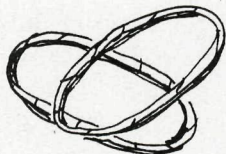


## REFLECTIONS ON PRACTICE AND LIFE: HOW ONE INFORMS AND CREATES THE OTHER

*I am standing at a crossroads. It is an uneasy place to tarry. I have been a social worker for most of my life. I have tolerated my own ambivalence about social work education, and about the profession of social work. In this narrative I will tolerate my own ambivalence about practice itself – and about myself in the process. I will explore themes and events that appear in my practice and my life – love and hate, joy and pain, trial and triumph. I will share my first formal group work experience in detail as it contains many metaphors for my ongoing struggle and commitment. I will also reflect on cases, other groups, and experiences that bring these themes into the present time. The story begins in 1966.*

**By Judith A. B. Lee**

Judith Lee, DSW, is Professor, School of Social Work, University of Connecticut, West Hartford, Conn.



I have put this writing off because I am afraid to find out what I am really thinking about social work and life. Writing often takes on a direction of its own. It might take me where I am not prepared to go. I have been aware of standing at a crossroads.

I am alarmed at recent trends in the profession, particularly our acquiescent response to “managed care” and how it influences client service, practice, teaching and learning. Building relationships and space for reflection take too much time and energy. Time is money. Formulae and fast solutions are the order of the day. One must design succinct measurable objectives so one can prove that whatever it is that can be done so briefly actually works.

The handwriting has been on the wall for a long time. I anticipated aspects of this in earlier writing (Lee, 1983;1987). I identified many of the salient issues though I unnecessarily polarized the clinical and the political levels of practice. My recent book, *The Empowerment Approach To Social Work Practice* (1994a), was an attempt to unite the personal/clinical and the political in social work practice even as I have had no choice about uniting them in my life.

I view the narrative story as central to empowerment. Marsiglia and Zorita, in discussing the use of narratives with Latino/a students, acknowledge that stories are ideological structures produced by political realities which in turn influence the formation of the self. Further, they demonstrate how educators and social workers can help students and clients construct stories of their own affirmation and liberation (1996). *The Empowerment Approach* is replete with such stories. For the mature social worker and social work educator, we might say that the personal, the professional and the political are one. That is why it is scary to write the story.

I have tolerated my own ambivalence about social work education, and about the profession of social work. In this narrative I will tolerate my own ambivalence about practice itself — and about myself in the process. I will explore themes and events that appear in my practice and my life. I will share my first formal group work experience in detail as it contains many metaphors for my ongoing struggle and commitment. I will also reflect on cases, other groups, and experiences that bring these themes into the

present.

I stand at a turning point. It is an uneasy place to tarry. Some of it has to do with being 53 and having 32 years of paid formal social work practice behind me (including the practice of social work education). I have been a social worker for most of my life.

### REWIND: STOPPING TO TELL A FEW STORIES

The year is 1966. Aretha Franklin is singing "R-E-S-P-E-C-T" and the Beatles are moving into a Yellow Submarine. The challenging and beautiful words of Martin Luther King's 1963 "I Have a Dream" speech still linger in the hearts of those transformed by the gains of the Civil Rights Movement (King, 1964). When Dr. King spoke at a Baptist church one block from my home in Brooklyn's Bedford-Stuyvesant in the mid 1950s, we kids lined up outside and heard his voice on the loud speaker. The whole neighborhood was transfixed by his voice and the singing of the choir. By 1966, President Kennedy and Malcolm X have been assassinated. Hope has sustained mighty blows and there is a struggle against disillusion. In June of 1966, Stokely Carmichael

used Richard Wright's phrase "Black Power" to catalyze younger participants in the Freedom March through Mississippi after the shooting of James Meredith. Soon after, the Black Power Movement was born (Ansbro, 1982:211). "Black is beautiful" began to catch on though the term "Negro" was still popularly used by both African-Americans and Whites. The Watts riots were over and King worked toward mobilizing nonviolent direct action. He warned, "without another alternative Watts will look like a Sunday School Tea Party compared to what will happen" (Ansbro; 1982:249). King made the connection between war and resources. He began to identify poverty as a socioeconomic class problem, including the poor of all races in his concern. Poor Blacks, Whites And Hispanics were on the front lines in Viet Nam (Ansbro, 1982: 259). The Viet Nam War froze anti-poverty programs as it ushered in the beginning of a new era in human and civil rights history. Governments themselves could be challenged, or so it seemed. Many young people with means were "dropping out" even as they "dropped acid" (LSD). The Beatles sang - "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds." But most young people of working class, poor or lower middle class background who had somehow managed to go to college sought jobs where they could have security, make a contribution, make something of themselves and reach back to pull others along.

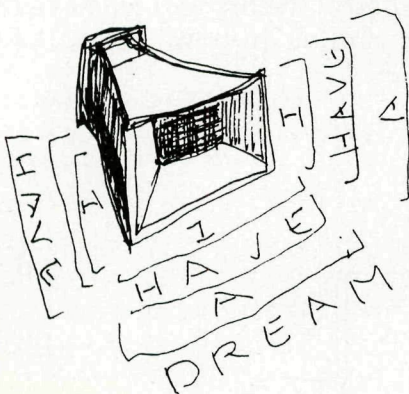
In November of 1966, I am twenty-three years old. I have been married for three years. Af-



ter an unsettling period of acculturation and winning acceptance, I enjoy being part of an extended Chinese family. My own family and childhood home broke asunder after the death of my grandmother shortly after I married. Nana was my heart and I inherited her caretaking roles but not all of her wisdom. I am 5'3", trim and a little awkward in my bearing, having never been at home in high heels or dresses yet conforming to the "professional" norm to wear them. My lipstick never stays on and I have long light brown hair with golden highlights. I am self-conscious as usual and my green-blue eyes are intent as I pace back and forth nervously awaiting the arrival of my first experience in group work at "The Agency"—New York City Bureau of Child Welfare, Division of Foster Home Care.

I have been a social worker for two years. Like my coworkers, I carry 25 foster children, their foster families and biological "natural" parents under the supervision of a clinically trained MSW. The teenage girls coming tonight, all African-American, are not from my caseload and I have not yet met them. The office is on the eleventh floor of a skyscraper set in the Civic Center of lower Manhattan. Kids do not usually like coming here.

In 1965, William Schwartz established group work here at the behest of Manny Fox and Rose Gutman, dedicated and forward thinking agency administrators. There was an aura about group work. At first only the supervi-



sors could attend Bill's sessions or practice with groups (Schwartz, 1968). The work was shared with us in staff meetings and I very much wanted to learn group work. I caught glimpses of Bill as the supervisors gathered around him after his training. I took an exciting group work course at Hunter with Aaron Beckerman. I was fired up to practice. I did not dream then that I could pursue a MSW or that I would be able to go to Columbia and finally take group work with Bill Schwartz, the penultimate teacher. When I got there in 1967, I worked out a casework and group work "double major" and the world opened up with a panoply of colors, textures and opportunities.

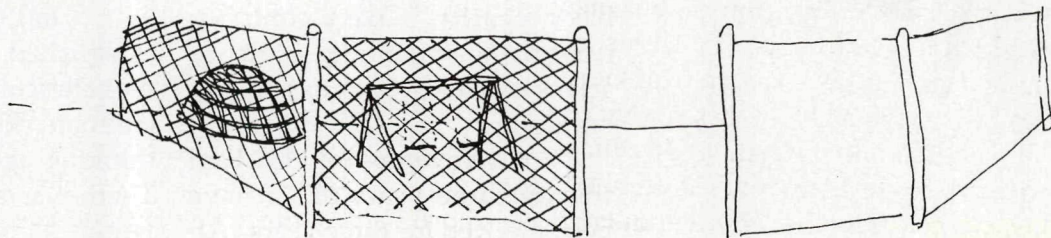
But as I waited on that Autumn day in 1966, I hoped I could do it. I knew it was hard for the agency to trust that I was ready for the experience. Finally, Mrs. Lovella Watson, a mature and charismatic African American supervisor, and I have been asked to start adolescent girls groups. I was to work with the older girls (16-19). Someone felt that would be easier! By now I was considered a fairly experienced foster care worker and I loved the work. But this very formal kind of group work was different. Sy Fass and Addie Dall, Assistant Directors, stopped my pacing by telling jokes. Addie added that she got the runs every time she began a new group. I sat down at my desk and closed my eyes to try to relax. It made me laugh to think about Mrs. Dall with the runs. I had "tuned in" to who the girls were a

million times (Schwartz and Zalba, 1971; Berman-Rossi, 1994). I knew they would be more scared than I was.

I remembered the church youth group that was so important in my teen years and the wonderful group leaders. I hoped I could offer that kind of experience and that the kids would accept me. A scene flashed across my mind. I am 18 and a PAL Play Street Summer Worker several blocks away from my own neighborhood. As usual I am the only White face around. My co-worker, a very tall and laid back African American college basketball player, was out ill. I organized some games and crafts. A fight broke out between Black and Puerto Rican boys. One had a stick. A smaller child was bleeding. I intervened. The angry eleven year old boy warned me to stay out of it. I didn't see how I could. Whack, his broomstick cracked across my face. I still remember the hurt—as much to my pride as to my head. The summer before, I was pinned to the wall by a huge Italian youth gang member in Red Hook as part of his flirtatious testing of the new playground worker. Somehow I got away. "Come on Vito, she's o.k.," the little kids screamed.

These memories were not helping now. I thought about the job. I considered it providential that I was chosen for the foster care division along with four oth-

ers out of a large group of applicants who passed a Department of Social Services test. I was learning social work. The starting pay was around \$4,000. I thought that was good. Foster parents only received about \$100 a month per child and the biological parents got much less from public funds. My training supervisor, Miss Edna May Davis, MSW, a gentle, wise and wonderful teacher and clinician of West Indian background, liked to tell the story that she took one look at me on my first day at the agency and said, "She'll never make it." This was confirmed after I yawned and almost fell asleep during our first unit meeting. As usual, I had taken the wrong train into Manhattan and walked so far I was exhausted. Miss Davis was a very bright and very structured woman whose air of authority could stop you dead in your tracks. By the time I left her unit, she admitted she was wrong about me, that I had miraculously turned into a good social worker. I was reassured when she came over to my desk and asked me if I were sleeping again. She retold the story of my first day and reminded me that I was well prepared to meet the girls tonight. Her smile and hand on my shoulder gave me the strength to get up and greet the first girl who eyed me cautiously from across the room.



## THE FIRST GROUP

(The practice vignettes are excerpted from the actual process records written after each group meeting. The parentheses indicate a summary or paraphrase. It is easy to see that process recordings are also narratives and important qualitative data.)

## THE BEGINNING

Cora arrived early. A timid, shy girl she was uneasy as we set up the room. Mary's arrival made it a little easier. She smiled warmly and moved close to Cora. I said that I knew it was hard to find the building as Mary spoke of getting lost. Bev then entered the room ushered by her social worker. She had an angry look on her face, slumped heavily into a chair and faced away from the group. I made introductions and Bev flashed a mock smile. Peg then entered in an animated way. Bev remained sullen and looked away and soon Peg stopped talking.

I got up and shut the door to draw us together symbolically and begin the meeting. Bev rolled her eyes at the closed door and turned to face the group. I said it was time to start and repeated my name and that I was the social worker who would be working with the group. Val then cheerfully entered and I encouraged introductions... I told them about the agency's group program for adolescents. Bev remained scowling. (I noted Bev's expression and) wondered what each felt about coming and what each thought the purpose of meeting together could be. Bev smiled to herself, pleased that I was recognizing her unpleasant negative expressions. The group looked at her. I smiled openly at her and she caught my eyes and looked quickly down. Peg said, No offense, but that she felt this group was formed to pry. She stopped and I repeated her feeling and encouraged her to go on. She said that social workers always pried into personal affairs and that she expected to see one way-mirrors in this room. Val said she thought Peg's thought was kind of odd. The group was formed so that they could talk about their problems together. Bev mumbled inaudibly. I asked what she said. She said, Nosy, Peg is right, social workers are just plain nosy. Val laughed and said she didn't think so — social workers try to help you. Bev replied, they never helped me....(six other girls then entered, one shortly

after the other so, we began again).

Larice, who walks with leg braces, a cane and a "tough girl" stance, had been in the same foster home as Val. She quickly began to say negative things about the foster parents and Val squirmed. I intervened. Val said it was O.K. as long as she could tell it her way too. Lari said O.K. and angrily proceeded with details. Val responded and concluded that it was a good home. Bev said, "Val, it was good for you but not for Lari." I reinforced this and added that one of the group purposes was for them to be able to talk about their foster homes. I praised the group members for working on this.

(They then added boys, school, jobs and being in foster care to the contract.) Bev told how embarrassing it was to have her White social worker come to the school...Then Cyn arrived with a disruptive air. She said, Let me tell you about my social worker. Bev insisted on telling more about hers first and proceeded to mimic her worker. After much laughter, each one shared feelings about social workers. (They also asked questions about allowances, and clothing money, which I answered honestly, and they volunteered for some committees.)

Bev took a poll on who would return. All except one would. Bev concluded, I came because I had to, my social worker made me. But now I see for myself and I want to come back. Almost all agreed. I was elated and said that I thought they had begun to help each other already, and that I hoped this would be a place where they could trust each other as each member had something to give and to gain from the group. (I discussed confidentiality and the kinds of things I would have to tell workers and when I might ask their permission to tell something.) After refreshments and just before the end of the meeting, Dot asked why social workers keep you from knowing about your real mother? This opened the door and stories poured forth. Cyn shared that she wished she never knew her mother was a prostitute and her father was unknown. "Social workers should sometimes not tell, especially when you're younger." The group fell silent. I sat back in my chair to listen. She elaborated. I said this was a most hurtful thing to learn and ...even now she finds this difficult to deal with. She said she did. I praised her strength in sharing this with the group. Bev, Peg and Eve, replied, it is hard, hard,

hard. I agreed with the sadness, and noted the time, adding I hoped we could talk like this again next time. Peg said, guess we got to go but when we talk about social workers we don't mean you, you're different. I said I was a social worker too, and we could talk about that again next time. I walked them to the elevator and said goodbye.

I was overwhelmed but pleased that I lived through my first meeting. I was delighted that the anger softened and the girls began to work. I worried about the scapegoating of the quieter girls. I felt especially pleased (and relieved) that Bev and Cyn were engaged. I had missed a lot but also caught a lot. I breathed a great sigh of relief, not fully realizing that it would take all 16 meetings and all I had in me to "reach" some of the girls and to help them develop a well functioning group. So far I had passed the tests but I did not realize what was ahead. I did not yet know that balance was needed in uncovering pain and learning new defenses to help bear it (Lee and Park, 1978; 1983). I did not yet know that the worker might be punished as if she caused the original hurt. I was to learn this. I was also to learn about love as well as hate and healing as well as hurting. It was a lot to learn at 23 but I have never forgotten these teachers. Some teaching\learning moments from the group follow.

### TESTING AND SCAPEGOATING

I know now that the second meeting represented a classic power and control struggle as leadership was established and limits were tested, including how much bullying among the members could be tolerated (Garland, Jones and Kolodny, 1973). I also know that Cyn needed to run from the feelings evoked by sharing so quickly about her "natural" parents and that in her pain she would strike out. Bev, her new friend and her rival for group leadership, would join in the attacks. Bev seemed to enter a battle for her very heart and soul.

In response to my reaching for what they thought about sharing many important concerns last meeting Cyn said she was glad to get "it" off her chest but didn't want to talk about "it" again since no one can do anything about it. Bev and Peg agreed. Cyn announced that she was tired and bored and we should talk about the coed party meeting. In the course of her report, she offended several group

members, including Bev, who took her on. Bev then asked if I would give them something else to talk about. In a too early attempt to make it their group, I didn't do this and their frustration began to grow.

Cyn then reengaged Bev by putting me on about using the refreshment money to buy beer. What was I going to do about it? I said I'd wait until I saw the beer. Everyone laughed and I passed the test. Cyn then grabbed a piece of paper from Bev and began to show it to others. It was a hand drawn pornographic picture. I said that I guessed I was supposed to be shocked, but sex was something they could talk about here. As the others relaxed at my response, Cyn snatched the paper back and said that was the last thing they ever wanted to talk about. Some disagreed but didn't say more. Bev then attacked: "This group can't help me — all they do is sit there ...There's such a thing as giving and taking and I'm doing all the giving." I tried to get a response from the others but Cyn jumped in and said "I can't wait forever— They're so damn slow." She got up to leave the room and I asked her to return. She did so angrily. Dot said she was not interested in talking about sex. Cora said she was, but it was difficult to get started. Bev then attacked Cora, "you say you're interested but you just sit like a dumb bump on a log. Are you stupid or something?" Lari intervened — "Bev, you and Cyn are dirty. When Cora has something to say, she'll say it. Why not pick on me instead..." Bev apologized to Cora and said she just wanted people to talk. Cora agreed.

I nodded toward Bev to continue. Cyn started laughing — "look at her nodding her head. I think its a damn habit." Peg, Bev and Cyn laughed and Peg apologized. Bev said I think she's testing us. Peg responded, no, I think we're testing her. I said I thought they were too. Most agreed. Val then suggested that they each bring something on their minds next time so the group could work on something that interested everyone. We are not empty heads to be filled and she just wants to be sure we're talking about what's really on our minds. And people will talk when they want to. All except Cyn agreed. I reinforced what Val said and added that I knew it was difficult to learn how to get along with each other. It was painful for everyone concerned but I was glad they were learning how to be a group. Bev took her poll and everyone said they were com-

ing back. Cyn said she'd get the beer and Lari replied I'm waiting to see it. Everyone laughed and relaxed a bit with the refreshments. I said this was a difficult meeting wasn't it? and looked around. There were nods and smiles all around and spirits seemed lighter as they left.

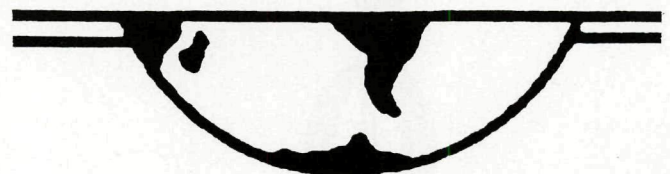
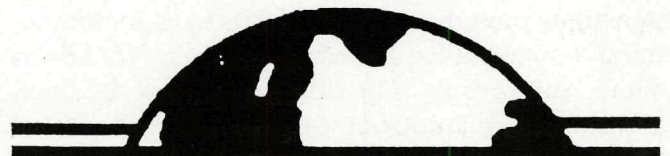
In my *Impressions* I recorded: This was a very difficult meeting for myself as the worker and for the group as a whole. I was somewhat threatened by Cyn's aggressive challenge and by Bev joining her...I expected to be tested. However, the directness, force and variety of the testing was something I had not fully anticipated nor prepared for... Bev's grappling with the contract and my role ("give us something to talk about") was very frustrating to her and to the group. I was so concerned over the theoretical, "let the discussion come from the group," that I failed to be more directing when it may have been comforting and helpful. Bev's impatience with the "quiet one's" may also be her impatience with me. She needed to share and could not... Cyn was of even more concern as she was unfeeling in the way she attacked the others. I had to resist the urge to be more protective of the quieter ones. I welcomed Lari's defense of Cora (and Val's wisdom on how to proceed with the group). In retrospect this very difficult meeting may be seen as a painful and crucial growing point for the group and for me.

I have learned to be more direct in reaching for the work and in naming what the painful or taboo "it" is. But the mysteries of power and control, caring and love, set out in my early practice experiences return again and again. An example of hostility on another level comes from a later meeting of the group. In this case it was about race.

### HOSTILITY AND RAGE

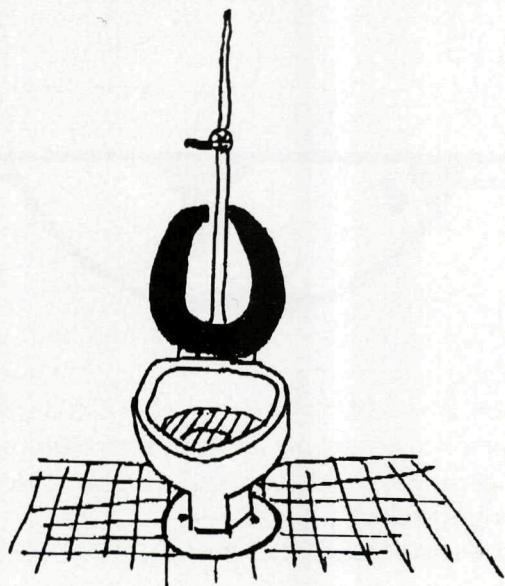
This meeting began with a discussion of popular books and T.V. shows about Black people... They said that Bill Cosby in "I Spy" was the only Negro on T.V. who didn't look like a stereotype of someone who would say "Yassuh, Boss." They began to talk about music, sharing their favorite songs—"Reach Out, I'll Be There" was #1. They were pleased that it was one of my favorites. I said I hoped that this group and I would also be there for them. Some affirmative nods and skeptical

looks. They were surprised that I had enjoyed *Manchild in the Promised Land* (Brown, 1965). Cyn then said, White folks' music was dumb, just like White folks. Bev said the best part in *Manchild* was where he beat up a group of White boys. Cyn then said that she hated her White English teacher because he told the class that she was a foster child. Bev said most White teachers are prejudiced anyway. Trying to encourage this expression about racism, I asked if the others felt this way? A few yesses and sharing of stories. Cyn then said, its not just teachers, the whole world is prejudiced. She added White people are ugly anyway and drew a verbal caricature. Bev agreed she hates White people with their ugly old pimply faces. Peg and Viv seemed uncomfortable and changed the subject back to Bill Cosby. I said I could understand the anger, things were pretty tough for them. Cyn said it was and heads nodded solemnly. I said that many of them had White social workers and asked if they felt that they, too, were prejudiced. Cyn and Bev said yes. Peg said they probably are but they don't show it. I said it must be hard to tell me these things because



I'm White too. Bev said that if I don't like what they say I can ask them to leave. I said I wanted to hear what they had to say. Cyn continued that they can say "cracker" but no White person can say "nigger." It's a fighting word. Bev told stories of a group of kids slashing a teacher's tires and smashing a store owner's windows because they were prejudiced. Cyn clapped her hands. Feelings were building ...

Bev said we were in the bathroom smoking at school. A White girl came in mumbling something about niggers. We grabbed her and stuck her head in the toilet bowl with all of the mess in it and flushed it. She had that long hair and you should have seen it swishing around. Several group members said "Ugh." Cyn said she saw that done too. She then described an incident where a White boy called a Black girl a nigger and a group of Black boys jumped him and shoved a stick up his rear end. It messed him up so bad he had to have a tube put in his side so he could urinate. Peg, Mary, Val and Viv said they didn't believe it. They turned to me and asked me if that could happen. I said I'm sure a stick could cause real damage, but I wondered if these actions were a solution to the problem of prejudice that they had presented. Cyn said well, in school they tell you the world is all peaches and cream, but it isn't. It's lousy. I agreed that prejudice was really lousy. I wondered what other solutions they thought of. Cyn said it's hard to do anything, look what happened to the Jews. Viv talked about Anne Frank. The others had read the book and they were animated. Cyn then said she hated yellow skinned Black people, they were as ugly as



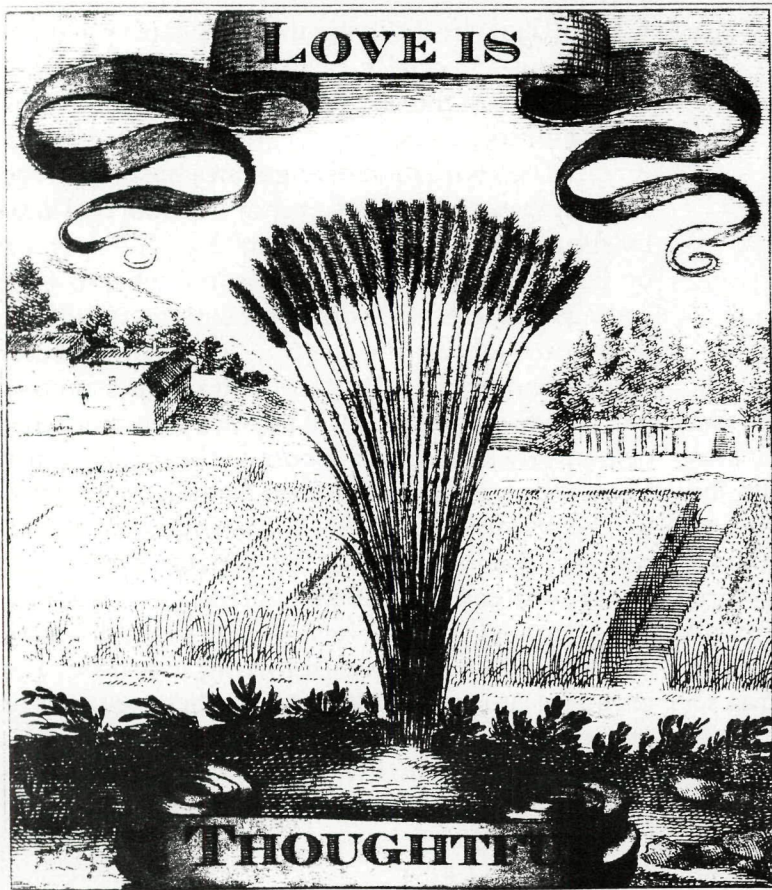
puke. Viv, the lightest in the group, said that inter-racial children were cute. Cyn and Bev disagreed. Cyn then changed the subject by bringing up a problem. She said she needs help because she steals and can't seem to stop....

I wrote in my *Impressions*: Cyn and Bev worked hard today. When Cyn shared her problem the others gave caring responses that seemed to soften her responses toward them .... Viv seemed O.K. although they gave her a hard time.... Bev seemed very relieved by the release of her hostility in the area of race. The group seems to feel comfortable enough with me to be uninhibited in this area and I feel gratified in being able to create this kind of atmosphere for them...

In retrospect, I truly meant that, but I also remember feeling threatened, almost frightened by the stories of violence and I remember seeing myself in the story of the long hair swishing in the toilet. I am sure that was intended. I remember feeling hurt, angry that I had been almost violated in effigy even as they had been violated by racism and hate. When I was 23 I couldn't admit such "unprofessional" thoughts to anyone, not even myself. At 53, with many more experiences of this kind under my belt, I realize how valuable it would have been to have shared those feelings with group members and colleagues. Yet I miss the selfless idealism and caring of my youth. Mayeroff describes the importance of such caring (1971).

## CARING AND LOVE

Many foster children feel totally unloved. This may be a function of depression or it may be tragic reality (Lee and Park, 1978). They long for love and caring. One of my individual cases was a thin, dark 14 year old boy raised in a religious foster home. One day he asked: if there is faith, hope and love and the greatest of these is love, why doesn't anyone love me? I put my arm around his shoulder and sat close as he cried and shared his longing for a "real mother." We talked. I wished I had the answer. I wished I could adopt him. I wished I could fix it. I left no stone unturned in locating his mother. A product of the rape of a



teenager by an adult man, he would be released for an adoption that would never happen. There was no glib answer to his pain. I remember leaving him feeling so thankful for the love of my own mother and grandmother. I wished I could give him a piece of that rich birthright. I knew the theme would emerge in the group. I also knew it explained much of the rage.

In the seventh meeting of the group, Peg brought in a newspaper article about three children being removed from their affluent foster home by our agency. This unleashed all of the projections of pain onto the agency and social workers who take children away...Bev noted, its not the home but the parents themselves that are important. Her former foster mother loved her but she died several years ago, she said softly. And, she heard that her real parents both died in a fire. Her present foster mother just wants that check, she said angrily. Several related feeling the same way. Peg said that her foster parents love her and give her a lot. She hates her

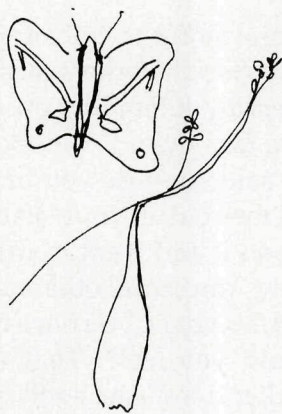
natural mother, who ran around with any man. Social workers mess up your happiness by reminding everyone that you are a foster child. Bev excitedly agreed. She said suppose you had an operation and they cut off your left breast. You disguised it and went to work and no one knew. You came home and your husband said, ho,ho,ho, you have no breast. How would you feel? That's what a social worker does, constantly reminding you that you are a foster child. Peg said that's right. I said that I could hear the pain they felt and it was very heavy pain. They were able to say that's why they want to forget it but they can't...

(We took a refreshment break, as much for me as for them). Mary shared that she was glad she was removed from her last foster home as she was abused by the foster father. Val said that happened to her too... Bev said she didn't fear removal as no one would want her anyway. Peg was drawing as she said we're just different. We're phony kids, not real. Sometimes I play with my foster Mom and say how was it when I was born. But you both know its not real. I said this hurt very much; she wants to be her foster mom's biological child. She and the others sadly agreed. Peg then produced an unflattering caricature of the Director. They all laughed. I said — I don't think you are really angry at the Director. Bev said no, we're angry because we're foster. Everyone agreed. I nodded in understanding. I asked if it helped to talk about it today, or did it rub salt into the wound. Bev said softly, it helped and the others nodded...

In the eleventh meeting Peg shared that she had been asked to write an article about our group for the agency's newspaper. She asked what the members had gotten or wanted to get out of the group. After joking that they got nothing and watching me squirm, Bev said sheepishly that she wanted love from the group and that she had gotten some affection. She added she wasn't sure she knew what love was. The group members struggled with whether they loved their foster parents, natural parents or boyfriends...

I was amazed that Bev could articulate that





she wanted love from the group. I learned then that the group could become a substitute family. It was very hard to end with these youngsters. From the 12th meeting on I began to gently echo the ending that would come. All of the group workers enjoyed the teen party, coed trip and individual group trips as they were pure fun for kids who had so many cares, and workers who could not take the pain away. Including the fun times, the group met 19 times.

## THE ENDING

Cyn, maintaining her hard exterior, said she got nothing out of the group anyway, but she'd return next year to see if it got better. After some hesitation Bev said that she had grown a lot in the group. Peg sensitively agreed that Bev had grown. Everyone was moved as Bev stated in a small voice — "I have grown from hate into kindness." She added that she hated me just for being White. This was a 'deep feeling,' but as meetings progressed she found herself not even thinking about it. She felt that I cared about her and that the other group members did too. We each said we did. She said now she likes her funny White social worker and it's even better at school. Peg said — "Judy, Bev really likes you, we all know it and feel the same." My voice cracked as I said I cared very much about Bev and each of them and ending was very hard. Lari said she didn't like me at first just because I was a social worker but she wished she had attended more meetings... They spoke of next year. They knew now that I would be leaving for school. They were sad. I said that it was the group that was important, not me, that they gained so much from each other. Bev said — "Well, I still have a problem and went on to

share it..."

This remains in my mind the most poignant of endings—especially Bev's precious gift of her transformation into caring. In my final group summary I wrote:

The ventilation of anger and hostility in the areas of foster care status, race and school had a cathartic effect on the group members. The opening up in the area of sex also gave some relief to guilt feelings and fears. For some problems were worked through while in the group. The White social worker and the hated authority figure (personified in the worker) turned into a positively seen helping person. I was able to encourage the group to use me as the object of their anger. At times it was hard to take, but the end result was more than worth it. I was especially gratified at Bev's metamorphosis as she grew in caring relationship to the leader and to the group.... I reached her...though I could not really reach Cyn. The scapegoating lessened. The group became cohesive and developed a sense of group identity. They made a positive identification with the agency. This was a most valuable experience for the group members and the leader.

## IN RETROSPECT

I am in awe of the young woman that wrote that summary and did that work. It is undoubtedly the love in the work and the experience of reaching the other that keeps me going. The caring is its own reward. But, I'm glad that by 24 I was able to admit that being the object of anger "was hard to take." It still is hard to take. I may not be as eager to encourage it as I was then although I can "handle it" more easily. I am better in pacing painful and consciousness raising experiences and it is a lot easier to talk about oppression now. Coming out as a lesbian in my thirties landed me in even greater solidarity with the oppressed than female status, a family that was different, or poverty. Yet, there is a cumulative effect to absorbing and carrying the pain of oppression whether in one's self or



to help others empower themselves. I am getting tired. I always believed that training top-notch African-American, Latino, and other minority group students, and mentoring their growth as social workers is most empowering to all concerned. But I must admit that just a corner of that is self-serving. There are times in the kitchen when I can't stand the heat!

### RECENT HEAT IN THE KITCHEN THE STORY CONTINUES

In 1974 I began my full time academic career as a Faculty Field Instructor/Assistant Professor for Columbia University School of Social Work at a Housing Authority Unit in the embattled South Bronx. The unit was originally set up by Alex Gitterman who mentored me in the effort (Gitterman, 1976). The full-time social worker job had been eliminated so I directed the agency; supervised 6-8 students; continued to develop the services; carried some direct helping responsibility; and taught at the School (Lee and Swenson, 1978).

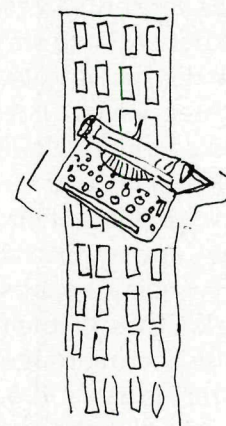
This was on the front lines. The students were diverse. The initial response to this huge housing project and devastated area was fear and revulsion. The office was located in a first floor apartment of a 34 story building. In most buildings the front door locks were broken, the elevators did not work and the stairwells reeked of urine. It was a scary location, even for me. But I soon got involved in the work and got to know our clients. Their strengths and will to work toward a better

life won me over completely. I was then better able to handle the students' fears.

One African-American woman student, whose father was a doctor initially was in great shock. As she learned to trust me, she shared her dismay at the plight of her people. She was then able to turn her anger toward working with a tenants group in our building. I remember a talented Puerto Rican student throwing up her arms and exclaiming in despair that she could no longer visit her favorite client in a situation of domestic violence. She was afraid. I had to agree. We were delighted when the battering man was jailed on another charge. There was a thoroughly frightened young White man from out of state and I could do little to unthaw him. He called the boys in his group "you people." They retaliated with ridicule. This was the first student I had to bring before the Educational Review Committee and ultimately fail. This was very difficult as I knew how hard this placement was.

Then there was a young Orthodox Jewish woman who did beautiful work with children. To the girls she was doubly different but she was experienced at handling her difference. She also worked with an elderly Jewish woman living on a top floor who refused to give up her apartment and enter a nursing home. Mrs. A. was a virtual prisoner of the broken elevators and her fear of muggings. The student was a faithful visitor. As Mrs. A. became more frail she realized it was time to go. The student held the tiny old woman in her arms and sang

with her "Pintele Yid," a Yiddish song about the little Jew. They cried together and I cried with her in supervision as we shared the woman's pain. She went to a Jewish Home where she eventually



thrived, with the help of the student who was her only visitor long after the student placement ended. The student broke the rules about "making clean endings" with my blessing. I understood that she had to respond to a higher calling in her sense of responsibility not to further abandon the Pintele Yid. There were times when I broke the rules for similar reasons, especially when working in War Zones.

### ANOTHER KIND OF WAR

After two years, when our office was robbed and the typewriters were thrown from the roof at us, I took an assistant professor position at NYU School of Social Work. My revered teacher, Hy Weiner, was now Dean and he encouraged me to come. He also mentored and supported me. I did not realize I was entering another kind of War Zone—academic life. When I was pursuing my Doctorate at Yeshiva, Lloyd Setleis, then Dean, observed that

the battles were so bad in academia because the stakes were so low. He was right, but it was hard for an idealistic young teacher to avoid the jousting. I loved teaching but the ideological battles were discouraging. I did not know how to stay out of it without distancing myself. I did this in three ways. I relied on friends like Lucretia Phillips and others. I practiced in the New York City Women's Shelters near the School, and eventually I left.

Practicing social work in New York City's Women's Shelters was like doing triage during a disaster (Lee, 1986, 1990, 1994a,b). In one shelter there were 150 women and only one part time MSW (Jean Anmuth) to assist essentially paraprofessional staff. It was painful to see women warehoused and so roughly treated, and this was relatively good as shelters go. While some women, unused to human caring, cursed you for reaching out, most grabbed on for dear life. I involved students and other professionals but one could never do enough. Tragic faces haunted me as I tried to intervene on the direct practice level, doing group and individual work, and at the system level with top administrators (Lee, 1994b). Once again, the clinical job included absorbing rage and pain, but this time, going beyond words to the remedies for homelessness was imperative, and the lack of resources was shameful. Yet, the quality of caring and mutual aid was inspiring. There were some women who literally had no one in an outside support network like Nina, a mentally and physically challenged member of the "primary

group" I developed (Lee, 1990;1994b). A few years later I learned from Lorna Rabinowitz, the indigenous leader of the group, that Nina contracted the HIV virus. Lorna was her only visitor in a state facility where people lived and died with AIDS. Nina died alone and uncared for, except for Lorna.

Lorna, now 59, has only one old friend in her support network. I am also her friend. She is the unpaid group leader and counselor for many of the residents of the Psychiatric "Halfway House" where she continues to live with over 300 others. During our last visit last we sat on the beach in Brooklyn and reflected. She was scared to leave there and take a chance on the unknown but she also felt she had purpose in her life: "to be there for people who were pushed aside by the system." She was angry at the "new breed of social workers who showed no caring for people with mental illness." She cited endless examples of client neglect. I advised her on what she might do. She advised me on teaching students to care. I am glad to have her as my friend. It is sometimes important to break the rules.



## CONNECTICUT

In 1984, I left NYU and joined my friend and mentor, Carel Germain, on the social work faculty at the University of Connecticut (UConn). Sharing our work as teachers and our joys and struggles kept me alive in academia. Though, even as I adjusted to my new outsidership, I remained angry that Carel was not treated with the utmost respect and dignity she deserved befitting her well earned status in the profession. Her retirement in 1987 was hard for me, but we were still in close contact. Her death last August left me feeling alone (despite my friends on faculty) in another kind of academic battle zone. I'm getting better at distancing to survive. Ruth Martin, Mark Abrahamson and others have helped me use my sense of humor. But battlefields have no redeeming features. People say "that's par for the course in academia. It happens in every school." Human beings are the casualties. This crossroad has a clear sign: "This way out of the war zone."

And then there is an additional factor. At NYU my coming out as a gay faculty member in 1982 broke a norm. It was not welcomed. At UConn there were other openly gay faculty members. Another drawing card. But I have realized that I must deal with homophobia and judgment in every class I teach and in everything I do. Just this past semester a middle-aged White male student bravely shared in our class evaluation that he was relieved that I had not lived up to his stereotype of what a "man-hating

lesbian teacher" would be like. I was "fair to all, gentle of spirit, and a good teacher." Another student said it was "amazing to find a lesbian with a faith commitment and compassion." Ouch! When I take difficult positions, or fail a student, especially a minority of color student, or speak out on an unpopular point of view, I inevitably fulfill someone's stereotype about strong women or lesbians. That's the thing about stereotypes. You're damned for all occasions as long as they are safely harbored in the collective or individual unconscious. I sometimes wish I was a more timid sort that would evoke less response. But at 53, I am finally comfortable with myself. The golden hair is short and silver-white with just a hint of color. Overweight and sturdy in bearing and soul, I wear what I want, say what I want, think what I want, and do what I think is right. My eyes are still intense, but not as often. Sometimes I look as tired as I feel yet I am rounded at the edges and confident where I was anxious. There are some good things about growing older. But growing older and still caring deeply is not easy.

## RECENT PRACTICE

Practice intersects at the crossroads. In Hartford it has been my work with the Coalition to End Homelessness and My Sister's Place (MSP), now a four tier agency serving homeless and formerly homeless individuals and families that has challenged me and formed the basis for my theory development and teaching (Lee, 1994b). I have always enjoyed practice, especially when

clients genuinely struggle to change the conditions of their oppression. Yet the work is hard in a number of ways.

I think of Betty, once beautiful and bright, a 32 year old individual client who developed AIDS dementia, other AIDS related symptoms and full blown rapidly cycling manic depression at the same time. I helped her extended family to arrange care for her two children. Her brother curtly told me the family preferred a Black social worker for the children. I arranged it. He did not care if I kept Betty as he thought she was "too far gone." The family later thanked me profusely for my work. But I could no longer handle Betty alone, I needed agency and team support. MSP III was able to accept her into the residential program for women with mental illness. Gail Bourdon, friend and program director, and I brought her to emergency psychiatric intervention during a manic episode. Once there she refused to be admitted. We could not talk her into it but thought it was not the time for an involuntary commitment. The admitting psychiatrist angrily challenged me to take her home for the night and get her reestablished on her meds. With some trepidation I did. I was ashamed of my own gnawing doubts about bodily fluids—on glasses, toilets, pillow cases, and my cheek as she hugged me goodnight. I knew better, and I dealt with my irrational side. Gail was on call and my partner, Judy Beaumont, was right there by my side, reassuring Betty that she was welcome in our home. Betty calmed down. Thank goodness the medication

began to work. I kissed her on her forehead and tucked her into bed. Then I stayed up half the night watching her. She slept peacefully, a beautiful ebony angel. The next day I got her family to do round the clock monitoring and she was O.K. for a few months. She had some quality time with her family. There would soon be an endless circle of involuntary and voluntary hospitalizations punctuated by drug abuse. Now in hospice care, she is a thin, ashen and foreboding shadow of herself. It's hard to witness. I'm glad I broke the rules and gave her a night's peace and a few good months. I couldn't have done it without support. I do not recommend it for students or unseasoned professionals. It was a difficult judgment call.

Many of the women of My Sisters' Place, staff and clients, are my teachers and friends. Judy is the Executive Director. We met when I consulted on setting up the MSP III program. She is the blessing for the second half of my life and her courage is greater than mine. I think of Tracey, the President of the Successful Women's Group (Shelter Alumnae) that Judy and I co-led (Lee, 1994b). This young mother works two jobs and struggles hard to overcome the effects of poverty and the segregated second-class education she received in Hartford. She has a complex, usually supportive family network. Each Mother's Day she sends us a card as her "Other Mothers, who believed in me and asked the best of me." And there is Shandra, Tracey's buddy, who still struggles against depression and extricating herself from abusive

relationships (Lee, 1994). She has proudly completed nine college credits and often shares her excitement at the world that is hers through her courses. She calls us Grandmothers. Her mother has now come into the MSP Program, is in recovery from her drug addiction, and making marvelous gains in reaching back and helping others. She has recently been hired to work part time in the Shelter. With these women and several of the staff and other clients there is a genuine experience in sistering and in sharing a common struggle. **But it is not all rosy.** There are Fran, Keisha and Leola, clients whose homophobia caused them to spread vicious rumors which were hurtful to Judy, to My Sisters' Place and to me. Fran had a gay teenage son that she publically called "the scum of the earth." Unable to deal with his gayness, she also told the children in residence to beware of us as "white lesbian bitches." This made it especially hard on the three foster children we cared for whose siblings were in residence. This "struck home" for us in ways Fran could not have envisioned. Some staff members supported the rumors. Perhaps most tragically, a few homophobic "professionals" in the surrounding community also echo the same words as they attempt to block some of the new program initiatives. To them we are freakish enemies, not co-laborers in a common cause.

#### CODA

Life and practice are filled with experiences of love and hate, joy and pain. Risking these moments makes us human. There

are times when anger is the appropriate response. But, what sticks with me most in these reflections are those times when hate and pain were transformed by love and caring. In my first group, when Bev said, "I have grown from hate into kindness" it was such a moment. **The transforming power in social work practice and in the group first appeared for me then — bright, alluring and real.** Practice with people who have been deeply hurt by hate and oppression is not easy. It changes some of the easy formulations we cut our professional teeth on. It requires authenticity and it costs a lot. It necessitates risk. Absorbing hate for a reason is a form of caring which transforms and deepens. When there is no reason, hate should neither be tolerated nor permitted. All of this is experienced personally and, even as it wearies, it carves compassion and activism deeply into the soul. **As Gisa Konopka amply demonstrates, life and practice demand both courage and love (1988).** The deepened knowledge of racism, classism, homophobia, and academic politics necessitates and activates the power to bring about change in a world gone wrong. **How much more I want to bear or know remains a question at the crossroads.** The kind of social work practice and living discussed here does not leave the practitioner unscathed. Only the strength of loving support makes it possible. I am so thankful for that in my life. This is the real story here. □

#### REFERENCES

- Ansbro, John J. (1982). Martin Luther King, Jr: *The Making of a mind*. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis.
- Berman-Rossi, Toby (Ed.) (1994). *Social Work: The Collected writings of William Schwartz*. Itasca, ILL: F.E. Peacock Publishers, Inc.
- Brown, Claude (1965) *Manchild in the Promised Land*. New York: Macmillan.
- Garland, James, Hubert H. Jones and Ralph Kolodny (1973). A model for stages of development in social work groups. In Saul Bernstein, (Ed.) *Further explorations in group work*, pp. 17-71. Boston: Milford House.
- Gitterman, Alex (1971). Group work in the public schools. In William Schwartz and Serapio Zalba (Eds.) *The Practice of Group Work* (p. 45-72). New York: Columbia Univ. Press.
- King, Martin Luther, Jr. (1964). *Why we can't wait*. New York: A Mentor Book.
- Konopka, Gisela (1988). *Courage And Love*. Edina, Minn.: Burgess.
- Lee, Judith A.B. (1983). Weeping for a lost profession: Social work in transition. *Jewish Social Work Forum* (19) (Spring): 20-32.
- Lee, Judith A.B. (1987). Social work with oppressed populations: Jane Addams won't you please come home? In Joseph Lassner, Kathlee Powell, and Elaine Finnegan (Eds.) *Social group work: Competence and values*

*in practice*, p. 1-16. New York: Haworth.

Lee, Judith A.B. (1990). When I was well I was a sister: social work with homeless women. *Jewish Social Work Forum*. (26) (Spring): 22-30.

Lee, Judith A.B. (1994a). *The empowerment approach to social work practice*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Lee, Judith A.B. (1994b). No place to go: Homeless women. In Alex Gitterman and Lawrence Shulman (Eds.) *Mutual aid groups, Vulnerable populations, and the life cycle*, 2nd ed., p. 297-314. New York: Columbia University Press.

Lee, Judith A.B. and Danielle N. Park (1978). A group approach to the depressed adolescent girl in foster care." *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 48(3): 516-517.

Lee, Judith a.B. and Carol R. Swenson (1978). A community social service agency: Theory in action. *Social Casework* 59 (June): 359-369.

Mayeroff, Milton (1971). *On caring*. New York: Perennial Library, Marsiglia, Flavio F. and Paz M-B Zorita (1996). Narratives as a way to support Latino/a students in higher education. *Reflections* 2(1): 54-63.

Schwartz, William (1968). Group work in public welfare. *Public Welfare* (4):322-370.

Schwartz, William and Serapio Zalba (Eds.) (1971). *The practice of group work*. New York: Columbia University Press.



Copyright of Reflections: Narratives of Professional Helping is the property of Cleveland State University and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.