Where, after all, do universal human rights begin? In small places, close to home—so close and so small that they can’t be seen on any map of the world. Yet they are the world of the individual person.

—Eleanor Roosevelt (1958)

Last year (2001) at a national social work conference I attended, the presenter reported on a survey she had taken of her American and Albanian students of social work. How many had read the Universal Declaration of Human Rights? Only a minority had read the document, and twice as many of the Albanians as American students had done so. Upon my return I posed the question to my advanced graduate class. A few had heard of the document but none had read it. I then proceeded to pass out copies of the document that could be considered the foundation for human rights.

As we enter the global age, an age characterized by ethnic cleansing, suicide bombings, air strikes, the war on terrorism, suppression of civil liberties, and the decline of the welfare state to comply with the dictates of the free market economy, there is a need for new understandings, new approaches. Many problems that seem endemic to one state or one country can only be understood internationally, as common problems with common solutions.

Social welfare, in the sense of the well-being of a people, and human rights are inextricably linked. People cannot enjoy a sense of security and well-being if their rights are systematically violated by
the very state representatives from whom they would seek protection. Nor
can they enjoy the benefits of human rights such as exist in a democracy if
their social welfare need for such things as food, shelter, and clothing are not
met. Hence the reasons for Social Work and Human Rights: A Foundation for
Social Work Policy and Practice. Its publication is timely. The rationale of this
book is consistent with the 2000 NASW policy statement, “International
Policy on Human Rights.” This statement strongly endorses the Universal
Declaration, conventions, and treaties that, according to NASW, provide a
human rights template for social work.

Three categories of rights are provided in the declaration: economic and
cultural rights; protection against discrimination based on race, color, sex,
language, religion, and political opinion; and civil and political rights
against the arbitrary powers of the state. Those articles of the declaration
concerned with economic, social, and cultural rights range from the less ur-
gent, but also important, rights of “rest, leisure, and reasonable limitation of
working hours and periodic holidays with pay” (art. 24) to the more funda-
mental rights of food, housing, health care, work, and social security (art.
25). The fact that these rights are included nowhere in the U.S. Constitution
(but in many European constitutions) has hindered the American people in
their claims to basic social and economic benefits.

The principles of social and economic justice as enunciated in the Uni-
versal Declaration closely parallel the values practiced by the founding
mothers of social work since the earliest days and those more recently
spelled out in the NASW’s 1996 Code of Ethics. Unique to social work among
helping professions is the emphasis on social justice in the social environ-
ment. Merely putting Band-Aids on clients is never, can never be, enough.
Because the personal is political, and the political personal, the artificial split
between macro and micro is just that—artificial. American social work ed-
ucation has been remiss in its failure to integrate human rights content into
the curriculum and to prepare students for the kind of ethical dilemmas
they may face when a client’s rights are being violated. Only in 1996, in fact,
had the word global even been included in our social work code of ethics.
This inclusion is most striking in Standard 6:01: “Social workers should pro-
mote the general welfare of society from local to global levels.”

Elisabeth Reichert’s Social Work and Human Rights aims to remedy the
relative neglect of human rights issues in American social work and to bring
human rights concepts to the forefront of the discussion. Reichert’s aim is
achieved and achieved magnificently. Drawing on international law as pre-
sented in United Nations documents, this book successfully presents the
unifying and systematic conceptualization of human rights for the profes-
sion that we sorely needed. However, do not think this is your usual dreary
theoretical treatise. The presentation is as dynamic as the content. Consider
some of the questions addressed in this book:

- Is the social work profession a human rights profession?
- To what extent are economic rights human rights?
- Why does the United States vehemently oppose ratification of the U.N. Conven-
tion on the Rights of the Child?
- Which highly vulnerable group found in every country is not included in any
human rights document?
- How do we reconcile the value of cultural relativism with the recognition that
some truths are universal?
- On what occasion and to what extent did governments acknowledge that
poverty was a form of violence against women?
- What is the role of social workers with regard to human rights?
- In what way does the Universal Declaration of Human Rights go beyond the
limits of the U.S. Constitution?
- How can the social work code of ethics be regarded as a mini-Universal Declara-
tion?
- Does America’s war on terrorism violate human rights?

There is much to learn here. This is a book not to be merely read or
skimmed, in fact, but to be pored over. The human rights framework as pre-
sented in this volume provides a prism through which to view the hidden
assumptions and values of the social work profession.

“Where is the human rights compass to guide social workers?” asks Elisa-
beth Reichert (in the last, climactic chapter). I have found it, and it is here—
in the pages that follow.

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