A Vision for Our Future

This issue of the American Journal of Occupational Therapy is dedicated to Wilma Louise West, long esteemed as the profession’s visionary and grand dame. In what ways is she deserving of these titles?

A review of her published writings as well as some memoirs reflected through an oral history gives us Willie’s vision for occupational therapy. She was one of the earliest and staunchest supporters of the concept of occupation science. As an advocate for excellence in education, she had long recognized that the liberal arts and sciences should and must form the basis of the educational preparation of the therapist. In occupation science she saw the opportunity to integrate concepts of human development, sociobiology, adaptation, and rehabilitation, thus beginning a necessary synthesis of the loosely-related constructs around which occupational therapy had grown.

Willie recognized that authentic occupational therapy is concerned with health as well as healing, with prevention as well as treatment (West, 1969). She knew that a profession that dwells on disability cannot understand or respond to the long-term needs of the chronically ill; the challenge of self-determination, the formulation of a new life so to speak, is not easily recognized or met through a disablement model. Instead, we need to understand what brings meaning to life, how motivation overcomes despair, and how the unique balance in occupational roles can help to fulfill a person’s dreams.

The whole person was Wilma’s concern, that individual who was not a collection of organs...some diseased, some healthy...but a person who lived in a world that had social, cultural, and personal values. Biological limitations might constrain that person’s ability to manage or thrive in the natural world, and the occupational therapist needs a world view that will help the person over the barriers that prevent return to a satisfying life in a nonthreatening, nonfrustrating environment of the person’s own choice.

These beliefs Wilma found to be supported and enhanced by occupation science. In her role as visionary, she recognized that the fundamental premises of the profession were at last to be organized in a cohesive intellectual structure that would instill these beliefs and values in the generations that followed.

In her role as grand dame she remained until her last days a fervent champion of professionalism. In Willie’s view there was no excuse for an occupational therapist to ignore or fail to respond to the social, economic, political, or medical challenges and weaknesses that clashed with the values of occupational therapy (West, 1958). Her life was devoted to “the profession,” and her oft-quoted comment regarding our collective response to a professional problem reflects her activist position: We might first ask ourselves a basic question “What can I do about this?” and then second, not “To whom can I refer this?” but “Who else can help me with it?”

In her view,

It matters most of all that we recognize the responsibility of the profession to change with changing demands for its services, to adapt via new approaches, to assume different roles, to develop the preparation for them, and to recruit in a new mold rather than by recasting the prototype of an earlier time. (West, 1968, pp. 14–15)

Befitting Wilma’s vision of the profession and its enormous potential for contributing to society and its ills, she maintained a posture of professional responsibility in everything she did. Long before most others, Wilma West recognized that only by developing a sense of professional responsibility in each student can we insure that members will support their professional organizations financially and through their memberships and contribute to the research and publication processes that give the world its perspective on occupational therapy.

She knew that in the absence of a strong sense of professional responsibility in individual members, the organiza-
tions representing those members might lack the courage and the wherewithal to do battle with the social and political and economic forces that threaten to diminish or eliminate the values upon which this profession has been built. Thus although the struggle to move from therapist to health agent, as Wilma West encouraged us to do in 1969 (West, 1969), is an appropriate response to today’s needs for a new health care system, the collective sense of risk-taking as a form of responsibility appears to be weak. Wilma would lament the tendency to remain exclusively in the medical trenches, so to speak, using the tools and concepts of yesteryear. Instead, she would insist that we define the new challenges we must meet and define them in our own terms. Occupational therapy has much to offer society as a whole; she would not like to think of us as being limited to medically-driven systems of care when, in fact, far more of our citizens would benefit from an occupationally-driven health care system.

These ideas developed over the lifetime of her career, but many of them were in print by 1958 (West, 1958). Was she a visionary, a grand dame with a vision? It would seem so, with her ability to anticipate today’s challenges to the profession. But where have we been? With an articulate spokesperson like Wilma West, the handwriting has been on the wall for a long time. Can we, now that she’s gone, accept the challenges she has so fervently laid out for us and assume our rightful position of leadership in a changing health care system? Today would be a good time to begin.

References

