

Chapter 2

Voice to the Voiceless—Sue Ash, AO

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“Sue Ash speaks up for the voiceless”, “Coming out as gay in the country” and “Community at a crossroads”: these media articles highlight the advocacy and policy work of Sue Ash, AO, a well-known Western Australian leader in the community services sector. After more than 40 years of experience in this sector, Sue reflects on the context in which contemporary social work is situated, a *different environment ... with statutory compliance like we’ve never had before ... with legal sanctions like we’ve never had before ... with an increasing disrespect for our human services and ... we’re becoming agents of some very draconian policy*. She ponders on the future of social work and *how we actually keep a profession alive when most of our salaries are coming from the public sector*, grateful of her membership of the non-profit sector where *we can value social work*.

The interview came at a turning point in Sue’s life—the recent loss of her mother and increasing caring responsibilities for her father. A time to once again look and plan for the future, acknowledging how the past has shaped her and that she is now at a time where she is content with her *professional voice* and her contribution to the profession: *over the last few years it’s been great to own being a social worker and try and put something back into both our profession but also for the world actually seeing what social workers are capable of doing*.

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Early Life

This was a family where you could talk about things.

A deep sense of community and civic-mindedness, instilled and embodied by Sue's parents, are enduring influences in her life. These virtues were necessary in the *isolated little community* that was Middle Swan, Western Australia, in 1951. The family in which Sue grew up was one where membership and involvement in the Christian church and the sense of responsibility to contribute to the wellbeing of the community lay at the core. It is clear that these family values were, and still are, a significant influence in Sue's personal and professional life.

Although the eldest of three, Sue was an *innately shy* child: so much so that Jill, her younger sister by two and a half years, was *the voice for the pair* of them on shopping errands and in other public activities. *We would go to the shops together, as you did in those days, at four and a half and two, and it would be Jill who would order the sausages.* The family knew this but, importantly, Sue was never made to feel different or incapable for this almost excruciating shyness—she was accepted and loved just as she was. She was not subjected to the labelling or categorisation that she feels defines contemporary childhood, but rather left to grow at her own pace. And a capable and confident Sue took on the role of carer, with responsibilities in the home, and for her mum during her *really nasty pregnancies*. Being *very competent at home but not competent outside* meant that Sue's career success has been somewhat of a surprise to her.

Sue's mother, Joan—what we would now call a “stay-at-home mum” but what was the norm at the time—played a pivotal role in Sue's life. Her sacrifice of career and independence for family life was common for women of that generation. Her enforced relinquishment of a job as a public servant and subsequent need to rear a family on the outskirts of Perth meant she needed to find something else to keep her sane: finding a niche in the community and Methodist church provided this and also instilled in her children an understanding of the importance of participating in civic life. Looking after the children on her own while her husband was away for work, *catching the bus once a week to see her mother* and being involved in the church kept Joan busy and connected in a small community.

A man of his times, Sue's father, Ross, held more black and white attitudes than Joan, but he too held a strong belief in community and Christian faith. A self-employed builder by trade and necessity, Ross held aspirations for a career in civil engineering that proved elusive, for the course he had worked hard and nearly completed was not accredited. Sue recalls this as being soul destroying for her father, for all the years of studying at night and travelling for work had in the end not achieved the university degree that he'd aimed for. Instead he continued as a builder, the family moving multiple times for him to secure employment.

Significantly, these were parents who enacted their civic-mindedness. Within months of being married they were sharing their house and spare room with Dutch refugees who couldn't find accommodation. Caring for and about others was *part of our narrative in our family and [the family was] always expected to do things like*

that. The family always had a world perspective and an involvement in overseas missionary activities. A formative part of childhood that Sue loved was staying up late, listening to the cricket in England (on a crystal set), and imagining a world across the seas. This contact with the outside world came to a head when, as a ten-year-old, Sue listened aghast to stories of the brutal fight for independence in Belgian Congo. This was a turning point for her, as she learned firstly about the human potential for good and bad, *for good people to do some pretty awful things.* It was also the beginnings of the development of a complex and nuanced understanding of white privilege. Although *this was a family where you could talk about things* Sue felt confused and confronted and held her thoughts privately, unable and unprepared to talk to anyone about them, but knowing somehow that her life in sleepy Western Australia had changed forever.

The Sue at school was the Sue in public: a quiet achiever in primary school, but who spent many hours in the high school library until a librarian coaxed her out at lunchtimes; this teacher, like other influential people in Sue's life, went on to become and remain a friend over many years. The 1960s were a time when girls studied domestic science and boys technical drawing; Sue wanted to be an architect and the pathway for that was technical drawing, one that was closed to her simply due to her gender. Demure, quiet Sue performed her first act of civil disobedience at being *told that as a girl I couldn't do it. I had to do domestic science.* With a satisfied smile on her face, Sue recounts sitting in the playground letting the sponge cake burn: *I know I can make a sponge but there's no way in the world I'm going to allow you to have the last laugh.*

And so school lost some meaning for Sue until year 11, for being unable to learn technical drawing and related subjects had a significant effect on her, her results becoming *pretty ordinary.* Yet another change in schools, this time to enable her to go on to year 12, which her family supported, despite their meagre resources. Making the most of teenage life meant that Sue's marks suffered and, so strong was her sense of responsibility in not letting her parents or herself down, she decided that she would leave school and train in dental nursing. Although her family *knew that I wasn't going to last,* having felt so much compassion for her sister Jill that she fainted regularly on seeing Jill in pain in the dentist's chair, they allowed her to make the choice. Lasting only six weeks in this respectable and suitable job for a woman, Sue *plucked up the courage* to tell her parents she wanted to return to school. Although the financial costs incurred in buying uniform and equipment for dental nursing were significant, her parents supported this decision. She returned to school to year 12 and it was at this point that Sue encountered economics and her love for the subject.

Starting Out in Social Work

The early 1960s for me were really big years because they were years where I was ... yeah, I was just doing a whole pile of thinking ... and appreciated the opportunity of being able to belong to Perth ...

Without any sense of what she wanted to do, at the suggestion of a school counsellor in 1968, at the age of 16, Sue applied for, and successfully obtained, two cadetships, one with the Department of Child Welfare and one into engineering with Main Roads. She chose social work because in order to do engineering she would have had to do extra work to make up for not studying physics at school, and she and her family were travelling during that period. Sue also refers to herself at this time as being *somewhat of a feminist*; it's no wonder then that social work was *a joy, opening up a whole new world*. Social work at the Western Australian Institute of Technology (WAIT), now Curtin University, was thus a breath of fresh air, a formative period of learning about social economics, anthropology and community. It was also a time when Sue questioned what she saw as a mismatch between the social justice she read of in the Bible and its absence in her church. As an adolescent she *couldn't join the two together and social work for me was a really wonderful opportunity to have a different world view on justice ... it also equipped me to see the world through a whole range of different people's ... world views would be the language we use these days*.

The social work course was an opportunity for Sue to learn about politics *in a systemic way, to see the world through community as well as individuals*. It was also an opportunity to find her own voice in a period when she was treated as though she was capable, despite her age. Sue speaks of the different, lower status accorded to WAIT courses because at that time it had just moved from a technical to a degree course, saying she was *really delighted to be at WAIT because there's nothing that fires me up like being told that you're not good enough*. It was this voice that enabled Sue's resistance to being told that WAIT social work students could not do medical social work placements. At the encouragement of a WAIT social work lecturer, Sue and a colleague travelled to New Zealand to complete their final placements, not only a medical placement but a four-month psychiatric medical social work placement. Speaking of this period, Sue says, *It was quite important to both of us to actually find a way through the system to actually achieve what we wanted to do*. This was also the beginning of a lifetime of travel; social work has been a *wonderful career for a woman who wanted to travel ... rather than just being a tourist*.

The other opportunity for Sue to test her voice was when she and other students felt that the therapeutic processes in which they were compelled to participate were traumatic to some. This was *the era of therapeutic communities and we had all these amazing in-depth focus groups where you would bare all and sometimes you would feel as though you were being torn apart and not put back together very well*. At 19 Sue was nearing the point of withdrawing from the course—a big decision, given her love and commitment to social work knowledge. She shared these thoughts with her mother, who *rarely intervened in our lives* and, spurred on by her mother's uncharacteristic threat of going into talk to the Head of Department, Sue took matters into her own hands. She challenged the lecturer *about his boundaries*

and the *pulling [the person] apart* which felt *almost gratuitous*. It was this experience that taught her the importance of fully informed consent, a value she has held dear through her career: *What should have happened, and what I always endeavoured to do from then on, is to ensure that we demonstrate full consent.*

The feminist movement was influential in Sue *finding her voice*, standing up against the school system that prevented her from pursuing technical drawing, the hierarchy between the two social work courses, and the lecturer who she felt *abused his power with vulnerable women*. Of this period Sue describes herself as not being so much a *public feminist of the seventies* and *your ordinary feminist* but that *the essence of being feminist was absolutely there*. Although different today, being a feminist in the church was *interesting*: but then Sue *always intended to push boundaries*.

Social Work Placements

Over the years what were opportunities to learn new things gradually became integrated and it's been a really strong part of my personal development to live an integrated life...

Sue's placement opportunities were diverse: City of South Perth (community survey); Mofflyn, now UnitingCare West; and Catholic Migration, now Centrecare.

It was this last placement with Barry Hickey—who later became Archbishop of Perth—that Sue, a 19-year-old, worked with a poor Irish working family on managing their budget. One Friday, six weeks later, she called into their house to find (non-budgeted) fish and chips on the kitchen table. It was here that Sue learned something more about poverty and that *we're much more than rational beings*. She speaks of the importance of learning from clients, who are the experts in their own lives. While her immediate reaction was to wonder why and how the family made the decision to splurge when they *were doing so well*, later, when she was driving home, she had the realisation that:

these people wanted to ensure that their children had a normal experience and they ... you know, the short-term consequences versus the long-term pain, they'd lived in poverty a long time. They probably knew a million more times than their 19-year-old social worker about how they would do that. But it was so important for them that their kids had something special and for them special was fish and chips.

Sue says: *the history of my career is you just (keep) learning ... it was just a powerful lesson.*

Sue completed her final exams on her twentieth birthday; that is, she was considered young; when the subject of the appropriate age to study social work arises on social work advisory groups she challenges this, saying *I had a demonstrated capacity to learn and I think some of the really critical things that have formed me as a social worker were already well formed by the time I was twenty.*

Early Career

Work has never really been a hardship because it's always been ... I don't know that it's quite vocation but it's certainly been a career or a profession rather than a job.

The finance section of the Department of Child Welfare was to be Sue's first job, where at 17 her role was to process foster care payments, *which for someone with a brain like mine took a lot of discipline because I was much more interested in figuring out where the money went than making sure all the numbers added up.* Once again she speaks of the influence of a mentor, Mike, who later became a friend: *a fantastic public servant who built into her a sense of responsibility that if you get it wrong you will impact someone's life. It was Mike who taught her about what public service means and the art of translation that she believes is essential for social work: he took what I learnt about politics and he translated it for me.* Sue reflects on how they worked with paper, where clients had cards that were *tangible evidence* and helped social workers understand *how critical their work was in those days because they weren't an entry on the screen.* She learned an important lesson: *get it right and you're part of a really well-oiled machine that's providing good care for a child.*

Family welfare officers, though considered a lower rank than social workers, also mentored and guided Sue, showing her how to do everyday administrative tasks as well as about accountability in a legal environment. Speaking of their openness and warm welcome, she cites her thirst for learning: *I'm sure my curiosity helped because I wasn't there under sufferance. I really wanted to know.* One officer, also a good friend now, coached and modelled for her how to stick to a decision once you had made it, that her job was to protect the life of vulnerable children. This helped her in an early recommendation as a worker in adoptions, rejecting a prospective adoptive family's care application and being able to articulate the reasons for her verdict. It was also at this time that Sue learned two valuable lessons: *track the money* and that *process has always only ever been about ensuring that you get good outcomes, respectful outcomes for your employer but good outcomes for people and those sort of process things are not the end point.* It was these mentors in her life who enabled her to see that effective social workers *understand where the money is, who makes the decisions and how it transfers.* Effective social workers are aware of their power and the mindful and judicious use of this power: *Don't assume anybody wants you in their life. They need you in their life because of your position. So don't abuse it. Don't do any harm and if you feel as though you're doing harm, stand back.*

Social work enabled travel and Sue made the most of these opportunities, travelling to Kalgoorlie and Esperance in her role as adoptions officer, staying with work colleagues who became friends, friends she still has today. An experience in this role had a resounding effect, *I still can't drive down this street in Perth without remembering this child.* Well into the adoption process, the birth mother revoked her consent and 20-year-old Sue *had to go and get this baby* from the adoptive parents. The support she received helped her, for she *learnt about the consequences*

of decisions without feeling as though I was being clobbered because we made a wrong decision. She was involved again later when the same child came into care and she has been a colleague to the mother of the second adoptive family, highlighting once again the importance of integration of personal and professional aspects of self: *We've had this intertwining (personal/professional) relationship and for me the only way you get through that is this integration of your self.*

At age 22 Sue spent two years at the new combined department called Community Welfare in Derby, in far north Western Australia, working with colleagues to develop Aboriginal communities and in collaboration with all the state government agencies. She notes that her learning there was *how fantastic it is to actually work across a team and not just a team in an organisation, but across the community.* Sue was involved in the early stages of the development of the community at One Arm Point, with the Bardi people; she worked with the elders in the Indigenous communities who *were incredibly gracious of this little white girl.* It was here that Sue had another life-changing experience, this time with an Indigenous child who she brought to Perth from Derby for adoption. Of her role in this Sue says, *I wasn't part of all the decision making but I was a critical part of her [relinquishing Aboriginal parent] losing her son.* For Sue, *the line between child protection and Stolen Generation, even as late as the early seventies, was still very blurred.* Years later, at a Bringing Them Home conference, she worked with an Indigenous leader on a shared presentation as a way to work through social work's involvement with the Stolen Generation. Of this time Sue says, *And I really wanted to represent colleagues, me included, in what I think was a very ambivalent period in social work practice. And to be absolutely honest I think we are still there but we coat it with all sorts of other things.* Sue's hope is to one day return to the Kimberly to meet the mother: *I think I'm brave enough now that if she's really angry about what happened and that she didn't get her son back or something awful happened that I can probably cope with that.*

Sue also speaks of the two-storey office building in Derby, which *literally looked down on the reserve ... I was always uncomfortable ... because it just spoke privilege.* Yet this bird's eye view also meant that staff could see what was happening in the community and meant that *you didn't need to intrude on people's lives.* Sue sums this up when she says: *I think that whole sense of trying not to abuse privilege but being curious is a really interesting challenge for us as people who work with people.*

Sound observational skills, many of which seem to be lost today, were developed early in Sue's training and practised in Derby in a multicultural situation:

In the era that I was trained in, all of us were great people observers. We would go to dinner and we would make up the story of the person at the next table and you would practise your nonverbal observation and you'd practise your interpretation of dress and code and all those sorts of things. We just did it all the time.

Not only was working in the Kimberly an amazing opportunity to fly over and visit beautiful parts of Western Australia, it was a chance to practise preventative work, keeping families together, and without paternalistic state responses. An

example of this was a girl who was placed in foster care during the week while her single-parent father was at work. Comparing it to more rigid contemporary responses Sue says:

We'd probably call it shared care these days but for the Dad, he saw himself as still being her primary carer but he was just supported by another couple and for his daughter, she literally moved from his place to their place and back again and it was all very normal. I grieve the fact that we find it so difficult to do those things these days ... today ... she would have been in care.

Unhappy with being rejected for a senior position for which she concedes she was not professionally ready, Sue decided not to return to Derby after a trip to Perth for medical treatment. She decided that after a visit to Papua New Guinea to see her parents she would continue to England. However, this trip did not eventuate; the lure of another rural job based with an aerial health service, establishing health centres in outback New South Wales, proved too strong. Newcastle was to become Sue's next home base and a multidisciplinary work team environment was one in which she flourished. The team travelled to Broken Hill and Lightning Ridge and Brewarrina and Albury and anywhere that was outback New South Wales. When the team was moved to Sydney, Sue chose to find another job in Newcastle, from where she could visit Sydney but avoid the hassle of living in a big city.

This was the Whitlam era, and the next phase of Sue's life, at the NSW Department of Social Services, involved regional community development work. Now part of the Newcastle community, she and a friend became aware of the increasing rates of domestic violence as a result of the downsizing of the BHP iron works. They travelled to Sydney to see Elsie Women's Refuge and to Canberra to see the newly established refuge there, returning to form Jenny House, a *little project on the side* of their day jobs that in reality involved intricate and lengthy consultation, collaboration and negotiation with business and local government.

Sue transferred back to Perth to the Midland Department of Social Security. Although the idea was to spend a year with her sister and brother (who were both getting married at the end of the year) and then travel to England, the plan was thwarted, but for good reason: it was at Midland that Sue met Graeme, who she subsequently married and with whom she had two children. To support Graeme's subsequent studies in agriculture prior to training for the Uniting Church ministry, Sue worked as a consultant for five years. They were not able to fulfil their hope to work in rural/remote Australia, for Graeme died suddenly in 1986, at the age of 29, only nine years into their marriage.

Now a single parent and primary breadwinner with two children under the age of six, Sue experienced being a "client", becoming acutely aware of the *little symbols of power* manifested, for example, in the quality of waiting rooms and reception areas and separate staff and client entrances. Sue had always been aware of the importance of knowing how fine the line was between "provider" and "consumer", that *today you could be in one seat and tomorrow you could be in another*. These new experiences reinforced her belief that *If you have been given the privilege of a position then function as though it's a privilege and not a right, and function as*

though the person you're working with could easily be in the same circumstance that you are and you could be in their circumstance. These experiences informed her current view that *clients are treated as well or better than staff*, which means that *client areas need to be as good as your staff areas*. Staff need equal focus for *our staff do amazingly difficult jobs and they need to know that they're valued and looked after and cared for*.

Another aspect of the personal and professional influencing each other was the awareness for Sue of the importance of children's involvement in *the reality* of death and how her grief, although deep, was different to that of many social work clients, for whom grief was multiple. Sue reflects on her positioning of herself as *fortunate*, saying:

I was a well-educated 34-year-old with two kids. I mean, you cannot get a bigger sympathy vote than me. But, you know there would be people who wouldn't get the support that I got or people who would deal with it differently or people who hadn't had my social work background and I cannot tell you how important that was.

Graeme's death meant that Sue had to make some life-changing decisions in her professional life; after trying to manage part-time work with vulnerable families she decided that these families needed a social worker who was able to provide support and skills and she was not yet ready to provide that. And so began the first of a series of ten-year life plans to sort decisions about life and work.

A Graduate Diploma in Primary Teaching, though on the plan, was not for Sue and seven weeks later she applied for and successfully obtained a full-time lecturing position at TAFE, teaching in her area of expertise—out-of-home care for kids and working with children with disabilities. This position enabled her to combine parenting and employment and was something Sue had always wanted to do. It was during this time that she feels she had one of her greatest achievements: seeing 22 out of 23 Indigenous students graduate from an inclusion course that she had worked on at its inception. Sue puts it down to the students: *these students were generous with their sharing of knowledge and culture and I think we really built a community in that group*.

By this time Sue had also taken on a leadership role in her church and obtained a Diploma in Theology. Her faith, though tested, has guided her through the majority of her adult life. Her first period of questioning Christianity was during university, when she queried where the espoused social justice was manifested in the church. Years later, in Newcastle in the Department of Social Services, as the only Protestant on the team, Sue was exposed to different ways of thinking. Derby had already been in a point in her life when she had decided that the Christian faith, although appropriate for her parents, was not for her. Her parents' response that they accepted her decision and would be praying for her angered her *because I think deep in my own personal belief system there was an acknowledgement of the power of God and if they were praying then no matter what they did behaviourally there was still influence*. It was during some time off a few years later, ironically while working in a pest control agency, that Sue reflected on the importance of Christian

faith and, after much consideration, *came to grips with a personal Christian faith and that has been really solid since then.*

Education continued to play a key role when Sue was involved in setting up a regional social work course at Edith Cowan University in Bunbury, Western Australia, bringing together two passions: social work and regional communities. She returned to an operational position as a manager in the Department of Family and Community Services, once again covering regional WA. The position required extensive travel and the family perfected *Telstra parenting*—doing many family activities via phone calls. This was the first of a series of senior management jobs in Sue's career. She was able to once again *join the dots*: her boss from Derby was her boss at FaCS in Bunbury. Departure from that position due to a restructure was postponed by a significant local disaster: a landslide in 1996 in the coastal town of Gracetown involved managing a multi-community recovery effort, working in a team of police, fire fighters and health professionals. Another learning opportunity: Sue regrets her assumption that she knew what the families needed; she provided privacy in their time of grief when what they needed, they later said, was community.

I was applying this sense of being an individual in grief and shock and wanting ... not applying learning around self-determination but doing what you think is right for the person as opposed to enabling people to engage in decision making, even in what was a really difficult set of circumstances for these people.

Gracetown also had a *big impact ... in terms of always working with rather than doing to and enabling people to have as much opportunity to make decisions for themselves as they possibly can and that communities are different to aggregates of individuals.* It was at this point that Sue learned the importance of being bilingual and knowing and understanding concepts well enough to translate them into other people's professional language. After all, it is a social worker's *systemic ecological understanding of the world* to be respectful of languages and cultures.

Leadership

Sue's qualities as a leader were further strengthened in her first position as Chief Executive Officer, at Wanslea (Family Services). For a period of seven years she oversaw the threefold growth of the organisation and the establishment of regional facilities. Mission and value changes were developed as well, and a broader definition of family, current to the twentieth century, was applied to the constitution. A move from a traditional conceptualisation of family as confined to mother and child to one that was *broader ... multiple generations, multiple gender, all sorts of things.* This enabled opportunities for the creation of *programs for grandparents caring for grandchildren, for family members who were no longer with custody of their kids, with fathers, with children caring for parents.* Computerisation of client records and the creation of a client data system enabled a research focus that was absent in other agencies at this time. It was also a time of personal growth for Sue,

who never saw herself as a leader, equating quietness with an inability to be a leader. Learning around leadership was significant, with the realisation that *if you can build a team and you can build a vision and a direction and you can ask the right questions you can actually shape things.*

With her children grown up, it was time for a change, this time to Canberra to be Manager of Child Protection for the ACT Government. A review of the child protection system commenced soon after and a significant period of flux ensued over the next year. Returning to Perth to be closer to an ill father and to return to education, Sue commenced work as a lecturer at Curtin University, where she had started her education more than 35 years before. The pressures of extensive teaching, a PhD, less income and a sense that the contribution she was making was minimal, led her to resign from Curtin to take a position as CEO of an aged care organisation for which she had been head-hunted. Three years later, Sue moved to the position of CEO, WA Council of Social Service (WACOSS).

WACOSS was to become Sue's *Esther job*, a two-and-half-year job that enabled all the elements in her life to integrate. Dealing with the media was a steep learning curve and she established a strategy that addressed both the general citizen (people like her own mother) and senior government decision makers. Once again Sue grew an agency, expanding it within the context of an extremely tight budget.

Participating in the local and Australian community through volunteer work has always been part of Sue's life: the establishment of Families Australia, involvement with the Australian Family Support Association and membership, including presidency, of WACOSS and membership of the Board of ACOSS. Giving back to those who had supported her and her family was equally important, as was contributing to the Uniting Church ministry with whom Graeme had been training when he died and whose insurance policy had enabled Sue to put a deposit on her first home. Sue speaks of her philosophy around volunteer work as being *typical of my career... There's always been voluntary projects on the backend of various things that I've done because again I think you're given much and it's a great opportunity to see what you can do with it.*

In April 2010, Sue proposed to the WACOSS Board that WACOSS become the local partner with the Commonwealth Foundation on the delivery of the Commonwealth People's Forum (CPF) during the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meetings (CHOGM) in October 2011. This involved 18 months of work, including significant international leadership and negotiation. Delivery of the CPF was a highlight of Sue's career. This was an opportunity to influence what was to go on in the national social policy debate of CHOGM and to demonstrate to the state government what WACOSS could contribute. Two thousand Western Australian citizens were directly involved in some aspect of the CPF. Of this *little bit busy* period Sue says, *I suppose for me just that growing personal sense of confidence about being able to lead and influence and build teams and work with some amazing people.* A significant, though quiet achievement, was facilitating the presentation by three Indigenous elders to Kevin Rudd, then Prime Minister, Australian foreign minister, and all the foreign ministers. For this and her other work Sue received an Officer of the Order of Australia (AO) in 2014, for

“distinguished service to the community, particularly in the area of social policy development, reform and implementation, and to the provision of services to people in need”. This was a major achievement for a quiet girl from Middle Swan, yet Sue shows her humility by saying that her happiness is from the joy that it gave other people in the sector and that it was the first time many people actually knew someone on the list. This award came as *both a surprise and a huge honour and again, for me, the personal and the professional collided*. During the lead-up to CHOGM Sue moved to her current position of CEO of UnitingCare West, which was another agency that nurtured the integration of all the spheres of her life. Sue took this job because of the social justice part of the agency, its faith base and its intentionality about its mission.

The Future for Social Work

We’re a profession of hope and opportunity and justice ... so let’s use all that we’ve got and set some long horizons and then work towards them.

For Sue, the future for social work is one in which we recognise our *responsibility to challenge systems* and alongside our strengths of description and critiquing, we also have to develop an ability to find and provide *alternative solutions*, many of which involve the *awful inevitable problem of compromising*.

No matter what Sue does for the next ten years, it is clear she will continue to be a leader, because her style of leadership is one needed for social workers struggling in the current context. Leadership is about being able to develop and nurture people’s abilities, *about building capability and treating people as capable*. It is about being aware of not letting your ego get too big, of being open: *interested and ... curious and understanding there may be additional aspects to issues that you really need to be taking into account as you form your opinion*.

Analysis of Qualities/Character

Integrity: Joining the Dots

In considering the expression of values and character in her life narrative, Sue Ash presents an overarching theme of the integration of the personal and the professional self. This is seen clearly in her account of *joining the dots*. At one point this is explained in terms of *joining the applied with the theory, joining the policy with the practice, joining the international with the national and joining the individual with the community* (points to which the discussion returns below). These ideas convey a sense of integration of thinking and action that is constantly attending to the complexities and contradictions of the world. In contrast, for Sue *joining the dots* also means personal integrity. She says *I started to see my career [in terms of*

the] joining bits of my passions. Again, this notion appears in a practical sense in a commitment to making different parts of a role fit together. But most of all it means being able to hold the different aspects of oneself in a coherent whole, so that beliefs and values are expressed coherently in practices and relationships. Examples of what this looked like in day-to-day practice include the use of *plain language*, so that people of different cultural and educational backgrounds could understand what was happening. As Sue puts it:

I would privilege plain language and the capacity to engage people with me in the thinking rather than use exclusionary language which would give me more power in some environments but not in others. I thought how can you have all this knowledge and understanding and espouse self-determination and inclusion and then function exactly the opposite to that? It never resonated ... it didn't sit well with me.

A personal quality that Sue brings to her professional role is her Christian faith and she considers that her current role as CEO of UnitingCare West permits this to feel more directly integrated, yet the values she espouses and demonstrates are congruent with this belief system. Indeed, in one account from her early life she describes how she became aware that Christian theology often makes strong pronouncements about social justice while at the same time church institutions fail to act on this value. As she says, *I couldn't see it being enacted in the churches I was part of.* While at that stage she sought to achieve greater integrity by moving away from religious belief, over time as faith increasingly became an important foundation for her own life, her response was to put effort into trying to change church institutions from the inside. This has involved voluntary work throughout her life. It also forms the backdrop to the integration of all aspects of Sue's identity and her relationships—in social work, in her family and in the community (including the church). Together, these qualities identify the integration of the personal and the professional as a way of developing and maintaining congruence in values and purpose, which characterises the whole of Sue's account of her career and life.

Thus, to the observer, Sue's character can be summarised in the expression "what you see is what you get". Sometimes such a description can be used to portray a person who is inflexible and perhaps unreflective, whereas Sue is the opposite of this. What she displays is openness and consideration of others, combined with consistency, reliability and intentionality. Sue reports how in her early adult life she was described by a supervisor as "stolid" and that she baulked at this, feeling it was *not an easy word to hear*. Yet she puts this into context by saying that she would have preferred to be described as *reasonable and responsible and competent and capable*, all of which might point to a personal strength and maturity, which it is possible this supervisor was trying to communicate.

Within the interviews there are some values that are particularly strongly expressed and form the substance of what it might be said Sue integrates from a moral or ethical perspective. These are: social justice, power and responsibility, commitment and resilience, and a broader set of values that together contribute complexity and detail to the whole picture. So these will now be discussed in more detail.

Social Justice

The expression of social justice as a core value runs throughout Sue's life narrative. Her memory of her family providing accommodation for a refugee family in the early 1950s is combined with a childhood awareness of being white and the privilege that this conferred in a society such as Australia. Ironically, this latter understanding came from listening to world news of the implications of decolonisation in Africa and the atrocities being experienced by colonists in the Congo. It was not that Sue had a sense of entitlement through whiteness, but rather the empirical observation that it came with privilege and a realisation that in other circumstances to those of her own life this was being challenged. This then helped her to develop a deeper understanding of what "racial" constructions of life opportunities might involve.

Alongside this developing understanding was also a realisation that human beings, *[even] good people [could] do some pretty awful things [when put] in circumstances of survival or whatever*. This has been a life-long lesson, as *to this day it still impacts me what people can do to each other* but, moreover, *this wasn't just about the other [as] I was probably in some circumstances capable of doing the same thing*.

As noted above, Sue had also learned as a teenager that the ideas people express and their actions may not always be congruent, as she had been impressed with the biblical theme of social justice, while in the relationships and structures of the churches that she had attended she had not observed the value being acted on. At this stage she rejected faith as the basis for such values and held on to the idea of social justice. This she found supported by social work studies, especially in subjects such as anthropology, economics and politics. She also encountered aspects of injustice in her own situation, both as a woman and as someone who was studying at a non-university institution. For example, particular parts of social work were closed off as options for practice placements (field education). These became factors that Sue found ways of challenging, and thus they became important lessons in struggling with injustice, whether on grounds of gender or of social class. This resonated with her earlier experience of being blocked from doing technical drawing at school because as a girl she had to do domestic science—she had practised a form of resistance by deliberately not doing well (letting a cake burn). Later in her life the same commitment has been expressed in participating in the establishment of a women's refuge in Newcastle and in being part of the Women's Electoral Lobby.

For example, as CEO of WACOSS a particular achievement was in working with the Premier of Western Australia to ensure that when the CHOGM took place in Perth four significant social justice goals were included in the agenda. First, that there was Indigenous leadership represented at the meeting; second, to ensure that homeless people in the city were not harmed by the various logistical and security arrangements that were put in place; third, that refugees' and migrants' issues were placed on the agenda; and fourth, that mental health and trauma were also

considered. In doing this, the political dimension of social justice was brought to the forefront as part of the social work role. Thus the role of WACOSS CEO enabled Sue to act on what for her is both a personal and a professional core value.

Power and Responsibility

As Sue has progressed through her career her sense of social justice has become much more concrete and immediate. The first example that she describes is the experience of being a social worker in the Kimberley, and her encounter with service users from a different cultural background. She became aware that power took the form of language as well as of the capacity to make decisions affecting other people's lives. In this sense language meant both a particular usage of English and also the use of technical, professional concepts. This is the power of control through exclusion. She realised this was the antithesis of the core social work principles of inclusion and self-determination.

A major point in this respect was from her experiences when her husband died and she found herself as a service user at this very vulnerable point. *I went from being a senior social worker in the Department of Social Services to a client and I remember sitting in the waiting room ... and the sense of the little symbols of power were very strong.* Subsequently this understanding that the relationship between professionals and service users is basically one of power has affected all aspects of her work. This can be seen in three particular ways that Sue regards good practice: power exercised in one's own practice; the responsibilities that professionals have towards service users arising from the power that is exercised; and, more broadly, that professionalism is about service.

In respect to the exercise of power in her own work, Sue expresses this in very tangible ways. For example, in her early work in child welfare she learned that quite mundane aspects of interaction with service users, such as processing payments accurately and on time, could impact dramatically on the lives of disadvantaged people. So what some professionals might regard as bureaucracy, for Sue became one aspect of the means by which professionals can make either a positive or a negative impact on people's lives. Later on it found expression in the aspiration that *clients are treated as well or better than staff—and that doesn't mean you treat your staff badly, it just means that your client areas need to be as good as your staff areas.* Power can be used to communicate respect for service users, or it can be used to separate and control. For Sue the former is good practice and the latter is a misuse of power.

One of the main responsibilities that follow from professional power is that of accountability. This can take different forms. In one example Sue talks about her sense that there are possible issues that were not fully addressed for a young Indigenous woman who had given up her baby for adoption. So when, many years later, Sue found herself working with Indigenous colleagues on a conference to examine the *Bringing Them Home* report into the Stolen Generation she continued

to feel a sense of responsibility to be accountable for past practices, irrespective of whether her own actions could be regarded as good or bad in terms of the welfare of the child, because *for me the line between child protection and Stolen Generation, even as late as the early seventies, was still very blurred*. More broadly, this approach to responsibility and accountability can be seen in Sue's view that technical language should be avoided as much as possible. Accountability can only be achieved when there is clear communication between professionals and service users, so that professionals should *privilege plain language and the capacity to engage people ... rather than use exclusionary language which would give [professionals] more power*. The question this poses for social workers is: *How can you have all this knowledge and understanding and espouse self-determination and inclusion and then function exactly the opposite to that?*

This view leads to a position where the meaning of professionalism is found in service. There is a strong similarity between Sue's position and that articulated by Sercombe (2010, p. 10) that professionals "do not provide a service, we serve". This can be seen in many aspects of Sue's career, in which she appears to have focused on what was beneficial for service users or for a service such as Jenny House women's refuge in Newcastle, rather than what was easier for herself. Indeed, she is critical of what she sees as a different type of professionalism in social work where colleagues are either so focused on processes that they forget to attend to outcomes, or in which there appears to be a *lack of curiosity and the lack of initiative to find solutions beyond those that are ordained or acquired ... I see people critique policy but then not go on to the next stage*. Such an approach is not necessarily easy, however, as it requires commitment and also may involve compromise of the kind that can be seen in Sue's work with a government in the organisation of the CHOGM meeting, where that government may not match your own values.

Commitment and Resilience

Sue's life and career demonstrate several personal qualities that are crucial to understanding the way in which she has achieved the integration of personal and professional values. In particular, she demonstrates commitment and resilience in several ways. First, despite challenges and setbacks, she kept coming back to social work. In fact, with the exception of a short period working in a pest control agency in the 1970s, the whole of Sue's career has been in some aspect of social work. This has included casework, management of child welfare, teaching at both TAFE and universities and, most recently, the role of CEO in three large non-government organisations. Although Sue expresses some ambivalence about social work as a profession, throughout her adult life she has used it as a vehicle to pursue her values. In that sense it would appear that her commitment is to the underlying values rather than (always) to the profession. At the same time, these values appear to have formed a basis for her to be resilient in the face of challenges.

Possibly the biggest single challenge of this kind was in the death of her husband when she was aged 34, with two small children. Both in the way in which Sue faced this life crisis and in the way that she demonstrates learning from it and other somewhat less confronting experiences, she has developed insights that have contributed to her focus on helping others. These insights are formed empathically: while giving a concrete sense of what it is like to experience such deep loss, at the same time Sue's bereavement appears to have heightened her awareness that everyone deals with suffering in their own way.

In practical ways, the qualities of commitment and resilience are evident in how Sue has balanced professional and family life. This has involved sometimes making some very difficult choices that follow from a strong sense of responsibility as a parent and in caring for her own parents. On some occasions a change of job has been made in response to such family commitments, such as in moving back to Perth from Canberra in order to provide support for her parents. Yet at other times, finding ways to balance these different commitments has been possible, such as in the way Sue sought to be an active parent while at the same time undertaking a very demanding role in the disaster response work at Gracetown in the south of Western Australia.

Broader Values

Throughout her account of her life and professional career, Sue identifies key values that have provided a broad base for her thinking and practice. The first of these is that of non-maleficence, or seeking to do no harm. At one point, recounting an example of practice that had not produced a very good outcome, she exclaimed *what we do is harmful!* In several other parts of her story the theme of harm and the avoidance of harm as a primary social work goal is apparent. Sue sees this as a strong motivator for her own practice and also the decisions she has made about her career: *this do-no-harm thing is strong in me.* Again, she notes that as a social work teacher she told her students: *Don't do any harm and if you feel as though you're doing harm stand back.* In her current position with UnitingCare West, the Board and its chairperson overtly ask to be reassured that the organisation is not causing any harm. Sue's stance in advocating for homeless people in Perth during CHOGM came from an awareness that they were at risk of being harmed by the event, while on another occasion she was reluctant to have service users appear in media stories because of the harm that might follow for them personally. On the other side of the coin, Sue also refers to the value of beneficence or seeking to do good. Examples include practice in which a vulnerable child was protected while at the same time family relationships were maintained.

Second, although she does not refer to the concept overtly more than twice, Sue regards compassion as a quality that is very important for her. Here she is referring

to a value that she finds expressed in her faith. The meaning of compassion that comes from her description of her work has parallels with Nussbaum's (2001) notion of an intelligent emotion in response to the serious plight experienced by another person, in which we also find a sense of shared humanity. This is most evident in the way in which Sue discusses her experience of being a service user immediately after the death of her husband, and its impact on her approach to working with service users throughout her following career. This awareness was evident before that critical event, but in her story it is given particular prominence by the pivotal significance of this experience.

Third, Sue greatly values competence or capability. Indeed her story from an early age demonstrates how important it is for her to evaluate herself and be seen by others as competent or capable. From this, she has then sought to emphasise other people's competencies and capabilities in her practice (and in her parenting). This is both an ethical position, in that it communicates the value that is placed on the humanity of others, and also a type of strengths approach [developed prior to that becoming a formal social work theory, cf. Saleebey (1996)].

Fourth, following on from the emphasis placed on competence, Sue clearly expresses humility. She is aware of her own limitations and of the importance of working as part of a team. In many places this is a balanced viewpoint, as it includes being able to express a sense of awareness of her own competence, for example in being a leader and being able to practise leadership that supports and enables others. At the same time there are also occasions on which humility risks becoming self-deprecation, such as when she describes herself as *this very ordinary person*. In particular, Sue is conscious of what she perceives as a lack of theoretical language in which to express policy and practice ideas—yet at the same time, as noted above, she values plain language, especially as a means to be inclusive of service users.

The final two broader points are expressions of what might be termed practical politics. The discussion above has already noted that Sue holds the view that social work may be prone to too much of a focus on process. She says:

I think these days social work is vulnerable to only doing good process stuff. So for me the process has always only ever been about ensuring that you get good outcomes, respectful outcomes for your employer but good outcomes for people, and those sort of process things are not the end point. They are literally a way of being able to ... make sure you know what the end point is of why you're engaged in somebody's life.

This sits alongside a conviction that being able to work within organisations and the politics of social welfare is vital to effective practice. Sue claims her motto is *follow the money* and she states, *I have a very strong view that you can't be an effective social worker unless you actually understand where the money is, who makes the decisions and how it transfers*. When social workers are willing to engage with material resources, and the compromises that can sometimes require, then there is greater potential for being able to set the agenda.

Conclusion

In 2014 “this very ordinary person” Sue Ash was recognised by the community in the award of the Order of Australia for her contribution to social work, for example in the social justice approach taken to looking after the interests of homeless and other disadvantaged people during CHOGM. While at times in her career Sue has felt ambivalent about social work, at this stage she says:

I think over the last few years it’s been great to own being a social worker and try and put something back into ... our profession but also for the world actually seeing what social workers are capable of doing, to try and ensure that the social workers who we have got working now feel empowered and enabled to actually do some of that.

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