

Applying Gabriel Marcel's Thought in Social Work Practice

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Abstract: Gabriel Marcel's thought is applied to social work practice in the fields of restorative justice conferencing for young people and working with male perpetrators of family violence. Existential ideas have helped to shape social work from its beginnings, but with the one exception of Jim Lantz, the philosophical ideas of Gabriel Marcel have not been utilised. I argue that Marcel's existential concepts speak to the vocation of social work and the challenge to fully participate in the world in the 21st century. These concepts include the concrete value of people's lived experience, which includes elements of mystery and problem, the importance of being accessible and present to others, and seeking to respond to the cry of the world heard in our communities.

Introduction

Gabriel Marcel's thought is useful to social workers and to some of the key challenges facing the profession in the 21st century. Social workers are re-examining their vocation, moving beyond a social maintenance and functional role, focusing on the importance of relationship building in the attempt to heal social harms, and are embracing a holistic approach to concrete social problems that incorporates a spiritual perspective and a participatory understanding of human existence. In this article, Marcel's thought is applied to working in a men's behaviour change group addressing family violence, and in facilitating a restorative justice conference with a young offender and his victim, together with their supporters and other professionals. I argue that existential thought has shaped social work throughout its history, but that Marcel, with one noted exception, has been neglected and that his thought deserves to be revived, because it provides some key ideas for a new existential approach to social work practice.

A Brief History of Existential Thought in Social Work

Elements of existential thought have shaped social work practice since its very beginnings. Social casework, the first method in social work, grew from the lived experience of the first social caseworkers. In 1922, Mary Richmond applied ontological terminology to define "social work in being" from the first case histories. These were written by some of the first social workers and inspired from the experiences of teachers working with troubled students, which led to unique attention being given to each individual personality.¹

Jessie Taft, the founder of the Functional School of social work, placed the therapeutic relationship and the assertion of the client's will within the limits of agency function at the centre

¹ See Mary Richmond, *What Is Social Case Work?* (New York: Russell Sage, 1922).

of practice.² Her work attempting to challenge the dominance of interpretation by psychoanalytic practitioners was inspired by Otto Rank. This early existential challenge was portrayed as a battle between the Freudian Diagnostic and Rankian Functional schools of social work. In this ideological battle, the functional approach is often described as limited, by allowing the function of the social welfare agency to determine the parameters of service user needs. What is missing from this version of the story is how Taft had been primarily inspired by Rank's capacity to help a person find their true place in life.³ Rank used time limits in therapy to foster engagement with the natural resistance of people to change. Taft used agency function in social work for a similar purpose, as the concrete limitation within which the clients can explore change.⁴ Later, critics of the functional school of social work would assert that this concrete limitation of the agency may be oppressive to the client's possibilities. However, social workers employed by agencies do not have the authority to operate outside of agency function or program guidelines and can only change oppressive practices within agencies through social action with others. At the operational 'coalface,' Taft was correct in using agency function as an obvious boundary. Today, policy and program guidelines attached to program funding play a more determining role in setting limits.

In the end, the Freudian Diagnostic school won the battle in social work and became the dominant theoretical perspective in clinical social work until the 1960s. The 1960s also saw the radicalisation of social work and the incorporation of Rank's influence in Carl Rogers's client centred therapeutic approach.⁵ The emergence of existential therapy was an additional development.⁶

Neil Thompson, a leading British social work scholar, championed the application of existential thought to social work practice.⁷ Thompson's focus has mainly been upon Sartre's critical post World War II Marxist phase. Sartre's philosophy influenced the development of Thompson's anti-discriminatory model, and his challenging of oppression at personal, cultural and structural levels. In America, existential thought entered social work mainly through the existential therapy movement.

Gabriel Marcel's thought has only rarely been mentioned in the social work literature. This is surprising given that many of his ideas seem highly relevant to social work, such as his concepts of availability, secondary reflection, and the broken world. One major exception to this neglect of Marcel is Jim Lantz's work in psychotherapy, crisis work, cross-cultural practice, casework, family therapy, and the application of cognitive theory to social work practice.⁸ Lantz was a leading social work academic and practitioner in America with an existentially informed approach. He is primarily remembered for his connection to Victor Frankl's

² See Virginia P. Robinson, *Jessie Taft, Therapist and Social Work Educator: A Professional Biography* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1962).

³ See Jessie Taft, *Otto Rank* (New York: The Julian Press, 1958), pp.271-96.

⁴ See Jessie Taft, *Family Casework and Counselling: A Functional Approach* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1948), pp.122-23.

⁵ See Carl Rogers, "Client Centred Therapy" in Howard Kirschenbaum and V.L.Henderson (eds.), *Carl Rogers: Dialogues* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989), pp.9-38.

⁶ See John H. Ehrenreich, *The Altruistic Imagination* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell U.P., 1985), pp.102-138.

⁷ See Neil Thompson, *Existentialism and Social Work* (London: Avebury, 1992).

⁸ See Jim Lantz, "Cognitive Theory and Social Work Treatment " in Francis J. Turner (ed.), *Social Work Treatment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp.94-115; Jim Lantz, *Meaning-Centered Marital and Family Therapy* (Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas, 2000); Jim Lantz and Karen V. Harper-Dorton, *Cross-Cultural Social Work Practice* (Chicago, IL.: Lyceum Books, 2007).

logotherapy school of existential therapy.⁹ Lantz also applied the philosophical thought of Marcel to his practice, which I will discuss later in this article. In America, Donald Krill championed existential social work for nearly forty years, and his perspective on this topic draws upon existential and related therapies.¹⁰

What is “Social Work”?

Social workers struggle to define exactly what social work is. The focus is on what they do or think and rarely on what it means to be a social worker. The “social” part of social work has received considerable attention because it defines the profession as one that interfaces between the individual and society in all its forms, unlike therapy which tends to be more focused on the individual client. The “worker” part of the definition has received less attention other than an early debate concerning whether social work is a profession or semi-profession.

Social work is the only profession that maintains the “worker” label. Social workers are employed in various public or semi-publicly funded welfare agencies doing statutory or related work of various kinds such as child protection, allied health professional work, family work, justice work, and activities connected to marginalised populations like the homeless. Social work activities include advocacy, referral, case management, liaison and networking, and group work. These activities occupy social work time alongside clinical therapeutic interventions. However, in the literature, therapeutic work receives far more attention than the other typical activities in which social workers engage in their everyday work. Social workers are also involved in management, staff supervision, social action through involvement in various social movements, and they also help develop social policies which shape service delivery. Many of the social issues or problems social workers deal with are complex and have been described more recently as “wicked problems.”¹¹ Such problems are meant not in the sense of being evil, but in the sense of being difficult to resolve. What solutions or ways forward are generally negotiated with key stakeholders, and the aims of social policy often include a recognition of the ongoing intransigence of the problems. Thompson has described what social workers do as “doing society’s ‘dirty work’.”¹² There is a sense in which many of the more difficult problems of society end up on the social worker’s desk. Other allied health professions have more specific roles and social workers are meant to be skilled in the “harder people” problem issues, which include involvement in social control as much as social change.

Social work is also being shaped by global forces, like managerialism and risk management, technical innovations like computerised case management systems, the demise of the welfare state and the embracing of market forces in service delivery, and the rise of individualised personalised care, which it has partly championed.¹³ Simultaneously, social work helps shape this world through its collective actions as a profession, and through individual social workers and other welfare leaders combining with social movements to pioneer new

⁹ See Jim Lantz, *Existential Family Therapy: Using the Concepts of Victor Frankl* (Lanham, MD: Jason Aronson, 1993).

¹⁰ See Donald F. Krill, *Existential Social Work* (New York: Free Press, 1978); also his “Existential Approach” in *Encyclopedia of Social Work* (Silver Springs, MD: National Association of Social Workers, 1987); Donald F. Krill, “Existential Social Work” in *Advances in Social Work* 15, No. 1 (Spring 2014), pp.117-128.

¹¹ See Australian Government, “Tackling Wicked Problems” (Australian Public Service Commission, Commonwealth of Australia, 2007).

¹² Neil Thompson, *Understanding Social Work* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p.6.

¹³ See John Pierson, *Understanding Social Work* (New York: Open University Press, 2011), pp.205-217.

agencies and approaches to entrenched social problems, such as Rosanne Haggerty in establishing Common Ground which seeks permanent solutions to homelessness. Common Ground sought to challenge the existing homeless service system which offered staged solutions for rough sleepers with an approach that provided immediate permanent homes for chronic homeless people with support services available in one location. While it is no panacea for chronic homelessness, the migration of the common ground model to Australia from the USA has challenged the existing homeless sector to improve this model. Under pressure from high service demand, increased surveillance, increased job insecurity and more prescriptive practice settings, social workers can resort to a functional attitude toward their work where there is a “refusal to reflect.”¹⁴ How can Marcel’s thought contribute to understanding the place of social work in the world and help the profession take advantage of opportunities to change the world for the better?

Gabriel Marcel as a Social Worker

Marcel was the only leading existential thinker in the 20th century with social work experience. It transformed his worldview and helped create some of the fundamental ideas we now associate with the existential viewpoint such as being-in-the-world. Marcel’s first job was as Head of the Information Service with the Red Cross in World War I. This military social work position involved working with the families of men who were missing in action, or taken prisoner or deceased. Much of his job involved administration such as creating filing cards on soldiers, and chasing up details, just as social workers do today. Then, there would be meetings with distraught family members that would bring the filing record to life in the most profound and human way. Marcel dealt with an overwhelming number of cases and experienced the impossibility of meeting all this human need. He faced the relentlessness of human longing and tragedy and the search for meaning by himself and by his clients. This experience lead him away from his philosophical commitment to abstract German idealism to a concrete personal participatory philosophy that always begins with making sense of lived experience.¹⁵

I believe his reflections on this experience appear in one of his first publications, where he wrote, describing the experience of unavailability: “If one had to be touched by every human misfortune life would be not possible, it would indeed be too short. The moment I think: after all, this is only a case, No. 75627, it is no good, I feel nothing. But the characteristic of the soul which is present and at the disposal of others is that it cannot think in terms of *cases*; in its eyes there are *no cases at all*.”¹⁶ In *The Existential Background of Human Dignity*, he states that his social work experience “gave me the opportunity of coming in contact with many people from all walks of life and of making a constant effort to put myself in their place, in order to imagine the anguish which they all shared but which underwent subtle transformations in each of them. It was against this background of deep distress, that each questionnaire, each inquiry stood out.”¹⁷

¹⁴ Gabriel Marcel, *Man Against Mass Society* (South Bend, IN: St Augustine’s Press 2008), p.98.

¹⁵ See Gabriel Marcel, *The Existential Background of Human Dignity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963), pp.36-37; see also, Dennis Moran, *Gabriel Marcel* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1992), pp.2-3.

¹⁶ Gabriel Marcel, “Concrete Approaches to Investigating the Ontological Mystery,” in K. R. Hanley (ed.), *Gabriel Marcel’s Perspectives on the Broken World* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette U.P., 1998), p.193.

¹⁷ Gabriel Marcel, *The Existential Background of Human Dignity*, p.36.

In *Creative Fidelity*, Marcel writes that his military social work experience “has, I am convinced, played a fundamental role in the development of my thought.”¹⁸

His experiences in social work helped Marcel discover the situated involvement of reality that is ignored in objective, abstract thinking. In this experience, Marcel defined existential thought as primary before the abstract thought applied in science and philosophy. We now understand this concept as “being-in-the-world,” made famous by Heidegger, but it was Marcel who first and independently described the situated and embodied subjectivity that we have come to understand as the lived experience of human beings. This reversal places lived experience as the primary source of our understanding. For Marcel, it includes an element of mystery in that it cannot be reduced to the problematic or conceptual, without neglecting the element of my participation in being.

Marcel mentions overhearing a remark by “a person at the centre of international social work” to the effect that “they didn’t object to mysteries on principle, in fact there may be mysteries for all I know....But I can’t see what it has to do with me or what use it can be to me.”¹⁹ Marcel objected to the scientific reduction that occurred in humanism in the 20th century based upon objective studies that assumed the position of the bystander or the non-involved stance of the scientist. When we examine our lived experience carefully from the point of view of an involved participant there is always more going on than we can explain. In a sense that is difficult to express, I am participating in and moving through my lived experience, encompassed by being that envelops my existence and to which, in some mysterious way, I return.

Jim Lantz and the Application of Marcel’s Thought in Social Work Practice

Jim Lantz applied Marcel’s philosophy directly in his practice. As a family therapist, Lantz maintained that “the desire to experience meaning is the primary and basic motivation for most human marital and family behaviour.”²⁰ Using Frankl’s theories, Lantz argues that an existential vacuum results when people fail to address meaning in their lives. The purpose of therapy is to help shrink the existential vacuum, thereby reducing the symptoms of this disease which other therapies tend to treat directly, ignoring the existential vacuum.²¹ Lantz uses recollection to help the family recover the meaning potentials in their lives, empathetic availability to teach a new approach to the self that is other centred and filled with love and charity toward other family members. Lantz used primary and secondary reflection to problem-solve (primary reflection), and to discover wholeness, mystery, and unity of experience (secondary reflection).²²

Lantz challenges the use of abstraction by both clients and workers, the use of technological skills or what he calls “technomania,” where treatment employs a range of different helping techniques drawn from different schools of thought. Where people focus on things and controlling others in the family, Lantz calls it “marital or family possession.” This is a sense of “having” rather than “being” in a relationship. Having possessions is not something that

¹⁸ Gabriel Marcel, “Incarnate Being as the Central Datum of Metaphysical Reflection,” in *Creative Fidelity* (New York: Fordham U.P., 2002), pp.31-32.

¹⁹ Gabriel Marcel, *Being and Having* (Glasgow: The University Press, 1949), p.195.

²⁰ See Jim Lantz, *Meaning-Centered Marital and Family Therapy*, p.5.

²¹ See Jim Lantz, “The Use of Frankl’s Concepts in Family Therapy,” *Journal of Independent Social Work* 2(2), Winter 1987, pp.65-80.

²² See Jim Lantz, *Meaning-Centered Marital and Family Therapy*, pp.27-30.

can be avoided, but what is being addressed are the dangers associated with an attitude of power and control over things and others.

Lantz, who died in 2003, expressed disillusionment with the loss of spirit and soul in the family therapy movement in his book, *Meaning-Centered Marital and Family Therapy*. He was critical of the “shifty radical constructionists” who claimed that all reality is socially constructed. He praised their willingness to respect the client’s narrative but decried their claim that love, commitment, fidelity, meaning, intimacy are simply constructed and can be changed. On the other end of the family therapy spectrum, Lantz believed that the “controlling technomaniacs” or strategic family therapists use technical strategies to make changes to family systems, just like the technicians fixing a human machine.

Lantz was particularly attracted to Marcel because of his concrete or incarnational introduction of the holy into family life. An example of this was his use of secondary reflection on values, spiritual realities and potentials in the family through a shoebox exercise. This exercise involved family members sharing their open and private meanings which they had been afraid to share with each other in the past. Like Otto Rank, Lantz welcomes a family’s resistance to change and views this as their positive effort to develop their own freedom, and find a way out of their dilemmas, thereby leading to growth. Surprises and attempts to develop their own solutions are not discouraged, but equally the therapist is actively challenging and promoting change through experiential work and reflective activities. This battle of views and opinions is highly valued in existential therapies, with the therapist guiding but not directing the outcomes. Lantz also advocated the use of cognitive theory in existential practice, through Socratic dialogue, analysing thinking processes that contribute to feeling states, and actively changing these thinking patterns, beliefs and self-talk. Jim Lantz considered Marcel’s philosophy perfectly consistent with the use of cognitive theory in social work treatment. He used primary and secondary reflection on unmeasurable meanings and discovery through participation and encounter, via concrete experiential activities instead of abstract insight approaches.

Lantz used Marcel’s work to create a unique approach to the evaluation of existential therapy via what he called the participation report. This report addressed how the therapist and client engaged with each other, what reflective processes were used and how they communicated their results. Various qualitative approaches were recommended, with change coming from a variety of potential sources, not just via the therapist’s interventions as a matter of course, which is assumed in the standard experimental designs. Lantz developed numerous experiential and art based approaches to therapy, including the use of testimony as described by Marcel in his application of existential therapy.

Lantz ends his book on *Meaning-Centered Marital and Family Therapy* by stating that it was Marcel’s philosophy that helped him restrain his own tendencies to be a shifty radical constructionist and a technomaniac strategic family therapist and that Marcel’s philosophy formed the basis of his approach. Lantz recognised that the key to his social work practice in family therapy and in other methods was Marcel’s focus on the “manifestations of change that serve and follow” the “spiritual realities and potentials of marital and family life.”²³

²³ *Ibid.*, p.108.

True Infinity, Transcendence and the Other in Social Work

Marcel rejected Hegel's idealistic philosophy in favour of a concrete approach to reality that focused on the fullness of being allowing for mystery and understanding. But Marcel also wrote these words in describing his fascination over a long period with the Hegelian system: "For in spite of appearances to the contrary, Hegel did make a very splendid effort to preserve the primacy of the concrete; and no philosopher has protested more strongly against the confusion of the concrete with the immediately given."²⁴

Robert Wallace states that Hegel regarded his concept of true infinity as the most important concept of all in his philosophy.²⁵ Hegel was grappling with making sense of the absolute value of freedom as it was being developed in the modern world, along with his wish to make sense of the Christian revelation that God had become man in Jesus Christ. Wallace argues that Hegel discovered how freedom and individuality can be married with an ethical stance toward the other. This is a problem for some forms of existentialism. Indeed, this is what drove Sartre to propose the view that in choosing for myself I choose for others.²⁶ This is also the problem that existentialism faces because, without some form of external value, what is there to stop the rational egoist from choosing selfish goals? Wallace suggests that Hegel found the key in this notion of self-determination or being capable of stepping back from whatever inclinations, desires or drives one may experience and acting on only those decisions that makes sense for one's life as a whole. For a person to be truly self-determining, they must go beyond their finite characteristics and take on some infinite characteristics which are self-determining. It is this intimate relationship between the finite and the infinite and his concept of true infinity which encompasses the finite that enables Hegel to create a complete new understanding of self-determination or thinking for oneself. For example, Hegel argues that reason is not the polar opposite of the drives or inclinations or senses or nature but rather something that represents the full realisation of the need. So the infinite is present in our concrete world if we are open to embracing this reality. Levinas makes a similar argument in the infinity found in the face of the other and so does Kierkegaard in seeing infinity in the limitless potential of the human imagination.

In the most systematic elaboration of his philosophy, *The Mystery of Being*, Marcel provides his first practical example of an inner transformation or transcendence that occurs in a husband's attitude toward his wife. While taking account of the 1950s era in which this lecture is delivered, I could not help but be reminded of the transformation we currently aim to inspire in an abusive male partner who always puts his needs before his partner's. Here are Marcel's words:

Here is a husband who has begun by considering his wife in relation to himself, in relation to the sensual enjoyments she can give him, or even simply in relation to her services as an unpaid cook and char women. Let us suppose that he is gradually led into discovering that this woman has a reality, a value of her own, and that, without realising it, he gradually comes to treat

²⁴ Gabriel Marcel, *Man Against Mass Society* (South Bend IN.: St Augustine's Press, 2008), p.1.

²⁵ See Robert Wallace, *Hegel's Philosophy of Reality, Freedom and God* (New York: Cambridge U.P., 2005), pp.76-82.

²⁶ See Jean-Paul Sartre, "Existentialism Is a Humanism," in W. Kaufmann (ed.), *Existentialism from Dostoyevsky to Sartre* (New York: Penguin, 1975), pp.345-369.

her as a creature existing in her own right; it may be that he will finally become capable of sacrificing for her sake a taste or a purpose which he would formally have regarded as having an unconditional importance. In this case, we are witnesses of a change in the moment of experience which provides a direct illustration of my argument. This change revolves upon the centre of an experiencing self; or, to speak more exactly, let us say the progress of the husband's thought gradually substitutes one centre for another; and of course the word thought is not quite exactly the right word here, we're dealing with the change in the attitude of the human being considered as a whole, and with the change, also, in so far as it embodies itself in that human being's acts. I hope this example gives us a glimpse, at least, of the direction in which we must set ourselves to move who want to give a meaning to these words that are certainly obscure in themselves: *urgent inner need for transcendence*.²⁷

This first illustration in *The Mystery of Being* shows what Marcel means by transcendence. Hegel, in his concept of the truly infinite, which encompasses the finite, is challenging the modernist view of self-determination as defined by self-interest, and arguing that real self-determination must include the other and her needs, wishes and desires. Abusive men in behaviour change groups commonly express the view that the activity where we ask them to figuratively put on their partner's shoes is a most powerful experience for them. Here, they imagine things from her position and try to understand what it is like to walk around in her shoes in the home and unsafe atmosphere. Perhaps in using their imagination and in glimpsing into the face of the other their transcendence of family violence may commence. In *Problematic Man*, Marcel gives an insight into what happens when a violent man fully realises he has damaged his relationships irreparably. The man must come to accept his situation and change his perspective on his past, letting a new attitude of safety and respect for others shape how he relates to them. Nothing necessarily follows from this change. We cannot guarantee anything. In Marcel's words, there is "no inevitable or mechanical development."²⁸ But something can take place. His word for this transformation is grace. And I have seen what he means when the smallest gesture can completely transform a group of people. Marcel describes it:

from the moment that I give evidence of fidelity by proclaiming the infinite value of this participation, no matter what may have happened later, it is as if a current which had seemed interrupted were re-established, as if a spring which appeared dried up began to flow again; as if the deprivation which was and remains so cruel for me lost its definitive character, as if what I have lost were somehow given back to me.²⁹

Marcel may not be describing broken families reuniting, but he does mean that suddenly communication may begin again and perhaps positive things will start to happen that improve damaged lives. Family violence destroys marriages but that doesn't mean a violent husband cannot learn to become committed to non-violence. This conviction on his part can mean he reassumes a positive parenting role in his family. In Marcel's terms, this father has affirmed the

²⁷ Gabriel Marcel, *The Mystery of Being* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 2001 edition), p.48.

²⁸ Gabriel Marcel, *Problematic Man* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967), p.43.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.44.

primacy of being. This means that he has put family before his own egoistic demands, and placed the spiritual before the material or the desire for a peaceful family environment before any other personal desire. In Hegel's terms, he has allowed his connection to true infinity to shape his finite response to his current circumstances. But the damage done from his abuse of his partner and the cost to her of this process may never be repaired. The father must accept this reality as part of the damage he has caused to the family.

Later, in the same work, Marcel asserts that if we follow our spiritual directions, we are assured we will not lack what is precisely indispensable in order to accomplish this task. Marcel describes this experience as "the affirmation of the primacy of being," in which I "give grace its chance, that is, I put myself in position to receive it, without, of course, having the pretence of setting it in motion."³⁰ An essential part of this process is an acceptance on the part of the man of the reality that some relationships can never be repaired. When you work with men who abuse or are violent with their families, you begin to sense when they are finally beginning to make changes in their attitude that can make a difference to their families. It's when they begin to see things from their partner's and/or children's point of view. I am listening to a man complain about his partner's difficulties with handling the family budget and I sense how oppressive is his approach to her. If I can convey back to him how I am feeling as a group facilitator, perhaps he may gain a new perspective on his attempt "to change his partner."

"John" joined the men's behaviour change program and was initially very depressed because his ex-partner had taken his daughter into another state. He watched the video "It's not about the nail," (a *You Tube* clip) about men learning to listen to their ex-partners. He is transformed in his view of how he should communicate. Since John began to listen without commenting on or judging his partner's stories, there has been a transformation in the communication. He now has access to his daughter. Other men in the group also become inspired by this video clip and share it with their partners. Communication improves rapidly and this result is confirmed via our partner contact process which confidentially supports the partners and ex-partners of men involved in the program. Finally, the message seems to get through that real listening involves suspending judgement and creatively attempting to understand the other's point of view.

Availability and Presence in Social Work Practice

What does Gabriel Marcel mean by availability? In social work, attending behaviour is considered one of the fundamental helping skills in counselling. Otto Friedrich Bollnow explains that Marcel considers availability to be his second basic concept, complementing the existential value of commitment.³¹ He notes that the concept of availability played no previous role in the history of philosophy and that this concept was a genuine discovery by Marcel.³² Bollnow notes that availability is frequently used in philosophical theory in relation to utilitarian purposes, such as being "present at hand," like a tool. By contrast, Marcel is speaking of availability as a human virtue which responds in complete freedom and includes a receptiveness to the other.³³ In his article on Marcel's concept of availability, Bollnow defines it as "the readiness to allow

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ See Otto Friedrich Bollnow, "Marcel's Concept of Availability," in Paul A. Schilpp and Lewis E. Hahn (ed.), *The Philosophy of Gabriel Marcel* (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1984), pp.177-199.

³² *Ibid.*, p.182.

³³ *Ibid.*, p.183.

ourselves to be committed and open to another person by some challenge,”³⁴ implying that it is a quality of the whole person. Readiness to be available to others is also described as “presence” by Marcel. Marcel defines availability via its opposite “unavailability,” which he describes as preoccupation with oneself, self-centeredness, inertness and the inability to respond to claims or to appeals. To quote Marcel:

The notion of availability is no less important for our subject than that of presence, with which it is bound up. It is an undeniable fact...that there are some people who reveal themselves as present, at our disposal when we are in pain or in need to confide in someone, while there are other people who do not give us this feeling....It should be noted that the distinction between presence and absence is not at all the same as between attention and distraction. The most attentive and conscientious listener may give me the impression of not being present. He gives me nothing. He cannot make room for me in himself, whatever the material favours which he is prepared to grant me. The truth is that there is a way of listening which is a way of giving and another way of listening that is a way of refusing, of refusing oneself; a material gift, or a visible action, do not necessarily witness presence. We must not speak of proof in this connection....Presence is something which reveals itself immediately and unmistakably in a look, a smile and interaction or a handshake.

It will perhaps make it clearer if I say that the person who was at my disposal is the one who is capable of being with me with the whole of himself when I am in need; while the one who is not at my disposal seems merely to offer me a temporary loan raised on his resources. For the one I am presence, for the other I am an object. Unavailability is invariably rooted in some measure of alienation.³⁵

I think Marcel’s concepts of presence and availability are richer than existing client centred approaches that require attending behaviour, and congruence or genuineness on the part of the social worker or therapist. Equally said, these concepts could enhance efforts to improve communication skills taught to men which focus on listening skills. Being available and present includes a capacity to genuinely respond to the other.

Mystery vs. Problem-Solving in Social Work

While undertaking the *Ignatian Spiritual Exercises in Daily Life*, a young person was referred to me who was the most difficult to engage with that I had ever experienced in my years of working with marginalised young people. (The Spiritual Exercises involve an extended retreat, where you remain in your ordinary occupation and home, whilst increasing your daily spiritual practices, and have regular weekly contact with your spiritual advisor—in this case, my agency’s chaplain).

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p.185.

³⁵ Gabriel Marcel, "Concrete Approaches to Investigating the Ontological Mystery," p.192.

I knew that this young person had already failed to engage with our state's most respected youth mentoring programs. He was eventually locked up because of his re-offending. Usually, when young people are sent to detention, the opportunity to divert them from a custodial sentence has ceased.

However, in group conferencing, we work to the court's directions and focus on reporting outcomes to the court that result in agreements to repair the harm caused by offences and return the young person to some kind of community-based order. In this case, I still had the referral from the court and the young person was on remand, so I could legally keep seeing him, even though the chances of running a group conference were very remote. So I continued to call to see him and he continued to refuse to see me. This had been his way of dealing with me when I visited him at his home. He would show virtually no interest in our meetings, knowing that "helpful youth workers" would eventually give up on him. However, with the chaplain's direction, I was encouraged not to give up.

It was humiliating for me. It is very unusual for young people in a lock up situation to refuse to see a social worker. Even the most disturbed young people enjoy the presence of visitors from outside. When young people avoid you and miss appointments in the community, it is invisible to the outside world, but when it happens in the presence of an institution, it becomes public. The others in the system asked, "Why is this guy insisting on seeing him?" The young person was eventually moved to another section of the facility with new staff and the process recommenced. I turned up and he refused to see me. My sense of humiliation continued. And then a strange thing happened. The staff at this new section became more curious about what I was trying to do and took pity on me. They had influence over the boy and helped him engage with the process. I had already engaged the victim of the offences that the young man had committed and she had agreed to participate in a group conference. She knew she was likely to receive nothing from him, given his current poor capacity to empathise with her situation or offer any form of apology or compensation. I was brutally honest with her, but she said, "I don't care, I know what you're trying to do and I will come to the group conference. I support what you are doing...I want to meet him and I don't expect anything from it." His offence involved stealing her children's bicycles, a relatively trivial offence by societal standards, but not one for this family. She wanted to convey that her children saved for the bicycles and how much the offence had impacted on them.

With the help of the section staff, this young person completed the group conference program, met his victim, heard how his crime had affected her small children, and apologised to her in the group conference. He also wrote her a letter of apology for the children. It was the first youth program this young person had ever completed in his life. The section staff really appreciated the conference and could not understand why we didn't do this with other young people who are locked up. The victim felt very happy with the conference and wanted him to visit her on release. I forwarded his letter of apology to the victim. The Chaplain commented that he could not imagine designing a more relevant experience for me in what the spiritual exercises stand for. According to my diary notes, he stated, "build this case into your hard-wire."

The chaplain died shortly after this case. I published the case example in a Jesuit publication to honour his work with the staff at the agency. The article was titled by the editor, "Never Giving Up,"³⁶ a title I felt missed the mysterious nature of what happened. It was not my persistence that created the transformation in this case. This was because I had given up, and

³⁶ See Mark Griffiths, "Never Giving Up," in *Province Express, Newsletter of Australian Jesuits*, July 5th, 2011.

only my willingness to trust the faith shown by this chaplain in the power of spirit kept me involved. Those that see this case objectively would say it was simply the result of the institutional staff acting to facilitate the process. For me, that explanation is unsatisfactory. It cannot explain why I received this particular young person at this time in my career in the process of doing a spiritual practice exercise. Nor can it make sense of the chaplain dying shortly afterwards and the impact it had on shaping my perspective on these events. It helped me understand that the transcendent is part of the “situated involvement” of our human existence. In Gabriel Marcel’s terms, we are more than our problems. Something more is going on and what we have to do is to be available to receive this gift of hope that is present in reality if we are open to it. Marcel asserts that concrete reality includes the mysterious or mysteries of being that cannot be explained by conceptual knowledge. Even detailed descriptions of the situation cannot encompass the full story. It can only be a lived experience.

While this is only one case example, it taught me that there is being which is working alongside our efforts to help us transform situations and what we have to do is become aware of its presence in our concrete situations. I have the confidence that transformation is possible if I work with being for the betterment of others. This is my purpose in bringing an existential perspective to social work. A postscript to this case is the news that in 2014 the Victorian Government in Australia extended the group conferencing program to young people in detention.

Vocation and Social Work

Marcel describes vocation as an appeal or response to a call:

It comes both from me and from outside me at one and the same time or rather, in it we become aware of that most intimate connection between what comes from me and what comes from outside the connection, which is nourishing or constructive and cannot be relinquished without the ego wasting or tending toward death.³⁷

Many social workers feel they must have a unique purpose for their lives and, when this purpose is not present, they feel their lives are not fulfilled. Marcel regards this view as a mistake. As Terrence Sweeney has explained, Marcel considers the human as a “homo-viator, a pilgrim or wayfarer” on a journey that involves mystery that is to be “lived and contemplated,” a “wandering but with direction,” with “life lived and understood as drama and story.”³⁸ Part of this drama is a sense of captivity, of being constrained from a fullness of life and a wish to break out of this, often by taking on some ideology that provides collective meaning. Vocation cannot be separated from the personal which is also inherently inter-personal and situated. It comes as an appeal to me from my concrete life. I am free to ignore this calling or to treat it as a call of the superego or society.

For Marcel, becoming a social worker is a work of continuous creation. He is wary of the “dream of escape,” and suggests rather that we “dig in to the narrow place that has been given.”³⁹

³⁷ See Gabriel Marcel, *Homo Viator* (South Bend, IN.: St. Augustine's Press, 2010), p.17.

³⁸ See Terrence Sweeney, “Against Ideology: Gabriel Marcel's Philosophy of Vocation,” *Logos* 16, No. 4 (2013), pp.179-81.

³⁹ Gabriel Marcel, *Homo Viator*, p.22.

Remaining open toward others or inter-subjectivity allows for the cry that comes from within and without, an appeal to me, to become “that which now I am not.”⁴⁰

In 1960, the existentialist Paul Tillich wrote on the philosophy of social work. He was addressing *Self Help*, an organization that helped refugees from Europe after World War II settle in America. Tillich was involved in founding and helping to steer *Self Help* for over 25 years. Tillich highlights that “things cry,” and situations also “cry out for attention.”⁴¹ The danger in social work is always to impose instead of listen, to act mechanically instead of thoughtfully.

Men’s behaviour change groups can adopt this stance. They can exercise power over men. Here I am not ignoring the obvious power of having court mandated involuntary clients or that in challenging men about their excuses for minimising or justifying their violence, they are not exercising power over men. What I am focusing on is the need in group facilitation to be aware of what is crying out for my attention. Is it the need to encourage the group to reflect on their interactions when there are some real learning opportunities present? Can the facilitators allow for the spontaneity of the group to shape the proceedings or do they script the action to deny this possibility? Of course if the spontaneity is disrespectful, that must be challenged, but I certainly struggled with allowing the group to discuss things and to be puzzled. But as Kierkegaard admired in Socrates, we learn by being uncertain and, finally, acknowledging our need for knowledge.

In discussing the aims of social work, Tillich notes that encouraging independence from service delivery is important but Tillich makes “the feeling of being necessary” as the need least met by social welfare services. By this, Tillich means that social work clients need to be offered opportunities to give back, to be more than burdens, noting that “whatever their external destiny may be, people no longer have an eternal orientation, an orientation which is independent of space and time. It is the feeling of having a necessary, incomparable and unique place within the whole of being.”⁴² Tillich describes this as the final aim of social work; for in “helping every individual to find a place where he can consider himself necessary,”⁴³ you help to fulfil the ultimate aim of the world, namely “the universal community of all beings in which any individual aim is taken into the universal aim of being itself.”⁴⁴ Whilst noting the sexist language in the above quotation, perhaps men who use violence and power over their families and refuse to change are attempting, in a negative way, to meet this need to feel ultimately necessary, to the great detriment of their families.

In Victoria, Australia, our peak body “No To Violence” and its operational arm, “The Men’s Referral Service,” provides opportunities for men who have used family violence to help other men stop their violence and abuse. Yet these opportunities become available only after the men have been assessed and have completed a men’s behaviour change program and have been trained in men’s behaviour change telephone counselling. This is an example of what Tillich is describing. Sara Elinoff Acker in *Unclenching Our Fists*, also examines the journey that abusive men can take from needing help to finding a non-abusive way to live, and finally to give back to the community in some way.⁴⁵ Some women express concern that giving previously violent men a voluntary role in the sector is a form of reward for their violence. This view fails to take

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ See Paul Tillich, “The Philosophy of Social Work,” *Social Services Review* Vol. 36, No. 1 (1962), pp.13-16.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p.16.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Sara Elinoff Acker, *Unclenching Our Fists* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2013).

account of how far these men have journeyed away from violence, of their genuine transformation. Indeed, few actually make this complete journey, where they become advocates for non-violence.

Hope in Social Work

It is not uncommon in social work for a single case to define and shape a new policy response to a social problem. Yet, this phenomena rarely gets discussed in social policy. Perhaps this is because social policy favours systematic responses to social problems and individual cases that shape new approaches are difficult to control and the outcomes too difficult to predict. In Australia, an 11 year old boy, Luke Batty, was killed by his father, Greg Anderson, at cricket practice, and the police were forced to kill the father in response. His mother, Rosie Batty, showed empathy for the father's mental condition and even forgiveness towards him, whilst also naming the crime as an incident of family violence. The mother's reaction captured the public's attention, given the horror of the event. The Victorian Police Commissioner, Ken Lay, spoke of the "Rosie Batty" factor in explaining how this one case had shaped a new effort to tackle family violence by all sectors of the government and had galvanised the community and service system to respond more effectively to the issues associated with the event. Rosie Batty obtained this level of government and public attention because she was compassionate and forgiving toward the perpetrator despite his revengeful action, which was the culmination of ten years of intermittent family violence. Rosie Battie had a simple message for people. We need to put the focus on the male perpetrators and stop blaming the women and families for these situations. She also had a message of hope. Out of terrible evil comes good.⁴⁶

Hope can be a two-edged sword in family violence. For example, when men finally enter a men's behaviour change program, their female partners can finally discover that nothing is going to change and, by giving up on their hope of eventual change, start to make realistic plans for themselves and their families. Some women stay longer in violent relationships because the involvement of the man in the program keeps alive the hope that, maybe, he will change. So giving up on hope can be a positive outcome, from the point of view of the safety and well-being for the family. On another level, this ending of hope can be seen as a renewal of hope in a new life, free of family violence, without the male perpetrator.

Marcel describes hope as a "knowing which outstrips the unknown."⁴⁷ He states that family relations "do not offer any consistency or any guarantee of solidity" and that it is only at the level of being, which envelops our transitory existence, that we have the "living renewal which is given or revealed through hope." Hope is the dialectical opposite of despair and is separate from desire. Hope needs to act and overcome despair. Marcel's hope is an ontological finite response to infinite being in which it is enveloped. "Hope consists in asserting that there is, at the heart of being, beyond all data, beyond all inventories and all calculations, a mysterious principle in connivance with me, which cannot will but what I will, at least if what I will is really worth willing and is, in fact willed by the whole of my being."⁴⁸ Reasonable hope is a practice we do with others. It is about being not having, a process or journey not a destination. Fishman describes how the having philosophy has entered into our broken world of human relationships: "Even the love between spouses involves constant entries in a ledger to make sure that what each

⁴⁶ Mex Cooper, "Out of Tragedy Comes Change," *The Age*, June 4, 2014. (www.theage.com.au)

⁴⁷ Gabriel Marcel, *Homo Viator*, p.10.

⁴⁸ See Gabriel Marcel, "Concrete Approaches to Investigating the Ontological Mystery," p.184.

spouse puts into the relationship equals what each takes out. These claims for equality and equal rights are disheartening, for Marcel, because they encourage a lack of trust in and charitable love of others. This is sad for him because trust and charitable love are at the centre of his view of hope. Hope is present when we are available to others, without imposing demands about what they must do in return.”⁴⁹ Our giving enhances us and others. However, in the context of unequal gender relationships, there is a danger this will work against women.

Male dominance and sexism gives men power and control in their intimate relationships, and plays a significant part in the perpetuation of family violence. Gender equality is an important concept that is built into men’s behaviour change programs. Violence is also motivated by fears and insecurities that men refuse to face up to in a “cycle of feeling avoidance”⁵⁰ where men fail to identify what is motivating their violent behaviours and feel unable to express their negative feelings. Many violent men feel like victims and feel a strong sense of unfairness and injustice toward the system and their ex-partners. But isn’t there, below this level of injustice, a sense of entitlement that they deserve to be treated better? What would it take for a man to give up this want or demand and instead seek nothing but a desire to acknowledge and repair the harm already done in a safe manner? Perhaps the fear that if he gives up the male sense of entitlement or privilege he will be more badly treated is holding him and his family in a prison of inequality, loss, pain and harm.

Marcel asserts that hope, when enacted without desire, is prophetic. Sledgers states: “It is essentially open to what may come and recognises that even though reality is fundamentally on its side, the way in which this fact may eventually show itself is uncertain.”⁵¹ Hope is not optimistic. Optimism ignores the vague, marginal, messy, unexpected, unknown, unpredictable, and the other. Radical hope is not a turning away from reality. It is an openness to the fullness of being that includes the mystery there in reality. Jonathon Lear illustrates the potential of radical hope with Crow Indian Chief Plenty Coup’s example, which involved the imaginative use of the Chickadee as the symbol of new courage in the eye of cultural despair.⁵² Listen and learn with others and hope without end. The Rosie Batty factor is an example of this radical hope operating in my area of social work practice. Family Violence, particularly men’s violence against women, has been long neglected in social work practice. It is now finally getting the attention it deserves. Rosie Batty was named Australian of the Year in 2015 and a Royal Commission into Family Violence has since been established in Victoria.

Conclusion

In this article I have provided a glimpse into the current social work world of male family violence in Australia and my previous work in restorative justice conferencing with young people. At the “coal face” of social work, people may question the relevance of philosophy, particularly existential philosophy, with its unusual concepts. I have suggested otherwise and applied some of Marcel’s key ideas to social work. While existential thought has helped shape

⁴⁹ Steve Fishman, “Dewey in Dialogue with Gabriel Marcel: Hope with and without God,” in Stephen and McCarthy Fishman (eds.), *John Dewey and the Philosophy of Hope* (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2007), p.35.

⁵⁰ Michelle Kendall and Harvey Evans, “Working in Groups with Men Who Batter,” in Michael P. Andronico (ed.), *Men in Groups* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Society, 1999), pp.357-375.

⁵¹ Rosa Slegers, “Reflections on a Broken World: Gabriel Marcel and William James on Despair, Hope and Desire,” in Janet and Wiltze Horrigan (eds.), *Hope against Hope* (Amsterdam: Rodopi Press, 2010), p.69.

⁵² Jonathon Lear, *Radical Hope* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 2006).

social work, Marcel's thought has been neglected, with the notable exception of the work of Jim Lantz. Along with other existential thinkers, Marcel discovered the primacy of being-in-the-world over abstract thought, a realm of thought that he argued is derived from this more fundamental level of experience. Marcel argues that our concrete lived experience includes the transcendence and imminence of being and, in social work, we can work with being to bring about healing and constructive change.

This requires that we understand and apply some of his key themes, such as presence and availability, our participatory situation and willingness to embrace the other, including the spiritual dimension of our world. Such an approach does not guarantee success. Indeed, Marcel explicitly rejects direct causal links, but it does help us seize the moment, have courage and be fully present to opportunities on our journey through life.