Children Australia

www.cambridge.org/cha

My brilliant career

Simon Gardiner

Retired Social Worker, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia

Practice Commentary

Cite this article: Gardiner S (2020). My brilliant career. *Children Australia* **45**: 74–79. https://doi.org/10.1017/cha.2020.28

Received: 28 April 2020
Revised: 18 May 2020
Accepted: 18 May 2020
First published online: 15 June 2020

Keywords:
Reflections; social work career; child welfare

Author for correspondence:
Simon Gardiner, Email:
gardinersimon33@gmail.com

Abstract

This contribution, written by a recently retired social worker, reflects on the impact of his early casework experience in child welfare. It discusses, via case examples, how these formative experiences influenced his social work career. These case examples illustrate the power of mentorship and continuing reflective learning. The article concludes with suggestions for the profession, for the employing organisations of social workers and for the newly graduated social work professional.

Introduction

Miles Franklin's novel, *My Brilliant Career* (1901/1986), ends ironically without Sybylla, the protagonist, getting a glimpse of the craved-for brilliant career. I have purloined Franklin's title to describe my professional life, with similar irony. My career has not been brilliant, but, on the other hand, it has never plumbed the depths of Franklin's sequel (1946/2012), *My Career Goes Bung*!

I have had a blessed working life. I have followed my interests and have been rewarded with job satisfaction, professional regards from those who matter and sufficient financial remuneration. I have had the privilege of working with disadvantaged and vulnerable families and children and, more recently, with adults who bear the scars of damaging and neglectful childhoods. I started in statutory child welfare, took a byway into nursing and finished in a support service for adults who, as children, were abused by our institutional care system. There is circularity about this journey . . .

> The beginning is often the end
> And to make an end is to make a beginning . . .
> And know the place for the first time (Eliot, 1942/1973, pp. 256–257).

Literature has accompanied me on this journey. Literature offers us a mirror to ourselves and our society. At its best, it provides space, always for reflection and sometimes for hope. It is able to say things about the complexities, challenges and the joy of life that are sometimes missed in our professional journals and the corporate correctness of our charitable organisations. Australian novels such as *Cloudstreet* (Winton, 1991), *The Sound of One Hand Clapping* (Flanagan, 1997) and *The Choke* (Laguna, 2017) describe the varieties of family life and the strength and love that can exist amidst trauma and chaos. These observers of our domestic life have a place in our social work curriculum. Some of their observations and those of other writers appear in this reflection.

Early days

My professional working life started in 1976. I worked for what was then the Social Welfare Department (so many iterations!) in Broadmeadows/Coburg. I was a part of the NOW Centre established by the Royal Commission into Government Administration (1975). Its purpose was to provide an action/learning environment to explore the possibility of reducing duplication in welfare service delivery. The development of local services within a community development framework (Whitlam's Australian Assistance Plan) was then in vogue.

I had some wonderful mentors during my early social work career. They were all women and included Lynda Campbell, Willa Longmuir and Sandie de Wolf. These women brought respect for their clients and each other, a compassionate intelligence and a reflective honesty to their work. I learnt that child welfare work was complex, reflecting the uniqueness and messiness of individual and family lives. There were few easy resolutions as parents battled poverty and their own impoverished childhoods to be good enough parents.

I will outline three of the 'cases' I worked with. Memories of the circumstances facing the children and their families, my responses to these people and their circumstances and the outcomes for the children and families have never left me. I look back, with some embarrassment, at my ignorance as I wandered through the chaos and the sadness in the lives of others. I wonder how I could have been so oblivious. I also look back, with gratitude, as I realise how much I have learnt and how much of this learning has come from those I helped.

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Names and some details in these 'cases' have been changed to ensure anonymity.

Cathy and her children

My first case involved preparing a report for the Children's Court. A 6-month-old child had been left in a Fitzroy boarding house, while her mother went to drink at the Builders' Arms, a local hotel. The child had been left with another resident who sexually abused her.

I visited the child's mother, Cathy, in Port Melbourne; she had been given some accommodation by the Salvation Army. I had never met an Aboriginal person before. With a lawyer from the Aboriginal Legal Service, we went with Cathy to Allambie Reception Centre to visit her daughter, Katie. Cathy was quiet and passive. She wept when she saw Katie. Her handling of Katie was gentle and assured.

Katie was placed on a supervision order and came home with Cathy; home was a housing commission house in Dallas, a long way from Fitzroy and, as I later learnt, from Lake Tyers Aboriginal Mission where Cathy had been brought up.

I was good at drinking cups of tea, but I knew nothing about the needs of a 6-month-old child or about the impact on Cathy of an abusive childhood and the violent relationships she had experienced as an adult. The Stolen Generations was a concept 20 years away and the knowledge of the impact of family violence even further away. I was very ignorant.

I sat at Cathy's kitchen table and we talked. She enjoyed the company. She didn't have a lot of visitors.

Information about Cathy's children came slowly. She had four other children. Richard was 16 and living in a hostel in Ballarat, Robert (13) was living with an Aboriginal family, Graeme (5) was in a white foster placement in Kyneton and Bradley (2) was at a babies' home in Canterbury.

The father of Richard and Robert had died in a fight some years ago. The father of the youngest three children was living in Gippsland. Cathy had fled to Melbourne to escape his violence.

Cathy had not seen her children for many months. Slowly I realised that Cathy did want to see her children; she simply did not know how to go about it. There were different departmental sections responsible for each of her children. None of them talked to each other, and none of them thought that it was their responsibility to encourage contact between Cathy and her widely dispersed children.

I then had the good fortune to meet Molly Dyer. Molly had come back to Australia after travelling to the USA to investigate how First Nations people there looked after their children. Molly set up the Aboriginal Child Care Association in 1977, later to become the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Association (VACCA). With her encouragement, we set out to reconnect Cathy and her children. There were some difficulties.

Len Tierney's study of children in care in Victoria, *Children Who Need Help* (Tierney, 1963), had come out in 1963. Most of the children in care, over 6,000, were in institutional care. Many of them were in care without plans for family reconnection and/or contact. The practice, if not the policy at the time, was to place and forget. The Department was dominated by the powerful Youth and Family Welfare Divisions of which the Children's Home and Adoption and Foster Care Sections were a part.

Len's work led to a rethink of child placement policy and practice. The institutional care system was beginning to be broken up with campus style care in smaller residential units and family group home accommodation being developed.

Slowly, the Department began to develop a regional service programme that would locate staff and services where families lived. So, offices were opened in Preston, Geelong and Broadmeadows. David Green, a great man, led this reform. There were inevitable internal organisational tensions. The Regional Services Division was the new kid on the block, seen as a bit uppity and sure of itself. These tensions became evident as we organised contact between Cathy and her children. Cathy had had no contact with Graeme or Bradley for over 12 months. It took multiple phone calls and letters of request before Cathy was given permission to visit Graeme and Bradley. We then discovered that plans were being made, so far without reference to Cathy, for the children to be adopted. There was confusion and conflict over which Division of the Department could make an adoption case planning decision. Was it the Division working with the family (Regional Services) or the Division (Family Welfare – Children's Homes and Adoption and Foster Care Sections) that was holding the child?

Molly and I were invited, reluctantly, to a case plan meeting to rubber stamp these plans at the Department's Head office, chaired by the powerful head of Adoption and Foster Care. Molly was formidable, alternately charming and then assertive, challenging departmental staff with her expectation of the rights of Aboriginal children to grow up with their parents and with knowledge of their Aboriginal heritage. In the end, it was agreed that increased contact between Cathy and the two children would be encouraged. If contact was useful and sustained, then the children could be moved to a facility closer to where Cathy lived.

Establishing an access plan took hours of conversations and planning. Both boys had adults who wanted to adopt them. The foster carers in Kyneton, with departmental collusion, had actively excluded Cathy from contact with Graeme. They remained hostile. A young nurse at the babies' home had grown close to Bradley and took him back to her parents' home every weekend. I met the boys; Graeme first under the gaze of the foster carers and the foster care worker and then Bradley in the nursery at the babies' home. I wanted to know about their sense of family and place. I played with them just as I had played with my younger brothers and sisters. They had no memory of their mother or their siblings. Who and how was one to decide if it was the right thing to reconnect the children with their mother?

The learnings from our child welfare past – the experiences of children in institutional care and the forced adoption practices – were only just being applied. The importance of family connection was dimly understood. Adoption was still the preferred family placement; it was in effect a service for childless couples and not necessarily a service for the children and families of the poor.

There was no recognition of the impact of indigenous dispossession. There was no Aboriginal Child Placement Principle, no policy about Cultural Support Planning and no 'return to country' activities. There was only a young and energetic but essentially ignorant social worker and a charismatic but overburdened Aboriginal advocate, Molly.

Cathy met with them too; in a chilly, windswept park in Kyneton and in the leafy green surrounds of the slightly more hospitable babies' home. Contact continued between Cathy and her two younger boys. The boys were cautious, even timid, walking warily around Cathy's sparsely furnished house. I put this down to Cathy's semi-estrangement from them. Katie delighted in their company. She was growing and was a happy and active toddler. We had a barbeque one Sunday at Cathy's house. Her two older boys

came and Molly, her husband Charlie and another worker, Bernie, cooked up a storm. Cathy looked at me when we were cleaning up and said: 'I never thought we could be all together'.

Shortly after this, Cathy and Katie disappeared for 2 days. News came via a contact of Molly. Cathy had been seen back at the same Fitzroy pub. Katie was with her. I called in at the pub. The public bar was heavy with smoke, soggy underfoot and occupied by a number of 'rough' characters; the pub was known as a 'blood house'. Cathy was not there. I asked after her. I rapidly realised that a respectably dressed young white man, asking after an Aboriginal woman and her child, in a public bar with a significant number of Aboriginal drinkers present, was a really bad idea. I left.

Further news arrived next day. The police had been called late at night as Cathy, with Katie, was banging on the door of a Fitzroy boarding house in Nicholson Street, trying to gain entry. Katie had been taken to Allambie Reception Centre and was 'remanded' to return to the Children's Court in 2 days' time.

I searched for Cathy. She was not at her Dallas house. Molly again provided news. Cathy was at a boarding house in Nicholson Street. On 'spec', I went to find her. I walked up a grand entrance into an impressive foyer. The foyer dissolved into a rabbit warren of dim and badly constructed divided corridors, which then meandered into dingy cubicles. Cathy was sharing a room, furnished with mattresses on the floor and a gaping wardrobe, with a number of other women. Cathy gathered her few belongings and we drove back to Dallas. She wanted to visit Katie and she wanted to try again.

I wanted to know why, after all she had achieved, had she gone on a 2-day bender, threatening the immediate safety of Katie (again) and imperilling the reunification plans with Graeme and Bradley? I'm not sure she knew and, if she did, she couldn't explain it to me. And I was not sufficiently insightful and knowledgeable enough to help her explain it.

I talked with Molly. Molly told me a little bit about Cathy's history. How her family and many others had been sent to Lake Tyers Aboriginal Mission 60 years ago from the Coranderrk Aboriginal Reserve at Healesville. At the age of five, Cathy was placed with a foster family in Sale. I never found out what led to this placement. In her teens, she spent time as a domestic. Cathy returned to the settlement at 18. Her parents were dead, and she had a brother who had spent time at Kilmany Farm Home for Boys in Sale. She had relationships with a number of indigenous and non-indigenous men. Children followed. In her last relationship, Cathy was living with an older white man, Alex, the father of Graeme, Bradley and Katie, in a farmhouse near Bairnsdale. Cathy was hospitalised twice following serious assaults by Alex. This explained the scar across the left side of her face and the scarred swelling on her left forearm. This violence was the context of the removal of the two boys, Graeme and Bradley. Katie was born after Cathy had fled Alex's violence.

I tried to imagine Cathy's life. I dimly recognised that Cathy wanted to belong. Her family remained scattered, as they had been all her life. Her children were gone, and the sense of displacement was happening all over again. This recognition came without knowing what we now know: that indigenous family dispossession is compounded by cultural displacement. I saw it only in terms of Cathy and her life. She had gone to Fitzroy because that is where her people were. She went to celebrate, to belong and to be accepted.

Katie was returned home by the court although she was placed on a guardianship order. The boys were moved together to a family group home in Glenroy.

Then Alex re-appeared. Off the grog Alex was funny and caring. On the grog he was a wild man, scary and dangerous. He promised the world that he was off the grog and would do all he could to help Cathy with the children. With Cathy's acquiescence, he moved in. Alex's return to the family – and I should have known this at the time – effectively meant the end of any long-term family reunification plan. Hindsight is the great reprover.

All seemed to go well for some months. Cathy was a regular visitor to the two boys at their family group home. They had some overnight stays with her. The children seemed to enjoy each other although at home with Cathy they were almost invisible. Cathy was a very capable domestic manager. Cathy's brother came to stay. There was a procession of visitors. The drinking and the fighting started.

I remember emptying a cask of sweet white wine down the kitchen sink after watching Alex scull four glasses of wine in a minute or two. Alex was less than impressed. Cathy sought safety in Fitzroy. Katie went to stay with her brothers in the Glenroy family group home.

And that is what happened and that is how it stayed. These events took place over a 4-year period, 40 years ago. I always think about the 'what ifs'. What could we have done for a better outcome? Should we have moved Graeme and Bradley at all? Could or should they have been adopted? All that we know now suggests that knowledge of, and connection with, family really matters. What if Alex had not returned or somehow with Cathy's co-operation he was sanctioned out of the family? In the time that I knew them, the boys found little security in their own family. The three children were now together as a sibling group. It must be said that at the time this was quite an achievement. But they had seen and heard some terrible things and experienced a lot of fear in their young lives. It was us who put them through this. We did this because we thought their mother had been wronged. They were her children and we thought they should be with her.

Cathy had been wronged, grievously and many times, but this didn't mean that she could provide safety for them. It took me a long time to realise this.

I do wonder what has happened to them.

Michael and his family

And now Michael. I do know what happened to Michael.

I met Michael when he was 15. He was on a probation order and living in Coburg with his parents. Over the previous 12 months, he had had a series of run-ins with the police for property damage and thefts. He was loosely associated with a group of teenage boys who had been involved in some group work programmes to address their 'offending' behaviour.

Most of these young men were from a range of different ethnic backgrounds. Their parents were first-generation migrants. These young people were often out of school, had little time for their hard-working parents and were risk-takers. They were resourceful in semi-legal ways and approached life as a challenge. They weren't going to be what their parents were; life must offer something more than this. These young men were easy to engage and, despite their fecklessness, fun to be around. Michael tagged along with this group.

But he was different. Michael was morose, hard to engage with, conversations petered out and he had empty eyes. I met his parents. His father appeared to be barely present. He worked as a bookkeeper for a large Catholic health care organisation and was involved in local parish activities. Michael's mother was chatty and appeared anxious. Michael treated them both with indifference bordering on contempt.

I didn't understand the dynamics in this family. An older brother had moved away a year or two ago. The only visitor they seemed to have was an uncle, in a religious order who taught at a primary school somewhere in the country.

I spent more time talking to Michael's mother than I did talking to Michael. She noticed that Michael's behaviour had changed when he was 11 or 12. He had been a bright active boy until he went to secondary school. His mother thought that he had got in with the wrong crowd.

Michael's offending continued. He stole cars, was made a Ward of State (a Children's Court disposition which place guardianship responsibilities with the Department) and spent time at Turana Reception Centre, the central institution for Wards or young men on remand or a sentence. I would visit him. These were brief visits. Michael had little to say. I remember a classification meeting at the institution that would decide where Michael should be placed. I argued that Michael should return home rather than be transferred to another institution, such as Bayswater Boys Home. This was supported by the consultant psychiatrist who had been seeing Michael.

Michael came home. He remained aloof and miserable. He stopped seeing the psychiatrist. His Wardship was discharged 6 months later. And then he died of an overdose in his bedroom.

It was another 30 years before I fitted the missing bits of Michael's life together. A newspaper reported that a Christian Brother from a Ballarat primary school had been sentenced to many years in jail for the sexual assault of his pupils. The man was Michael's uncle.

Melinda, her mother and foster carer

And then there was Melinda and her mother, Margaret. Margaret's mental health was volatile. She was diagnosed as having a bi-polar disorder. When taking her medication, she was relatively stable, but when she didn't comply with her treatment regime, she became paranoid and angry. Melinda was living in a long-term foster care placement with Jo, a lawyer, who had befriended Margaret years ago, via involvement in the Council for the Single Mother and her Child. The placement, initially a voluntary one, had become formalised when Melinda was two after Margaret was admitted as a long-term psychiatric inpatient. In the following years, Melinda spent time with Margaret mostly at the home of the foster carer. This appeared to be by mutual agreement and was never monitored by the Department.

Melinda's file had been held in the Department's Adoption and Foster Care Section for most of her young life. Every year Melinda and Jo would receive a visit from a Departmental worker. The annual visit could be little more than a perfunctory run through a checklist. The file suggested that little attention had been paid to Margaret, her health and her relationship with her child. Margaret had multiple addresses. Attempts may have been made to get in touch with Margaret, but there was little evidence of this on the file. Years went by.

Margaret became more and more unwell. Tensions arose between Margaret and Jo; Margaret was arriving unannounced, dishevelled and abusive at Jo and Melinda's home. One morning in 1976 Margaret caused havoc at the Social Welfare Department central office. She worked her way through floor after floor, demanding that her daughter be immediately returned to her care. Melinda's file was promptly transferred to the Department's Regional Office where Margaret was currently living on the grounds that it was time to build the relationship between Margaret and Melinda.

When I first met Melinda she was 11 years old. Melinda was quite clear; she did not want to live with her mother. Melinda loved her mother; however; she had seen Margaret at her worst times and knew from her mother's voice (there was a lot of phone contact) when Margaret was having one of her 'episodes'. She would refuse to see Margaret. I learned that children have a voice. Melinda had a voice, but I had to listen for that voice to be heard.

Jo provided safety, security and consistency for Melinda. She loved Melinda but never attempted to 'own' her or to pretend she was Melinda's mother.

My work required that collectively we (Margaret, Melinda, Jo and myself) create a plan that would allow useful contact to be maintained between Margaret and Melinda.

Margaret in her paranoid moments was dangerous. In the early days of our relationship, she once barged into the office in Coburg, accusing me of not allowing her to see her child. She smashed two phones and gave me a resounding slap across the face. The police were not called. Today they would be and Margaret would face charges, but to what end? On this and other occasions, after venting, Margaret would exhaustedly settle down. We would arrange to meet the following day and we would start again.

I knew a little about Margaret's childhood. She had been brought up by Catholic nuns in Geelong. She had left St Catherine's Girls Orphanage at 15 and was sent to work as a domestic. She had no family and no one (including myself) ever thought it may be useful to help her search for her family. It is devastating to write this now, but she was completely alone.

It is ironic that the people at the Council for the Single Mother and her Child who had initially helped Margaret with Melinda were now complicit, at least in Margaret's eyes, in keeping Melinda from her.

It went on like this for 3 years. Margaret felt the eroding anguish of lost motherhood and the fear that she had failed Melinda; perhaps as she felt her mother had failed her. A complicated visiting schedule was organised around Melinda's school activities; of which there were many as she was an energetic and inquisitive child. Margaret was mostly an enthusiastic and willing participant. Melinda and Margaret had lunches together. Margaret was invited to school concerts and to sporting events. Jo continued to be supportive and as inclusive as possible although she was no longer willing to allow Margaret to visit at her home.

Margaret was now living in Richmond and with encouragement and support, joined the local neighbourhood house and the local church. But despite sustained efforts of the community mental health staff, she remained erratic with her medication regime. Her episodes of mental ill-health persisted, although spasmodic and separated by many months. Her uncontained behaviour ostracised her from her community connections. The police were once called to Jo and Melinda's home. Contact ceased following this incident. Somewhat foolhardily, I visited Margaret after this incident to discuss future arrangements. I was again assaulted. Margaret wept and profusely apologised.

I was now the team leader and had an ineffectual and often absent male manager. I had limited opportunities to discuss, with a supervisor, my work with the family and my relationship with Margaret. I needed someone to help me tease out the threads of my work. What was my role? Had this changed over time? What did Margaret see as my role? How did I differentiate my role as the guardianship worker for Melinda and my role as a support for Margaret? These are the bread and butter questions of what

used to be known as 'post court' child protection work. It is easy to get lost and that is why supervision is so important. I was instructed to transfer the case to the appropriate geographical regional office, Inner Urban.

Margaret felt betrayed and abandoned by this decision.

I struggled with self-doubt about my efforts and their impact on Margaret. Tim Winton in his novel *Eyrie* (2013) puts it like this:

> People sometimes confuse simple decency with investment. You help them, therefore you must love them . . . And then you're expected to forsake everyone else for them . . . I wished I'd not been so vain . . . that we knew more, that we'd done a better job. (p. 313)

I thought that we had slipped back to where we were 3 years previously. Contact between Margaret and Melinda remained fraught. It was Jo who put our collective efforts into perspective. Melinda was now nearly 15, well established at school, doing well academically and able, in an extraordinary way, to accommodate her mother's illness.

Jo was affirming of my efforts to maintain mother–daughter contact and appreciative of the time and effort that went into this. She was aware that there would be no happy ending with mother and daughter walking off hand in hand into the sunset of family bliss. She was aware that as Melinda grew older she might decide to live with her mother. Jo would always be there. She was an extraordinary woman. Melinda shook my hand as I made my farewell. She said touchingly: 'Thank you for looking after my mother'. Melinda's case was transferred to the Department's Inner Urban Regional office and that was it.

Many years later, I was talking to a group of teachers about the introduction of mandatory reporting – this was an insane piece of public policy introduced at a time of major cuts by the Kennett government to community and early years' services. The message child protection managers were required to give to their local service systems and communities was: 'You report, we'll respond'. All this did was to encourage organisations to tightly gate-keep access to services and, in a time of service scarcity, to use child protection as the service of first response. This policy, and its unintended consequences, has done more to derail our child welfare/protection system in the last 25 years than any other government decision. It has led to a huge increase in reports to child protection, most of which are not responded to, and to needy and vulnerable families missing out on necessary services.

A young woman perhaps in her late 20s came up after the session and introduced herself. She was Melinda. She was teaching English and history. We talked briefly. After she left school, Melinda had worked in the city for a couple of years as a shop assistant. She then completed an Arts degree and a teaching qualification. She saw Jo often and they spoke on the phone weekly. Melinda never moved in with her mother.

Melinda said only a little about her mother's current circumstances, but it was clear that, inevitably, Margaret was suffering the consequences of years of mental ill-health, social isolation and loneliness. It seemed that Margaret was now chronically unwell, passive and withdrawn and was relying on visiting mental health nurses from the local clinic for a monthly injection. Domiciliary staff from the local council were visiting twice a week.

Melinda was a poised and accomplished young woman. It was her good fortune as a child to have had a devoted and dedicated foster carer who provided the essential *agape* that provides the opportunity for a fulfilled life. The child welfare system's contribution to the positive outcome for Melinda was that it did enough to sustain the placement with Jo and to provide opportunities for Melinda and her mother to know each other. And that was an achievement.

At the time, I lacked the necessary imagination. I could not conceive, 'imagine', how difficult it was for Melinda to sustain her relationship with her mother. Imagination comes with experience which can bring wisdom and empathy. In *A Sense for Humanity* (2014, p. 121), Dorothy Scott, quotes Raimond Gaita as saying a child needs two things: 'to be loved and to love their parents without shame'. How difficult is it to love a very vulnerable parent with shame? Did I help Melinda to love her mother without shame?

We, collectively and individually, were unable to alter Margaret's life course. She was never able to leave behind a childhood spent in institutional care and then the loss of her own child. She struggled all her life with social dislocation, loneliness and mental ill-health, all compounding and acting on each other.

George Eliot, in *Middlemarch* (1871–1872/2001, p. 342), said it so well: 'What loneliness is more lonely than distrust?' Why and how could Margaret trust? All of us who were involved with Margaret failed to grasp the significance of the corroding power of distrust. It was my work with Forgotten Australians, 35 years later, that brought an understanding of the devastating impact institutional care could have on children.

What have I learnt?

In the moment, when I was working on these cases in the midst of an active and large caseload, I would have thought I had learnt very little. Overtime and with postgraduate studies and reflective peer support I realised I was learning incrementally. I valued the learnings and insights of academics and practitioners: Len Tierney, Dorothy Scott and Lynda Campbell in Australia, Anne Hartmann from the USA and Nigel Parton, Eileen Munro and the Dartington Social Research Unit, all from UK. I realised we all learn in different ways and at different speeds. An 'insatiable curiosity' followed by introspection and reflection have always been important elements in my life of learning. At our best we are always learning. It is hard to remember when we started; we never stop.

Social work is a career for the curious, the compassionate and the committed. It requires both intellectual and emotional capacities. As an experience it can, at the same time, be both rewarding and wearing. The need for competent social work practitioners, within the broad child welfare field, will remain constant. There are huge challenges.

The challenge for the profession is to continue to advocate for a skilled family-based practice approach and affirmative social policies that are deliberately designed to address the significant impact on families of economic and cultural poverty.

The challenge for organisations, in the 'helping industry', is to understand that the necessary service individuation that sits at the core of working with vulnerable families and children is best met by social work.

The challenge for the social work practitioner is to be clear about purpose and role, to be comfortable with the use of self and, in the area of child welfare, to be clear about the appropriate use of authority.

This is my learning distilled:

1. Social work occurs in a social context. Social work practice is about individuation. Social work practice, in child welfare, is full of ambiguities and uncertainties. Much of this stems, for better or for worse, from the organisational context in which

it inevitably occurs. Social work practice is imbedded in tension. Authentic social work practice is difficult particularly within large organisations.

2. Our work is about sustaining, building and rebuilding relationships and connections between family members, between families and their communities and between services that support the family. Our work can only be done via a face-to-face direct service relationship; a relationship that, at its best, can nurture hope. No template, mechanistic reliance on procedure or 'tick a box' check list can provide this.
3. Good intentions are not enough; good case work practice requires knowledge, the intelligence to apply this knowledge, wisdom and reflection. We are present fleetingly in the life course of a child and his/her family. We must attempt to tread gently and strive to do no harm. Children must always be in view. A quiet child is a child to be noticed and engaged with. It is easy to be blind and oblivious and to be captured by adults.
4. Curiosity and the development of a relationship can lead in interesting directions. It revolves around being prepared to listen, over months, to the telling of a story.
5. The attraction of fads and fashions is to be resisted; the notion that complex circumstances and dynamics are reducible to a simple solution, by a 'silver bullet', in the form of a treatment 'guru', an imported 'evidence based' programme model or a 're-engineered' service system, is idiotic.
6. The power of *agape* is always available. In this field, it is the blessing of unconditional love to a damaged and unhappy child that is provided by an adult, in many cases a caregiver.
7. There is a place for humility. I made many mistakes. Sometimes I was brave enough to acknowledge these. I got better as I got older but being humble is hard. Too often humility is seen as meekness and not befitting the surety of role that is demanded by and within an organisation.
8. Hubris is dangerous. In its most dangerous form, this is the belief that you, as the new worker to the case, will make the difference when others have 'failed'. Hubris includes not reading past case notes and reports (who needs to know about the past?) and/or conversely blindly relying on and regurgitating past impressions and observations into formal case documents.
9. And this leads to the importance of being able to participate in reflective and supportive supervision.
10. The integration of knowledge into practice never stops. Questions to be asked are universal – Why this presentation and this behaviour – what is its meaning? What is the story sitting behind this particular presentation? In my time, the big knowledge bursts have been about brain development and brain plasticity, the impact of indigenous dispossession, intergenerational trauma, and family violence, and the importance of sustaining family connections.

It is strange but even after 40 years in social work and health, mostly at the coal face, I still think that, one day, I will understand what it has all been about; my endeavours will be explained and lasting solutions will be found. Meanwhile, for me (while I am waiting!), our shared humanity provides possibilities of infinite variety and wonder.

> Oh, wonder!
> How many goodly creatures are there here!
> How beauteous mankind is! O, brave new world,
> That has such people in't. (Shakespeare, 1610–1611/1999, 5.1, pp. 215–218)

Acknowledgements. The author acknowledges all those who have been part of this professional and personal journey, the families and the children and those who he has worked alongside. The author thanks Meredith Kiraly who has provided considerable assistance and guidance in the preparation of this article.

References

Eliot, G. (2001). *Middlemarch: A study of provincial life*. Chancellor Press. (Original work published 1871–1872).

Eliot, T. S. (1973). Little Gidding. In P. Larkin (Ed.), The Oxford book of twentieth century English verse. Clarendon Press. (Original work published 1942).

Flanagan, R. (1997). *The sound of one hand clapping*. Random House.

Franklin, M. (1986). *My brilliant career*. Angus & Robertson (Original work published 1901).

Franklin, M. (2012). *My career goes bung*. Allen & Unwin (Original work published 1946).

Laguna, S. (2017). *The choke*. Allen & Unwin.

Scott, D. (2014). A crucible of compassion, a harbinger of hope. In C. Taylor & M. Graffe (Eds.), *A sense for humanity: The ethical thought of Raimond Gaita*. Monash University Publishing.

Shakespeare, W. (1999). *The Pelican Shakespeare: The Tempest*. Penguin Classics (Original work published 1610–1611).

Tierney, L. (1963). *Children who need help: A study of child welfare policy and administration in Victoria*. Melbourne University Press.

Winton, T. (1991). *Cloudstreet*. McPhee Gribble.

Winton, T. (2013). *Eyrie*. Hamish Hamilton.

■