

## **Occupy Baltimore, Social Work and social Activism**

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I was interested in participating in today's event for many reasons but mostly because I graduated from the UM school of Social Work.

### **Women, Social Work and social Change**

Historically -- at the core of the field of social work are women involved in social change. However in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century many of the founding women in sociology and social work were E R A S E D from its history. (One means of transforming a society is to change its history.) Many of these women were considered erased rather than invisible because they were well-known public figures for their "social" work during their lifetimes. They generated social descriptions and analyzed structures of inequality in regard to race, ethnicity, age, gender, and yes -- class. They then designed and implemented a variety of programs to address the structural inequalities they articulated.

One -- who survived the erasure was a mentor to many that followed in her footsteps. She is considered to be the founder of social work. Jane Addams is best know for the [Hull House](#), a settlement house that was a holistic center for the assimilation of immigrants. Addams and others working with her developed three "ethical principles" to guide their work in social settlements:

"To teach by example, to practice cooperation and to develop a social democracy. According to them a social democracy is based on egalitarian relations across class lines."<sup>1</sup>

So as a social worker, social reform has always been an element of my being a social worker. Over the years I have been involved in a variety of social organizations most of them devoted to children, women rights and peace.

By the way, Jane Addams a co-founder of WILPF, the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, received the [Nobel Peace prize](#) for her work against WWI and all wars.

**I became a social worker because I was interested in social change. And I became an activist because of my social work.**

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<sup>1</sup> Lengermann, P.M. and Niebrugge-Brantley, J. "Women and the Birth of Sociology" in Seeing Ourselves: Classic, Contemporary, and Cross-Cultural Reading in Sociology. Macionis, John, Benokraitis, Nijole. 2007. Seventh Edition. New Jersey: Pearson/Prentice Hall.

When I graduated from the school of social work I went to work for Baltimore County Department Social Services in a program that developed alternative plans to incarceration for non-violent offenders.<sup>2</sup>

Many of these "offenders" had spent time growing up in foster-care. I thought this an interesting connection. So when the program was terminated, as an element of a prison industrial complex system nested in "lock them all up," I turned to working with adolescents.

I worked with adolescents for over a decade in a variety of settings from residential care, foster care, adoption services and private practice. I was working with abused children, their families and agencies working with them – something was missing. The models, techniques and interventions did not function -- for them.

So years after being an administrator, therapist and consultant, I asked myself: Why was I working to change a child and her or his family when they then had to live in a society unwilling to change -- and unsupportive of their change. I came to realize that it was not the children, nor the parents that were the problem. They were only symptoms of a dysfunctional society.

I no longer wanted to **reform society**, I wanted a **new society**. This is an important distinction.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> I came to the School of Social Work after working in a nursing home where money was NOT an issue for residents. Their privilege afforded me the privilege of dealing with living as dying and thus entropy. Entropy is a word I came to know as a graduate student in social work when studying systems theory. (Actually the focus in systems theory was negative entropy.) Entropy -- a deliberately constructed concept about how everything decays sooner or later. For example, everybody knows we are dying yet we use the term living – its sounds much nicer. Yet it functions to deny the message we need to hear. We are dying -- so act now in ways that retard the decay of wellbeing. (Herbert Brun)

Entropy is decay – negative entropy retards the decay and the retardation of decay, like peace, is a need, and needs must be met so that they can happen again and again. For example, agreement accelerates entropy it generated nothing new. Disagreement opens space for something new to emerge. So let's have peace and then disagreement.

<sup>3</sup> I am no longer interested in saving or improving society. I want a new one. What premises might support such a creative endeavor? One idea, based in a triadic relationship between observers, language and society is that; society arises in dialogue, that the primary function of dialogue is not communication BUT the maintenance and *creation of distinctions*. So dialogue as conversation is the *converse of control*. Hence control and communication (useful concepts when doing 1<sup>st</sup>-order cybernetics) as THE primary mechanisms of *society* are challenged. And anticommunication a process for creating and retarding decay when designing conversations. (Larry Richards)

I went back to graduate school and let my work guide my studies. I found second-order cybernetics and video as tools for me being with people, reporting on relations and documenting dynamics.<sup>4</sup>

## Occupy

As a video-ethnographer I went to Occupy Baltimore on October 4, 2011 to document the process. I was intrigued by the idea of doing yoga in a public space so I went back. Taking care of oneself and others is an important element of activism. I then discovered that General Assembly (GA) meetings were organized vis-a-vis consensus model. I was hooked.

I attended my first GA meeting October 14 and started [blogging](#) about Occupy Baltimore and the Occupy Movement. My first entry about OB was October 14.

The videos I constructed address many of the current concerns of Occupy Baltimore including: housing foreclosures and evictions, current practices of the Baltimore Development Corporation, the post office closings crises, and the Cradle to Prison Pipeline phenomena about building jails rather than schools.

## Consensus Model, Conflict and social Transformation

Consensus model drew me in because I think doing consensus is transformative. I had tried over the years to implement a modified consensus model in a variety of settings, to no avail. So I was ecstatic to be involved in a movement that at its core was a consensus model for making horizontal rather than hierarchical decisions, a model that structures encourage participation by all in attendance, a model that opens space for embracing conflict without violence so that something new might emerge. However.

When attending General Assemblies I regularly notice that when conflicts emerge many participants appear to want to cease the moment rather than seize the moment as an opportunity for conversation.<sup>5</sup> I think avoiding our differences, and the tensions and conflicts that coincide with them, is problematic to the GA process, to the occupy movement and to the transformation of society toward a society I desire to be a part of. I think we need a new way of thinking about ways of thinking that can dialectically dance together, like, [when peace is a need](#). Another story. -- Thank you.

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<sup>4</sup> There is an article entitled "Cybernetic Epistemology" by Sophie Freud in the book *Paradigms of Clinical Social Work*, Edited by Rachele A. Dorfman, that was used at the school of social work years ago.

<sup>5</sup> Conversation a particular dynamic of interactions between participants such that the dynamics move from asynchronicity toward synchronicity (L. Richards)

