

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

On Being an Activist

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This essay has been amazingly hard to write. To do it, I have had to wander through my early years, sorting out DNA from family influence and social milieu to figure out how I came to be where I am now -- a scholar-activist as the Journal's editors have identified me. I am agreeing to that label because, as Coordinator of Psychologists for Social Responsibility for many years, I spent a good bit of time finding ways to get what scholars in the social sciences know into public policy discourse and applied on the ground in problem situations. Sometimes I have been successful in small but significant ways, and revisiting those events has also been a trip that took much longer than I had imagined it would take when I agreed to write this article. So, I am describing some of my experiences and perspectives in the hope that they will help others clarify and focus their own journeys in social change work. I have organized my thoughts around three themes: Mentoring, Showing Up, and Doing it Anyway.

Mentoring

Like most human learning, I became an activist because I saw people I cared about working for change, and they invited me in and included me in their projects. My folks helped the communities they lived in make important changes, like getting a branch library in our Dallas, Texas neighborhood (and I loved to read!). They supported me when at age fourteen I wanted to participate in the church youth group weekend conference with a black church youth group - perhaps the first overnight, bi-racial conference for youth in Dallas in the 1950's. Their lives of socially conscious activism, in spite of ending up on different sides of the political spectrum from me, inspired me to follow their example and their philosophy -- 'always try to leave a place you live in a little better than you found it', 'don't complain unless you are willing to do

something about the problem,' and 'think things through to make sure you know what you want to do'.

For me, college in the early 1960s was a time of applying these ideas. I am fond of saying that I majored in extra-curricular activities, since I belonged to many clubs and committees, served as floor counselor and hall president, etc. Two actions stand out for me that gave me the experience of early success, which is one of the factors that build resilience in activism. The first was when the entire Grinnell College campus (Iowa) boycotted the local formal restaurant when it refused to seat one of our African exchange students. Within two weeks the owners had apologized and changed their policy. I learned the value and power of numbers and singleness of purpose in addressing a social ill.

The second experience involved creating a response to address the disparity I was experiencing between my own life of plenty on this small liberal arts campus and the poverty I was reading about in my classes (I was a non-Western History major). At that time, the food service on campus served a fancy buffet meal each Saturday night, with roast beef carved on the buffet line, and all the many trimmings that come with a good old-fashioned Iowa farm dinner. We all looked forward to Saturday night because it really was delicious food, and Grinnell College is "60 miles from everywhere," as we were fond of saying. However, the contrast between Saturday night in Iowa and the bowl of rice people were lucky to get once a day in places like Bangladesh was painful. What to do? I don't remember now whose idea it was, but a few of us ended up meeting with the food service manager and proposing a "Share-a-Meal" Saturday night once a semester. We would eat rice and beans and vegetables (much better for us, and the world, we now know!) and the food service would send the money they saved to a charity of their choice that fed hungry people. He was agreeable and figured out how much the difference in cost it would be: It was in the thousands. So, we launched a publicity campaign to convince our fellow students to give up one Saturday night a semester and it worked beautifully. Of course, it was just a drop in the bucket, but it raised consciousness, gave students studying in Iowa a tangible way to help others across the globe, created community among those of us who worked on the project, and, perhaps most importantly, it felt good! When something feels good, and addresses a lousy feeling inside, one wants to be able to repeat that experience.

So, when I think of my becoming a scholar-activist, my personal perspective is that I brought a tradition of activism to scholarship. I entered the wild and woolly 1970s as a "wifeandmother," with a passion for supporting civil rights for all and ending the Viet Nam war, and departed the 1970s still a mother with a friendly co-parent in my children's father, and as a feminist counselor with six other therapists in a collaborative practice that is still alive and well today. My entry into the counseling practice was through an apprenticeship model, since there were no formal training programs in feminist counseling back then, and anyway, the feminist model was intent upon changing the way the mental health profession saw and treated women. So my perspective on the fields of psychology, social work, and counseling is based first and foremost in critically examining traditional forms of practice and scholarship. And, just to complete the history of my training, I really learned how to do therapy in seven years of supervision group led by psychologist Sheldon Kopp and social worker Laura Price. Then, when the licensing laws for counselors changed in Washington, DC, I went back to school and got my social work degree.

One of the most valuable aspects of the feminist model for me has been its emphasis on collaborative work with clients. Of course, there is always transference to be alert to, but when one works in the context of being clear that the client is in charge of her/his life, it is much easier to steer clear of paternalism. Given that I am Caucasian, with an advanced degree, and a woman living in a city in which Caucasians are a minority, but still hold enormous privileges, the issues are often starkly presented before me. There are times when my white face, with all the privilege it represents, is useful to my work and times when it gets in the way. I keep alert for moments in my work when I can acknowledge the differences in our race, status, circumstances, as appropriate. In the therapy room, I want to make everything "talkable," and sometimes it really helps to have the differences in race, class, and privilege out on the table.

Please note that I consider my work to be both in the therapy office, in collaboration with staff at agencies I consult with, and out on the street, in my community, which has seen many changes over the years. There are constant tensions in the neighborhood between races and classes that need some facilitation and I do what I can as a community member to express my own views and listen carefully to other points of view. Most of all, I try my best to see people as individuals, and to treat them with respect and friendliness as often as possible. Although in discussing the effects of power differential I am focusing on the work I do in Washington, DC, I find that the principles of collaborative work, of attending to and acknowledging the effect that differences may have in our problems of communication, and treating people as individuals to be respected, are useful in working in other cultural settings, in other countries, and in other languages.

Showing Up

In 1963 I had the luck to have chosen to be in Washington, DC for the summer, between my junior and senior year of college, so I was able to join the throngs of people on the mall for the civil rights march that has come to be known as the Martin Luther King "I Have a Dream" event. I know that this was another pivotal event for me, teaching me that it can be incredibly valuable to simply be part of something larger than myself. The main experience I remember is just how joyful it was to be there together with all these other folk who were dedicated to making things better for everyone. I remember black and white smiling shyly at each other, not saying much - I would not have known what to say - but demonstrating by our presence that we wanted to be together peacefully and nonviolently. This is an important aspect that is often overlooked, I think, when assessing the impact of large demonstrations and marches. Often the media focuses on whether the action taken affected the policy makers, which may or may not happen, given how many other factors are involved in their decision-making. Scholar-activists from the social sciences can often provide empirical support for that such actions give the participants an experience that feels good and develops their resilience as social activists. We know a lot about community-building and we can put it to good use.

Showing up also gives serendipity a boost. If you are on the scene, you are available for consultation, for intervention, for support of non-violent action. You can use what you know to bolster the self-confidence of those who are on the ground, often having to make decisions using common sense and regular human interactions. Often they are right! And it really helps if there is a professional available to say, "Great job!" I remember serving on an International Technical Assistance Group for Christian Children's Fund going to Honduras to help with needs assessment after Hurricane Mitch devastated the country. The group worked hard, bringing

expertise from many parts of the world, and when we brought forward our suggestions, most of them had already been thought of and were being implemented as we spoke. It was really encouraging to the Honduran staff to know that they were on the right track, and I suspect they were more willing to trust their own instincts when the next crisis arose. We provided support, information about *why* their interventions were useful ones, and relief of some of the stress of not knowing if their decisions were good ones.

Another instance of setting up the possibilities of having something good happen came with the work of the Coordination of Women's Advocacy during the conflict among the parts of the former Yugoslavia. Because Psychologists for Social Responsibility (PsySR) had analyzed the situation and decided that the best use of our expertise was to develop a simple self-help brochure on trauma (*War Trauma and Recovery*) for the region, I was invited to a meeting on Capitol Hill to hear Elenor Richter-Lyonette speak about her work with the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY). She reported on the high incidence of rape and other gender-specific war crimes and promoted the importance of charging perpetrators with rape as a war crime. I gave her samples of the brochure to take to the mental health professionals and human rights activists she was working with in Europe.

Then, I was invited to join their consultative group working with the prosecution staff of the ICTY, which I met with several times. We worked hard, helping the prosecution staff members consider various practices that might reduce the incidence of retraumatization of witnesses testifying on rape as a war crime. Using PsySR's network, in cooperation with Women's Program Office of the American Psychological Association, within a 24 hour period, I was able to provide critical studies that showed the chilling effect on testimony in rape cases when women's identity was not shielded from public scrutiny. As a result, the ICTY adopted rules that allowed confidential and anonymous testimony in gender-specific war crime cases.

One of the most interesting serendipitous moments in this series of consultations at The Hague and in Switzerland came when we were struggling to figure out why the witnesses were not making use of the counseling staff provided by the Tribunal. We pondered and discussed, put forth ideas and theories and then knocked them down as we talked. Finally, someone thought to ask how many counselors were on staff: The answer was three, which led to us finding out that the counselors were regularly available to witnesses in the same trial for both the prosecution and the defense. In a flash it became clear that there was a break in the confidentiality that could not be mended without bringing more staff on so an individual counselor did not have to work with both sides at the same time. Within an hour of us sorting out that issue we happened to have a meeting with the United Nations Special Rapporteur for the former Yugoslavia. She just happened to be heading back to the European Union meeting at which she would be able to propose additional funds to hire more counselors. She did, it passed, and more counselors were hired. That was the fastest, most straightforward direct effect of an action that I have ever experienced, and most of it happened through a combination of setting up the consultations and the meetings, showing up, and then having circumstances, information, and power to make something happen coalesce into effective social change.

Doing It Anyway

Would that we could see that kind of effective action all the time! It would be so much easier to engage in action, measure outcomes, make decisions about what to do next, but that is not how it usually works. As we know, interventions are often subtle, change happens over a longer time frame in incremental steps, and sometimes it is two steps forward and one step back, if we are lucky.

I have found in working with Psychologists for Social Responsibility (PsySR) that really fine people, with a passionate interest in fostering a more peaceful world, often have trouble moving beyond the work of research and analysis. As we well know, there is really nothing certain about science, so any statement made with certainty can always be challenged and carrying things further to put a concept into action really means risking a lot. I have had brilliant psychology professors tell me, over the years, that they were very interested and committed to PsySR's mission, but would need to wait to get tenure before they could risk getting more involved. Psychologists in small towns, with many clients who necessarily meet them in the grocery store, have also told me that the best they could do was be a PsySR member and no more, because of how complicated becoming more active at the policy level would make their lives with their clients. These are all important and legitimate concerns, which is why I promote the idea that everyone can do something within their realm of possibilities. We need to help each other think about what each one can contribute to the process of making the world a more sustainable, peaceful place.

I urge researchers looking at social issues, as their research comes to a close with some useful data, to consider how to use it. Even if one cannot do it directly, there must be someone who could! We in the social sciences are often so close to our subject matter that we forget that many of the ideas that we take for granted are not well-known, much less practiced in our communities as large. But, again, sometimes they are, and they need to be honored and strengthened with our knowledge.

Here's an example from the streets of Washington, DC. Back in the 1980s, when crack was hitting our communities with devastating consequences, the Orange Hat Coalition was established. Using non-violent tactics, the participants were determined to take back the street corners from the drug dealers. The Coalition was formed in Far Southeast of the city, but then the organizer made himself available to train others around the city. There are still orange hat patrols going around my neighborhood these days, and they are somewhat different now, but back then this was a very new thing.

So, it was important to make sure that these groups were seen as friendly neighbors, not vigilante gangs. The training was very appropriate. Everyone got a hat, chose a "handle" to use on the walkie-talkies (this was before cell phones, so we had a home base for someone to call the police, if need be), and went around and shook hands with everyone in the group before we went down to the problem corner. We made sure we stayed in a loose, relaxed group, made eye contact and said "hi" to everyone who went by, and also were friendly to the folks standing on the corner. Sometimes we brought lemonade and cookies. We also ostentatiously took down the license plate numbers of every car going by, thereby discouraging people who were there to purchase drugs. After three days the situation was under control

again, and the drug dealers had moved on. At its height, there were some 250 neighborhood Orange Hat Coalitions, and there had been almost no difficult confrontations and no injuries. When I did some of the training over the years, I emphasized what an open group looks like and what a closed group looks and feels like, so that the Coalition members could be aware of avoiding standing in a circle with all their backs out, for instance. Our neighborhood group made sure that we looked like our mixed neighborhood when we went out—a mix of young and old, male and female, Black and White and Latino. If we happened to have only part of our community represented, we just went home and did not patrol at all that evening. The genius of the design was in the friendliness displayed and the gentle confrontational style along with a show of strength from the community at large that gave the dealers an opportunity to save face and move on without having to hurt anyone. It also gave people in the community something to do about these very tense and dangerous situations that fit their style, for the most part. Nonviolent tactics were well known in Washington, DC, and it felt good to people to be able to use them together.

Another example that I am pleased with is what psychologists working on the issue of torture have done to change the policies of the American Psychological Association (APA). This was a good test for me of what to do about the frustration of not being able to do something about an important issue directly. I remember saying, like a broken record, "I can't figure out how psychologists, or any mental health professionals, can be involved in the processes happening at Guantanamo, or other secret sites, where international human rights protections are not in place, and still be sure they are practicing ethically." I felt like all I could do was keep asking variations of this question at appropriate moments, and others who are members of APA would have to carry the heavy burden of working through all the bureaucratic levels of the organization to make the change happen. I have had feedback that my asking the question was useful, for which I am grateful, but this is one of those times where I was "doing it anyway", because I thought it was right and it was just about all I could do. There were, of course, many other things that PsySR did to support the work of those working within APA, and will continue to do to make sure that the new policies that prohibit psychologists from participating inappropriately in such situations are implemented and enforced.

As you can tell from my examples, there have been many ways that I have been active and I continue that activism at this point with a focus on the problem of the unequal status of Washington, DC. This injustice has been going on for 209 years, when the citizens living in the District of Columbia were disenfranchised by having the land that makes up DC ceded from two states, Maryland and Virginia. This is a long-standing issue for me, since I have lived in DC since 1964, the first year that DC citizens were allowed to vote for the President of the United States. However, we still do not have a vote in the House, nor any Senators, because we are not a state. There are a number of ways that I am using what I have learned from the social sciences in this struggle, which has a problematic bill attempting to fix things going through Congress right now. Here are some principles I am using right now:

- 1) Find ways to understand the "Others" in this struggle and refuse to demonize anyone. I was at a meeting yesterday where we agreed that all our roundtables and panels, etc., would have representatives from every point of view so we can keep the discussion going and everyone has a chance to feel heard.

- 2) Establish entry points for people new to the issue and interested in helping out. They can put a yard sign in their yard, get an invitation to an event, and we reach out to talk to them about the issue in a friendly, open way.
- 3) Gather as much information as possible about this issue, in as many different presentation styles as possible, so as to make it accessible educational material for the broadest number of people.
- 4) Use all networks available to educate and build interest and enthusiasm. I have taken to responding to the multiple requests I get in the mail for donations with a note saying that I am so concerned about our lack of equal footing with the rest of the United States that I am not giving money until I hear what their position is on DC Statehood.
- 5) Maintain hopefulness and avoid burnout by working with people and creating community. I am thanking folks for their help, attending planning meetings that support my own enthusiasm, and talking to friends, colleagues, neighbors, and YOU! If you want to know more, you can go to DCStatehoodYesWeCan.org.

I'll close this section by quoting M. K. Gandhi. I have this little piece of newsprint taped on my computer monitor that I clipped long ago from I don't know where. He says, "Almost anything you do will seem insignificant, but it is very important that you do it." I think he is talking about the importance of doing something for social change on multiple levels. The first one is probably that no matter what you do, you can't really know what will happen, so you might as well go ahead and act as your conscience leads you. A second level he may be addressing is the way that small individual actions can add up to a major social event, but that we can only do our small part. And, finally, I think he is addressing the human difficulty of giving oneself credit for contributing to an effort if it doesn't look "big enough." I think he is saying, "Guess what! It is going to take all of us doing our small part, and we won't know until we're done with the project just what effect we were having, so we just have to gather ourselves and march to the sea to make salt together, anyway."

So, there you have it. We can all find a mentor, and/or be a mentor. We need to show up as much as we can for issues and social actions we feel passionate about. Those of us who are social scientists can take courage in knowing that we have a lot to offer and that our task is finding ways to do our small part. I salute everyone working for social change and hope that our projects come to successful fruition.

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