

ii. "Here We Are, Amazingly Alive, Against Long Odds"¹

In the early nineties I was giving a speech in Washington State on behalf of Amnesty International. We were protesting an execution. The original agenda was for me to educate activists around international issues regarding the death penalty and to speak of global moves towards its abolition, which is the direction of the planet, if not the United States. To the surprise of the organizers, the audience consisted primarily of elders. Some of these folks had been part of resisting the execution of the Rosenbergs in the 1950s. I put my agenda aside and invited the elders into a conversation. Instead of delivering the speech I had intended, I proceeded to interview them around their history of resistance against the death penalty in particular, and in promoting human rights in general. I was moved by their ability to sustain themselves collectively over time. It seemed arrogant for me to presume that I had anything more useful to say in the context of this community of elders who held much of the wisdom of a social justice movement. As Steve Earle sings, they were "still willin'".²

Naïvely, I asked them how they could still be there because they hadn't won anything. An old wizened gentleman looked at me and said, "Who told you we didn't win anything? We have won tons of things". His speaking invited me into a faith in change, and a more expansive vision of what change could be. All of my activist life I had been told that we were up against unbeatable foes. These claims fell to the floor as I realized that my involvement in human rights movements came from my desire to do the right thing, but not from a solid belief that things really could be different. I had a sinking feeling that my principles alone would not sustain me as an activist over the long haul. In that moment I realized that I needed to change my ideas about what it meant "to be of use",³ and that I needed a community. These elders were not there because of naïveté or boredom, or because they lacked a life. Their continual presence within this struggle was grounded in their connections with each other, their experience of the usefulness of their resistance, and by the many small successes that would not have been noticed or celebrated without their finely tuned attention. I held on dearly to the spirit of these elders, and became fascinated by the practices of *doing justice* while collectively fostering sustainability.

Through all the years of my involvement in community work and counselling, the spirit of this community of elders has accompanied me. I still borrow on their hope, as I visualize being effective, *doing justice*, and staying alive in the work well into my nineties. At the heart of my work is my desire to bridge the worlds of community work and activism. I identify myself as political, but of course all helpers are political because we deal in relationships of power. I have never been neutral about torture, violence or poverty. I know that identifying as neutral is a political act.

At times our work as community workers can replicate the kinds of dominance we hope to alleviate; accommodating people to lives of poverty, and participating in practices that can serve as social control. Some workers sign on to cynicism; throwing up their hands at institutions and bureaucracy instead of rolling up their sleeves and working to change policy; and maligning other

¹ This title is borrowed from a poem, *Amazingly Alive*, by Bud Osborn (1999), pp. 7.

² Steve Earle, an activist folk singer, covers this Little Feat song (Lowell, 1971).

³ This phrase is taken from the title of a poem by Marge Piercy (1982, pp. 106). This poem resonates with many activists, and it is often quoted and referred to, particularly in feminist movements.

workers and programs, like dogs under the table fighting over the bones. As an activist, all of these tactics were familiar to me, and disheartening.

As I taught and trained other workers they recounted experiences of being "whittled away", exposed, and judged in some case consultations where expert talk de-humanized clients and mechanized their work. Counsellors have told me that showing vulnerability and asking questions has sometimes been met with negative judgments. Conversely, many community workers and counsellors work in extreme isolation, and have no one following their work closely, accompanying them and inviting a welcome accountability, although case notes and paperwork are tracked. Particularly disconcerting to me were invitations and expectations that I would speak as an expert on other people's lives. This expectation was painful to me because it amplified my power and voice at the cost of the people I had hoped to serve. My work has been elevated, and my reputation esteemed at times, mainly because the people I have worked with endured suffering such as torture.

Our community and counselling work is often a frontline response to acts of violence, abuses of power, and other acts of oppression that clients struggle against; it is part of our collective resistance to an unjust world. Despite the fact that our work is not innocent, or fair, I began to puzzle over what *just practice* could look like in a society which is more just to some than to others. I began to wonder what could promote our collective sustainability as community workers.

Most workers have told me they expect to experience burnout from working in the margins at some point in this work. I believe that what gets called burnout says more about our society collectively than it says about us as workers individually. The problem is not in our heads or in ourselves; it is in the real world where there is a lack of justice. The people I work alongside don't burn me out and they don't hurt me: they transform me, challenge me and inspire me. We're not burning out, we're resisting being blown up! What is threatening to blow me up is the inability to work in line with my ethics. It is also my frustrating failure to personally change social contexts of injustice that people wrestle with and live in.

The practices I have developed and write about here follow from my commitments to develop work that can sustain community workers by increasing their sense of collectivity as they work to do justice with people in the margins of our society. My best resources for dealing with despair, hopelessness, and what gets called burnout derive from activist cultures. I believe that this work is profoundly collaborative: We do this work on the shoulders of others and we shoulder others up. I love Bud Osborn's description of this joint action⁴ in a dedication, "Since no human being accomplishes anything alone, I dedicate this collection of poems to the many people who literally kept me alive through the years when I had lost all caring for myself. In a very profound sense, this book is a collaboration".⁵ Borrowing from my community of activist elders I envision our collective work as both doable and sustainable.

My hope is to foster a knowing-in-the-bones that our work matters, because too often it is left to us as workers to witness each other. In this difficult work we can be connected with each other across differences despite being on separate paths. We can go on somehow, fortified by knowing that

⁴ Shotter (1993a, 1984)

⁵ Osborn (1999)

others are moving in similar directions with shared hopes that we are "establishing connections just below the surface of every day life, eventually bursting forth in unpredictable ways".⁶ Activism, and my community of elders, teach me that ongoing commitments and engagement with ethics can sustain us collectively across a lifespan of *doing justice*.

⁶ Uzleman (2005), pp. 17.