

**In a Special Section on *Personal Narratives on Activism for Social Justice and Systems Transformation***

**Social Justice Work: It's About Who We Are:  
An Interview with A. Michael Hutchins**

**Interviewed by Allison Browne and Lindsay Craft**  
Lewis & Clark Graduate School of Education and Counseling

*Dr. A. Michael Hutchins has been active in social justice work throughout his life. He has incorporated this work into many areas of his career, including contributions to the teaching and counseling professions. As an active member of the American Counseling Association (ACA), he served as the first Chair of the ACA Human Rights Committee. He was the founding president of Counselors for Social Justice; is a past-president of the Association for Specialists in Group Work; and is a past-chair of the Association for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Issues in Counseling. He currently serves on the City of Tucson, Arizona Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Commission. Dr. Hutchins shares the lessons of his social justice experiences in his writing, through workshops and numerous community involvements. He currently maintains a private practice in Tucson, AZ; and at the invitation of his children, he is becoming an avid bicyclist.*

Allison Browne and Lindsay Craft (see bio sketches below) interviewed Michael on Friday March 13, 2009. The transcript has been edited for reading clarity.

Allison Browne: What experiences have led you to work for change beyond the professional realm of teaching and research and counseling?

Michael Hutchins: I was thinking about that and trying to identify specific experiences, and recognized that part of my belief system is that social justice work and advocacy is not about what we do, it's about who we are.

AB: Interesting.

MH: Yes, and I was thinking 'where did that idea come from for me?' It certainly was part of my family. I grew up with the assumption that people have a responsibility to give back to their community in whatever ways possible. This led me to thinking about a geometry teacher I had in my sophomore year of high school who often quoted 'To whom much has been given much can be expected.' I grew up going to a Catholic boys' high school in New England where the expectation was that as part of education people will be involved in doing some kind of community work and that carried over into college. I went to a Jesuit college where we learned that as community members we had a responsibility to be engaged in activities that would enhance and improve our community. That's where much of the foundation is.

As a result of the influences throughout high school and college, when I graduated from college I spent two years with the Jesuit Lay Volunteer Corps teaching in Baghdad, Iraq -- that was prior to Saddam Hussein - and that was where I first learned that the New England view of the world was not the only view of the world. (laughter) The Jesuits at that time had a mission - this was 1965 and the mission had started in 1932- where their belief was that if you educated people of different world views together, they would come to a better understanding of each other. I think this is the belief that really was transformational to me. So I taught chemistry, and I had Christian and Muslim students working together on chemistry projects. Working with these students helped me to begin formulating ways to help folks from diverse backgrounds develop ways for collaboration.

These experiences as a young adult really encouraged me to explore what I wanted to do with my life. I wanted to work for that collaborative view, to work with people so that we get to more completely understand each other and then change systems from a core level. I believe that systemic change occurs when people on all levels throughout the system work together toward a common vision. I think those early experiences and the frustration that came about for me led to personal change. I can remember toward the end of my two years in Iraq thinking, 'now teaching is great but I want to be able to create change at an even more fundamental level.' That desire brought me into counseling as a profession. The academic teaching part isn't the core, it's the 'next step up', if you will. I came back to the States; got my Master's in counseling; then I moved to Baltimore.

I moved to Baltimore during the Vietnam War when Daniel and Patrick Berrigan, and the 'Catonsville 9' were involved in the antiwar movement. I became active in the peace movement and I heard Dorothy Day speak. Dorothy Day, at that point, was in her 70's, was part of the Catholic Worker movement and was a pacifist. Her message was that we were supposed to create peace and that's what our lives were about. She challenged people to work for peace at a time that was not peaceful. She spoke at a rally in Baltimore during the trial of the Catonsville 9 (the Berrigans and others were on trial for destroying draft cards). I remember her saying 'as members of a community our moral responsibility is to work for peace.' I hope that I've begun to integrate her ideas into my life.

AB: As you've been integrating some of those lessons about peace and the fundamental responsibility to participate and give back to the community, have there been specific experiences in that work where you've either run into a particular challenge or learned a particular lesson that has changed the course of how you go about doing the work?

MH: Right, yes. (laughter) I've never formally planned out my career; I've always seemed to be in a place where things have opened up for me. So I went to what was then the American Personnel Guidance Association Conference in Atlantic City after I was a school counselor for three years. I knew I wanted to do something else but I didn't know what. It was raining and I stopped to have lunch instead of going to the conference. I ended up sitting next to this man, Tom Hipple, and we started talking. He was the head of the Counselor Education department at the University of Idaho, and as a result of our conversation I started to think about going into a doctoral program. I ended up at the University of Idaho - I didn't even know where Idaho was at that point. (laughter) I was married and I came back to Baltimore and said "I think I have an opportunity to go to the University of Idaho and my wife at the time said 'where's Idaho?'. I responded 'up near Nebraska someplace.'

Off we go, my son is 14 months old, we head to Idaho. The year is 1971 and I've never been west of the Berkshires- this long-haired, Eastern liberal is dropped into the conservative world of Moscow, Idaho. During my first semester at the University of Idaho, I had an internship in the counseling center and my first client was a young woman from a Mormon community in southern Idaho. All of a sudden I'm thinking 'Oh my god.' I am confronted with the ideas of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. I have been working for peace, social justice and inclusion in an Eastern urban environment which valued intellectual curiosity and critical thinking and I was confronted with a young woman whose belief system seemed to consistently conflict with mine. I can remember sitting down with my supervisor in my internship saying 'How do I work with a belief system that is so different from that in which I was raised and which seems so contradictory to my own; even more of a conflict than I had encountered in Iraq?' All that I know does not seem to work; I am frustrated and I want to understand and be a part of my new community.'

There was an organization at the University of Idaho at the time [called] the Center for Human and Organizational Research and Development (CHORD). I became involved with that group] because these were people that were doing group work and what one would now call 'cross cultural studies', but they didn't have that language in the early 70's. CHORD was bringing together people whose world views were very different and doing group work (task, psychoeducational, and counseling groups). We ended up teaching students how to evaluate teaching processes; we worked with different academic and ancillary departments to teach collaborative decision making, problem solving and effective communication; and we facilitated a variety of personal growth groups for individuals and groups within the community. Additionally, we conducted research based on the group work in which we were engaged. The work with CHORD became the next piece for me. However, there was such resistance in making that happen.

AB: Had you ever encountered resistance at that level?

MH: No, this was the first time I met resistance at such a level. What happened is the person who developed this program, which was funded out of the President's office, was a faculty member in clinical psychology. He left the university and recommended to the President that I be made Executive Director of this organization. I was appointed Executive Director and I encountered explosive university politics. I was a doctoral student in the College of Education and in the Counseling Program. The chair of the Clinical Psychology program, which is in a

different College, believed that the program should be housed in the clinical psychology department and should be administered by a tenured faculty member. As a graduate student, I was not particularly knowledgeable about the politics of the university so I was just going through, doing what I do and experiencing political backlash. I can remember sitting down with the chair of the clinical psych department to explore ways to move through the process which had occurred and continue developing programs which were valuable to the university community. This process was one of the most valuable parts of my doctoral training.

Another step in the process for me was acknowledging my attraction to men. As a married man, I was teaching on a university faculty. I met a man with whom I fell in love. After three years of being on a roller coaster, I left my marriage and began exploring life as a gay-identified man. During this time, I left the field, although I did remain in human service work. I believed that I was not in a spiritual and emotional place to do the kind of work I wanted to do with clients while I was moving through this part of my life. I did experience much resistance during these years of change, and I believe the greatest resistance was in myself and that the resistance of others mirrored my own struggle. Both my son and my daughter who are, perhaps, my greatest teachers were instrumental in our shared growth during these years. In many ways, they have been the resources who have given me much strength to do the work I now do within the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender community.

The resistance within the academic department within which I was working was significant and was instrumental in my decision to leave academia and to focus on being a practitioner. The changes at this time in my life were very much related to my experiences in 'coming out' as a gay man in the mid-1970's. So, events in my life have created a finely-woven fabric that has, at times, been difficult; at times, easier, and always rewarding. The conflicts at Idaho and those which encouraged me to leave academia are a part of who I have become.

AB: And did the changes for which you were working occur?

MH: The situation with CHORD involved extensive discussion and movement through emotionally-charged territory. It led to collaboration. As a result of these discussions, CHORD became a stronger organization; greater understanding developed between academic departments; and the university programs were enriched. The dynamics surrounding my coming out as a gay-identified counseling professional were much more complicated. Over the past thirty years, our culture has changed. We are beginning to have a greater understanding of sexual orientation and gender variance. Yes, we have much more work to do in these arenas.

Many of us who do social justice work operate from anger - and it's often well-founded anger - but that's not the most effective place from which to create change. Are you familiar with the work of bell hooks?

AB: Yes.

MH: My son graduated from Evergreen State University in Olympia, Washington, and bell hooks was his graduation speaker in 1998. I can remember sitting at Evergreen listening to her challenging the graduates from Evergreen to go out and change the world from the position of love. And that's the work I think we have to do.

AB: And how is it for you incorporating that theme into what you are doing now? We read your bio and we know about some of your involvements. But I've also heard you say you feel like the social justice work is who you are as a person. How do you wrap that into what you are doing now, and has it gotten easier?

MH: This is something I speak about when I work with groups. If the core feeling is love, the cognitive process that goes with that includes the belief that 'I deserve to be loved and respected.' I want to go into any situation with respect for who I am and who the other person is. I learned about this from members of the Spanish speaking street gangs in Phoenix when I worked in juvenile corrections. A common theme that I heard from those young men that got them into trouble was 'he disrespected me and if you disrespect me I have got to do something.' I like to believe that when I go into a situation I go in with the intent of being respectful and inviting people who see the world differently from the way I see it to feel safe enough to have that discussion with me.

To get back to your questions, right now, I'm a member of the Gay Lesbian Bisexual Transgender (GLBT) Commission for the City of Tucson and our job as members of that commission is to advise the mayor and city council on issues related to the GLBT community and to advocate for the inclusion of those issues when the city makes decisions. As an example, folks from that commission just were part of the interviewing panel in hiring the fire chief. The fire department had been addressing issues of discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and against women in particular. The candidates interviewing for the position of fire chief were expecting that as a commission, we would be very confrontational. The commissioners mindfully decided that we would not approach our discussion antagonistically but rather explore ways to work together with the fire department to make the department and the services they provide to the people of Tucson the most effective possible while integrating the department in ways that reflect the community in which we live.

I would like counselors and psychologists to embrace the worldview that our clients are not only the people coming into our offices; our clients are the community in which those people who come into our office must live.

AB: That's a really nice way to sum that up.

MH: Yesterday I was telling one of my clients who's just about to get his MSW that I was going to be doing this interview and he said 'so you counselors want to become social workers?' And I said - 'Let's stop right there! Can we get beneath the label? (laughter) What is it that you as a social worker want to do, what kind of change do you want to make, and how do we work together to create that change?'

AB: Is there anything else that you haven't had the chance to say, in terms of an observation or a reflection about your perspective or experiences?

MH: At the risk of getting in hot water with some of my colleagues in the American Counseling Association, I'm really encouraged and really hopeful with the change that has happened politically in this country with the election of Barack Obama. I disagree with him on some policies and practices, but I think he has a world view and a way of seeing problems that invites all of us to see and address problems in a different way. And I think we have to be doing that. I

like to believe that one of the things that I've brought to the table is a change in how we speak. That we don't speak in terms of us/them, good/bad, right/wrong, black/white but that we are using language, even as we speak, that is more inclusive and that for me is a real fundamental part of how we do create change.

AB: So how would you summarize the ways in which 'we are who we are' actually produce change toward social justice?

MH: On a personal level, when 'we are social justice advocates' rather than 'do social justice work', we operate with authenticity and integrity. What we say we believe is consistent with how we feel and our behavior reflects that congruence. In our personal lives, we operate from self-respect and respect for others. Our language is the language of inclusion and we creatively work to develop a language that does not perpetuate divisiveness; we approach the world in terms of 'both/and' rather than 'either/or'.

When we integrate a worldview based on respect, we approach our interactions with others in a respectful way. When we encounter injustice, we may become appropriately angry, for example. However, in expressing our anger at injustice, we do so respectfully and in a manner which encourages collaboration and problem-solving. We experience the joy of connection with others to create a stronger community.

In working with clients, we model and encourage the integration of basic beliefs, core feelings, and congruent behavior. We frame changes in client integration in terms of growth and development rather than in pathology. Clients learn with us to recognize those dynamics over which we have control and recognize the impact of systemic discrimination and inequity. We encourage clients to work within systems, where appropriate, to create change, and we encourage empowerment when we need to step outside systems.

In the larger community, we become authentic advocates for respectful and inclusive social change. We recognize the impact of historical fear, anger, hurt and shame and, with colleagues, develop and initiate plans to transcend the dissonance created by such history. We build alliances based on respect and dignity to create systemic change.

On a global level, we join with colleagues who work across disciplines to create global change. We understand at some core level that as long as one person is the target of discrimination, we are all the target of discrimination; as long as we operate in ways that perpetuate isolation and separation, we do damage to our planet. We believe that we have a moral and ethical responsibility to work for integration on all levels.

We also believe that decisions made from shame, fear, hurt and anger are likely to perpetuate divisiveness. Therefore, we commit ourselves to authentically working from love and respect. As mental health professionals, we focus on the process of change and not merely the content of change. When we engage in such a process, we perpetuate authenticity, dignity, love and joy.

When we live a life committed to social justice, we experience the joy and hope of being in the world.

Contact information:

A. Michael Hutchins, Ph.D.,L.P.C.  
6812 N. Oracle Rd., Suite 100  
Tucson AZ 85704  
Email: hutchinsaca@comcast.net

*Allison Browne received a B.A. in Critical Social Thought from Mount Holyoke College and is pursuing her M.A. in Counseling Psychology at Lewis & Clark College. One of her primary interests is the relationship between changes in the socio-political landscape and identity development across the lifespan.*

*Lindsay Craft graduated from The University of Oregon in 2007 with a B.A. in Psychology. She currently works for Oregon Research Institute and volunteers for Oregon Partnership and Big Sis/Lil Sis. She is working on her MA in Community Counseling at Lewis and Clark and hopes eventually to be a professor of psychology.*