

EDITORIAL: " BUTTING IN"

"All lives are connected to other lives. Where all human connections are distrusted, the human being is quickly lost."

— James Baldwin

by Paul Abels

One of my major concerns, is that I am a "buttsky." This may be the reason I became a social worker. They haven't yet discovered whether there is a genetic disposition for butting in, but I know it runs in the family. My wife Sonia, for instance, never misses an opportunity to approach a mother who is hitting her child and commenting that the mother must be upset about her child's carrying on, or whatever the behavior that led to the parental loss of temper. While this intervention stops the hitting, I have felt impelled to talk to her about the risk of getting hit herself, maybe worse, but to no avail. Whether supermarket or mall, her behavior has not changed. On the other hand, I butt in a lot at faculty meetings, poker games, and social occasions, when doodling instead, would save a lot of people aggravation. Lately I have had to rethink my butting-in-ness. Things I have taken for granted are under scrutiny and attack, while one definition of butting in is "intervention," another is "meddling." Helpers are vulnerable or helpful, depending on which interpretation those we care for and care to work with, assume about us.

A number of things occurred during the past year that have created an unbalance in my homeostatic existence. I was asked to write a chapter for a de-

bate, "Can ethnic agencies more effectively serve ethnic communities than mainstream agencies?" I was "con." Then the President passed the new welfare legislation, I questioned the moral stance of that position with my Democratic friends, that too was like taking the "con." Then I read the article in this issue by Howard Goldstein in which he discusses what I believe to be the coming asunder of our profession's historic mission. Both he and I are on the "wrong" side. That colleague from Newark, he talks about, whose dean called him "too moral," well I'm from Newark. "Con" again. I am out of balance, and the ground is swampy. Read on.

In Professor Lee's article we see an Anglo woman working with a group of young minority teen girls, by all "objective" observations, a very helpful process unfolds. In other times, there would be little question that it was a good match up, in fact, right or wrong, some might have felt there was a lot to be gained by that cross-cultural coming together. But in our times the question of the "right to," rather than the "ability to" becomes an issue of conflict.

The intervention dilemma is brought home most clearly in the Amy Biehl article. Here we see the ultimate consequence of interventions, welcomed by some, de-

plored by others. We are faced with the question of whether anyone has the right to "butt in." Must we be invited, must we be selective, must we only help "our own?" Who gives us the sanction, what proportion of the population, which group? Who has the right to say "butt out?" These are important questions for those in the helping professions to consider, as the article's commentators attest. Research will not help us, moral imperialism certainly can't help us, but a sense of moral responsibility might. What is one life as measured by the death and oppression of thousands? No one can answer that for anyone, but if we can connect to the death of one, then we won't forget to connect to the death of the thousands of ones. It is not a matter of body counts, but a matter of what counts... Dunne said it best, perhaps forever...

No man is an island, entire of itself: every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main; if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friends or of thy own were; any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind; and therefore never send me to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.

These are hard times for our profession. Society will soon tire of the stories and pictures of people saying "there is nothing left for them to do but starve with out food stamps," or of mothers forced to work at below standard wages begging for a day care program for their children, or of the unions saying the new laws are 'union busting,' or of immigrant children fearful that they will be

put out of school. But not us! We will continue to intervene or meddle or butt in. That's what we're here for. Divided we still stand. But the bells are tolling. □



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