

# A SOCIAL WORK CLASS AS MUTUAL AID GROUP: IN THE AFTERMATH OF SEPTEMBER 11<sup>TH</sup>

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*During the author's second week of a new teaching assignment, the tragedies of September 11 occurred. In the following days, after evacuating her apartment and volunteering with the Salvation Army, she resumed teaching. In this narrative she shares her reflections about how her students helped each other deal with the turmoil.*

Under thy shadow by the piers I waited;  
Only in darkness is thy shadow clear.  
The city's fiery parcels all undone,  
Already snow submerges an iron year...

"To the Brooklyn Bridge," Hart Crane

On September 11<sup>th</sup>, I awoke full of excitement. It was the second week of my new job as visiting assistant professor. I was thrilled to be teaching social work students on a graduate level. It was the second week for my son at his new college and he was thriving in his guitar studies and performances. After a nervous first day, my daughter was into her third week of her new high school. Last night she'd been singing in the shower and telling my husband and I how much fun school was. My husband was working on a major project and feeling optimistic. I actually remember thinking, "How could my life get any better than this?"

Shortly after 9 a.m., I am alone in my loft apartment in Tribeca. The building shakes suddenly. I run to the living room and see the burning upper floors of the first tower that was hit. I am pacing back and forth, crying, saying "no, no" in a whisper and then as a prayer, "This isn't happening. Please God, don't let this be happening." I am seeing what looks like objects falling. I am seeing people clinging to the building, then jumping. I am hearing the strangest sound I have ever heard; it is like the plopping of water balloons. Absurd, that I remember playing with water bal-

loons on summer days with my friends. But these are the sounds of bodies and parts of human beings. When we leave, I don't know that it will be three weeks before we can move back.

The first class I taught after September 11<sup>th</sup> was on Thursday, September 13<sup>th</sup>, a foundation course in social justice, oppression, and social work in organizations. I was late for class. I had been with a national guardsman who accompanied my husband and I into our building in order to get a change of clothes. Entering the building was like entering a mineshaft, smoky and dark. By flashlight beams, we climbed ten flights of stairs to our apartment, which was blanketed in a white lunar dust.

I don't remember much about that class. My students were concerned about me. I told them how I had fled my apartment and that my family and I were safe and staying with friends. I was afraid I would break down, that I would not be professional. Just the week before, I had encouraged students not to be afraid of showing clients that they had feelings and cared. I was also aware that I was supposed to be teaching about the history and current realities of de facto and overt race, class, and gender discrimination. This topic was both intensely real and yet also felt obsolete and irrelevant. The distinctions between rich, poor, Asian, Black, and Hispanic working class and professional were erased in the shared sense of our universal vulnerability and mortality in this dangerous new world. I had

seen the leveling of divisions among the people on the lines at the makeshift morgue. On September 12th, I had gone to the Salvation Army and been recruited to work in the medical examiner's office taking missing persons reports and sitting with police officers as they interviewed families. I felt honored to be a social worker.

I know that numbing is one of the first reactions to trauma, and I could see that people were numb as they answered our questions on the missing persons forms or told me their stories. On September 13th the morgue was moved to the armory. I went there with my new Salvation Army badge. People were exhausted; the lines snaked around the block. I thought of the poem "Hope" by Emily Dickinson, in which she describes hope as a feathered thing that perches on the soul. I handed out water and talked to people, asking them how they were doing. I was with people as they went through the new updated lists of names of dead, hospitalized, or missing. I sat with a woman who had identified the body of her brother. I held the hand of a woman who was looking for her son, a boy my son's age. By the end of the day, I could recognize the physical signs of shock. There it was, the feathered thing that perches on the soul, the thing we in social work sometimes call resiliency, the resiliency of hope in the parents who walked from hospital to hospital looking for their daughter, showing her picture and asking "Have you seen this woman?"

On September 15th, four days after the attacks, I was about to teach a social policy class. By then, the numbness had given way to sadness, fear, and moments of feeling intensely alive. I had connected with my family, friends, and others who were trying to help and serve. I was exhausted. I know now that I needed to stop and be with my family, but I was also driven by a need to do something.

My mind was racing. How could I teach this class when I knew that the students were so shaken up? Should I let everyone talk

about how they feel? Maybe they just needed to start with how they were healing or hurting. On the other hand, if the students made the effort to get here, didn't they want me to teach a class? Would my teaching make us feel "normal?"

The class is made up of students from all over the world, and the students range from early twenties to middle age. Some have many years of experience, and others are just out of undergraduate school. They have chosen this difficult and rewarding profession in order to be of service to others and to redress injustice; but they never expected to begin their careers as history was being reshaped.

The decision to hold class or not was taken out of my hands. There had been a bomb threat on a crowded subway, and students in the class were on that train which was evacuated at the 59<sup>th</sup> Street Columbus Circle stop, the stop for Fordham University. People had become so panicked that one of the students had nearly been trampled. I had the class make a circle of their seats as each one of us hugged the student (M) who burst into sobs. She told us that this was the first time she had cried since September 11<sup>th</sup>; M couldn't cry in front of her mother. She lived in a tough neighborhood in the Bronx, she had lost three brothers in the past five years to the violence of the streets, and her mother needed her to be strong. One of the oldest students, a man who told us his son was in the Marines, got up and began to walk out saying, "I don't want to talk about this." But as he got to the door of the classroom he turned around and came back to sit next to M. I thanked him and, turning to the class, I said that I was torn, too, about what to do. I felt I had a responsibility to teach them since they had taken it upon themselves to come to class, but I also wanted to let them spend as much time as they needed to talk about what had happened. "Could we talk?" Heads nodded in agreement. One woman said that, like M, she had not yet cried and now she was

not sure she could focus on anything but her need to let herself weep. Tissues were passed around and most of the students were wiping their eyes.

The windows of the classroom are high above Columbus Avenue, a busy city street. We heard sirens below and helicopters above. Sounds we would have ignored, like the thud of the elevator doors, made some of us jump. One by one students began to tell where they were when the attacks occurred. The next piece of information they wanted to share was how helpless they felt and how much they wanted to do something constructive. The student who had returned to his seat said he was full of anger. All he could think about was getting into a plane with a bomb to "push the button." Other students shook their heads in what seemed like disapproval mixed with understanding. I asked this student how different that would be from flying a plane into a building. A student from Nigeria, who had been in the United States for several years, began to speak about massacres by terrorists in her country. She had come to the United States in part to escape the bloodshed between Moslems and Christians. She felt that we Americans were naive and characterized Moslems as wanting only one thing: to destroy all of us. A student replied saying that hearing this frightened her because she lived in an area of Brooklyn where Moslem families were being beaten up and windows broken in the shops owned by Moslems. This was her neighborhood, not Nigeria, not the Middle East, where for as long as she remembered everyone had gotten along.

A silence, and then one of the students, a young woman with an Arabic name and the physical features of someone from the Middle East, spoke up. She told the class that she was born in the United States and her parents were born in Egypt. Her family were assimilated into American life but belonged to a mosque, and their holy book was the Koran. She was as hurt as anyone else in the class.

She insisted that the people who committed the acts of terror were not Islamic; they were a sect calling themselves Islamic. She was offended by the remarks of the Nigerian student and hoped that she could come here to school and feel safe. She had not been treated differently than any other American since the attack, but she was becoming afraid for her seven-year-old son who might encounter these attitudes at his school in Queens. I asked the class how we could help this student feel safe as well as help each other feel safe. The Nigerian student got up and gave her name and telephone number to the Moslem student. I suggested that we pass the sheet of paper around and all who wished could write down their names, phone numbers, and e-mail addresses.

One of the last students to speak was a woman who had been on 24-hour call with an emergency rescue group that was part of a victim's services agency. I asked her how much sleep she had gotten. This was the fourth day since the attacks and she said she had averaged between two and four hours a night for the past three nights. She felt she could not stop moving. She wanted to cry, but she just couldn't. I asked the class to tell her how this made them feel. Some students said they admired her, and some said they were amazed that she could be so strong. One of the male students told her that if the men in the class could cry, then surely there was nothing to be ashamed of by crying. The student said that her mother, with whom she lived, was the only person she could feel safe crying in front of, but since the attacks her mother was riveted to the television and would only talk angrily about the attacks. The student found her mother's tirades so grating that she kept her distance, going straight to bed but not falling asleep. Was her mother stopping her from expressing her fears and hurt?

I suggested we do a role play and she would be her mother and I would be she. I said words to the effect, "Mom, look at me, I

understand how angry you are, but I'm exhausted and I need you to help me out. If I don't talk to you about what I'm going through, I am not going to be able to help anyone and I need your help now." But the student dismissed my words with a wave of her hand and said she couldn't speak that way to her mother. I turned to the class for help. Several people asked if this student had really tried to speak to her mother or if she wasn't perhaps avoiding her feelings and blaming her mother. They asked, "Did you tell your mother to look at you and to listen to you?" The student became thoughtful for a moment and then said that she was afraid; maybe if she did express her pain, she wouldn't be able to gather her strength to go out for another 12-hour shift. One of the students asked what would happen if she just called and said she needed a break? Would she lose her job? Wouldn't her agency understand?

I looked at the clock and saw that there were only ten minutes left. We had been talking for ninety minutes. A student who had been in tears earlier spoke to us. She said that she had been holding onto a happy feeling and did not want to let anything take it away. The previous day she had learned that she was pregnant. At that, the class broke into applause and smiles. I asked the students if they would hold hands in a circle for a moment before class ended. But the students did not want me to end the class until I talked about myself. Actually, I needed to talk just as much as they did. I told them that I had been living with friends and how we had to evacuate our apartment. I told them that I saw from my window what the world saw from their television screens, but this view was close up and contained unspeakable images that I know I will never fully erase from my memory and that I hope will never be seen by children or by the families of those who perished. I told them that in the days after the attack on the WTC, my colleagues at Fordham and I

worked with agencies such as the Red Cross and that I was a volunteer with the Salvation Army.

In the coming weeks, I would be covering the topic of mutual aid groups in this class. Had I planned it as a teaching exercise, I could not imagine a better illustration of the "powerful healing force" of a group (Gitterman & Shulman, 1994). I felt their caring and support as I spoke.

At the time of this writing, we have had one other class. It is still early in the semester and I usually do a lot of lecturing from my notes. But, I didn't get very far. Discussions were lively. Students brought in web site information and a news article about the outpouring of social welfare for the families affected by the disaster. The student who was in the subway during the bomb scare has arranged to get a ride every week with the man who spoke about getting on a plane with a bomb. The Moslem woman was absent from the class, but I hope to see her at the next class.

## Reference

- Gitterman, A., & Shulman, L., (1994). Mutual aid, oppression, and the mediating function. In A. Gitterman & L. Shulman (Eds). *Mutual Aid Groups: Vulnerable Populations and the Life Cycle* (2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.), pp. 3-26, New York: Columbia University Press.

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