

REFLECTIONS ON A DIFFERENT LIFE: Am I a Stranger?

By
Emilia E. Martinez-Brawley, Ph.D.

Emilia E. Martinez-Brawley, Ph.D. is Dean and Professor, School of Social Work, Arizona State University

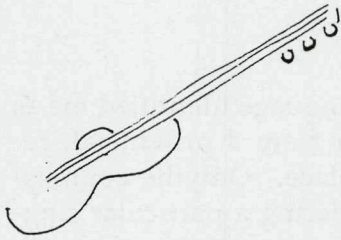
I was asked to write some reflections for this issue on "strangers" and their professional insights. After nearly forty years in this country — albeit with a few detours was I still regarded as one? This would be an interesting topic for reflection. Did I perceive myself as "a stranger?" Was "stranger" the proper word? Was "the other" a better one? Did I represent a "stranger" in the sense of a foreign perspective or did I view myself as espousing views that were unique or "eccentric" in the sense of ex-center or outside the center or mainstream? Obviously I was now a United States citizen but was I an American in thought and in deed? Was I "the other" American? A foreign American? A Latina/American? Was being a stranger an issue of birth, ethnicity, citizenship, or personality? Even though people in other countries, including my own, often thought I acted as an American, I was still, in some way, different. Outside the United States, my dress and assurance tagged me as an American but my style and concern with the "social image," I had been told, denounced my Mediterranean roots. When I spoke Spanish, my carefully articu-

lated language identified me as coming from a provincial, remote place. Only the connoisseur, hearing a particular sing-song quality to my speech, would suggest one of the more distant mountain provinces of Argentina.

As a professional, I can be nothing else but an American trained social worker. Yes, perhaps my view of the profession has always been somewhat on the fringe, a little outside the mainstream. I always felt that social work's extreme efforts at professionalization and maintenance of often artificial boundaries did not serve us well. From my early days in practice, I believed social work was an approach or method of helping, not a content area. Our content was the arts, the humanities, value commitments, and the wisdom of the ages. When I was in practice, if we related to a social work technology at all, it was contained in what we fondly labeled the Biestek Catechism, "to begin where the client is."

Years later, as a member of our professional board, I felt we were becoming too concerned with business, with safeguarding specializations and constituencies while perhaps abandon-

ing our more global humanity. As an educational leader, I often felt that some accreditation rules were too stringent and curtailed program creativity. I wanted social work to be an art, an in-



spirational call more than a technology. I wanted social workers to "create" a work of the helping art with every intervention, not duplicate responses through pre-set formulae. I shared Howard Goldstein's belief that mental health or social adjustment was not conformity but "the acceptance of personal responsibility, [the] willingness to experiment with new ideas and make personal choices and [the] capability for ethical dissent without harm to or resentment of the other person" (Goldstein, 1996:69).

Yes, I guess I was a rebel, a voice from the fringes, the periphery, rather than the core: a stranger in many ways. But, useful as introspection can be, why was I being singled out to discuss my "otherness" in an academic journal? Would such an exercise be worthwhile? Encouragement came from the words of Mary Catherine Bateson who, in *Peripheral Visions*, talked about learning from strangers. . .

...that person or group that inhabits the imagination and, loved or hated, seems profoundly and significantly different. Whether negative or positive, the presence of the other leads to self-consciousness and puts familiar ways of being into question. Sometimes the other is the opposite sex, sometimes a minority group, sometimes even a distant culture described in terms that counterpoint one's own. (Bateson, 1994:21)

And, although self-consciousness per se is not the only road to understanding, after the initial friction that is often generated by the meeting of different customs and world views, it is possible to arrive, in the end, to better understandings.

Childhood and Teenage Years

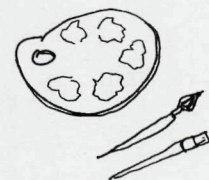
I was born in a very small town in northern Argentina. This was a particularly determining factor in my upbringing and in my outlook on life, since at the time I was born, the difference between *core* and *periphery* in many South American countries, including Argentina, was quite marked. My hometown was a small northwestern town where strong Spanish-colonial and Inca heritages — which we always referred to as *Quichua* — were proudly proclaimed. Attachment to Indian rituals and traditions were evident among the members of the agricultural classes, whose spoken communication drew heavily from the *Quichua* language and whose history and mores were rooted

in the culture of the *Altiplano*. The *Calchaquíes*, a tribe that had inhabited the fertile valleys, influenced the growing practices of a large section of the western part of the province. Indian languages and traditions were also integrated into the spoken Spanish and the lives of many members of the upper classes, who cultivated an attachment to both as a strong form of "criollo" identity.

My father was a stranger in the town; my mother came from a well entrenched family in the agricultural valley. I grew up between the marked differences of my mother's and father's ways. Neither my mother's nor my father's family were particularly wealthy, as wealth is judged today. It was an issue of history, attachment to the province and roots in the agricultural North of Argentina versus the industrial South that contributed to their different ways of looking at the world.

On reflection, I was probably more influenced by my mother's family mores, the idea of "Pride of place." At a time when entertainment was family bound, house *folklore fiestas*, a form of non-intentional but effective culture maintenance ritual, were common.

Children learned from the beginning that a well developed sense of the "social ,



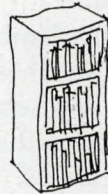
learned very quickly that the "self" was fundamental to their survival. Our super-ego's were strongly formed at home, church, and school, while our ids were reduced by the fear of the consequences of bad behavior. Girls particularly, who had to rely on a totally unblemished reputation to survive in the small townway in which they presented themselves in everyday life was important for success. From the time I was in elementary school, I took lessons in *declamación*, now probably quite a forgotten art, which combined public speaking and theatrical interpretation of poetry and song. This introduction to art determined my valuing the beauty of words and the magic of the dramatic. Clearly, great value was placed in my circle on verbal ability. Mine was a society of tales and songs, where natural and supernatural domains were intertwined, a society reminiscent of Isabel Allende's *House of the Spirits*. My interest in how cultural constructs determine our realities is clearly grounded in the context of my childhood.

At the age of fifteen I came to the United States as a high school exchange student. My American family, as I then called it, was a fairly traditional family in what was then a small town on the eastern seaboard. There was little difference between the moral familial responsibility much emphasized in my family of origin and moral and communal responsibility emphasized in my adopted family.

As I had done in my hometown, my American sister and I

walked to school every day. If I felt like a "stranger," as I guess I sometimes did at school, it was as a unique and valued one.

One area of frustration for me was that my high school placed low value on the Spanish language. All of my newly made school friends studied a language at school, but none studied Spanish. The general belief was that French or German was more useful and pres-



tigious. In the United States of the late 1950s, it was apparent that to study Spanish was not the mark of high literary status I had been brought up to believe the language of Cervantes deserved. All of the "college bound" students took French or German, while those who on the surface were not as ambitious were in the Spanish classes. Was I, by implication, not a valued stranger?

In retrospect, my disappointment reflected what I instinctively must have perceived as the devaluing of a history or a culture. It would take me many years to learn about the history of Spanish cultures in the United States and to give a name to what then I had perceived more with a level of surprise and sadness than with anger.

Going to University

When I returned home to attend university, my imagination was captured by the "word." I was enamored with languages. I had cultivated the facility not only for the spoken word, but also for the study of foreign languages. Throughout my high school days, both in the United States and in Argentina, I took every opportunity to study and practice those languages with which I had become acquainted. Did I love the sound of foreign tongues because, once learned, that knowledge conquered strangeness?

I enjoyed the subtleties of the English language. I had attended a bilingual school since I was about seven years old and had a great desire to achieve not only proficiency but full command of the English language. Additionally, I enjoyed challenging myself and others to finding better ways to express ideas, to figuring out new ways of constructing sentences, to discovering the existent and non-existent reasons for the patterns of the language. I had also studied Italian and had taken some lessons in German. Languages were my fascination. They spoke of exotic places, of new cultures, of new ways of telling stories and definitely, they provided new tools for exploring human idiosyncrasies.

But alas, I had been "destined" for the law. I had been told since childhood, by relatives and a favorite lawyer-uncle of mine, that I was a natural lawyer. So, when I returned

from the United States, I took on the study of law while at the same time continuing the cultivation of languages. Shortly thereafter, I realized that the law, at least the way in which it was taught in Latin America at the time, did not suit my creative interests. Financial pressures compounded the problem. Access to many careers was limited in my small rural town, a matter that clearly stressed our peripheral identity. Within a short period of time, by interest as well as necessity, I devoted myself the study of languages.

I was convinced that every polyglot was a world citizen. Those who had command of other languages, it seemed to me, held the universe in their hands. My friends, the children of recent immigrants or immi-



grants themselves, were, in my view, admittedly strange and exotic; they represented the gamut of foreign tongues. I was fascinated by their sounds and experiences. I became involved in a number of student exchange programs that highlighted the value of "the other" and emphasized that it is possible for strangers in the world to articulate differences and even work

together in situations intimate enough to produce friction while, at the same time, solving common concerns.

Shortly after finishing university, through one of my many friends I received an invitation to come to the United States. While I returned to the United States not with the idea of staying but rather of adding to my language experiences, circumstances led me in a different direction. The early 1960s, shortly after Sputnik, were a wonderful period for language instruction in the United States. Most high schools and even some elementary schools had become oriented to the teaching of foreign languages. They had wonderful facilities and were also very interested in qualified teachers who could teach the many students who had become eager learners of foreign languages. A chance meeting led me to an interview and I soon found myself as a high school teacher in the United States.

Once again I was immersed with people who loved foreign cultures since I was part of the language department. Those were the early days of integration in American high schools. Although the high school where I taught had only a handful of Black, or Negro, students — as was then the term — and an even smaller number of Black teachers, two of them were in the language department. The language department was the best example of what diversity could be. The language teachers enjoyed each other's company, learned from each other, and appreciated and

valued each other. Every one of us exhibited a certain "smugness" about our ability to transcend the barriers of parochialism and discrimination through languages.

It is, of course, hard to tell whether the reality I recall today was the reality perceived by those who were not as fortunate as this small group of foreign language teachers. We dreamed of an America where all people would join hands to create the Tower of Babel that this country was meant to be. I guess we believed with the poet Glancy that we build a world with what we say, that words make the path on which we walk (Norris, 1996: 154). Were we utopian? Were we removed from the real world? Clearly we were, but our idealism was fueled and it fueled lofty goals.

My European Years

Shortly after living in the United States, I moved to Europe where my language education was to continue. I spent some time in Spain, the land of my ancestors, then a very poor country with very generous people. I studied briefly in Italy, a country I came to enjoy in spite of its then painfully uncomfortable student boarding houses. I was strange and different in these places, but I was confident in my strangeness; these were countries of emigrants, not immigrants, where strangers evoked memories and comparisons of those who had left.

My language career took a turn in Scotland where I met the person who later became my

husband. Though I arrived as a student, the transition from understanding a culture to adopting or marrying into a culture seemed to me part of the natural course of life. Bateson (1995) speaks of similar events and feelings when she married in Iran. Yet, such transitions require much learning, total immersion in the culture of the "other," and changes in one's status from observer or stranger to participant who adapts to and adopts the new cultural milieu. My first job in this very different and austere land was as an elementary school teacher.

As we experience moments of our lives, we are unable to tell why pain or discomfort may be experienced by those living on the borders between the native and the foreign. On reflection, one realizes that the native experience takes for granted behaviors and responses to most situations while the experiences of the stranger bring to the fore a different level of awareness of the self and others. It is only today that I recognize the challenge I had undertaken when I married and settled to start a family in such a distant land. Engaging in the daily routines that are second nature to the native are a challenge to the stranger who must navigate with intuition as a compass. Every event is a new road to be explored and thus the "stranger" develops a resiliency and gusto for living which often escapes the native.

Becoming a Social Worker

My husband was a brand

new social work graduate when we met, but it was not until I was substituting in a school for delinquent boys that I became more acquainted with what social workers did. As I worked as a teacher with delinquent boys, I recognized that much of what I was attempting to teach them was probably difficult to absorb, not because of lack of intelligence or an innate lack of desire, but rather because fundamentally more important issues were occupying their minds. It was not just poverty that affected them but family turmoil, or the ups and downs of a very difficult and exacting society. Furthermore, corporal punishment was an acceptable disciplinary measure in Scottish schools at the time. Surely, I thought at that point, a social worker must be better equipped to handle these challenging children!

My interest in helping children with personal difficulties by becoming a social worker was further kindled by



my own efforts to fully grasp the intricacies of another culture and country. The physical demands of living in the Scotland of the 1960s were extraordinary; the difficulties met by most young couples in securing appropriate housing, and manag-

ing budgets and eventually a pregnancy were significant.

A few years later after moving back to the United States, I found myself again working in a school for delinquent boys. In the mid 1960s, adjudicated delinquents came from a variety of environments. Some were poor; some were not. At that time, persistent school truancy was considered delinquent behavior. Thus the children that I encountered had the gamut of difficulties of adolescent adjustment. I remember, to this day, Ricky, an eleven year old who, having been brought handcuffed by a sheriff, "promised" me not to run away while I walked him to his cottage if I allowed him to follow me rather than to walk with the sheriff. Of course, in my "school teacher fashion," a promise made was to be interpreted as a hopeful learning event and I agreed. Ricky took off with enormous agility and speed leaving me speechless in the middle of a plowed field between the reception area and his cottage!

After working as an intake caseworker in that school for a number of years, somebody suggested that if I truly wanted to continue working with children in these circumstances, I needed to become a "master level caseworker." So, in the late 1960s, with my years of experience as a teacher and as a caseworker with delinquent boys, I marched on to school of social work.

My route to social work was not a linear one. I did not necessarily plan to be a social worker, but social work



emerged as a possible career as I attempted to find better answers to challenging problems. It was purely coincidental that I was directed to get my MSW. No one spoke of golden opportunities; it was just a way to improve my skills and to keep a job.

I was lucky to live near Bryn Mawr College where a group of progressive women had established in the 1930s the School of Social Administration. I was accepted at Bryn Mawr where my law, language, and teaching backgrounds were viewed as an asset by a kindly intake director. By that time, I had children of my own and felt confident in my parenting. I was in an environment that was, by and large, accepting of women — since the college *raison d'être* was the education for women. The daily responsibilities of managing a family, and a rigorous program taxed and occupied all my time. I was with a small circle of women in similar circumstances, and the sense of “strangeness,” if I felt any, was neither apparent nor acknowledged. My schedule was totally consuming and I simply moved from activity to activity as most mothers of young children do.

I thought that my law background might help me in

the community organizing track, but alas, the lead instructor in my interview made it sound as if community organizing was unsuitable for women with young children. Off I went into the more measured and psychologically oriented case-work track!

I never thought of myself as anything other than a Latina woman, but the words and consciousness of Latinismo as a condition were still not publicly articulated. The Civil Rights movement, which brought tears of admiration to our eyes, was still focused, in that traditional Pennsylvania enclave, primarily, if not exclusively, on Black Americans. The Chicano movement seemed to be then focused on the West Coast. As I can now recall, Freire’s conscientization literature entered the stage in the U.S. toward the end of my Bryn Mawr years.

There was one event in my second year placement which, though miniscule, must have been significant for I still remember it quite clearly. It pointed to my “strangeness.” The family service agency where I was placed was located in a building of precarious construction. My stern supervisor called me one day to point out that my “voice” could be heard across the walls. Were the walls too thin or the insulation too inadequate? No. My voice was too distinct, I enunciated too much, my modulations needed to be changed; native speakers did not utter every distinct sound! — a true statement of a trait that foreign speakers find hard to acquire. At that point I

recognized that my differences could become a liability. Interestingly, it was the clients to whom my supervisor had assigned me who appreciated some of my traits and greatly helped me to transcend criticisms. After two years, with my resonant voice, my enunciating and my differences still intact, I graduated from Bryn Mawr with a shiny MSS.

The Years of Conscientisação

One of the first organizations I joined shortly after my MSS was the Rural Social Work Caucus. As soon as I learned that there was a group of social workers interested in bringing to the fore an awareness of the rural condition, I was ready to jump on the bandwagon. Since I had been born on the periphery, in a country where centralism and urbanism were rampant, my most vivid memories of being on the fringe were connected to the rural condition. My school and university experiences in Northern Argentina had been heavily influenced by the marginality of the place where I grew up as compared to the rest of the country. My memories of the periphery were that had the proud people of the province not “made a cult” out of being “from the country and the mountains,” I would have probably felt more keenly than I had the consequences of rural isolation. Rural people deserved advocacy and I was ready to join the cause.

Armed with my rural identification with small town

Pennsylvania, I was very outspoken on the issue of rural marginality not only in the U.S. but also in other parts of the world. By then, my research on the history of the rural movement in the United States had acquainted me with the common elements of rural marginality throughout the world. I became fascinated with the writings and photographs documenting the struggle of rural families during the Depression years. I also found profound meaning in exploring the lives of many rural pioneers, particularly rural women who may have been considered strange or eccentric in their time. They often left comfortable families to join "back to the land" or Country Life movement of the 1930s and 40s; they had settled to the different ways of life than those their families had anticipated for them, or they espoused new and non-traditional ideas Josephine Chapin Brown, Josephine Strode, Louise Cotterll, and Mattie Call Maxted were all strangers in their own land, and I was intrigued by their "otherness."

Freire's proposition that consciousness of one's condition is a prerequisite for empowerment grew out of a rural reality. As I became more aware of the rural condition, I became more aware that whatever was unique in me was also apart of my Latina-rural identity.

My aim continued to be to convince others of the worth

of my cause and my rural proposals and to offer to others my Latina way of looking at the world with "honey instead of vinegar." If one could be clear and articulate— as a woman, a rural citizen, a Latina, a non-native—I had thought others could not but succumb to the reasonableness of one's cause. In retrospect, my introduction as a teenager to a worldwide consciousness of understanding heavily determined my approach to change. I had been part of a movement of world peace as gentle as its ancient motto: "Walk together, talk together, all ye people of the world for then and only then shall ye have peace." My teaching experiences as a foreign language instructor, and the influence of Quakerism which surrounded me in Pennsylvania, had all added to my utopian ideals. Yes, I was aware that in a rich country like the United States, the distribution of resources was a major concern and that people did not always fight fairly or cleanly when resources were at stake. But, in my mind, I still believed that a convincing, reasonable, and diplomatic approach would conquer those difficulties.

Perhaps my rural life and my somewhat sheltered experiences in small town Pennsylvania were not preparing me fully for the world that I would eventually face. However, idealism was comforting and sustained my efforts and commitments.

Joining the Academy in Social Work Education

I was "discovered" into social work education—as I jokingly like to say—by a student. I had as a supervisee the school setting where I worked as a practitioner, an eloquent Black man before he entered the School of Social Work. Again, my ability to articulate messages probably appealed to his sense of "the word." His was the culture and tradition of Garvey, Du Bois, and King; my interest in the spoken word was not strange to him. He recommended me as a speaker for one of the yearly field instruction meetings at this university, and thus I became acquainted with social work in academia. It was by chance that I got my first academic job. That first job made me realize that, in fact, I could do well in the classroom. Social work education would become my next career move.

It is not possible to focus on the progression and growth I experienced through nearly twenty years in social work education. My doctorate in Curriculum Theory gave me the tools to think about social work education rather broadly and even differently. Perhaps from the beginning. I prepared myself to speak from the fringes of multidisciplinary. Even today, my interest is in making sure that we offer students a broad view of life rather than a narrow perspective on helping. I continue to believe that what is important in social work is not so much the prescriptive steps we might transmit to our novices,

but the commitment to improve the human condition. I am convinced that the best of social work is aided by our inventiveness, our ability to be proud even "at the fringes." It is the marginality of social work that makes us strong; as Kathleen Norris has described, the margins are "those places in the ecosystem where, as ecologists can tell you, the most life forms are to be found" (Norris, 1996: 64).

In a world that emphasizes the material over the spiritual, the concrete over the imaginary, the scientific and technical over the artistic, social workers by-and-large have strange or inappropriate responses. The social work as a cause and calling is really quite unusual and eccentric if judged by today's standards; it has always attracted those at "the fringes" and continues to welcome people whose fit is uncomfortable in the other arenas of endeavor.

When I became dean, my uniqueness took on a different twist. While the stranger as a peer can be easily tolerated, the stranger as a leader offers different challenges and is differently confronted. Women frequently encounter this problem when they accept positions of leadership. African-Americans, Latinos/as and other minorities are fully familiar with the idea of stranger, whether in business, the sciences, or the professions. In my case, every trait that I had considered valuable and successful pointed to my otherness as a leader. I was clearly outside the pack and, while such a stance can be valu-

able, it can also be a vulnerability.

Coda

I was in the United Kingdom when Sonia Leib Abels, *Reflections* editor, comments on my manuscript reached me. She wanted me to add some "answers," perhaps some "endings" or closure" to the questions I had posed at the outset. She was interested in the reader learning how I now felt: "Was I, after all, a stranger? Was I "the other?"

Sonia's comments reached me the week when the world news was dominated by Princess Diana's and Mother Teresa's deaths. Additionally, the British news was dominated by the matter of the Scottish referendum on a separate parliament.

The first two sad issues fueled discussions of "otherness;" the last one stirred feelings about the value of the fringes. Thinking about the lives of both women affirmed my conclusion that "otherness," whether consciously felt or unconsciously experienced, gives individuals determination and stamina, for they live with interdeterminacy and fumble differently. Have I concluded whether "otherness" is a matter of birth, ethnicity, or personality? No, I have no real conclusions, but in my case, it is probably a matter of all three and many more factors interacting in equal measure. As to being a stranger in the culture of the United States, before venturing such an answer, one would have to determine what

"is" the culture, clearly an almost insurmountable challenge. But do any of my traits, whether speech of intellectual stances, single me out as "other?" Probably yes.

The recognition of my differences does not worry me, but condescension or rejection because of these differences does. For, above all, I still believe fringes can be areas of unique worth. The magic of the fringes is the very certainty of uncertainty; the knowledge that from those frayed, uncertain edges one can touch and be touched by others even though one might never truly belong.

□

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