

VOICES FROM THE DEPTHS

By Paul Abels

There are many persons whose voices are rarely heard. Among these are members of minority groups, immigrants, the poor, and even certain professions. Having a 'voice' has become a metaphor related to civil rights, equality, resistance, liberation, and power. Perhaps the most clarion calls for their voices being heard has come from women, exemplified by books such as *In Another Voice*. Being heard seems to be the major way a group is recognized, not to downplay being seen, as in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, but the voice seems to be the dominant way of acknowledgment of existence. Even a person seen is usually acknowledged by a verbal message. Hello, how are you?

Persons whose voices are rarely heard at times find ways to reach society which may not be generally acceptable outside the group, and at times at great risk. Gangs may commit audacious acts, painting their identity on signs, railway cars, or walls. Subjugated people may paint a V for victory, or . . . -s on the walls, as the underground did in World War II. At the extremes, gangs may communicate

by criminal acts, drive-by shootings, and on desperate occasions by riots and rebellion. Certainly the rebellions of the 60's gave many "under-voiced" groups access to the poverty programs they catalyzed.

To the degree that you have power you have a voice. Who speaks for the powerless, those whose voices are ignored? A difficult question to ask, since as social workers we have been alerted to the pitfalls of trying to represent the ideas of others, or to speak on their behalf, even for the best of reasons. But wouldn't it have been great if someone had spoken for those who would soon be victims of the Holocaust or of the Tuskegee experiments. Is it not mandatory to speak for life? Perhaps we can proclaim that we speak for social justice and not for any one group that might be voiceless at the moment. At times we are authorized to speak for a particular group, authorized by our social contract with society. And certainly social work's mandate has always been to represent the best needs of the poor and oppressed in our society. That is our profession's historic mission. If not the poor, than us! If not the



oppressed, than us! If not us, than who?

In the narratives on the following pages, there are many voices heard, voices of conscience, of the dead, of prostitutes, of hurt children, of puzzled social workers, of homeless women, of a whistle blower, and more. These are strong voices because they are now public. . But their power will soon be relegated to the book shelves and the libraries. They will become voices in the depths...

Unless... unless our profession begins to deal with the critical core of our existence . We are neither radical social workers nor clinical social workers, a profession whose core task requires working for freedom, social justice, and dignity for people. It is our voices which have become too silent, it is our leadership (whomever they may be) who have become too timid. Our professional organizations have come to accept the current welfare scene without a scream! Making nice to political leaders who vote against the poor and the disenfranchised. Our educational leaders back down in the face of a dismantling of affirmative action and discrimination against gays and lesbians. There are some who still seem to understand what this profession is all about, but we all need to reiterate and reaffirm our critical core. What will be our forum? Who will take the leadership? Sorry, there aren't enough Bertha Capen Reynolds groups. Sorry there aren't enough *Social Justice Action* student newspapers. Sorry, there is no more safety net, never was much. . Sorry folks, we can't wait for another Jane Addams...we'll have to do it ourselves.

There are people out there whose voices need to be heard. They want the world to know about their struggles, their attempts to overcome, their oppression, their ignored needs, and of their bravery as they survive in the face of callous disregard. It is our job to tell their story. You are the ones they are counting on to tell their story. Eliot Liebow's book, *Tell them who I am: the lives of Homeless Women*, is just such a current narrative. It exemplifies our journal's stories of brave people whose daily struggles make them heroes, keeping families and lives together in the face of a "voice-proof " society. These are stories of oppression, but also of protest and rebellion

against the odds, and the voices that label them and tell them they are unworthy and should "give up." There is great strength in the people we work with. At times we we add to the strength and together we we beat the odds. Our voices whisper our failures to us, urging us to find a better way, a new approach, to try harder. But we need to hear the voices of the past as well as of the future.

The voices of those who built our profession, whose tasks were just as trying, funds just as meager, rewards just as thin, can give us the strength we need to beat the odds. They might tell us that our voice can be the bridge between client and community, and that there are still many stories that need to be told, that all persons voices need to be heard, that the odyssey is not yet over.

TELL THEIR STORY!

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