It is six years since I wrote a short piece for Professional Social Work about my relationship with my mother, then with advancing dementia, called ‘My mother and me’. The article dealt with our relationship, my adopted status and thoughts concerning my entry into social work practice and academia within that context.

Many things have changed since then, such as social work’s place and status – in England especially, but also the UK as a whole and indeed throughout the world. Other things have changed in our own lives. For me, perhaps the most profound being the death of my mother on Good Friday this year alongside establishing contact and a relationship with my birth mother in 2010 and my own remarriage.

So, it is with these developments in mind that I write this somewhat belated follow-up piece in which I explore some of the questions that the human beings who are social workers deal with in their everyday lives, including life and loss, humanity and seeking meaning on what it is to be human. And in this, I call for our re-commitment to humanising social work.

For me, one of the central aspects of social work in England is that we are in danger of consigning to the margins the notion that it comprises a fundamentally human activity. This perspective is being displaced in favour of one that indexes, controls and rigidifies social and personal life through the deployment of inanimate systems.

The turn towards bureaucratisation, assisted through overt politicisation following much publicised tragedies, has exacted a great toll on social workers. For some, this has made the concept of helping others an almost illegitimate activity, claiming that to ‘help’ smacks of power imbalance and is patronising and judgemental.

However, such ideas fail to acknowledge our mutual interdependence as human beings and the need for reciprocal support from others to reach our full potential. Of course, social workers must use their authority, especially in complex and difficult situations of potential abuse, severe neglect, and enduring and acute mental health problems and so on.

However, it is these situations that require so much of our emotions in seeking to work with people, as fellow human beings, to protect or to prevent them from causing further harm, and to assist, in other words help, them to find their place in life and society.

As social workers, we have long demonstrated our commitment to values and to continued reflection on those underpinning beliefs about people that guide our actions, and which may also, at times, challenge our individual belief systems and traverse the demands and expectations of political mores and employers.

This puts social workers in a tense and somewhat dangerous relationship with society and one which, again, demands an emotional resilience not required in many other professions or necessarily in daily life.
So, how does my changing life and its enfolding events interact with my relationship with social work? Writing about my mother in 2008 was a cathartic experience, one in which I began to reflect on the loss of a still living person who had given me a tremendous start in life to become what I am. Being born at a time when Dr Barnado’s were still transporting children for adoption to Australia and Canada, I was ever-grateful for the love, encouragement and support to study, to make decisions and to enjoy life.

The article was a beginning expression of grief for the loss of that person as she changed and became more withdrawn from the world, her friends, church and neighbourhood, as she herself became more in need of help. Before entering academic life, I had been a social worker, latterly working with people living with dementia and had experienced through others this process of a ‘living bereavement’ and seen the relief tempered with great sadness when the person finally died.

**Emotions**

Knowing this has been a great help to me but, of course, real life reminds one that it is lived by real people and the feelings and emotions felt and expressed are individual. My emotions do not follow a set pattern, but they are as confused and individual as anyone else’s in similar but unique circumstances.

This reinforces to me the centrality of recognising the person-in-context as an axiom in social work. We cannot ‘live by numbers’, or act according to textbook case studies. The people we work with will each respond differently and will need our help, empathy and, yes – the word often being seen as pejorative – our sympathy. These individual expressions demand of us an openness to accept cultural nuances, more personally played out in families and by individuals within them.

What an open and deep knowledge of our humanity also does is to help us, as social workers, to acknowledge our needs for support; to accept that we are affected emotionally and spiritually, some times profoundly so, by the experiences we see in the people with whom we work. Our emotions can be triggered by what we see in others, and by the ways in which we require ourselves to walk alongside others when they are in pain.

I have seen many social workers who have distanced themselves from the emotional turmoil of others, often becoming cold and hardened to suffering and taking refuge in procedural approaches that guard against them thinking too deeply.

I believe this to be a mechanism for coping but one that is counterproductive. It hurts us more as human beings, which is what social workers are, to deny our distress, and it does nothing for our service users.

Life twists and unfurls in many complex ways and, with the encouragement and support of my wife, I set to trace my birth mother in 2010. Since a teenager I had thought of undertaking such a search but avoided it, not wishing to cause upset to my parents. Now that my mother was no longer thought of undertaking such a search but avoided it, not wishing to cause upset to my parents. Now that my mother was no longer...