chapter one

A Witness to Pain

"Everything has its wonders, even darkness and silence, and I learn that whatever state I may be in, therein to be content."

—HELEN KELLER

Marcie and John were five sessions into marital counseling.[1] Emotionally, they seemed to be somewhere between "Why are we here?" and "Now that we know what we're dealing with, what can we do about it?" I, as their therapist, had made every effort to "move" them in some sort of direction . . . any direction. Through challenging their beliefs about what the experience of marriage was supposed to be after fifteen years together to giving them assignments to work on around emotional intimacy and seeking to meet one another's needs, I had hoped to see some evidence of healing. During many of our sessions, it was obvious that John was emotionally, psychologically, and physically leaving the relationship right before Marcie's and my eyes. Ten minutes into each session, John's chair would slowly and steadily start backing toward the corner of the room. Now, it certainly could be that John, a Desert Storm veteran, suffering from posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), was moving his chair out of fear, a sense of powerlessness, or to feel safe; but in reality, as we eventually discovered, John was leaving the relationship.

1. Names of clients have been changed in addition to some details regarding actual client stories to protect their identities.

During session five, Marcie was adamant that once John's traumatic experiences in combat were dealt with, he would be the man she loved and had been married to for the past fifteen years. But John, as we found out in session five, was done. He was done with Marcie, with their marriage, and with the work that was being asked of him in marital therapy. Toward the end of our session that evening, I was feeling especially hopeless and frustrated about how to help this couple. In our closing minutes together, John slowly and solemnly looked up, looked to his wife, and said, "Marcie, I'm sorry. I don't love you as I once did. I wanted so badly to feel something for you again. But I don't. I can't. It's over."

John began to sob, uncontrollably, while Marcie watched in disbelief. She looked to me, a look of questioning, shock, and desperation. She numbly responded, "John. I love you. I can't believe this. I want you to be happy . . ." Her words trailed off like a car vanishing down an endless country road with only a cloud of dust remaining. The mix of anger and gut-wrenching pain was evident both in her eyes and on her face. Their pain filled the room. I watched. I listened. I silently thought, "Here it is. The end. The end of a marriage. What could I say? What *should* I say?" "*Just be with them,"* I told myself; "*Just be with them and their pain."*

I am not sure when I began to recognize the value of being with people in their pain. As a social worker, I am a witness to pain. Being with people in pain—emotional and sometimes physical pain—is what I do. It's what I feel called to do. And so begins my journey of sharing with you, my fellow social workers, how we can witness pain, how we can be with people in their darkest moments, and in their most personal anguish, and how this experience can be life changing for both them and us. Our work is to somehow, some way, help our clients maneuver through their pain, and maybe, just as important, how we, as social workers, find our way.

The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) provides a code of ethics for professional social work practice. The code serves as an invaluable guide not only to our client-centered practice but it also provides insight into how we need to allow our clients to determine their own paths, both through their own choices and their own mis-

takes. To a large extent, this can be very freeing for us, the helper. The code not only guides but also validates the importance of allowing and encouraging our clients to "be in the pain." The following section of the code has helped me tremendously in my practice:

> Social Workers respect and promote the right of clients to self-determination and assist clients in their efforts to identify and clarify their goals. [NASW, 2006, §. 1.02—Self-Determination]

When we are with our clients, listening, pondering, contemplating, challenging, and helping, there are several things we can do to uphold our professional values while gaining wisdom from our clients' often-remarkable ability and will to survive. Just as we act to sustain life and survive, so do our clients. I've made numerous mistakes along my professional path, but I've also discovered some basic philosophies and insights that work. The balance between helping my clients and not sacrificing my own mental health is a fine line. It's like balancing on a high wire and we, as the helpers, decide if the net will be there to catch us or not. To care for our clients, we need to care for ourselves. (More on the issue of self-care later in the book.) And so back to my original dilemma with Marci and John—"What should I say?" Or my frequently held belief, "I need to do something, what will I do?" The following insights and experiences have occurred and evolved over time. I find them useful, simple, and straightforward.

Insight 1: Listen

Very early in my career, I was working at a nonprofit, grassroots organization that had a primary mission of advocating for victims of sexual violence. With little practical experience, but an enormous amount of compassion and drive—"I can and will change the world, one victim at a time!"—I vividly recall a hands-on learning experience with a severely traumatized woman. I responded to a crisis call in the early hours of the morning: my pager went off, my heart began to race, and I quickly learned that a victim of acquaintance rape had just arrived at the local emergency trauma center. With a belief in myself and my abilities and self-assuredness I cannot explain, I went to this woman. At just before

two a.m., in the dark hours of the morning, I was quietly and quickly ushered to her exam room where I soon discovered I was very, very small. The smallness felt childlike. It's like that feeling when you walk into a room and all eyes turn to you with some sort of expectant gaze. There were only two pairs of eyes that night, one of the nurse showing me to this woman, and the woman herself. I humbly wondered to myself, "How long before they realize I don't really know what I'm doing?" I felt small in the sense that I was about to encounter someone, something . . . an experience much, much bigger than me. I was uncertain that my compassion and drive would be enough in those moments.

I began to listen. I decided that likely there were no words for what had happened to this woman. The best and most important tool I had was the ability to listen—to truly and authentically hear the words, the feelings, and the pain she was sharing with me. Me, this stranger who was there in the early hours of the morning, at one of the darkest moments of this young woman's life. I was ready to hear what she wanted to tell me. I did not and could not know her experience. I quietly and calmly introduced myself and simply said, "I am here. When you're ready to talk, I will listen."

Insight 2: Be Present

It is uncomfortable when others are in excruciating emotional pain. I grew up and continue to live in the Midwest. We have coined a phrase, it's "Minnesota Nice." What this means for me is that when people are upset, angry, distraught, or feeling anything other than fine, I tend to want to rescue, to make it okay, to make the other person comfortable. This was and continues to be a key piece of my personal and professional development. A balance must be struck between being compassionate as a helper and finding a comfort level with witnessing clients' pain.

I was in session in an outpatient mental health setting with a client who was processing very painful experiences related to childhood sexual trauma. The client began to process his self-loathing related to his experiences, truly believing he had acted in a way (at age eight) to bring the abuse on himself. "I must have said something," he recalled. "I maybe joked with him [the abuser] and let him think it would be okay [to abuse me]." As the client continued to attempt to process

these beliefs and work through his painful experience, I found myself thinking about the busy day I had ahead of me. He was my first client of the day, the session had been an intense twenty-five minutes at this point and I began to drift, in my own mind, to what was awaiting me in the lobby . . . more painful stories, more clients.

The client looked at me at this point, his tearfulness interrupted my self-absorbed thoughts, and he asked, "Are you okay? Maybe I shouldn't be dumping this on you." I was dumbfounded. I was like a deer on a northern Minnesota road gazing into the headlights of an oncoming vehicle, unable to move. I realized in that moment that I was not present with my client. I was unintentionally reinforcing for him the beliefs he had held for the last forty years of his life, "I am not worth it." Needless to say, my response was open and quick. Together, we moved in the direction we needed to go therapeutically. I asked him why he was wondering if I was okay. The client responded as I feared he would, he said, "Well, it seems like you're mind is somewhere else." In fact it was. Caught. I told the client I appreciated his concern and admitted, quite honestly that I was not as present, emotionally, as I needed to be. I apologized for this and assured him that he was worth listening to and that I was going to work harder at this in the remainder of our session. I have to admit that I wanted to tell my client, "No! I'm absolutely fine. I've heard everything you've said and I am fully present with you." This response would have (1) been untruthful and (2) not given my client credit for his accurate perceptions of our work, which would have invalidated his experience.

The lesson I take from this experience is to be present, always, with our clients. It is human nature to daydream, to allow our minds to wander, to become distracted; however, it is acutely important that when working with traumatized individuals we, as helping professionals, be present with them as they share with us some of their most personal and painful experiences. We owe them our presence.

Insight 3: Be Mindful

What has never ceased to amaze me is the resiliency of the human spirit. I have heard and witnessed horrific stories of trauma, abuse, and torture in my professional work with clients and it is humbling to see

and experience individuals' will and ability to survive the utmost devastating circumstances. Being mindful of what my clients have endured and may continue to endure is imperative in our work together.

An amazing young, female, Operation Iraqi Freedom veteran was in my office a few years ago, and we were discussing her recent PTSD diagnosis. She was describing nightmares, frequent panic attacks, and flashbacks related to her work as a truck driver with her unit stationed in Baghdad. She was engaged in amazingly tough work in therapy, accepting her experiences, processing and sharing her pain, and moving forward with healing her internal wounds.

During one particularly productive session, we began to discuss support systems. Who and what, specifically, in her life did she have to support her continued healing and growth? As the consummate social worker and helper, I engaged with her, brainstorming areas where she could take emotional risks, reach out to others, and continue on her very successful path. As a young veteran, she was clearly proud of this aspect of her identity and all she had accomplished in Iraq. During our brainstorming session, I openly suggested that she consider joining the "DAV Organization." She looked at me pensively and asked, "DAV? What's that?" "Well," I said, "it's a well-known organization and it stands for Disabled American Veterans. This might be a really neat group for you to join." I continued to try, not very successfully, to sell my idea. The response from this young woman will stay with me forever, a true "aha!" moment. She calmly and confidently said, "That doesn't sound like a group for me. I am not disabled."

Be mindful. Be mindful about our clients' perceptions of themselves, others, and the world. How they filter information based on these experiences is as valid as it is valuable. It cannot be overlooked and it cannot be minimized. Always be mindful of what our clients can and will teach us.

Insight 4: Do Not Judge

In my early career, I found myself in what I truly consider one of the most challenging posts of our profession. I worked in child protective services for a period of twenty-two months in an impoverished, rural, central Minnesota county and discovered the tendency of human

beings to judge, to inflict our personal values, even when in a professional role, onto those individuals with whom we work.

When I was twenty-two years old, in the earliest stages of my career, my own choices and beliefs at that time found me in a brand-new relationship, unwed, and pregnant. I still consider this one of the most painful periods of my life. I became severely ill with the pregnancy, and in ruminating about my limited choices in the circumstances I found myself, tended to fuel my already wildly burning sense of self-doubt, guilt, and shame. Ultimately, I not only survived this period of my life, I thrived. I grew emotionally in ways I didn't know were possible. I was able to take something frightening and overwhelming and create something amazing. My beautiful teenage daughter has now heard this story, years and what seems like lifetimes later. She looks at me with curiosity, all the while knowing and trusting the depth of my love for her.

I was working, shortly after my son, my second child, was born, as a child protection specialist in an impoverished, rural community. One of the cases I was working on involved a young woman, Michelle, age twenty-two, who had just given birth to her third child. She was not married, she was afraid, alone, and not necessarily ready for my help. She was struggling, as I recall, with early recovery from methamphetamine addiction and had recently had her two older children returned to her custody from a foster care placement.

I walked into her building and made my way to her apartment for one of our frequent, scheduled home visits. It was just after lunchtime and I remember my mood was hopeful and optimistic for Michelle. After knocking loudly for several minutes, hearing the noise of cartoons playing on the television and children's voices inside, Michelle came to the door. My knocking had awoken her, the home was a mess as I looked around, and as I entered the apartment, my gut began to twitch. It's a sixth sense I believe we all possess. I listen to mine all the time and it's a skill I've learned to use and value in this work. Michelle immediately began to apologize for the condition of the apartment. She gave many reasons why she was waking in the early afternoon, why the children were still in their pajamas, and why I should not be concerned. I listened to Michelle and I did not realize it at the time, but I began to judge her. I began to question her abilities, her motivation,

and her reasons. I began not to hear Michelle's words and became defensive with her. I was upset, even angry. I challenged her reasons and questioned her abilities. Our relationship, which had been built, tested, and strengthened over a period of nearly a year, was quickly deteriorating. What I recognize today, years later, with more experience, and certainly more wisdom, is that in many ways, I was Michelle. Her story was my story. Her struggle brought me back to my struggle . . . as an unwed, frightened parent. My pain. What I didn't recognize at the time was that I was feeling helpless that day in Michelle's apartment looking around at the mess, the chaos, and the stress. And even though I am blessed not to have had to battle addiction, Michelle's fatigue, the demands of her children, and the demands of the system, of me, were overwhelming her.

Passing judgment on our clients' experiences will damage our relationship with them. It will create and sustain a barrier to the work that could be incredibly positive and life changing. Wherever our judgments are rooted, we need to closely examine the source, where the negativity, fear, or uncertainty is coming from, and work hard to address the issues. For me, I needed to do some painful self-examination, I needed to recognize within myself my own pain, my own experiences and how my feelings seemed to closely mirror Michelle's experiences and perhaps her feelings. My judgment toward Michelle could have been disastrous for both of us, but with self-examination, accessing supervision, and always working toward heightened self-awareness, I was able to recognize within myself the work I needed to do to be effective in my working relationship with Michelle. I was going to be of no help to Michelle as long as I held on to my judgmental views.

As with all of my clients, Michelle did not need my judgment, she needed my understanding and compassion. A wise social worker once said to me, "We are only ever one step away from being a client. Never, ever forget that." Trust me, I never will.

Insight 5: Do Not Rescue

I have come to terms with the idea that rescuing my clients is one of the biggest disservices I can render. Attempts to take away that which is

truly sacred, clients' personal experiences, is in the truest sense, taking away their stories. Typically, those times I've made the mistake of rescuing my clients has been when I am uncomfortable, anxious, or afraid of their experiences or of my ability to help them with those experiences.

One of the first and still one of the most valuable tools a former supervisor and great social worker gave me was, "Don't hand your clients the tissue box." This is powerful. In sessions in which my work with the client involves emotionally laden issues or we are engaged in trauma processing, for example, tears often (and hopefully) flow freely for the client. It is our tendency as helpers and quite possibly as compassionate human beings to want the painful emotion to resolve, to stop, or at least to stop hurting so much. What my wise supervisor taught me was that by handing the client the tissue box in a moment of open emotional sharing, including tears of pain or joy, is a potentially harmful disruption that could be perceived or internalized by clients as an effort to rescue them, to stop what is healing expression of feelings and very natural. Why, you might ask, does this really matter? Well, I've considered this long and hard and when it comes to rescuing, by allowing our clients their emotional expression, no matter how painful, distressing, or uncomfortable, we are in a greater sense giving them permission to have feelings, any feelings, and we are not judging them, just being with them. Ultimately, we are not rescuing, we are simply allowing. This can be a very important and powerful experience for the therapist and client in building the therapeutic relationship. The message that can be deduced from this shared experience is a message of support from the therapist, such as "I can hold your pain, and your pain is valid. But I cannot rescue you from your pain." Another validating message might be, "I believe in you. I believe in your ability to survive this pain and if I rescue you, I take this ability away from you." I have come to believe that rescuing clients is more about the helping professional's needs than about the clients' needs.

Insight 6: Be Patient

My time line for my client's healing process and expression of pain is often quite different from my client's time line. My job is to encourage,

to patiently and gently nudge when appropriate, and to slow down and guide when we agree this is necessary. If we are keen listeners and observers, our clients will tell us with their words or with their actions what they need us to know about their process.

I had an opportunity one summer to assist in the development and teaching of a course for at-risk male adolescents at an alternative high school with the unfortunate reputation of being the last resort for these amazing kids. The first day of class, I walked in, looked around, and began to sense the intensity of who was in the room with me. These young men were ready, without any hesitation, to let me know they were not pleased about my presence or theirs. Survival for these kids was a priority, school, especially summer school, was way down on the list.

The group was rich with cultural and ethnic differences. African American, Latino, American Indian, and Caucasian kids—all together—all with unique stories and many of them struggling and in pain.

The group was laid out for twelve weeks, two hours per day just before lunch. According to the school and my partner, one of my social work mentors, the clear-cut goal was that each of these students would earn adequate English credit to move on to the next grade level and for many, to graduate high school.

I have kept a journal or a diary on and off ever since I was a little girl. I have always loved to write and to tell stories. I continue to enjoy writing and telling stories, and I see a real value in writing today, especially in the context of therapy and the work of healing pain. Suffice it to say, I arrived at the first day of class like a kindergartner on her first day of show-and-tell. I believed I had a possession to lift up before my audience and that I would be greeted with wonder and amazement. This was not like show-and-tell. What I had to bring, to share, was not well received the first day, or the second day, or the third week. These young men, as I discovered, were in pain. They were angry, afraid, and desperate. The battle I waged was uphill the entire way and I would not trade the experience for anything. From walking out of the room in the midst of a discussion, to loud verbal and nonverbal interruptions (sleep and even some snoring), the challenge to engage these kids was a great one. Sharing from the various writing exercises and journaling entries

we asked the students to write, was always optional. On a rare occasion, several days into class, we'd get to hear amazing poetry, free writing, and autobiographical tidbits from the kids' lives.

As the hot and humid days of August came to an end, so did our class. We spent the last week of class enjoying lunches together, playing a variety of music, and the atmosphere was free—free from the worries of day-to-day life. The last day of class, I asked each student to write a brief, one-page summary about their thoughts and feelings related to the summer school class and our time together. I was taking a big risk. I believed my self-esteem was ready, even for the worst, and so I waited with baited breath for the students to finish their final writing exercise and turn it in to me before they left.

I cannot put into words what the responses meant to me. It is easier for me to share one from a seventeen-year-old American Indian student that continues to be one of the most important tools I've grasped in working with clients in pain thus far. His statement read:

> Miss Sarah,
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> This class was good. I did not want to be here at first, because I need to work full-time to help take care of my mom and younger brother and sister. I have never had a class like this before. I never really tried journaling, but I guess it's not that bad. Maybe I'll keep doing it. Like I said in class, my people come from a long line of storytellers. Maybe I am a storyteller, too. My grandmother told me a story once about the lesson of the turtle. She said that the turtle is a wise and creative teacher. She said that the turtle buries its eggs in the sand and allows the sun, in time, to hatch them. She taught me to bury my thoughts, like the turtle's eggs. To give time and patience to my ideas before I allow them to come out.
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> The turtle helps me so I always remember to be patient. Anything worth having is worth my time. Thank you for sticking with our class and for not giving up on me.

Today, I have a small, stone carving of a sea turtle on my desk. I think I found it in Georgia on a trip I took a while back. The student's story, his wisdom, and his willingness to risk, are all lessons I carry with me. Having patience with our clients and allowing them to tell us and to show us what they need from us is at times challenging, but offers a richness to the relationship that cannot be forged without it.