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The Jenny Morrison Memorial Lecture, 2012

Sponsored by the University of Queensland Social Work and the AASW (Queensland Branch)

'On Character: Some ideas on its place in contemporary social work'

Presented by Professor Jan Carter, AM

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University of Queensland, St Lucia, Brisbane

Thank you so much for asking me to your annual celebration of Jenny's life and social work practice. First, I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of this land, their ancestors past and elders present. Also, thank you to Robert Bland for his generous introduction and also to the Committee which organized this evening. It is good to be in the University of Queensland again and I acknowledge the Head of Social Work, Professor Kargher and our AASW President, Professor Karen Healy.

It is particularly good, as Director of the new Australian College of Social Work to see two of our Foundation Fellows, Professors Robert Bland and Lesley Chenoweth and two of our Foundation members, Rene and Anne.

I am very pleased to be here for several reasons. First, because it's Queensland. My association with social work at University of Queensland goes back some 30 years and also I am an Adjunct Professor in the University. Some of my 'volunteer' work takes place in Queensland at the Cape York community, Lockhart River. I'm also an avid consumer of Queensland art, the remarkable annual chamber music festival at Townsville and the Cairns Indigenous Art Fair. All these reasons entitle me to call myself an honorary Queenslander!

Second, this is my first outing in Brisbane as Director of the new Australian College of Social Work. This exciting investment by the AASW in the quality assurance of its advanced practitioners will over time, provide thought leadership, support the consolidation of social work knowledge and raise standards for advanced practice. I am so grateful for the enthusiastic support of our Queensland Fellows and Members in getting this exciting new venture off the ground.

But third and most importantly for tonight, my delight in being here is occasioned by knowing the late Jenny Morrison herself. I met Jenny when we were both young social workers in London in the mid 1970s, at Moorfields Eye Hospital. I had just landed my first research job there and Jenny was the locum in the one person social work department. She made a vivid impression as a person of great talent and character.

We met again, a few years later when I came from the National Institute of Social Work in London, to speak at the National Child Protection Conference in Brisbane in 1983. I don't remember much about this but Robert reminded me that I quoted some poems illustrating child neglect and abuse and one of these was memorable for Jenny.

'In came the doctor
In came the nurse
In came the lady, with the alligator purse'

The context of this is lost —but I think I was trying to say, by the last line, how *not* to appear as a social worker in a children's hospital in child protection!

But to pursue our memories of Jenny as a person of talent *and* character I would like to talk tonight about one of these things: character. Character in social work will be my theme and then I'll muse about its' relationship to the broader themes of future risks and opportunities as the given title of my speech indicates.

After dinner talks are always problematic: they are so often the barrier between you and someone to whom you want to talk - someone you haven't seen for years! In my opinion, an after dinner speech needs to be in the nature of those mid meal sorbets designed to clear the palate — light, interesting, not too long, sweet, but with a hidden kick! But the good thing for me is that after dinner speeches let the speaker off the specialist leash, allowing for wider roaming on issues beyond one's formal expertise. I intend to claim the risks and opportunity inherent in this tonight: what I put before you tonight is not as an expert or moral philosopher, but the reflections of a fellow traveler.

I am sure that you will agree that we live in a time of unparalleled moral complexity. Central to this complexity has been the repositioning of the dividing line between the public and private spheres of life; with a privileging of the public over the private and the dismantling of many taboos about the public expression of many emotions, previously confined to the 'private' sphere of life. Whilst increased freedom in the public expression of emotion has had many important benefits (Nussbaum 2001), it leaves us, for the present at least, in a

landscape of unparalleled moral confusion. Just as old structures in the economic landscape are being overturned, leaving a wake of economic casualties, a similar case can be made about the overthrow of many 'taken for granted' moral certainties and its consequent trail of moral casualties. Crises in family and gender relations, plus a pervasive anxiety in society, fuelled by regular "moral panics" can be seen as manifestations of concerns about the consequences of potentially unlimited personal freedoms (Hunt 1999). The critical social and political question has become: what are the institutions and mechanisms for passing on character from generation to generation? Both the state (in its regulation of morality) and the family have been found wanting in this quest.

I don't propose to answer this question tonight, but simply to signal the complex context in which we discuss the issue of character in social work. Character is, of course an old topic and one hundred years ago, its formation was of major importance in education, family and religious life (Hunt 1999). The acquisition of character traits such as decency, honesty, self control, perseverance, diligence, hard work and good manners was central to maintaining a hierarchical society where personal freedoms were restricted on grounds of gender, race and class and income. The past fifty years however have presaged the expansion of personal freedoms and a consequent decline, in the west, at any rate, of public and private interest in matters of individual character formation and transmission, except in those matters where family failure precedes state intervention, such in child or substance abuse. In these cases, the assessment of character is important in understanding the limits and likely success of intervention. As social workers we participate in character assessments of our clients continually, on behalf of the wider society.

Although as already mentioned, we live in a period where character (or 'moral constitution' as the Oxford Dictionary calls it) is overlooked, set aside or deconstructed, I suggest that we can't discount the importance of character, as it is still the *substance* of public and private reputation. Without reputation, we are diminished or invalidated as individuals, institutions or in our case, as a profession. So, tonight, I want to make an old-fashioned argument for us to put the matter of character under our searchlight.

I am sure I don't need to remind you of fallen heroes — sexual abusers in the Roman Catholic and other Churches, business leaders succumbing to graft and corruption, and our own Federal Parliament where the survival of the Government depends on two MPs whose character is under question.

And closer to home in social work we have had our own scandals. I know of three social workers (and at least two have been AASW members) in recent years who have been accused of serious criminal offences — the most recent only a matter of weeks ago (and in another State) where serious criminal charges have been laid against an active senior member of our profession. Although we have an outstanding ethical code in the AASW, it is clear that it is only as strong as the character of the interpreter.

How have we come to this state of confusion about the place of character in our society? I don't want to discuss this at length but Richard Sennett, US and now UK sociologist, has a socio economic explanation. He argues in his book *The Corrosion of Character* (1998) that changes in work in contemporary capitalism have been devastating for character. He points to the qualities of character valued in work: long term commitment, sustained purpose, personal integrity and trust in others — where one's word was one's bond - as the main qualities fundamental to work for the old economy and our grandfathers and possibly our fathers. He insists that these qualities are overlooked in the new capitalism. (Perhaps Sennett has a romantic view of the old labor force — for example he fails to note that there was little space for women in the old economy and the importance of women in the home as principal agents in the transmission of character from generation to generation cannot be overlooked).

Nevertheless, let's stick with Sennett's argument that the contemporary socio economic upheaval of capitalism has been so cataclysmic that character is not being transmitted from one working generation to the next, in the way it was under the 'old' capitalism. (The TV show Downton Abbey provides fine examples of this transmission under the old capitalism). The assumptions underpinning most contemporary organizations; universities included,

health and welfare in particular, value contracts, 'flexibility' and short termism over stable long term commitments. Sennett reserves particular venom for teamwork. He thinks that current business team work practices favour people good at PR and 'spin', not at developing the deep commitments and loyalties that are fundamental to the formation of character. So he argues that the current nature of work is undermining — corroding is his term — character.

When I try to apply what Sennett is saying to a workplace, I think, first of all of that fictional anti hero – Dr Howard Kirk, also a sociologist, invented by the English academic novelist, Malcolm Bradbury. I first read Bradbury's book *The History Man* 30 years ago, just about the time I met Jenny Morrison in London. Aside from thinking it (at the time) the funniest novel I had read, it made a deep impression on this youngish social worker.

According to Kirk, the essence of life in the social sciences is mastering a little bit of Marx, a bit of Freud and a bit of social history. But the central issue the novel raised for me at the time — probably unintended by the author, was the distinction made between moral character (and moral conscience) and social activism (and social conscience). Of course, now professionally grown up and aware of more complex Marx, Freud and social history, I agree that moral conscience and social conscience cannot be equated. But in my naivety in the 70s I (and probably Jenny) thought them much the same thing. Dr Kirk, the anti hero of the novel undermined my belief.

Dr Howard Kirk, a senior lecturer in sociology at a new university, was an opportunist and a professional radical. You have to see him as likeable, but as so self interested, so careerist, so upwardly mobile, so exploitative (sexually and intellectually) — of others, including colleagues, students, family — that he is an absolute caricature.

Kirk's nemesis in the University is a young woman member of the English Department whom he accuses of lacking a social conscience — that is defined in the book as willingness to be radical by undertaking public advocacy and railing against social injustice and personal

oppression. Miss Callender of the English Department agrees that whilst she has no social conscience she possesses a strong moral conscience, which she uses a lot. 'I'm very old fashioned' she says. 'Well, we will have to modernize you' says Dr Kirk. Unsurprisingly, the dialogue between Dr Kirk and Miss Callendar on the distinction between a social and moral conscience was part of the former's campaign to seduce the latter. So Bradbury has separated the two forms of conscience to suit his literary ends and although at the time I found this literary distinction helpful to my own thinking, I am not arguing that philosophically the two issues are entirely distinct. However, in social work, they are useful to consider separately for heuristic reasons, in order to understand the distinctions and connections, if any, between the two. Let me illustrate.

Many of my colleagues worry about the current state of social work practice and the implications of this for future generations of social workers. How could separating out these two things, social conscience and moral character, assist us? Like you, I can think of social workers who were strongly in favor of social activism in social work: those who were happy to go on demonstrations and campaign for antidiscrimination but who had no apparent compunction about minor shoplifting, doing drugs, taking free rides on public transport or sleeping with a client. On the other hand I also have known honest, diligent and polite social workers who are unresponsive to social injustice and discrimination and without interest in social reform. Both a social worker with a social justice bypass and the social worker whose moral character is suspect are ethically lopsided and could never be described as social workers doing good work. Surely, both moral character and social conscience are at the heart of impressive social work? So, in practice, should we think more about how moral character is important to practice?

As these are issues that are not much discussed in social work selection, education, admittance to the profession and practice, I need to turn to contemporary biography and autobiography. An interesting recent autobiography on this subject is that of Queenslander, Alex Mitchell's *Come the Revolution* (2011), where he describes his life as journalist and a London-based Trotskyist in a world of revolutionary socialism, through the Workers Revolutionary Party members where the actors Vanessa and Corin Redgrave were

celebrated members. I was never a member myself, but had friends who were part of the WRP at about the time I met Jenny. A decade later, with its world aims of extending revolutionary socialism in tatters, Mitchell describes how the WRP collapsed, brought down by the poor character of its founder.

Reading *Wild Card*, which describes the author, playwright and poet Dorothy Hewett's involvement in post second world war communist Sydney, leads to a similar conclusion; that revolutionary politics let down its followers, and that this, more often than not, was fuelled by the poor character of its leaders (Hewett 1991). If moral character is distinct from social (and revolutionary) activism, should we not make more space for the discussion of the importance of character within social work's standards and ethical frameworks?

My next story about character tonight concerns a football club, an unlikely exemplar for social work! I come from a Victorian AFL football family and ever the odd woman out, have always considered that I had little to learn from footballers, their organization or culture. Until recently! My brother, Colin, is now President of Geelong Football Club, the reigning AFL Premiers. Geelong was a regional city which became very economically and socially depressed when it virtually went bankrupt in the 1990s after being brought low by an infamous financial scandal by some of the town's senior businessmen (which eventually brought down the Victorian Labor Government). The Football Club had not won a premiership in 50 years.

My brother tells the story of the sign on the desk of the previous President: 'Character before Talent'. How surprising — footballers are elite young sportsmen earning a fortune that social workers can only blink at. It seems counter intuitive that a Club would choose young men of character ahead of young men with talent! But Geelong Football Club had spurned the customary approach to rebuilding their club; i.e. buying the best football 'talent' on the market. Apart from anything else, their finances did not allow this. They also worked out that talent without character could be trouble. Many of the AFL scandals surrounding talented footballers have ended up costing clubs and other players dearly (Cook 2009).

So Geelong decided to become a values-based club, emphasizing the importance of good character before talent in their recruits and emphasizing the importance of character on the field and in their life in the Club. They found a US program with 52 elements of character, one taught for each week of the year! There was a set of behavioral exercises for each week to be practiced by staff and players. The first element was persistence.

My brother, now the President, tells the story of joining the players for lunch recently and watching as each young man got up, went to the kitchen and washed down his own dishes and put them in the dishwasher. This is not intuitive behavior for young men! My brother was impressed, particularly when it happened again and again, so he asked about it. The footballers had unpacked their mission statement about being good team players and this was their version of *respect* for those on the domestic staff, less well paid and busy.

This sounds simple stuff. But it has built a club which wins premierships, breaks football records and is noted locally as a club of high integrity *and* commitment to local social issues. Simple isn't the same as simplistic! As Bill Kelty said last week to the ACTU conference: "Sometimes we make politics too complex. We blame the media. We blame the Opposition. We could start by telling the truth." On much the same theme, a cartoon by Michael Leunig last week in the Age had two politicians — one labeled '*Modern Politician consulting his Code of Conduct*' and gazing at his computer and immersed in a spaghetti like diagram. The other politician sitting in chair thinking was labeled *Old style Politician consulting his conscience*. The thought balloon was saying 'Right or wrong?'

In social work, perhaps we need to start thinking again about some simple issues: the importance of moral character to practice. Perhaps we take it for granted that all social workers are of exemplary character, yet we are no less subject to the corrosion of character in the new capitalism than any other occupational group. So we need to take note of recent discussions in social work, emphasizing the *virtue ethics* and the *care ethics*.

Virtue ethics are: prudence, persistence and courage; moderation and self restraint and fairness and justice. The virtue ethics assume that it is the person who is the moral agent and the driving force of ethical behavior, not the set of rules or the ethical code (Clark, 2006). These are:

- Prudence
- Persistence and courage
- Moderation and self restraint
- Fairness and justice

As I mentioned earlier, any ethical code is only as sound as its interpreter. Dr Chris Clark from University of Edinburgh (Clark 2006) argues, as I am doing, that the requirements of the social worker include demonstrating a virtuous character. This has long been implicitly accepted in social work, he says, in practice; but it needs to become more clearly acknowledged. If we did so, it would have transformative impacts on our selection processes in university and then later, in admittance to the AASW.

Another social worker, Van den Bersselaar (2004) of Amsterdam, talks about using the virtue ethics as a practice strategy: as a structure for discussing client narratives and also as a framework in students' education. In addition to the virtue ethics, are the four 'care ethics' which have been revived by women's studies and scholars such as Carol Gilligan. These four care ethics are:

- Attentiveness to others needs
- Responsibility to care
- Competence in caring
- Responsiveness in dealing with the vulnerabilities and power inequalities implicit in caring.

From a perspective of social value, I think the Australian community, if asked, would demand that social workers demonstrate character *and* talent. If asked which institution

the community would prefer to support: volunteers chosen for their character or professional social workers chosen for their talent, I have no doubt about which the community would find more valuable. We should never get to the stage of requiring such a choice, as long as we insert 'virtuous character' as a requirement for social work practice and foster it as seriously as we now foster intellectual talent.

My main reason for raising this topic tonight is to suggest that we need a dialogue with ourselves. 'Who we are' is the most important issue for our future and at once the biggest opportunity and greatest risk. Yet it is 'what we do' that is generally the preoccupation of educational and professional formation. Private character, in the end, is the basis of our public reputation, good, bad or indifferent; individual and collective. You might say it is our only real asset. That is why we need to take stock, to commence a conversation. I am confident that Jenny Morrison would agree.

Professor Jan Carter, AM

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