

SPECIAL SECTION ON VIOLENCE

EDITORIAL

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A Reflections Special Edition on Violence was planned in the wake of the Columbine tragedy and the hate shootings on the Jewish preschool children and teachers in California. Many in the country and the media were once again focused on and fearful of the causes and outcomes of violence. Since helping professionals are often faced with issues of violence, possibly in their own lives, and, often in the course of their work, we believed a special edition on violence was quite timely and would provide important insights for us all.

While Columbine and many of the other recent youth killings in schools raise many issues, one concern that speaks strongly to me is the apparent and woeful lack of understanding of the "real lives" of our youth on the part of the people who spend so much time with them—their parents and educators. My work in some of our low-income and violence-prone communities has taught me the incredible strength and resiliency of children and families who struggle with these interconnected problems on a daily basis, yet rise successfully above them. At the same time, I am often surprised at how little professionals who work in yet live outside these communities seem to understand what happens in the lives of our children. I can vividly recall the student teacher in tears and struggling with the reality that all but two of the children in her kindergarten class had had someone close to them die—"that never happened in my school." I remember the school social work student righteously denouncing the parents she was working with who told their child to

hit other kids when they were bothered being interrupted by another student who had grown up in South Central Los Angeles. The second student talked about her moral dilemma in teaching kids not to fight back, since she knew that in her neighborhood the only way for the gangs to leave you alone was to "take a baseball bat to someone's head." I can still see the child protective services administrator who was against out-stationing his staff at a local middle school because the neighborhood was too dangerous—yet the children they served faced these dangers daily.

I thought it important to ask the youth themselves how they experienced and perceived violence. The call went out to over 50 schools; one class of students answered. Their vignettes tell compelling stories about the lives of our youth. I hope we can learn from these as well as take the time to learn the stories of other youth whose lives we touch.

To some extent, my concerns regarding the "gap" between the lives of professionals and those with whom we work are strongly echoed in the articles written by Molidar and Maes and Farrar. The Molidar and Maes article describes the personal struggles experienced by a social work professor and social work students as they are blatantly confronted by on their abilities and knowledge by an ex-gang member who has come to class to talk about working with gang members and street youth. This article highlights the importance of teaching helping professionals to learn from their "clients" and of the imperative to establish

rather than assume credibility with each and every person regardless of the number of letters behind our names. These themes should resonate with anyone who has had the experience of working with alienated youth or diverse populations. The article by Farrar grippingly describes a conversation in which a high school student tells his teacher about how he has killed two people while she grades his essay. While the student, often angrily, unburdens himself, the teacher is "stunned by killer/child sitting before her," and possibly by how little she knew of him prior to their discussion.

Cocinis's article, "A Time to Kill," powerfully evokes the ethical and moral struggles facing social workers researching and writing mitigating circumstance reports for inmates facing the death penalty. While I had never heard of this type of social work practice prior to this narrative, the institutional racism in our justice system as well as the large number of death row convictions that have recently been overturned or put under review underscore the importance of working for justice even the most violent in our society. The Juarez article traces his involvement in violence prevention activities at both the individual and societal level. His narrative describes the terrible pain experienced by people who have lost their loved ones to homicide, and how his empathy and efforts led to the creation of agencies and coalitions dedicated to reducing violence. Both articles contribute to our understanding of how personal histories and commitment to social justice may lead helping professionals to work in violence-related areas, regardless of the mixed emotions and challenges involved.

As I read these articles and ponder the violence I sometimes see in the communities where I work, I also look into the face of my innocent and beloved ten-month old son. I pray that he will never be the victim or perpetrator of such violence and am grateful that so many of us are willing to give so much of ourselves to reduce violence in our society. □

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