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- Vibrant Institutions
- Christ-Shaped Leadership
- Traditioned Innovation
- Transformative Leadership
- Generative Organization
- Sustainable Design

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- Staff Directory
- Program Offerings
- Custom Services

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- Articles »
- Multimedia »
- Profiles »
- Q&A »
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- Sermons »

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Walk with light

Go and do likewise. The story of the Good Samaritan illustrates the demand for professionals and institutions to help people in need, says historian Timothy B. Tyson in a graduation address to UNC social workers.

by [Timothy B. Tyson](#)



May 19, 2009

Editor's note: This address was given at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill School of Social work commencement on May 9, 2009.

This has got to be the most exciting time to become a social worker in many, many years. The country is a mess. Never before has there been so much work for you to do, and so little money to pay you. And we have a community organizer in the White House; someone who set aside lucrative career prospects to help mend the broken world.

Community organizing, as you know, has its historical roots in an important part of the social work profession. Whether you're a community organizer or a social worker, either way, your parents are worried half to death -- and proud, too, no doubt.

Whether your families are proud, appalled, or both, I myself am very proud of you. My sister, Boo Tyson, is a social worker, and my sister-in-law, Lori Messenger, has an M.S.W. and a Ph.D. from this very program. I have two whiz-kid teenaged children, and I live in fear that one of them may end up a burden on society -- you know, an investment banker or a corporate executive. As I look out in front of

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GO

me, I feel an enormous sense of relief and reassurance. All these shining faces and vibrant souls, saved from the witch's cauldron of commerce. It does my pinko heart good.

I have a social work story for you today. It is a well-known story by an ancient writer named Luke, and attributed to Jesus. It starts with a question from a hostile attorney, asking Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"

Jesus knows better than to submit to questioning by a lawyer, and so he tells this story instead. [Luke 10:25-37](#) "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead.

"Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, he passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity.

"He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him, and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.'

"Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?"

"[The lawyer] said, 'The one who showed him mercy.' Jesus said to him, 'Go and do likewise.'"

To me, this seems a very good social work story -- not quite perfect, no offense to Jesus, who was not writing a social work textbook, after all, but nonetheless very good.

First, it shows that faith-based solutions have their limits. The priest and the Levite both pass by on the other side of the road. Who knows, maybe they were on their way to a conference about crime and poverty? I don't think we should be too hard on them; after all, if I stopped on my way to work to help every person who needs help, I would never get to work, not even once. That's one reason we need social workers.

Second, the story points straight toward the ethnic and racial implications of many of our social problems. Jesus did not make his protagonist a Samaritan at random. The Samaritans were an ethnic and religious group whose past placed them at odds with the Jews; the book of John points out that "Jews have no dealings with Samaritans." There is no effective social work without an understanding of the histories and identities that divide us. And social work often labors at the perilous intersections of cultures, where it is easy to misunderstand and make mistakes. That is why your training here is so important.

Third, the story points toward the need for institutions that are equipped to deal with those in need. The Samaritan does bind up the victim's wounds himself. He risks himself at a dangerous place in the road, gets down where the pain is, and pours in oil and wine for healing. But he does not merely take the victim home with him. Instead, he takes the victim to an institution that is set up to deal with the man's injuries. And he makes sure that the institution has enough money to do its work.

And this we should pledge to one another, regardless of whether we are social workers or merely love a social worker: that we will not see ourselves merely as individuals, but instead we will make sure that the rape crisis center, the homeless shelter, the rehabilitation programs, the elder care centers, all the institutions that we need, have enough financial support to do their jobs. Social work has to be rooted in communities, and those communities need to stand behind their social workers.

I said the story of the Good Samaritan was not a perfect social work story. And here's why. We don't get any indication that anyone in the story is trying to figure out why people are being attacked on the Jericho road. Of course, this may not be a fair criticism. Maybe the Samaritan has to leave the man at the inn because he has to read page proofs for his forthcoming study of the dangers of the Jericho road, and the root causes of the violence there. Maybe the two religious figures in the story, the Levite and the priest, are co-authoring a piece for the *Journal of Social Work* on religious indifference to human suffering. But nonetheless we do well to remember that we need to understand the reasons for the suffering around us, even while we move to ameliorate it. Social work is not just about Band-Aids.

The story also does not say anything about the training of the Samaritan. Though it appears that the

Samaritan is thoughtful and competent, it is not clear whether this represents good instincts or acquired knowledge. But Social work is not just about charitable tendencies, but about sets of skills that count and ways of understanding that matter. That is one reason to celebrate your accomplishment today -- because it represents not merely good intentions but best practices and professional standards.

But social work, like other professions, has to look beyond itself. I am a historian, and I have acquired some professional methodologies that matter to me. But those skills are not worth much without the vision to let them speak to the human dilemma. History without a social vision is pointless trivia or empty nostalgia. And social work without a social vision is dabbing at the ocean with a Kleenex.

Social work has to concern itself with social justice. Social workers have to be agents for change -- healers of the world as well as healers of individuals. We have to understand the world, we have to develop the skill sets for confronting it, but we also have to be open to larger ways of changing it. There is no reason why a social worker should not be on the school board -- or in the White House, or raising hell in the streets outside the White House.

I have a few personal words for those of you who have reached this moment of high achievement today. Savor it, now and always. You have worked hard to be here. Not only that, but somebody sacrificed a great deal for you to stand here. There was some sweat on the money, somewhere back there, not just a cashier's check in a crisp envelope. You are the precious object of sacrificial love. You are the answer to somebody's prayers. You and yours have paid a lot for this day. Congratulations.

In closing, let me say once again that your generation of social work professionals may well be the luckiest in many, many years. There is a new will at work in the world. For all our problems, there is a fresh determination to meet them. The redemptive vision that animates social work has to be at the heart of our common resolve.

And that resolve rejects what Dr. King called the "thingification" of human beings. It springs from an eternally radical vision of the dignity of human personality, the essential self-ownership of each person, and the recognition that we are all in this together. In all the hustle of celebration, in all the scurrying to enter your chosen profession, don't overlook the hopes that infuse this historical moment. As a certain community organizer recently told the world, "the old hatreds shall someday pass; the lines of tribe shall soon dissolve; and as the world grows smaller, our common humanity shall reveal itself."

Because we're in Chapel Hill and it is graduation, I am actually required by some kind of cosmic law, if not an actual local ordinance, to say something nostalgic and sentimental, poignant, personal and perhaps instructive. And so I have to tell you that I lost a dear friend this past year. He was a little stick-figure man with a round head who perched over the crosswalk for Franklin Street, right by the old post office, and when it was safe for you to cross the street, he would light up and shine a brilliant white glow. That was his one shining moment, and he waited for it all day. The authorities finally dragged him away this year. What I liked best about this inspiring figure was the sign above his post, which the city also removed, unfortunately: it said, "Walk with Light." That's right, "Walk with Light."

Dearly Beloved, as you go out into the world, you just try to do that, and see if you don't feel better.