

SOCIAL WORKING FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

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This narrative is the story of the author's work in a profession he believed would provide him the ideal opportunity to both earn a living and work for social justice. He discusses his early social activism and social work in Ann Arbor, his social work activism and education in New York, his years in New Orleans working with Social Workers for Social Justice, the early days of the Bertha Capen Reynolds Society (now Social Welfare Action Alliance), and the recent implications of his new identities.

Introduction

In this narrative, I describe the strategies I adopted as an activist and social worker to work for social justice while living in Ann Arbor, New York, and New Orleans. I discuss my efforts to organize students and colleagues in ways which also resulted in my undergoing personal and professional change. Along the way, I received advice from earlier generations of social workers and social activists and also adopted new identities that have influenced my activism. I illustrate how being engaged in social change work takes on many forms. I provide examples from a crude typology of six overlapping kinds of activism: multi-issue organization-based activism; electoral activism; writing for publication to influence public opinion; single-issue values based activism, identity-rooted activism, and organizational change work. This typology of activism forms may be of value for the introspection of activists, and for efforts at peer intervention and counseling with social activists. I know it has been helpful to me, as I have developed while writing this narrative. As may become apparent, over-involvement in one form of activism may not be the best way to make a contribution to struggles for social justice.

Early Ann Arbor Years

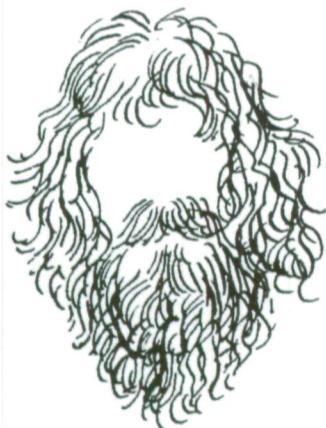
I had never known a social worker until one day in January 1969, when, having dropped out of the University of Michigan, I needed a job. I had arrived in Ann Arbor from Grosse Pointe High School in summer 1966. Despite being raised in a politically conservative home, I immediately realized our President was lying to us. That fall I began writing editorials with

titles like "No Alternative but Protest," "The Insensitive Peace Feeler," "Grosse Pointe Integration," etc. I was promoted to assistant night editor and had my sights on eventually becoming a senior editor. I thought I was doing a good job as a reporter and might even make my father proud.

Journalism was in my blood. My dad had been a *Cleveland Press* copy boy, a stringer for *Stars and Stripes* during WWII, a public relations officer for UNNRA in Eastern Europe, and a writer and consultant in the field of employee communications. I avoided joining Voice/SDS and other campus radical groups that first year, in part because of the notion of journalistic objectivity.

In April 1967, I traveled by bus with Barbara Fuller and her Interfaith Council for Peace and Justice to go to a massive Central Park anti-war mobilization in New York City. I was now part of an intergenerational peace movement. This was my first involvement in single-issue values based activism. In May of the same year, I was arrested in Toledo while covering a demonstration against a National Guard training exercise that involved a mock attack on a Vietnamese village. In order to get out of jail, I pleaded "no lo contendere" to a disturbing the peace charge. That summer, I spent a couple of days in Detroit during the rebellion, mainly hanging around police headquarters and hoping to scare up a story. Slowly, but surely, I was losing my journalistic objectivity. I began taking sides.

A debate about taking sides emerged while organizing for the spring 1967 antiwar mobilization. Many felt that the radical thing to do was to take sides and express solidarity by raising the slogan "Support the National



Liberation Front!" Others said we should demand immediate withdrawal. The position which won out, demanding a stop to the bombing, wasn't the most radical position. But it was arguably the most progressive position, namely the one which would mobilize as many people as possible to speak out against the war. This debate about taking sides reflected a choice between a focus on peace activism and a focus on solidarity activism.

After the spring mobilization I met some of the people planning the Peace Torch Marathon, which walked across the country to the October 1967 Pentagon demonstration. I helped organize a local Peace Torch Coordinating Committee, with the idea of having a rally on the UM Diag (University of Michigan Diagonal Green) during the week of the demonstration in Washington. I proposed that, after the rally, we pass the peace torch hand to hand from the Diag to the Hoover Street athletic building. The rally and peace torch passing went off without a hitch, but we couldn't have done this without the help of older activists such as Gene Gladstone, who coordinated the National Mobilization Committee's plans for buses to the D.C. march. After the rally I joined the Marathon, walking with the group from Pittsburg to the Capitol.

In the Fall of 1967, I helped form the Ann Arbor branch of the Student Communications Network (SCN), with national headquarters in Berkeley. We set up telex machines including one at the *Michigan Daily*, which linked Berkeley, Chicago, Denver, San Francisco, New York, Utica, and Oxford (England). This led to a red letter front page December 11, 1967 headline in the right-wing *Berkeley Gazette*: "Student Network to Link Major College Campuses!" SCN provided a radical alternative press network which supplemented the work of Liberation News Service (LNS), with which we later merged. That fall, I represented SCN at the December 1967 University Christian Movement conference in Cleveland, where I first met Ray Mungo of LNS. LNS had grown out of a split within the United States Student Press Association. In early 1968, Ray, Marshall Bloom, myself, Paul Krassner, and Jerry Rubin

attended the U.S.SPA conference in Washington D.C., and conspired to do some rather humorous guerilla theater at the plenary session.

No wonder I got an incomplete that term. I had enrolled in my first sociology course with Max Heirich (now Professor Emeritus). I finished it during the summer of 1968 by going to Detroit and interviewing twenty people living at the epicenter of the rebellion. I asked each why they thought the disturbances started. One of the people I interviewed was a pastor who said the cause of the rebellion was a troubled school system, due to school funding being adversely affected by so much property being exempt from taxation (including his church).

I filed the paper away, only realizing after I completed my dissertation on the property tax exemption in Ohio's urban areas that the idea had germinated a long time ago (Dover, 2003). My other notes from spring 1968 show that I felt the most important thing to focus on was not ideology but on the "real material human needs" which people had. That idea apparently continued to percolate for me (Dover, 2010; Dover & Joseph, 2008).

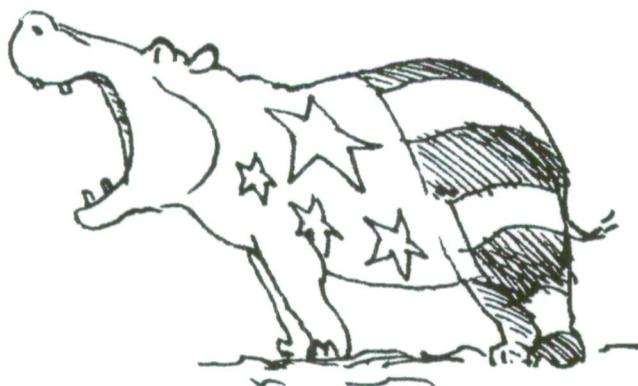
1968 was also a year of tremendous heartache as we saw the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert Kennedy, which led to disillusionment for many about the potential for electoral change. Although many activists of that generation "stayed clean for Gene" and supported the McCarthy campaign, I grew out my hair and beard. I attended the Peace and Freedom Party national convention in Ann Arbor in August. My main role was covering these developments for the SCN newsletter, which was published in mimeograph form in Ann Arbor by David Robbins, Tom Anderson, myself, and two dozen other contributors, typists, and co-conspirators.

By now I was getting pretty radical. I remained involved in alternative journalism (writing for publication to influence public opinion), but I was also involved in single-issue, values-based antiwar activism, and had now been introduced to radical third party electoral activism. Lorraine Hansberry's quote, on a Radio Free People poster, justified radicalism to me at the time: "Acceptance of the present

condition is the only form of extremism which discredits U.S. to our children.”

Also, as I now see it, the 20th century was a century of partisanship: the pursuit of social justice involved taking sides. It involved being partisan to the cause of labor, or the cause of national liberation, or the cause of socialism, or to the cause of ending oppression of many kinds. It often involved an overblown belief that multi-issue parties or organizations were the best vehicle for pursuing social justice. In other words, it often privileged multi-issue, organization-based activism over the other kinds of activism in my typology.

The well known folk song *Which Side Are You On?* goes like this: “Don’t scab for the bosses. Don’t listen to their lies. Poor folks ain’t got a chance. Unless they organize.” I sang it then, sang it as a union-based social worker and agency-organizer, and sing it now. But the first time I sang the *Internationale*, I was troubled by these lyrics: “The international working class will be the human race.” Billy Bragg’s version now goes, “The Internationale unites the world in song.” This change reflected a growing awareness rooted in new thinking coming out of the Gorbachev era that universal human values and a focus on human rights and human needs must inform our social action, in addition to partisan struggles for the immediate interests of that segment of humanity needing our solidarity.



My First Social Work Job

In January 1969, I needed a job. I discovered that Jules Schrager was friendly to young radicals and hired them at his group

home, The Vineyard, which he ran on a farm outside of town. For instance, Skip Taube (later Minister of Information for the White Panther Party) and Bill Ayers both worked there before me. I worked 7 days a week in this live-in job, with a little time off as needed. The young men living there were all teenagers who were in group foster care. Their lives had not been easy. They hadn’t had the benefit of the affirmative action of the day, such as the UM practice of giving bonus points on top of GPA points to students who graduated from high schools in places like Grosse Pointe or Birmingham. These young people came from poor and working class homes and had very little going for them, other than what had to be one of the best foster care placements around. It was sad to me to see the reality of their lives, and it gave me some secondhand experience of the nature of injustice. I did what I could to help with meals and outings. Jules provided psychotherapy, and met with the group home workers to make sure things were going smoothly.

One night, things *didn't* go so smoothly. I was awakened at 4:00 a.m. by a fight between two residents. I rushed up to see Bill straddling Steve, who was on his stomach struggling to get up. I didn’t see that Steve had a paring knife in his right hand. Bill was pinning Steve’s right arm to the floor, holding his wrist tightly. When exhortation to stop fighting didn’t work, I came up from behind and grabbed Bill, pulling him off Steve. Steve felt the weight lifted off him and leaped to his feet, wildly swinging the knife at Bill’s chest. Still holding Bill tightly from behind, I turned sharply to the left, trying to keep the knife away from Steve. Suddenly, I felt the knife plunge into my own back and fell to the floor. The boys started crying, saying they were sorry, that it was an accident. I was bleeding but it wasn’t too bad, so I talked with them for a few minutes while someone called Jules. I tried to reassure them everything would be ok. Suddenly, I felt my right lung collapse. Now I was worried. Somehow we got to the hospital emergency room; eventually a thoracic surgeon arrived, put a tube through my ribs, and blew the lung back up. Jules was very supportive, and I returned to work. Supportive that is, until I was arrested again!

This time it was during the South University Street riots. In the Summer of 1969, the White Panthers wanted to turn the street into a pedestrian mall. Thousands gathered, only to be dispersed by the police. Three days of disturbances ensued. I had to cover it, no? Sure enough, another arrest. Although I was subsequently acquitted the following year, Jules explained that—what with the stabbing and the arrest—for the good of the group home, it was time for me to find another job. But we stayed in touch, and for several years we played poker together. During that time I drove a bus, worked as a cab driver/owner/dispatcher, and wrote for the alternative press. I was turning myself inside out in an effort to devote myself to movements for peace and social justice.

Perhaps most importantly, I was realizing that the heart and soul of the anti-war movement and other social justice movements in Ann Arbor was inherited from previous generations of activists. Yes, the New Left I had joined up with made up the bulk of the crowds at demonstrations. But on a day-to-day basis, it wasn't mainly the New Left organizing these events; it was veterans of the earlier social movements, their children, and new adherents. It was the CP, SWP, pacifists, and Christian socialists. They rejected violence and believed in coalition building, even lobbying and electoral work. Some of them, I noticed, were social workers!

Nevertheless, it was largely New Left forces which further involved me in electoral activism. The Human Rights Party (HRP) was formed; a hippo was our alternative to the donkey and the elephant. In 1972, we elected two members of City Council, and in 1974 we elected Kathy Kozachenko to Council. She was the first openly gay or lesbian candidate to be elected in the nation. I was involved in labor outreach for the party, organizing strike support and proposing an initiative petition that gained the support of the UAW and the AFL-CIO, and would have placed an anti-strikebreaking law on the books. Unfortunately, HRP withdrew its support after the petitions were already printed, insisting that "himself" be removed from the printed petition that referred to "any person who offers herself or

himself for employment in place of an employee involved in a strike or lock-out." I was now involved in electoral activism, but had also learned a lesson about the way in which extreme positions can undermine social movement organizations.

By the time I left Ann Arbor, I played a key role in organizing the last large social movement in Ann Arbor of the early 1970s: the Chile solidarity movement. Within days of the coup in September 1973, our Chile Support Coalition had the support of the Human Rights Party, Young Worker's Liberation League, Student Government Council, Youth Liberation, the Tenant's Union, and other groups. We mobilized 2,500 people to a Diag rally. Afterwards, we marched downtown to Congressman Esch's office and later succeeded in meeting with him to demand that he oppose U.S. recognition of the Pinochet-led junta which had taken power in September 1973. Suddenly I was on the other side of the news, being quoted in *Ann Arbor News* accounts as the spokesperson for the Coalition.

Later that fall, I joined the U.S. delegation to the World Peace Council in Moscow. By meeting representatives of the African National Congress, other third world peace and liberation activists, and communist and socialist activists from Western and Eastern Europe, I began to realize more fully that activism was more than my little generational rebellion, organizing addiction, or typing predilection. It was a matter of survival and of basic freedoms for people around the world.

During my Ann Arbor years, I focused my activism in several ways: opposition to the Vietnam war as an unnecessary and immoral and to the violent overthrow of the democratically-elected government of Salvador Allende in Chile (both examples of single-issue values based activism); support for the Students of Conscience group that supported the Black Action Movement (an example of activism rooted in my identity as an upper-middle-class white person who felt a responsibility to oppose racism); work with the alternative press (an example of writing for publication to influence public opinion), and electoral activism. Up until now, I had hadn't become primarily involved with multi-issue

organization-based activism or organizational change work, but I was headed in that direction.

Moving On To New York

In March 1974, I attended the founding conference of the National Coordinating Committee in Solidarity with Chile, which was attended by 150 people from 97 groups. At the conference, Helen Winter of the U.S. Peace Council asked if I would like to staff the national office of the group. I moved to New York and also spent time in Washington D.C., helping organize a National Legislative Conference on Chile held in July. I also wrote an article about this work for *Grass Roots*, a movement publication. Within a few years this solidarity movement succeeded in getting military aid to the junta ended.

The cause of the Chilean people was an issue which continued to motivate me over the years. For many years, I served as membership database coordinator for the Committee on International Human Rights Inquiry, a social work group which defended Chilean and other social workers who were persecuted for their political work. Ruth Wilson, Phyllis Grunauer, and Sol Gorelick (all now deceased) and other social workers including Marilyn Moch (currently Social Welfare Action Alliance co-chair) were the core of this group, whose remaining members were recently invited to merge with the SWAA. This was another example of single-issue values based activism. It was really the issue which was heartfelt for me, not the organization through which I worked. In this case I was engaged not in peace activism, but in solidarity activism.

In 1975, needing a job, I once again ended up a social worker. I started working as a housing organizer in the Chelsea Action Center, an anti-poverty program. The job had an advantageous benefit: ten hours a week of release time if you went back to school! I asked Jules about applying to Adelphi's urban undergraduate social work program in Manhattan. "I think you've found your niche," Jules said, and his reference letter helped me get admitted. My decision to complete my BSW and enter right into the MSW program

at Columbia was motivated by my belief that social work was an ideal profession within which to earn a living and work to change society.

After all, didn't all my social work professors stress the role of social justice in social work? My first social work paper was for Phil Coltoff of the Children's Aid Society. The title page had the following quote from Eugen Pusic: "We must ask ourselves who is in a better position and more called upon to act collectively, politically and responsibly for the goals of welfare than those who have made welfare their profession, that is, the dominant occupation of their lives."

Clearly, I was hooked. Hook, line and sinker, by the end of my first term in the BSW program, I had swallowed the idea that social work was for me. It would be an avenue for the organizing of my fellow social workers to participate in broader social justice movements. I set to work.

A Long March through Social Work Institutions Begins

As soon as I enrolled at the Columbia University School of Social Work in August 1980, I discovered that Verne Weed lived across the street. Verne (who passed away in 1985) had known Bertha Reynolds, and she knew a lot more besides. A 1941 graduate of the Columbia University School of Social Work, in April 2010, Verne was posthumously given the Pioneer Award by the Columbia University School of Social Work's Alumni Association. When I met her, Verne was active in the Radical Alliance of Social Service Workers (RASSW), a mainly New York and New Jersey formation, as well as in the Bertha Capen Reynolds Club, associated with the CPUSA. Along with the *Catalyst* collective (which evolved into the *Journal of Progressive Human Services*), social work involvement in trade unionism, and work within NASW, these were the primary poles around which the social work left revolved at the time.

Verne used to say, "Look out for live wires, and get them involved." By live wires, Verne meant people who were active, engaged, sane, and interested in becoming more involved. Such people don't come around all the time

and you need to find ways to help them get involved and stay involved, she would say. One day Verne dropped off some flyers at the CUSSW and heard of our efforts to organize the Open Letter Movement, which called for more curriculum content on racism, cross-cultural social work, and knowledge of ethnic cultures (in the policy, practice, and HBSE-like courses of the day). Verne approved, but warned me: "Be political, not politicized." Play it politically smart. Don't marginalize yourself by using political rhetoric, she explained. I don't claim to have always lived up to that advice, but I've tried.

The Open Letter movement originated with a group of us in Renee Solomon's practice class (and with her blessing, as I recall). At the time, I had a coveted first-year psychiatric social work placement, but I felt totally inadequate to be working with African-American parents of children with psychiatric or behavioral problems (Dover, 2009). After several mass meetings and an Open Letter with a couple of hundred student and faculty signatures, we obtained faculty approval for a review of the curriculum content in these areas. As long as Mitchell Ginsberg and George Brager were the Deans, the reviews continued every other year.

Perhaps on the basis of the Open Letter campaign, I was elected President of the Student Union. We formed a coalition with the Black Caucus and the Puerto Rican Caucus, and also succeeded in getting the School to hire a full-time recruiter who would focus half their time on minority recruitment. The person hired, David Yam, remains at the School as Senior Assistant Dean. This work around affirmative action in social work admissions continued my earlier activism with Students of Conscience at the University of Michigan. Later, I spent five years working in the admissions office at the University of Michigan School of Social Work (1992-1997), where I conceived of and successfully advocated for mission-oriented bonus points to supplement other forms of affirmative action. Later, I participated in unsuccessful efforts to defeat the electoral initiative which outlawed the use of race in affirmative action in Michigan. For many, defense of affirmative action is a single-

issue, values-based form of activism, but for me it was identity-rooted activism; a reaction against the privilege associated with my identity as a white person.

For my second year field placement, I was at District 65-UAW, with Beth Silverman. This was a progressive, left-led union that represented workers in multiple industries in the New York area as well as legal service workers nationally. For my required second year change project, Irving Miller was my professor. My project idea was to set up a new program for unemployed members at the hiring hall on the ninth floor. However, this meant absenting myself from intake on the sixth floor one day a week. That didn't sit well with some of the staff and interns, who would have to pick up the slack. Bright ideas like this have been getting me in trouble throughout my career.

Beth told me at the time, "You're an idea person." And Irving told me that my greatest practice strength was program development. Perhaps they were being tactful. They might have said, "Mike, you may be in the clinical track, but we don't see you as a therapist." They tried to teach me how to generate and implement ideas without pissing people off, but I'm not sure I ever mastered that. Once a colleague told me, "Mike, you're really good at coming up with ideas that cause other people to have to do more work." However, at least the Hiring Hall Outreach project did take root and remained in place for another ten years after I left.

Now, I was not only hooked on widespread social change as the ultimate goal, but was also appreciative of small victories. Societies sometimes change fundamentally, but organizations seem to be more amenable to incremental changes. These were my first experiences with something I now consider a form of social activism: organizational change work. Such changes provide some consolation when large scale social change comes slowly, which can be discouraging, even for an optimist like me. Along the way, I found that cultural workers helped. One of my favorite songs was written by the late James Dunn, DSW, who in addition to helping found the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond (<http://>

www.pisab.org) was a musician. The lyrics to his song "No Other Choice" goes like this: "There's no such thing as burnout, once your vision's clear. Take strength from those who went before, and conquered doubt and fear."

Heading for New Orleans

In August 1980, I graduated from CUSSW and took a job in New Orleans as the regional coordinator of Dan Molloy's National Maritime Union Personal Services Unit (Molloy, 2010). Giselle, my beloved partner and spouse since 1972, joined me the following spring when she got a job teaching acting at Tulane University. Our marriage followed in 1981, our daughter Daniela was born in 1983, and our son Mark in was born in 1987.

While I was in New Orleans, I felt what might be called the organizational impulse. I was seeking a multi-issue, organization-based home for my activism. Apparently, others felt the same way. A few of us got together and started a group called Social Workers for Social Change, which eventually attracted a couple of dozen supporters. Our recruitment slogan was, "Are you serious about social change? Join us!" We attended the 1983 Anniversary March on Washington, supported efforts to defend the local tax that supported the Welfare Department, defended senior citizens in a subsidized high rise which somebody wanted to turn into a hotel, attended local peace rallies, and held potlucks and fundraisers and such.

We also set up Health and Human Service Workers for Jesse Jackson, and Social Workers for Mondale. In other words, we started where folks were at and moved from there. Whenever you try to force an organization to have clear politics (usually, *your* politics), or complain the members don't "get it" and try to align the organization with your favorite cause or organization, you might as well close up shop. But thankfully we didn't make that mistake. We held it together. We were engaged in small scale multi-issue, organization-based activism. David Wagner (1990) has found that some radical social workers are highly identified with social work and some are highly critical of social work. Both kinds were attracted to our SWSC group.

Around 1984, Maryann Mahaffey visited New Orleans to speak at Tulane. She also met with Social Workers for Social Change. A former NASW President who had once visited Bertha Reynolds at her home, Maryann was a Detroit City Councilwoman and a person of the left. Maryann gave us some good advice, which was similar to advice that African-American civil rights activists had given to white folk interested in supporting the civil rights movement: organize in your own backyard. For me, that meant that social workers should organize to support social justice movements. I began to realize that there wasn't any real organizational home which could bring together social workers and human service workers on the left, like the National Lawyers Guild had long done for lawyers and legal workers. I remained active in both SWSC and NASW, serving as chapter membership secretary.

The Bertha Capen Reynolds Society and SWAA

One day in early 1985, the *NASW News* arrived. One article was about Bertha Reynolds and the upcoming 1985 Bertha Reynolds Centennial Conference at Smith College, organized by Jack Kamaiko and his colleagues. The article said that Bertha Reynolds had been ostracized during the McCarthy period, even though it had never been "proven" that she was a Communist! I was pretty upset. Since when was it okay to ostracize someone within a profession even if that someone was a Communist? And since when was trying to prove something like that legitimate? Hadn't the profession learned its lesson when CSWE honored Bertha after her death in 1978? Hadn't NASW re-published two of her books (Reynolds, 1951, 1963)?

After reacting to that article, I thought back to Stu Dowty and Janet Goldwasser, the couple who were central to the Ann Arbor based Radicals in the Professions group of the late 1960s and early 1970s. I started thinking about the many radicals in the professions and disciplines groups: from the National Lawyers Guild to the Union of Radical Political Economists, to the various caucus groups such as the Socialist Caucus of the U.S. Public

Health Association, which included social workers such as Beth Lewis. There were also a number of groups such as Psychologists and Psychotherapists for Social Responsibility. Why, I thought, shouldn't social work have a national organization of progressive social work activists? Although there was a history of local radical social worker groups in New York, Chicago, and now in New Orleans, not since the Rank-and-File Movement of the 1930s and early 1940s had there been anything close to a national organization of social workers devoted to social activism. The notable exception was Social Workers for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament (SWPND), a semi-independent body within NASW which had some local chapters and maintained a national newsletter and mailing list for many years in the 1980s and 1990s. Mary Rusak of SWPND used to tell me that one goal of progressives in social work should be to have an impact on the profession itself. She certainly did. In 1995, having just turned 90 years old, Mary received an award from NASW's New York City Chapter for "leadership promoting peace, nuclear disarmament, social justice, and the concept that activism is part of the social worker's responsibility to improve the policies that affect the people of New York City."

The Benjamin Rush Society was a group of radical psychiatrists, psychologists and some clinical social workers, mainly in the New York area. If radicals in one professional group could be named after a person, why not another? Why not a Bertha Capen Reynolds Society? In Social Workers for Social Change, we thought that forming a national group would be a good idea. The first step was to talk to those whose support would be needed for any such group, starting with Verne Weed. Verne was supportive, but said that one of the lessons from RASSW was the need to find a way to resolve tension between the old left and the new left.

Next, we asked Maryann Mahaffey at the NASW Occupational Social Work Conference in Boston in the spring of 2005. Maryann's answer was, "Do it!" This quote was later featured in the BCRS brochure, which was modified with her permission to say, "Do it! Join the Bertha Reynolds Society." At the

same conference, Chauncey Alexander stated that, as important as NASW was, he thought there was a need for an independent group of social work activists that could help keep the progressive tradition alive.

Support from Maryann and Chauncey was encouraging, but it didn't seem to us that we could count upon established leaders in social work to do the Jane and Jimmy Higgins work of building an actual organization. Luckily there were people like Beth Lewis, who was working at an occupational health clinic in New Haven at the time (Lewis, 2010). As a side trip to the Boston conference, Beth, David Antebi and I jumped in a car and visited the homestead and hometown of Bertha Reynolds. On the way we talked, hoped, dreamed, and conspired a little about how we might build a Bertha Capen Reynolds Society.

We began talking about what the principles of such a group might be, and between then and the Centennial conference a draft circulated. It was at the Centennial conference in June 1985 that I met Marti Bombyk, the founding Chair of the Society. Implementing Verne's suggestion to reach out to the New Left, I approached Mimi Abramovitz, asking who from the *Catalyst* collective might be interested in helping launch such a Society. She suggested Marti, and a strong partnership between us was born. Marti and I immediately began talking about how to convene an organizing meeting for such a Society there at the Centennial Conference. About fifty people participated. The meeting decided to form a Bertha Capen Reynolds Society, to call a meeting in Chicago in November in conjunction with the NASW Conference, and to issue a Call to Join prior to the November session. Numerous suggestions were also made at the organizing session to amend the proposed ten principles of the society, which Marti and I had revised just prior to the organizing meeting.

Following the organizing session, I sent out a letter on July 7, 1985 to all those who attended the organizing meeting. The letter said, "Following your suggestions, deletions, additions, Marti Bombyk, Beth Lewis and I will finalize the Call, and possible signatories will receive the Call along with a response

form to return for those wishing to sign the Call." An initial Call to Join was included along with a draft cover letter and membership form. The cover letter that went out was signed by the Interim Organizing Committee of the Society, and was signed by Marti (East Coast), Beth Lewis (New England), Joan Dworkin (Midwest), myself (South), and Arline Prigoff (West Coast). The naming of the group after Bertha was explained in this manner in the original Call, issued in August 2005: "For politically progressive social workers, her commitment to humanistic practice methods, fundamental social change and the scientific study of society call for new efforts to study and continue the progressive tradition in social work." The initial Call to Join included an initial draft of a statement of principles of the Society. The principles were debated and amended and adopted at the founding meeting and later published in a brochure. In January, 1986, a revised call provided a history of the organizing so far and a list of the initial 150 signatories, which soon grew to 409 founding members and endorsers of the Call, including the founding editors of *Reflections: Narratives of Professional Helping*, Sonia and Paul Abels.

From 1985-1991, Marti was Chair and I was Membership Committee Chair. During that time we exchanged hundreds of letters, calls, and later emails. Mimi herself also became involved in the Steering Committee, which met in her living room for many years. From 2004-2005, Mimi also worked with Joan Dworkin to help reorganize the SWAA Faculty Network, as membership had declined during the 1999-2003 period. Over 3000 people have belonged to BCRS and SWAA over the years. There have been approximately 20 national conferences during this time and dozens of issues of the newsletter, now archived for members on the website: <http://socialwelfareactionalliance.org>. In 1999, the Society was renamed Social Welfare Action Alliance (Reisch & Andrews, 2001). The principles of the organization have been amended in a minor way on a couple of occasions, with a view to increasing the focus on supporting the struggles of low income and oppressed people and making it more clear

that the organization is open to human service workers as well as social workers.

A letter that Marti and I sent to the over 100 founding members who joined prior to the November 1985 founding conference of BCRS in Chicago was signed, "For a Lasting Struggle." I note that it said "for a lasting struggle," not "for a lasting organization." Richard Cloward had some views on this which bear consideration. Dick used to tell me that the goal should be to build social movements, not organizations per se. I countered that without building organizations, it is hard to build social movements. He admitted that this was the case but he had little tolerance for any kind of ideological dogmatism which would rule out creative tactics and strategies or give primacy to any particular organization's role in building social movements. It took a long time for me to realize that Dick was right.

I'm not sure I fully realize it today. Since leaving the leadership of SWAA late in 2009, having last served as Co-Treasurer with Herman Curiel and Gretchen Lash, I still harbor fantasies of new organizational forms in social work and on the left as the best way to work for social justice. For instance, I yearn for a more united and effective social work profession. Shortly before his death, Chauncey told me something relevant to the need for organizational unity in social work. I asked him what role the left in social work played in the 1950s during the formation of NASW from disparate groups. His simple answer is instructive today: "We demanded unity."

Will SWAA or even NASW for that matter be around in another 25 years? In my view, one can't take organizations for granted, nor should one become dependent upon the contribution of any one organization. I do think that the left in social work has played and should play an important role in helping shape the direction of a profession which ultimately reflects a broad range of social work political opinion. As for the role of BCRS/SWAA so far, there have been several accounts (Bombyk, 1995; Bricker-Jenkins & Joseph, 2008; Reisch & Andrews, 2001). However, for me, 25 years was not only enough, it was too much. I clearly overinvested myself in work on this form of multi-issue organization-

based activism, at the cost of time devoted to the other forms of activism noted in my typology, as well as to my scholarly work.

New Identities

While planning a workshop for the St. Louis conference of SWAA, I spoke with longtime social worker and left activist Chicagoan Mildred Williamson about how many activists complain about identity politics; i.e., that somehow the movement is being held back by the prevalence of identity politics, as opposed to people having class consciousness. But Mildred pointed out that we all have multiple identities! If that is the case, I reasoned that identity politics isn't a hindrance but one way of building unity, as long as we recognize that we shouldn't privilege one identity without recognizing the reality that we all have multiple identities.

For instance, I had always resisted the notion that being white was an identity. I've argued that in privileging a discourse on privilege, we can actually undermine an analysis of racism and other forms of oppression (Dover, 2008). But in 2006, I undertook a two and a half day training session offered by the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond (<http://www.pisab.org>). The power-centered analysis of racism offered by the Institute used the concept of privilege, but didn't make it the center of an analysis which stresses group oppression to the exclusion of the role of exploitation (Johnson, 2000). The Institute has now trained over a thousand social workers and social work educators as part of its training of tens-of-thousands of activists and others over the years. I came away from this training realizing that I had to take my identity as a white person seriously, given the context of racism in this country. I realized retrospectively that in my activism on affirmative action, I had already engaged in identity-rooted activism.

I'm also a Jew. True, I'm a Jew by choice, having completed a Conservative conversion in 2000. I wasn't looking for a new identity. I was turning 50 and was no longer able to ignore the religiosity that I probably inherited from my Pentecostal Christian grandmother. I had long ago moved away from my childhood

Presbyterianism, and my adult Unitarianism wasn't doing it for me. Reading University of Michigan anthropologist Roy Rappaport's *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* (1999) convinced me that religion is central to human culture. Some of us need ritual and religion at various points in our lives, and even those of us who are entirely secular are essentially free riders on the existence of organized religions that are essential to society. My wife and children were Jewish and I had been attending services for almost 10 years; it made sense to convert.

But now I felt a responsibility as a Jew to work for peace with justice in the Middle East. I became an active member of Brit Tzedek v'Shalom and its successor, J Street, another example of identity-rooted activism. Here I also applied the distinction between peace and solidarity activism. I admitted that the causes of the Palestinian people and of the people of Israel have required active solidarity at key historical moments. However, I argued that at the present time we must demand active U.S. support for a just, two-state solution to the conflict, rather than building solidarity campaigns that can encourage one side or the other to eschew peace. After my conversion, I sought advice on this from the late Spanish Civil war veteran Saul Wellman. Saul said that sometimes we shouldn't take sides but rather demand compromise! As the example of demands from the anti-Vietnam War movement illustrated, the progressive thing to do at any one point isn't necessarily the most "left" thing to do. The progressive thing to do is the thing that needs to be done to advance the cause of humanity, not the "side" one may favor.

Suddenly, I was beginning to understand what Mildred meant by multiple identity politics. I was a person of the left, I was a social worker, I was a sociologist, I was a white person, and I was now a Jew. I had multiple identities, each with its implications for working for social justice.

Later, I took on a couple other identities. Around 2006, I became the husband of a person with cancer. I became the patient's husband/social worker/sociologist from hell. I began to realize how institutional sexism affects

the entire medical delivery system for women with cancer. Perhaps belatedly, I finally got it about how truly deep sexism is in terms of its institutional impact, and how it goes beyond household and relationship behavior or employment discrimination.

Then the other shoe dropped. We became a couple with cancer. They say cancer changes everything; if I didn't already realize that, I soon did from being diagnosed with early stage and treatable cancer myself. Again, I told myself, I wasn't seeking another identity. But there is no escaping the implications of a new role, such as the role of a person with cancer. I soon realized that it wasn't just sexism which infects the medical delivery system, it is also a dehumanization process. Dehumanization was something I had written about, having developed a typology of theories of oppression, dehumanization and exploitation (Dover, 2008). Now I was seeing it myself at a deeper level. I began to wonder, and I wonder more as I now reflect where this will lead me, in terms of the one constant that seems to be part of all my identities: the social justice implications.

Michael Austin once told me, "Everything is relationships." I resisted accepting that. For me, everything was building organizations, seeing clients for short-term service, organizing communities, and teaching students in ways that often involved transitory relationships rather than sustained ones. Steve Burghardt wrote once about styles of organizing, the hard and the soft (Burghardt, 1982). I'm pretty sure I never mastered either. That leaves me at a crossroads, forty-plus years since I devoted myself to social work and social activism as the primary activities of my life.

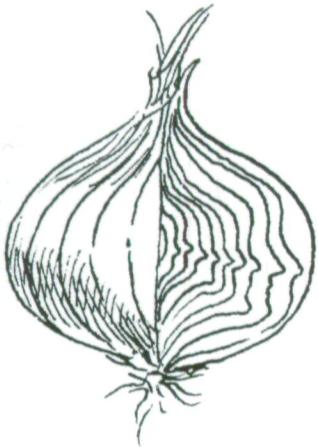
Conclusions

What seems to be missing for me, and what seems to have been at the center of my work when I was most effective, is a commitment not to an organization of progressive social workers, or a multi-issue organization of the organized left, or to a community of residence. It is to work around a single issue that is, itself, crying out for social justice work. I'm not sure what that will be, but with unemployment continuing to grow, I am inspired by the proposal of an activist

attorney I worked with in New Orleans. Bill Quigley (2003) has proposed a constitutional amendment for the right to jobs that pay living wages, and recently spoke at a national conference co-sponsored by the National Jobs for All Coalition (<http://www.njfac.org>), chaired by social work educator Trudy Goldberg. This would be a great example of the kind of activism I started out in: single-issue values based activism. On the other hand, doesn't this account also show that writing was my first love? Should I perhaps consider focusing on making a contribution through my scholarly and public affairs writing? Upon reflection, it seems to me that I was at my best when I was working on an issue, with the organization being secondary, or when I was writing about issues close to my heart.

My quixotic quest for organizational development may have been where my own efforts to combine social work and social justice got off track. Perhaps I thought that I could organize myself a solution to the unresolved issues of my life as an activist, as a social worker, and as a person. For the BCRS/SWAA membership renewal letters, I chose the following quote from Bertha Capen Reynolds which has been used each year: "The fulfillment of individual life is in belonging with others who share the same purposes. In this relatedness an individual develops them and a sharing which gives glory and meaning to life." I now think that Bertha was wrong about this. The "belong" part is where it gets off track. "Belonging" assumes some organizational home that provides this relatedness, the very kind of timeless organization we should know by now doesn't exist and shouldn't exist.

Yes, social movements and social change often have organizational vehicles, but we must recognize that these are disposable and should be seen as such, or we end up misdirecting our energies, as I have probably done. The movement is much bigger than any one organization. In his Nobel prize address, Mikhail Gorbachev stated: "Life is much richer and more complex than even the most perfect plans to make it better. It ultimately takes vengeance for attempts to impose abstract schemes, even with the best of intentions." In 1992, I wrote an article for *Crossroads* (Dover,



1992). It included that quote, and it included an account of the Australian film *Winter of Our Dreams*, in which Judy Davis played a heroin addict whose best friend had committed suicide. Before her death, her friend had become involved in the peace movement. At the film's end, the Davis' character attended a disarmament rally, where a folksinger sang John Farnham's moving song, "Til Time Brings Change." Partial lyrics of the song are instructive: "And so we share our common bond. And face the turmoils that surround. 'Til time brings change. 'Til time brings change."

While writing this narrative, I concluded that just as efforts to control clients—such as those with alcoholism—are fruitless, it is also impossible to build a just society by basing it upon a unitary political ideology or the work of a voluntary association or political party. Acting upon that belief myself, I stepped down from my role as the first BCRS Membership Committee Chairperson in 1991, around the time that Marti Bombyk stepped down as founding Chairperson. Marti immersed herself in her teaching at Eastern Michigan University and developed a consistent commitment to housing justice in Ypsilanti. I entered the doctoral program in social work and sociology at Michigan, and helped raise my two children.

But I don't think I fully learned the lesson of that song. Intellectually, I knew and had written about how we must give up the illusion that we can bring about social justice if only we can get our organizations right, or our theory or ideology right, or even our president right. But soon I was back barking up the organizational tree, resuming activity in SWAA in various capacities. I also supported the building of the Committees of Correspondence for Democracy and Socialism, by attending the founding conference in Berkeley in 1992 and by publishing a discussion document which had been circulating among activists in 1991 (Dover, 1991). I remain a member of CC-DS and of Democratic Socialist of America to this day. I'm not saying I shouldn't have done these things, or shouldn't do these things. I'm not saying people shouldn't do these things. I'm just concluding that for me, at this time, a major involvement within multi-issue organizations activism is not the best way for me to work to

oppose the sources of injustice in our world: oppression, dehumanization and exploitation.

A Chilean poet once wrote, "Stay on the left, as your heart desires." But the left has no monopoly on social justice. People of all political beliefs can and often do work in a way that is consistent with social justice. Social workers certainly confront such issues all the time in our work and in our communities and in our world.

I conclude that it is possible for social work to be a profession in which we can actively work for social justice while at the same time helping individuals, families, groups, organizations and communities. But in order to do so, it helps for us to be aware of the range of different forms our activism can take. Checkoway (1995) identified six strategies for community change (mass mobilization, social action, citizen participation, public advocacy, popular education, and local services development). Here, however, at the level of the individual activist, I have presented a no doubt imperfect typology of six forms my imperfect activism took: multi-issue organization-based activism; electoral activism; writing for publication to influence public opinion; single-issue values based activism, identity-rooted activism, and organizational change work. If there is one conclusion I've come to from the work described here, it is that while organizations are important, it is friends, colleagues, and comrades who really count.

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