

Editorial

by Rebecca A. Lopez, Ph.D

In our training of social work professionals, we are conscious of including the promotion of diversity as a quality to be acknowledged and valued. Differences in race, ethnicity, lifestyle and capabilities are realities to be celebrated in our pluralist society. The rights to co-exist "in difference" in our society have been hard-won in our most recent history. We no longer accept the ideal that all additions to our society must be Americanized to fit into the proverbial melting pot. This has been no easy task, and we still struggle with vile factions of oppressive intolerance with sometimes deadly consequences. We define and continue to re-define majority-minority relationships in light of changing demographics and the blurring of cultural lines. Our historical and socio-structural foundations have allowed us our temporary transgressions without the total destruction of our country as we know it.

Yet, many places in our world have imploded under the intolerance of diversity. Intolerance of ethnic and religious difference among Yugoslavia's federation of republics is the focus of this issue of REFLECTIONS. The collapse of the communist system of old brought a splintering of interests clearly along historical ethnic and religious lines. Serbs, Croats and Muslims now asserted their

independence with a torrent of brutal nationalism and persecution of "others".

But, who were these "others"? For many, these nationalistic and ethnic lines would seem contrived. Many (including several authors in this issue) can attest to the fact that ethnic boundaries were blurring in the pre-war Balkans. Estimates are that as many as one third of the marriages in Bosnia were mixed marriages prior to the 1992-95 civil war. Families of mixed marriages and people for whom ethnic identity was not a prime consideration were now forced to pledge allegiance to one faction. The ultimate human tragedy was the result when children of intermarriage were forced to choose sides in this conflict. Childhood friends, neighbors and even relatives now became the enemy in a protracted exchange of hostilities whose vehemence produced human suffering on a scale not seen in modern times.

In viewing the escalation of atrocities in the Balkans, many in the helping professions were forced to confront a dilemma of conscience. Senses of incredulity, frustration, even anger at the U.S. role in NATO's bombing campaign were voiced by many who felt they knew where they stood in issues of peace, war and non-violent expression. The need to respond to these events was met in a number

of ways beyond intellectual discourse. Some protested. Some volunteered to help with the aftermath of this crisis. Helping professionals were, and still are working with the estimated 400,000 refugees and displaced persons, as well as the family members of the quarter of a million dead and missing. Helping professionals are providing technical expertise to mend families and, hopefully, nations that are still immersed in emotional minefields. And persons in the helping professions have been spurred on to new inquiry in dealing with difference and non-violent conflict resolution, as some of our authors illustrate. It becomes the imperative for all helping professionals to share what they know and believe about the necessity for constant vigilance against devaluation of differences in others.

This, unfortunately, will not be the last time helping professionals will be asked to take on these roles. But we must believe that the lessons we teach about tolerance and appreciation of diversity will have some impact on the tasks the future brings. Perhaps we would do well to recognize the elemental truth posed by Black Elk of the Oglala Sioux nation who envisioned the world as a "whole hoop." The "sacred hoop" of his nation was but "one of many hoops that made one circle, wide as daylight and as star-

light, and in the center grew one mighty flowering tree to shelter all the children of one mother and one father."^a With the escalation of development in destructive technologies in many parts of the world, failure to recognize this elemental truth that we are all part of that "whole hoop", will bring consequences from which there will be no recovery. □

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Reflections welcomes letters to the Editor. Letters should be sent with the writer's name, address and daytime phone number to Editor, Reflections, Department of Social Work, CSULB, 1250 Bellflower, Long Beach, CA 90840. They can also be faxed (562-985-5514) or sent via E-mail to reflect@csulb.edu. Letters may be edited for length and clarity and may be published in the journal.

^a Black Elk (1988) Black Elk speaks: Being the life story of the holy man of the Oglala Sioux, as told to J.G. Neihart. Lincoln, NB. P. 43.

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