



Prologue

Introduction

Introduction

You might have joined social work with a noble purpose.
To help people in need.
Me too. Here's my story.

I joined social work after volunteering with the intellectually disabled for 3 years. In one of my earliest encounters, I met a boy with a mild learning disability. He speaks English and Mandarin.

We sit down to design a card for Mother's Day. I ask him to write the alphabet 'A' in block letters. After struggling for 5 minutes, he looks at me and says in Mandarin, '我不会写这个!' (Or, 'I don't know how to write this!')

That's when I realise that in the life I led chasing academic 'As, I had forgotten what a privilege it was to *even* pursue these.

I decided I wanted a career allowing me to leave a personal impact in each person's life.

Fast forward 3 years.

I've finished university, graduating as a social worker.

As I sit down in my office, I check through the stock prices of different companies. I then switch to the book I'm reading. Later, I start surfing the web aimlessly.

Suddenly, it strikes me.

Why Write This?

When I became a social worker, was this what I expected?

I thought I would be excited about helping people every day, changing lives, and making a difference. I hadn't expected to be bored, watching the clock, wondering how I could finish my work as quickly as possible.

That afternoon, I realised that something needed to change. I needed to do social work differently. Or social work would do me in.

It would end up destroying my soul.

At the heart is my belief:

*You can strive, and thrive,
and not just survive.*

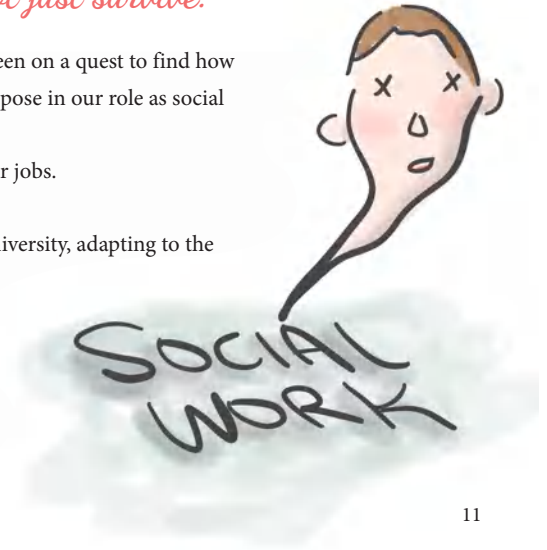
Since that fateful afternoon, I have been on a quest to find how we can find greater meaning and purpose in our role as social workers.

It's also about how we can grow at our jobs.

Because let's face it...

After learning great things during university, adapting to the new workplace as a newly qualified social worker... you feel like you aren't growing anymore. Your skills seem to have hit a plateau.

You're overwhelmed by casework, case notes, and office politics.



It seems foolish to be stuck in social work, when your friends are earning more, without bearing the emotional pain of being with clients.

Today, I share the results of that quest.

Who is this book for?

Maybe this is you today.

Instead of feeling motivated to help your client, you wonder how you can finish all the paperwork he is going to generate. Instead of tuning into the words your client is saying, you find yourself worrying about the programme you are supposed to deliver next week. Instead of helping others, you find that you now need to help yourself.

If so, this book is for you.

How can you become a better social worker for your client? How do you become a better colleague? How do you become a better person to yourself?

Or maybe you are struggling with the demands of the job, rushing from home visit to office, and then to another multiagency meeting. You struggle to record down everything you have done. You struggle to even have time for lunch!

Becoming better? You must be crazy! How do I even survive, let alone become better?

If so, this book is for you too.



“ I JUST TRY TO EAT MY SANDWICH
ON THE GO. HONESTLY... NO BIGGIE ”

My supervisor made time for everything in the car. She sweeps the breadcrumbs from her sandwich off her dress, and then says, “Oh I just have lunch in the car.”

Let's be clear.

Before we start, let's be clear about what this book is *not*.
 If you want more theory, textbooks, and research evidence, I don't have it in this book.
 But let's be honest too.
 Remember that fancy social work textbook you bought? Where is it now?
 Gathering dust on the shelf?
 We don't want that, do we?
 Not another *clever* book to have read, but a book that you truly read.

This book is not a guarantee of success in social work. The things I say here are *suggestions* that have worked for me and other social workers I've asked. Not all are peer-reviewed guidelines that have been published in academic journals.
 Take and try what works for you. Leave the rest.

Now that we are clear what it's not, what is it about?

This book is about:

Understanding why you do social work, and how to do it better

- Understanding your skills, strengths, and interests
- Knowing how you can systematically improve as a social worker

Unpicking the 'how' of social work

- Handling caseloads efficiently and effectively
- Handling the emotional labour of social work

Managing relationships in social work

- Working with difficult colleagues
- Collaborating better in teams
- Scaffolding support systems around you

Working within the communities you are part of

- Seeing humans as humans

This book is based on a system of principles that have worked for me and others.
 Drawn across disciplines from business to psychology, from people like practitioners, professionals, and service users, this book gathers principles that *work* in social work.

I'm not a PHD. I'm not a professor.

I'm a *person*.

So, I'm going to share with you person to person.

If you think I'm a social worker who's living in a state of flow and in nirvana every day, the simple answer is



I'm not.

I still struggle with finding my reimbursement form in my overflowing hard drive. Or feel stressed over the service users who are calling me. Or stare into my computer, wondering where to start with the huge pile of case notes.

Do you struggle in social work? I struggle too.

That's why I started this journey.

With you.

Because I believe:

As a social worker, you can thrive and strive, and not just survive.

Who are you? No... who are you really?

At the time this book was written, I've only had *1* year of post-qualifying experience.

Yes, you didn't read wrongly.

One. Any mistakes here are my fault.

Yet I write this. Why? Not because I'm an expert.

But precisely because I'm a *non*-expert. I wanted to answer questions I couldn't find the answers to.

- Why do you do social work?
- How do you deal with the overwhelming nature of social work (caseloads, emotions, and administrative work)?
- How do you become better in social work?
- Why do you *still* do social work?

Also, I was tired of reading through boring texts with paragraph after paragraph of instruction. We decided to make this more fun, engaging and playful.

We hope you have as much fun reading, as we had creating.

As a student social worker, I moved from Singapore to the UK.

In my first assignment, I failed it. I got 35/100.

I nearly failed my placement. I went through the concerns process*.

Twice.

* The concerns process is initiated when the practice educator (or supervisor) is worried that you will not pass the placement.

Ouch.

Yet despite these failures, I graduated with a first in social work. I went on to get 2 job offers in 2 weeks.

As a newly-qualified social worker now, I have been scolded many times for not being a good team player. I have been rapped for the quality of my case notes.

I share this because I want you to know something.

You may not be perfect. That's okay. It's about trying. And failing. And picking yourself up to try again.

It's the day before a public holiday. I'm preparing to go home. It's 8pm.

I see my colleague typing furiously at his desk. I walk up to him, and ask, 'Hey, are you not going home?'

'Nah, I'm just typing a few case notes before leaving.'

'Oh, good luck. What do you have planned tomorrow?'

'More of this. More case notes, and more assessments to write.'

Then he smiles. 'It's okay. Don't worry about me. How are you coping in your first month here?'

Yes, there are impossible demands placed on social workers. Structural and systemic problems make things harder. There are times when you may want to walk away.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying that you shouldn't fight the system. But pick your battles. Recognise what can and cannot be changed overnight. That's why this book focuses on you. Not because you are the problem.

But because you are the possibility.

For change. In clients. In cultures. In complexity.



How do I use this book?

As you can see from the graph above, this book is organised from the inside-out. You will learn about what you can do on the personal level to achieve better change. You will look at what you want.

Then, know skills you already *have*, to accomplish what you want.

You will then read about what better work looks like. What does 'better' social work entail? Much of this will entail the practical nature of social work, such as managing the overwhelming caseloads, the increasingly administrative and bureaucratic nature of social work, and the dreaded meetings in social work.

Then, I look at what you can do in the relationships you have with your colleagues, before moving to the communities you serve in.

To get the best out of this book

To build consistency, stick with a principle you find useful. Try it for a month and see how it changes you.

In this book, you will realise that many of the suggestions cover dealing with the mechanics of social work, rather than clients. I observed that many problems came from the unique way social work is organised. Like the number of cases you hold. The statutory requirements to see someone in X number of days. The emotional labour of

social work. The need to record everything you do.

There are areas you can improve your interactions with clients. But there is a more pressing imperative to improve how you work within the organisation you are a part of.

Are you ready?

A note on pronouns and clients

Throughout this book, you will see that I use the phrase clients, rather than service users. In the UK, 'service users' is a term to refer to the people we work with.

However, in other parts of the world like Singapore and the US, client is still the term of reference.

I also use the pronoun 'he' to refer generically to the people I speak about. This is to prevent excessive use of he/she/it/they/them.

Chapter 1

Better You

Introduction

'John, let's face it.

You're not very well-liked by most in the team.'

Inside me, something broke. I was having a Performance Improvement Plan discussion with my boss. If you're not sure what that is, it's a 'Shape Up or Ship Out' discussion. Get better, or get sacked.

For weeks, I blamed everything. Everyone. Even my dog got scolded.

Hopefully, that's not you today. But we all share some degree of that, don't we?

Where you complain about things around you, rather than things within you.

Going down the bottomless path of everything that's wrong yields little. If you want to feel powerless, overwhelmed, and overworked, you can carry on. Breaking out of the doom loop of what's wrong, starts with looking at what's right.

With you. Within you.

Thank you for picking up this book today. Thank you for allowing me to come on this journey together with you. I hope that through this book, I can offer a useful mirror through which you can observe yourself better. To be better.

The first step to better work is a better *you*. Let's face it. You can't change anybody else but yourself. As Mahatma Gandhi once said,

'You have to be the change you want to see.'

In this chapter, I look at how you can understand yourself better. Through the exercises listed, you can start being more self-aware. In turn, this heightened self-awareness reveals what you might want to do more of. More importantly, I hope it guides you to seeing what you need to do *less* of.



How do I read this?

This chapter helps you look at your past and present, to shape your future.

However, it's not only about a better *you*. It's also knowing what you want to be better at. I can mandate what 'better' looks like.

But if it's not important to you, you will not bother.

Before thinking about becoming better, you need to think about what 'best' looks like.

This will involve uncomfortable questions such as:

- What do you want out of your life?
- What do you want out of your career?
- Are you confident that social work will be the best way to achieve what you want with life?

Take a moment. Answer the questions above.

Maybe you decide that social work is not the path that will lead you where you want to go. That's okay. You would have saved some of the pain, time and effort required in a profession like social work.

You have
to be the
change you
want to see

Understanding what you want

Here's something important.

The reason why you get disillusioned by social work, even though it is so meaningful... is because you end up delivering the vision of *another*.

You deliver the vision of another person – your social work organisation (statutory authority, social service agency, charity etc.), your boss, your supervisor.

You don't deliver your own vision. Your own hopes, dreams, and goals, are exchanged for the vision of the person you work for.

When that happens, the Manager – with her own goals, dreams, and vision – is lost, as she dedicates herself to bringing the Emperor's exciting new Vision to fruition...

It takes away the Manager's hope and replaces it with the Emperor's intention.

Michael Gerber, The E-Myth Manager

That is why the first question you need to ask before you do better work is:

What do I want? What do I want to do here?

It's not what the organisation wants. The organisation is only a *conduit* to contribute your skills in helping.

Let's draw a simple analogy.

You might think of yourself as part of the organisation. If the organisation is a human body, you might see yourself as a small toe within the organisation.

But here's a thought.

What if you weren't part of the organisation, but the organisation was part of you? In this way, you are *the* human body. The organisation becomes like a pair of shoes. You can walk more comfortably with it, or further with it. You might impact more lives by working *through* the organisation, rather than by yourself. Seeing it this way allows you to see the organisation as an *accessory*. The organisation complements and supplements your social work. The beauty lies in the balance, in balancing your needs, your client's needs and the organisational needs.

Start looking at social work beyond the confines of your current organisation. Ask yourself:

What do I want to do?

What do I want to do here?

You might argue, 'But John, there's no perfect organisation. At the end of the day, I just want to help my clients, and I just have to make do with the organisation I'm at.'
Yes, that's true.
But.

If you're not sure what you want to help with, you might end up delivering the vision of an organisation that does not align with yours.



During my second placement, I worked in a statutory authority serving adults with learning disabilities. I agreed to the placement. I thought the local authority was a good place for exposure.

I didn't know what I wanted.

When I started, that's when I found out what a bad idea it was.

I disagreed with how thresholds¹ for providing help were getting higher. As Devaney argued, the thresholds for receiving help were being raised higher, preventing more people from getting help they needed.

I disliked how you had to show how much money a client's care would cost in the long-term. I needed to make a cost-analysis plan to determine the most cost-effective option.

It was difficult for me to reconcile with my personal belief of providing dignity to people who needed it to the organisational belief of cost-effectiveness. I was seeing them as pound-bills, rather than people.

I ended up going through two concerns process in two months.

Painful experience, important lesson. When you are unclear of what you want, you end up with an organisation delivering something you disagree with.

That can leave you feeling disillusioned, depressed, and desperate.

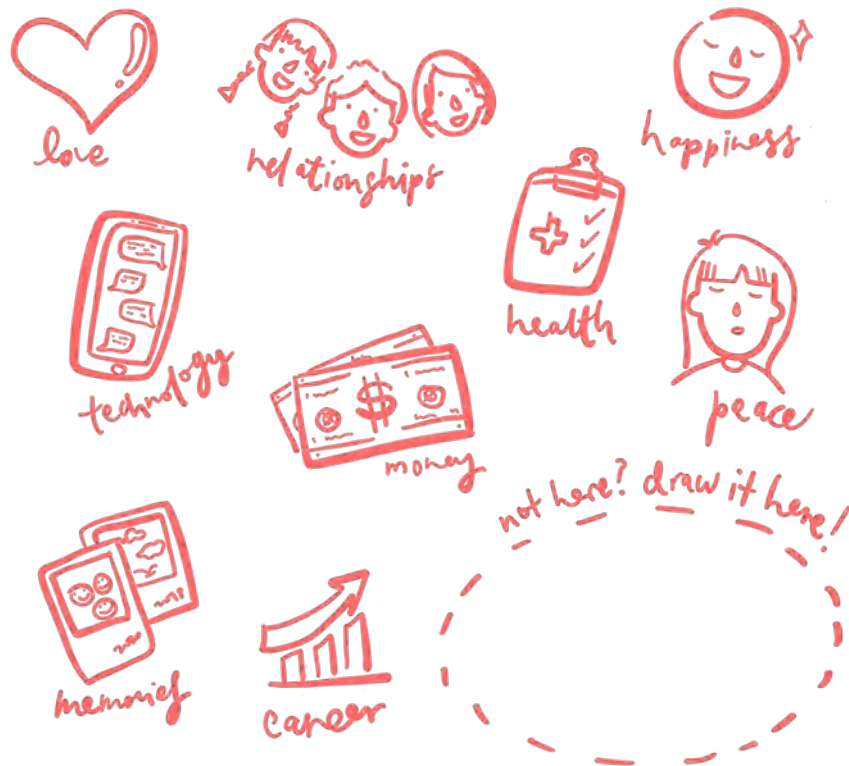
Being clear about what you want matters.



Exercise 1

What is important to you?

In this exercise, you will see different items. Circle the ones that are important to you.



I once had a boss who was extremely committed. She was so committed that she would send us messages and emails at all times of the day. From Saturday afternoons to Sunday nights. Very early on, I decided that between work and life, being *always* available to my boss was *not* something that was important to me. Even if that came at the cost of my promotion. That didn't matter to me as much as enjoying my own personal time.

*What is important to you?
What might be the actions you take to make that a priority?
(They can be something like not touching your work emails after 5pm.)*

Before becoming a social worker, I was hopelessly lost. In the days leading up to Christmas in 2015, each morning, I would carry a chair to the highest level of my apartment block. I would stand on the chair, wondering if I should flip myself over. I had done poorly in my A-Levels. I had not managed to get into medicine or law, two professions I thought would bring me great satisfaction.

I searched. And searched. And searched. For that elusive thing called *calling*.

‘Why am I here on Earth?’

is one of the most difficult questions anyone can have.

If you are a social worker today, I believe you are *called* to it. Social work is too demanding to continue without a clear reason. There are easier jobs around.

Being a better social worker starts with being secure in two things – your identity and your purpose.

Firstly, your *identity* as a human being.

It's easy to get confused. Your identity is *not* your role.

Let's say you meet me at a party. I say, 'Nice to meet you. Tell me about yourself.'

Pause for a moment and think through your response.

You *may* say, 'I'm a social worker.' But if you strip down all your roles – as a mother, a daughter, a social worker... who are you?

1. What do you stand for? What are your values?
2. Where do you come from?
3. What is your defining story?
4. Why do you do social work?

Secondly, your *purpose*. You have a purpose. And you are *purposed* for that purpose.

Only *you* have that unique mix of skills and interests for the work you do.

1. Why are you here?
2. What will you do here?
3. What do you take interest in automatically, without anyone asking you to do so?
4. What do people say you're naturally good at?

These questions are not to provoke an existential crisis. Hold them as you read this book. Or if you have some thoughts, jot them down.

Allow the answers to float as the questions above spark thought. As you go through other exercises, return to add your answers.

Every journey starts and ends with a destination. Before you start any journey, knowing your destination is helpful. For every human, the destination is clear. Death. It is the one great equaliser in every human being. From the richest, to the poorest. At your death, people are going to miss you. What do you want people to miss you for? What would you like them to say at your eulogy?

Exercise 2

My eulogies

Think about the loved ones you have around you now. Your parents, your siblings, your friends. You can also include significant people in your life. It could include your professor, or your supervisor, or your client. In the little speech bubbles below, I would like you to fill in the things you would like them to say at your eulogy.

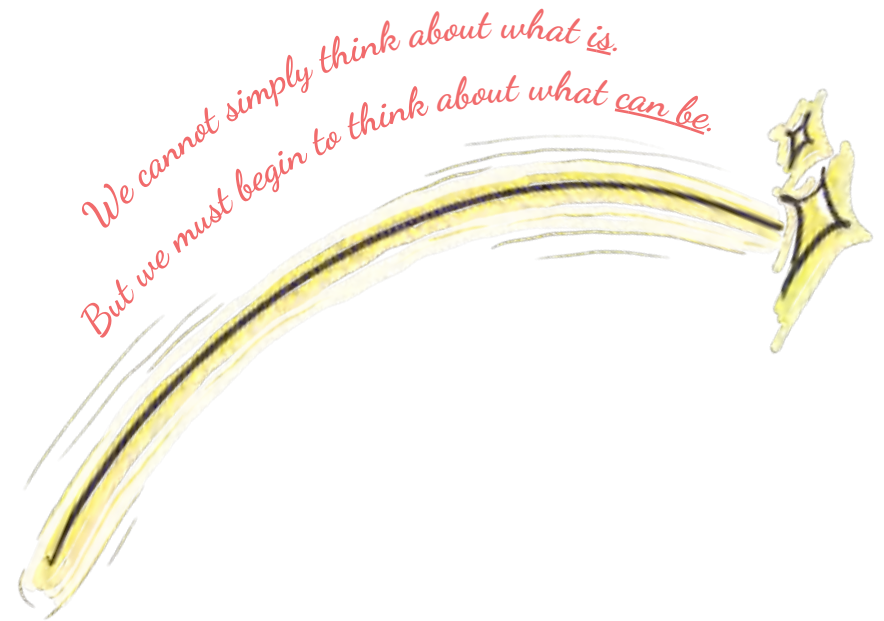


Your vision

Greatness doesn't begin with small shots.

It begins with *moonshots*.

Look at Abraham Lincoln or Martin Luther King Jr. The vision they had was very different from the realities around them. They did not think about what was before them. But they *dreamt* about what could be.



Exercise 3

Visioning

I want to invite you now to draw that vision in your mind. Write down what it feels like. What do you see, hear, taste and touch in your vision? In the space below, feel free to add cut-outs from magazines and newspapers to bring realism to your vision.

Here's an example.

My vision is for every youth to live understanding, unlocking and unleashing their potential. That looks like a youth waking up with excitement every morning, eager to start their day. It sounds like youths speaking in parliaments, on world stages, in front of thousands, about what matters to them.

