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SOCIAL WORK AND SOCIAL JUSTICE: A CHALLENGE TO THE PROFESSION

Social work has a rich history of advocacy for social justice of which we can rightly be proud. We consistently invoke it and, from my perspective, too rarely emulate it. From Ida B. Wells to Jane Addams, from Bertha Reynolds to Whitney Young, from Jeanette Rankin to Barbara Lee, we point with pride to what people associated with social work have done to stand up for the values associated with our social justice tradition. And we should.

The challenge to us is to find a way to integrate social justice into social work practice. And, our challenge as educators, is to help students, who often come to our schools because of their wish to advance social justice, find a way to do that in their practice, in what they do in the “dailyness” of their work in agencies. Finally, our challenge as a profession is to clarify what we stand for and to act on that position, even if it means flying in the face of powerful interests that we have allowed to define and control us. In the time available to me today, I would like to explore these challenges and seek allies in a concerted effort to reassert political and economic justice as the guiding principle for our practice and policies.

We have to begin this effort by acknowledging our history in its complexity. Our social work tradition does include a commitment to social justice, as it includes a commitment to social accommodation and retreat in the face of reaction. Ida B. Wells was an uncompromising freedom fighter in her time and that tenacity contributed to her being marginalized and isolated when she challenged her allies to live up to their rhetoric. When confronted with racist exclusion of African-American people from white settlement houses, she began her own settlements to serve communities of color – a move that did not endear her to the social welfare establishment of her time.

When Jane Addams suggested that the roots of poverty lay in social structures rather than the morality and character of the poor, the Charity Organization Societies moved to isolate her. When she opposed U. S. entry into the first World War, her “radicalism” prompted her ostracism and questions about her patriotism. Jeanette Rankin’s vote against that same war and the next one cost her reelection in each instance. Bertha Reynolds’ adoption of a socialist analysis of social conditions led to her dismissal from her teaching position at Smith College and a principled existence on the margins of social work as the mainstream of the profession shunned her. As she put it: “somewhere, a door blew shut.”

While Whitney Young never was marginalized to that extent and he was even elected president of NASW, internal struggles about racial justice within the profession’s organizations led to the creation of the National Association of Black Social Workers in protest against NASW’s timidity on civil rights. Barbara Lee has been much more fully embraced by the profession while facing a firestorm of criticism for her lone, courageous vote against entry into our latest Gulf war.

I recount this history to encourage humility in social work’s self-congratula-

tion for the courage of several of our colleagues whom social work didn’t defend when its support would have been meaningful. And, I also want to underscore that social work has embedded within its core structures and philosophies the very forces that tug us toward a conservative ideology. Our claiming of professional status – merited by virtue of our academic tradition and social worth – is a claim of privileges conferred by the state. Government has no interest in granting recognition and advantages to an institution that challenges its power. Social work’s professional status comes at the cost of embracing a deep and consistent advocacy of political and economic justice grounded in an analysis and critique of the structures that promote injustice.

That plays out most dramatically in its pursuit of licensing, a state-created monopoly on certain kinds of practice. I won’t dispute the consumer protection elements of licensure nor will I attempt to convince practitioners who feel consistently undervalued and underpaid that professional status is not appealing. But, it is worth pointing out that licenses are privileges granted, by and large, to people with privilege. The education requirements, combined with the exclusion from practice of unlicensed social service workers, reinforce the hierarchies of race, class and gender that permit some to attend graduate school and keep others out. In brief, licensing social workers may or may not be a good thing but it is undeniably an issue with implications for social justice and to exclude those considerations from the discussion is to do a disservice to a thoughtful exploration of the issue.

It is the unwillingness to consider issues such as the implications of licensure that makes it safe to say that the profession has not been on the cutting edge of confronting society’s racism, sexism, heterosexism, and classism, among many other bases of oppression.

Recognizing these dilemmas, it is incumbent on us to think critically about social work practice, how our values get enacted in our work. And the place to begin, I believe, is to recognize that values do drive our work. This goes beyond asserting that “social work is a values-based profession.” We assert that and then live with what I see as a disconnect between those values and much of what we do in practice. Values should be the basis upon which we choose the theories that inform our practice and only those theories congruent with our values should be used to guide our daily work and what we teach. No theory is value-free so we need to critically examine the ideology underlying theories to understand the degree to which they are consistent with or in opposition to the political and economic justice values we espouse.

And this is an extraordinarily difficult and often uncomfortable process. In the interest of “truth in advertising” I think it might be useful to reflect on

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LETTER FROM THE OUTGOING CHAIR/ CALLING ALL SWAACTIVISTS

Dear friends and comrades,

For three years I've been the Co-/Chair of SWAA's National Steering Committee—the group that helps keep our cross-national network going and give it some cohesiveness. We try to keep SWAA, in whatever evolutionary stage it is in, alive and moving forward. As you know, no group or network can exist and keep growing without involvement from its members. SWAA has many opportunities to get involved, locally, nationally, in your community or at special events.

I want to share a bit about SWAA, who we are, what we do, what we are striving to be. Most importantly, I hope to spark your ideas about what SWAA can be for you, and for all of us.

We are multidisciplinary, multigenerational, multifaceted. While many of us come from the field of social work, we also represent various backgrounds: many of us come into social work through these varied experiences. We are educators, human service workers, administrators, activists and people experiencing poverty and oppression. This diversity is a source of our strength.

Collectively, we strive toward social justice, economic equality, and human rights. This, too, is a source of our strength.

Additionally, our structure is a source of our strength. SWAA is:

- a network of local chapters and individuals across the U.S. Chapter activities range from protests to teach-ins to organizing with other local activist groups to pushing their local governments and other bodies of power to provide greater justice.
- a national network of social work and other faculty members. Colleagues engage in dialogue about social justice education, written materials to help the educational process, and other ways of supporting one another in pursuit of radical education while having to function within the typical institutional academic setting. Soon our website and additional planned listserves will further help with such networking.
- a participant in the poor peoples' movement, including partnerships with groups like the Kensington Welfare Rights Union and the Poor Peoples' Economic Human Rights Campaign.
- a host of annual gatherings—national conferences or localized teach-ins focused on current, progressive issues.
- an owner of a listserv used to inform one another and discuss issues that matter to us. The listserv, especially of late, hosts progressives expressing themselves, challenging each other and themselves (for example, can you really be progressive if you support a mainstream candidate), holding each other accountable, while also reminding each other about the importance of kindness and unity as we work in different ways toward the same goals.
- a partner in a radical mentoring program, where we pair a more seasoned SWAA member/progressive/radical with a student or newer activist.
- ever developing its new website.

SWAA also plays some less tangible, but arguably even more important roles. And these are things that come from our members, not (just) those of us, like myself, who make up the coordinating body of the network (of course we'd say nice things about ourselves!). We are:

- a place to get support and energy for this good but long fight that we fight.
- a place to focus and refocus on why we put in the effort that we do, why we join in the struggle.
- a place to connect, reflect, comfort each other and remind each other that we are not alone in the wilderness, in our striving to make peoples' lives less painful and our society more of what it has the potential to be.

For those of us practicing somewhere in the wide field of social work, we are proof that there are other social workers who are in this for the same reasons, that there are progressive and radical social workers out there. And I hope this is reassuring for those crossing paths with social workers, too, whether in solidarity or involuntarily.

We know the “system” is broken, and that it was never really set up right in the first place. And, as much as we may feel like Don Quixote at times, trying to ride into the gusts from the windmills, we want to try to make things work better. Make life better for those who are intimately—though often involuntarily—involved with The System(s), and to make life better for our friends, our families, ourselves. For which of us is not affected by at least one part of these systems:

- the social service system,
- the military system,
- the prison system,
- the increasingly homogeneous political system,
- the welfare system,
- the global economic system.

At this past summer's conference we attempted to gain a better understanding of these systems, how to analyze them and how to take them on (or take them out, as the case may be). These are the kinds of things that SWAA does.

As I pass the torch on to other members of the Steering Committee and SWAA at large, I thought I would share my hopes (which I know are not mine alone) about the future of SWAA. I believe that we will fulfill our current goals of producing dynamic (and more regular) newsletters, creating a useful, informative, and thought-provoking website, solidly re-establish the faculty network, and make the membership directory available to members, so that we can find one another and work together more effectively. I have hope that we can also be a more active partner and part of poor peoples' groups; and increasingly be a place to link - person to person, group to group, online, on campus, in gatherings, in the streets. “Linking” is, after all, a key role of social work, and a crucial, key component of the social justice movement.

I believe this - and much more, which you can envision - can be our SWAA, with its potential fulfilled.

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JPHS

The Journal of Progressive Human Services (JPHS) is available to members of SWAA at a substantial discount. It can be ordered through SWAA using the application in this issue of the BCR Reports. Neither the JPHS collective nor SWAA are involved in subscription fulfillment, that is the responsibility of our publisher, Haworth Press. If you are a subscriber and have not received an issue, contact Kathy Rutz at 1-800-HAWORTH.

To submit an article to JPHS, send one copy in floppy disk form and four hard copies (including a short abstract) to: Marcia Cohen, JPHS Collective, University of New England, School of Social Work, 716 Stevens Avenue, Portland, ME 04103. It is important that your name and any other identifying information not appear on three of the four hard copies. We also encourage submissions of poetry and short (500-1000 word) opinion pieces for our Soapbox column and letters to the editors.

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Marcia Cohen

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CHAPTER FEATURE: ROCHESTER, NEW YORK

The Rochester SWAA Chapter has been quite active. Last spring we hosted Mary Bricker-Jenkins and Willie Baptist at events that were co-sponsored by the SUNY Brockport Social Work Department, Poor People United, Strong Memorial Hospital's Social Work Division's Social Action Committee, and the Federation of Social Workers. Willie and Mary (and a "team" of presenters from KWRU) gave Economic Human Rights workshops on the Brockport Campus, at Baden Street Settlement House, and Strong Memorial Hospital. Their presentations had an exhibit of the "Shirts Off Our Backs," part of a traveling t-shirt exhibit from the "Welfare Made a Difference Campaign." Brockport students also made shirts with local poor people at various agency locations.

In April we also sponsored another Reality Tour. One of the "tourists" happened to be an MSW student who was so inspired by what she saw that she helped Poor People United secure a grant to purchase a bus to convert into an emergency hypothermia "shelter on wheels." The bus just made its debut during the second week of December!

This fall, we worked on our own voter registration project specific to the greater Rochester area. We formed a coalition with the local chapter of NASW and the Federation of Social Workers (union of social workers at the Department of Social Services). Representatives from these three organizations met regularly and pooled resources to create a brochure targeted to human services workers and one targeted to low income workers explaining the issues that might be of concern to Monroe County residents. We sent these brochures in addition to schedules for opportuni-

ties to registered voters to one hundred and fifty organizations and human service agencies.

SUNY Brockport social work students worked with the coalition and we focused voter registration efforts on low income housing areas in districts where county legislator seats were up for reelection. This was a big year for County government races; the Republican-controlled legislature had six seats open for reelection with the possibility of swaying the legislature to the Democratic side. We were able to register over eight hundred voters and on Election Day we helped make sure voters had transportation and child care to get to the polls. This effort built the ties between the three organizations and we have plans to continue working together in the future.

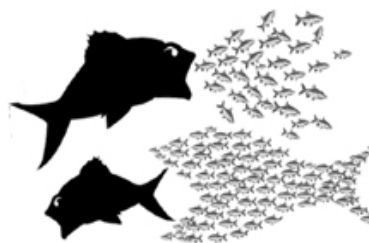
During the fall, in conjunction with local organizations such as SUNY Brockport, Poor People United, the Federation of Social Workers and House of Mercy, we held another Reality Tour, with a new "twist." We included issues related to the local refugee population and HIV/AIDS in Rochester. Among the passengers were eight medical students from the University of Rochester who have been part of a team that opened a "free clinic" in the city.

SWAA - along with the Rochester Poor People's Coalition - cosponsored an event with Poor People United, bringing Ron Casanova (NYC chapter of the Poor People's Economic Human Rights Campaign) to Rochester for a speaking engagement that was preceded by the showing of GNN's *Crack the CIA* and KWRU's *Corner Wars*.

HOW TO ORGANIZE A SWAA CHAPTER:

"How to Organize a SWAA Chapter" organizing packets are available by contacting Mel at Communication Services at (518) 438-2826, 50 Colvin Avenue, Albany, NY 12206. The contents of the packets include such things as posters, brochures, book order forms, recent newsletters, copy of by-laws, names of SWAA organizers from the Steering Committee who will help you, and much more! Please allow four weeks for delivery.

Student Social Workers' Alliance for a Progressive Society
S.S.W.A.P.S.
TAKE BACK the PROFESSION!



S.S.W.A.P.S., Student Social Workers' Alliance for a Progressive Society, is an organization of student social workers committed to reclaiming the social justice tradition through advocacy and activism.

S.S.W.A.P.S. members believe that the challenge for contemporary social workers is to raise the political consciousness of all people with whom we work and to engage in collective social action. As social workers, we are ethically obligated to take action to ensure ample resources and access to services. S.S.W.A.P.S. encourages students from all methods to participate in our educational forums and social actions. These activities include supporting student advocacy efforts, sponsoring teach-ins on social justice issues, mobilizing students for demonstrations, working in coalition on critical issues, and promoting anti-oppressive dialog in a variety of settings.

For upcoming events and information visit: www.sswaps.org

eTerrorism or iCensorship?

Over the past several months, various governments have raided at least three Indymedia outlets. Governments across the globe are looking to attain as much information as possible on activists and anyone with a tone of dissent within their voice. There are two major themes at the heart of these raids. First, international governments are looking for new ways to shut down, or at least censor, dissenting views and voices. Second, governments are becoming more aggressive in identifying activists as terrorists. If you make a seemingly anonymous post to the SWAA listserv that the government identifies as threatening, the government can subpoena the host of the site to turnover their IP address logs (described below) over to the government so that they can begin to track you down. Unless you are very proactive, you have no anonymity on the Internet and the government can follow your footprints in order to make you seem as terrorizing as possible.

As media monopolies continue to expand, therefore limiting diverse reporting, people across the world have been forced to search far and wide for alternative and fair journalism. A premiere international independent media resource is Indymedia. The global community has come to trust Indymedia as a rare fair and honest reporting entity. Indymedia does not only offer journalism services, but they also provide radio broadcasts and typically act as a communication-resource during most social justice actions. Chances are that if you are reading the SWAA newsletter that you are very familiar with Indymedia. However, if you have not already done so, visit: www.indymedia.org and search for the local Indymedia chapter in your city or town to gain a better understanding of the wide array of services facilitated through Indymedia.

As Indymedia's presence has grown throughout the global community, the U.S. and European governments have begun to pay closer attention to the activities on the numerous Indymedia websites. Indymedia sites allow anyone to post information about an event or an editorial or new report without censorship. Because of Indymedia's approach to maintain and encourage free speech, they do not keep logs of IP addresses that visit the sites. Every computer connected to the Internet is assigned a unique number known as an Internet Protocol (IP) address. By identifying an IP address, you can also identify the computer, and most likely the individual using the computer, and trace all activity of the computer and the user. The choice to not keep logs of the addresses was made by Indymedia's legal council, Electronic Frontier Foundation. By not keeping logs of IP addresses there is no way to track who posted what information. Anonymity of individuals is preserved by not keeping IP address logs.

The Electronic Frontier Foundation reports that:

On Thursday, October 7, 2004, more than 20 Independent Media Center (IMC) websites and other Internet services were taken offline pursuant to a secret government order. Two Internet servers, known as ahimsa1 and ahimsa2, provided space to more than 20 Independent Media Centers in the United States and around the world, offering independent journalists a soapbox upon which to speak in a public forum.

The servers were being hosted by Rackspace Managed Hosting, which is based in San Antonio, Texas and has offices in London. The FBI received a seizure order through the Mutual Legal Assistance Treaty (MLTA). This is a treaty that allows international governments to

secretly and anonymously request information through "secret orders" from other countries. Presumably, this treaty could have been created to address international terrorism and allow countries to work together to combat terrorism. In the Indymedia case, two unnamed countries requested that the FBI seize the two servers. As soon as the two servers were seized, 20 websites and 10-radio stations lost all support. The U.S. government clearly used the MLTA to censor dissent and free speech. The FBI clearly acted in defiance of the First-Amendment by dismantling a legal media outlet. "Silencing Indymedia with a secret order is no different than censoring any other news website, whether it's USA Today or your local paper," said Kevin Bankston, EFF attorney and Equal Justice Works/Bruce J. Ennis Fellow. "If the government is allowed to ignore the Constitution in this case, then every news publisher should be wondering, 'Will I be silenced next?'"

This most recent Indymedia raid is not unique in itself. During the Republican National Convention the FBI raided the New York City Indymedia location. Once again, the FBI was in search of IP addresses of individuals who had made posts to the web site. Fortunately, Indymedia-NYC did not keep logs of IP-addresses and the FBI was unable to attain the information that they were in search of. A similar incident occurred at the Netherlands Indymedia location. On Friday, November 12th, the Haaglanden Police demanded "...information on the person that posted a threat to politician Geert Wilders on the website of Indymedia.nl" (Indymedia-NL). Once again, no logs were kept, however an emerging theme seemed to be evolving.

The world's police are beginning to own up to their promises of ending international terrorism. Most Americans would agree that dissent would be frowned-upon. However, the ever-widening definition of "terrorism" has clearly expanded to include those you are critical of our government. If Indymedia had kept logs of IP-addresses (most websites do keep logs) then the governments would have seized information on individuals and most likely would have at least interrogated the person and could have possibly attained a search and seizure warrant in order to obtain the individual's computer.

As our lives become more occupied by technology we must do everything possible to maintain anonymity and privacy online. Individuals can easily download free programs that will anonymize your browsing as well as encrypt your emails (which only allow the intended receiver to be able to read your email). We must be sure that listserv administrators are keeping tally of who is capable of accessing the list. The precedent has been set that if you openly oppose and threaten a government, that the threatened government will go to all means necessary to find you and criminalize you. Protect yourself and raise the awareness of others.

*SWAA's informal listserv, **bertha-swaa** is through Yahoo! Groups. According to their privacy policy (effective March 28, 2002), Yahoo! Automatically registers the user's IP address. Further, "Yahoo! does not rent, sell, or share personal information about you with other people or nonaffiliated companies except to provide products or services you've requested, when we have your permission, or under the following circumstances:... [w]e respond to subpoenas, court orders, or legal process, or to establish or exercise our legal rights or defend against legal claims;... [w]e believe it is necessary to share information in order to investigate, prevent, or take action regarding illegal activities, suspected fraud, situations involving potential threats to the physical safety of any person, violations of Yahoo!'s terms of use, or as otherwise required by law." (<http://privacy.yahoo.com/privacy/us/>)*

What is privilege?

Privilege seems to be tied to social stratification, which in many societies is also related to ethnicity. In the state of Israel nationality is also one of the main axes of stratification. The state has been discriminating against Arabs legally and institutionally affecting their social status. The most common form of discrimination within the state is the practice of land confiscation. Therefore, most Israeli-Arabs are landless, increasing the proletarianization of their labor power. They engage mostly in manual labor, hold lower status jobs and commute from segregated Arab communities to Jewish ones.

The division within society exists among the various Israeli subpopulations and is based on an ethnic component. Jews are the upper strata of society, and Israeli-Arabs occupy the bottom strata. Sephardi Jews (from Asia & Africa) suffer downward social mobility compared to Ashkenazi Jews (from Europe & America). Israeli-Arabs experienced exclusion from their lands with limited access to white-collar jobs. Closely related to social mobility is the inequality of opportunity within the subpopulations. The Israeli state and government openly favor a euro centered, Caucasian society with privilege for the Ashkenazi Jews class primarily.

Class stereotypes simplify and sum up a complex set of characteristics. Groups identify internally as a category of what they are and are not in regards to other groups. People then categorize themselves as belonging to a class. Yet across the different classes there are also differences in terms of economic, cultural or social characteristics. Thus, stereotyping is used to simplify characterization and to justify belonging to a group by the possession of one characteristic and assuming the others are implied. Stereotypes serve a double function, to identify with members of one group and to separate from members of another group. Yet there is the concept that stratification is not a set order but a set of inequalities and characteristics that people can have. A person may be in a high rank regarding her education and qualifications, but she may be in a low rank regarding her income. This multidimensional view is difficult to incorporate to the rather stiff delimitations of class groups. Thus, stereotypes reduce a more complex reality, and may prevent an adequate understanding of it, to a simple categorization. In daily life, stereotypes sanction people to avoid looking at contradictions in their experience. In rational life, ideal types permit theories to exist despite their contradiction with reality.

Ethnicity may be reduced to social class or a vehicle for class organizing to fight for economic resources yet it is implicated in the social relations that produce inequalities. The criteria to belong to an ethnic group depend on such variables as skin color, cultural origin, language and so on. There is an important difference between class and ethnicity. Class is a category that people may move in and out of, not without some stigma; ethnicity and gender are not naturally changeable. Ethnicity and gender make up non-economic determinants of privilege in material inequality, social strata and movements, and political identity.

Jobs positions are closely linked to privilege, gender and ethnicity. The typical belief that white-collar jobs are more privileged than blue-collar ones, regardless of income, is widespread. Yet an ethnic group may have control over resources and therefore, another ethnic group

because they are the "right" group that has knowledge or economic power. Communities may become aware of the systems of inequality when they share similar life conditions with other communities. Then solidarities may form as a result and may create local struggles around the categories of class, gender and ethnicity. Some of these struggles may give birth to more permanent solidarities. This comprises ethnic groups struggling against exclusion or occupation.

The Israeli occupation of Palestine that started in 1948 has created an international solidarity movement around the systems of inequality that oppress Palestinians. The U.S.-Israeli relations have been one-sided and support Israel in the conflict. The role of the mainstream media fails to challenge U.S. foreign policy or put a human face to the Palestinian conflict fueling the division. The conflict is a struggle over rights against national and human rights to self-determination, legal protections and civil liberties of the Palestinian people. The International Court of Justice declared the Apartheid Wall illegal on July 9th 2004; yet Israel keeps constructing it. The U.S. has the power to veto any decisions made by the United Nations and there is no other effective international organization to enforce international law. Therefore, Israel has faced little legal consequences. However, it is these same violations that have started an international movement around human rights from NGOs to grassroots groups.

The International Solidarity Movement (ISM) is one of them. This non-violent grassroots organization supports the Palestinian people in their struggle for human rights. People from around the world participate twice annually in their campaigns. During the summer internationals go to different villages and towns and accompany Palestinians to checkpoints, roadblocks or join them in marches and non-violent protests against the Apartheid Wall. Almost every time they meet Israeli soldiers that use ammunition, some live, concoction grenades or tear gas to disperse the crowds. In the Fall internationals participate in the olive harvest, a main sustenance to a mostly agricultural society. Internationals place themselves on the front lines against the Israeli soldiers to protect Palestinians. The case of Rachel Corrie, killed by a bulldozer, while standing in front of a house about to be demolished, got international press coverage. However, the Israeli Security Service at the Ben Gurion Airport has not allowed many internationals into Israel because of their suspected association with ISM. The state considers this movement to operate against its national interests and its participants a national security threat. Some internationals resisted leaving the country when they were not allowed in, and faced deportation charges. They were at the airport detention center anywhere from a few weeks to a month waiting for their trial. Those detainees of Jewish heritage were examples of the contradiction of the state's open door policy to Jews from around the world and the invitation to become citizens. The Israeli court allowed one of the internationals in while warning her to keep away from the Wall or Occupied Territories or the state would deport her. In spite of all the efforts to break down international movements, the spirit of social justice has not been defeated. On the contrary, the greater the human rights violations, the greater the mobilizations to denounce them. Because of the many casualties and sacrifices of the Palestinian people, violators have sparked the fire of international social activism. May the flames burn through the wall of privilege and unite us all as one.

Cristina Cruz

You've been well cared for

I was sitting in the Homeless Unit of the Grove Hall Department of Transitional Assistance (welfare department) chatting with some women. One was living in a homeless shelter in Saugus, a town on the north shore of Massachusetts; the other was applying for shelter. They were ashamed to be here. They said that they had worked and held responsible jobs. Life had dealt them raw blows. One had to leave her job because of an injury to her spine which seemed to require endless treatment, and she didn't know when she could return to work. The other had various medical problems. She was infuriated because the DTA worker was "jerking her around." She had an appointment for 9:00, and it was now 11:00 and they still hadn't seen her.

They cared deeply about their children. The woman who lived in Saugus was driving her daughter to Boston every day so the child would not have to switch schools. I told her that a recent federal law requires the home school district to provide transportation for the shelter to the child's home school. I pointed to the sign on the wall that told about this and urged her to call the number.

The woman who was being "jerked around" said in a resigned voice, "It's all down hill when you get old. I'm 45 and I don't think things will get any better." I protested, "Com on, I'm 78 and I'm not going down hill. I'm still here fighting." The women were amazed. "You're 78?" they said. "You've been well cared for. We've been battered around all our lives."

I've been thinking about that a lot. I think the women were implying that I had been treated better in life because I am white, while prejudice and discrimination against African Americans had given them harsher treatment than I had faced. What that true?

As a child I didn't feel privileged. My father was one of the last homesteaders to get free land from the government, but he got the worst land – dry land in the prairies of Colorado where it seldom rained and the dust storms were so fierce that you literally couldn't see your hand in front of your face if you were outside, while the wind whipped sand through the cracks of the windows and doors. On a freezing winter day the car broke down coming home from school, which was seven miles away, and we froze our fingers and toes walking home for two miles.

My parents lived in constant dread of the bank foreclosing on the mortgage, and one day they held an auction to sell off cattle and machinery so they could pay the mortgage. We were eager to watch the auction, but my parents made us go to school so we would not witness their humiliation.

Still, we kept the farm and somehow all four of us children went to a public college where tuition was cheap. My sister and I raised and sold prize 4-H steers and saved the money for college. I pumped gas at a filling station during World War II, helped with bookkeeping at the gas station, typed letters for a local cattle rancher, and when I went to college, had a work-study job and a scholarship. I paid for my graduate school by part time secretarial jobs and stints as a group work leader at the YMHA and Community Church in New York City. I didn't mind working, even enjoyed much of it, but I never felt that I had a privileged life.

Yet as I thought about it, I did get the better breaks in life because of my white skin. When I read the history of the Homesteading Act, I learned that African Americans were discriminated against and didn't get even the poor land that my father got.

The Mexican American children whose family came to town to pick sugar beets attended my school, but they had to leave because their family moved onto other migratory work when the beets were pulled. My family and I were permanent residents and I could stay in school.

When I went to Grange Hall dances, I noticed that the two sons of the only African American farmer in our neighborhood stood on the sidelines and never asked any of the white girls to dance. I would have been shocked if they had asked me to dance, but I think I would have been pleased too because they were handsome and I had secretly wanted to get to know them. An unwritten community prejudice had kept us from getting to know one another. That was not privilege for me – that kept me from living as full a life as I could have.

At college I joined a sorority that I later discovered did not allow African Americans to become members. I tried to resign, but was told that no one was allowed to resign. Their racism was mandatory!

The parents of one of my best friends in college were living in a Japanese-American concentration camp, having been put there during World War II. I gave speeches against the injustice, and I knew that my parents were never under suspicion of being spies because their skins were white.

I taught at a state college and since I retired I have lived on the state pension, as well as Social Security. Many African Americans weren't covered by Social Security because it did not cover domestic workers or agricultural workers for many years. Even when they were covered, they often received less money because the work had paid so little.

I have had health problems too, but the state health benefit, combined with Medicare, pays for almost all of my medical care and I can choose any health care provider I wish. I can afford to pay for massages, acupuncture, and weight training classes, and to by both prescription drugs and herbal medicine. I know that I am privileged in this compared to Medicaid recipients, who have a limited choice of doctors and cannot get all the services they need, and compared to people who work in low-wage jobs that don't provide health insurance.

So yes, I have been privileged. Those women in the DTA office asked why I came to the office and did this kind of work. I told them that I had been a social work professor at Bridgewater State College, and I believed in not only talking about my knowledge and beliefs, but acting on them. They commended me and said that it was good to stay active and involved. "It's sure better than sitting on the couch and clicking the remote."

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Published Works by SWAA Members

Confronting Oppression, Restoring Justice: From Policy Analysis to Social Action (2004) by Katherine van Wormer, MSSW, Ph.D. Alexandria, VA: CSWE, paperback, 254 pp. \$23.95. ISBN: 0872931064

An empowerment approach is the organizing framework for this text which examines the nature of oppression, who does it and why, from the standpoint of biological and social psychological aspects. The impact on victim/survivors is explored through the inclusion of brief personal narratives recording grueling consciousness-raising experiences. Divided into two parts, the first of which focuses on oppression and the second on the twin concept of injustice, “Confronting Oppression, Restoring Justice,” has as its major task the addressing of the age-old question for social workers, How can we avoid participating in the oppression? Or, working from the outside, How can we help the casualties of economic restructuring or the victims of structural or interpersonal violence? Examples of exemplary programs and actions to confront oppression and injustice are provided. Recommended as a main or supplemental text for courses in policy, policy analysis, HBSE, and racial and ethnic minorities.

Features:

- Offers comprehensive coverage of the impact of oppressive practices including racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism, ageism, etc.
- Places societal oppression and injustice in the context of global economic forces.
- Expands the definition of social justice and injustice to go beyond economic considerations of distribution into the arena of social control.
- Offers a radical framework for policy evaluation and analysis that includes international and environmental considerations.
- Provides illustrations of successful legislative advocacy that resulted in program change at state and local levels.
- Forges a conceptual link between the oppression/injustice configuration and strategies of empowerment.
- Includes chapters on human rights and restorative justice.
- Offers an analysis of ethical dilemmas for social workers in encountering oppressive practices.
- Satisfies CSWE standards for the inclusion of content on oppression in the social work curriculum at the undergraduate and graduate levels.

Katherine Stuart van Wormer is professor, University of Northern Iowa, where she teaches social work. Active in the civil rights and peace movements at home and in Northern Ireland, van Wormer has worked as an alcoholism counselor in Washington state and Ohio, and for two years was program director for a treatment center in Norway. Professor van Wormer is author of six other books, including, most recently, “Addiction Treatment: A Strengths Perspective” (2003).

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All this takes people and their commitment to make it happen. As always, SWAA is looking for people to join, to rejoin, to join together... local chapters, the faculty network, the national network, the national steering committee. Ok, I know this is a bit of shameless plug, but I think it's my job here, at the moment. So please forgive me. We need you! Although if you don't get active with us, I plead with you to get active somewhere.

There was a posting this past autumn on the *bertha-swaa* listserv from member Jean Brookbank. She challenged us, especially in our harsh post-November 2nd reality, to look at "where our democracy may be vulnerable and begin the hard work of strengthening it again. I'm talking what is democratic behavior and where may we need to change our behavior." We can find so many opportunities for practicing our democracy. We can do it in 'safer' spaces like here in SWAA, where we truly have the power to make the organization what we need it to be. We can challenge ourselves to find opportunities in 'outside' spaces, too—in the streets, through our mailboxes, on our computers, voicing our ideas and demands to those with greater power...or in more intimate spaces, speaking to power in our own lives, advocating for truth and justice (and dare I say love), against harm and dysfunction and untruths in our own families, relationships, selves.

We each have uniquely important roles—in our social circles, our communities, our country, our world. How do we use our positions, ourselves, to move ourselves, our communities, these 'systems,' toward a place of greater socioeconomic justice and human rights?

Get involved.

*In peace and solidarity,
Christie Cobo*

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I agreed. I am privileged to be able to use my knowledge to come to the DTA office and tell a homeless woman that she does not have to drive her child 20 miles to school and back every day, and that the school system is breaking the law if they don't pick the child up. I am privileged to know enough to go into a fair hearing with a woman and point out to the worker and the hearing officer that they are breaking the law by cutting off the woman's welfare benefits. I am privileged to help a woman apply for food stamps. And I am privileged to know that brave mothers who come to the DTA and keep their spirits up for the sake of their children.

Betty Reid Mandell

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... articles for the next BCR Reports!!

Please forward all contributions for the next to:

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Letters to the editor, essays, news items, SWAA Chapter activities, cartoons, etc., are all welcome!

Please note: The deadline for materials submitted for inclusion in the next *BCR Reports* is **May 15, 2005**.



Social Welfare Action Alliance

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some of my own experiences as a teacher trying to incorporate my values into my practice in the classroom. I come to this dilemma with a long history of advocacy work and an often ambivalent relationship with the profession. So, in response to a request from students at Smith College's School for Social Work, my late friend and colleague Jerry Sachs and I developed a course on Clinical Work and Social Action. It was our intent to create a classroom environment in which the students and we could collaboratively develop a social justice based practice. We had our own ideas about what that would look like but also believed in a Freirian approach to education in which we would not be the purveyors of knowledge but facilitators of a process of knowledge-building. Talk about contradictions!

Here we were, offering a course at a school accredited by a standard setting body that demanded certain standards be met: a planned curriculum with clear learning objectives, faculty grading of students, set class times, to name a few. And, oddly enough, students had their own expectations. Some wanted a truly alternative learning environment, similar to what we had in mind. Others wanted a recognizable classroom format, compatible with what they had been socialized to expect. Some wanted a truly radical theory and practice as an antidote to what they had experienced as an approach to clinical work that reinforced oppressive social structures; others were troubled by and resentful of a pedagogy that asked them to challenge the learning they had worked so hard to acquire and integrate. And we wanted to teach what we wanted to teach – this radical method – and to do so in a democratic way that reflected our politics.

After thirteen years of teaching this course, I can safely say that, despite some sublime moments and exciting interactions, the class has never fully met our more grandiose expectations. It has helped students examine their practice and its underlying ideologies and provided some useful ideas but we haven't revolutionized practice or created a cadre of self-consciously radical practitioners. I offer this as a way of acknowledging the difficulty of truly radical pedagogy – both in terms of content and method – in a culture that fights against it in multiple ways. Academic norms, student expectations, professional structures, the larger culture, all mitigate against enacting political and economic justice values in our practice. And yet, the fight is worth making because, as Frederick Douglass said: "Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will."

So, we enter our classrooms as educators and, sometimes, as advocates. And, it is there, when we find ourselves in a room full of students who bring different ideas about what they want and what they think they are supposed to want, that we face the challenge of beginning a conversation that brings social work values into alignment with the policy and practice content of the course. And it is in that encounter that the possibility for a truly transformative experience lies. Our challenge, I submit to you, is to not allow that moment to get stolen by the demands of professionalism and the expectations of the educational institution.

Beyond our roles as teachers, we also engage with the profession through its various professional associations. Again speaking from experience – as the first Executive Director of the New York State NASW Chapter and as a member of a number of advocacy related NASW committees on the state and national level – I can attest to the disconnect between our professed commitment to social justice and the priorities of our organizations. As a spokesperson for NASW, I would often speak at gatherings of social workers about the link between social justice and the work we do. Members would come up and talk about how proud they were that NASW presented such a progressive face and voice.

And then, we would call for member involvement on issues that were consistent with our social justice mission – promoting a welfare grant increase or opposing a war or supporting women's reproductive rights or advocating anti-hate crime legislation – and the lack of response

would be truly impressive. Where was everybody? Perhaps, their work was so demanding that any additional activity was beyond their capacity. That was completely plausible. When, though, we would advance an agenda related to professional status – third party payments or licensing are good examples – the members would rally in great numbers and often assert that we were not doing enough on these issues, a complaint I rarely heard around our social justice agenda.

What then can we make of this? A reasonable reading is that people take pride in being identified with our best selves but get energized by their own self-interest. This is not exactly a brilliant insight. Most organizers know that you get your best response by framing things in terms of your constituency's self-interest. And I certainly recognize the need of social workers to have their own needs attended to by organizations created for that purpose. But, the central point is the question, how can we make the link between social justice and self-interest apparent to our students and colleagues? These need not be in opposition if we can understand self-interest broadly. Making our social justice tradition a centerpiece of our profession's activities is a long-term, frustrating effort to which all of us must dedicate ourselves, if that is to happen. That task speaks to us both as educators and as social workers and it is in both arenas – the classroom and the profession's own structures – that the battles for social justice must be fought.

We have allies in these struggles. On the outside of the mainstream organizations, we have groups like the Social Welfare Action Alliance. SWAA attempts to play both a progressive role within NASW and CSWE and, at the same time, provide an alternative and critical voice outside of those organizations. This provides a setting within which social workers truly committed to social justice can work together to develop an analysis of social service work and social work professionalism that will guide their own activities in the field.

Other groupings have a more contentious relationship to social work but wish to find strategic alliances with progressive workers in the field. Welfare rights groups such as the Poor People's Economic Human Rights Campaign and Rochester (New York)'s Poor People's Coalition are such groups. Similarly, there are consumer led organizations in the areas of disability rights and mental patient rights that would love to have social work allies challenging the practices that disempower them. These groups include many who are angry at the roles that social workers have played in their lives. A social justice based practice would recognize the validity of their experiences and incorporate consumer voices more respectfully into our educational efforts.

And yet other organizations are at the center of social work professionalism and have elements to their roles and activities that can be used to promote social justice. CSWE's curricular standards contain some very useful and progressive components and can be drawn upon to support positive change in curricula. NASW's various structures present the possibility of working with chapters and committees to advance a vision of social work consistent with the progressive traditions in our history.

So, today, my message to you is clear: to make social work what it claims to be, we must engage and challenge the profession's contradictions and be willing to stay at the table where those contradictions are played out. Walking away from those fights is to walk away from the possibility of taking back social work from the managed care companies and those who would capitulate to the increasingly conservative political climate we find ourselves in.

There are many worthwhile struggles to engage in and I would hope that we would be part of them. The fight for the soul of the profession is just one of those but it is one that is inextricably connected to a major part of our identities and, as such, calls on us to, in the words of Mahatma Gandhi, "be the change we wish to see."

Fred Newdom

Remarks presented at the conference of the New York State Social Work Educators Association, October 15, 2004, Syracuse, NY

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