

Simon's Story

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Counseling for social justice brings to mind public advocacy for our clients. This is to say, there are times when we should empower our clients to take action for themselves against forces which hold them at a disadvantage and deny them their human and civil rights. Sometimes, however, counseling for social justice may simply amount to listening to clients' life stories and helping them to understand when and how social forces may negatively impact their ability to live healthy and self-fulfilling lives.

Simon came to my private practice as a court-ordered sex-offender. He had received treatment for his offense in prison, but now sought an individual therapist instead of another group encounter as a way of understanding more deeply what motivated his behavior. Simon relayed the central facts of his case in a straightforward manner; he was clearly accustomed to telling his story. He had pled no-contest to several counts of gross sexual imposition, abduction and stalking and had served six years in prison—from ages 21 to 27. During his time in prison, Simon isolated himself from the violence of prison life by reading. He became friends with a few other inmates who were similarly inclined, and they began a reading program which included many of the classics of western philosophy and history.

At this point, I noticed that, although Simon had come to our session from his job as a factory worker, he carried with him two bags of books from the local library. I asked what he was reading. He took out the books to show me several volumes of history. One book he singled out in a very special way: "This is by my favorite author, Herodotus." I inquired as to what made Herodotus his favorite. Simon replied that "The *Histories* of Herodotus explain what went on between the Greeks and the Persians, the battles of two great cultures, the struggle for power." "Why was that so interesting?" I inquired. "For most of my life I have been trying to figure out how things work. In school, I was one of the few Black kids in the gifted program, and I was picked on and bullied. Then I dropped out and got an OK job in a bank, but quickly realized I was never going to really get anywhere. To get somewhere I needed more schooling, but that was what got me no friends; it got me beat up. I was just confused and fucked up and didn't know it."

Over several sessions, Simon began to unfold in more detail the sexual offense which brought him to prison. To get to and from his job, Simon needed to ride public transportation. He became aware that when he rode one particular bus line he would ride past a local girls' high

school. Several of the girls would get on the bus. At first Simon just watched the girls. He was mesmerized by their outgoingness, how much fun they seemed to be having, how it seemed as if they didn't have a care in the world. He listened to their conversations, discussions about school, boys and appearances. At this point in his life, Simon was still a virgin. As he told me this, he looked at me and said "I know you probably find this hard to believe, but I was too shy. Everybody thinks all Black men are players, but it just isn't true. I was raised strict."

What occurred next happened over a period of several weeks. Simon gradually moved to the back of the bus where the girls sat. He began talking to them, participating in the fun that they were having. In his mind they seemed interested in him. They asked him questions about himself, and Simon became aware that these suburban White girls saw him as a friendly, yet somewhat mysterious, representation of all the Black guys they saw on TV and in music videos. They awarded him a kind of status that he had never had. The bookish kid who had been bullied and beaten up was now seen as somebody, somebody powerful and a bit scary, but also fun to talk to.

Over time, Simon gradually used the power he had, combined with the girls' hesitancy to offend him, to begin touching these girls in sexually inappropriate ways. According to Simon the girls never told him to stop, but he could tell that they were scared. "If you knew they were scared, why didn't you stop?" I asked him. "It made me feel strong to know what I could get away with. Anyway, I thought it couldn't hurt them that much—their lives were so perfect, they had so much. Why couldn't I have something?"

"How do you know they have so much?" I asked. It was then that Simon told me about riding the buses with his friend when they were both in middle school.

"We both hated our neighborhood. It was dirty and run down. There was garbage and broken glass. There was nothing to do. One summer we started riding the buses. We would go downtown and get a bus and see where we ended up. One day we got a bus that took us way out to some White neighborhood in the suburbs. We got off the bus and began walking around. It was like no place I ever was before. The houses were all big and had lots of grass. There was no garbage, no sirens, no noise. There were flowers everywhere and parks with swing sets and basketball hoops. We didn't really see many people, just houses and streets. As we walked, we imagined that we lived there. We dreamed up families and jobs and what we would be doing. Afterwards, we got back on the bus and went home. Later that summer, my friend moved, but I

still took that bus and visited that neighborhood. Sometimes I just stayed on the bus until the end of the line. The people from that neighborhood would get on and I would look at them—I told myself that they were only people like me, but I didn't really believe it. They lived where they lived, and I lived where I lived; there was a big difference and it made me angry. Those White girls on the bus, they were from a neighborhood like that. They lived in those houses. I could tell; they acted like those people, as if they didn't have a care in the world.”

As we processed this story, we were able to begin connecting the dots from Simon's youthful experiences of the racial and cultural divides to Simon's coercive assertion of power through sex several years later. Given no outlet, Simon's anger and frustration at seeing himself as forever on the outside looking in led him to express himself in a wholly inappropriate way. When he made this connection Simon was able to recognize, and even to 'own,' some of his impulses which led to his victimization of others. Before these connections were recognized, Simon knew what he had done, but he was, in my view, bewildered by his actions. As he said to me, “I liked those girls. I didn't want to hurt them.” Yet it can be well argued that another part of Simon did want to hurt them and everything they represented.

Ironically, although unable to fully comprehend the inner motivation that fueled his actions, Simon's own self-directed reading focused on the same issues: issues of power and domination. Placed side-by-side, Simon's personal history as a sex offender and his fascination with the *Histories* of Herodotus were both attempts, albeit unconscious, to understand and master the world in which he found himself, a world of inequality and the subjugation of the powerless by the powerful.

Simon's counseling did not end with the telling of his story. Much more work was needed before he was able to understand and own all of his impulses. However, pointing out the connection between his anger and sense of disenfranchisement allowed him to begin to understand the forces that shaped him, and if he wasn't careful, could dominate and control him. Through counseling Simon gained the ability to choose to respond to his world rather than simply to react to it.

When Simon first entered my office he was trapped at the intersection of two powerful forces: society's treatment of African-Americans, especially Black males, and his own thwarted impulses to assert himself in a world that seemed to be dominated by those with the most power. While prior counseling had broken through his defenses and had brought to the forefront the

wrongness of his actions, it had not moved him towards understanding either his actions or himself. Sex offenses are viewed as so heinous that perpetrators are often treated as aliens who deserve a special brand of counseling, one in which confrontation and castigation lead to behavioral control. While the need to stop behavior that is so harmful and soul-destroying is necessary and understandable, this should not be the single focus of counseling. It is not oxymoronic to state that one way to advocate for victims, is to advocate for an understanding of sexual offenders. This is particularly true when race, sex, and power coincide.

As a young Black male and a sex offender, Simon was an individual not many would choose to advocate for. He had committed reprehensible acts and he embodied a racial divide and a stereotyping of the Black male that is as old as the earliest settlements in the colonies. His offenses stirred up some of the deepest fears of a white society. As advocates for social justice, Simon presents us with some unique challenges - - personally and professionally. It is personally comforting to advocate for homeless families who are victims of the economic downturn, or for individuals denied human rights because of their race, ethnic status or sexual orientation. It is initially more difficult to see the connection between the actions of a sex offender and the structural inequities and systemic racism of our society. Yet, those connections are clearly there. My work with Simon taught me that advocacy is not always simple and straightforward. Sometimes, it requires us to trace its roots to the deformations of self and psyche nurtured in poisoned soil.

Society as a whole needs to learn what counselors have learned through their work with clients like Simon: personal maladjustment often arises out of a difficult and complex personal and societal context. Society is right in requiring maladjusted citizens to become responsible citizens. At the same time, society must take responsibility for the social contexts that give birth to people like Simon. Listening to Simon non-judgmentally is one form of advocacy, but it is not enough. As counselors, we must also work towards a more just and equitable society.

Each of us needs a personal action plan, a plan which is proactive rather than reactive. Whether we act by speaking out against stereotyping and systemic economic inequalities, by educating our fellow citizens about the societal consequences of racism and marginalizing, by providing low-cost counseling services, or by supporting candidates and policies which seek to create a society which fosters the healthy growth and development of all, we need to move out of the consulting room and into the public sphere.

### **Applications for Social Justice**

- Advocating for a client begins when counselors are able to listen non-judgmentally.
- Pervasive social inequalities result in complex psychic distortions. Not all who have experienced discrimination and stereotyping are initially attractive clients who are easy to empathize with.
- Advocating for social justice might begin in the consulting room and then extend into society.
- By informing the wider public of insights gained from clients, counselors are educating as well as advocating for social justice.