

Protest, Reflect, Respond: A Personal Reflection by a Social Worker in Baltimore following the Death of Freddie Gray

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Abstract: This is a personal reflection on my experience participating in the protests in Baltimore following the death of Freddie Gray, and that ways that experience affected my role as a mental health consultant in neighborhoods experiencing unrest. It also explores what role I see social workers taking in the movement for racial justice given my personal experience.

Keywords: Racial Justice; Early Childhood Mental Health; Baltimore; Racism.

For me, the weeks since the death of Freddie Gray have been a lesson in holding different perspectives in tension. I am a mental health consultant in Head Start preschool programs in Baltimore, so holding different perspectives is part of my every day experience: when a child is struggling in school, I have to understand and balance the perspective of the child, the teacher, the caregiver, and the school administration. On a good day, I can help all parties see the situation through each other's eyes, but some days, it just doesn't work out and I end up as the holder of unresolved tensions. Sometimes I bring them home with me, thinking about them when I'm stuck in traffic or when I'm running at the gym. They keep popping up until they either fade away or I process them into something a little less intrusive while talking with my co-workers. When Freddie Gray was killed, the entire city began to grapple with the complex realities of race, class, power and privilege. As I became involved in the protests and movement for racial justice, my personal and professional lives began to overlap, expanding and intensifying the perspectives I needed to hold in tension.

I noticed the interconnection of my work and personal life at the first march I took part in. It was the Saturday after Freddie Gray died, before any of property destruction had taken place. It was a beautiful afternoon, and among the thousands of us marching, I noticed two of the families I work with at the Head Start with their preschoolers in tow. Marching with those families and echoing their calls for justice affirmed how relevant marching on a Saturday was to the work I do Monday through Friday. The mood of that march was urgent but peaceful and optimistic. There was an undercurrent of unrest, but it felt like a positive energy, the kind of energy that motivates people to stand up and

demand justice. As we marched through the streets of West Baltimore, people leaned out windows of apartment buildings to clap and cheer, and many joined in as we headed toward downtown. I felt a sense of community that made me think that change really might be possible and was grateful to be a part of it.

The day after that march, the media focused on the few incidences of looting and confrontations with police that occurred after most of the protesters had gone home, rather than covering the thousand of peaceful protesters chanting for justice all afternoon. A concerned co-worker sent out an email wondering if we should avoid going to Head Start sites in the neighborhoods where the protests were occurring when we went back to work on Monday. I understood her concern, but couldn't help but think that this was precisely the reason I became a social worker—to accompany the people that society has pushed aside—and I was not about to bail out now when the stakes were highest. I was grateful that I had been in the neighborhood on Saturday and could use my personal experience to testify to the peaceful nature of the protests, and my desire to continue to visit the sites as planned.

That was the first of many times we would talk about safety over the next few weeks and it became another point of tension for me to wrestle with. That Sunday it had been easy for me urge people not to let the media sensationalism color their view of what was safe and what wasn't, but things became more complicated on Monday when the clashes between youth and the police broke out, stores were looted and cars were burned. Everything shifted after Monday because the threat to safety felt bigger and more ominous. The curfew, the constant whir of the helicopters and the National Guard only added to the climate of fear in the

city. I still wanted to challenge people to think about what a privilege it was to be able to avoid areas deemed “unsafe” and to question what was really at the root of our fears, but at the same time, I understood that feelings of personal safety are important. I practice social work through a trauma informed lens, so I know that safety, both physical and psychological, is essential for people to be able function at their fullest capacity, myself and my co-workers included.

Throughout the unrest, I also thought a lot about the tension between micro and macro practice. My role falls mostly into the micro camp, and I do strongly believe that my team does great work with young children and families, especially because we take a strength-based and family centered approach. Everyone on our team is respectful and thinks critically about the issues our families face, constantly reframing cases to see resiliency. But with the magnitude of the issues bubbling up in Baltimore, it was hard not to wonder: Have we done enough? Have we focused our energy in the right place? We do such great work helping families cope with trauma, but what are we doing to try to stop those traumas from happening in the first place? Our families face so many situations that would be preventable if only there was the political will to make the changes. The disproportionate arrests and incarceration of black men, the lack of safe and affordable housing, and joblessness and underemployment touch every family I work with in some way. I believe that work I do is necessary and right, but I also know in my bones that the trauma won't stop without a major social movement.

This tension between working small scale with individuals and large scale on social movements has actually been the dichotomy that has been easiest to resolve though, because I know that we can do both, and that both types of work are enhanced when we do. As clinical social workers, our work is all about strengthening relationships, sometimes in places where a terrible rupture has occurred. It is also about asking people the hard questions that they may never have been asked before, and listening compassionately to their response. And finally, it is about looking hard for the good in people and

helping them name that goodness. These are skills that the movement for racial and social justice so desperately needs, and I hope that each of us who has these skills takes time to reflect on how we can intentionally use them to create change.

At the same time, we need to make sure that our clinical practices are informed by the social problems pulsing through our country. We need to talk about race and class, and understand our own privilege and bias. We need to think critically about who is at the table when decisions are made and whose voice really matters. And those of us who work for larger institutions like universities and hospitals have a responsibility ensure that these systems are using their vast power for justice, rather than perpetuating systemic racism within the institution and being complacent with oppression in the neighborhoods that surround them.

I will close with the overarching internal conflict I have felt throughout these last few weeks: the tension between respectfully letting someone speak their truth, and confronting someone when that truth contains elements that are racist or oppressive. Everyone in this city has an opinion on all that has gone on in the past few weeks, and everyone has been talking about it. I have been inspired by how many people understand the historical context of racism and oppression and are working hard to bring that to light. But I have also been disheartened by how many people I have heard say that this “isn't about race” or demanding that the protestors “stop the violence” with no mention of the violence committed against Freddie Gray and so many others. There have been so many times when I have let these comments slide, mostly out of fear of offending or of how I might be perceived. My hope for myself, and for all in the helping professions, is that we have the courage to make ourselves vulnerable in these conversations and speak up. I believe social workers are uniquely positioned to be transformative agents in the movement for racial justice, if only we will stand up and accept our call.

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