



JESUIT VOLUNTEER CORPS

Getting in the Way of Our Work & Doing Anti-Oppression Work Oppressively

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One of the main ironies about those of us who work against oppression is that we usually do not devote time to exploring and addressing how we, too, may be oppressive. This oversight is one of the key reasons many change efforts are so short lived and collapse from the inside out. This is not a new problem. It is a recurring pattern that has haunted movements in the past.

Many of us come to change circles, not as mere human beings wanting a more just world, but as representatives of our professional title, organizations and institutions, as someone of clout, someone who has “*made it*” in America. It is as if we have forgotten that what we do or what we have is not who we are at our core. In the absence of that memory, we go about relating to others in a distant, cold, paternalistic and authoritarian manner. As a result, we are reluctant to listen and feel the frustrations of others with less money, less power, or fewer credentials. We sometimes treat social change work as if it is one of many civic duties or charities we support instead of something we live. Therefore, we fail to connect on a human level. It is as if our success and status has put our humanity to sleep. All of this separates us from one another and weakens any real chance for community, group trust, and solidarity to emerge in the work we do.

Sometimes these attitudes are accompanied by specific philosophies and approaches to social change work that stress slow, incremental, conservative, reformative change, change that is generally non-confrontational or controversial. This rubs against those who are barely making it and for whom change cannot come quickly enough. Change was needed yesterday by people who look to it to gain a better daily life, whether it is changes in housing policies, educational opportunities, relationship with the criminal justice system, or access to quality healthcare. Economic differences orient and commit us to social change work differently and they also reflect the potential for conflict as they rise and play out at the surface. Those without economic power typically seek direct action immediately while those with something to lose call for slow incremental activities involving diplomacy. Many of us are more comfortable working behind the scenes than in the streets. We are more at ease if we do not rock the boat too much because as one person put it, we feel that “*you catch more flies with honey than with vinegar.*”

On another level, economic differences reflect a deeper rift amongst social justice workers. One which involves those with class privilege assuming that social change work is simply about changing things so that others who are less fortunate can “*have the things we have,*” or can “*live like we live.*” These dangerous assumptions demonstrate the seductive nature of success as defined by the dominant culture and its dehumanizing power, and they block deep reflection about what one has to do to board the proverbial boat of American success and float into the American Dream. They obstruct the fact that in the eyes of many, especially those without class and institutional privilege, the cost of passage into that dream may be too costly culturally, psychologically, and spiritually. For many change advocates, past and present, joining or desiring to be part of existing institutions is like boarding a sinking ship or moving into a burning house.

Regardless of these important issues, change advocates with social clout regularly equate social justice with securing access and opportunities for those locked out of institutional life instead of looking deeply into the morality and objectives of institutions. As one person put it when expressing her frustration about how her change group spent time teaching people how to “*fill out applications for bank loans instead of changing the banks, their application process, and lending practices as a whole.*” Or, as another person described his frustration with assimilationist change approaches, “*when you have retired military men at the table, who think that the system works, that it’s good, with young black men, who are not for the military and think that the whole system needs to be changed, it gets difficult!*”

Another major challenge is that privileged behavior seems normal to those who exhibit it. Most individuals are usually unaware of the ways in which their sense of entitlement marginalizes others even in spaces where equity is a major goal. Frequently, individuals with educational accomplishments and material resources come to change efforts with expectations of dictating or making major decisions or with ideas about the “*right way to do things*” because they believe their experiences are more valuable to the process than those with less education and money. It can be very difficult to get people with privilege to realize that their resources have been acquired through a system that inherently privileges some while marginalizing others. Awareness of these different orientations makes it easier to understand why many change advocates are angry, distrustful and view one another with suspicion and resentment. And though the assumptions, motivations, and objectives of many middle class change agents are sometimes troubling, this is not meant to suggest that they are the only source of confusion and conflict when it comes to class differences. This is also not meant to suggest that those without class privilege are passive and innocent bystanders. As Dr. King pointed out, “*nothing in wealth is inherently vicious and nothing in poverty is inherently virtuous*” (from *Strength to Love*, p. 53, New York, Harper & Row 1963).

As we become a more diverse society, we will have to increase our tolerance and acceptance of difference within our communities in order to build successful alliances across these widening chasms. In the end, enemies are created and lines are drawn in the proverbial sand, lines that separate and weaken the effectiveness of the efforts we support, lines that divide us against our self-interest and our long-term goals for social change.

Along with the problems that arise because of economic differences, we oppress and dehumanize one another through sexism, homophobia, religious intolerance, ageism, and other oppressions that we perpetrate in our social change circles and in our communities at large. This is an ongoing problem so it should be no surprise that our member base, allies, and potential supporters constantly fall away or vanish. They fall away and vanish when men repeatedly dominate spaces, when straight people alienate G/L/B/T/Q/I (*this is common shorthand for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Intersex communities*) members, when Christians marginalize those who are not Christian, when our young disrespect our elders, when our elders dismiss our youth, and when those with class status marginalize those without economic power, an official title, or a lucrative profession. One person described her experience along generational lines in one change effort as follows:

“It was clear that a lot of the older people were not comfortable with younger people being involved...and at times there was conflict. Ultimately, I feel that the younger people’s take on things were written off to the point that they left the group.”

This tendency is part of a larger mistake many of us continue to make which is attempting to address one form of oppression while ignoring other oppressions and expecting to build a mass, unified movement for justice.

When this fact is brought up inside change circles, or when we are challenged about our oppressive behavior and asked to explore it, most of us make excuses or turn a deaf ear to such accusations. And regardless of the reason we give, we continuously fail to look at how we too might be oppressive to those around us and those in the struggle with us. We do this because we fail to acknowledge or explore how we might be privileged along lines of race, gender, sexuality, class, religion, etc. At the most extreme end, many of us even believe we do not have to think about these areas because we are oppressed or belong to an oppressed group. We argue that our oppression is primary and separate from other forms. We see and rank our oppression as the most severe and dehumanizing form. At our most defensive, we argue that other forms of oppression are qualitatively different from our own and less destructive and want to work only on our own issues or the forms of oppression that affect our group. With this attitude, we draw lines between ourselves and others and set up what some have termed "*Oppression Olympics*," where one form of oppression "*wins the gold*" and other forms of injustice, if they make it, are placed lower in a hierarchy of oppressions.

From our most short-sighted positions, we may argue that those other areas are not bona fide oppressions and that people are being too sensitive. We may accuse others of trying to avoid the areas we want to address by interjecting their own issue. This does not mean that people do not try to use their own oppression to escape discussion of other forms because it does happen. Nonetheless, people who are marginalized along lines other than the particular oppression under consideration, repeatedly and consistently encounter oppressive spaces within social justice efforts where activists use the same logic and strategies we are combating. When people come to social change work and experience the continuous sting of these behaviors, they usually become silent, miss meetings and events, slowly drop off, and fade away. Those who stay conclude that their departure was an indication that they were not really serious about the work after all.

The seriousness and tragedy of these ongoing, recurring tendencies cannot be over emphasized. They are serious and tragic because they not only stop movements from form-ing, they also alienate both those most likely to understand oppression and those most liable to work against it on a long term basis. In many cases those most likely to understand how oppression works and those most likely to work against it are those with lived, firsthand experience with oppression and domination. Thus, this tendency is responsible for the loss of those most likely to empathize, understand, and commit to working for justice on an on-going long-term basis because of our inability, or unwillingness, to look at our own "*baggage*," our own tendencies to be oppressive, and our unwillingness to change as much as we want others to.

The fact that oppressions are not only interconnected but overlap and fuel one another is not going away on its own, nor will the fact that many of us are oppressive and destructive because of the sexism, heterosexism, classism, racism, and other "*isms*" we live out as we do our change work. Therefore, it may be time for us to acknowledge that although we may be oppressed along one social category we can simultaneously be oppressive if we enjoy class, male, Christian, and heterosexual social privilege. We must face the fact that no form of oppression trumps another and that the excuses we use to keep from facing how we oppress others are echoes of the excuses others use as they oppress us. We also might consider that our reluctance to engage and explore our own forms of social privilege might lend important insight into why others are reluctant to look at theirs. In order to change as much as we are asking others to we must explore those un-comfortable places in ourselves and begin to live the insightful adage that, "*injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere*" (from *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, Martin Luther King Jr. 1963). And finally, we must develop a new vision that reflects a radical revolution in values.