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Dangerous Memories: Women Resisting Structures of Power, Possession, and Violence

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Abstract: As a result of involvement with the Catholic Worker movement, women learned to see the world in a new way, developing authentic spirituality, practicing nonviolent resistance to American cultural values, and trusting personal conscience as a guide for involvement in social justice issues.

Introduction

Emancipatory educators challenge societal structures and values, viewing education as freedom from oppression by the dominant culture (Freire, 1999; hooks, 1994). Those who are engaged in a struggle against dominant cultural values can serve as a “signum cui contradicetur, or a sign of contradiction” to structures of power in society (Krupa, 2001, p. 196). Throughout the history of the United States, women have often stood with the oppressed in a society that has seen itself as the fulfillment “of a providential destiny, on and off the American continent” through the use of “violence, religious arrogance, and racial superiority” (Krupa, p.184).

Spiritually-based nonviolent resistance as both a lifestyle and a tool for social change is well documented through examples such as the movements led by Mohandas Gandhi, Quaker abolitionists, and Martin Luther King, Jr. (Juhnke & Hunter, 2001). As evidenced in the literature, movements for social change are fruitful settings for research about adult learning (Foley, 1999, 2001, Hart, 1990; Welton, 1993). A growing body of literature within the field of adult education draws significant connections between spirituality and work for social justice (Daloz, et al, 1996; Tisdell, 2000, 2003). More research is needed about social movements that foster this type of emancipatory learning. What factors contribute to the development of social movements that foster spiritually-based nonviolent resistance to cultural values of “power, possession and violence” (Soelle, 2001, p. 201)?

Feminist theologians investigating the relationship between spirituality and resistance offer assistance in understanding the nature of this type of social movement involvement. Welch (1990) offers a “theology of resistance and hope,” based on giving voice to “dangerous memories” of those who have fought against oppression (pp. 153-154). Soelle (2001) discusses the relationship between mysticism and resistance, and suggests Dorothy Day as an example of someone who struggled with the connection between longing for God and the creation of a more just world. Day was co-founder of the Catholic Worker movement, which emerged during the 1930s as a response to the social dislocation of the Great Depression. Through the publication of the *Catholic Worker* newspaper, houses of hospitality, and farming communes, a uniquely Catholic pacifist perspective developed that became a challenge to the hierarchy of the Catholic Church, as well as to the larger American society.

Women’s experiences within social movements are often eclipsed by attention to the more well-known movement founders. While Day’s involvements as a sign of contradiction to American societal values is well documented (Thorn, Runkel, & Mountin, 2001), the voices of other women involved in the early days of movement have not been heard. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate the experiences of women who were involved in the Catholic Worker movement during the 1930s and 1940s, and to come to a greater understanding of the contexts, beliefs, and actions which fostered a spiritually-based critique of American cultural values related to power, possession, and violence. The result of this investigation is increased understanding of social movements as learning sites for women, and an introduction to

those whose “dangerous memories” have not been heard. An introduction to oral history methodology will be followed by a brief exploration of the context for learning, and a review of significant findings about the Catholic Worker movement as an emancipatory learning site.

Oral History Methodology

Oral history is a research tool that challenges traditional forms of historical documentation and allows the researcher to hear new voices and new perspectives of the past. Oral history narrators (participants) have differing points of view and create a more complete picture of a time period, event, or social movement. In order to better understand women’s experiences in the early years of the Catholic Worker movement, oral history interviews were conducted with 12 women, of whom 10 were involved with the movement during the 1930s and 1940s. Narrators range in age from 84-91. While some of the women were interviewed previously (Riegle, 2003), the focus of prior interviews was on the movement’s founders, Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin, rather than specifically on their own experiences as women within the movement. Two women reflected on the experiences their mothers had within the movement during this time.

Narrators include Mary Helen Adler, Monica Ribar Cornell, Elizabeth Finegan Doyle, Mary Coisman Durnin, Mary Bigham Farren, Katherine Moos Mella, Nina Polcyn Moore, Isabelle Bates Mullin, Adele Butler Nash, Mary Reser, Margaret Beahon Winegarden, and Mary Alice Lautner Zarrella. Narrators were involved with the following Catholic Worker houses of hospitality and farming communes: St. Joseph’s House, New York, NY; Maryfarm at Easton, PA, and at Newburgh, NY; Holy Family House, Milwaukee, WI; St. Joseph’s House, Rochester, NY; House of Christ the Worker, Buffalo, NY; Chicago Catholic Worker; Blessed Martin de Porres House of Hospitality and Our Lady of the Wayside Farm, Cleveland, OH.

Context for Learning

Attention to context is essential to understand the multifaceted nature of adult learning within social movements (Schied, 1995a, 1995b). The Catholic Worker movement began in response to the economic devastation brought on by the Great Depression in the United States during the decade of the 1930s. The Great Depression brought economic hardship to people of all incomes, but the poorest members of society were hardest hit. With unemployment and evictions rising, families struggled to find basic necessities such as food, clothing, and shelter.

The desire to address the needs of workers from a Catholic perspective created the opportunity for an unusual point of view to be articulated in response to the events of the time. Dorothy Day, with encouragement from movement co-founder Peter Maurin, published the first issue of *The Catholic Worker* newspaper on May 1, 1933, distributing it in New York City’s Union Square. Following the publication of the newspaper, the movement grew as writers and editors cared for hungry and homeless people who arrived at the door. Women and men from across the country came to join the effort to carry out works of mercy and participate in the building of a radical alternative to American society, based on values of voluntary poverty, personal responsibility, and pacifism. As houses of hospitality and farming communes developed across the United States, members of the Catholic Worker movement sought to live up to Peter Maurin’s call to become worker-scholars. *The Catholic Worker* became a place where women and men carried out works of mercy and protest, engaged in intellectual discovery, and built significant relationships.

As concerned as the movement was with the needs of workers in American society, it was also a distinctly Catholic community. The all-encompassing culture of the Catholic Church, particularly among local ethnically homogeneous parishes, was an antidote to the outsider status

frequently conferred on Catholic immigrant families. Also true for women in this study, most children growing up in this culture were connected to the church at all stages of their lives, from their local parishes to Catholic elementary and secondary schools, Catholic colleges and universities, Catholic social groups, as well as nearby convents, and monasteries.

Significant findings emerged from the oral history interviews which broaden our understanding of learning in social movements. Women in the Catholic Worker sought an authentic spirituality, engaged in practices of nonviolent resistance to American cultural values, and trusted personal conscience over the dictates of family, Church, and society.

Authentic Spirituality

What was the nature of spirituality within the Catholic Worker movement? With strong grounding in the Catholic Church, women came to the Catholic Worker and learned a new way of seeing the world, defined spirituality as direct action or “doing,” and experienced struggle as they sought to live as faithful Catholics. Narrators for this study were immersed in American Catholic culture and were seeking a more authentic expression of Catholic faith than they saw in their own local parishes. Spurred by personal experience with the economic dislocation of the Depression, either by their own life of poverty or by the example of family members who cared for homeless or hungry people in their homes, women sought a place where they could pursue an authentic faith and life with others.

An important component of belief and practice within the Catholic Worker movement was a focus on Jesus’ teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, particularly attention to carrying out the works of mercy. The combination of caring for the needs of the poor, while studying the gospels, papal encyclicals on social justice, and contemporary Catholic writers created a radical framework or new way of seeing the world. Belle Bates Mullin notes that before she became involved with the Catholic Worker in Milwaukee, she was part of “a sleepy people.” She continues “...going to the Catholic Worker was a real eye opener. It puts you in touch with people who made you think and look at life with...more awareness.”

Helen Adler was involved with the Catholic Worker at Maryfarm and St. Joseph’s House in New York. She states, “The education I got about the system of our country and the inequality of class was invaluable. Well, it was right in front of our eyes.” She continues, “All you had to do was think about it...The people had nowhere to go and nobody gave a damn. They died on the street or not. It was [an] extremely un-Christian or uncaring world around us.”

Narrators often defined spirituality as direct action, or “doing,” making any separation between belief and action incomprehensible. Peg Beahon Winegarden was involved in the Rochester Catholic Worker. She states: “It’s awfully easy to get terribly spiritual and do nothing.” Mary Alice Lautner Zarrella (of St. Joseph’s House in New York) agrees: “The Catholic Worker is love in action...If you love the poor, you have to do something.” Narrators noted that they were drawn to the movement because of the opportunity for lay people to actively care for those in need.

Trying to faithfully follow Jesus was not easy, particularly as Catholic Workers embraced a spiritually-based nonviolent resistance to American cultural values. As spirituality was not separated from action within the Worker, the struggles of day to day life were also struggles of the spirit. The challenges of life within the Worker were felt in meeting needs within houses of hospitality, taking unpopular stands based on Catholic Worker beliefs, and continue to the present. Nina Polcyn Moore (of the Milwaukee Catholic Worker) states:

You see....every day you think of Dorothy and the tremendous mission of being poor with the poor. I can't buy a thing but that it doesn't stress me. It has to...once you've met somebody like Dorothy and once you read the paper, you're ruined. In the best sense."

Becoming involved in a movement that was returning to the roots of what it meant to be an authentic Catholic at times set up a dynamic contrast with the local parish that was difficult to reconcile. As a result, it seemed probable that by trying to be an authentic Catholic, a person could continually come into conflict with the Church. Not surprisingly, by following this more radical approach to faith, Catholic Workers mirrored Jesus' own relationships to those in power.

Nonviolent Resistance

All of the women were involved in nonviolent resistance to American cultural values through living in voluntary poverty, studying alternatives to capitalism while meeting the needs of those hurt by it, and standing up against war and unfair treatment of workers. Living in voluntary poverty, and thereby choosing a position of marginality within American society, may be perhaps the greatest form of nonviolent resistance to American cultural values. By living on the margins, and refusing to participate in an economy that was fueled by preparation for war, and the business perspectives that championed the value of the powerful over the powerless, women learned to live out their beliefs by sharing what the poor had, which was poverty.

Women studied the papal encyclicals on social justice, the gospels, and writings of contemporary Catholic writers, such as Jacques Maritain, Eric Gill, and G. K. Chesterton. Discussions at houses of hospitality over issues such as labor, racial injustice, and pacifism took place after visits by speakers, and while distributing food and clothing, cooking, and cleaning. These discussions were joined by opportunities for protest. Women were involved in a variety of practices of nonviolent resistance, including public protest. While some women chose to participate in picket lines, others registered their discontent through letter writing or activism within pacifist associations. Most of the picketing that took place focused on the unfair treatment of workers, and even extended to protests against the Catholic Church. Betty Finegan Doyle (of the Rochester Catholic Worker) remembers writing letters of protest to Church officials regarding issues of racial injustice and unfair labor practices, "we made quite an unpleasant fuss sometimes for the bishops." Other issues included protesting embassies or consulates of countries where either Catholics or others were mistreated. Nina Polcyn Moore recalls weekly picketing at the German consulate during the summer of 1935: "I carried something that said 'Bismarck tried and failed.' Somebody else carried... 'Spiritually we're all Semites.' That was pretty reckless because nobody was doing that in 1935."

As the movement developed over time, a clear perspective of pacifism emerged, represented in articles within the newspaper, roundtable discussions in the houses of hospitality, and provided motivation for acts of public protest. Later picket lines included protests against the draft and against preparation for nuclear war. While not engaged in public protests, Mary Alice Lautner Zarrella carried out active peacemaking efforts through involvements with the Association of Catholic Conscientious Objectors and the War Resisters League.

Daloz, et al, (1996) note the importance of the experience of marginality, "when one stands at the margins, astride the boundary between tribes, one stands also at the center of a larger and more adequate whole" (p. 77). Living and working on the margins of society created the opportunity for Catholic Workers to learn to act against what those who embrace dominant cultural values could not see.

Trusting Personal Conscience

A significant component of the pacifist perspective within the Catholic Worker is the value placed on individual conscience, rather than church or national authority, leading to a challenge of structures that oppress others (Gibbons, 2001). According to Gibbons, following the nonviolent approach advocated by Jesus in the gospels becomes “authenticated in praxis... [challenging] the individual to refer to the authority of conscience versus national or even Church leaders in fashioning a response to the evil of war” (pp. 170-171). A crucial question regarding the reliance on personal conscience in matters of faith and life is: who has the authority to create knowledge (Cunningham, 2000)? Narrators described learning to trust personal conscience over family, church, or society, as a result of the new way of seeing that they learned in the Catholic Worker. Day was viewed as a model for this approach, as women were empowered by her life and actions. Learning to trust personal conscience caused women to move into new areas of leadership as lay people within the Church, particularly related to issues of social justice.

In spite of some narrowing of opportunity as a result of gender, women described certain freedoms within the movement. Peg Beahon Winegarden notes that when decisions needed to be made at the Rochester house, no one had to wait for a priest, decisions were made jointly by those present. This perspective continued after Catholic Worker involvement for some women who were engaged in social justice work. In several instances, narrators described their roles in educating of priests, during and after their involvement with the Catholic Worker. Nina Polcyn Moore recalls that the questions that the group of women from Milwaukee asked about peace when they met for spiritual direction with Father Hugo in Pittsburgh, prompted him to explore pacifism at a deeper level. His articulation of a peace stance eventually emerged as a central component of Catholic Worker beliefs. Educating priests in Philadelphia was a priority for Helen Adler after her Catholic Worker experience. Helen worked to educate priests in the parish about God’s concern for the poor and the role that the Church should play regarding issues such as housing, education, and providing relief to those in need. The general lack of awareness of the needs of the poor created the need to teach or nudge priests in new directions that offered opportunities for women to continue to be involved in an authentic practice of the Catholic faith.

Conclusions

Daloz, et al, (1996) define critical-systemic faith as a critical perspective that enables activists to work for social change and “to tolerate the complexity and ambiguity with which commitment to the commons [the common good] must contend” (p. 143). Women in the Catholic Worker learned a compassionate and critical-systemic faith within the Catholic Worker movement, which focused on both meeting needs of those hurt by capitalism and articulating a critique of the structural systems within American society. The combination of living in voluntary poverty, in direct contact with those impoverished by capitalism, while developing a Catholic critique of church and society, heightened awareness and created a new way of seeing the world. Spirituality was expressed through direct action (works of mercy and protest) throughout their lives as women trusted personal conscience as a guide.

Implications for Adult Education

Women’s involvements in historic social movements offer significant insights into the nature of freedom and oppression within society. At other times in our nation’s past, there has been more openness to lively debate over how society should function. Societal critique, dissent, and discussion of alternative perspectives were challenged during the 1930s, as they are today.

Investigating the nature of learning for women in the Catholic Worker movement provides insight into lives built upon a differing set of values; women whose “dangerous memories” describe their resistance to the values of power, possession, and violence prevalent in American society.

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