

Introduction

Over a period of many years, I came to understand that there are extra hurdles I must jump in my life because I am a woman and a lesbian. I found literature on oppression and liberation and explored these processes in my practice as an adult educator and community development worker. I also became involved in work against poverty and racism and discovered my role in the oppression of others. I found literature written by and about allies; for example, men working against sexism, white people opposing racism, able-bodied people supporting those with disabilities, people from more privileged classes striving to end poverty and straight people working on behalf of those who are gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered.

I often experienced people putting different forms of oppression in competition with one another, mostly in the form of “our oppression is worse than yours.” This disturbed me because I found my parallel journeys of learning about myself as both oppressor and oppressed to be complementary. When I looked for literature on the larger jigsaw puzzle of oppression, I found very little. I began to write about it myself. It started as a journal but, over a period of years, became a book-length manuscript. In May of 1994, Fernwood Publishing published *Becoming an Ally: Breaking the Cycle of Oppression*, followed by a second edition, *Becoming an Ally: Breaking the Cycle of Oppression in People*, in 2002.

In the opening chapter I summarized my argument against competition among those who experience different forms of oppression:

When I see people competing, claiming their own oppression as the “worst,” or attacking the gains made by other oppressed groups, I see us all running on a treadmill. As long as we try to end our oppression by rising above others, we are reinforcing each other’s oppression, and eventually our own. We are fighting over who has more value, who has less, instead of asking why we must be valued as more or less. We are investing energy in the source of all our oppressions, which is competition itself.

The truth is that each form of oppression is part of a single, complex, interrelated, self-perpetuating system. The whole thing rests on a worldview that says we must constantly strive to be better than someone else. Competition assumes that we are separate beings—separate from each other, from other species,

from the earth. If we believe we are separate, then we are able to believe we can hurt another being and not suffer ourselves.

Competition also assumes that there is a hierarchy of beings. Those who “win” can take a “higher” position, one with more power and value than those who “lose.” It is a short step from accepting hierarchy as natural to assuming that exploitation is just. It becomes right, even admirable, for those who have more power and value to help themselves to the labour, land, resources, culture, possessions, even the bodies, of those who have less power and value. The result is a class system, where power and privilege increase as you go up the ladder, and those standing on each rung take for granted their right to benefit from the labour and resources of those below them.

As long as we who are fighting oppression continue to play the game of competition with one another, all forms of oppression will continue to exist. No one oppression can be ended without them all ending, and this can only happen when we succeed in replacing the assumptions of competition, hierarchy and separation with cooperation, an understanding that each being has value beyond measure and the knowledge that we cannot harm anyone or anything without harming ourselves.

The connection between different forms of oppression is often seen in the liberal sense which denies differences, ignores the continuing presence of history and blames individuals: “We’re all the same, all equal, everyone has problems, let’s just decide to get along.” I have found it difficult, when speaking in public, to say that all oppressions have one root without my audience hearing me say that all oppressions are the same, or equal. People often feel that their oppression has been belittled. But I am not saying that all oppressions are the same or equal; equality means nothing in this context, for how would you measure? I certainly am not saying that we all have problems and should just learn to get along; this denies a long, complicated history and all the terrible scars that need healing, collectively, before we can live together in peace. What I am saying is that all oppressions are interdependent, they all come from the same worldview, and none can be solved in isolation. We can either perpetuate a society based on competition, where some win and some lose, or we can work toward a society based on cooperation, where winning and losing become irrelevant. In the first scenario, oppression will continue to exist for almost everyone. In the second, it will fade away, because it serves no purpose.

The idea that one form of oppression, or even one person’s oppression, can be solved independently, is of great benefit to the rich and powerful. This belief is enough to keep oppressed people

fighting and jostling in competition with each other, never reaching a point of unity where we can successfully challenge those with more than their share.

In other chapters of *Becoming an Ally*, I analyzed how oppression came about and how it is maintained. I reflected on how the oppression we experience becomes internalized, so that we reproduce it in situations where we have a degree of power. I did a comparison of the similarities and differences among different forms of oppression, and I defined some steps for breaking the cycle of oppression in individuals: breaking the silence, consciousness and healing, becoming a worker in your own liberation and becoming an ally. I wrote guidelines for becoming an ally and a chapter on education of allies. Finally, I wrote a chapter on maintaining hope.

In the process of condensing my experience into *Becoming an Ally*, I developed an understanding of the patterns of oppression as they exist in, and are reproduced by, individuals. I answered my own questions as far as those questions went at the time.

When *Becoming an Ally* was published, I was working at a Canadian university. Because of my practice of acting as an ally, I became known as a supporter of Black, Native and gay/lesbian students and faculty on campus. This led to my involvement in a difficult and painful situation in one of the university's departments. At one point, I sat in a room of people deeply embroiled in conflict. We were discussing the possibility of asking a mediator to work with both sides. I looked around me, thought about my own experience in facilitating conflict resolution and thought, "Where would I start?" The sides were very far apart and their power in the institution was very unequal. Also, the dynamics of oppression as they function in and through individuals did not fully explain what was happening. I began to see that institutions have patterns resistant to change despite the will of the individuals that live or work in them.

I knew then that I needed to examine institutional oppression beyond the "sum of the parts" of the individuals within them. Because the situation at the university involved allegations of racism, I began to study the particular dynamics that come into play when an institution is accused of racism, the processes it uses to protect its interests and return life to "normal."

I am not abandoning the analysis I wrote about in *Becoming an Ally*. I believe that as individuals we unconsciously internalize the injuries done to us, both personally and as a result of belonging to oppressed groups. As long as the damage is unhealed and unconscious, it comes back into play when we achieve a measure of power. We sometimes project what we have experienced onto others and then act on it, behaving oppressively towards them.

Beyond this, however, there are patterns that belong to the institutions in which we participate. I can imagine them as accumulations of all the individual decisions and actions that have ever taken place within that

institution since its founding, but it is even more than that. The institution itself takes on a character. It is not a living being, but it can sometimes behave as if it is one. It is, in the words of theologian Walter Wink, an “entity” (Wink 1992). It can put pressure on individuals—choosing, forming, punishing and rewarding them, shaping their attitudes and framework of understanding. As a result, certain patterns tend strongly to hold true, even when many individuals within the institution want them to change.

If individuals wish to change an institution, they must work together, taking action aimed at gaining power and influence over those basic patterns, and they must plan to work at it for a very long time. Too brief or shallow an effort to change an institution can act as a “vaccine,” serving only to teach the oppressive elements in the institution how to resist real transformation, triggering defensiveness and making the situation worse than it was to begin with. Change strategies aimed at individuals can go only so far. The strategies required for institutional change must be directed toward transforming the institution itself.

An institution is like an elastic band. When people take collective action to change the basic patterns, the institution has a powerful tendency to snap back into its original shape. At this level there is another set of patterns, the strategies institutions use to return to “normal.” We must understand and expect these “second level” patterns, often called “backlash,” and prepare from the beginning to counter them.

Most of our methods of dealing with discrimination in institutions are modelled after our court system. They involve accusations, investigations and trial-like hearings where it is determined whether or not discrimination occurred. If the hearing finds that, on a “balance of probabilities,” discrimination occurred, a remedy is ordered. These procedures, typically focussed on the behaviour of individuals, mask the characteristic patterns of the institution’s behaviour and its power to shape the behaviour of the individuals within it.

This book begins with the story of how I learned that being an ally as an individual isn’t enough. The account is based on interviews with the four students and one faculty member who were at the heart of the events. After transcribing the interviews, I wrote a draft of the story. That first draft was shallow and disconnected. I realized that I couldn’t base my account on the interviews alone, because I was the one writing the story and it was my own experience that tied everything together. I re-wrote it with my own account as the central thread. Once the second draft was written, I began a process of negotiation. Drafts went back and forth with the interviewees. I incorporated their edits and suggestions, and tested my own, until I had an account that we could all live with.

I would love to have also included the viewpoints of those who became the “other side” in the conflict. Curious about how they perceived the events and particularly their reasons for their actions, I tried to talk

with three of them. One had played only a peripheral role. For the other two, the situation had become so polarized and I was so clearly identified with the “other side,” that they didn’t want to speak with me about it. As a result, the story is told from one side only.

I have tried my best to be disciplined about simply telling the story. I have included as much detail as possible about what happened with as few general labels and judgements as I could. I have tried to avoid language that implies judgement. However, this is, in part, my own story. I could not be objective, even if I believed objectivity is possible, which I don’t.

There is precedent and reason for telling a story about oppression from the point of view of those who are targeted by that form of oppression. Those with less power can usually see the situation more accurately than those with more power, because their survival depends on understanding and being able to predict the situation. Power and privilege obscure the view of those who benefit from them. I quote from *Becoming an Ally*:

Part of the oppression is that we are cut off from our ability to empathize with the oppressed. If we are aware of it at all, we tend to get defensive or write it off as not very serious—“They are just whining.” For another thing, the privileges that we obtain from oppressing others are invisible to us. For a third thing, oppression is structural. We derive benefits from being male or white or straight or able-bodied without taking any personal action against a woman, a person of colour, a gay/lesbian/bisexual person, or a person with a disability. (Bishop 2002: 128)

In her book *Is Nothing Sacred? When Sex Invades the Pastoral Relationship* (1989), Marie Fortune explains her choice to tell a story of sexual abuse from the point of view of the victims. She says:

I will tell this story as truthfully and carefully as I can. I will tell it from the perspective of the women, because when considering the question of whose perspective should be taken as definitive in an ethical situation, “the one against whom power is used has the more accurate perspective on the situation.” (xvi–xvii)

Fortune’s internal quote is from *Professional Ethics: Power and Paradox* by Karen Lebacqz. Here is the full quote:

All of this suggests that ethical issues related to the existence, use and abuse of power should be at the core of an analysis of professional ethics. Yet while sociologists have long touted the autonomy and power of the professions, most ethical analyses have

ignored this dimension and focused more narrowly on issues of trust. For instance, Sissela Bok argues that deception is akin to force or violence. She thus hints that analyses of power would be relevant for making decisions about truth telling. Yet in presenting and refuting arguments for lying, she fails to develop any explicit norms in response to the implications of this kinship between deception and power.

Nonetheless, Bok does give us a helpful beginning point. She suggests that we should look at lies from the perspective of the one who is deceived rather than from the perspective of the one who tells the lie. This focuses attention on the question of whose perspective on the situation should be taken as definitive. It suggests that the one against whom power is used has the more accurate perspective on the situation.

Now this is a startling suggestion in a professional context. Since professionals profess—that is, claim to know what is wrong and what to do about it—to suggest that someone else’s perspective is more accurate is to turn the tables upside down. Yet this may be precisely what we need if we are to take seriously the questions of power that arise in a professional setting. (1985: 128–129, citing Bok 1982: 214)

As someone involved in these events but not central, hurt but not incapacitated, connected by friendship and common values with those whose stories I felt should not be lost, witness to much of what happened and holder of a great deal of information, I was, I felt, in as good a position as anyone to figure out what happened, why it happened and propose a model for institutions to deal with conflicts of this nature. Others involved in these events have written and published their perspectives on it, of course different from mine. I can’t provide references because of the need to protect anonymity, but their work forms part of a growing literature on issues of institutional injustice and change.

The five women interviewed for the story chose pseudonyms. All other actors are identified by their institutional title or role. As part of my responsibility to make the story as anonymous as possible, I have changed the years in which it happened. I have, however, preserved the internal chronology of events.

In the chapters that follow the story, I give my own analysis of what happened, in terms of the institutional patterns displayed. I explore other writers to find documentation of other institutional patterns in circumstances like these. Finally, I propose some methods that I think will improve the way we go about solving the problem of oppression in institutions. Like *Becoming an Ally* before it, this book is part of an ongoing conversation. May it lead us towards justice.