

Tribute

William J. Reid: A Personal Remembrance

Stuart A. Kirk

IN 1969, I WAS a twenty-four-year-old MSW student at the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign. I was perplexed by the discrepancies between the profession's aspirations that practice should be grounded in science and the vague, frequently unfounded claims made in social work journal articles and practice textbooks, still infused with psychoanalytic theory and practices. I was confused by exactly how the methods of science were to shape the practice of social work.

I stumbled on a recently published small monograph that compared the outcomes of short-term versus long-term casework treatment. It was an uncommonly masterful empirical test of one of social work's sacred cows: namely, that the widely preferred long-term treatment was better for clients. Based on the study data, however, long-term treatment was not better, a surprise even to the researchers. Although undoubtedly the findings were disheartening to traditionalists, I was encouraged and impressed—not because I harbored a bias with regard to the preferred length of treatment, about which I knew little, but because I had found critically minded social work scholars who were using scientific methods to examine significant practice issues, and who exercised care and courage in interpreting the findings. This book, *Brief and Extended Casework*, by Bill Reid and Ann Shyne (1969), was a model of applied social work research. At the time, I had never heard of William J. Reid, who was in his mid-thirties and a professor of social work at the University of Chicago. I was unaware that this marvelous study was one of Bill's earliest publications and his first book. I certainly couldn't have forecast that it would be the beginning of four decades of outstanding scholarship, in which he would be in the forefront of empirical practice, a tough-minded and rigorous academic, but one with an eye for practice realities and applications. Bill Reid's work inspired me and many others.

Scholarship

His professional achievements are now well known: distinguished university professor; author of nearly 200 publications, including 18 books; founding editor of the journal *Social Work Research*; winner of national awards for his research contributions; developer and ardent proponent of task-centered practice; and mentor to generations of doctoral students at the University of Chicago and the University at Albany.

He was one of very few researchers whose body of work has made a difference in both what we teach and how we deliver services. A pioneer in using empirical methods to develop knowledge for practice, he was one of the leaders and champions in what was perhaps the most influential development in social work practice in the last half of the twentieth century, a movement that led directly to what is now labeled Evidence-Based Practice.

In a 2003 article, coauthors and I surveyed dozens of leaders in social work, asking them to list the top researchers who had made the most significant contributions to the profession. When we published the results, we listed the names, but deliberately did not identify the specific ranking of the individuals who were among the top group. When we immediately started getting e-mails from colleagues asking how they personally ranked, we decided not to reveal the specific ranks to anyone because of the instability of such scores. Even though one of the coauthors and I had known Bill for decades, he would never have asked such a question and wouldn't have been interested in the answer anyway. Nevertheless, in drafting this tribute, my coauthors agreed that I could make an exception and reveal that in our survey, Bill Reid's reputation as a researcher ranked first nationally. I now wish that I had shared that with him.

He did not gain his prominence in the profession, however, in the usual ways—consciously promoting himself, elbowing his way into positions of leadership, skillfully cultivating friends in high places, crafty political maneuvering, or gaining renown by natural charisma. His prominence came from the significance of his written work and his steadfast commitment to studying interventions empirically. This modest, soft-spoken, slightly disheveled, self-effacing professor actually seemed uneasy with his public reputation and more at home in his study, surrounded by books and piles of articles, than at the podium.

To me, another indicator of his stature was how he achieved his stunning record of publications. In most disciplines, hundreds of publications are the result of a senior investigator overseeing teams of researchers, supported by large foundation and federal grants, cranking out dozens of group-written articles carrying the senior investigator's name. Bill's contributions are not

the products of the largesse of foundations or national institutes. Although he received many small grants for his work, he managed to remain an independent, incredibly productive scholar through sheer energy, dedication, and involvement in the practice world.

He was not, however, an isolated scholar, a recluse working alone. Many of his articles and books were coauthored, usually with his current or former doctoral students. Such collaborations are a testament to his role as a mentor and role model to young scholars. In fact, through his prodigious writings, he served as a mentor to many others who were not necessarily young and who never had the opportunity to work directly with him. I had known Bill for years before I worked with him as a colleague at Albany, and while we didn't publish together during those years, we certainly worked together on many educational projects and reports. A decade after I left Albany, I had the good fortune to work with Bill on a book addressing the very topic that had concerned me as an MSW student thirty years before, about which this young University of Chicago professor had been an inspiration. As it turned out, it was the only publication we wrote together. I could hardly ask for a more personally meaningful collaboration. He was an ideal partner—responsive, helpful, reassuring, and fully engaged. As many know from personal experience, Bill was a precise and skilled writer and editor. Never had co-authoring been as easy or rewarding for me.

Institution Building

In 1979 I accepted the deanship at the School of Social Welfare at Albany. It was an incredible opportunity. The school was young and underdeveloped. The university's president, Vincent O'Leary, encouraged us to develop a top-tier school of social welfare. The challenge required recruiting the best senior and junior faculty in the country, building a research-oriented program, and initiating the first Ph.D. program in social welfare in the state university system.

In the year of transition as I moved to Albany, we hired six new faculty to build on the existing core of very fine scholars already there. One of the new recruits stood out: we had enticed Professor William J. Reid to join us from the University of Chicago. That one hire was, in my opinion, the catalyst for the future development and growth at Albany. Bill's arrival attracted the attention of the national social work academic community and encouraged all the school faculty to have higher aspirations for the program and their own work. It allowed us to develop a proposal for a credible research-oriented Ph.D. program and confirmed the campus administration's faith in the future of the school. Equally important, it helped us continue recruiting other

superb faculty within the next five years. The scholarly productivity of the school's faculty jumped from a rank of 57th (Jayaratne 1979) into the top five or ten, a coveted position maintained for over 20 years (Feldman 2006).

Bill did not hide in his office and write articles; he was actively engaged in this transformation. As soon as he arrived at Albany he took a critical and influential, if partly behind the scenes, role in helping to reshape the school—its directions, its academic standards, and its commitment to practice research. For example, within the first few months I asked him to help me shape a proposal for the new Ph.D. program. In keeping with his incredible task focus, Bill had the essence of the program designed in about four days. As was common for the SUNY bureaucracy, it took about four years for the program to be reviewed and approved. The fact that he directed the Ph.D. program for so many years must have given him great and deserved satisfaction. Although I left Albany as it commenced, his leadership allowed me to know over the years that the program we started was in very good hands.

As a young dean, I was learning as I was leading, and relying heavily on the wisdom of others. Having Bill in the school's hallways, at faculty meetings, and available as an advisor was an enormous asset. His presence was reassuring and his encouragement about what we might achieve collectively was an inspiration to me and others.

Personal

Among Bill's remarkable personal qualities were his modesty and reserve. He was comfortably unpretentious. I can't remember ever hearing him boast of his achievements, expect deference, or seek praise. He never pursued fame or prominence. He was a very private person, cautious and reserved, not quick at a social gathering to tell you his life story or his wide-ranging interests. I didn't know, for instance, that he played cards well, until some faculty invited him to join our poker group and he lightened our wallets. Many know he was a prodigious scholar and workaholic, but few knew he loved the outdoors. One winter, I invited him to UCLA to talk at a doctoral seminar. He arrived in California with his wet suit, ready to do some body surfing. He was a swimmer, hiker, and naturalist. Not exactly the athleticism you'd expect from a seventy-year-old professor ensconced in a crowded office writing book after book.

His subdued, restrained personal style also characterized his scholarship, which was deliberate and careful. His academic work never consisted of showmanship, deliberately meant to entertain or provoke. He quietly pursued his own agenda, avoiding as best he could the many distractions that derail most scholars. He was absorbed and energized by his own projects that he relished

and pursued vigorously. I have met very few professors in my life with as much focus and persistence, and not a single one who sustained such a high level of craftsmanship for as long as Bill did. When he was in his late sixties, I asked Ricky Fortune if Bill was thinking of retiring. She told me he never would. I think that was what I personally wanted to hear. Bill retiring was simply unimaginable.

Despite his inner-directedness, Bill was always available to work for the collective good, and was gracious with his assistance. You would've thought that someone as well read and accomplished as he would have trouble suffering fools. Not so. It was remarkable to me how even-handed and judicious he was in his criticism of others' work. He had, of course, a definite point of view and strongly held opinions, but he used them to gently persuade if he could, not to put others down. He had the wisdom to know that nothing useful could be accomplished by sharpening conflict. Bill was not only a social work scholar of the first order but also a very decent man.

Bill was a scholar's scholar, an ideal colleague, a trusted friend. In the profession of social work, he was a giant among us. I miss his friendship, but I am grateful that his significant contributions to social work will endure. In 1969 I was a student and Bill was a teacher. Now, after forty years, I'm still learning from him.

References

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