities will still be there three years from now. I know, because I already have eager persons on my doorstep wondering, "Now, HOW long do you have left of school?" I am highly suspicious of the motive of their question...

All corporations, agencies, and every organized group of people have a spoken or unspoken mission statement. I could take you back 20 years ago to Steven Covey's bestseller, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, a book written before some of you had even entered elementary school, but his writing has proven to be timeless. He recommends developing a personal mission statement or philosophy. He writes, "It focuses on what you want to be (character) and to do (contributions and achievements) on the values or principles upon which being and doing are based" (Covey, 1989, pg. 106). Once you have a sense of your own mission, you have the vision and the values that direct your life – it will give you the same timeless strength in the midst of any change you may encounter. I encourage you to find your own mission statement. Make it simple... a couple of words... make it short enough you can remember it. Stick with it. Then no matter what job you are so lucky to have... your purpose and mission statement goes with you wherever you go. You are what you have prioritized. Make it count. Make it a commitment to the Social Work values. I trust you will see these values modeled by your professors, others in your cohort, as well as clients who enter your life for mysterious, noble reasons. Keep your personal mission statement at the forefront of everything you do.

For years I have tried to live by world renowned cultural anthropologist, Angeles Arrien's , four rules for the living. I have taught them to adults. I have taught them to elementary school children. I have them posted in my home and at work. The rules are:

Show up.

Pay attention.

Always tell the truth.

Don't be too attached to the outcome.

I believe, if you follow these simple rules, you will be not only a great social worker, but also a member of our society that will bring about change for the betterment of all.

In closing, if you are here today seeking adventure, may you be given the right tools and may you find yourself able to meet the challenges as you climb new heights.

If you are here today to test or confirm your occupational path, may you discover the path that will bring you satisfaction and fulfillment.

If you are here to make a load of money, may you find your exit *sooner* rather than *later*.

If you are here today because you want to save the world, may you learn you cannot save the world. You can companion those in need and offer support... and out of that, we will have a better world.

If you are here because you thought it would be an easy degree, may you be challenged in all the ways best for your personal growth.

If you are here because you heard the profs let you out of class early every night.... well... you heard wrong.

If you are here today in the hopes of expanding your understanding of our world... that is EXACTLY what you will receive.

May you find, as a social worker, a deeper true self, and know it is a wonderful and worthy profession – a profession in need of people just like you.

I wish you all the best.

Resources

Covey, S. (1989). *The 7 habits of highly effective people*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Lamott, A. (1999). *Traveling mercies*. New York: Pantheon Books.