FROM THE 'GARDEN' OF POVERTY: Amazing Blooms

This is a reflection on my years as director of a community outreach, community development program in public housing. I have tried to convey a sense of the community and its people, and of the students and staff who were the essential players in our outreach effort. But I have also used this essay to try and come to grips with some of the moral and civil, political and social dimensions and issues that affect my understanding of poverty as well as our society's attitude about poor people.

by Dennis Saleebey

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I have started this reflection many times. I am not sure what has made it so difficult to write a narrative. Perhaps, it is the variety of points of view and perspectives I think I must represent. Maybe it is simply the passage of time and trying to capture the rhythm and flow of events and people reasonably and fairly, although I know that reason and fairness are not requisites for story. Perhaps it just may be the enormous responsibility of constructing, deconstructing, and reconstructing my own experience, knowing that as I proceed the experience will change its meaning and relevance right before my eyes. As some wag once put it, I'll see it when I believe it. Maybe I cannot see it clearly yet because I am not sure what I believe and understand about it.

Nonetheless, I must begin. I will do so in the simplest way, describing the scenarios of my reflections. It was part of the mission of the School of Social Welfare to extend itself into the community to develop community-based programs essentially staffed by students, supervised by a Ph.D. student, and overseen by a faculty member. These units provided education for the students, service to the clients, and research opportunities for the faculty. Most of these units addressed those individuals in several communities who suffered with what we now call persistent and severe mental illness. But it was the wish of the administration, and some of the School's faculty to really extend ourselves into a community where poverty, economic dislocation, and geographic and social marginalization played an important role in the life-chances and the life-world of the members of the community. After all, we reasoned, social work educators must visibly demonstrate their commitment to the pursuit of social justice and the restoration of social resources that underwrite personal, familial, and communal resourcefulness. We cannot just climb hortatory scaffolding in the classroom. We must build the lattice-work of our commitments in the worlds around us. As we can see from today's political rhetoric and often contentious argument, poverty is a reality that conflicts the American soul and intellect.

I am not exactly sure why I involved myself from the outset. I have always thought that as an educator I have an obligation to work in the world of my professional interests. I had long lost interest in doing "clinical" work.

Over the years, I chose another path. It brought me to the work of enabling the efforts of people in communities and neighborhoods to make their world better, to build something of value for themselves and their progeny. Most of these were fairly modest efforts on my part. However, two of the projects were fabulously successful and really caught my attention. The idea of the power in the people had been but an abstraction to me up to that point. I must admit that I did not plunge into any of these projects with the motivation and commitment that one would have suspected, had they heard me wax activist in the classroom. I believed every word I said. I even practiced some of what I said. But there was always some kind of holding back, restraining myself from fuller involvement. Radicals (in the more Marxist/Socialist sense of the word) can diagnose this problem from 50 yards away. While it may not be false consciousness, it is a problem of praxis, aligning belief and commitment (the easy part) with action and project in the world of suffering and oppression. I knew that I was falling short, fainting at the finish line. Knowing this, I also understood that, at some point, I was going to have to put up or shut up.

BEGINNINGS

The School decided that a public housing community would be an appropriate site for a community-based service, education, and research effort. I offered to (actually I wanted to, or needed to) take responsibility for getting the project off the ground and then, if it took off, to oversee its operation. I met with a variety of people to discover some of the ideas, principles, and practices that make for success and relevance. I met Diana, a Puerto Rican BSW graduate of our School. She and her husband had lived in New York city public housing. They had been active in mobilizing residents around a number of causes. At the time I met her, Diana was working with legal aid in a public housing community around a number of concerns. For example, the community surrounding Lifton Gardens, wanted the Gardens razed.[1] The neighborhoods had gathered considerable political and financial impetus for this effort. A coalition of the Gardens' residents, legal aid, some staff of the local housing authority, and faculty and students at the School worked diligently over months to prevent this from happening. Diana and a faculty member from the School were deeply involved in this collective effort that, in the end, was successful. Thus, when we selected a community it only seemed logical to us that Lifton Gardens might be willing to invite us in.

We began with several principles. We would not do anything unless the residents or resident leaders assured us that it was in their interest. (A noble sentiment, but naive. Leaders, as elsewhere, are not of one mind and sometimes may not represent the views of their constituency.) We would not do anything preemptorily. (We tried very hard to be loyal to this, but occasionally opportunities and crises presented themselves and we had to act.) We would strive to work with the residents to help them make Lifton Gardens the kind of community they wanted — but on their terms. We would be appreciative of and work with the individual and collective strengths of the community toward this end. Part of the philosophy of the School, the strengths orientation, requires diligence, real faith, and hard work to sustain. The residents we ended up working with live under sometimes siege conditions, personally and collectively. The damage, trauma, and crises must be attended to. These occasionally swarmed our capacity to attend to the strengths and resiliencies of the residents. Our program has had over the years three essential components: case management and direct services to individuals and families; technical assistance to the Resident Management Corporation Board (RMC); and community development activities designed to strengthen the solidarity of and

LIFTON GARDENS

[1] Lifton Gardens is a fictitous name. The other names in this account, except for Diana, are also fictitious.

connections within the community.

Diana and I went before the RMC Board to present our proposal. There were about 15 members present. Most were African-American women, but there was an Anglo man and an African-American man in attendance as well. I recall being extremely nervous. I had presented to many "boards" before, but there was something at stake here. At the time I was not sure what it was. In retrospect, however, I think it may have been that, out of some moral and professional necessity, I was taking the success of our proposal very personally. The Board members asked some hard questions of us. After all, service providers, program developers, funders, governments, and bureaucracies had disappointed and disarmed the residents before. Thanks to Diana and the School's recent involvement with the Gardens, it seemed likely that the residents would invite us into their community. And they did. I was elated.

It was important to the RMC Board members and to us that we would be on site. I cannot tell you well enough how different work is from the inside looking out, even though we could leave at night. (Residents would sometimes pointedly remind us of that reality: "Bad stuff don't ever happen here 'til nighttime. You-all are long gone by then." So, while we were inside, we were not "insiders," and it was important for us to acknowledge and respect that.) The residents readily accepted Diana. The community would wait to see how the rest of us were. Would we be trustworthy? Would we deliver? Would we work with and not on them? Surprisingly quickly, with some reserve, the residents began to welcome and accept us. At the end of our first year, the "Outreach" program had established a degree of trust in the community. The majority of the students were white. Unless students chose to make something out of it, the racial differences were usually less important to residents than matters of daily living. I remember, as we prepared to begin the fourth year of work, encountering Ms. Wilkinson, a matriarch in the community and no person to trifle with. She flagged me down and said, "You and Diana going to bring us some more of those good white students to work with us?" Damn' right, I said to myself. "You bet, Leona," I replied. Using her first name was not the thing to do. I was so heartened by her comment her name just spilled out. "How do you know my name?" "Well, you just look like a Leona to me." She laughed. I sighed.

RECOLLECTION AND REMINISCENCE

The Gardens

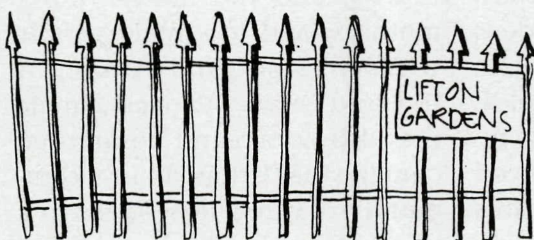
Lifton Gardens, if you squint, looks like a residential area with two and three story apartments of varying sizes. Made of red brick the buildings are unremarkable architecturally. To a casual observer the Gardens might appear as not a bad place to live. Once inside the complex, though, some elements of the topography struck me. I noticed that there were no flowers (this was late summer in the Midwest). There was little grass and a lot of scrabble. Dirt, weeds, and broken glass were prominent. Trash, leaves, and waste accumulated in the hallways and entrance ways of some of the apartment complexes. There were no people outside even though it was late mornings, sunny and not hot. As I recounted my promenade through the grounds, a friend pointed out to me later that I sounded more like a real estate agent than a social worker. Middle class biases aside, I wondered if we could actually help summon up a sense of community here. Perhaps I was, as any outsider should admit, unaware of the sense of community that already existed. Two things happened soon after we entered the community that suggested that my initial impression was off the mark.

The "Fence"

The Gardens had about 150 families, and some 400 individuals, many of whom were children. Most of the families were African-American, single parent—usually a younger mother, and in poverty, under-employed or unemployed. (Ms. Washington, who had lived in the Gardens since its beginning and raised 11 children, said it best: "This used to be a place where people of all races lived, where most people worked, where people trusted each other. But now it's mostly us Blacks, and too many young mothers, and too many people who don't work. And the drugs.") It would be hard to overestimate the individual and communal damage that drugs do in a community that has less access to a variety of supporting institutional

resources (churches, local schools, police, involved local merchants). And it doesn't take many dealers, who are usually outsiders, to terrorize a community—most often after dark. In response to an increase in drugs (drugs are a business and subject to variety of market and faddish fluctuations) and the crimes associated with dealing and using, the local housing authority through the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) appropriated the money to build an electronic "fence" around the community. Each resident would have a card that could be used to open one of three gates into the community. Friends, relatives, and other visitors would have to contact the resident through an intercom system if they were to be allowed to enter, and their names would have to be entered in a roster so, if they caused trouble, they could be tracked. The fence, if you squinted again, looked attractive. Wrought iron and about 7 feet tall, it was reminiscent of the kind of tasteful deterrents/barriers cropping up around the country in more stylish "gated" communities. But the residents reaction was essentially: "Are they keeping drug dealers out? Or us in?" Many residents sensed it was the latter, although we were later to discover in a survey that security and safety were the major concerns of the residents. This incident was one of many, that demonstrated that a paternalistic impulse borne of good will is still paternalistic.

For people and communities who struggle to keep their heads above water economically, who are in effect sequestered by geography or prejudice, there is no end of programs designed on Broadway or the Beltway that are imported to the residents (or to clients of an agency) that have little effect but to assure those residents that they are needy, have problems, and cannot meet or solve these themselves. Worse yet, they don't work or they are withdrawn when appropriations run out. Paternalism is an attitude that is directly counter to promoting citizenship and participation. Programs devised without the knowledge and expertise of residents, no matter how well-intentioned, usually falter and fail. As I write these words, I find myself getting angry; angry at the way in which the fates of the poor and struggling are decided by individuals who have little idea who the people and communities they are addressing are. I also get angry at the gross and misshapen pictures of the poor that have become a part of too many local, state, and national colloquies about "What to do about them?" The current strand of thinking seems to be to make life even more difficult for the poor, to wage war on the poverty-stricken.

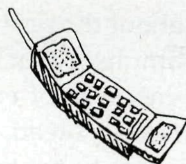


But it is not just anger that I feel sometimes, it is also anxiety that, in our outreach program, we will end up with the same preemptive, paternalistic style of interacting with the members of the community. With respect to the idea of the fence and its symbolism, I recently happened to see on TV Henry Cisneros taking a CNN reporter through several public housing developments in Cleveland, some rehabilitated, some not. As they toured one beautifully renovated community, the reporter asked about the fence surrounding it. Cisneros indicated that at first residents probably felt that they were being enclosed, they may now feel more secure because of the fence. I thought it might be worthwhile to ask the residents if they feel more secure because of the fence. Or do they feel more secure because they live in a neighborhood that has been built in such a way that it would be difficult for strangers to lurk about, appropriating hallways and entrances that cannot be seen until you are right upon them. Erving Goffman used to call these architectural angles, "lurk lines." Nonetheless, the fence at the Gardens, for good and ill, forever altered the conception of "place" for longtime residents, and further symbolized the separation between public housing and the surrounding neighborhoods.

The Car Phone

In our first year of operation, we were invited to the annual awards dinner sponsored by the RMC Board to honor members and agencies who have contributed to the life of the community in affirming and positive ways. It was a wonderful affair. Food and good will flowed bountifully. The students, for the first time, were able to see "the community" in

action. It helped that we—primarily thanks to Diana—were given an award for service as well. The students were a little apprehensive about being in the neighborhood at night. They had heard the stories, but the residents promised to make them secure and welcome. One of the students, Lorna, drove her van to the affair. She parked outside the community center where the banquet was being held. Being nighttime, some youth, not at the dinner, were hanging out. Lorna was a former mayor of a small community, prominent in that community and, as she put it, "hopelessly middle class." But in the few short weeks she had been working at the Gardens, like the other students, Lorna showed a remarkable ability to forge relationships with people in the community, a relationship borne of genuine and mutual respect. During the dinner, word came that her van had been broken into and her cellular phone stolen. The place was abuzz; the residents were embarrassed; the students' concern about safety became palpable. Lucille, one of the elders, indicated that we needed to call the police. She ran to the phone, dialed the police, and told the dispatcher, "We got trouble down here at Lifton Gardens. Someone broke into a van and stole a car phone!" (You might well imagine that, in the order of civil and criminal offenses, a stolen car phone in a public housing complex that is largely African-American and poor is not high on the law enforcement top 10 list of need-to-respond immediately.) Lucille understood that, too. She indicated that the van belonged to



a "White woman, a guest, from Elmwoods" (a fairly well-to-do middle class neighborhood in a suburban, mostly white, community). Lucille knew her stuff. Five—count 'em—five squad cars appeared, sirens blaring and lights blinking. Later, Lucille and others allowed as to how difficult it was ever to get the police to respond to their calls for assistance, unless the problem could not be ignored, like a shooting. Never did they mention the word racism. Rather, they saw their plight clearly and accepted it with an aplomb that is difficult to imagine occurring in, say, an Elmwoods.

The burglary had two interesting upshots. Lorna, naturally, was shaken by the event. Was it a foretelling of dangers and assaults to come? She also worried that her husband, a lawyer, might insist that she find another less risky placement. She and the field supervisor drove around for about an hour to calm down and also to try to figure out how and what to tell her husband. She eventually mustered the nerve to tell him the truth, but with the assertion that she wanted to stay at the Gardens and would not consider leaving. He was upset but didn't push it. A week later, while he was at work in the downtown area, his car in the company parking lot was broken into and, guess what? His car phone—gone. The young man who took Lorna's phone had a long history of trouble. One of our students, Matt, a firefighter by trade, agreed that he would work with the young man, Rudy, to help him begin righting the course of his life. They worked together even after Matt's placement was over. It was difficult, not always successful, work. By the way, the car phone was returned when Matt first met Rudy and they agreed to work together. Matt and Rudy both knew the odds against a young African-American male with a rap sheet making it. But they both made a moral commitment to try.

To me, these early stories and happenings represent the difference between being with people and doing things together, trusting in each other to do as well as we can, as opposed to doing things for and to people because you know what is right for them. And, in myself, I find a similar tension, whether it is in teaching, in this work, in administrative duties, or volunteer activities. Sometimes, I think I know what needs to be done and am tempted to do what I must to make certain that it does. But almost always when I act pre-emptorily, things do not turn out as well as they might—in the long run. On the other hand, working collaboratively, eye-to-eye, or as Friere requires, in humble, loving dialogue, can be frustrating, a seemingly endless path. What eventually turns out or up, however, is well worth the patience and endurance.

Breaking Bread

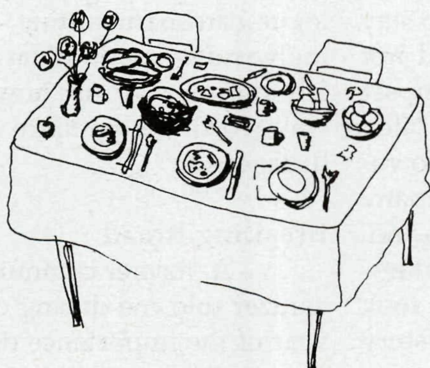
A former community organizer told me during our first year of the importance of break-

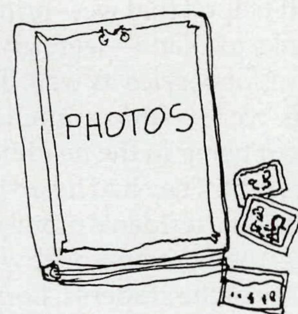
ing bread with constituents, consumers, and residents. Eating together, enjoying a meal puts us at the same table, encourages talk and sharing, and is almost always organically good. He was right. All of us loved the times we spent with residents at the table, or in chairs juggling paper plates heaped with food. No matter how close your relationship is with individuals and families, having a meal together allows each to see and appreciate the utter and shared humanity of all. The best meals, and we had many occasions each year to break bread, were potluck. Individuals and families brought delectable and bountiful treats to the table. These were truly feasts. Two years ago, at the end of the year on the occasion of the students leaving, some of the elder women wanted to have a lunch to honor the students, (I was always gratified to see how close students and residents became, and how some students maintained their relationship with some residents over the years because they had become genuine friends.) For 24 hours they cooked, baked, assembled and that afternoon a banquet was put before us that would have embarrassed any haute cuisine. We sat for hours laughing, sharing stories about our families, reminiscing about the past year's trials and triumphs. To me, this is an outcome measure of extreme potency. Breaking bread, at another level, seems to me to be an apt metaphor for other interactions. Projects that students, staff, and residents created—a street fair, a talent show, a Kwaanza celebration, a Black history month celebration— to me developed into a kind of a homespun, modest praxis and a symbolic breaking of bread together.

Polaroidô.

In the second year one of the students began to take pictures, candid camera shots of events, everyday activities and events, a visual archive of what was happening in the Gardens. Women dancing and moving during the aerobics class (a minigrant project), children coming home from school, residents and students enjoying a Thanksgiving repast, students and parents handing out gifts at Christmas. But most of the shots were cameos of all the children and adults who came our way.

We plastered our windows with them. One day, one of the mothers was seen taking down a couple of pictures, one of her and one of her children. Of course, the initial response was that something is wrong here; this is not a good thing to do. But here's the story. Most of the parents and kids had never had their picture taken and had no





photos of themselves in their apartments. These Polaroids became a treasure, a revelation. Imagine that. We take the family photo album for granted, as expected as a piece of furniture. But never to have had a camera, or never to have had the wall of a room dappled with pictures of children, friends, parents, or lovers is almost incomprehensible. So the student with the Polaroid became the visual biographer for the Gardens that year. The hunger for this record, the sheer pleasure in receiving it, would be difficult to overstate. How much else in the life of the poor is missing because of lack of money? How many opportunities for family celebration are lost because of lack of money? How many family excursions are not taken because of lack of money? I think to myself: Add these all up and, in their summation, how do they conspire against family solidarity and comfort?

LESSONS FROM THE 'GARDEN'

Reflecting on the days, months, and years of our project, I draw a number of lessons.

Capacity

In an agency setting, a bureaucratically sculpted organiza-

tion, it sometimes is difficult to see and appreciate the competence, the skills, and the assets of both colleagues and clients. Often, the veil of social role and job dimension requirements is thrown over our eyes and we cannot see the person as clearly as we might. In the community, you must see the person or you cannot become a "member." Something that enthralls me are two seemingly antagonistic perceptions and insights. First, the dailiness of troubles for people struggling in poverty cannot be overstated. It isn't just not having enough money—that's bad enough in consumption-crazed culture. It is being labeled as "poor" or "underclass" and, thus undeserving. Worse yet, the "poor" are frequently dismissed by officialdom: social workers, teachers, police, physicians, and government officials among others. It isn't just being disregarded but segregated as well. Not just the segregation of place; this is the segregation in the public mind, the dismembering of a "citizen." We drive by the hundreds of Lifton Gardens in this country and shut our civil and moral senses to the people who live there in real time and real space—a drive-by "snooting," in effect. Second, however, once in the community one comes to know in short order not just the troubles, the trauma, the crises, the weaknesses of spirit and flesh, but the extraordinary capacity of people who confront adversity more often than they should. The strengths come from not just dealing with adversity, but also from people's own inner resources and knowledge: traits and virtues developed along the way. When first in the community, I struggled to see beyond the problems—whether it was drugs or disorganization, or just the mighty battle against the erosion of spirit and energy that alienation and poverty can set loose. But being there, with the guidance of Diana, I shortly came to see and appreciate, as the students did, the bounty of resources and skills in the residents.

> LaShawn, with a history of being abused as a child and being battered and beaten by men in her adult life, mother of two boys with an array of learning and physical problems, and herself with a number of medical problems, takes leadership of the RMC Board. Her intelligence and dedication to the community quickly become apparent. For three years she guides the RMC with a steady, sometimes stern hand. The Board becomes a viable entity. Diana and the students help along the way, but it clearly is LaShawn who is doing the driving. Without compensation, LaShawn worked 30-40 hours a week on Board matters. In that time, the food pantry thrived, the thrift shop was a going concern, and each unit had a tenant organizer to trouble shoot, meet needs, and keep people informed.
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> Ms. Washington who had raised 11 kids, 8 of whom have survived and all of whom are financially independent, is now in her 80s but still active in the community in a quiet way. No matter what goes on around her, the porch in her little apartment—spring, summer and fall—is festooned with flowers and plants. Her faith and religion are what she claims keep her going and what kept her children out of trouble. "I was always there; made sure that we ate every meal together, and I read from the Bible every night." A student's cleverness encouraged Ms. Washington to impart a little of her wisdom to others (which she did informally). We had a mini-grant program where residents could get up to $200 for a project that a panel of students and residents determined would benefit the community. The student urged Ms. Washington to follow through on her idea of having a Bible study class by applying for a mini-grant to buy Bibles and refreshments for such an endeavor. She did. The "club" met every week and Ms. Washington dispensed to young and old alike a little of her folk wisdom about raising children successfully. The student thought that would happen.
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> Willie had five children, the oldest almost 6. I can only believe that in the eyes of pro-

fessionals and politicians, she would be a walking advertisement for ending welfare as we know it and getting tough on teenage mothers. No doubt Willie is in for it as her children grow and she contends with poverty. But Willie was a remarkable mother. Tall, lithe, and extraordinarily beautiful, she gave all of her kids unqualified love and attention. Her apartment looked as if it has been hit by a clothes and toys bomb, but that is not the point. The point is that Willie made a home for her kids. She also was smart enough to know that she should not have any more children. At one point, an old boyfriend and father of one of the kids called and wanted her and the children to move in with him. He was living in a large metropolitan area 600 miles away. Willie pondered the offer. The idea of having a father and a helpmate was seductive. She decided to go, knowing the risks. She borrowed an old car. The car had no front seat so Willie installed a wooden chair on the driver's side, packed up the kids and drove west. Imagine that 600 mile drive—with five little children. At any rate, she made her destination. In two days she realized it was not going to work out. She packed up the children once again and headed home. Her mother offered to take her in, to get her out of public housing. But Willie did not want to impose that burden on her mother who is not well. She wanted to make it on her own. Who knows what help she will need along the way? But whatever help is extended, Willie's considerable strengths, ingenuity, and capacity for love must be the centerpiece of work. By the way, Willie was 21 years old.

Lorenzo is trouble. Argumentative, wily, suspicious, he has been involved in the community for years, but much of his involvement is based in serious self-interest. Lorenzo is smart and is dedicated to a cause. He has become a Muslim. He believes—when he looks beyond his own gains—that the strength of the community lies in developing a strong, even militant spirituality. He has a theory of poverty that, while it might sound to a casual listener like a seedling of paranoia, has a lot of plausibility. He is slow to trust our outreach effort, thinking that perhaps we are another of the occupying forces of the housing authority. He knows —he is not wrong here—that a lot of service providers, individuals, and institutions make money off poor folks and do not deliver. Lorenzo and I talk a lot. He can infuriate me, but I know that there is a powerful intellect at work here, a curiosity about the way the world works. If Lorenzo were somewhere else he just might be an "official" scholar. In his own way, he is committed to the community even though he, too, makes a little money off the poor. "I am poor. I know what it's like and when I take money I know I am going to give it back." Whether he does or not, Lorenzo is a man making intellectual, moral, and financial capital out of being poor.

So many stories could be told of the hundreds of acts of kindness, intelligence, and courage that help to make the Gardens a neighborhood in a battle zone. If I lived in the Gardens, I would be hard-pressed to do as well as some of the residents do. As workers and policy-makers, we need to understand how they do it, to support it, and on the basis of what they teach us develop ways to support their hopes and visions—apart from public housing.

Students, too, amazed me with their aplomb and strength. Our "agency" is a hymn to flexibility, looseness or, shall I say, disorganization? Many first- year students find that discomfiting, if not baffling. Being in a public housing complex also immediately raises concerns about safety. Most of our students are middle-class and white. They sometimes come with the same biases about public housing so plentiful in the larger society: drugs, danger, disorganization, and destitution. Other students, both White and African-American, have come from relative poverty, a few from public housing. In some cases, these students had a different sort of conflict. They had come out of poverty, relatively speaking, and in their hearts initially wondered, if they made it why couldn't these individuals? Or they had come away from poverty and now had to be reminded of how it can grind your face into the ground. Nonetheless, the students, with very

few exceptions, and not without some anguish and pain, found themselves devoted to the residents they encountered, felt in some nearly ineffable way connected to and a part of the community. I cannot possibly do justice to all the students here but I hope a few brief vignettes will give the reader a sense of the hopes and fears, energy and excitement, frustration and glory, ingenuity and capacity of these students.

Nikki, who does not take "no" for an answer, is working with Ms. Wren. Ms. Wren weighs about 300 pounds and has numerous medical problems. Most of the time she is chair-bound or bed-ridden. Her two older sons try to take care of her but have their own troubles to attend to, so their care is unreliable. Ms. Wren doesn't trust doctors but, even if she did, she can't get to the clinic. After many weeks of work, Nikki finally gets Ms. Wren to go to see a doctor. But how to get her there? In the end, Nikki brings her, pick-up truck and a ramp. She wheels Ms. Wren into the bed of the truck, lashes her in, makes her comfortable, and off they go. As an aside. Ms. Wren lived in an apartment that was not handicapped accessible. Nikki with help from Diana got that changed, too.

Ray is a bear of a man but has the soul of a shaman. He is working with a single father who has a teenage daughter who is going through some difficulties at school. Earl, coming off years of struggle with alcohol, is frail, and has many medical problems that Ray makes sure are attended to. But it is his concern about his daughter and about being a better parent that bring Ray and Earl together. They spend hours with each other—on the grounds, in the car, in Earl's apartment—and as time passes you can see Earl take on some of Ray's spiritual heft. He gains more confidence and begins to strengthen his relationship with his daughter who begins to calm down at school. Ray and Earl have become friends, bound in the heart and spirit. In the summer, after Ray has gone, Earl dies suddenly. Ray has lost a family member, and like one, does what he can to help the rest of family face this transition.

Jeffrey is young, bright, activist by inclination, and in his budding career wants to bring law and social work to bear in helping individuals and communities where poverty is the rule. He is with the program for three years. During that time he works with the city-wide resident council composed of resident leaders and presidents of RMC Boards. This is a critical group politically if the residents are to have a significant voice in the affairs of city government and the housing authority in matters that relate to the quality of residents' lives. These are all women, many elders, very strong in their own ways. But the group has languished and floundered and they face a critical juncture. The housing authority is going into receivership thanks to a class action suit brought by Legal Aid. The voice of the residents must be heard clearly during this momentous transitional period. Young, innocent-looking (looking but not acting) Jeffrey, along with the lawyer who brought the suit to Federal court, works with this group over months, and helps guide them to a position of purpose and strength. Jeffrey knows that the coalition is fragile but leaves also knowing that they have new knowledge, resolve, and have experienced success (they did manage to have input in the selection of a receiver). Wise beyond his years, Jeffrey leaves us with the admonition that unless we become more politically active, nothing is going to change. He may be right.

Deena is African-American, dramatically beautiful, young and not at all sure she wants to be in this placement. After all, she later explains, "I came from this. I came from a life of poverty and abuse. I do not need to relive it." This after three months of not seeming to take hold. It now is too late to change her field placement. Anna, the Ph.D. student acting as field instructor, a woman of great calm, exceptional insight, and patience helps Deena confront her fears, remembrances, hesitations. She manages to get Deena connected to a young woman about Deena's age who has gone through some of the same turmoil Deena is facing but who may be subduing her turmoil with alcohol and

drugs. Reluctantly, Deena begins to engage Lynette. Soon, they are taking long walks together, discussing everything under the sun. Their troubles become less of a focus as they mutually crafted a plan to become more healthy and whole, more assertive, more knowledgeable and respectful of their African-American heritage and of the strengths of Black women in particular. At the end of the year, as a kind of ritual celebration of their journey, and as part of a street fair in the community, Deena, Lynette and other women and young girls in the complex put on a fashion show of African-American clothes. A stunning exhibition, I think to myself of the chrysalis of pain bursting into the beauty of identity.

I could have told 25 other stories. Stories about the determined feminist orientation of Marie, another Ph.D. student/supervisor whose commitments meant so much to some of the women residents. Stories about Lorna's capacity to embrace so warmly all of the residents she met. About Mitchell's work with young men fighting to get right. And, of course, about Diana's steadfast and remarkable presence through all of these years. I think you get the idea. I must also say these are my recollections and I bear full responsibility for them.

CONSCIENCE AND A SENSE OF THE COMMON

The anger I described earlier might best be understood as indignation. To see the effects of our attitudes about, our theories of, our research into, and policies around the poor is to be morally affronted. We still think that being poor is primarily a result of individual characteristics of those in poverty. Researchers delve into the attributes and personalities of the poor. Politicians make hay out of assertions that the poor, especially those on welfare, are bleeding the system dry and with purpose. Citizens' views of the poor are framed in fear and anger, propelled by unflattering and debasing labels, often code words for race. As a society, at many different levels, we scapegoat the poor, often, as Herbert Gans points out, displacing larger problems and concerns onto them where they seem more manageable and in safe remove. If the family is falling apart, it is because of the increase of teenage pregnancy, especially among African-American females. If the budget deficit is growing it is because the undeserving poor have attached like leeches to the veins of the welfare system. If crime is growing in the inner city, it is because poor families (read African-American) are disreputable and disorganized and because their children drop out of school and deal drugs. The current designation or, rather, label that sticks in the minds of the media, politicians, and social scientists is underclass. This creates a powerful image, often racial depending on the user, of a people apart and beneath the rest of us, apart civilly, morally, psychologically, and behaviorally. If they are apart, of course, it is of their own doing. Rarely do we look at the structural, historical, political and social forces that, in our society, assure that "the poor you shall always have among you." To demand that the welfare mother go to work when the job market is shrinking wildly in her part of the country is nothing short of, well, nuts. But, in the end, to disparage the poor is to not know them; to not be aware of or familiar with the fact that they are like us. They have virtues and strengths, weaknesses and failings. They have triumphed and fallen from grace and redeemed themselves. Their stories are our stories. They are us...except they are poor.

HOPE

HUD

To work in the community, as student or professional, is constantly to be aware of peculiar moral tension. Jeffrey, at the end of this year, said it in an essay he wrote for my community development class. There is perhaps an irresolvable conflict between working from a strengths perspective and working to organize a community. In the former instance, we are in danger of forgetting the political and social realities that shape and nurture poverty. Maybe we are even in danger of playing into the hands of those who would hurt the poor by insisting they either lift themselves up by their bootstraps or suffer the consequences. In the latter case, our work is driven by the need to appreciate and be

keenly aware of the structural factors that grind the poor down.

We must commit ourselves principally to act against those forces. To do that means mobilizing the poor and their friends and confronting directly the policies and practices that separate, discriminate, and oppress. I am not sure that this is the way to describe the tension but nonetheless there is a sense sometimes of doing the trivial when only the heroic will do.

There is another source of discomfort. We do not want to fall into the Rousseauian trap of romanticizing people who are poor. Appreciate and understand we must. We also must clearly see the situations before us. Two female students this year, fragile in appearance but strong enough in will, were accosted by a man whom they knew, wielding a knife. He had them alone in our apartment and spurred, at least, by alcohol, threatened to show what he could do to them with the knife. Fortunately, Diana entered the apartment and intervened, tossing the man out on his ear and calling the police. Some of the residents were upset at her for the arrest. They regarded Jacque (the assailant) as innocent enough. Diana's attitude was that anyone wielding a weapon and full of alcohol has lost his/her innocence.

So we must hone our conscience as we work in the community. No matter what the focus of our work, whether it is building on the assets and strengths of members of the community toward making the community a little stronger or whether it is helping a middle-aged man get his VA benefits, we do well to develop the capacity for critical consciousness. This is a state of mind, a condition of perception, a framework for cognition, and a moral complexion that directs us to be aware, no matter that we are helping Jaime learn how to drive so he can apply for jobs, but there are institutional reasons Jaime is going to have trouble getting a job, reasons that extend far beyond the modest domain of his life. To be indignant, not angry, is not to be paralyzed or overwhelmed at the scope and dimension of poverty but to be motivated to do whatever has to be done within the limits of one's time and energy to assist people, together and singly, to move down a path toward a better life. To not act because one awaits the valiant impulse, the moment for the sweeping gesture, is to demur, albeit dramatically. But I worry, usually late at night, that being in the Gardens, whatever the auspices or intent, only reinforces the status quo.

A sense of the common goes a long way toward helping one work in the community—the moral disharmony described above notwithstanding. I think that a sense of the common involves many subtle appreciations and skills. The students who did best seemed to either have or develop it. Of course, I hope I have it, too. At the least, "closeness to the people" is a requisite. By that phrase, I mean a disposition to work side-by-side, hand-in-hand, to obliterate obvious class, racial, ethnic differences in the service of "being there." We honor and respect the folk wisdom laid before us. We appreciate the tempo, rhythm, and meanings of another's world and are more than willing to partake heartily of that world.

The second meaning of a sense of the common is what we would expect. Anyone doing

work in the community should have common sense: A set of capacities, attitudes, inventions, ideas, and behaviors that point one on the direction of the most practical, the most relevant, the most interesting, and the most consequential ways of doing something or achieving a goal. Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "Nothing astonishes [people] as much as common sense and plain dealing." One of the most common of the attributes is the capacity of for caring and connection. Whatever else it may be, work in the community is about being able to establish relationships, to connect people with each other, to express caring and steadfastness in the dailiness of the experience. All else flows from that.

A FINAL WORD: CITIZENSHIP

We work, when it comes down to it, to establish the citizenship of the disaffected, disowned, and alienated. Eventually, citizenship is secured by policies, practices, and laws that ensure full rights and responsibilities for all. Most of the poor people in this country are not in fact or in effect fully endowed citizens. Michael Walzer argues that to be without membership is to be in a condition of infinite danger. Our program cannot bestow citizenship but we can help assure participation, connection, and access; we can assist in the strengthening of personal and communal assets and resolve; we can advocate for; we can help create small venues in which citizenship is experienced. But I and others must face the fact that there will have to be a cultural, social and institutional change of heart about people who are poor and about poverty before citizenship is a palpable reality. Until then we live with the discomfort of falling short. We also live with the remembrance and reality of the courage and patience of the people and families who are the faces of "poverty." □

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