

## A JOURNEY FOR JUSTICE

*Social workers spend their careers driving for change, working to improve the plight of individuals and their social environments. Though this is true, the student or the professional inevitably realizes that goals are elusive and destinations unclear. As is the case in life in general, meaning and identity are to be found in the journey.*

by  
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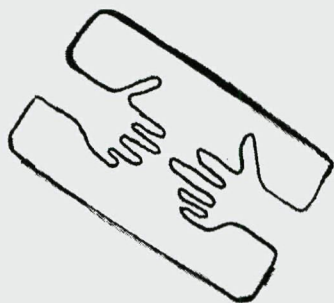
### Introduction

I have never received AFDC welfare nor have I been economically disadvantaged. And yet for the past decade I have dedicated myself to the issues of women and families in poverty and the related issue of welfare reform. This story is about a personal and professional journey for justice. My activities of the past thirty years have been varied. Most recently, I have been studying poverty and welfare reform, reading any and all research I can, and doing research: I participate in community groups that care deeply about the consequences of poverty and welfare reform for families in our community, and I provide services to women in welfare reform projects through a small community-based non-profit program that I co-created. Each of these avenues has provided me with many insights and stories that form my understandings of justice. On my journey I have found the words of Frances Moore Lappé (1989) to be a source of guidance: "Justice derives from our capacity for identifying with each other's pain and from our innate need for community" (p.13). As I relate my story here, her words and their meaning to me become evident.

### Origins: Planting Seeds of Understanding

Stories such as this one do not really begin or end at a particular historic point. My story could begin at a number of points in my life, and I have chosen two earlier events that somehow are often with me and that inevitably led to my present actions.

*"It was the right place for me to be."* It was the summer of 1967, when riots were a common occurrence in the city of Philadelphia and Mayor Frank Rizzo had banned groups of more than 12 from collecting on the city streets. I was part of a group of 19 youth from five area churches, half of us Black, half of us White. Our mission was to work with children and teach about prejudice. As we gathered at city playgrounds and on city streets, heads turned; it was clear we were "different." We defied the rule of 12 and we were racially mixed. It was the right place for me to be, a way to act on my values, to be part of a group that went against the "rules" and to be teaching about prejudice. This experience for me had something to do with justice, even though at age 17, I'm not sure I knew what that was.



"How are you?" Or my story could begin in 1972 in Gurabo, Puerto Rico, a small town thirty-five miles south and "years" away from San Juan. As a VISTA volunteer, I was there acting on a personal commitment to give away to others what had come so easily for me: the opportunity for education. Of course I had to abandon the "prescribed" education my government sent me to give, English as a second language, and decide that the children would learn more (as would I) through our relationship.

I grew a particular attachment to the group of "lowest" girls in the seventh grade. They had a quest for knowledge that went beyond their struggle to distinguish "How are you?" from "How old are you?" (I would ask them, "How are you?" and they would respond, "12.") I will never forget when I decided to take them on a field trip to San Juan. It was hard for me to believe most of them had never been there before. They were so excited when they saw things they had never seen, such as a nun in full habit walking down the street, or the McDonalds. I hated seeing McDonalds in San Juan; it reminded me of the exploitation of Puerto Rico, but the children were so excited we had to drive by. We did not stop, however, because none of them could afford to buy anything, another injustice I am not sure I fully understood at the time (East, 1995).

For the past 15 years I have had a sign in my office: "If you want peace, work for justice. -Pope Paul VI." It joined

my office repertoire of inspirational words in the early 1980's when I was working for Catholic Charities and involved in the anti-nuclear movement. At the same time I was, on a daily basis, meeting families who needed emergency food, clothing, rent assistance, and other basics of survival. By then I understood enough about justice to know there was a relationship in these two activities—and that the peace I hoped for, and therefore the justice, in my own community had something to do with poverty. As my understanding of the connections grew, prejudice, riots, McDonalds in San Juan, the nuclear arms race and poverty were no longer isolated events on my journey. And my need for community grew.

### **Standing with the Pain and Building Community**

#### *Three Episodes on the Journey*

**D**uring the last ten years, since 1988, my work has been a continuation of my personal journey of action for justice. This work has included a commitment to learning and teaching about the issues of women and their children in poverty, primarily from a feminist perspective. My journey has also included a commitment to being involved in my community to effect change. My choice of actions and involvement on this journey mirror Lappé's words as a guiding principle; I wanted to stand with the pain and I wanted to do this in the

context of community. Standing with the pain for me has meant being with the people that are represented in statistics I so often quote. As Ruth Sidel (1986) notes, "statistics are people with the tears washed off" (p. xvi). I do not abandon statistics, but I am impelled to move beyond the statistics to relationships and stories of women and their families. My study of the research and issues of women and children in poverty gives me a voice, a way to present arguments for justice in my community. My experience of women's lives and voices bolsters my arguments; not only can I make the statistics real, I can present them with a passion that helps me engage others in the discussion.

I have chosen three stories of community efforts related to women, poverty, and welfare reform to represent my journey for justice. Through each of my three community stories, I have tried to pay close attention to both women's voices and the impact I might make in an advocacy and policy agenda. These involvements, as a whole, are an example of how a social worker can live out the journey for justice.

#### *The Community Council: 1988-1997*

On October 14, 1988, the day President Reagan signed into law the Family Support Act, a welfare reform bill, I am among about 100 individuals who have been invited to a meeting to hear about welfare reform. I am there as a repre-

representative of Catholic Charities. The meeting is located at Clayton College, at one time an orphanage and boys' school. We are in the center campus building. It has a large entryway with high ceilings and a wide circular staircase. As I go up the steps for the meeting, I can picture the young boys of earlier years marching up the steps two by two for an event in the upstairs auditorium. I wonder if times have changed for children or if it is all another version of

"reform." At this meeting there are pictures around the room drawn by the children of AFDC families. I wonder how these children are different

from or the same as the boys whose steps have preceded me.

The meeting is the kick-off for the development of a Community Council in Denver, Colorado, in which I participated for its nine years of existence. There is lots of energy in this room and many ideas about what we should do in Denver about reform welfare. There are many important community figures: the Mayor, agency directors, foundations, and the like. We hear Linda Wolfe, President of the American Public Welfare Association, tell us we are in a new era of the social contract; individual responsibility and social responsibility will work together in ways to make it possible for families to leave the welfare system and become self-sufficient. It sounds a bit like the justice I hope for, but I am skeptical. After all, these are just words and I know that putting

words into practice can bring about unusual transformations. I am also skeptical about top-down approaches to changing people's lives. Despite my skepticism I am glad I am here. As I leave the meeting, I feel connected to something that could make a difference if it were centered in the local community.

Over the next nine years, until the council's dissolution in 1997, I spent hundreds of hours in meetings, listening and discussing how to make welfare reform work for families. There were times when I felt hopeful; the project had many successes such as developing new programs, creat-

ing alliances and resources, educating the community, and influencing legislation. From my perspective, one of the greatest successes was that our community worked very hard to define welfare reform and the process by which families become economically self-sufficient in a broad context. Self-sufficiency was viewed as an outcome that could be achieved only by creating a system of services to address the multiple barriers an individual family might face. This is a contrast to the much narrower perspective, which many communities choose, which is "jobs are the route to self-sufficiency."

There were also times when my involvement in this kind of community initiative was discouraging; we lost some legislative battles, the bureaucracy of the welfare department at times seemed unworkable

and too slow to change, success for the women was too often defined as a low-wage dead end job, and finally in the end the Council was not sustained.

If I remember one moment during my Council involvement when I was clear about the pursuit of justice standing with pain as part of community, it was at the Annual Meeting of the Council in 1993. A welfare participant stood before a group of 150 community leaders and described her difficult journey to give up welfare assistance. I was not the only one in tears with her—the community was a part of her pain and as a community we were working to change the systems that had oppressed her.

*All Families Deserve a Chance (AFDC) Coalition: 1990 - present*

December, 1990: A good friend of mine (also an MSW student), Mary Beth, is starting a project to form a coalition of women on welfare called the AFDC Coalition. She has designed this project as part of her second-year field placement and as a student in my Seminar in Community Organizing. She has asked me to help her facilitate the meeting. We are in a community room at a low-income housing development and there are about 20 women there. There is an energy in this room also, and the women are quite articulate about their concerns. They know what they need to become self-sufficient and they also know there are many barriers. We conclude the meeting by getting a list of names of people



interested in participating in the effort. I leave this meeting excited about the potential that has begun with this small seed and somehow knowing this will make a difference.

March, 1998: There have been many meetings since December 1990. In addition to meetings, there have been rallies and actions where women speak out. Now the welfare rolls are dropping at great rates all around the country. At an AFDC Coalition meeting, we are discussing how to monitor the effects of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, the latest welfare reform legislation that went into effect in Colorado in July 1997. We are all very concerned about what is happening to families and we are planning our research/advocacy strategy. Being part of this community effort over the past eight years has been very rewarding. There have also been many successes. Women with little voice have grown into leadership roles, legislation and policy implementation have been influenced, and a power base has evolved. The women often express how their involvement in the coalition has led them to feel more empowered (Parsons, East, & Boesen, 1994). One said when interviewed, "I know that people in the Coalition are ready to back me up anytime I need it, so I really feel a sense of community... that I am actually accomplishing something and that I haven't given up makes me feel good." In addition, the Coalition has developed a power base and has been successful in influencing

the policy agenda of the State. For example, in 1995 the Coalition lobbied the State Legislature to get renewal of drivers' licenses contingent on the applicant being current in child support payments. The bill passed and the bill sponsor noted that the Coalition was a major influence. As part of an advocacy coalition, the most significant events for me are when women tell their stories of pain and the community must listen. In this case their pain has been mobilized to collective action—another way to express justice.

*Project WISE: 1994 - present*

My third story on this journey has been the creation of a community based program for women who receive welfare. In October 1994 I am with a fellow social worker who is also a friend, Susan. We are in her basement and we are creating a project, a dream we have had for the past 18 years since we were M.S.W. students together. The dream is to provide an avenue for women who have low incomes to experience a sense of empowerment. The philosophy of the project will be to connect individual change and social change so that women can find their voices and reach their goals. As we give life to our ideas, I believe in my heart that this project, which we eventually name Project WISE, A Women's Initiative for Service and Empowerment, can and will make a difference.

Now in June 1999, Project WISE has been officially a non-profit organization for

four years. We have talked with and met over 300 women who are living the experiences of poverty and of welfare reform. We created this project based on both an identified need and a philosophy of services. The need was in response to the past experiences and present realities that confront women receiving welfare assistance. These realities included domestic violence, past abuse, lack of support systems, lack of self-esteem, and a system of policies about which they had little say. We saw a need for women to gain a sense of personal self-sufficiency that went hand in hand with economic self-sufficiency. We started with a practice model of empowerment (Gutierrez, 1990) and from that developed a program of services that includes strengths-based counseling, support groups, and leadership development for advocacy. Each of these activities is aimed at enhancing the personal, interpersonal, and political empowerment of women with few economic resources (East, in press). We too have had successes; women have left abusive relationships, returned to school, increased their self-esteem, and spoken out on behalf of themselves and others. The women's voices speak to these changes:

*"I was very withdrawn... shy. I never wanted to be heard and through counseling I have become more outspoken."*

*"Having a lot of women together you know that other people have problems and you are not the only one out there."*

*"The Project WISE retreat changed my way of thinking. There is more out there to achieve. I want to go back to school and get my GED."*

We have also had setbacks. Some women do not trust, are too afraid to speak out, or cannot face their pain. Esther, for example, has sunk into deeper depression, her physical problems have required surgery, and she quit counseling saying, "I just can't face it." The creation of Project WISE has been very rewarding and has taught me a lot about what it means to be in a community. While the community coalitions focus my action on larger systems' changes, it is in my direct contact with women, not only in *our* pain but in the strength of a community we co-create, that my journey for justice is made real.

### The Lessons. . . the Meaning

The lessons I have learned on my journey are many, and I will highlight four of the most significant. The first lesson is that community involvement to bring about change in poverty or welfare reform requires tenacity, patience, and a long term-commitment. The issues are complicated and easy solutions do not exist. My belief in the community's capacity for justice means the tenacity to show up, not just for the big events, like city-wide kick off meetings or rallies, but to persist in almost daily conversations in small group meetings. Creativity can and will likely

emerge in such forums where ongoing participation is demanding (Bellah, 1992). This requires my patience: "Patience has the time and strength to recognize complicated conditions and people, [and] to engage them in cooperation and conversation. . ." (Borgman, 1992, 124).

The commitment is part of the journey. My willingness to stay on this path is strongly rooted in my social work values and the importance to me of being part of a value-based profession. A discussion of values in the context of social work is com-

mon and there are many definitions of values (Loewenberg & Dolgoff, 1992). For me, a value is something I hold as essentially important. I am interested in my own choice of the word "hold." My image is that of "holding" in my hand, my heart, my head, my soul (East, 1995). As reflected in this narrative, the one value that seems to be most significant in relation to my choice of social work as a profession, and my work for women in poverty and welfare reform, is the way in which I give meaning to the value of justice. That meaning has evolved through my commitment to staying with the journey. This lesson is one I often share with my students. When they are anxious for answers and change, I respond with the story of my journey and how one must commit to the long haul.

The second lesson is that while it is clear that my profession supports my actions for justice as congruent with its value

base, the definition of justice as a value and a goal is complex, and so are the choices for my action. Justice can be defined as an impartial administration of reactions to conflicting claims, or the establishment of rights according to laws or rules, or as a device that keeps "transgressions against each other in check" (Lappé, 1989, p.13). While I accept those definitions of justice, my justice is also about equal, although not necessarily the same, access to and distribution of rights and resources for all peoples, based on what those people desire. This meaning of justice includes a means to secure individual and subsequent community rights (East, 1995). This perspective on justice keeps me centered as a social worker.

The context of welfare reform challenges my value of justice on an almost daily basis. For example, throughout 1996, as we fought to get the most humane possible welfare reform bill passed in our state, I often felt far away from justice. How is trying to make the best of a situation that does not stand with the pain of women and children receiving welfare contribute to justice, I asked myself? Such questions do not stop me, however; I continue to act, and my involvement in various welfare reform activities keeps my passion and urgency for justice rooted. However, in my many roles I often wonder if I am making the right choices for action. Should I be more advocate and



less researcher? More practitioner and less policy analyst? I used to be troubled by such questions. Now I realize I must keep asking them and not become complacent about my choices, for justice is much too complex for complacency.

A third lesson is about the need to make a difference. I heard this often from community members as I asked them about their involvement in community work (East, 1995). I hear it from

my students regularly. As part of the Community Council, the AFDC Coalition, and my work at Project WISE, I, along with others, have been working to influence legislation and local implementation of welfare reform, from the Family Support Act of 1988 to the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996. I am representative of a number of other individuals who, over these years, have been trying to "make a difference" in the welfare reform discourse, in the subsequent actions, and ultimately in the lives of people in our community. I have learned that an advantage of a long-term perspective centered in one local community is that I can see small steps of influence and how we have made a difference along the way. For example, in the early nineties, one of the emerging issues coming both from our own experience and from national research was the connec-

tion between domestic violence, mental health, and welfare use. Following our experience of building community collaboratives, three of us formed a small mental health task group. Now, five years later, the group no longer meets but a continuum of services is in place specifically designed for welfare families. When seen cumulatively, small steps, such as forming a task group, creates differences

that may not be so small. On this journey for justice, I find I need to remind myself and others of the significance of small steps. The meaning of making a difference is best seen collectively, over time, rather than individually—and therefore is best fostered in community.

My final lesson is about community. No matter what role I have, I must act. To value justice means to act justly and the test is measured in my actions. As I reflect on this journey, it has also confirmed for me that such a journey is rooted in my being a part of my community. My actions in a community context mean a context greater than my immediate personal world, a context that puts me in a relationship with others who are "strangers." To be part of community also means to be with women and families experiencing the pain of poverty, as they are my community. By being with them, listening to their

stories, and using my gifts to bring their stories into the discourse of the political community, I experience the innate need for community. Community is the place where my individual values and social work values meet.

An example of this comes to mind. In my work with women through Project WISE, I listen to women, and one day this is what I hear. Maria says:

*"I have ten children, four little ones still. I'm a good mother and now welfare is telling me I can't stay home and watch them or be with them. I worry constantly.*

*"I've tried to work before but my daycare experience has been terrible. I started with one center and my little girl just didn't fit in. I transferred to another center and when I went one day to pick up the kids, my little boy was almost blue. He has asthma and was having a reaction. The daycare said they just thought he needed to rest. I rushed him to the emergency room. So I decided no more strangers and I asked a long-time friend to watch the kids so I could attend here. Yesterday I went home and my friend has boyfriends over, drinking beer."*

In tears Maria continues, "I need to be home with my kids."

The same week I heard these stories, our local newspaper took a call-in poll and 87% of those who called thought welfare mothers with children under one should work. I hear



the concern of women for their children and I contrast that with the state opinion poll. I am left, as we all are, with a great challenge on this journey for justice. All of these words and conversations are a part of my community. Action in the context of community is not about agreement, but about being there for the conversations. In these community conversations, my journey for justice, as a social worker, meets its test.

### Closing Thoughts

Often when I think of a journey, I think of a destination. But on this journey, the destination seems elusive. I dream of a destination, like ending poverty as we know it. And yet I realize that the commitment to stand with others' pain and our innate need for community means that it is the journey, and not the destination, that I must stay focused on. The words of Denise Levertov (1978) speak to me:

*How could we tire of hope  
- so much is in bud.  
How can desire fail?  
- we have only begun...  
Beginners*

I have already begun and I have only begun. Yet there is a continuity to my journey; it is rooted in who I am personally and professionally. I will stay in it for the long haul in as many roles as I can. I will be my voice, and I will work to clearly represent those who do not have the access to policy makers that I do.

And finally, I will encourage others, especially social workers and social work students, to join with me, to stand with the pain and in community, and together we will create more journeys for justice. □

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