

WHAT I LEARNED ON MY SABBATICAL

By Mary Ann Jimenez, Ph.D.

I return from a seven-month sabbatical this month, reflecting on the unrecognized privileges we in academia and the helping professions enjoy that many do not. I spent time in several cities engaged in research, enjoying the privilege of fresh perspective, windows on different lifestyles, new professional acquaintances, and renewal of old family and friendship ties that travel allows. I was following my own research idea through libraries and document collections, speaking at length with experts in the field I had chosen to investigate. My days were my own as were my thoughts and virtually all my choices. Waiting at home was the life I had temporarily exited as I sought the opportunity to refresh myself as a scholar and traveler.

Even though I believe that my time away from the University will deepen my teaching and result in a contribution to social work, I frequently was reminded of my privileged life as a professional academic during encounters in various urban areas with poverty and suffering. Floating through economically depressed areas, I took in the curious stares of passersby with the relaxed, unfazed attitude that comes with the privilege of moving through the tribulations of others without having to account for oneself or stop to intervene.

I realized how few people who stood grimly on the morning subways of the metropolitan centers had control over the most essential matters of their lives - their economic status, the discrimination they experienced, the health problems for which no one offered a solution. Many of the

people I spoke with worked in low paying jobs, and shared with those who were unemployed a sense of bleakness and hopelessness; a striking and painful counterpoint to the surge of energy I was experiencing in my recreated state of freedom. The privilege of sustained thought about matters not related to daily existence is one many of us have enjoyed in our professional education and lives; most others have not been afforded this. The time to follow through with a creative idea is a gift accorded those who have privileges tied to wealth, education or professional status.

Over the course of my sabbatical, I was struck not by the shared nature of human struggle, but by the differences between my life and those of many others. Many helping professionals and virtually all academics share the privileges that I experienced. This separates us ineluctably from those we wish to help, teach or treat. For social workers, in particular the gulf is wide - working with oppressed, marginalized groups means working with those who have few if any of these unearned, unrecognized privileges. How can we understand, through standpoint theory or any other means, the lived life of many of our clients? Do we need to understand to make a difference? In her moving narrative *"At Home with Poor Women and Children: My Sabbatical at Bethany House,"* Jennifer Soule recounts how she reconnected with the lives of her clients as well as her own background on her sabbatical, a very different one from mine. She was able to overcome these differences by living with poor women.

After reading the pieces in the "*Violence and Children*" section of this issue, I was struck by how far my life has always been from the experiences these adolescents have already have lived through. On the other hand, like Cynthia Cannon Poindexter in "*Honoring our dead by breaking silence: Remembering those who died from AIDS,*" many of our lives have been deeply touched by AIDS. Yet even as we supported and loved our friends and family during terrible times, I doubt that any witness, no matter how close, could understand the lived experience of suffering and dying from AIDS.

What I learned from my sabbatical is that many privileges separate me from others, and that this distance is far greater than the essential human isolation that makes it impossible to fully understand another's experience. Any idea that a bridge to others can be created out of empathy alone is an illusion created to make us feel better, less guilty and more useful. Recognizing the fundamental differences between our lives and the lives of others, including many of our clients, as well as understanding that a great deal of this difference is due to inequality and discrimination, seem necessary pre-conditions for any connection. The rest is very hard and humbling work. □

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