AN EARLY EXAMPLE OF BRIEF STRENGTHS-BASED PRACTICE: BERTHA REYNOLDS AT THE NATIONAL MARITIME UNION, 1943 - 1947

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Abstract

Bertha Reynolds, one of the foremothers of social casework, is known for her commitment to social justice and the struggles of poor and working people. Her ideas about brief strengths-based practice, which she taught when she supervised social workers at the National Maritime Union between 1943 and 1947, are less well known. She presented these ideas with case examples in her book *Social Work and Social Living*, a work that includes a critique of society, social policies, and the social work profession. The author contends that Reynolds was ahead of her time in her conceptualization of brief treatment.

INTRODUCTION

Bertha Reynolds has been widely acknowledged as one of the foremothers of social casework. Active from the 1920s through the 1950s, she is also recognized as a radical social critic, political activist, trade unionist, and advocate for the empowerment of poor and working people (Bandler, 1979; Hartman, 1972, 1986; Freedberg, 1984, 1986; Leighninger, 1986; Goldstein, 1981; Freedberg & Goldstein, 1986; Dubois & Krogsrud, 1996; Hiersteiner & Peterson, 1999). Less well known, and barely addressed in the scholarly literature, is the model of short-term social work intervention that Reynolds presented in her book, *Social Work and Social Living* (Reynolds, 1951/1975). In this book she described an experience of brief treatment and challenged the long-term casework model practiced by most of her contemporaries. She maintained that her model, born of necessity, offered a greater opportunity to empower clients and mobilize their strengths than long-term treatment often did.

This article will discuss Reynolds’ ideas about clinical social work practice, especially casework, along with case examples of the brief treatment she practiced in the National Maritime Union between 1943 and 1947. The author believes that her principles remain relevant for practitioners today. Today brief treatment techniques are widely used by social
workers in response to the pressures of managed care. Particular modalities are often used simply because the managed care companies prefer them, regardless of whether or not the worker finds that they fit the client’s need (Chambliss, 2000). Corporate-managed social work troubles many workers and runs counter to Reynolds’ own strongly held convictions. At the same time, in recognition of the pressures of managed care, some contemporary authors have proposed short-term models based on understanding and maximizing strengths, and empowering clients to actively seek solutions in the here-and-now. Reynolds’ book anticipated the development of this body of work.

REYNOLDS’ BACKGROUND

Bertha Capen Reynolds (1885–1978) was a pioneering social caseworker, legendary teacher, and prolific writer. Trained in psychiatric social work during the 1920s, under the influence of the psychoanalytic movement, Reynolds never lost her appreciation for the power of unconscious mental processes. At the same time, the desperate conditions of the Great Depression of the 1930s made her first a supporter of the New Deal and then an advocate of collective action for social change. Because of her open left-wing views and organizational connections, Reynolds was blacklisted during the 1940s and 1950s.

Reynolds’ deep ethical commitment undoubtedly derived from her early upbringing as a New England Methodist (Freedberg, 1984). Later, she came under the influence of two of the central intellectual traditions of the twentieth century, those of Freud and Marx, and constantly strove to connect and integrate the individual with the environment, social action with social casework, and the science of society with the science of human behavior (Hartman, 1972, 1986; Freedberg, 1986; Leighninger, 1986; Goldstein, 1981; Bandler, 1979). She conceptualized social work as generic, encompassing individual, family, group, and community perspectives. She recognized how psychological training could help in understanding clients, and enhance social workers’ professional selves by increasing self-awareness and removing personal impediments to the helping process. Presaging the ecological (Germain & Gitterman, 1980) and the ego psychological approaches (Goldstein, 1995), Reynolds drew a distinction between psychotherapy and social casework (now generally called clinical social work) in that the former concentrated mainly on a person’s inner life, while the latter addressed the individual’s social relationships and adaptation to the environment. She believed in both understanding pathology and focusing on client strengths.
Reynolds' writings also foreshadowed the current discussion about power imbalances in the social worker-client relationship, and the orientation of the profession toward clinical practice (Jacobson, 2001). In addition to addressing paternalism in agencies and in professional relationships, she analyzed issues of power in society. Her criticisms of social injustice led her to advocate radical reforms. According to her vision, rather than serving as agents of social control, social workers should join clients and other working people in organizing for a more humane society (Reynolds, 1934). She believed that casework, while striving to understand a person's emotional life, must also exist in "relation to social living in groups [connected] with the social movements of people, solving their own problems" (Reynolds, 1963, p. 209).

Sensitive, highly intelligent, and emotionally fragile, Reynolds became a teacher after graduation from college, but suffered a nervous breakdown following a difficult first year working at a segregated school for Black children in the south. She recovered rapidly—after only four sessions with a psychotherapist. Recognizing her passion to help others, Reynolds' therapist encouraged her to enter social work, which had recently emerged out of the philanthropic tradition to become a bona-fide profession. She studied at the Boston School for Social Workers, and after five years as a caseworker entered a training program in psychiatric social work at the Smith School for Social Work. She later became the Associate Director of the program at Smith. One can speculate that her personal experience of a powerfully efficacious episode of brief treatment planted the seeds of later thinking.

Reynolds had two intervals of psychoanalysis with a psychiatrist who influenced her in a number of ways. Her first analysis began in 1927, when her analyst was following the ideas of Rank, and the second five years later, when he had become a Freudian. She wrote in her autobiography, *An Uncharted Journey* (1963), that the Freudian analysis was more effective than the Rankian. On the other hand, this two-staged approach may account for the fact that her own work reflected the influences of both the diagnostic and functional casework schools. When the analysis ended, in 1933, Reynolds experienced a release of energy: "I was free, with the closing of my psychoanalysis, to step out into a new and blooming world" (1963, p. 149). She found herself able to sustain better mental health and get closer to other people.

The conclusion of Reynolds' psychoanalysis coincided with the deepening of the Depression of the 1930s. Always concerned about the needs of the poor and disadvantaged, and acutely aware of the suffering around her, she supported the demands for relief and social insurance. Impressed
by the success of collective action, she joined the movement for radical social change (Reynolds, 1963). The woman who had once struggled with shyness and a sense of alienation from others (Freedberg, 1986) became a Marxist socialist, a supporter of the radical “rank and file movement” and unionization of social workers, a member of the newly formed Social Service Employees Union and a contributor to the left-wing journal, *Social Work Today*.

Her radical views, along with the suspension of a program for supervisors she had developed at Smith, led to Reynolds’ departure from the Smith School for Social Work in 1938. She spent the next five years consulting and teaching throughout the country. After Pearl Harbor she applied for a position with the Red Cross but did not even receive a reply, clearly indicating that she was already being blacklisted (Reynolds, 1963; Freedberg, 1984).

In 1943 Reynolds was offered a job supervising a joint project between United Seamen’s Services, a new agency, and the Personal Services Department of the militant National Maritime Union, which had been organized in 1937 to represent merchant seamen. The NMU offered her this position, the last full-time professional casework job of her career, because—in addition to her considerable reputation—she herself was a union member. She now had an opportunity to apply her social casework skills in a setting supportive of the struggles of working people.

During World War II merchant seamen, whose work was so crucial to the war effort, experienced constant dangers and suffered a large number of casualties from submarine warfare. They were ineligible, however, for many of the on-shore benefits available to members of the armed services. USS was charged with the mission of providing recreation and other services to seamen in port cities so they could rest, receive medical assistance, help for their families, and return to sea as soon as possible. The slogan was: “Keep 'Em Sailing!” (Reynolds, 1963). On behalf of its members, the NMU had already taken over many aspects of the work situation, including the rotating hiring hall, adequate provision for seamen on ships in port, and resolution of grievances. The location of Reynolds’ unit in the NMU’s New York shipping hall signified the union’s influence over its mission, which she heartily endorsed. She was responsible for a loan fund for emergencies (for seamen as well as their families), and for supervising four or five caseworkers. The union provided loans because members resisted receiving “charity” even when they were desperate.

As Reynolds started her new job, the war had begun to mitigate the double-digit unemployment and misery of the Depression. The New Deal
had produced Social Security, unemployment insurance, and public assistance, while labor had won significant victories with the passage of the National Labor Relations Act and the organization of the CIO. Nonetheless, painful memories of privation remained. In 1942 the National Resources Planning Board had presented President Roosevelt with a report titled “Security, Work, and Relief Policies.” The report, which Reynolds endorsed, called for guaranteed full employment, extensive social insurance, national health coverage, and an education and housing policy. As this author has demonstrated elsewhere (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1993), the “Economic Bill of Rights” (which resembled the Beveridge Report that led to the post-war welfare state in England) was overwhelmingly popular. Public opinion polls consistently indicated widespread support; and both President Roosevelt and his Republican challenger, Thomas E. Dewey, spoke in favor of it during the 1944 presidential election campaign. The “Economic Bill of Rights” continued to command strong public support throughout the decade of the 1940s, and was taken up by Harry S. Truman in his 1948 campaign. Yet the program of the National Resources Planning Board was never implemented. In the late 1940s, the Cold War and McCarthyism changed the political climate in the United States.

The NMU project abruptly concluded in 1947, due to political and ideological splits within the union (Goldstein, 1981). After a period as a freelance consultant Reynolds retired. She retained her interest in and concern for social work, however. She had always attempted to contribute to the knowledge base of the profession (Leighninger, 1986), and wrote a book about the union project titled Social Work and Social Living: Explorations in Philosophy and Practice (1951/1975). This discussion of what she termed an “experiment in social living” provides a fascinating illustration of her views and predicts developments a half century later.

Leighninger (1986) notes that “Reynolds’ view of the social work profession was at heart a personal, practitioner’s view. She emphasized the skills and needs of caseworkers and their capacity to act professionally, within the larger social context of their work” (p. 120). Social Work and Social Living illustrates the validity of this observation. It is simultaneously a practical how-to manual and a critique of society, social policy, and the social work profession. Rather than presenting them separately, however, Reynolds intermingles these micro and macro dimensions throughout the book.
Reviewing the history of social work, including the developments of the 1930s, Reynolds took her profession to task both for perpetuating class distinctions and sometimes failing those most in need. Albeit in more sophisticated ways, agencies tended to perpetuate the old notions of the “worthy” and “unworthy” poor. Middle-class social workers, in private agencies that linked financial assistance to the provision of counseling or other services, generally assumed that clients’ problems derived from personal failings, despite the fact that “such a basic need as an opportunity to earn a living is no longer in individual hands, and...wretched housing, ill health and frustration take a terrible toll from family life” (p. 34). Sometimes agencies selected clients who were verbal and compliant, and dismissed the most disadvantaged because they failed to satisfy the agency’s definition of its function. At the NMU, on the other hand, men were offered—by right as union members—a range of services, including loans, from which they could select. This policy strongly resembled universal social insurance, available by right, and contrasted sharply with the barely minimal, stigmatizing public assistance given to the poor.

According to Reynolds, social work contained a built-in contradiction, an inequality exemplified by the term “client.” She asked whether small groups like the NMU, which embodied the concept of sharing, must inevitably remain isolated examples of a healthy kind of mutual helpfulness. Unfortunately, most social services operated on a less democratic principle: “The ‘haves’ giving to the ‘have nots,’ but taking away from them, at the same time, their right to have any responsible voice about the services they use” (p. 172). The union was not a typical social agency, in which requests for financial assistance might be scrutinized in a demeaning or negative manner that highlighted the gap in power between the person holding the funds and the one asking for help. This money belonged to the members themselves.

In Reynolds’ opinion, “Social work can defend its standards only if it realizes the organized nature of the opposition to it, why these interests are opposed, and where its own allies are to be found” (p. 166). Her allegiance was to the most disadvantaged, and she saw powerful forces joining together to attack adequate welfare legislation, low-cost housing, and universal health care. Years before Eisenhower’s famous speech warning of the dangers posed by the “military-industrial complex,” she pointed out that military expenditures were consuming far more of the national budget than schools, hospitals, and social services. In her estimation, the whole community must demand adequate public assistance for needy people, because “without acceptance of a decent standard of living for those who
must depend on relief, labor has no floor below which wages may not fall” (p. 50). She urged social workers to join with clients and other social workers in labor unions.

REYNOLDS’ CASEWORK PHILOSOPHY

Reynolds observed that after World War I, the influence of psychology led caseworkers to emphasize clients’ feelings while minimizing living conditions, even those of extreme poverty and deprivation. The same influences produced the concept that a professional relationship required detachment from clients. The NMU project, however, offered a different way of being a professional and doing casework. “The caseworkers were constantly concerned with feelings, but always in relation to social situations which urgently needed solution” (p. 8). Moreover, their closeness with union “brothers” (not clients) derived from the agency setting, in an organization striving for the welfare of its members. This allowed union “brothers” to immediately trust the workers, and their lack of “resistance” contrasted sharply with that of clients at other agencies. Finally, the project “could not but enhance a caseworker’s faith in the capacity of ordinary people to do a better job for themselves than anyone outside their situation could do for them” (p. 10). They did not need social workers to “save” them.

The allocation of money, in addition to a range of other services, was a major part of the NMU Personal Services project mission. Addressing a concern within the profession, Reynolds maintained that giving concrete help did not have to increase dependency. She acknowledged that “in coming to the loan service [seamen] often used a request for money symbolically, to express their wish for an enveloping protection and care” (p. 91). But the social worker who helped them to actively achieve their goals could not render them dependent as long as “the person [was] built up by increasing his security, self-respect and self-confidence, and by opportunities to be active in worthwhile ways” (p. 84). An agency is actually in a better position to do good casework, she wrote, when it can truly acknowledge need in a manner consistent with a client’s self-respect. The group ethos of the NMU was ideal for this purpose.

Yet the union’s emphasis on group needs sometimes posed a challenge to caseworkers, whose training had taught them to be nonjudgmental with respect to individual beliefs and preferences. The union could neither consider a seaman’s problems in isolation nor tolerate attitudes or behaviors that jeopardized collective interests. For example, a man who requested a loan in order to avoid shipping out with an African American (“Negro”)
bunkmate would not be allowed to exercise self-determination in this regard, but would have to be refused. Similarly, alcohol abuse was endemic among seamen ashore, due to such factors as loneliness, emotional deprivation at sea, and the frequent trauma of being torpedoed. The caseworkers had been trained to regard alcoholism as an individual problem and a disease; but at the NMU they learned to view it equally in terms of a man’s responsibility to the group, because an alcoholic seaman could jeopardize the lives of everyone on board ship. In essence, the union required that working seamen be as free of troubles as possible, so they would be ready and able to assist their co-workers.

Reynolds provides many rich case studies in the book, drawn mainly from the NMU project, but also from her long experience as both a direct practitioner and a supervisor. One of the issues she grapples with in *Social Work and Social Living* was the question of how and when social workers should use their knowledge of unconscious mental processes. In presenting a problem to a social worker, she wrote, “people disguise what they cannot bear to face, under a less painful request which they sense will be acceptable” (p. 40). She understood that while seamen came to Personal Services for help with economic problems, around these requests emotional and social relationship difficulties were interwoven. She took note of symbols in speech, but cautioned that repression should be respected and the unconscious need not be explored. When an agitated seaman, who came to see a caseworker because his wife had been unfaithful, described her and his teenage daughter as “intertwined like two rose bushes,” Reynolds wondered: “Is the symbol significant? Thorns for him, as well as beauty?” (p. 139). She decided that the man may have felt excluded from his daughter’s life, and worked with him to increase his presence with his daughter. Thus, even though she was profoundly influenced by her psychoanalytic training, she believed in applying it to increase people’s well-being in the here-and-now. In her opinion, “the function of social casework is not to treat the individual alone or the environment alone, but the process of adaptation which is a dynamic interaction between the two” (Hartman, 1986, p. 89).

The case of a man whose leg had been amputated clearly illustrates her point of view. The man’s caseworker had focused at length on his feelings and fears, especially his fear of losing his wife’s love. In the meantime, he was still unable to go out alone or to make plans for returning to work. Reynolds felt that most of all, he needed to return to normal living in his family and to his social role as a wage-earner.
While [the worker] was trying to bring [his] fear into full consciousness, she was keeping the patient’s attention centered on himself and on his weakness and feeling of inferiority rather than on his strengths. She was even creating a marital problem....[S]he could have worked with the man to develop his ability to walk, and to plan actively for some occupation...[and] could have strengthened the relationship between the man and his wife....She would have made full use of her knowledge of emotional life as each step of the treatment plans evoked feelings which would play a real part in the man’s capacity to go ahead with confidence in himself. (pp. 121-122)

The important question, according to Reynolds, “is not what a person has packed away in his unconscious (as if it were a storehouse), but how he is using the interplay of forces in his mental life to cope with the objective world around him” (p. 131).

**BRIEF TREATMENT**

As noted above, in young adulthood Reynolds’ life had been changed by only four sessions of psychotherapy. In addition, Rankian ideas about short contacts appealed to her (Hartman, 1972), and she sought to expand the definition of casework beyond the extended counseling practiced in many private agencies. This interest was timely during the Depression, in view of the financial constraints on agencies that had forced them to use brief contacts (Hartman, 1972). *An Experiment in Short Contact Interviewing* (Reynolds, 1932) describes a project undertaken by the Boston Children’s Aid Society, a child welfare agency, in which parents seeking to place children, as well as prospective foster parents, could be seen only once. Through case examples, Reynolds’ monograph establishes that experienced caseworkers, using their psychological understanding, could accomplish a great deal in a single session with a client. Furthermore, she concludes that this technique could be taught to social work students. Making a point that she reiterated throughout her career, she wrote that the object of casework skill must be to help people use their own resources. The caseworker can and must establish a relationship during the first contact, and should focus on the client in his or her situation, rather than restricting herself to simple information gathering. The crucial element of the professional relationship, she asserted, is to stimulate people’s confidence in themselves.

At the NMU, the urgency of returning to sea typically gave men a very limited time, often as little as one session, to see the caseworkers. Thus,
short-term treatment became the logical modality. *Social Work and Social Living* contains Reynolds’ more developed views on the philosophy and practice of brief contact social work. It illustrates her conviction that good casework can be done briefly, using the same principles that apply to practice in general. In short contacts, she wrote, the relationship must be established immediately, and the diagnosis—which cannot be either superficial or based on snap judgments—demands an especially high level of skill. Rather than being imposed from a detached position, it requires “weaving together the threads that both client and caseworker draw from life and work together” (p. 109). Strengths as well as weaknesses have to be examined, since an exclusive emphasis on weaknesses creates inferiority feelings. The NMU caseworkers were trained psychiatric social workers who listened with the question, “What is [the person’s] unconscious, as well as his conscious mind trying to tell me?” (p. 144). At the same time, since the social workers were trying to understand the person-in-situation, they also had to be familiar with such issues as the workings of the merchant marine, industry conditions, and available resources in the environment.

Brief casework required an examination of the essential aspects of the problem, especially those that could be acted on quickly and constructively. Even if short contact work “cannot explore a person’s whole life it must see with even more clarity the limited piece of work that can be done in a limited time” (p. 111). Thus, it increased a person’s level of activity with respect to the designated problem. The social worker’s role, Reynolds believed, is similar to that of a catalyst in a chemical experiment. Using the support of the professional relationship, a person can understand more about his or her problem and begin to act on this understanding. In *An Experiment in Short Contact Interviewing* (1932) she writes, “There is no greater challenge to psychiatric skill in a caseworker than this of having to size up in some way in the first interview the client’s capacity to take responsibility for the next steps” (1932, p. 10). In *Social Work and Social Living* she added a new concept: activity itself “is a healing force as well as a direct means of solving the problem” (p. 146).

A case discussion titled “one who hardly felt he belonged” is one of several that Reynolds offered from the NMU project to illustrate her ideas about the possibilities inherent in brief contact social work. A 22-year-old man, described as tense, nervous, and thin, reluctantly requested a loan while waiting three weeks to be shipped out. He had previously seen enemy action and had been torpedoed three times. Once he spent a week in a lifeboat in the Atlantic and saw half his shipmates die before being
rescued. Despite a tremor in his arm he insisted that he was fine. Later he revealed that he had a bad heart, drank too much, and spent money foolishly on shore leave.

Reynolds suspected that “Philip” had “a war neurosis, perhaps overlaying deeper maladjustments” (p. 70). However, he refused to see a psychiatrist. The caseworker decided to give him small loans so he could have decent food and did not have to sleep in the subway. She tried to persuade him to get a medical check-up, but he refused. What she learned about his personality affected the treatment plan. He was the youngest of 14 children and described himself as the black sheep of his family. He left school early and first went to sea at the age of 14. Separated from family and community life at a young age, he became a merchant seaman with his father, who disciplined him on board ship. His only contacts with women had been on waterfronts around the world. Thus, his style of life had “shut off social contacts and independent decisions which would have made it possible for him to mature emotionally in a normal way” (p. 70). He was convinced that decent people would not want to associate with him.

The goal for Philip was to “give him a different point of view about himself, to overcome his hopelessness about ever amounting to anything, and in some simple ways to build up his resources for a different way of spending his shore leave” (p. 71). First he was shown that he could deposit some of his monthly wages in the union’s credit bank. Having some extra money enabled him to buy new clothes and go to a canteen where he enjoyed himself and met a young woman he could talk to. Despite the fact that he was not ready to address his deeper problems and fears, “this social treatment did make a slight break in a vicious cycle of inferiority feeling, low companions, fears for his health, a conviction that he would die young, and was not worth saving anyway” (p. 71). The caseworker gave him hope that he could be like other people his age, and look forward to eventually having a family of his own. By showing him how to save money, she helped him gain self-respect and some social experience. In the process, “this brief treatment opened the door to new incentives and a more normal outlook” (p. 71).

Reynolds’ espousal of the benefits of short-term treatment resonates strongly with ideas in the current practice literature. For example, Budman & Gurman’s (1988) model of brief treatment assumes, like Reynolds, that people conduct their lives in social contexts. Like Reynolds and other present-day authors, they maintain that people can continue to grow after treatment is concluded even if they have made only small changes. They also advocate building on strengths and social supports,
rather than focusing solely on problems and making people feel inadequate. De Jong & Miller (1995) draw on the strengths perspective (Saleeby, 1992) in describing short-term solution-focused interviewing that aims to help people feel better and build self-respect and confidence. Echoing Reynolds, they write that “discovering strengths requires a process of cooperative exploration between clients and workers; ‘expert’ practitioners do not have the last word on what clients need” (1995, p. 729). Their approach is also similar in emphasizing that helping people in the here-and-now may involve setting goals to promote activity that will continue to generate positive developments. Basch’s (1995) model of brief treatment resembles that of Reynolds’ in using an understanding of unconscious, symbolic language, while working to help people strengthen themselves and become more active on their own behalf. Reynolds’ statement that the social work relationship “helps people to test and understand their reality, physical, social, and emotional, and to mobilize resources within themselves and in their physical and social environment to meet their reality or change it” (p.131) anticipates the integrative approach of Goldstein and Noonan (1999). All these short-term approaches support Reynolds’ concept that in short-term treatment the worker-client relationship is a collaborative one.

CONCLUSION

This paper has focused on the contributions of Bertha Reynolds, especially as illustrated in her book, Social Work and Social Living. A small volume, it touches on a number of important problems, including the significance of the agency context, the influence of larger socioeconomic forces, the meaning of professionalism, the philosophy of giving and receiving help, and many aspects of work with clients. It highlights and endorses brief treatment, not simply as a necessity but as a benefit. Reynolds focuses on client strengths and strategies of empowerment. For clinical social workers she poses a number of questions that concern us today: How can social workers develop relationships and accomplish goals with clients in a limited time period? How close should they get to clients? What is the connection between concrete services and psychologically based interventions? How can social workers challenge the status quo on behalf of clients?

Hiersteiner and Peterson describe Reynolds as “the first widely published scholar-practitioner to make explicit the joint themes of individual help giving and political awareness and social action, wedding the care-centered
and social justice models of reasoning” (1999, p. 156). A trained case-worker, she became involved in larger issues affecting clients, agencies, the profession, and society. In this way she bridged the gap that is sometimes thought to divide micro from macro perspectives, and clinicians from social policy experts and community organizers. In *Social Work and Social Living* she applies her understanding of social forces, along with her considerable skill and knowledge of casework, to direct practice. She always sought to integrate the various aspects of her experience, and to empirically test the insights gained from her work in the service of enriching the profession. She had a base of strong ethics and values, a powerful desire to fight for social justice, and a deep reservoir of clinical skills and experience.

Today, as in Reynolds’ own time, we are witnessing serious assaults on welfare, health, and education programs for poor and working class people. These developments, along with market-driven economic arrangements for service delivery, impact social workers as they offer services of all kinds. Reynolds’ ideas are rich in implications for practice. In *Social Work and Social Living* she shows that brief treatment, even when dictated by external circumstances, need not be inferior to long-term work, as long as it respects and mobilizes people’s strengths. These principles continue to inform and energize her beloved profession.

REFERENCES


