

WHAT'S AN OLD CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTOR TO DO?

By William E. Powell, Ph.D., Professor, Social Work Department, University of Wisconsin - Whitewater

This brief narrative provides a first person account of the thoughts and recollections of a social work educator as he meets with his research class during the unfolding events on the morning of 9/11/2001.

Driving home just before sundown on the evening of September 10th, I saw to the east, a complete and perfect rainbow on the horizon. Under the rainbow, the sky was as black as night and above it pure blue. Having never witnessed such a rainbow before, so eerily beautiful, I pulled to the edge of the road and stopped so that I could take it in. The morning of September 11th found the sky azure blue but peppered with clouds like little biscuits. Each cloud wept a trail of snow far below it—very odd for September. I was so taken with the sight that I stood at my window transfixed. The telephone rang and my sister from Indiana yelled, “Turn on the TV quick” and hung up. I turned on the television just as an airliner hit the second of the two World Trade Towers. I watched the coverage for an hour and then rushed off to the University to meet with the first of my two research classes. I wondered if anyone would show up for the class—everyone did.

On the way to campus, I wondered what to say and do in class and thought about the poor souls in those buildings and planes. New events and rumors were still occurring, and I had no idea how much more might happen. I pondered the proper thing to say to students in a moment in time that will remain forever etched in their minds. There must be a special weight to our words when what we say and do together might be with someone forever. Should I talk about research? Or respond to the ongoing events of the morning?

Preparing for any class is not an entirely

intellectual process, and this day it was a special mix of feeling and thought and anticipation. What I felt were the distractions of sadness, pain, helplessness, apprehension, and grief. Emotions trigger memories, and my memories reverted to the violence of another time. It was another war that brought me into social work. During the war in Vietnam, I was a conscientious objector, a pacifist. The Selective Service System assigned me to a state hospital in Indiana to do my alternate service for two years. The hospital assigned me to the Social Work Department, and I became a social worker in spite of my objections. Now, thirty plus years later, I am still in social work. Odd, the little twists of fate in life—the changes in one's life course—that can be attributed to a moral repulsion to violence!

In the subsequent seventeen years that I was in practice, I often dealt with the aftermath of violence—as a sexual assault and domestic violence counselor and as a social worker who worked with the terminally ill in a medical setting. Violence and death are not strangers to me. The juxtaposition of my pacifist soul and the focus of my practice on the effects of violence and death certainly affect how and what I teach. When I teach, of necessity I bring my experiences with me. I mention them only sparingly, yet one's memories are part of the lens through which the world and its possibilities are viewed. I can be nothing other than who I have been and who I have become. One's sense of morality, like one's sense of ethics, becomes infused into

one's practice and is part of the perspective from which one teaches.

I am, on my mother's side, the descendent of English Quakers, pacifists, who came to this country three and one-half centuries ago fleeing religious persecution. As a small child, I came to understand that violence is to be deplored. It is a failure of sorts. As a social worker, I have too often seen the effects of violence and injustice firsthand. My Quaker roots tell me that the soul of the poorest orphan in Afghanistan or Africa is the full equal of the soul of any rich man occupying the White House. I am a social worker and still a pacifist.

In the few minutes before my class began, news was still breaking: a plane had crashed in Pennsylvania, rumors of smoke rising from the Capital mall, a tower may have collapsed. No one knew whether there was more to come, or if today's violence was at an end. We knew that more would come—that those who sow the wind reap the whirlwind, that violence begets violence. I went to my class not knowing the majority of the students since it was only the third class of the semester. It was larger than most social work classes; most students are initially more pensive and hesitant in the larger classes. They are particularly pensive in research classes. In spite of not knowing one another well, the previous class sessions had been lively and students had begun to open up in front of one another.

As I walked to class, there was a hush about the campus, and I reminded myself that whatever I would say and do in class must be done mindful of my students' learning and of their futures. I entered the class without an agenda or a prepared speech. I opted to let my mind and heart say and respond as they would and to hear what my students wished to say. I greeted them and asked if there was anything they would like to say or talk about and whether they had already had a chance to talk during the previous class period. Many

had eyes welling with tears. One student sarcastically said that she just came from another class and the instructor had gone on with the lesson as if nothing was unusual: "It was weird, it was like nothing was happening!" Another student said her previous class was canceled "...we didn't even have a chance to talk about what's going on." Several say that they have never seen people die in front of their eyes, that "this is not like the movies, people really died as we watched!" I responded, acknowledging that in spite of all the violence in our media, there is something jolting when we know that what appears before our eyes is real and current and will change us all forever. Some students say they are afraid—will we be in a war? What will happen to us? Who else might die? What else is going to happen? Some are angry at those who did the evil. Many are mute and stunned. One young woman simply says, "I love my country so much!" Another says that she thinks her cousin works in the Trade Towers. Others ask how it is that someone could hate us that much and we never knew about it or why.

I responded to their comments and acknowledged that it is the very ignorance of our effects on one another that is a problem, that we are all too often blind to how others see us. I said that acknowledging that we may have been foolishly unaware of the anger of others does not excuse their actions. One student rather angrily says that she believes that we are getting back all the subtle evil that others have done in our name, that corporations and special interests and the government have angered and undermined other cultures and we're all paying for the actions of a few. Her anger seemed as accepted as was the fear of others. My sense was that the opportunity to talk and express emotions in the company of others with whom they shared a major and with whom they had already talked was reassuring. The structure of the classroom brought a little sense of normalcy into an otherwise wildly abnormal day.

After the comments and small discussions faded, it was clear that most couldn't find words to adequately convey the jumble of emotions they were feeling. A room full of young souls were discovering the ineffable. The troubles in articulating strong feelings led to a silence at odds with the previous meeting, where they had begun to chat with one another quite casually. The silence, however, did not seem uncomfortable to them. It seemed time for me to speak, but I felt no great wisdom welling up inside of me.

I said that since this was a research class, I hoped we might sometime, when normality returned, think of using research techniques to help us discover and better understand why such events happen. That what research can do is to help us understand how others see the world, how things are correlated. It does help people know how to avoid problems or to work better together. However, the students seemed too distraught by the ongoing events to deal with the rationality of applied research methods. Clearly, they were caught up in the emotionality and import of the moment and the fear of what would happen next. Being with them and hearing the pain in their voices, I was surprised by the unexpected triggering of a recollection of my feelings the moment I heard that President Kennedy was assassinated. I shared with them the power of emotion laden memories on the life courses of people and how the details of things are often etched on our minds until the end of our days. I shared the story of that one such memory for me. I was working in a small dry goods store in Indiana. The ordinariness of that day in 1963 was broken when someone burst in the side door shouting that the president had just been killed. We turned on a radio and heard that it was indeed true. Everyone, staff and customers alike, looked at one another in stunned silence. I remember feeling dazed and frozen in place, immobilized, unable to articulate a coherent thought. An elderly African-American customer softly sug-

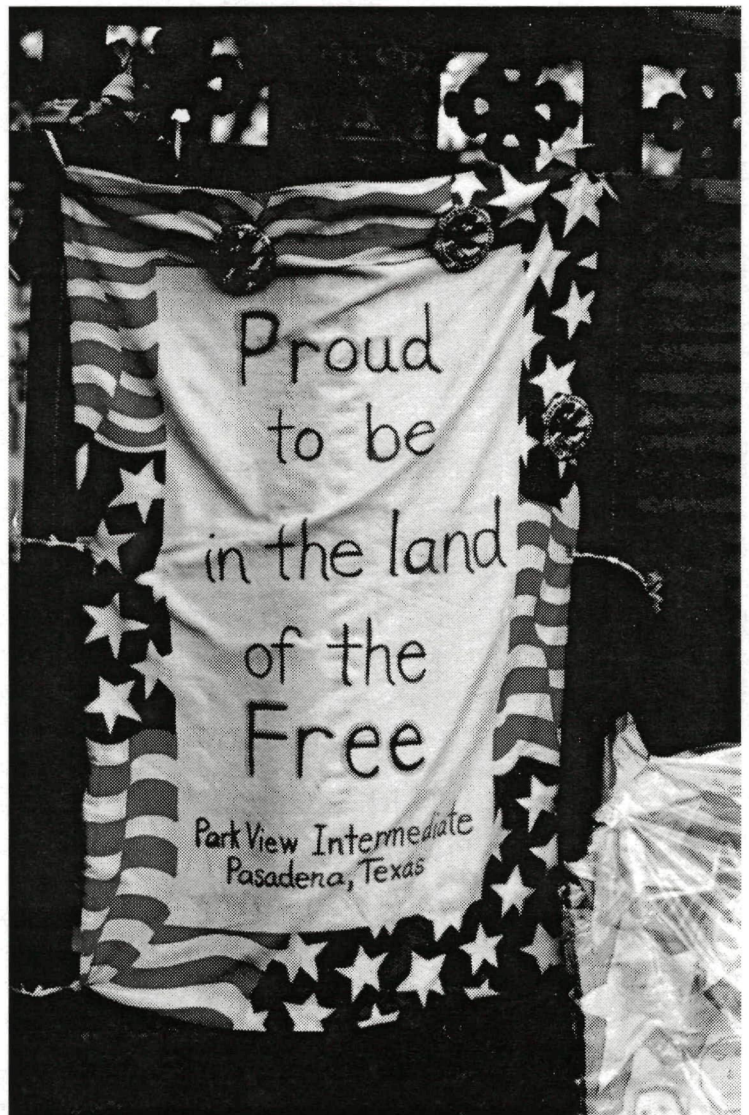
gested, "I think we should pray" and she led everyone—customers and staff—silently in prayer. The silence was like the shared presence and silence of a Quaker meeting, and our emotions and concerns bound us together in a way that words could not have. I have rarely felt as connected with others as in the resonance of that most painful of moments. That moment remains with me for life.

I tell my students the story and then talk about the permanence of, the imprinting of, memories in times such as this. I ask if they have called their parents and loved ones. All respond that they have called those whom they hold dear. I suggest that they allow themselves a moment to care about those who died and will die and who suffer. To pay attention to whom you love and what you value, for the thoughts and emotions and memories of this day, like that day of my youth, may be with you forever. I say, "Fill your mind with good thoughts and good wishes and the love of others, of all people, for such memories will be linked with the memories of pain and will always be with you. Do not let your memory of this day be tainted with hatred. Be with others you care about. Look at one another and realize how wonderful, what a gift, life is." "Treat others so that no one will ever dislike us that intensely again. What has happened is evil and what causes such hatred and evil may itself be evil." I say to them that we, as humans, are capable of so much more and in my heart what I most want at that moment is to spare them the pain and fear that they are going through, but I cannot do that. I say that answering violence with violence is no solution and ask them to take care of themselves and, again, to talk with those who love them and to hold dear all those to whom they are connected.

I can conjure up no magic "right words" to quell the fear of unknowns unleashed upon their young worlds. Another bit of innocence in the world has broken away. My voice begins to fail. I thank them for their attention

and our shared presence in such a moment and say, "That is all for class today. We can talk more, or you may leave as you wish." My eyes brim with tears and we stay with one another in silence, in the ineffable, for a few moments, and then they trickle out of class murmuring softly to one another, suddenly looking older than their years. One kind soul comes over and whispers "thank you" as we leave. Outside, the sky is clear blue with no vapor trails dividing it and the hush of an expectant world envelops and holds us. We wait for what is to come.

Class that day was not an exercise in rationality but rather a moment in time when an instructor and his students could gather together, be with one another, in the midst of ongoing catastrophe and terror and uncertainty. It was a time when our common humanity bound us together and a time when we jointly tailored memories that had begun being woven into the various narratives of our lives.



A banner made by school children in Texas at the Ground Zero Memorial

Copyright of Reflections: Narratives of Professional Helping is the property of Cleveland State University and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.