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VOICES

: on difference

A student-led journal focusing on issues of social justice

Graduate Social Work Department
West Chester University



“In our work and in our living, we must recognize that difference is a reason for celebration and growth, rather than a reason for destruction.”

– Audre Lorde

Editors’ Note

Thank you for joining us for the second issue of VOICES. A year has gone by since releasing our first issue, and what an exciting year it has been for our editorial board. In October, we traveled to Atlanta, GA, to present VOICES at the 57th Annual Program Meeting of the Council on Social Work Education. We were proud to represent West Chester University’s MSW program at the conference. We also enjoyed the process of reflecting on this exciting project in order to present our process to a conference audience. Preparing for this presentation confirmed and renewed our belief in the goal of this journal: providing a forum for students to share what they bring to the profession.

Our contributors have provided an array of personal stories, reflections, poetry, and artwork that make up this second issue. We are very proud and pleased to share it with you, and hope that it inspires you to contribute to VOICES in the future.

As we say farewell to two of our graduating editors, we look toward to expanding our editorial board and welcoming new perspectives, experiences, and voices to this project.

Editorial Board 2012

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Table of Contents

Social Work Towing: My Journey of Personal Breakdown and Repair Ashley Carraher, MSW '124
On the Mend: Reflections on New Orleans Elena Gregorio, MSW '12, Jessica Jolly, MSW '12, Danielle Rupp, MSW '12, & Ann Schoonover, MSW '125
Deal Me In Maria Gullo, MSW Candidate '137
More Like a Woman Stefanie Montenegro, MSW Candidate '138
The Wonder and Hope of a Young Child Sage Sullivan, MSW Candidate '139
Trapped Victoria McDonald, MSW Candidate '1410
Read Between the Labels Bridget McGovern, MSW Candidate '1411
Artwork Kristina Winter, MSW Candidate '1513
<i>Alumna Contributor</i> Rest in Peace at CROSS Street Meg Panichelli, MSW '0914

Social Work Towing: My Journey of Personal Breakdown and Repair

Ashley Carraher, MSW Candidate '12

I own a blue Saturn Ion that has transported me all over the northeastern part of the United States for almost a decade. It has enabled me to finish my undergraduate degree, maintain a social life, move in and out of various dwellings, and generally grow into my twenty-something self. The day I finished making payments on it was a very rewarding, personal moment. I had achieved an adult milestone and was ready to cruise the streets in my 2003 blue Tennessee-manufactured sedan! Acknowledging I had taken on a huge responsibility, I ensured that my car had proper maintenance and service to maintain its longevity so that it could purr in its plastic glory on its journey down life's highway.

I never considered that this could apply to the concept of my own self-care.

Now it is three years later on a Sunday night in late March. I'm sitting in my car in a random parking lot near my home. My fingers are clutching my cell phone as I try to talk to my boyfriend, vacantly listening to him tell me everything that was wrong with me.

Vowels and consonants stream into my brain: "Look, I don't want to take responsibility for your misery. It's your fault you feel this way about us."

Through my tear-filled eyes, I notice the jumping digits on my dashboard clock.

It was seven minutes fast.

"I can't show any emotion because yours are more important, Ashley. Your tears are your way of hooking me in and making me feel like crap."

I focused hard on the neon green dashes as the numbers glared back.

"It would make sense for you to move in with me. I can't trust you when you're not here. Move in or we're breaking up."

I remember deliberately setting it seven minutes fast in order to trick myself into arriving at class and my internship with time to spare. I thought I could at least feel confident about that, because I knew my well-oiled vehicle could take me there.

"Are you still crying? God, you're too emotional. How are you going to be a good social worker if you can't handle your own crap? I don't want a girlfriend like that."

My car would never let me down.

"You're not rational when you cry. I can't talk to you

when you're like this."

It would never hurt me.

As social workers, we are warned to take time for "self-care:" basically make sure that we take care of ourselves physically, emotionally, and mentally. Without a self-care plan, we are told that the possibility of "burn-out" is imminent and could easily veer us off the path of social justice and client advocacy. To the codependent, self-care can make you feel selfish or neglectful of others.

"Self-care is a dangerous balance to establish."

For so long, you have decided to find your own self-worth through satisfying others. The concept of slowing down and having time alone is frightening and uncomfortable. Self-care is a dangerous balance to establish, especially when it can force you to face personal struggles with mental illness that you have tried in vain to ignore.

This wasn't my first experience with an abusive relationship. I was not new to the concept of my own codependency and the sessions of verbal and emotional abuse I was receiving from a romantic partner who claimed to love and support me. After experiencing my current situation within the context of graduate social work, I knew I was quickly slowing down. I was turning into just another case study I read about in class: another enabling, codependent girlfriend in an endless cycle of abuse. My engine was running on empty; my transmission was about to go and my tires were bald and rusty after traveling the same circle of dirt road for so long.

I was about to break down.

My car and I were equally dependent, but what I had not realized was how similar we both were in needing care. I had a plan for my car when it needed necessary maintenance, but what good would that serve when I had no plan of self-care for my own journey? Graduate school is not an easy road to travel; a roadmap is given to you and it is your job to chart your rest stops, travel activities, and record regular tune-ups. My abusive relationship became the deep, unexpected potholes that sprouted up... or the random wildlife that could cause me to swerve and slam on my brakes. How could I travel on this route with distractions like these? Now I knew that my vehicle was leaking and unreliable, and I was about to put on my emergency blinkers.

I had a future to think of, a professional life in which I would need to learn the practice and habit of taking care of myself right now. Do I focus on me or focus on

repairing an already disintegrating love life? Should I really focus on just me and give up working on something that gave me crummy, low-grade gas in my tank and occasional, fleeting sunlight through my sunroof? Was a lack of all of this worth the discomfort of personal exploration by venturing down an unpredictable road?

Fast forward to early October. My car is jam-packed with remnants of cohabitation; it is overflowing with clothes, kitchen items, framed photos, my toothbrush, my books, and my ever-faithful cat Morris in a carrier beside me.

"Meow?" Morris asks quizzically, looking at me through the carrier's wire door.

"Meow indeed." I reply.

I shift my car into drive without looking back.

Thus began my self-journey back home: home to the car mechanics of supportive friends and family, back home to plan out how to open the hood and discover the deepest part of my engine in which self-care could begin. Back home to an environment in which I could take time to myself, enjoy a cup of coffee, and feel comfortable with who I was and what I was doing with my life: home to a repair shop in which I didn't have to feel on edge, abused, degraded, and never good enough.

Later in the drive, my boyfriend arrived home to find me removed from the house. Enraged, he lights up my cell phone with a plethora of accusatory text messages.

"What did I do to deserve this treatment?"

"I didn't do anything to you!"

"How could you not give me the courtesy to tell me you would just bolt like this?"

"You are so cruel. All you care about is yourself."

Taking a deep breath, I turn my phone off and begin repairs.

The following is a compilation of reflections from students who traveled to New Orleans over fall break in October of 2011 as our final assignment for Dr. Bean's Social Work and Disasters elective summer course. I think I can speak for the entire group of ten students who made the trip that it was an educational, challenging, and rewarding experience that any aspiring social worker would find beneficial and enjoyable.

When we arrived at lowernine.org's headquarters, which was our first volunteer assignment, I was struck by the sense of community among the long-term volunteers living there. It was humbling to see these people from all over the world volunteering large amounts of their time to rebuild this area and live right in the heart of it. I found myself wishing I had done something like that when I was right out of college, armed only with a somewhat worthless music degree.

Many times throughout the trip, I thought of all the schoolwork that was awaiting me at home, but I was able to push it aside and enjoy the experience for what it was, even though it was during a busy time in the semester. In that regard, I am proud that so many of us were able to take the time to drop everything, miss some field and class hours, and essentially forfeit the 'downtime' of our fall break to do good work down there.

Afterwards, when I told people about where I had gone for my fall break, I was usually met with the same reaction—amazement that there was still enough work to do down there for out-of-state volunteers to be making the trip. While my intention was not to impress or make others feel guilty for not knowing, it felt good to encourage education and awareness about the work that still has to be done.

—Elena Gregorio, MSW '12

As we headed to work on the first day, I could not help but be shocked by how many homes were still in disarray. Multiple times I had to remind myself that I was not in a third world country, but in the United States many years after Katrina hit. The images of those homes and the vacant lots will always be with me, but what made an even more lasting impression was the sense of community and pride in their roots that people from New Orleans have. This is still evident despite all

they have been through.

As we drove around, I also noticed that many of the trees were still standing. To me they were a symbol of resilience and hope, a representation of the people of New Orleans. Parker (2008) stated it perfectly: "Many of the water oak trees, some more than 100 years old, were still standing. Such physical landmarks that become part of our history somehow seem like anchors in the aftermath of disaster" (p. 76). They withstood the storm and so did the survivors of Katrina.

It is so hard to sum up such a vast array of feelings, experiences and thoughts in a few sentences. I think a woman from the film *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts* (2006) said it better than I ever could: "Levees broke, families broke, lives broke, sense of direction broke, smiles broke, but I have begun to mend." And that is true for New Orleans, too. Lots of brokenness, but it is slowly on the mend.

--Danielle Rupp, MSW '12

Going down to New Orleans as part of the Social Work in Disasters class was a life-changing experience for me. In 2005, when Hurricane Katrina swept through the area, I remember watching the horrific scenes of people waiting to be rescued on their rooftops for days and residents packed into the Superdome like cattle. I always wondered what I could do to make a difference or help in some way. I am grateful that I was able to take part in the ongoing rebuilding efforts in the Lower Ninth Ward and St. Bernard Parish.

For the first few days, I worked in two different community gardens. The first was a neighborhood garden that gave residents an opportunity to grow their own garden and serve as a community-gathering place. The second was a garden sponsored by lowernine.org. Many grocery stores have not returned, cutting off access to fresh foods for residents. While there, we performed garden maintenance and special projects like creating a stepping-stone path.

On the last day, we helped wherever we could to restore a resident's home; this included painting, tiling, mudding, and cutting trim. The homeowner told us the story of her life before and after Katrina. It was really

touching to experience her narrative, which made me more aware of the countless difficulties residents must face years after the storm. There is still so much to be done in the way of healing and rebuilding; the process is slow and the funding is limited for non-profits who are trying their best to make a difference.

--Jessica Jolly, MSW '12

During the summer, a group of students of which I was a member completed Dr. Nadine Bean's course in Social Work and Disasters. This one-week course was certainly intense, done purposely to simulate the intensity of working in a disaster setting. Students spent the week learning and discussing techniques for working with individuals and communities following disasters. Major disasters, including Hurricane Katrina and the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States, were studied, highlighted with examples from Dr. Bean's experience as an American Red Cross Disaster Mental Health volunteer. Students had the option of attending a volunteer trip to New Orleans to help with rebuilding efforts.

Ten students traveled with Dr. Bean to New Orleans in October. Students spent the first two days volunteering in the Lower Ninth Ward. Students were given a tour of the area, which brought to life the images they had only previously seen on film. Six years after the disaster, many roads were still littered with potholes and incomplete construction. Empty lots, where houses used to stand, were overgrown with wild grasses, showing little sign that anything manmade had stood there before. The houses that were not washed away following the breaches of the levees needed to be completely gutted before restoration could be started.

Students spent two days of the trip getting to know New Orleans and its unique and rich culture. Students attended mass at St. Augustine's Catholic Church, which had been severely damaged in the flood. Congregation members show strength and resilience in their continuing perseverance despite the years of reconstruction and healing.

On the final day in New Orleans, the entire group of 10 students worked together on a home being restored by the St. Bernard Project. The home stood in the

"Congregation members show strength and resilience in their continuing perseverance despite the years of reconstruction and healing."

middle of a once highly populated neighborhood. Now, the street was eerily quiet. Across the street were two homes that had yet to be touched and still had the infamous Xs spray-painted on the front to show that they had been checked for survivors or dead bodies. We learned from a neighbor that there had been a murder on the street on the previous evening. We ended our day with a visit by the 70-year-old homeowner. She sat herself down on the porch as we all gathered around her as she shared her story. She told us that she was able to get out of New Orleans before the storm and flood but experienced severe anxiety and emotional concerns after seeing images of the flood in her own neighborhood. She later learned that her brother and sister-in-law had perished in the flood. She shook her head as she told us, "New Orleans ain't the same."

The trip to New Orleans was an incredible experience for those who attended. It brought home the tragic images that so many of us have seen from countless news reports. The images of devastation and sadness will remain with us, as will the beautiful experiences and unique, enduring culture of the people of New Orleans.

—Ann M. Schoonover, MSW '12

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Deal Me In Maria Gullo, MSW Candidate '13

She brought baby upon baby into the world
And you would scarcely be able to believe it by looking
At her, only five foot two with sticks for legs
If she yelled obscenities during child birth
Her husband would not really know as he was out
Tending to his butcher stop
The only one in town
It was her duty, she knew, to work in the tobacco fields
Carry the child with her in the basket
Then return home at the end of the night and tenderly
remove
Each feather upon feather from the chicken
To be served to her family
She knew her place
One evening at 3am her husband still had not returned
From the only coffee house in town where men would sit
around
And look important, play card games, and give manly
stares
That would declare them strong and wise among the
tribe
The good wife stayed at home pacing the house
Trembling fearing the worst
Without hesitation she asked a family friend to stay at
the house
Until she got back and she marched a fire
The same fire you see when volcanoes get angry
She arrived at the coffee house, wiped the sweat from
her brow
And continued into the men's domain
They tried to stop her
"What do you think you're doing? Have you lost your
mind woman! Man, can't you control your wife?!"
What did they have now that a woman trotted into their
private meetings?
How could their masculinity be so disregarded?
Flies flew in and out of their gaping wide mouths
She shook off their stares like the dirt from her feet as
she sat
Down at the table
Where her husband was sitting
His head in his hands
She slammed her hand on the table and she declared
"Deal me in!"
He never was late again, and it took him a long time
To find the confidence to show his face at another card
game
*Before there was Susan B. Anthony
Or Gloria Steinem
There was my grandmother's mother*

More Like A Woman

Stefanie Montenegro, MSW Candidate '13

“What woman wouldn’t want a Coach bag?” My mother looked genuinely distressed and confused. You see, I had just politely declined her generous offer of a birthday gift in the form of one of these stylish and very expensive designer handbags. The thought had never crossed her mind that this would be something that wouldn’t appeal to me, although she knew very well, through countless dubiously productive dialogues, that my notions of style and practicality differ greatly from her own.

My mother, whom I love very much, made a bit of a scene in the department store that day. Despite being somewhat awkward at the time, the experience also brought me to reflect on current societal norms and expectations for women, especially in western cultures. If you believe popular culture and media, women are supposed to carry designer handbags, amass a vast wardrobe of trendy, often rather revealing clothes, and collect several dozen pairs of adorable yet probably-not-very-comfortable shoes. We should also be in the possession of a veritable arsenal of beauty products, ranging from shampoo that promises radiantly lustrous hair to powders and creams supposedly designed to give us that flawless, “colorfully-painted” look.

If you ever look at the pictures of “perfect” women in magazines or on billboards and then imagine seeing a woman with that same exact appearance in the supermarket, she would most likely come across like a super-human alien freak. Nobody really looks like that without ample intervention by someone skilled at using Adobe Photoshop. Yet, all the same we are supposed to invest significant amounts of time, money, and energy to achieve this unattainable feminine “ideal.”

In contrast, we should consider a very different situation. Recently, there has been much discussion about the wearing of various veils by Islamic women. Many of these women make the personal decision to veil themselves for an assortment of reasons including considering the veil to be a symbol of their faith and opposing the sexualization of women in popular culture (Zine, 2006, p. 248). Yet many other people seem to feel that veiled women need to be rescued from their “oppressive” lifestyle and allowed to live more freely according to Western standards, meaning that they should be wear-

ing Western-style clothing and have their face and hair visible to the world.

Countries like France and Belgium have recently taken this notion to an extreme by passing laws that ban the wearing of a full veil such as the *niqab* or *burka* anywhere that’s considered to be a public place. Reasoning for this prohibition can range from security concerns to encouraging cultural integration. However, if the concern has anything to do with the genuine desire to free women from perceived cultural oppression, the governments are completely missing the mark.

The moment someone tries to make a woman dress a certain way, whether this takes the form of pressure to wear a veil or a bikini, or a rule that forces them not to, this is oppression. When someone’s choice is taken from them, be it by obvious means such as a law, or more insidious techniques like mass media, that removal of choice is the real danger, and therein lies the risk for

social injustice. Certainly there are consequences of dressing at either end of the continuum, and we must always be conscious of the fact that our decisions regarding our appearance will inevitably affect the impressions we make on other people.

Jasmin Zine (2006) expressed this concept more academically when she wrote that “we can conceive of the body as a site of variable inscriptions that visually mark and code religious, cultural, and gendered norms or conversely, resist and subvert these norms” (p. 242). The real heart of the controversy lies in trying to tell women how to be more like women. Clearly this is an insult to our own intelligence and right of self-determination, but mostly it’s just plain absurd.

“Removal of choice is the real danger, and therein lies the risk for social injustice.”

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The Hope and Wonder of a Young Child

Sage Sullivan, MSW Candidate '13

When I was a little girl, I dreamed of one day falling in love and of being the star of my own real-life fairytale, except I didn't want to be rescued in my fairytale like most of those princesses I had heard stories about; instead, I wanted to be able to fend for myself and just happen to fall in love during my great adventure traveling the world. I also wanted to be a marine biologist, or a paleontologist; whichever I thought was cooler when I was, as I thought the saying was, "all growed-up." I was passionate and undoubtedly filled with wonder and hope.

I think it's pretty remarkable that kids everywhere have so many similarities. In reflecting on my own childhood aspirations, emotions, and behaviors, I often think back to those of the children from all over the world that I got to know last summer while working at the Compassion International Headquarters, as well as to those of the children from low-income households with whom I worked throughout my undergraduate career at an arts-enrichment preschool in Philadelphia. At the end of my summer internship with Compassion, I was given the opportunity to visit a number of childhood development centers in Managua, Nicaragua, where I laughed, shared stories, and played kickball with a number of joyful children. Despite having very few material possessions, these children had an inspiring zest for life.

What I've found, both in my work and travels, is that all children love to be loved. They love to make you laugh so that they can giggle along with you. They're clever little problem-solvers with elaborate and wild imaginations. I remember one day at the preschool in Philadelphia, I had a song stuck in my head, and I mean really lodged in there. One of the little girls in my class said, "Want me to get it out for ya?" As soon as I gave her the go-ahead, she proceeded to perform a very elaborate (pretend) medical procedure that involved unscrewing the top of my head, carefully peeling back the layers of tissue and bone, meticulously dislodging the song, and then sewing my head back together, which she followed up with a swift pat on the head and a "Voila, good as new!"

I often find myself thinking about that little girl and her classmates with whom I worked in Philadelphia, wondering what it is that their little hearts are dreaming for their future. What memories from now will stick

with them forever? What will their lives be like 10 or 20 years from now—where will they be, what will they be doing, and what kinds of battles might they be facing? Many children may feel timid or shy when confronted by new people or places, but because these children are growing up within concentrated areas of urban poverty, they are likely to carry with them an additional set of social anxieties that may stir feelings of inferiority, shame and even low self-worth as a direct result of the role that oppression plays in our society (Wilkinson, 2005). I know that some of them will display resiliency and that they will survive and even thrive amidst exposure to a varying number of psychosocial stressors, but I also know that some of them will have fallen through the cracks of our system.

It pains me to know that many of these children are going to develop deep wounds that they will carry around with them for the rest of their lives in response to the evil that is racism. I know that some of these children might one day become teenagers who have given up on the childhood dreams that they once had for themselves because they have been so burned time and time again. It makes me angry to know that some parents have to have this type of conversation with their 10-year-old sons: "When you are confronted by the police, your number one goal cannot be to prove that you are innocent, but to survive. You must make it out alive." This is a conversation that my middle class, white-privileged aunt would never have to have with her 10-year-old son.

I find myself asking how the future reality of a child who loves to play with toys and to be tickled, just like I did, can be so different from what has become my reality as an adult? It is difficult for me to grasp that some of these children might one day have to make life-or-death decisions possibly on a day-to-day basis, and that the weightiest decision that I had to make this past year involved selecting which graduate school I would attend. These realizations make my heart ache for the grown-up versions of these little kids.

Amidst my heartache, I have great joy because I know that, as emerging social workers, we do not have to simply sit on the sadness that we feel when we are confronted with social injustices. Our training is equipping us with the tools we need to take feelings of

"What I've found, both in my work and travels, is that all children love to be loved."

sadness and rage and turn them into fuel for evoking change. We are taught to examine our own personal biases and question the systems that have planted them within us. In doing so, we are able to uncover and eliminate any ugliness that we may be harboring in our own hearts, and we are encouraged to see the dignity and worth of each person.

This humbling work shifts the lens through which we see the world, and allows us to join with our clients and help them to recognize their strengths as well as their ability to cultivate many more. We are also able to help them slough away any muck that our society has used to cover up their strengths and made it difficult for them to understand their greatness. We are called to be interventionists and advocates, and to provide resources where they are lacking. We hope that our work will empower our clients to effect positive changes in their lives.

I have only just begun my first semester of graduate school and I certainly have not yet decided which route I will take when I obtain my MSW; however, what I do know is that I am supposed to intervene in the lives of these children by advocating for them. It is my dream to help those grown-up "little kids," who have slipped through the cracks of our system by no fault of their own, to go back and rescue the wonder and hope that they had as young children so that they, too, have the opportunity to pursue the dreams they once had for themselves.

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Trapped

Victoria McDonald, MSW Candidate '14

Of all the populations struggling in our society today, I believe that the transgender community is one of the most oppressed. On an individual level, oppression comes from family, friends, co-workers, neighbors, and congregations. The most hurtful alienation, though, is the one that comes from a parent. In many cases, when an individual reveals his transgendered status to his parents, the parents may prove unsupportive and, ultimately, fail to provide a safe and loving environment for their child (Burdge, 2007). I believe that when a person decides to become a parent, she must accept the commitment and responsibility of providing nurturance and unconditional love in a safe and stable environment. Parents should ensure that the home environment is a refuge from oppression and alienation. Yet, sadly, "parents are often ill equipped to understand their transgendered child" (Burdge, 2007, p.2).

Since our son has a brain injury, our family often experiences discrimination. Consequently, several family dinner discussions focus on how we can educate others and help alleviate their fear, which is the basis of their discrimination. Being victims of discrimination, celebrators of diversity, and liberal-minded throwbacks to the 1960s, you might think that if one of our children revealed a desire to change gender, we would be comfortable with the idea. However, recent reflection made me realize that I would be saddened at such a revelation. I had to ask myself why. Certainly we would love and support our children no matter how they lived their lives. So, what was it about my child changing gender that made me sad? I realized that for all my blustering about how progressive I am, I am more like mainstream society than I wanted to admit, harboring Victorian views that gender is defined by sex assignment.

Oppression occurs on the institutional level, as well. For instance, there are no disposal boxes for pads or tampons in men's public restrooms for females who are transitioning to males. Even more powerful, "if a U.S. citizen is married to someone who is not a U.S. citizen, their spouse automatically gets the opportunity to pursue citizenship, unless the couple is same-sex, and unless either one of them is a transgender person" (Routledge, 2007, p.2).

Each day, transgendered individuals are discriminated against in the workplace, shunned in religious congregations, harassed in neighborhoods, and verbally, physically, and sexually assaulted. Even the media

McDonald, cont'd.

oppresses transgendered individuals by presenting them as comic relief in skits.

Lorber (2010) brought out a good point when she talked about gender being “one of the major ways that human beings organize their lives” (p.55). This oppression has its foundation in society’s inability to neatly categorize transgendered individuals, so as to maintain the social order delineated by constructs deeply inured in its subconscious. To wit, an individual is either a female or a male, nothing else. Mainstream America cannot accept that gender and sex are two totally different facets of a person. An individual’s sex (biological anatomy) may be incongruent to her gender (social identity).

This past Sunday, my daughter and I set off for some shopping and book browsing. As usual, I was drawn to such things as jewelry, dresses and, of course, shoes. Afterward, I wondered how I would feel if I was drawn to these items, but had male anatomy – in other words, if I was trapped in a man’s body. How would I be treated as I looked at these items? How desperate would I become to live my life in authenticity and truth? Would I make cosmetic changes or would I be so driven to live life as a woman that I would elect to have surgery and take hormone injections? How would my mother, sister and other family members treat me? Would I have to leave my job? How does one make a new life? These and other similar questions swirled around in my head. But, in the end, one question overshadowed all others: shouldn’t every person have the right to live an authentic life?

The other night, I asked my husband the same question: “How would you feel if you were trapped in a woman’s body?” I asked him to focus on all the “maleness” of his life—sports, clothes, movies—then imagine that he is locked in a woman’s body; he doesn’t want to wear women’s clothes; he isn’t enamored with jewelry or make-up, but is being forced to live like that because it is dictated by societal norms. Yet, these norms are mere schemas imposed on him, a mute person with no voice to speak up and speak out.

My husband did not respond for several minutes. Finally, he said that it was difficult for him to imagine such a scenario. I saw the look on his face, as his eyes dove into the pool of the impossible: what I saw in him was fear. The same fear and sadness that is captured in the eyes of those individuals who do not need to imagine what it would be like, because they know what it is like.

Fear to live a life trapped must be replaced with freedom to live a life authenticated.

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Read Between the Labels

Bridget McGovern, MSW Candidate '14

The suggestion that I don’t know my own sexual orientation, and that I find it difficult to believe that anyone can, is not meant to imply evidence of personal unawareness nor is it meant to put into question our experience of authentic love and attraction. What I *am* suggesting is that we only know who and what we are in relationship to our social constructs (Freire, 1997), which have the power to both restrict and release, confine and create. We also ‘orient’ within a domain of oppressive factors that determine the roles of gender and significance of skin pigment, which are most certainly dynamics that influence appeal, opportunity, and plausibility. What really throws flesh onto the bones of these concepts for me is Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* and the feelings Celie has toward Shug.

When my declaration of no *true* sense of sexual identity confuses people, angers them, I ask them to think of *The Color Purple*. It seems that most of my friends are quickly able to mentally assemble Celie’s story. She is a

poor, uneducated, abandoned, black woman living in a small, racist, patriarchal world. It is dreadful. She is beaten and raped and relentlessly told of her awkward appearance. She is oppression personified. Shug, on the other hand, represents another idea of womanhood. Shug is different and Celie loves her. Is Celie gay? I contend that Celie, under such stark tyranny, was only able to self-actualize under the umbrella of others-actualized. The image of Celie's reality is often able to better illustrate my purposeful declaration of sexual complexity than any stories of my own. Oppression, when made so overt, is something that most obviously blurs the lines of self-realization. This point is mentioned in Miller's "Domination and Subordination" (2010) but more accurately explored in the first chapter of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1997). Celie's identity, even when liberated, remains a relational response to the oppressor(s).

Though her story of oppression is quite severe in its dehumanization, it should not give allowances for a multitude of oppressive factors to flourish in society simply because they pale in comparison. The more subtle social restrictions we face pose a threat in their cunning ability to often go unrecognized, untouched, and unstopped. Celie wonders, "Why us suffer. Why us black. Why us men and women" (Walker, 1982). These "whys," by nature, command the loss of self.

I may not live in a world like Celie's, but I do live in a world *with* Celie. We all do. For some of us, it is oppression not realized. For others of us, it is oppression ignored. Our attempts to 'identify' as one thing or another in such conditions are simply social responses to a socially constructed reality. In order to promote equality and gauge injustice, we are forced to use measures that categorize—an appropriate social response ironic in its necessity. Documenting racial distribution, for instance, may assist in promoting diversity, but our means of measuring fall short of capturing our true identity as a human community. Many of us find this difficult because race, in actuality, is a social creation. Navarro (2010) eloquently documented this in the article, "Going Beyond Black and White, Hispanics in Census Pick 'Other.'" I deem that sexual orientation, like race, is also a socially constructed idea that doesn't really "fit" who

we are as sexual beings and my opinion echoes much of what is addressed in Hubbard's "The Social Construction of Sexuality" (2010).

Although not everyone experiences difficulty with "fitting" or "not fitting" in racial categories, many can at least identify with those that do have such a dilemma. If asked to consider every person in the world and draw six lines (or 600 lines) of racial separation, most, I imagine, would have great difficulty with the task, both logistically and ethically. As Navarro (2010) pointed out, racial identity is not a simple question of a belonging or not belonging. Options for the best match are often ill fitting and a blending of choices frequently leaves more questions than answers. Sexual orientation, on the other hand, seemingly fits neatly into four categories; these suggest that you are *one*, the *other*, *both*, or *none*. This concept is likened to racial identity in "Night to His

Day': The Social Construction of Gender" (Lorber, 2010). They all stem from the *one* and therefore are arguably exclusive, overly simplistic, and collectively inaccurate.

While Hubbard (2010) pointed to this concept in eloquent academic language, I find that I often have to defend a similar position about the

social constructs of gender and sexual labels in language befitting scenes more *social* in nature—like the barstools of Southwest Philly. I find that what is typically argued is that racial categories aren't really reasonable because, in addition to unique individual physical features, there are lots and lots and lots of colors. However, there are only two sets of genitalia: male and female. Thus, most conclude, there can only be two genders and *only that many* sexual orientations. There are lots and lots and lots of colors? Really? I thought it was just one color with lots and lots and lots of demonstration.

I don't like to say I'm heterosexual because, well . . . I'm not—nor do I care to declare myself as homosexual. While it may honor my current same-sex relationship and give way to a justice-oriented political agenda, it also painfully denies tender memories of my past romantic relationships with men – very good men. Bisexuality doesn't seem an accurate description either, as it suggests that there is some kind of middle-ground, go-between identity that denies the difference in how I am attracted to women and men. I am attracted to both, but

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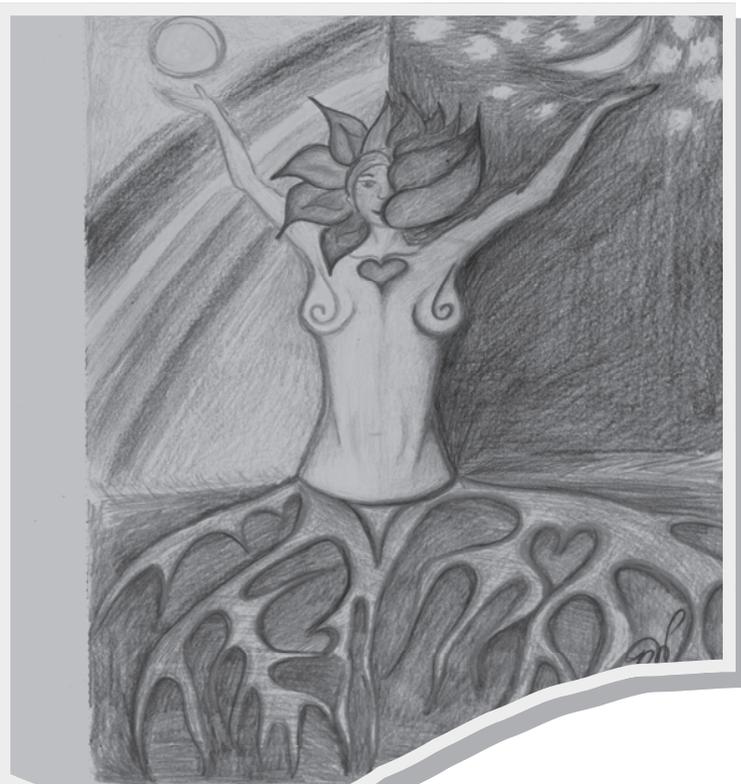
not in the same way, and bisexuality seems to reject the idea of this unique disparity—something that I feel strongly. I sometimes am encouraged to make analogies to defend my sense of sexual orientation being “other” than options typically provided. I often make the comparison to dry ice (CO₂) by drawing attention to a scar on my right hand and pointing out the irony of the burn caused by a cooling agent. It is a compound that is both hot and cold, but certainly *not* lukewarm. Like the carbon dioxide compound, I am both heterosexual and homosexual, but do not fit as bisexual. I am both, but not both. I am all, but not *other*. My sexuality does not fit on a scale somewhere between 32° and 212° of attraction. Like CO₂, I am comprised of simple, common elements, but am unique in my composition. I believe we all are.

We live in a world of similar chemical compounds and our elements of identity are being fused together and broken apart in a bath of passionately charged movements: androcentrism battling gynocentrism, justice confronting injustice, civil rights defeating heterosexism, integration overcoming racism. I declare that I have difficulty separating Celie from the tyranny of her environment, I have difficulty separating myself from

my world and the constant motion with which it moves. What I can say, with absolute certainty, is that I love my girlfriend. Her name is Maeve.

References

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Letters to the Editors

We encourage our readers to share their thoughts about the content posted herein, which may be printed in a future issue.

Please contact us at pbuck@wcupa.edu, and we will do our best to address your inquiries.

Thank you!

In my Social Work Ph.D. program we have been encouraged to consider how we approach social work research and social work practice, and how we bring ourselves and our identities into this work. I believe that anyone entering the many fields of social work or social justice work must reflect on what social justice means and how to do anti-oppressive (AOP) social work. It is not enough to commit to the NASW Code of Ethics; we must spend time learning how oppression and privilege manifest institutionally, personally, and societally, as well as how this contributes to social inequity. It is essential that we continually examine our privilege, power, marginalization, internalized (or externalized) oppression, goals, and location, and how we bring this into our work as practitioners, researchers, teachers, and activists.

In the spirit of self-reflexivity and AOP social work practice/research I share a journal entry I wrote the summer before the final year of my MSW program:

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Walk out my front door. Make a right. Go to the end of my street where it meets 5th Street and make another right. Walk to the stop sign at 5th and Morris, walk across the street to the opposite side of 5th Street. There you will see a pole that used to have a SEPTA sign attached to it, surrounded by teddy bears, candles, and a signed tri-fold poster board, telling Jerry "RIP" and "you were loved." Behind that pole on the sidewalk against the house rests a sign that says CROSS Street. How ironic.

At 7 a.m. on Saturday morning I drove home from being up all night at the Ball. I came home with T and we parked on Morris Street, just past 5th. We were so tired and got into bed. I had been drinking Red Bull all night so I lay down but my mind was wide awake. The butch next to me had her head resting on my arm and I was comforted to know she was there. It was a dreary morning and I would have felt lonely if I had come home to an empty bed. At some point, I heard a series of loud explosions, which at first instinct sounded like gunshots. I immediately dismissed what I think of as my internalized racism surfacing, and thought, "Oh, probably just kids playing with fireworks...at 8:30am." I fell kind of asleep. When I woke at 1:30 to drive T home, we walked past yellow police tape. My first thought this time was, "Oh, they must be having a block party," and

then I thought, "Maybe someone was shot." We didn't say anything about it to each other. Then, later that day there were teddy bears surrounding the pole and I understood that someone was shot and killed in that spot.

So now I await a phone call from my frantic mother shouting, "Someone was killed at 5th and Morris! Oh the city is such a scary place! Come home, Meggy!" At which point I would fight with her saying something like, "It's about structural oppression. White people set systems up, Mom, so that things like this would happen and people of color would be blamed for being too violent. And, Mom, there is violence everywhere, even in our hometown." I have so many feelings when I recall the events of the past couple of days. I realize my ears witnessed a murder. I wonder what if, when I heard that, I had run downstairs and out my door just to be sure it wasn't gunshots? Could I have called 911, and maybe the man would have lived? Did he lie there while all of my neighbors assumed firecrackers had gone off? In such a short time there was so much going on in my head surrounding race, privilege and sadness.

Where I grew up, surrounded by woods, if I heard gunshots I knew it was someone killing an animal, most likely a deer. I never thought a person. Now I'm living in Philly, where guns go off a lot, and where many folks of color have been killed. I don't want to think that another young black man was killed. I also don't want to believe or understand that people are shot less than a block from my house. Which ultimately means that then I have to think about where I CHOSE to live. I have to think about the privilege I have in that moment to "feel scared." How my presence contributes to gentrification and how that leads to violence. It's about people protecting their homes and where they come from. It's about how people earn honor. It's about education. Racism. Class. Gender. Capitalism.

It's about what counts as legitimate knowledge. What resources are available, and how can they be accessed? It's about literacy and sexuality. It's about intersectionality and systematic oppression. It's about being on parole for 40 years, and being set up to fail. It's about industrial complexes; prison, medical, non-profit, immigration. Whose lives are valued? It's about brand new condos being built where once generations of families grew up. It's about white people who want the

"It's about what counts as legitimate knowledge."

urban experience and them needing to be protected while they have that experience. It's about white supremacy culture and how historically and presently oppressed communities and groups internalize oppression and sometimes hurt one another.

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I can't really put this all together coherently or into some direction for hope. As I try, my position in this experience "trespasses" on the communities who experience these injustices daily and I want to think more about that (Orlie, 1997, p. 23 in Rossiter, 2001).

This story is complicated and my intent is to push myself, and I hope readers, to question the location,

privilege, and power that we occupy in the various spaces we move through. Especially as we participate in a profession whose ethics are about social justice. So, I try to translate this experience through my heart and through my lens as young white queer feminist social worker who feels passionate about social change.

References

- Rossiter, A. (2001). Innocence lost and suspicion found: Do we educate for or against social work? *Critical Social Work*, 2(1) 1-5.

Call for Submissions

We are currently seeking written submissions, essays, poems, photography or original artwork for the next issue of the student-led journal, VOICES. Through this type of open-access, peer-reviewed publication, we are seeking to help social workers raise their voices around issues of social justice.

Written Submissions:

- 1,000 word limit
- Double-spaced, 12-point font, 1" margins
- Professional tone and APA style
- Cover page with name, title & contact info
- Electronic submission to Faculty Advisor by January 15, 2013. Essays reflecting personal perspectives on issues of social justice with clear ties to social work practice are especially encouraged

All submissions will be reviewed anonymously by the Student Editors, and final decisions will be communicated to authors by the Faculty Advisor. All questions and concerns should be directed to the Faculty Advisor.

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