Charles Dickens, Social Worker in His Time

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As the world marks the 200th anniversary of Charles Dickens's birth, social workers may take note of the contributions Dickens made to 19th century social reform. Ever the advocate for people who were poor and oppressed, Dickens, in his timeless fictional narratives, continues to have relevance for contemporary social justice advocacy. This article draws on Dickens's biography and writing to highlight select lessons of relevance to social work. The focus is on developing a professional lens, changing social norms, and interpreting case studies across ecological systems.

KEY WORDS: *critical thinking and reading; education for reflective practice; liberal arts and social work; literature and social work; narrative practice*

February 7, 2012, marked the 200th anniversary of the birth of Charles Dickens, British author and social reformer. Social workers, who owe much to the social movements influenced by Dickens's powerful pen and voice, surely will be among the people who celebrate his life and work going forward from this occasion. Though he lived before social work emerged as a profession, Dickens deserves to be titled an honorary "social worker" for his tireless promotion of compassionate social norms with regard to the poor and oppressed, advocacy for social policy reform, and development of community programs. This article provides a brief review of Dickens's value to social work and recommends ways to draw on his immortal wisdom while developing social work practice for the 21st century.

Social workers are giving renewed credence to the power of real-life narrative for assessment, meaning, and therapeutic change (Larsson & Sjöblom, 2010; Riessman, 2008; Riessman & Quinney, 2005). Fictional narrative can also enable exploration of thoughts, feelings, and observed actions and expressions that are the essence of social relationships (Goldstein, 2002; Hardy, 2005). The Council on Social Work Education's (CSWE) *Education Policy and Accreditation Standards* (2.0) (2008) stipulated that "social work education is grounded in the liberal arts, which provide the intellectual basis for the curriculum and inform its design" (p. 3). While reading literature, budding and experienced social workers alike ponder the dilemmas of literary characters, gain enlightenment about their own real-world concerns, and realize ways to make meaning from dilemmas (Falkenheim, 1993). Greene (1966) referred to this as "symbolic engagement" that promotes awareness of "perplexities, nuances, and ambiguities." Turner (1991) emphasized the potential for literature to be far more than a "source of illustrations for common human predicaments" (p. 237); careful study of literature through the social work lens can enrich the development of "sensibility," which extends thought and feeling and builds on intuitive understanding.

This article aims to remind social work practitioners and scholars of the rich legacy that Dickens left for advocates of social justice. The social work educator can open to almost any page of Dickens and find a lesson rich with descriptions of human behavior in the social environment as well as effective and ineffective social interventions. Here, I offer a few lessons focused on understanding the professional lens, changing social norms, and interpreting case studies across ecological systems. Extensive resources exist to help educators and students probe this subject more deeply —people have been writing about Dickens for over a century. Such resources are secondary to the primacy of Dickens's publications—no one can substitute reading about Dickens's work or life for reading Dickens's work.

For the sake of brevity and illustration, excerpts from selected Dickens' publications are offered here, but adequate study would be grounded in all of his works. The stories, novels, and essays contain complex themes, intricately woven, that must be taken out of context here. Numerous

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biographies of Dickens have been published (for example, Ackroyd, 1990; Orwell, 1940), including a classic in his lifetime (Forster, 1874). In the following section, facts from the life of Dickens are drawn from the most recent biography, by Michael Slater (2009). Observations about Dickens's writings come from my own reading of the works.

LESSON 1: CONTEXT AND THE PROFESSIONAL LENS

Social workers must learn to continually assess the personal lens through which they view social life and develop and polish a professional lens. The social work lens is informed by the profession's core values of service, social justice, the dignity and worth of the person, the importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence (NASW, 2008); theoretical understanding of human behavior in the social environment; and training in social change at the individual, family, group, organizational, and community levels (Andrews, 2007; CSWE, 2008). As social workers assess social conditions professionally, they develop a keener awareness of their personal lens. Using the life of Dickens as a case example, social workers can better understand how a personal lens affects judgment and, thus, can affect the professional lens.

Dickens lived in England from 1812 to 1870, as the Victorian era emerged, when British imperialism and industrialism prevailed, democracy slowly blossomed, and a middle class developed. Dickens chronicled this transformative period from the streets of London and its surrounding villages. His characters, though fictional, portray daily social life from the perspective of people who are poor, working class, and middle class in ways that can easily be recognized as embodiments of frank, timeless reality. Dickens transparently demonstrated how ineffective social policies and prevailing discriminatory social norms wreaked havoc on families and communities.

Dickens saw life as a white, urban, educated, middle-class, Protestant man whose family of origin included two involved parents—obviously a position of relative privilege and empowerment. His sensitivity to the plight of poor and working people can be attributed in part to the fragility of his childhood social and economic status. His father was an assistant clerk in a government office, and his mother was a homemaker. Charles, the oldest son, recalled a happy childhood; by age 10, he had three brothers and two sisters. Some of this happiness stemmed from the support of household staff, school, friends in a middle-class neighborhood, and excursions partially paid for by loans his father encumbered to live a genteel life, one beyond his means.

In 1822, when Charles was 10, his father was transferred to London, where he continued to accrue debt. The family no longer could afford school for Charles, so he ran errands for his family and absorbed the sights and sounds of the London streets through his childish, unsupervised senses. These themes—the precariousness of social position, living above one's means, unrealized aspirations, solitary innocent sojourners in a vibrant broader environment, and optimism in the face of adversity—recur throughout Dickens's writing. They illustrate how our personal lives, particularly our early childhood development, influence our professional perspectives.

And nothing shapes our lives like trauma. For Charles, this occurred at age 12 when his father was arrested for debt and sentenced to the Marshalsea, an ancient for-profit prison where debtors were forced to pay for their own stay while gathering resources through day jobs, family, and friends to pay down their debt. Charles's parents and younger siblings lived at the prison while Charles lodged with an aunt and worked 12-hour days at a relative's shoe polish factory, wandering the streets at other times. The family was released after a few months, when a grandmother died and left a small inheritance that covered the debt. Charles resumed his education, but the school his family could afford is immortalized in *David Copperfield* as a brutal, dilapidated, meager establishment that saps rather than nourishes the developing child.[1] Through family connections and his own resilience, Charles completed his education and became a law clerk and then a newspaper reporter, which helped launch his career as a writer.

[1] Throughout this article, in the interest of readability, I depart from standard APA-style citation for Dickens's works. All works discussed have entries in the References, and the page numbers given in text correspond to the editions specified there.

Something about Charles's development led him to perceive how factors in the social environment, not solely individual agency or pathology, contribute to personal and social problems. Surely his early optimism, position of relative privilege, and sense of empowerment emboldened him to relentlessly disclose the folly of ineffective social policies and norms. Dickens developed a life-long passion for reform of the poor laws and promotion of educational progress, epitomized in the scene from *A Christmas Carol* in which the Ghost of Christmas Present reveals two "wretched, abject, frightful, hideous, miserable" children (p. 55). They are "Ignorance" and "Want," products of humanity and harbingers of doom. Dickens, ever determined to challenge complacency about these pervasive conditions, aimed to awaken the reader's conscience with this description of the two:

> They were a boy and a girl. Yellow, meager, ragged, scowling, wolfish; but prostrate, too, in their humility. Where graceful youth should have filled their features out, and touched them with its freshest tints, a stale and shriveled hand, like that of age, had pinched, and twisted them, and pulled them into shreds. Where angels might have sat enthroned, devils lurked, and glared out menacingly. No change, no degradation, no perversion of humanity, in any grade, through all the mysteries of wonderful creation, has monsters half so horrible and dread. (p. 55)

When Scrooge asks, "Have they no refuge or resource?" (p. 56), the Spirit responds by mocking his earlier statement that the poor should rely on prisons or workhouses. The power of Dickens's words, transcending time and place, is that they illustrate the burden and meaning of poverty in ways no statistical data or photographic images of today can.

Dickens took on debtor's prison reform directly. He situated an entire novel at the Marshalsea prison. *Little Dorrit*, published as a series from 1855 to 1857, tells the life of Amy, a young woman born and raised in the prison because her father, locked in his regard for himself as a "gentleman" and, thus, incapacitated as a worker by his own fear of shame and societal attitudes, spent decades in the prison, to the point that he was known as the "Father" of the place. The story of the father is a compelling case study of the psychological phenomenon known as "learned helplessness" (Peterson, Maier, & Seligman, 1995), though Dickens particularly focuses on the prison from the perspective of the motherless child Amy. The prison manager (the turnkey) and the residents form Amy's protective and nurturing village. They live behind literal bars, but we can imagine the psychological and social barriers that poverty imposes on families, and empathize with how poor people may feel today, as we picture Amy's life:

> With a pitiful and plaintive look for everything indeed, but with something in it only for him that was like protection, this Child of the Marshalsea and child of the Father of the Marshalsea, sat by her friend the turnkey in the lodge, kept the family room, or wandered about the prison-yard, for the first eight years of her life. With a pitiful and plaintive look for her wayward sister; for her idle brother; for the high blank walls; for the faded crowd they shut in; for the games of the prison children as they whooped and ran, and played at hide and seek, and made the iron bars of the inner gateway, "Home." (p. 73)

Dickens's younger brothers and sisters had lived at the Marshalsea, so there is a good chance he observed children at play in this depressing setting. People with means did not have to look at poor people when they were behind the high walls. Dickens brought them out to his readers.

Dickens wanted readers to ponder what poverty might look like through the eyes of an innocent child, born with no other option. Amy's is a story of resilience, for she is the one who aspires to leave the prison. Given the despair induced by the Marshalsea, her family is resigned. Her father dissociates into mental despondency; her sister does what women in poverty often must —becomes an exploited dancer at a bar; and her brother gives up looking for work, subsisting on one handout or another, falling into habits of vice:

> What her pitiful look saw, at that early time, in her father, in her sister, in her brother, in the jail; how much, or how little of the

> wretched truth it pleased God to make visible to her; lies hidden with many mysteries. It is enough that she was inspired to be something which was not what the rest were, and to be that something, different and laborious, for the sake of the rest.... She took the place of the eldest of the three, in all things but precedence; was the head of the fallen family; and bore, in her own heart, its anxieties and shames. (pp. 75–76)

English public policy may have aimed to punish debtors, but Dickens portrayed vividly how innocent children bear the weight of the penalty.

Dickens also used satire to communicate how ridiculously ineffective debtors' prisons are as public policy. In *David Copperfield*, the good-natured and ostentatious Mr. Micawber, who is forever living beyond his means and expecting something to "turn up" as an income, repeatedly gets arrested for debt and calls on friends, in a roundabout way, to pay for his release. Dickens uses Micawber's melodramatic tone to mock the grandiosity of the English penal system, backed by the greatest empire in the world (under King Edward VII), which prosecutes people of insignificant means. At one point, Micawber is arrested and sends David this note:

> Another writ has been issued (in His Majesty's High Court of King's Bench at Westminster), in another cause of *Heep v. Micawber*, and the defendant in that cause is the prey of the sheriff having legal jurisdiction in this bailiwick.
>
> 'Now's the day, and now's the hour,
> See the front of battle lower,
> See approach proud Edward's power—
> Chains and slavery!' (p. 362)

Micawber's perspective reveals Dickens's opinion that powerful governments regulate and harass the poor. He portrayed the complexity of the social condition, sparing no blame with regard to the responsibility of individuals like Micawber who make foolish choices, highlighting how the actions of government only make matters worse and offering that, in the end, mutual support is the only relief. Though Dickens lived to see reform of the poor laws in England (for example, the Bankruptcy Act of 1869, passed just a year before his death in 1870, abolished debtor's prisons), the relevance of this portrayal of power dynamics and plight of people in debt persists.

Dickens's lived experiences affected his professional lens as a writer, yielding themes such as innocence in adversity, resilience, ignorance and want, unjust social policy, optimism, and capacity for change. Examination of Dickens's biography and identification of autobiographical themes in his writings helps students and practitioners understand the relationship of their own histories to the emergence of a professional lens on social work.

LESSON 2: SOCIAL NORMS AND THE POWER OF THE WORD

Social workers learn the power of social norms in shaping public policies and personal choices (Bandura, 1986; Bicchieri, 2006; Coleman, 1990). In Dickens's work, we see how social status affects normative expectations, but we also see how change in social norms occurs. Dickens started his career as a news reporter and released most of his works through what are the equivalents of monthly magazine serials, so he was ever conscious of his relationship to his audience, the public. He exposed hypocrisy in prevalent public norms, such as support of Christian outreach to the poor in concert with toleration of injustice (for example, beating children, ostracizing people with disabilities). Although Dickens's biases of privilege came through his works, he persistently sought to reveal the abuse of power across the rigid social class system.

Perhaps the greatest illustration ever of how people in poverty are challenged when they seek empowerment is the title character of *Oliver Twist*'s famous plea for food. The prevailing social norm was (and is) that people in poverty should humbly and nonassertively accept what is given to them. Under a charity model, all power rests with the giver. Oliver's assertion is not exactly an act of empowerment on his part. He is the new kid at the orphanage, and, under threat that one of the larger boys is so hungry he will eat a younger boy, the boys conspire to ask for more. The lot falls to tiny Oliver. The skinny, starving children, having eaten their gruel, licked their bowls, and sucked their fingers, nudge him forward to Mr. Bumble:

> "Please sir, I want some more."
>
> The master was a fat, healthy man; but he turned very pale. He gazed in stupified astonishment on the small rebel for some seconds; and then clung for support to the copper. The assistants were paralyzed with wonder; the boys with fear.
>
> "What!" said the master at length, in a faint voice.
>
> "Please sir," replied Oliver, "I want some more."
>
> The master aimed a blow at Oliver's head with the ladle; pinioned him in his arms; and shrieked aloud for the beadle. (pp. 12–13)

The official response to this audacious act of rebellion was the cruelest of punishments for Oliver: beating, confinement, and expulsion from the orphanage by being put up for sale (through indenture) as an apprentice. The pompous board of directors was even willing to sell Oliver to a chimney sweep, which would mean sure death at an early age; he was saved by one compassionate man. Dickens blasted the charity model, revealing the cruel oppression that can lie beneath the relationship between giver and receiver and the hopelessness of the receiver. All of Dickens's works include the theme of the power differential between people of different socioeconomic classes, though some are more subtle than *Oliver Twist.*

Although Dickens took on class structure, he was less able to overcome the ethnic prejudices inherent in his privileged position. He has been criticized for anti-Semitic depiction of Jews, particularly the thief and corruptor of boys, Fagin, in *Oliver Twist.* Eliza Davis, a prominent Jewish lady in London, wrote to Dickens that she regretted his encouragement of "vile prejudice" against Jews (Slater, 2009). Dickens, though initially defensive, changed the portrayal, albeit slightly, in later editions by using Fagin's name instead of calling him "the Jew." In subsequent works, he tried to compensate with kinder depictions of Jewish characters, such as Mr. Riah in *Our Mutual Friend*, but he still cast this character in a stereotypical Jewish role (money lender). Dickens's biases, though transformable, were resistant to change. Today, social workers engage in lifelong development to overcome their own and others' similar resistance to change as they master cultural competency skills.

Though Dickens communicated empathy for people who are outcasts, he also perpetuated discrimination. For example, his portrayal of Mr. Quilp, the evil exploiter in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, as a "dwarf" fuels readers' biases against people with differences. Granted, many of Dickens's evil characters are from privileged groups, but Dickens did not make a point of repeatedly referring to their atypical characteristics as he did in Quilp's case.

Dickens likewise kept women in stereotypical roles—mostly as overseers of domestic environs or in childlike dependency. But, unlike many male authors, he portrayed depth in his female characters. Dickens tackled sexism head-on in *Dombey and Son*, the story of Florence, the only surviving child of a father who forsakes her because she is not a son. The ominous, pent-up capacity for vengeance in Madame DeFarge (*A Tale of Two Cities*) intimates the hidden power of women. In *Bleak House*, Esther, an unattractive young woman—pockmarked by scars of smallpox, born out of wedlock to an aristocratic woman—holds a marginal formal social status. Against these odds, Esther emerges as a figure of power in her own right.

One of the more recurrent themes in Dickens's work is his revelation of how women in poverty are beaten and exploited. Who can pass moral judgment on Nancy, the ill-fated prostitute who risks her own life to save Oliver Twist? Even though she chooses to return to her batterer when offered refuge, her plight, Dickens makes clear, stems from social forces in her environment, and we grudgingly admire her value of loyalty to the friends who share that plight. In real life, Dickens knew well the conditions of "fallen women." He devoted 10 years of hands-on effort and funding to help Burdett Coutts operate Urania Cottage, a transition home for women struggling with prostitution, addiction, violence, and poverty (Slater, 1983).

Dickens lived in the age of imperialism and colonialism, when people of color were subjugated around the world. Repulsed by slavery, after visiting the United States in 1841 he promulgated ideas from the Anti-Slavery Society. Dickens, master of sarcasm, portrayed the haughty, blind attitudes of white people toward people of color. In *Martin Chuzzlewit*, he describes a British man's

first encounter with a former slave while visiting the United States. Martin's white American friend Mark Tapley, in the bluntly callous tone reflecting social norms of the time, whispers the following about the man who is their luggage porter:

> "Ah!" said Mark in the same tone. "Nothing else. A slave. Why, when that there man was young—don't look at him, while I'm a telling it—he was shot in the leg; gashed in the arm; scored in his live limbs, like crimped fish; beaten out of shape; has his neck galled with an iron collar, and wore iron rings upon his wrists and ankles. The marks are on him to this day. When I was having my dinner just now, he stripped off his coat, and took away my appetite." (p. 297)

Mark goes on to describe how the slave saved up and bought his own freedom,

> "which he got pretty cheap at last, on account of his strength being nearly gone, and he being ill. Then he come here. And now he's saving up to treat himself afore he dies, to one small purchase—it's nothing to speak of: only his own daughter; that's all!" cried Mr. Tapley, becoming excited. "Liberty for ever! Hurrah! Hail Columbia!" (p. 297)

The sarcastic passage mocks the United States's claim to be a haven of liberty by highlighting the cruel path to freedom for many of its residents.

Dickens was even more direct with criticism of his own neighbors' blindness to and avoidance of social justice. When the poor little homeless Jo, a boy harassed by a lord's lawyer and the police, dies on the streets of London in *Bleak House*, Dickens changes narrative perspective, stepping out of the story and speaking directly to the people of England:

> Dead, Your Majesty. Dead, my lords and gentlemen. Dead, Right Reverends and Wrong Reverends of every order. Dead, men and women, born with Heavenly compassion, in your hearts. And dying thus around us every day. (p. 215)

Dickens's work, though biased by his own social position, reflects his understanding of how social norms affect human interactions across settings. His works demonstrate that he understood the power of his own words and the power of others to promote change in the direction of compassionate social norms with regard to the poor and oppressed.

LESSON 3: CASE STUDIES

One of the more common ways social work educators use literature is to create case studies that simulate real life (Falkenheim, 1993; Hardy, 2005). Dickens's works offer numerous case studies at the individual, group, family, community, and organizational levels.

Cases to Illustrate Individual and Family Dynamics

Dickens's characters and stories boldly portray the complexity of life and contain multiple themes. In the interest of brevity, a single theme, mental health, is featured here.

Social workers often struggle with survivors of domestic battery who willingly return to their batterers. In a Dickens short story, "The Hospital Patient," witnesses accuse a man of "grossest brutality" as a woman lies dying of the injuries she suffered at his hand. Authorities bring the man to her bedside, where she cries, "No gentlemen, for God's sake! I did it myself—it was nobody's fault —it was an accident. He didn't hurt me; he wouldn't for all the world. Jack, dear Jack, you know you wouldn't!" (p. 227). This story raises issues about dynamics of intimate partner violence, self-blame, a victim's willingness to forgive, the relation of community norms and personal agency, constancy in attachment, learned helplessness, and relentless hope for change, creating opportunities for intense group discussion and personal reflection among social work readers.

The pitiful Miss Haversham, forever reliving her abandonment by her fiancé on the day of her wedding (*Great Expectations*), and Dr. Manette, released political prisoner who was in the Bastille for 18 years, emerging with a compulsion to withdraw and make shoes when stressed (*A Tale of Two Cities*), are textbook examples of people with symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (Huber & te Wildt, 2005).

Another short story, "The Black Veil," portrays the impact of a public policy, the death penalty, on innocent family members. A mother calls for a physician to visit her home after her son's lifeless, executed body is delivered. When he tells her the son is dead, she responds:

> The woman started to her feet and beat her hands together. "Oh, don't say so sir," she exclaimed, with a burst of passion, amounting almost to frenzy. "Oh! Don't say so, sir! I can't bear it! Men have been brought to life before, when unskillful people have given them up for lost; and men have died, who might have been restored, if proper means had been resorted to. Don't let him lie here, sir, without one effort to save him!" (p. 361)

Disbelief is a common reaction by family members when a loved one has committed a grievous crime (Beck, Britto, & Andrews, 2007). In Dickens's story, as the mother faces her son's ultimate penalty, her plea for redemption and resurrection illustrates the intensity of maternal attachment, psychological mechanisms of denial and dissociation, and traumatic grief.

A pervasive theme throughout Dickens's work is the family system, particularly the parent–child relationship (Adrian, 1984). Dickens was one of six children and a father of 10. He provided for his family; his parents; and, ultimately, a mistress. He was a staunch advocate of letting children be childlike. His portrayals of abuse and neglect are legendary. He showed the effects of maltreatment on children, particularly parentification (Chase, 1999) and role reversal, through which children take on adult responsibilities (Macfie, Mcelwain, Houts, & Cox, 2005). The relationships of children—such as Oliver Twist, David Copperfield, and Pip (*Great Expectations*)—to various adults in their lives offer an array of models of social relations in a family context.

Among the more poignant of Dickens's child characters is Little Nell, devoted caregiver for her grandfather—who has dementia, paranoia, and a gambling addiction—in *The Old Curiosity Shop*. This exchange occurs soon after they have fled to the countryside, living by begging, to escape the grandfather's arrest for debt:

> "Then how," said the old man, looking fearfully round, "how can you bear to think we are safe, when they are searching for me everywhere, and may come here, and steal upon us, even while we're talking?"
>
> "Because I'm sure we have not been followed," said the child. "Judge for yourself dear grandfather; look round, and see how quiet and still it is. We are alone together, and may ramble where we like. Not safe! Could I feel easy—did I feel at ease—when any danger threatened you?" (p. 189)

This case raises issues of adult and child protection. Parent–child roles are reversed, the two are emotionally enmeshed, and the adult seems to exploit the child while earnestly striving to provide for her future by gambling, hoping to land a win that will secure that future. The story offers an excellent study of how family members cope with addiction, particularly the scenes in which Nell tries to dissuade her grandfather from gambling. One night at a lodging house, the landlord enticed Nell's grandfather into a game of cards by telling him that one of the players is often a loser:

> "Did you hear what he says," whispered the old man. "Did you hear that, Nell?"
>
> The child saw with astonishment and alarm that his whole appearance had undergone a complete change. His face was flushed and eager, his eyes were strained, his teeth set, his breath came short and thick, and the hand he laid upon her arm trembled so violently that she shook beneath its grasp....
>
> "I saw you with money yesterday. What money have we? Give it to me."
>
> "No, no, let me keep it, grandfather," said the frightened child. "Let us go away from here. Do not mind the rain. Pray let us go." (p. 230)

After more pleading, she gives him the money, and of course all is lost.

Through illustrations such as these, Dickens simulated for us real situations that social work clients now tell us about, often in words insufficient to describe the intensity of the emotion or the detail of the interaction. The reader can

empathically stand in the shoes of the client through such stories.

Although Dickens revealed social problems, he shared stories of social assets too. In the end, most of the children get saved by caring adults or die with caring support at hand. Dickens wrote many tales of mutual support. In *The Pickwick Papers*, a group of middle-aged single men share camaraderie and exploits together. The unmarried Mr. John Jarndyce of *Bleak House* selflessly supports several orphans as well as a ne'er-do-well, Mr. Skimpole, whose abandoned large family needs support from somewhere. Captain Cuttle awkwardly and devotedly fosters Florence when she runs away after being struck by her father (*Dombey and Son*). Dickens knew the value of what current professionals call "natural social support" in helping people cope and recover.

This section has focused on mental health concerns, but Dickens's works also poignantly illustrate the life experiences of people with intellectual disabilities and those dealing with illiteracy, unemployment, and a host of other social problems. His stories shed light on how people cope with disparities, death and dying, consequences of bad decisions, love and marriage, parenting, and other facts of life. They also illustrate the human capacity for care through generosity, active listening, foster care, mentoring, mutual support, and a range of prosocial supports.

Cases to Illustrate Organizational and Community Dynamics

Dickens persistently criticized professional abuses of power through portrayals of bumbling and malicious characters in roles of organizational responsibility. He was particularly harsh with regard to authorities who have responsibility for vulnerable populations, especially children. In *David Copperfield*, Dickens puts David's childhood tormenter, schoolmaster Mr. Creakle, in his proper place. By the time David becomes an adult, Mr. Creakle is a prison-master who has devised a dehumanizing "system" of complete isolation for each inmate, which is intended to lead to their professing repentance and, ultimately, their reform. When David (as an adult) visits the prison, he observes that the inmates, from a "love of deception," have undermined the ridiculous system, to Mr. Creakle's oblivion. The disparity between how workers and clients see the systems of which they are a part makes for interesting discussion, including focuses on the tendency of workers to have blind faith in the effectiveness of their methods, without evidence of results.

Dickens offered a poignant critique of the charity model of service in his portrayal of Mrs. Pardiggle, the friendly visitor in *Bleak House*, who takes the young ladies Ada and Esther along for a home visit to a "hovel." Esther narrates the scene. Mrs. Pardiggle, "leading the way with great moral determination," (p. 111) arrives at the house. Esther observes: "'Well, my friends,' said Mrs. Pardiggle; but her voice had not a friendly sound, I thought; it was much too business-like and systematic" (p. 111). The man of the house, drunk, is verbally hostile to the "friendly" visitor; among other things, he chastises her for leaving the little book (a religious tract), because they cannot read. The pompous visitor ignores him and insists on reading to them, holding them "in religious custody." Esther narrates that she and Ada are uncomfortable and feel out of place. The visitor leaves, completely overlooking the bruised eye of the wife and missing the fact that the baby she is holding has died. Naïve Esther and Ada, in juxtaposition to the "friendly visitor," show exquisite sensitivity and compassion. And true comfort comes from the mutual support grounded in the poor wife's community. The wife's friend arrives, and Esther observes the following:

> I thought it very touching to see these two women, coarse and shabby and beaten, so united; to see what they could be to one another; to see how they felt for one another; how the heart of each to each was softened by the hard trials of their lives. I think the best side of such people is almost hidden from us. What the poor are to the poor is little known, excepting to themselves and God. (p. 114)

Esther's observation expresses what social workers are trained to do—apply a strengths perspective, acknowledging the capacities of the client rather than just his or her deficits or challenges.

Dickens took on entire systems, too. The "Circumlocution Office" in *Little Dorrit* is a useless, confusing government bureaucracy where employees talk in complex, meaningless sentences

without ever giving a definitive answer to a question. The office, which controls information about such matters as debt and, thus, can be the key to a debtor's freedom, requires filing of forms and making appointments, though the exact nature of the forms and how to make an appointment are obscure. Though this is humorous, the modern reader can find distressing similarities to some current health and human services systems (see, for example, Ehrenreich, 2001; Hochman, Hochman, & Miller, 2004).

Drawing on his early work as a law clerk and his later legal problems, Dickens addressed the criminal and civil justice systems. A major undercurrent in *Bleak House* is the inefficiency of the Chancery Court, which handles inheritance conflicts. In the story, legal wrangling regarding the case of the protagonists drags on for years, to the point that when the settlement finally occurs, nothing is left because all has been spent on legal fees. In the "Preface," Dickens claims (perhaps facetiously) that "everything set forth in these pages concerning the Court of Chancery is substantially true" (p. viii) and that there was an active suit before the court that had commenced 20 years earlier and 30 to 40 counsel had been known to appear at one time. Although Dickens portrays lawyers as greedy and predatory, a broader theme is the destructive craving for money through entitlement (a still-prevalent theme, as Hudson, 2010, has described in his exposé about predatory lending and the Wall Street bailout).

The overarching theme that government hurts powerless people pervades Dickens's writing, but he saves his most intense wrath for the entitled aristocracy. In *A Tale of Two Cities*, he implies a warning about what could happen if the people ever organized and struck back. Using the French Revolution as his setting, he dramatizes what insistence on privilege can do. Charles Darnay, who denounced his royal title and fought hard for the people's revolution, ultimately is sentenced to die simply because, by birth, he can claim an aristocratic title—the people will not forgive him that. They will not give it up, just as entitled people tend to cling to their titles. Darnay is saved only because his guilt-ridden friend, feeling he has wasted his own life, decides to finally do a good deed, tricks Darnay into changing places, and is executed in his stead.

Dickens exposed the harmful effects of corporate greed, exploitive labor practices, entitlement and property, hypocritical relations between givers and receivers, and other factors that are inherent in social structures.

CONCLUSION

These samples illustrate the power of Dickens's prose as a means to enlighten social workers as they grapple with developing their personal and professional lenses, understanding social norm transitions, and interpreting case studies. Although Dickens was sometimes blinded by his position of relative privilege, as when he perpetuated systemic ethnic oppression, his life and work demonstrate that he had the heart of a social worker. The profession's core values of service, social justice, the dignity and worth of the person, the importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence recur throughout his works. Dickens understood what we now call social systems and wrote about individuals, families, communities, and organizations in ways that reveal the powerful effects of systemic social forces. He courageously and persistently exposed social disparities, pursued social justice, and advocated for social welfare on behalf of people who were oppressed and vulnerable. He drew from his own lived experience to create stories that generated popular discourse about the social concerns in the Victorian era. These stories give us history while also illustrating the durability of culture and resistance to change.

Dickens was a prolific author as well as a journalist, dramatist, editor, and public speaker. Though social workers can gain much from the works of current journalists and dramatists who continue the tradition of investigation and exposure of social ills, the classic stories of Dickens still hold power and relevance. Few writers in the English language have his gift of expression. Using fictional stories that are distant in time and place helps to protect the privacy of the real lives on which the stories are based while focusing on themes that challenge social workers.

Social work educators, students, and practitioners are encouraged to explore Dickens in a variety of ways. Classes and book clubs might select readings for discussion, perhaps juxtaposed with examples of current practice situations or compared with contemporary works of fiction or nonfiction. They might read a Dickens biography and one of

his novels as a foundation for discussing how personal experience affects the lens through which life is viewed. Many excellent films have captured Dickens's plots and are useful for promoting discussion, though no film can capture the rich legacy of his words or promote reflection as would reading. As the CSWE (2008) *Educational and Policy Accreditation Standards* imply, the intellectual grounding of social work is the liberal arts. Many, many other lessons than those offered here can be garnered from a careful reading of Dickens's fiction and nonfiction. Critical thinking about these lessons can advance social work practice.

In another 200 years, social workers will still be using Oliver Twist's dilemma to illustrate abuse of power and vulnerability of the poor. Maybe by then, such disparities will be history, as Charles Dickens hoped. In the meantime, social workers will continue to practice the values Dickens espoused.

Happy Birthday, Mr. Dickens! **SW**

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