

REMEMBRANCES OF THINGS PAST

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As social workers, our context is almost entirely related to working for social justice. It is our heritage and our commitment. Enclosed are a few extraordinary situations in which social justice became a major factor in the author's work.

A Day at the Beach and the Wade-Ins

It was a wonderful day. The sun was out, and it was nice to get out of the Chicago heat to spend a day at the beach, but we were not looking forward to it with eager anticipation. For us, my wife Sonia and three daughters, Chicago was a wonderful place to live. We were directly across from a fine school in the Hyde Park/Kenwood area, and five minutes from my work. Our major concern that morning was that we had the children with us, and we were worried about what to expect when we all walked together onto Rainbow Beach. While the Chicago beaches were open to all, Rainbow Beach, on the south side of Chicago, was different. African Americans had been hassled, jostled, insulted, and physically attacked when they went to that beach. There were varying degrees of welcome on the other Chicago beaches, but not Rainbow. It was the site of a series of "Wade-Ins," and we were on our way to a sit in at the beach. We were to be joined by other African American and White families. We were told by the wade-in organizers that there would be police on the beach trying to insure that the demonstration did not lead to any violence; but in the 1960's, Chicago was not known for its tolerance of equality. We were also given some information as to how to maintain decorum if we were harassed. We were almost certain there would be verbal abuse, and hoped that would be the worst of it.

I was the director of a Jewish youth center on the South Side of Chicago. It was in an area close to Rainbow Beach, in a predominantly white community that was quickly changing and apprehensive about it. Most of the board members did not live in the community, but more likely in the high rise

buildings along the lake. The parent advisory group consisted of neighborhood people.

It was not the most peaceful day at the beach. At times it was down right scary, particularly when small groups went into the water. I do not remember the numbers actively objecting to our presence, as the beach was crowded; but the degree of verbal abuse seemed to change up and down frequently during the day. I did not observe any physical actions, but there was a great deal of name calling. It was the first time I had heard the "N" word used along with the word "lover." It was a rather difficult experience, and I must admit it was not the best place for us to have taken our young kids. My hunch was that along with the number of police, the presence of reporters and cameramen served to keep the protesters more subdued than was the case at some of the other wade-ins. When the press interviewed some of the wade-in group, I was one person interviewed. I noted that I was director of the nearby youth center, but was not there in that capacity. Our family was interested in equal rights etc., etc. Part of that interview was broadcast on television, and I am not sure how it was received by the board members at the youth center, although one of them spoke to me about it and thought I had made a good presentation. But he was the only one. In the face of the agency being in a community that was changing, my position was bound to create mixed reactions among people who felt that this kind of change was going to negatively alter their community.

Without writing my autobiography, I will just say that one of the reasons I became a social worker was due to my belief in the contribution the profession was making to a society in which all people were entitled to be treated with dignity and respect, and I was

committed to working for a more just society. My wife felt the same way.

It was during that summer that I completed my Doctoral courses at the University of Chicago. That was soon followed with an invitation to teach group work at the School of Applied Social Sciences (SASS) at Case Western Reserve University, an exceptional opportunity to work for social justice at a school which was noted for work with groups, and the social justice advocacy of Grace Coyle. While I had not had any thoughts about teaching, the concern with my future at the youth center helped me to accept the offer.

VISTA, Me, and the Riots

While in Chicago I had been a field supervisor for some social work students at the University of Chicago, and started to understand how much students looked forward to real life experiences. When I began teaching at Case Western Reserve University, I believed it was important for me to continue with some social work practice so as to keep current with issues and trends. I felt it would also be helpful in teaching. Over a period of ten years I worked with various groups: blind people, cancer patients, unmarried teenage fathers, and alcoholic teenagers. I supervised a Settlement House worker who refused to pay income tax, because the money would go for war. I also worked on a committee for equality in public housing, which was known for segregating people in areas of the city. These were tough, but powerful practice/service opportunities which helped shape me, and which led to experiences around practice and social justice that I brought into the classroom over the years.

One of the most poignant experiences took place in the summer of 1966. Knowing that I was not teaching during the summer, Robert Bond, the Executive Director of the Greater Cleveland Neighborhood Associations, asked me if I would be willing to develop and run a summer VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America) program for which he had received a grant. It would require the training of thirty six young volunteers. VISTA was a Federal program consisting of a corps of full-time volunteers living and working with the poor on

the front line of what was then called the "War on Poverty." The volunteers trained by VISTA brought various opportunities and assistance into the neighborhoods and homes those in need. The volunteers could be requested by local agencies, public or private, that were serving the poor directly. VISTA was open to all who were willing to give a year of service. There were no educational requirements. Applicants were given some options as to where they wanted to serve and what type of work they wanted to do. The National Federation of Settlements was developing six week training courses, and Cleveland was selected for one of them.

I had to recruit and supervise five trainers as well as develop the training program. The Phyllis Wheatley Settlement, which was located in the center of an almost totally African American area of Cleveland, provided living accommodations for the 36 volunteers over the summer. The settlement was named after a famous African American poetess and was founded over a hundred years earlier, mainly to serve women. The VISTA volunteers were made up of males and females, mostly in their early twenties, college students or graduates, and all were white. I had little information on the volunteers other than how many there were, their ages, and sex. In the month prior to their arrival I recruited a staff of five; some were associates of mine from Case Western Reserve. There were three women and two men; two were African American.

My own orientation to VISTA came from Bob Bond and an afternoon with a person from the national VISTA office. None of the staff lived at the settlement with the volunteers, but they were there for about twelve hours a day. Except for a few special events, weekends were free for both the staff and the volunteers.

The six week program consisted of classes and field placements of the volunteers in settlement houses two full days each week. Speakers included Carl B. Stokes, who at that time was an Ohio State Representative (later mayor), the superintendent of the Cleveland School System, and the head of Urban Renewal. Evenings after dinner were generally free, with a few planned outings such as a

Cleveland baseball game, and seeing *My Fair Lady*. There were small group discussions and supervisory sessions related to field experiences. Class sessions included educators, a psychiatrist, civil rights leaders, city planners, the Welfare Department director, and speakers from groups representing the poor. All went well... until the **Hough Riots**.

On the evening of July 18, 1966, a group of African Americans gathered outside a bar on 79th Street objecting to a sign in the window which displayed a number of anti African American racist comments. A number of police arrived, and soon a melee took place. It continued for about eight days and led to deaths, injuries, and property destruction that increased the fears and hatred that already existed in that area and in parts of Cleveland. The initial site of the riots was about a mile from the Phyllis Whitley settlement and soon spread to the surrounding areas. The major impact was felt the following day and evening as word of the riot spread. Governor Rhodes ordered the National Guard to come out the next day, but they did not arrive until about 11:00 p.m. that evening. Soon there were jeeps with National Guardsmen and machine guns on many of the corners leading to downtown Cleveland to protect people going to work, and to keep the rioting contained.

My wife Sonia took the trip to her job downtown at the Welfare Department, and was one the many who called the mayor's office urging him to get the National Guard out to the riot area. I drove to Phyllis Whitley each day. Schools were closed down, as were many area businesses. The trainees remained in the settlement. They were living in a well-guarded, untouched but troubled zone. They had a lot to think and talk about. "Just treatment" was no longer a theoretical topic: it was a real living experience.

During that week the training program continued, with a few changes. The staff came to work and the speakers showed up, but we did cancel the field work assignments. It was a difficult time for the trainees as they were basically forced to remain at the settlement house for five days and nights. The staff offered a few programs—a dance, and movie—but the trainees were frightened,

bored, interested, excited; all of which led to new experiences and ways of viewing themselves now that they were in the middle of a riot.

Discussions related to poverty, slum housing, fair treatment, police-community relationships, the use of force, and the reasons the riots might have started were shaped by their new life experiences. The weeks following the riots were a continuing series of trainee motivated sessions where they tried to make sense of the experiences they had witnessed almost firsthand. It brought the trainee group together as persons who had shared a rough experience which they were not able to do anything about, but was strongly related to why they had offered to serve their country. The question of how such things could happen and why became an important point of discussion, and source of evaluation of themselves and their country. The questions that went through their minds and voices were echoed in return in the minds of the trainers, and in me. We had a number of staff discussions on how to proceed in the face of what the students had experienced.

Personally, having gone to the March on Washington in 1963 with my family and heard Martin Luther King's "I have a dream" speech, I wondered if there would ever be an end to racism, hatred, and the unjust use of power in my lifetime? Was I really battling the problem, or was I part of the problem? The weight of that idea enforced the notion that, as a teacher, I also had to be involved in the practice of change, both in and out of the classroom. The classroom had to be a place to learn not only from books, but from students' experiences with me and each other in the classroom, and hopefully from my practice. Was that, too, just a dream?

No Rent! No Rent!

The Cleveland riots, which have been duplicated in various ways throughout the country over the years, had a strong impact on the development of programs to help mediate some of the social problems they reflected. One problem was in the area of housing for the poor, and in some cases for the middle class. In American cities like

Cleveland and Chicago, the tenants had no rights. They could be put out of their homes without being given a reason. Not only was slum housing overpriced, but repairs were not made, complaints from tenants were ignored, or worse, tenants were simply given notice to vacate within 30 days.

In 1967, Bob Bond asked me to undertake a major project of the Cleveland Neighborhood Centers Association, working in partnership with the Legal Aid Society and the CEO. The task was to help organize tenant unions in Cleveland by recruiting tenants, helping to develop the organization, and offer leadership to the program. The goal was to not only develop the union but to train tenants on how to deal with landlords; and in public housing, to carry out management tasks. It was to be a “from the ground up” project. The organizers, once they were selected and trained, would be tenants. A staff member from GCNCA carried out inter-organization contacts and functions, and handled financial affairs and support services. By-laws for the union would have to be developed, and rules had to be agreed upon. It carried the risk of tenant eviction, and so safeguards had to be established. If there was to be a strike of any kind, it had to have the support of the union, and could only be held in the spring and summer so that if a strike resulted in evictions, tenants would not be “out in the cold.” It was hoped that strikes, while sometimes effective, would be avoided.

I recalled the power in the threat of a rent strike from Arthur Arent’s play *One Third of a Nation*. President Roosevelt, in his second inaugural address on January 20, 1937, proclaimed: “I see one third of a nation ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished.” Arent used that part of the speech as the title in his play about poverty and the lack of housing. The following excerpt from the play deals with the gouging of the poor in run-down housing. (Arent uses the accepted language of the time.) The men are tenants in a room with a number of beds. Each man rents a bed for part of the day. In their despair, they seek change.

FIRST NEGRO: When you don’t like the way things are, and you want to change ‘em, don’t

try to do it all by yourself. You can’t... You got to get ‘em all together; then gotta do somethin’ together!

(There is a pause.)

SECOND NEGRO: (slowly) Do something? Like what?

FIRST NEGRO: Like this... (Slowly he turns facing out; then, addressing an imaginary landlord) You go to the landlord and say: If you don’t stop gougin’ us – if you don’t fix them rusty pipes and clean up this here house, you know what we’re going to do? You know what? (Pause) We ain’t gonna pay no rent!

SECOND NEGRO: No rent? But they won’t let me stay here. They’ll kick me out.

FIRST NEGRO: Sure they will—if you do it yourself. But suppose everybody in this whole house didn’t pay rent until every man had a bed of his own and that sink downstairs was fixed. Would you get it fixed or wouldn’t you?

(There is a pause, the SECOND NEGRO regards him for a moment, then, joyously.)

SECOND NEGRO: (shouting): No rent! We ain’t gonna pay no rent!

TWO NEGROES: No rent! No rent!

The goal of the Tenant Union program was to develop organizations made up of tenants (those who pay rent) to bargain collectively with landlords. Any tenant in an area served by the program could join. There was no fee, but as a local group organized, they could establish some membership dues. It was the hope that tenants, with the help of a worker, could negotiate a suitable rental lease, contracts to establish grievance procedures, and a steward system so that complaints of a neighborhood could be voiced effectively. They could work for needed repairs and insure proper building care by the landlord. The following announcement appeared in the initial recruitment flyer.

Who Will Run The Tenant Union?

You!!! Staff workers will help you to organize, give you technical assistance and training, but you will run the unions.

You will establish the rules, the contracts, and the method for solution of problems. This will be Your Tenant Union

At the time that the unions were being developed in Cleveland there were already a few in other parts of the country. One was in Chicago, and another was in the Watts area of Los Angeles. They were showing positive results, and the idea was beginning to catch on nationally. From the beginning of our initial efforts to recruit tenants, we found a great deal of community support, and the program showed signs of being a success. About half a dozen communities began to organize; after two months, some had started to discuss issues with landlords. In the meantime, my staff and other support groups started to deal with the city council and some of the political leaders of Cleveland. A decision was made to have a citywide convention to draw up by-laws and promote the idea of a citywide tenant committee. During that time, Martin Luther King was approaching Cleveland and supporting the Garbage Collectors Union, Housing Improvements, and other projects for the poor. The convention organizers planned to invite King to be a guest speaker. I am not sure if he was ever asked, although I was working on lists for guests and his name was given as a possible speaker. Some of his aides were working in Cleveland, and I believe there had been some cross contact at the time around housing concerns

The Tenant Union movement grew. There were a few rent strikes, and many tenants were hired to work at and even manage some of

the apartments. A number of laws were passed to help tenants; some landlord restrictions were passed to keep housing safe, and even laws were put into place to prevent tenants from being evicted without cause. Over time some of us were able to deal with some of the public housing segregation, but not as part of the tenant union movement. But that's another story.

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