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**Letting Go**

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Complex systems that exist "on the boundary between order and chaos" are the most likely to evolve. (Csikszentmihalyi, 1993, p. 318)

Growing up, my life was rather crazy. We moved quite often and by the tenth grade, I had attended twelve different schools. I was always the new kid in school, somehow always starting school at least a week after everyone else. I would spend months alone, and right around the time I made a few friends, we moved again. Don't get me wrong, it wasn't all bad. Moving every year provided me with a new school library, and I could curl up in each book and escape from the craziness for hours on end. Moving every year also gave me a chance to start over, to leave behind those things in my life that had gotten out of control. Growing up, I lived in two worlds. One world made sense, with loving parents, family vacations, pink bedspreads and dust ruffles, laughter, and cookies after school. The other world that I lived in was filled with secrets and shadows, places to hide, sticky fingers, and monsters under the bed.

When I was thirteen, life took a turn for the worse. We moved to the same town that my uncle lived in—the uncle that liked young girls. For years, I blamed myself. I should have seen it coming, should have known somehow. But I didn't. That first time, alone with him, I was caught by surprise. After that, each visit to his house was evidence to me of my own culpability in creating the shadows and secrets in my other world. It also confirmed for me the need to be on guard at all times and in control.

Perhaps it was my knowledge of the dark side that awakened my sympathy for the victim, the underdog, and the exploited. Perhaps my outrage against injustice was a safe way for me to scream. Perhaps it was a twisted admiration for my father who failed to keep me safe, but reached out to others who needed help. In the end, it doesn't matter. For whatever reasons, I joined the ranks of social activism early and I believe this saved my life. As the demons of my childhood chased me into adulthood, I found refuge in the arms of politics. I slipped easily into the accoutrements of a radical, having had no membership in typically significant social clubs such as girls waiting to lose their virginity.

At the age of 23, I joined a Marxist organization and buried my childhood nightmares under a stack of leaflets and newspapers. I found a new library to crawl into and escape, beginning with Marx's *Das Kapital* and quickly moving on to Engels, Lenin, Stalin, Mao, and Enver Hoxha. I found the freedom to rage against an acceptable monster—the capitalist system. With a renewed purpose for living, I gave up my attempts at suicide, and was too busy to roam the streets or close the bars. Among the misfits and intellectuals of The Marxist Leninist Party (MLP), I discovered an acceptance based on unity for a common goal, and for the first time in my life, a sense of community.

For fifteen years, I worked side by side with other activists in a tireless effort to bring down the system of capitalism and all its woes. I worked in low-paid factory jobs, wrote leaflets and speeches, worked on the national newspaper, marched, picketed, knocked on doors, and defended clinics. I left my children with friends or family and drove all night to cities that included Chicago, Washington, D.C., New York, and Boston, so I could march all day and drive home again with no sleep. I raised my family in the midst of songs against apartheid in South Africa and campaigns against Reagan's budget cuts. I struggled to pay the rent during the eighties, laid off more often than not. Through it all, I developed a level of awareness about the capitalist system that haunts me today.

In 1991, my childhood monsters caught up with me and I went into crisis. I remember the year clearly, because the U.S. was bombing Iraq and I was having a difficult time at work. I had left the factories in 1988 because of a repetitive motion injury and found work at Beaumont Hospital in the patient transportation department. Among the low-paid hospital workers, I found a sympathetic ear for revolutionary politics, and in the fall of 1990, there was a fair amount of anti-war sentiment. As the campaign to "support the troops" became more frenzied, those with the anti-war sentiment grew quieter and I became more and more isolated. On New Year's Day, my husband of seven years announced he wanted a divorce. Between the arguments at work over the war and my husband's plans to leave, I found myself falling apart minute by minute. After waiting weeks for an insurance referral, I finally saw a psychiatrist who gave me a prescription for anti-depressant drugs and made an appointment for me to see a counselor. The Prozac at least allowed me to function enough to go to work and take care of my two teen-aged children from a previous marriage while I tried to save my marriage.

It was out of some deep-seated guilt (I learned later), that my husband agreed to try marriage counseling. With renewed hope, I read all the recommended books and tried to figure out what was at the heart of this dysfunctional family we had created. (For years I had joked that I was a single mom, married to a bachelor.) He, on the other hand, had very little to say. When I approached him with the idea that my childhood traumas could be playing a role in our relationship, his response was less than enthusiastic. He said he couldn't see how events that had happened thirty years ago, could have anything to do with today. After four months of having little to say in our counseling sessions, he lifted his head and announced that it would require more time, effort, and energy than he was willing to give in order to save our marriage. He announced he was leaving within the week. My counselor's response was to announce that it was going to be our last session together anyway, because she was leaving for a job in another town. My abandonment issues hit an all time high and my world fell apart.

As I watched him pull away with his things packed in the car, I felt like I was dying. I collapsed on the kitchen floor and began to make phone calls, trying to find some help. Over the next few months I found a new counselor and some self-help groups, and slowly pulled myself together. As my therapy progressed, I began to question some of the political views of those around me. I realized that to deny the importance of the individual for the sake of the revolution was to deny the essence of the need for overthrowing capitalism—our humanness. I began a journey of discovery, re-examining my beliefs, slowly sorting the wheat from the chaff. I began to rethink what was important in life. I realized that there was an imbalance in my life, that I was spending too much time working for social change and paying too little attention to human relationships. While I still felt very strongly about the need for a fundamental change in society to end exploitation and inequality, I also saw the importance of helping individuals in their own day-to-day personal struggles, based on my own search for help. I also questioned the viability of a fundamental change in this system at this time, and I began to see the need for the achievement of more immediate goals. I began to have more of an orientation of concentrating on the positive and placing importance on human relationships. I reached out to my children, whom I had ignored for the sake of the cause, and took a parenting class, which helped to repair some damage.

I began to question some of the judgmental attitudes of my comrades. I began to question their lack of acceptance of differing views and ideas and their over-emphasis on being politically correct. My main concern arose over the question of religion. Out of my own personal struggles, I began to see the need for religion to be left as a personal issue, and that an individual's faith

should not be criticized or ridiculed as unimportant. I became more sensitive to the rigid views that, I believed, were underlying the judgmental attitudes in the MLP, rigid views that meant denouncing those who failed to agree with everything the group believed in. It had always bothered me that some comrades were so quick to criticize, but now I was beginning to see that it appeared to be a defense mechanism for the inability to think outside the written doctrine. There was a safety in the black and white delineation of "us and them." This, along with blind obedience to "orthodox" Marxist positions, smacked of being a religion of its own. I began to see the danger in imposing ideas or demanding action from people before they had come to those conclusions themselves. I had learned that change was part of a process and felt that people must be allowed to come to conclusions out of their own experience and thoughtfulness, since to do otherwise would be to dictate social consciousness. I began to rethink the Leninist theories of proletarian revolution, that a group of "more conscious" workers would lead the rest of society in both carrying out the revolution and building a new society based on socialism. In reality, this means that a small group of people, who may have the best of intentions, would impose their conclusions about how society should be organized on everyone else.

As I look back now, I can see that this ideological struggle was yet another step towards developing social work values and principles, even before I knew anything about social work. My hard work has led me to a place where I understand the need to accept people for who they are and where they are in their journey. As it became clear to me that I was on a different path, it became more and more difficult to even discuss the changes in my orientation with my former comrades. This was particularly hard since I had begun a spiritual journey, which is a tough road for a communist atheist. In 1992, I resigned membership in the MLP.

By 1995, I emerged out of the fog and shadows of my childhood with a new enthusiasm for the endless possibilities of my new life, and I applied to Wayne State University. I thoroughly enjoyed each one of the required classes at Wayne, and I began to search for a field I could contribute to, given my dedication to social justice, and my newly found sentience for the importance of human relationships. Finding the Thompson Home was like coming home. I was excited to learn about the broad range of possible fields that social work offered, along with an open commitment for social change. Over the past ten years, I have struggled to reconcile my political history with my personal and spiritual growth. With questions and doubts about the ideology that I had held so dear, I have worked hard to figure out what I believe in and who I am. Part of my struggle has been to find new friends and like-minded people to share both my political

concerns and my history, without feeling judged. Within the School of Social Work, I have found encouragement, support and acceptance.

As I wrestled with choosing the content for this paper, my unresolved political questions were beginning to surface at my macro field placement. More than anything else, my commitment to write this paper afforded me the opportunity to delve deeper into my history and try to find some answers. It became clear to me that the real reward would not be winning the scholarship, but the actual process itself and my subsequent growth.

During the first few months of field placement at the church, my fellow student and I attempted to investigate the community surrounding the church. Following an initial search through statistics and records to find the basic demographics on poverty, homelessness, socio-economic and racial composition, and its history, we moved on to the task of finding out what needs existed and what recourses were available. We were not surprised to find a myriad of needs but were somewhat puzzled to find an even large number of service organizations working in the community. As we interviewed some of the service providers, it appeared that there was a lack of cooperation and a duplication of services in several areas. In fact, we couldn't help but notice an unspoken and somewhat hostile competition for clients between service providers, and an air of territorialism, perhaps due to the competition over grant monies. My initial response was to be somewhat demoralized. How did this happen? Perhaps it was the result of the move to privatize charity during the Reagan and Bush administrations. I began to wonder how this competitive and adversarial atmosphere could be changed. Since the source seemed to be the government and capitalist mentality, I was hard pressed for any answers.

As the weeks went by, it became clear that our project for the year was to assist the community to get organized so they could have a voice in the changes that are going on in the area. Again, the contradictions of capitalism reared their ugly heads. On the one hand, exciting things were happening in the Cass Corridor. Old, historic brick houses were being refurbished, apartment buildings redone and occupied, old industrial buildings that sat empty for years were being turned into expansive lofts. At first glance, the rebirth of this neighborhood that had been abandoned and neglected was exciting. On the other hand, if you look more closely at this renaissance, it becomes clear that this rebirth was clearly one-sided and would benefit only those with money. This gentrification may beautify the neighborhood, but the poor and disenfranchised who have occupied the streets and buildings for the past twenty years are not included in the

plans. This development has meant an increase in prices for land, homes and rent, which is good news for those who own property, but will mean further devastation for those who live on the edge. Poor folks who have stayed in this neighborhood over the years, either out of economic necessity or a stubborn refusal to flee to the suburbs, will now be forced out. They will not be given the chance to reap the benefits of this renaissance and rebirth. One newly posted sign, for new housing on Peterboro, pretty much says it all. It announces affordable housing units starting at \$69,000! The developers and contractors who are dumping money into these projects have made it clear that the homeless are not welcome. The homeless are under attack by the police, with bulldozers scooping up all their worldly possessions in early morning clean-up efforts. Homeless shelters are unable to purchase the vacant adjacent lots in order to expand their services because of the rising cost from rampant land speculation for future projects.

In the face of this, what can the residents do? If this neighborhood had been a vital community over the years, perhaps it would be in a position to rally, through already existing groups and organizations, to fight this drive for development and gentrification. But this neighborhood has suffered the brunt of the white flight and the economic bust of the last twenty years and is disorganized and broken up from previous development, such as the medical center. To make matters worse, the city has been making decisions behind closed doors, excluding the residents in the area from having a voice in the plans.

My field placement has raised a serious question for me. How do social workers involved in community organizing deal with the frustration of working within the capitalist system? To answer this question, I found myself in yet another library, among the stacks of Purdy/Kresge, where I was introduced to other social workers that have grappled with these same questions. During the Depression, social workers struggled with the immensity of need and lack of resources along with a growing consciousness about the ills of capitalism and the need for building a new society. In her autobiography, *Uncharted Journey*, Bertha Reynolds describes the struggle of some social workers during the 1930s to change their orientation from one with a concentration on therapy to one of fighting for social change. In the fourth winter of the Depression, she describes many questions raised at the Milford Conference of 1932-33 in New York. She summed up their conclusions with this passage:

Social casework has become professionally conscious. It is not conceivable that it can allow itself to be used by communities to cover exploitation or to distribute the

gifts of philanthropy while the social order is itself destroying life by its injustices. It grows clearer day by day that the future of social work is bound up with the coming of a sounder social order and the members of this profession have not only the obligation to work for justice which good citizenship implies but the professional duty to make real the conditions under which their service can be given. Whatever of scientific fact-finding they can contribute, whatever of social vision they have gained in work with individuals, social caseworkers must be close to the social engineers in days filled with import for the future of mankind. (Reynolds, 1963, p. 141-142)

Knowing that the capitalists, politicians, and landowners have made their plans in the Cass Corridor, I feel an overwhelming sense of frustration. It is difficult not to succumb to the impossibility of trying to fight this system. My first reaction is to point the finger at the capitalist system, which is aimed at the profit of a few at the expense of many. The logical conclusion is to go after the system itself, but as a social worker, I feel I must try to accept the circumstances in which we have to work. This acceptance is hard to come by and most days I fight my demoralization by repeating the Serenity Prayer, "To accept the things we cannot change, the courage to change the things we can, and the wisdom to know the difference" (As Bill Sees It, 1967, p. 20).

This prayer has allowed me to move forward in my personal life, and to let go of those things over which I have no control. For example, during the last few years, my brother who is HIV+, has continued to drink and abuse drugs in order to cope with his demons. I have spent years trying to convince him to take care of himself, often picking up the pieces when he made poor choices. For two years I rescued him from homelessness and even attempted to take over his finances, to make sure he stayed off the street. I finally had to learn to accept where he was in his path and give up my attempts to control his life.

And so I try to let go of those things I cannot change, and concentrate on those things over which I have control. I am beginning to see that for the Cass Corridor community, it may not be possible to beat back the tide of renewed development for the benefit of the upper class. The homeless may be pushed out into a poorer area, and the seniors may not be able to stay in their homes as the rents go up, and they, too, may have to move. In the end, the Cass Corridor may become a ritzy, expensive gentrified neighborhood where only the upper crust can afford to live.

But I am convinced that it is only the process of trying to defend the interests of the residents that really matters, even if it is only in the realm of defining what kind of world or neighborhood they want to live in. I put my faith not in some miracle of victory in our war against capitalism, but in the process of our attempt. How we conduct ourselves in that process is the true victory. Through this process we will learn and grow, we will make friends and comrades, and in the end, those of us who unite for the cause of the underclass will be better armed for the next battle. The key, I believe, is to cling even more tightly to what is important in life: the human condition, not the profit margin. If we conduct ourselves with integrity and kindness, concentrate on building the positive, on building community, honesty and trust between neighbors, then we will make in-roads—even if they are small—against the influence of capitalism. Both the professionals and residents can take these lessons into the next struggle, and take one more step in the evolution towards a better society. For it is in learning how to not stoop to the level of the capitalist mentality, not to fight over clients or grant money, that we will learn the skills we need to build a new society. Struggling with similar issues, Bertha Reynolds, participating in a 1934 symposium called "Philosophies emerging," concluded that:

Social work today is standing at the crossroads. It may go on with its face towards the past, bolstering up the decaying profit system, having to defend what is indefensible for the sake of money which pays for its services. On the other hand it may envision a future in which professional social service as well as education, medical service, and the like, shall be the unquestioned right of all, conferred not as a benefit but as society's only way of maintaining itself . . . . If we can form some conception of what a community based on co-operation instead of exploitation would be like, if we can see our casework with individuals as preparing them to live in and carry the responsibilities of such a society, undoubtedly that kind of blueprint of what we are working toward will affect decidedly many of our procedures in casework with individuals. (Reynolds, p. 143)

We cannot build a new society in which all persons have equality and worth if we spend our time tearing down others and judging who they are. Some people might say that it is capitulation to accept the capitalists for who they are. But what other choice do we have? I cannot convince my brother to end his self-destructive behavior, but can only set healthy boundaries and control my own behavior. I will not spend all my time, energy, and money to bail him out and in essence assist him to continue to kill himself. Instead I confront him with love and honesty, I say

no to his efforts to draw me into his crazy world, I set an example through my own actions, and show him alternatives. I cannot control him anymore than I can control the capitalist system, but I can choose a path that is not self-destructive—one that is based on honesty, love, compassion, and respect. As we as humans make choices to walk in this path, instead of the well-worn path of "me first," "mine," and material gain, then there will be fewer and fewer people to participate in capitalist exploitation and, like a trail headed up the mountain, it will disappear. As Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "Do not go where the path may lead, go instead where there is no path and leave a trail" (Emerson, Date Unknown).

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