

An Ethic of Resistance

Frontline worker as activist

By Vikki Reynolds I believe that frontline work dealing with violence is *activism* and a collective resistance to an unjust society. Frontline workers are asked by society to deal with the life experiences of people whose human rights are ignored or abused. The cost of this unjust society falls on both the impoverished and the frontline workers who struggle alongside them and bear witness to the suffering that other citizens have the privilege of choosing not to see. This inherently political work requires an *Ethic of Resistance* that takes a position for justice.

Activism is not just tolerable but necessary. I am a professional and I have never been neutral about sexual abuse, torture or violence. An *Ethic of Resistance* is not apolitical, and invites an overt and just positioning of the frontline worker.

I am often identified as political, a political frontline worker, a political activist. Of course all frontline workers are political; we deal in relationships of power. There has been scrutiny of politically located workers and some concerns that we may be "doing politics" with the people we work alongside. My supervisory experience informs me that frontline workers who are co-located as activists are more aware of their power, and the supervisory relationship addresses the need to de-center their activism in the helping relationship. Workers who identify as neutral and non-political may not acknowledge their access to power or their political locations. They are more likely, then, to replicate both acts of power-over and status quo agendas in the helping relationship.

Accommodating people to private lives of hell is not something any of us wants to do. But if we reflect on our practice this is a possibility, given the helping fields' connections to ideals and values of neutrality and objectivity. Many progressive frontline workers have spoken of the activist analysis of private pain-public issue where an individual woman is judged as an unfit mother and held responsible for the squalor of her children's lives. There is rarely acknowledgement of the welfare poverty, the level of men's violence in their lives, and the contexts of racism and colonization in which they live. Naming these injustices is activism, and not naming them is equally political. An *Ethic of Resistance* requires that we name the unjust problems and not simply blame people or make up a story that seeks to accuse.

An *Ethic of Resistance* invites collective social responsibility. It speaks to an understanding of the unfair structures of society. All people do not have equal access to safety or food or a bed, and so there must be a balance of power and responsibility. The person is held responsible for their actions, but not for the social context. Responsibility must be in balance with access to power. Collectively, society is responsible for a social context that upholds and tolerates child abuse, violence, and poverty. Building a just society is a collective responsibility that demands all frontline workers become activists for social change both in their work with the person and in their lives.

If we view our work as Doing Justice, we need to embrace our power and work transparently to transform the social contexts of oppression. Collective accountability is not an individual response; rather, activism teaches that there are structures that support problems of injustice. We must address problems together, both in the individual lives of the people we work with, and also in the wider society.

For me activism is the doing of love, and an *Ethic of Resistance* unapologetically embraces therapeutic and revolutionary love. Despite the disappearance of love from professionalism, probably a result of legal advice in a litigious society, therapeutic love and revolutionary love are at the center of an *Ethic of Resistance*. To quote Che Guevara, "Let me say at the risk of sounding ridiculous, the true revolutionary is guided by great feelings of love."

Vikki Reynolds is a therapist/activist interested in liberating justice, resistance, and solidarity from the margins of our work into the ethical center. She is currently writing a PhD addressing her stance for a supervision of solidarity that incorporates witnessing and commitments to both an ethic of resistance and the practices of social justice into sustaining and honouring supervision

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