

# SOCIAL JUSTICE IN MY LIFE AND PRACTICE

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*This narrative describes the life experiences that contributed to the author's understanding of socially just practice, including his childhood, adolescence, young adulthood as a college student, and his professional life. He believes that this process is lifelong and ever changing.*

## **Introduction**

In this narrative, I seek to reflect upon events in my life that molded my understanding of social justice and how to practice social work in a socially just way. I see this as an ongoing process that begins in early childhood and continues throughout life. This paper as such is a narrative of reflection on my life in relationship to understanding social justice. I begin with some definitions. Writers on this subject often refer to the work of John Rawls (1995) in defining justice:

Justice as Fairness: According to this principle, each person has an equal right to the most extensive basic liberty compatible with a similar liberty for others.

Just Arrangements: Social and economic inequalities are arranged so they are both to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged and attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of fair and equal opportunity.

Dennis Saleebey (1990, p. 37) contends that the following conditions must be met to achieve social justice:

1. Social resources are distributed on the principle of need with the clear understanding that such resources underlie the development of personal resources, with the proviso that entitlement to such resources is one of the gifts of citizenship.

2. Opportunities for personal and social development are open to all with the understanding that those who have been unfairly hampered through no fault of their own will be appropriately compensated.

3. The establishment—at all levels of society—of agendas and policies that have human development and the enriching of human experience as their essential goal and are understood to take precedence over other agendas and policies, is essential.

4. The arbitrary exercise of social and political power is forsaken.

5. Oppression as a means for establishing priorities, for developing social and natural resources and distributing them, and resolving social problems is foresworn.

## **Childhood**

As I reflect on how the idea of social justice has come to have a central role in all my current writings and other activities, I am sure that much of this is rooted in my childhood experiences. I am not claiming that the concept of social justice was in any way known to me but I am sure that I had a profound sense that I was disadvantaged and oppressed—although again I do not assert that I knew these words. I also was less aware of the fact that I was advantaged, and I will comment on this later.

One sense I had of disadvantage is that we were relatively poor. My parents owned a millinery store when I was born in 1929, but



lost it in the next few years as women were not buying expensive hats during the depression. My father had an 8<sup>th</sup> grade education and my mother had 3 years of high school. My father was born in Russia and came to this country as a young child, but my mother was born on the lower east side of New York (her father was born in Poland). Therefore, my father got a job selling vacuum cleaners and other appliances, my mother worked part time selling hats, and my sister and I were cared for by a series of African American women who worked for what I'm sure was, even then, a pittance. I don't think I had a sense then of the oppression of African Americans, although by the time I was in high school I thought about this very much (but more about this later). However, I did remember these women as being very nurturing to us.

Nevertheless, I was aware we had very little money. My maternal grandparents, my parents, sister and I, and an unmarried aunt all moved into one apartment so we could afford to pay the rent. Although we were Jewish, the alderman brought clothes for me and my sister at Christmas and various relatives donated clothing to us when their children outgrew them. A primary contributor was an uncle who was a successful writer (he wrote the original *Jazz Singer*). I was aware that my parents worried constantly about money. I was less aware until much later in life how privileged we were by virtue of our skin color, the fact that we lived in an apartment in a middle class section of Chicago (Rogers Park), and we had extended family who I am sure helped in many ways. My writer-uncle also took a shine to me (he thought I was bright) and paid for me to attend a small private school in kindergarten and 1<sup>st</sup> grade, which allowed me to start school at age 4; a year earlier than the public schools would. I was largely unaware of male privilege (I thought being male subjected me to more bullying) but I undoubtedly benefitted from my gender. I was given educational and other benefits by my parents and uncle that were not given to my sister, and I know through what she said later that she resented this. (Incidentally, she had been a heavy smoker and died from lung cancer over a decade ago.)



A second factor that I am certain contributed to my understanding of justice is that I was a somewhat fearful child. (Exactly *why* I was is something I'm still exploring.) I was afraid of the neighborhood bullies who undoubtedly come to exist in all or most communities, and who saw me as an easy target. I also saw myself as horrible at and fearful of sports, and this contributed to my status among my peers. In school I was always the last chosen for a team and justifiably so. (It wasn't until my late teens that I discovered I liked to play sports after my friends and I came to accept my ineptness.) I don't remember friends before the 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> grade, though I imagine I must have had some. I mark the beginning of friendships to 5<sup>th</sup> grade when my family moved and I changed schools. My first friends there were Arthur and Richard, and for reasons that seem to contradict what I have just written, we became inseparable - some of those friends I made back then are still my friends to this day...70 years later! I consciously knew that I was less likely to be picked on by bullies when I was with friends, especially those who were less fearful of fighting than I was. That probably accounts for my deep conviction that people can and should help one another and that "in numbers there is strength" (mutual aid).

A third aspect of my childhood that ultimately contributed to my concern for social justice was my developing awareness of what it meant to be Jewish. At first (in the 1930's), I heard relatives at family gatherings discussing how difficult it was to find employment because of their Jewishness. My own father changed his name from Garfinkle to Garvin so that prejudice would not stand in the way of his selling appliances. (My legal name remained Garfinkle although I was



entered in school, drafted in the army, and was married as Garvin. I legally changed my name in 1968 in order for my passport to show the same last name as my wife and children.)

In the middle to late 1930's and beyond, I was fully aware of the treatment of the Jews by Nazi Germany through reports in the press. I was moderately fearful that this could happen in the United States as I read about Nazi groups here. However, I narrowly missed being drafted in World War II as the war ended when I was 16.

### Adolescence

As I moved into my high school years, I became even more concerned about anti-Semitism and at first dealt with this by supporting causes related to the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine. I "fell" for the distortion that this was "a land without people for a people without land." (Palestine was definitely not a land without people; it had a significant Palestinian-Arab population.) I was aware that there were few places for survivors of the Holocaust to go, including limitations on immigration to the United States. I was not a particularly observant Jew—nor was my family at the time—but I was proud of what I read in the Jewish history books. I tried to learn more about Judaism, so I briefly joined the local affiliate of a Jewish reform high school organization and even took some courses in Jewish history at the local college of Jewish studies. I was also a member (and eventually president) of the AZA, which was the Jewish high school boy's organization (which has now been replaced by a co-ed B'nai B'rith youth group) and relied on it for many of my social activities in high school.

To this day I'm not sure what brought about my shift of interest in my latter years of high school to radical political affiliations rather than Zionist ones. I did not reject my interest in what became Israel, but I am sure I saw the connections among oppression toward many groups, including African Americans, poor people, and people who labored in fields and factories. My father was a very loyal union member, and I remember our family struggling through many strikes that my father fully supported. For reasons that I do not have the

space to dwell on here, I did not have a close relationship with my father, but I remember one incident that I valued with respect to him. We were at a family get-together where a number of family members who were small shopkeepers bemoaned the bad behavior of their employees. My father spoke up and said, "We working people see this differently!" In any case, I began attending meetings of the American Youth for Democracy (AYD) which was labeled by the government as a "communist front organization." I was aware of this and, I think, but may be giving myself too much credit, that I already held the opinion that conservative forces in the United States sought to stifle dissent and punish dissenters.

### College Years

After high school I enrolled in a public junior college in Chicago. I had no money to attend any other college (the fee for that institution was only \$10.00 a semester), and I was unsuccessful in obtaining scholarships to other institutions. However, I found that the Chicago junior colleges in 1946 had excellent instructors. I resumed the kinds of extra-curricular activities I had in high school, including the school paper and the college branch of the AYD. The former was very significant in my life, as I met people who have remained my friends for many years. The latter proved significant in the evolution of my ideas about social justice, which relates to the following incident.

One project taken on by the AYD was to oppose the call by President Harry Truman to resume the draft, which had been discontinued after the end of World War II. One part of this project involved the members (there were actually only a few of us; I believe less than 10) handling out leaflets across from the school asking people to write letters opposing the draft. On my first day of participation, the Dean of the college called the police. They forced me to go with them to the Dean's office, threatened me with arrest, and the Dean threatened me with expulsion. I can't remember how aware I was at that time that many free speech battles had been fought throughout U.S. history to safeguard such actions as distributing leaflets, but I must have



had some idea of this. To put it bluntly I was “scared shitless.” Nevertheless, although I had previously thought of myself as somewhat of a coward, I didn’t consider leaving the AYD or changing my beliefs.

The college veteran’s organization called publicly for my expulsion. The faculty, who I knew to be left-wingers, whispered in my ear they were with me. The local community newspaper ran an article headlined: “Garvin, AYD, Flailed by Vet’s Group.” Such notoriety I didn’t need.

Looking back on it now, I realize that despite my view at the time that I was being persecuted for my beliefs (an important lesson), I was still comparatively privileged. I was a middle class white person. If I had been a poor person of color, I think the police might have been less gentle with me. And despite my fears to the contrary, I remained in college and ultimately became a University of Chicago student. Others who were less privileged than I probably wouldn’t have been able to develop their careers because of the stigma of being a “radical” and a “troublemaker.”

At the next AYD meeting, our membership had doubled as other students who were concerned about civil rights decided to show their support. The actions of the Dean and the police seemed to have backfired a bit! At that time, I was an active member of a college sponsored social science club in which we discussed how various social sciences added to our understanding of ourselves and society. The club was sponsored by Meyer Weinberg, a history teacher at the college. I enjoyed talking with him as he had a passion for social justice and a conviction that social science had a strong role to play in determining the means for attaining it. We subsequently became friends, and we stayed in touch until his death a few years ago. I was also friendly with his wife, which became very important to me later, as she was a practicing social worker.

Another consequence of my AYD affiliation was that I was invited to attend a group studying Marxism. I found this to be very interesting as it sought to explain important issues such as major historical developments and current political dilemmas. I realize that this contributed to allegation that

the AYD was linked to the Communist Party, but the meaning of and the judgments placed on this go far beyond the purposes of this narrative. At the time, many of us were either ignorant of the injustices and horrors of the Stalin regime or saw these charges as part of the “Red Scare.” This was the period in which Senator McCarthy held sway, many prominent individuals were called to testify about their alleged communist ties, and the leading Communists were jailed. I, along with many others, feared that a fascist state might emerge here in the United States.

In 1947, another event occurred that was to have a large influence on my awareness of social justice. I had joined an organization called B’nai B’rith Young Men, which had sent out a call for members to volunteer in settlement houses, presumably to help other segments of the population get to know Jews personally. At the time I thought this was not a very powerful approach to the issue, but I had my own reasons for volunteering. Many of the placements were in African-American communities, and I had a strong desire to have personal relationships in one of those communities, as my social life in the north side of Chicago was limited to others of my same color.



So one Saturday during Fall of 1947, I showed up at the door of Henry Booth House on the west side of Chicago near the famous Maxwell Street. Fifty years earlier, the area had been Jewish, full of Eastern European immigrants. This neighborhood was also about a mile south of the original Hull House founded



by Jane Addams, which she had written about extensively. In 1947, the Booth House neighborhood was primarily African American and was one of first settlements for people from the southern United States. The houses were in very bad shape; the director of Henry Booth House, Edna Hansen, used to quip that the Chicago fire of 1971 began north of there and blew the wrong way. I became like "the man who came to dinner," as I was affiliated with Henry Booth House until 1956 - except for the two years in which I was drafted into the army (1952-1954). This settlement experience ultimately affected my choice of career, my close relationships, my values, and my identity!

My first work in the settlement involved working with the director who facilitated a group called "Leaders in Training." The teenagers in this group were being taught group leadership techniques, but we also discussed many issues of the day with them such as international conflicts, prejudice and discrimination, and the existence of oppression in the form of police harassment, denial of decent community services, and denial of opportunities based on their color. I was thrilled to discover that these teenagers showed intense interest in these issues. The reader should take note that many of these youth were in one parent families that subsisted on welfare. (The government assistance program most prevalent at that time was Aid to Dependent Children, or ADC.) They lived crowded together in buildings that often lacked adequate plumbing and heat, and they could be evicted easily if the parent failed in paying the rent.

I will never forget the time I met a six-year-old boy whose face was severely disfigured, because, as a baby, a rat had eaten his nose while he lay in his crib. He was a very angry, aggressive little boy who had bitten virtually every staff member at the settlement. Nevertheless, the staff vowed to treat him with kindness. Unfortunately, he could not have plastic reconstruction until he reached his teen years and his face had stopped growing. I came to meet his whole family: his sister got pregnant in her teens; his brother was killed by a train while he was playing on the tracks;

but I remember little about his older brother or mother.

I was invited by "Head Resident" of the agency (as such directors were called at the time) to become a counselor that summer at a camp she directed on behalf of another settlement—the Abraham Lincoln Center—which was located in the heart of Chicago's south side African American community. Most of the staff members and campers were African American. The junior counselors were Leaders in Training from the two settlements. This was my first experience living in a primarily African American community. It was a fantastic learning experience for me as I was immersed in the music, language, and culture of that community. One teen even volunteered to teach me "how to talk." I don't remember any time feeling separate from these people, although as a result of writing this narrative I have begun to reflect on how privileged they must have perceived me to be. I became aware of the many ways these people had been oppressed, and I am sure that this continued to feed my commitment to attain social justice.

During my third year of college I was admitted to the Sociology Department of the University of Chicago, and returned to my part time work at the settlement. I may even have received some payment for my services. I had very little money, so in addition to working at the settlement, I became a field worker for the B'nai B'rith Youth Organization, as well as a statistical coder for a large insurance company. The Sociology Department at Chicago was a very exciting environment, with faculty made up of famous sociological pioneers as Ernest Burgess, William Lloyd Warner, Louis Wirth, William Ogburn, and Everett Hughes. While I would hardly claim that these were the major thinkers about social justice, they helped me to become comfortable with terms I would later use to discuss the causes and consequences of social injustice.

As I noted above, I continued to work at the settlement house and I return to that experience as it significantly altered my college and professional career, and many other aspects of my life. The director of the settlement was a social worker and had



received her training at the School of Social Service Administration (SSA) of the University of Chicago. I met many other social workers through the settlement's relationship with other agencies and, it seems in retrospect, to have been an inevitable decision and no struggle at all to decide that the rest of my life lay with that profession. This was reinforced by my political experiences, as I was still a participant in radical/left activity. The social work profession seemed the best way to unify that activity, its concern with social justice, and my education for a career.

Many of my radical college friends were critical of my decision. Some of my friends thought they would unite their political convictions with their occupations by going to work in factories and becoming active members of a labor union, or by becoming staff members of radical organizations. Some sought to intellectually aid the struggle by becoming historians, focusing on such topics as labor history, Black history, etc. I was not strongly interested in becoming a historian and, based on some factory work I did while in high school, knew that I would be miserable in that kind of situation. I also admit that I feared some of the negative consequences of radical activity based on the "arrest" I had experienced back in junior college, and the conservative direction in the country in which Communists and others were to be persecuted. The social work profession seemed the right solution for me!

I notified the SSA that I wished to transfer to that department, and was readily accepted. At that time, SSA had an undergraduate program in which the future social workers enrolled in a well-rounded set of social science courses until they had completed four years of college. Then they would automatically be enrolled in the graduate social work program.<sup>1</sup> These two years were very intellectually exciting, as I studied with internationally renowned professors: Walter Johnson taught history, Ernest Burgess taught sociology, William Lloyd Warner taught social anthropology, Earl Hamilton taught economic history, and Hans Morgenthau taught international law. All of these studies at Chicago had a thrust toward what is now called the pursuit of social justice.

This was epitomized by the University of Chicago's chancellor, Hutchins, who was idolized by many students for his stand on world peace, an enlightened electorate (e.g. his participation in the creation of the Great Books Program), and his international perspective. During the McCarthy period, he hired faculty from other universities who had been fired because of their political beliefs.

It should come as no surprise to the reader that I was very active in extra-curricular activities. My favorite was the student newspaper, the *Chicago Maroon*. I had been active on the student paper in junior college; I enjoyed writing, and had previously thought of having a career as a writer due in large part to my identification with my uncle who was a well known playwright. (The editor at that time was a man named David Broder, who later became a well known columnist). I gradually worked my way up, and was elected editor-in-chief in 1950. I was a member of a group of *Maroon* staff members who made up the left wing of the staff. This enabled me (and us) to pursue editorial policies and to publish articles that were viewed by many as radical. To me, they represented what we today would call a strong commitment to social justice. The following are some examples:<sup>2</sup>

- I wrote an editorial entitled "To remove some barriers," that was a strong call for what we now call affirmative action. This was reprinted in Chicago's African American newspaper, *The Defender* (November 17, 1950).
- We quoted Hutchins (6/27/50) as saying, "The day of force as the determining factor in world affairs ended with our atomic monopoly."
- We reported that a dean of the school suspended a campus peace organization (7/14/50).
- We reported that 107 faculty approved an Einstein peace proposal (7/14/50).
- We published a review of a book that was highly critical of the University of California loyalty oaths (10/6/50).



- We gave extensive reportage to the suspension of a student for circulating a petition on campus (10/13/50).
- We reported on the attendance of a student at the International Union of Students in Prague (10/13/50).
- I interviewed Chancellor Hutchins and reported that he said, "The University of Chicago has no intention of infringing on student freedoms" (10/20/1050).
- We printed an editorial that criticized the tearing down of posters for peace organizations (10/20/50).
- We published an editorial criticizing the "McCarran-Wood Act," which was seen as allowing the government to interfere with the rights of communist front or action organizations (10/27/50).

It was inevitable that these and other things printed in the paper would provoke a strong reaction from some students as well as the administration, which was increasingly concerned about the political climate of the country. Even Chancellor Hutchins was called to testify before an Illinois legislative committee that was investigating so-called "un-American activities," and many students, including myself, went to the state capitol to hear him.

I recently spent a couple of days re-reading issues of the paper printed under my editorship sixty years ago. It would take an entire article to discuss what I found, and the purpose of this narrative is not to critique, condemn, or justify the newspaper's policies under my editorship. Suffice it to say, as a result of that experience I learned a great deal about how a major institution such as the University of Chicago dealt with a student paper that took what were undoubtedly left-wing positions by criticizing it for being biased, of poor quality, and undemocratic, and ultimately calling for a different way of selecting the editor than by a vote of the staff. This experience prepared me for many later events in which I sought to

fight against injustice as I saw it, and to respond to the critical or oppressive reactions of others.

In addition to these extra-curricular activities, I was also a graduate student seeking to be educated as a social worker. I was much younger than many of the other social work students, and social work education was exciting. Like most students, I was most excited by the field work experience. My first placement was with the Cook County Department of Welfare, where I provided casework services to aged and disabled individuals, as well as to families who were receiving financial assistance because of their so-called "dependent" children. I learned a great deal about how the welfare system oppressed these people, yet they had one service that to this day I deem important: they had the use of a caseworker such as myself (if they wished to avail themselves of this) along with their financial assistance. In a later period, the country modified this and created a dual system in which one staff member administered assistance, and another administered services. In theory, this may have provided better service to those who wished to receive it; but in actuality, the service component became weaker and weaker.

My second year field placement was at a residential treatment center for children, Chapin Hall.<sup>3</sup> I don't think this experience added to my understanding of social justice, but it did help me to improve my skills working with children that had severe problems. I had been in this position for about six months when I was drafted into the Army during the Korean War. Some readers of this narrative might be confused about this fact since later, during the Viet Nam War, many young men left the country or became conscientious objectors. I was not of a mind to leave the country and I didn't oppose all wars, so this left me little choice.

### **The Army**

The Army learned of my political activities and put me through basic training three times while the authorities considered what to do with me. This was very unpleasant as I was being trained as a fighter, which was an anathema to me. Additionally, there were all



the other unpleasant events: KP, being yelled at and punished by non-commissioned officers, and so forth. I learned two important things about myself. I was resilient, and managed to take a lot of unpleasantness in stride. Secondly, though I'd always regarded myself as physically weak, many weeks of physical training enabled me to do push ups, sit ups, and chin ups, all of which I never dreamed myself capable.

After basic training, I was put in a replacement company. I met another radical who seemed to be spending his entire army career in this company. Since I could type, I was utilized as a clerk. However, I was notified that I would be used as a social worker (I already had a master's) and was to be sent to a camp in Georgia. This surprised me, although several years later the settlement house director told me she had been visited by the FBI to inquire about me; she told them I was very patriotic! I don't know what the FBI made of my college activities, although I recently read some University of Chicago documents about the *Chicago Maroon* which left no doubt what the university administrators thought of my politics.

I had one other encounter with the Army bureaucracy. My first social work assignment was with the Disciplinary Barracks—referred to as the USDB (i.e. prison)—where men were imprisoned to fulfill sentences they received for offenses ranging from theft to desertion. Our job as social workers was to determine whether there could have been a psychological defense related to the crime and what type of rehabilitation was possible. I learned a lot from the inmates, such as the elaborate intelligence system they had in place to learn about matters such as changes planned by the administration. Several months after I arrived I was transferred to the post's psychiatric hospital as a policy had been put in place to prevent any "security risks" from having a position in that installation. I remained in that position until my official discharge in 1954. I learned a lot about the use of power there. One relatively minor event (although it didn't seem to at the time) was when the chief psychiatrist sent the non-commissioned social workers to be ward attendants in order to

punish an allegedly lazy social work officer. The positive impact of that on my learning was that I worked with and interacted with persons diagnosed as mentally ill for 10 hours a day, and learned a lot about how capable and intelligent most of them were. The way I viewed people of that status was forever changed.

### **Return to Civilian Life and Career**

I was offered two jobs around the time I was about to be discharged. One was at the Jewish family agency in Chicago as a caseworker. The other was at Henry Booth House. I made the decision to return to the settlement full time and to live there. I was attracted to the idea of working in a place where I could interact with individuals, groups, families, and community organizations to help solve problems rather than being restricted to primarily working with individuals. This required me to locate myself in an oppressed community, and to help individuals and community organizations, largely through groups, to pursue social justice. I also realized that I did not have sufficient understanding of group work theory and methods because my master's program did not offer these. I enrolled part time in the social work program at the University of Illinois in order to take all the group work courses offered there. (One important product of this experience is that the woman who was to become my wife was also studying in that school!) I studied with Paul Simon and William Schwartz, who both took a strong stance on the role of groups in achieving social change. The latter particularly incorporated this in his principle that the group worker "lends a vision" of what society can become, to the group and its members.

I also became the director of the settlement camp where I had been a counselor several years before. During the next two years, I worked on projects such as training teenagers for leadership. I helped a group of teens who termed themselves "Better Human Relations Builders" who approached the settlement for help, advocating for teens caught in the criminal justice system, advocating for families seeking assistance from the welfare system,



and supporting the development of so-called "block clubs."

At the end of two years, I resigned from the settlement and took a position with the Jewish Community Centers of Chicago (JCC). I wanted to hone my group work skills and, at the time, that agency had some of the most experienced group workers in the area. I also wanted to see if the Jewish identity I shared with many of the agency's members could enable me to motivate members to seek social change. I was ambivalent about this decision as it meant leaving the African American community, but I continue to this day—54 years later—to maintain some of the relationships I began then.

My first job at JCC was to direct a small program conducted by the agency in cooperation with a synagogue in the Hyde Park community near the University of Chicago. I continued to be very involved with the youth of that community, some of whom were the children of University faculty. I sought to be sensitive to their social and personal issues, such as struggling to develop their unique identities and values, ways of coping with school bureaucracies, means of relating to young people from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, their ways of dealing with prejudice against Jews, and their feelings about the adjacent African American communities.

My subsequent position with JCC was to work in a larger branch supervising work done with teens and pre-teens. My last position before leaving the agency in 1963 was as the Program Director of an agency branch in one of the less affluent communities, the Max Strauss Center in Albany Park. I continued to learn about how the people I worked with dealt with their privileges and oppressions based on religion, gender, sexual orientation, and age.

In the late 1950's, I enrolled in a four year part-time program at the Institute for Psychoanalysis, which trained professionals to use psychoanalytic approaches in work with children and adolescents. This had little impact on my understanding of social justice, but added to my skills as a social worker. I was deeply affected by a course I took with Bruno Bettelheim, who also consulted with me for an academic year on my supervision of social

work students.<sup>4</sup> I also worked for a short time as a relief counselor at the institution he headed. What I learned from him was a strong commitment to penetrate more deeply into the undercurrents and meanings of everyday situations. However, I did not see him as a role model for teaching because I thought his strong confrontational style might be more harmful than helpful to many learners!

### Doctoral Studies

By the early 1960s, I began to think seriously of working for a doctorate and ultimately teaching in a University. My reasons for this were that I thought I had accomplished as much as I could as a practitioner, and I could accomplish more toward the development of social work knowledge and the pursuit of social justice as a faculty member. I took one doctoral course at the University of Chicago, then applied for and was accepted to the doctoral program. One anecdote I wish to relate is that the director of the doctoral program confided in me that a faculty member (who happened to be related to the person who was Dean of Students when I edited the school paper) informed her that I was not suitable because of my history of radicalism. The doctoral director said that, to the contrary, that made me more desirable as a doctoral student!

The history of my tenure as a doctoral student merits more discussion than I have space for here, but I enjoyed the doctoral experience, as well as the opportunity to examine social work and social welfare with a more critical eye. One principle with reference to the application of social justice to social work is that the wishes and needs of the recipients of service take precedence over those of the practitioners. Therefore, for my dissertation, I sought to test the proposition that "when the practitioner is perceived by the group members as knowing and responding to their expectations, the outcomes of the process will be best." I obtained strong support for this proposition and presented my results at professional conferences and in print. I was grateful to William Schwartz, whom I consulted on that project, as well as my new colleagues at the University of Michigan.



As I was working on my dissertation, I received an invitation to interview for a position at the University of Michigan and this led to an offer—which I accepted—to join the faculty. Michigan is and was an exciting place. The campus was heavily involved in the struggle to end the war in Viet Nam and was one of the leaders, perhaps the originator, of the teach-ins on that subject. The campus chapter of the left wing organization “The Students for a Democratic Society” (SDS) was very active, and had many members among the social work students. These forces were highly influential in my thinking about social justice. There were many faculty members who were active in struggles for social change, and I learned from such people as Rosemary Sarri, Robert Vinter, Eugene Litwak, John Erlich, and, not least of all, our Dean, Fedele Fauri, who was a major contributor to the creation of social programs at the federal and state levels.

I never thought I would remain at Michigan for the rest of my career but that is what happened, mainly because the School of Social Work remained such a progressive and dynamic place. I was on the active faculty for 37 years and have been an emeritus professor for eight. It would take a volume to describe all my experiences there, but I will comment on a few that were most relevant to the development of my understanding of how to work toward social justice. But before I do so, I will digress to discuss a little more of how my family life related to this.

### **My Family**

I have now been married to my wife, Janet, for almost 53 years. The story of those years would fill a book. We have three children—all adopted and now grown—with children of their own. I cannot claim that my relations with my family have always been egalitarian and just, but in my struggles to make it more so I have had a lot of opportunities to reflect on justice and equality in family life. One place in which I got help for doing this was through a men’s group that has been in existence around 30 years. In this group, we frequently discussed how our relations with partners and children are affected by our experience of male

privilege. Several of the men are gay and have shared with the members of the group their struggles to create a just world for themselves.

One major event in our marriage belongs here. Although my wife would undoubtedly tell the reader of my strengths as well as limitations with regard to justice in a marriage, she is unable to do so now as she suffered a stroke ten years ago, which left her with disabilities including aphasia which creates difficulty in speaking. I have learned much from being her caregiver about oppression of people with disabilities, such as the following:

- Physical and other barriers that prevent people with disabilities from using facilities, even in the presence of legislation that requires such access. For example, we face many hassles when traveling, especially with security and airlines. I sometimes think the authorities are more suspicious of elderly people in wheelchairs than of other people!
- Many limitations in the rehabilitation services available and paid for by health insurance, although our privileged status of having pensions means that we can afford some of these.
- Some individuals in the public are inconsiderate of people with disabilities.
- Limitations in the services available to support caregivers such as myself.

A second major event in our family that taught me a lot about social justice was adopting a child who had suffered a good deal of trauma before coming into our family. Concerns for his privacy prohibit me from telling more of his story, although he is now a fine man, father, husband, and worker. But in raising him I learned a lot about the oppression of children with special needs, such as lack of understanding and services in the schools, lack of supports for parents, and lack of adequate services in the community.

I will close this brief discussion of my family life with an anecdote that one of my sons has told on several occasions, the most recent being in a speech he gave when he



was awarded the state's recognition for being the outstanding social worker of the year. He recalled that, as his father, I had contributed to his sense of justice on several occasions, the most memorable being that when he was in grade school. He and an African American child were having serious conflicts with each other. I had requested a meeting with the other child and his mother (his father was not in the home) to engage in a true dialogue about their conflicts. As a result of this, he and the other child became close friends.

### **Years at Michigan**

Now I will comment on a few experiences that, over a 37 year period, most tied in with my developing consciousness of social justice. First, I typically sought to hold membership on—and at times the chair—of any committees relating to social justice. In the early days these committees were often called “intercultural” committees and devoted themselves to critiquing the curriculum and its adequacy with regard to cultural differences. For example, during the early years I developed a course with Chuck Jones, an African American faculty member called “Ethnicity and Social Work.” Later when such a course became mandatory, I helped to further develop teach the course. I also became very interested in feminism, writing several articles on group work and feminism with Beth Reed. At one point I taught a group work course primarily using feminist writings.

I also was very concerned about the power differentials between students and faculty. In the 1960s, I was strongly supportive of a change in school policy requiring that half the membership of school committees be students, although the chair always remained a faculty member. I was also supportive of what became known as the Black Action Movement, which on several occasions literally shut the university down in with demands for an enlarged Black enrollment and a revised curriculum. The 1960's were very heady times in universities, especially Michigan.

During these years, I was elected to leadership in two organizations: The International Association for the Advancement of Social Work with Groups (AASWG) and

the Group for the Advancement of Doctoral Education in Social Work (GADE). The former was most important in my understanding of social justice because they stood for the idea that justice and democracy can and should be advanced through groups, which I strongly believe. In the latter organization, I tried to further the idea that doctoral education in social work should help students develop more effective means of changing social systems to be more just, rather than educating students to do research without this as a product.

### **Retirement (So to Speak)**

I don't intend this essay to be a history of my perspective on the evolution of diversity thinking at Michigan. I should note, however, that after some years and by the turn of the century, this thinking was evolving into a multifaceted effort using the term social justice, as such, and incorporating the dimensions of privilege, oppression, diversity and social justice – or “PODS.” I strongly supported this evolution, and as an emeritus professor helped to write a field manual on how PODS should be taught in the field, and participated in the committee working on other details of this. I saw this as another part of the evolution of my understanding of social justice.

As an emeritus professor, I am trying to draw on the various experiences I've described in this narrative to do work related to social justice. This includes helping direct a participatory action research project, which would train high school students to take leadership in the peaceful negotiation of group conflicts, co-authoring a book with Robert Ortega on a social justice approach to group work, and co-authoring another book with Richard Tolman on how to research group work. This also takes a strong stance on the relationship of this research to issues of social justice.

I view learning about social justice and practicing in a socially just way as a continuous and lifelong effort as I change, and as the world changes around me. I pray that I will have the energy and capacity to continue in this way, having reached the age of 81. So far, so good!



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#### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> This arrangement was also a result of the reorganization of degree programs at Chicago under the leadership of Robert Maynard Hutchins in which students completed four years of college after two years of high school and received a Bachelor's degree at that time. I had gone to junior college elsewhere and was not eligible for that program and, thus, I have had the usual four years in college but never was awarded a Bachelor's degree.

<sup>2</sup> I am looking at my yellowed copies of the *Maroon* as I write this.

<sup>3</sup> After I worked for my Ph.D. and went to Michigan to teach, I returned to Chapin Hall on a monthly basis to help them develop a group treatment program. I did this for a year or so and then was abruptly dropped. I thought this was because I expressed opinions that may have been seen by the agency leadership as critical. This is another lesson I learned about the way some agency leaders use power. A few years later the board closed the agency, and I think this was because the leadership inadequately dealt with allegations of child abuse. The endowment of the agency was given to the School of Social Service Administration, to create a research center.

<sup>4</sup> I am aware of the controversies that surrounded him, especially after his death, in which he was accused of mistreating children. Yet I did learn a lot from his penetrating use of questions, and his confrontation of students. I thought the latter excessive but useful when used with more discretion.



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