VOICES

: on difference

A student-led journal focusing on issues of social justice

"Like snowflakes, the human pattern is never cast twice. We are uncommonly and marvelously intricate in thought and action, our problems are most complex and, too often, silently borne."

-Alice Childress, 1984

Editors' Note

As the photo on the cover of this journal reminds us, each snowflake is different. Yes, this sentiment may be a bit of a cliché, but it is particularly relevant to the social work field. In the photo, we see snowflakes that have landed on a car windshield. From the driver's seat, we can clearly see the details of each snowflake and how it stands out sharply against the blurry background. Similarly, as we get to know our clients or patients, we learn about not only what makes them stand out but also how they fit into their surroundings.

Just as every person we work with is different and has a story that makes him or her unique, it's important to remember that *we as social workers* are all different, too. While some of us may have similar motivations for getting into the social work field, we each have a unique history and set of experiences that have shaped us into who we are. We hope this journal can provide a forum for sharing what we bring to the profession. In choosing "difference" as the theme of our first issue, we wanted to hear students' views on what it is that makes people unique.

What we received in response was just that and more. Our contributors shared personal stories that shed light on themselves and let us in on their incredible experiences. It is now our pleasure to share these essays with you; we hope that you enjoy them as much as we have. Please consider contributing to the next issue of VOICES.

Cover photo credit: Ashley Carraher, MSW Candidate '12

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Embracing Difference
Jocelyn Spencer Sagrati, MSW Candidate '11

When we are young, it doesn't take long for us to learn that if the color of our skin, our dialect, or the god we worship is different from the majority group, we may be harshly judged or ridiculed. It takes a bit longer to learn that if our internal workings—our thoughts, drives, perceptions, and feelings—are significantly different from the norm, there may be social consequences to pay. Not long after learning these lessons, we begin to internalize our differences and seek safety in 'sameness.' We learn to believe that if we are too different from others, we are most likely flawed in some way. Many of us learn that differences should be concealed, not revealed.

It is a sobering reality that the vast majority of us will experience trauma at some point in our lives. Traumatic experiences rearrange our internal workings by causing us to question what we know about ourselves, the people in our lives, and the safety of the world around us. Survivors of significant trauma or abuse typically feel disconnected and profoundly different from other members of society. At my field placement, the clients that I counsel in individual therapy are all survivors of childhood sexual abuse, and they also exhibit this tendency. When asked to explore ways that their trauma has affected how they see themselves, these young men and women choose adjectives such as 'broken,' 'enclosed,' and 'detached.' I interpret their responses to mean that they feel flawed, separate, and profoundly different from their peers.

The violations of self which survivors of abuse have endured often leave them feeling deeply ashamed and unable to make meaning of past events. It is not uncommon for trauma survivors to describe themselves as exposed and vulnerable. Fear of being judged typically prevents these individuals from sharing their personal stories, an endeavor that could help them to connect with others who have had similar experiences and who could remind them that they are not alone in their difference.

MSW candidates study human behavior through a theoretical lens that helps us to better understand the impact of the social environment. As I progress through my course work, I cannot help but take a closer look at my own social interactions and life course trajectory. I am not alone in my discovery of previously unseen patterns in my life, and I am not the only student who has found renewed purpose in my own personal struggles during the course of my study. As we became more familiar with one another as classmates, many of us began to peel away our protective layers. Together, we exposed our challenges, misgivings, and foibles; extolled our triumphs; and shared wisdom gained from valuable life lessons. In finding the courage to lay bare our differences, we learned that we have much in common, and that we are far more alike than we thought.

The simple act of sharing ourselves with others—be it in a classroom, at home with family and friends, or in the workplace—reminds us of the healing power of mutual aid. Revealing aspects of ourselves that we deem unseemly, regrettable, challenging, and *different* from others can be difficult and frightening, but in the long run it enables us to become fully actualized human beings…and ultimately better social workers. To use the language of social work, it is our past experiences—the good, the bad, and the ugly—that inform our understanding of how we might best serve those whom we seek to help. We discover that when we bring our whole selves into our work, we truly meet our clients wherever it is that they may be on their path of transformation and change. We can do this because we are on that same path, continuing to learn and grow as we progress in collaboration with them.

"By definition, trauma survivors are courageous."

Unlike the clients whom I counsel, I have not been victimized by sexual abuse. I am, however, a survivor of trauma. I have endured desperate situations, overcome great disappointments and personal failures, and have witnessed and shared in suffering and loss. Like many trauma survivors, I sometimes fear that asking for assistance will make me appear less strong than I believe myself to be, or that others might view a request for help as a sign of weakness. To overcome this fear, I remind myself that by definition, trauma survivors are courageous. They are individuals who have suffered great injustices and have met tremendous obstacles, yet have prevailed by tapping into inner reserves of resilience, and have been able to move forward in productive ways that allow them to find some measure of peace with their past. It takes great courage to be 'different' in this way.

I realize now that the experiences that I once felt set me apart from others are actually my most important social work tools. I also realize that I don't have a professional persona that I selectively bring into the clinical setting. I simply bring myself: a fully integrated and whole person who has learned to appreciate and celebrate both the sorrows and joys of her life. I have embraced the conflicting sides of my life experience because I have learned that when we are authentic, our dark side and our light side can coexist, in much the same way that revealing our differences actually makes us more similar. By bringing my authentic self into my social work practice I extend an invitation to my clients to do the same. It is my sincere hope that they will feel comfortable enough to come as they are.

Deconstructing the Rules of Privilege and Oppression
Burgandy Holiday, MSW Candidate '12

In the past, I have often been ambivalent when considering historic and daily acts of oppression. As a person living within multiple categories of long-term systematic oppression, it is hard for me to find a way to fully engage in the dialogue without responding with feelings of outrage when I learn about another means of oppression, or frustration when some oppressive act I have experienced or have knowledge of personally is called to public attention, and others cannot believe that it could even exist. I've found that my emerging dual identity as an oppressed person and social work professional has allowed me to look at the experiences of my life through a new lens; it helps me understand how people of color could experience wide professional success alongside a discontent with their place in the world at large, or the privileges of whiteness that some seem to be unaware of, but people of oppressed status often know too keenly. Peggy McIntosh (1989) identified ways in which whites are given certain undue privileges in our society as "white privilege" and visualized it as an "invisible knapsack full of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools and blank checks" (p. 10).

In particular, I find myself thinking about how white privilege affects me, and my own role in its eradication. I initially felt powerless in changing anything; I worried that my lack of privileged status would not give me sufficient access to those that have little concept of their "invisible knapsack." I then had a minor epiphany when I realized that this sense of powerlessness in the eradication of oppression was something I learned in my youth. I now feel empowered, by Peggy McIntosh's effort to acknowledge and confront her white privilege, and have begun to consider the contents of my own knapsack—within it lie the secret rules of living as a person of color that I call the *Brown Rules.*

In my own life, I have learned that for people of color, there is a set of rules for their interaction with the oppressor, often referred to in blanket terms as whites. These Brown Rules are typically passed on to others via direct and indirect teaching. These rules are taught early in our lives by family members, religious leaders, teachers, older siblings, and other influential people in our lives. While they are not always the healthiest way of managing the delicate relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed, they are in place to accommodate oppressive forces. They provide a buffer zone and a sense of power in otherwise powerless situations. The first few rules I can remember being taught as a person of color are:

- The oppressed must act like oppressive intimidation is not occurring. In fact, they are expected to smile through the indignity they experience.
- To ensure access to the resources of the oppressor, the oppressed must show that they are helpless or nonthreatening.
- The oppressed must fit themselves into an oppressor-identified stereotype or caricature of their group in order to be "accepted." This is often referred to as *shucking and jiving.*

These rules are ingrained early in us, and if a person of color is to succeed in typical ways in the white world, they must stick closely to these rules. There are individuals who ignore the Brown Rules, opting to go the path of uncompromising personal authenticity. These people are to be admired for their pursuit of authenticity, but oftentimes are admonished for their unwillingness to accommodate the guilt of the oppressor. For example, both Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm "X" Little were dynamic leaders and advocates for equal rights. Some suggest that King has a day of remembrance and Little has none due to their differing ways of achieving their common goal. Many see King as passive, safe, and willing to accommodate the needs of the oppressor to accomplish his goals, and Little's acts of pointing to the transgressions of white America and bearing arms to protect his community and family by any means necessary as harsh, unnecessary, and drastic. This "calling out" of the oppressor made Little appear "unreasonable" or radical, and therefore his value in the civil rights movement has in ways been diminished by not providing a larger societal acknowledgement through days of remembrance and road renaming. Changing a street's name implies a city or region accepts this person and what they stood for as a part of its collective identity. Seattle is located in King County, Washington. The official logo on the county website uses a picture of Martin Luther King, Jr. Additionally, I could find statistics for 730 roads across the country renamed for King, but no comparable statistics to give insight into the number that of roads renamed for Little. The oppressed, typically living in communities rendered "unsavory" by the oppressed, should under no circumstances invite the oppressor to their homes—this is informed by the reoccurring reference to the community as a "warzone."

I learned this rule when I asked if my high school friend could come to my grandmother's home one day for a visit. My grandmother promptly told me that he could sit on the steps, but he could not come in. It was November, and I knew immediately what she meant was that he was not welcome in her home. Years later, I met a white "hipster-type" at a party. The neighborhood I was raised in came up in conversation, and he likened it

> *"For people of color, there is a set of rules for their interaction with the oppressor."*

to a third-world country. A friend from the same neighborhood stood there with me witnessing this affront, feeling powerless and unable to speak. My friend and I quickly moved on to talk with others at the party, changing the subject until we could discuss this without "mixed company." Later in the evening we rattled off numerous stories of people who cared about the community and the families and relationships that grew there.

- The above mentioned rules should be kept within the community, and guarded. The oppressors' knowledge of these rules may cause confusion that could turn to anger and retribution. The oppressed population is often reliant on the oppressor for access to resources for success, financial stability, and social status change.

There is no written documentation of these rules, just as there was none prior to Peggy McIntosh's effort to create a written record of white privilege. As an emerging social worker, I have found myself in conversations, explaining how these systems of oppression began, the undue privileges they offer to the oppressor, and occasionally find myself in the role of the voice of the oppressed. In this role of translating the feelings, the coping techniques, and the rationales, I feel both empowered as a part of the eradication of oppression, and in some ways a betrayer to the oppressed. I imagine that this article could be considered a major faux pas to many, as I have blatantly broken one of the rules by even sharing this concept. I see this not as an "outing" of the oppressed, but an earnest attempt to begin demystifying a portion of the phenomena that stands in the way of truly understanding the nuances of oppression as they relate to race. I hope that this brief article is the genesis of an open discourse on the topic, and that we collectively can continue considering these "Brown Rules" and dig deeper into the concept of the unsaid rules of the oppressed in their interactions with the oppressor. I hope that this discourse can be a part of the liberation of many who may still be oppressed.

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Endangered Species: Farm Girl
Heather Sowers, MSW Candidate '12

My earliest memory is of holding life in my hands. I stood on a chair at the kitchen sink next to my grandmother as she cleaned a chicken she had just butchered. She reached in and pulled out an egg from inside the now dead hen. I remember the rubbery feel of the shell-less egg and marveling, in the wondrous way only small children can do, at how hens sit on eggs for a month until tiny furry chicks peck their way into the world. I don't think there's a single picture of me prior to age 5 that does not contain a chick, duckling, kitten, puppy, lamb, calf, piglet, or at the very least a flower, tree, or some evidence of nature. I could drive our John Deere Skid Steer by the time I was 6 even though I dreamed of becoming Amish when I grew up so I could live like my heroine, Laura Ingalls Wilder, and drive a horse and buggy.

I'm a farm girl, born in Story City, IA, the heartland of American agriculture. In my family, the Industrial Revolution, when masses of people left the country for the city, happened in my own lifetime. When I was born in 1972, over 75% of my extended family on both parents' sides lived on a farm or made their living from a directly farm-related industry. By the time I was 20, that ratio had decreased to less than 10%. Nowadays, I feel like an endangered species—I don't know anyone my age that grew up on a working farm. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, less than 1% of the U.S. adult population claim farming as an occupation (and about 2% actually live on farms).

Life and death go hand in hand on a farm. In the first decade of my life, I cried over dozens of cats named Fluffy (or Mr. Fluffy), who usually met an early demise being run over by a car, truck or tractor or, in one unfortunate incident, sat on by a half-ton Holstein cow. Yet my father's favorite, a gray calico named Princess, lived to be 20 years old and had a fondness for tomato soup. Though my grandmother was the only person in our family who butchered meat, I always knew that meat came from animals. If a car hit one of our cows when the cows inevitably got out, she would inevitably end up in our freezer. Caring for animals that were being raised for meat did not seem cruel or wrong to me since I did the same thing with vegetables in the garden. I cherish memories of working in the garden with my mother and grandmother, eating peas right out of the pod. To this day, I find it sacrilegious to tarnish nature's perfection by cooking peas and turning crunchy green candy-on-the-vine into soggy little pellets. I ran a large garden at the boarding school where I worked in Montana and one of my students, fascinated by how peas climb, thought I had gone out in the middle of the night and wrapped the little tendrils around the trellis myself!

Why should social workers in suburban or urban areas be concerned about rural America? Rural inhabi-

tants constitute a definite disenfranchised minority in this country. They rarely have the economic or political power to make their voices truly heard on issues that affect their communities. And, as more people leave rural areas for urban settings, chances increase that social workers may someday work with a rural client in an urban or suburban setting. I was in fifth grade when my family left the Midwest and moved to the East Coast. We had lost our family farm and my father had been hired to run a large dairy farm on the Eastern Shore of Maryland; within a year we had left the farm entirely when my father took a new job in a farming-related industry. That transition made an impact on our entire family. I was devastated that our cat, Tapioca, kept running away and traveling several miles back to the farm. For the first time in my life, we had neighbors and bought milk from the store—even whole milk tasted like milk-flavored water compared to what we were used to. I remember crying to the school nurse one day because I was stressed out by how different everything was.

Imagine what it's like for a person from a place with literally one stop light in the whole county to move near a city with more people than their whole state. It can be exciting and also terrifying. In the 10 years prior to my relocation, I hadn't lived in a home on less than 12 acres (the equivalent of about six city blocks). Commuting nightmares and road rage are unheard of in Montana, where our daytime speed limit was "reasonable and prudent" until 1997.

As a frame of reference, Philadelphia has 1,526,006 as of 2010 people in an area covering 135 square miles, which means 11,304 people per square mile. By contrast, Chester County, PA, with a geographic area of 756 square miles has a population density of 573 people per square mile. Sanders County, MT, is three and a half times bigger than Chester County at 2,762 square miles but only has four people per square mile.

I feel safe and comfortable surrounded by the peace and quiet of nature, whether it's Chester County pastureland or the wild Montana woods. As we tend to our own self-care and encourage clients to do the same, consider spending some time outside and pondering the role that nature plays in all of our lives.

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What does it mean to be Jewish among the African American community, and vice versa? Joe Wood, an African American male who has attended both preparatory school and college alongside a large Jewish population, wonders. Both are categorized beneath the white man, the "WASP," on the hierarchy of American identity (Wood, 20009, p. 420). Both own histories of enslavement, and the disparaging regard toward white oppression is prominent in both the Jewish and African American communities (Wood, 2009). Simply, both communities are united by an underdog sentiment.

Over time, Wood senses a cloaked battle between both groups to claim their people as history's most victimized. He encounters a Jewish population that is sympathetic to the African American plight, though condescending undertones lurk between the lines (Wood, 2009). While the Jews in Wood's prep school claim overall disdain for their gentile cohorts, later, in attending Yale University, Wood witnesses a strange sort of Jewish admiration for the WASP, and perhaps a secret longing to be considered equal with their non-Jewish counterparts. Similarly, in the African American community, while Jewish neighbors are viewed through the lens of a collective stereotype—cheap, evasive, but resourcefully venerable—they are considered to have mastered the art of unity, of working together, of finding prosperity in unification (Wood, 2009). The example of Jewish progress is not lost on the community (Wood, 2009). Does the secret-admiration of Jews for Gentiles mirror the underpinnings of African American consideration of Jews?

At the end of the day, while the hierarchy stands, a heavy line marks a distinction between the tiers of inferiority—and that is race. In America, to be victimized because of skin color is more complex and insidious than being victimized by a historically recognized, "God-given" edict. Jews can hold to their history and culture—they can point to their progressions and achievements and society will concur. Wood acknowledges this when he wonders at his Jewish friend's ability to separate his "outsider" identity with his love for America. History allows Jews to both embrace their victimization while reflecting on it from a place of transcendence (2009, p. 421). They are part of the immigrant population, the hands that built this country (Wood, 2009, p. 422). African Americans, on the other hand, like non-white immigrants in the present day, are not counted among the brave masses upon whose backs the bricks of American foundation were carried, their own place in American history a reminder of an unpleasant chapter in the story of our nation's early days. Forced to the States, their history lost and tattered over a bloody journey at sea, Wood points out that this lack of origin point makes it difficult for African Americans to restart their

journeys beyond enslavement because there *is* no book-marker at which to turn (2009). The history has been lost, and it resumes in an untoward place.

My paternal grandfather was born in New York City in 1918. He went to the City College of New York, and served as a captain in the US Army during World War II. He loved convertibles, and the New York Yankees, and, as evidenced by loose pictures scattered on the bottom drawer of my father's cluttered nightstand, cigars. When I was 9, in that same drawer I discovered a yarmulke. It was white, and soft, and totally foreign to me. Puzzled, I brought it to my father. And that's how I learned that, in addition to my grandfather having been a war hero and cigar enthusiast, he was also Jewish.

It made sense. It was why my father had no real relationship with his paternal grandparents, who had disowned their son for marrying a Christian. It explained the Yahrzeit candle that burned in the kitchen sink for one night every year in October. But little is known of our Jewish heritage. My grandfather was the descendent of French Jews, his parents having emigrated to the States in the early part of the 20th century. There is only a shamefully small part of me that is curious about the ancestors who were murdered in the Holocaust; our surname was shortened at some point in time, and there is no way of tracing the roots. Frankly, my history has never been defined by the ovens of Nazism—though an atheist now, I was raised in the Catholic faith.

But maybe it is also because that Jewish part of me is still white, and part of the population of "model immigrants" that has found a place of acceptance in American history (Wood, 2009, p. 422). And when the Judaism of my past was somehow diluted through marriage to a Gentile, the stigma faded, slipped away unseen, and remained shrouded by decades of accidental ignorance until I uncovered it in that night table drawer. Being white means that I can choose whether or not I am descended from those selected by God to suffer, and to live. And it means that I may also choose to present myself as deeply aligned with my Irish maternal grandparents, their roots entrenched in Catholicism. My whiteness allows me the ambiguity to align myself with the history to which I most closely identify. Either way, I have power, because regardless of my connectedness to either ancestry, the color of my skin does not change. African Americans, the peoples chosen to suffer by the white man, and to flounder at the bottom of a hierarchy of victimization that history has built, don't often get to make that choice.

As Wood (2009) says, the heart is "raised on a mess of stories, then writes its own" (p. 422). Though I don't fully know how my grandfather's story affects mine, I have the choice to weave its threads into my own, or let it lie in the depths of my father's night table. And if I do choose to embrace it, I can do so without jeopardizing my claim to "real" Americanism and the immigrant success story. While the Jewish history of victimization is not so different from that of the African American—the journey of both groups being heavily marred by blood and enslavement—the African American's collective exclusion from "real" American history is where the division lies. This, and the color of African American skin, is what allows the cultural hierarchy to function perversely, even still.

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Advocacy and Social Justice for Individuals Living with Mental Illness
Laura Cekot, MSW Candidate '14

Recently, I have reflected on the oppression of individuals with mental illness, a vulnerable population for whom securing social justice is a constant battle. Mental illness affects individuals across all demographics, and is compounded by a reliance on the very systems that oppress them. Laws governing the mental health system are based on the assumption that individuals with mental illness have permanent and lifelong defects. In a sense, they are deemed to be permanently unequal. For example, individuals with severe mental illness (e.g. major depression, schizophrenia, bipolar disorder) who are unable to work also often have strained family relationships. Without financial assistance from loved ones, they are forced to rely on government assistance. Many live below the poverty line, and according to Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) it is estimated that 20-25% of the homeless population has a mental illness. In large part, this type of system has evolved in response to public fear of individuals with severe mental health issues. People often feel the need to be "protected" from this group.

For social workers and other advocates, the conflict between society feeling a need to keep their distance and the rights, autonomy, and self-determination of the person with mental illness presents a significant challenge. How can this population ever be liberated if societal responses continue to be so oppressive? I cannot help but question if this institutional oppression is purposeful and politically motivated to limit the choices for this population and prevent liberation

It is true that for some people with mental illness,

there is a struggle with medical compliance and periods of instability and impulsivity. Risk of harm to oneself, and possibly to others, can be a reality. However, the chance for liberation must be weighed against the social construct that allows the law to oppress and dominate those with mental illness. But at what point is the law prudent in protecting these individuals from themselves and others? Should it even be legislative responsibility? I have no doubt that many will feel that the effects of mental illness will always require some level of social control. I suggest, however, that another way to manage these risks while simultaneously seeking to alleviate oppressive conditions is to work for incremental social change by nurturing family and support systems. Individuals who struggle with mental illness, especially those with what is known as "serious mental illness," often cannot access this lifeline to fundamental stability. When we go to the source of strength and resiliency found in support systems, we can often mitigate the risks that are inherent in the struggle for mental health.

"We need to fight aggressively against stigmatization."

Families live with this lifelong struggle over how much involvement and support to provide their loved ones. This can be in the face of emotional absence or resistance. Families may endure great conflict with their loved ones due to symptoms of the illness. Hine (2006) describes the "narcissism of mental illness": missed holidays, forgotten birthdays, and emotional indifference. Family and loved ones will always debate "the right thing to do" and question how much "control" they should exert. However, the first step toward liberation for this population is to recognize that stabilization of symptomatic behavior is different from controlling the individual. Further, the answer does not lie solely with families; it requires collaboration, support, and choice. When well supported, however, families can work collaboratively to make informed decisions about the appropriate level of intervention for their loved ones. The reality for many people struggling with mental illness is that family support is not available. For these individuals, reliance on other types of formal and informal support systems is absolutely necessary.

There have been great strides made in procuring resources for low income individuals with mental illness. There is no question that effective programs exist, but not enough to adequately serve the needs of this large population. Recent data from the National Institute of Mental Health (2011) reflects that 1 in 4 or 26.2 % of adults in America suffer from a mental illness. Further, these individuals are expected to know how to navigate the complicated system and face rejection and wait lists. *The very reliance on this system perpetuates their oppression.* Even if these individuals opt not to rely on the system

for financial assistance or treatment (as should be their choice), there is a great potential that their psychiatric symptoms, and the stigma that surrounds them, will preclude them from being members of the mainstream.

How can we do better? Individuals with mental health issues should be afforded the choice of the appropriate level of support as needed. New models of service delivery must increase independence and encourage the use of formal and informal supports in an effort to move toward social justice. Increasing funding to support these efforts is a clear necessity. Social workers must recognize the needs of the individual from a strengths-based perspective and focus on autonomy and choice. All factors that could be compounding the oppression of mental illness such as race, culture, class, gender, sexual orientation, and religion need to be taken into account in understanding the experiences and challenges of each individual. We need to fight aggressively against stigmatization. Because society has shown us its power relative to this, our role as advocates is most important.

I agree with David Gil, social justice advocate, that "potentially effective strategies can be devised by rejecting the ones that failed, and by developing alternatives to avoid past mistakes" (Gil, 1998, p. 33). Social justice for this population begins with the support of family and other formal and informal support systems. It requires social workers to see beyond the illness and into the eyes of the individual. We may only witness incremental change toward social justice for this population within our lifetimes, but this cannot influence our ability to give these individuals a voice.

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The Importance of Acceptance
Jennifer Kutney, MSW Candidate '11

Six years ago, I took a course called "Women in Latin America" as a requirement for my minor in Women's Studies. In that class, I met a young woman with whom I had briefly been acquainted through mutual friends and during my time performing in a local *Rocky Horror Picture Show* shadow cast. She happened to identify as a lesbian. We became fast friends and together we suffered through a class that had the potential to be great but ended up being lackluster at best. We stayed in touch on and off over the years but, as it often happens, we fell out of touch for quite some time. Thanks to the magic of social networking websites, we got back in touch in 2009. We reminisced about times in that rather disappointing course, and I found out that she was dating a wonderful woman. One night, we were chatting about nothing in particular and she told me something about herself that she felt was important. With the support of family and friends, she was beginning the process of gender reassignment.

To my surprise, he revealed that I was one of the very few people he had told, and part of what gave him the strength to do so was the bond that we had formed in class. I had taken time to accept him for everything that he was without question and he had never forgotten that, despite not having spoken to me in well over two years. He felt that it was important for me to hear it from him. I was, of course, overwhelmingly happy for him and glad to hear that his family and, more importantly, his girlfriend had accepted him.

I was taught the basics of race and class privilege from an early age. I was also taught that this was not fair and to stand up not just for myself, but for the fair treatment of all people. I have discovered that to do anything else would be to support a system that is built on the mistreatment of others. I was also raised to accept a person for his or her differences as an individual and that we are more than a sum of our parts. From these lessons I have learned two things—the first is that there is an inherent danger to becoming blind to difference. The second is that the first step toward social justice is acceptance.

Since the election of President Barack Obama, there has been talk about how we live in a "post-racist" society and that there is no longer a need for civil rights movements. Throughout the years, we have often heard that we are "post-sexist" and there is no longer a need for feminism. People even go so far as to say that the world is now an accepting place for those in same-sex relationships or who are transgendered. In subscribing to these beliefs, however, one must ignore certain truths. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, African

American men were six times more likely than white men to be incarcerated in 2009 (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2010). One must also ignore the ongoing gender pay gap, which at last count still has women making 80% of male wages (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2009). One must also forget the ongoing battles for marriage and family equality among same-sex couples all over the country that continue to make headlines.

We have, as a society, still not managed to overcome basic injustices based on difference. We have also entered into an era of blindness. It allows those in power to reconcile both privilege-based power and staying silent on matters of oppression. Treating people as though difference does not exist denies a fundamental part of what people, both individually and as a group, experience every day. In doing this, injustices based on these differences are also able to continue unchecked. We must push for acceptance of difference rather than ignore it.

Often, acceptance is a forgotten part of the battle for social justice. Because the strengths-based perspective informs social work practice, we are trained to view difference as an asset rather than a detriment. In learning to see this difference, we can start to identify it in groups and communities as well. We can strive to cherish difference in society rather than fight to make everyone the same.

"Often, acceptance is a forgotten part of the battle for social justice."

Acceptance starts at home, and social justice does as well. It starts with teaching your children not to dismiss someone simply for what they look like, how they speak, or whom they love. It starts with loving your children for their differences. It starts with valuing the power to stand up not just for yourself, but for those who cannot stand up.

Sometimes it even starts with a conversation before class with the person sitting next to you.

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Through the Looking Glass: A Parent's Perspective on Neonatal and Perinatal Pregnancy Loss
Cathy Plaisted, MSW Candidate '11

I remember that hot day in August so well. From the Braxton Hicks contractions, to wondering if my water had really broken, it was all so ordinary, for a first-time mom. I packed my bag and waved goodbye to my neighbors, all of whom assured me that I would probably be back home in a few hours. "Four weeks early? No way! False labor is common for a first-time mom."

Except, in my case it wasn't.

The doctor confirmed that my water had broken, and I labored for hours. My baby had fetal distress. I was rushed into the OR at 4 A.M. and given an emergency C-section. I gave birth to a 4 lb., 15 oz. baby girl named Grace. She was a healthy, pretty, brown-eyed baby with eyes just like her dad's. I was in love with her immediately and completely.

At 4 P.M., the nurses told me that Grace was having a hard time keeping her body temperature stable. "Normal," I was reassured by the nurse, and a quick trip to the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) would be just that. Except, it was the last time I held my daughter without tubes and wires attached all over her body, unless you count when she died. My Grace had three heart defects that her ultrasounds could not detect. She survived two open-heart surgeries, but died from an infection acquired during her recovery. She was 30 days old; she was my first baby, and I loved her. I felt as if my heart had been pulled out of me.

"There is diversity in experience."

Grace's time in the hospital taught me a lot, but mostly that "ordinary" and "normal" don't really matter much to you when you are the exception to the norm. It did not matter at the cemetery to know that other babies had died too. I just felt alone and sad. Family and friends stood by me, but I felt like no one understood. People kept saying that I could have another baby, but all I wanted was to have my baby, my Grace, back in my arms. I missed her so much and I cried more than I could ever imagine possible.

They say when you lose your parents, you lose the past; when you lose your friends or partner, you lose the present. But when you lose a child—you lose the future. If your spouse dies before you, society considers you to be a widow or widower. If your parents predecease you, society considers you to be an orphan. But if your child dies first there is no word to define your status. The closest words we have are "bereaved parents." But what if that child were an infant who died shortly after birth, a baby born still or who died during pregnancy? Then the language becomes even more difficult to understand.

These are the words we use to describe the loss of a pregnancy and or an infant: miscarriage, stillbirth, SIDS, abortion, neonatal demise. These are medical terms which sometimes are used to describe the death of a baby before or after birth, but more often, we will hear of a situation in which a family has experienced this and simply say that they "lost the baby." Every time I hear this expression, I have to suppress a wry smile. I imagine all the parents out there who would be so relieved to find the baby right next to a lone earring, several mismatched socks, the appointment card from the dentist, or the spare set of car keys. What a relief! There she was all the time… .

I facilitate a parent support group for pregnancy and neonatal loss. I do this because I believe in the power of groups and because my parent grief support group held me up through the darkest hours of my life. But I really do this to honor my baby girl and because I know that the power of telling your story leads to healing. At every support group meeting parents share their story of their baby as a part of the introduction. Typically, it is very hard to share details of your baby's birth with people you know well, let alone people you do not know at all—especially because the ending is so sad. But I have found in our groups that just being in the presence of others who have experienced a similar situation makes this easier. Sometimes parents will not want to speak at all, but listening to others' stories opens up your heart as well as your mind.

The most common themes I have learned are the following:

- There is diversity in experience. Some people wanted these pregnancies, some may have been ambivalent. Others may not have wanted another baby at all. Ask us if we want to talk about it—it's okay. We have already suffered enough and your silence may only add to our hurt.

- Parents may feel isolated and ashamed of their loss as if it is their fault. They may feel that they could have prevented the loss, even though this is not true. We need to be careful with the language we use—no one is to blame.

- Listen to our story. Ask us about our babies. Learn their names. They were a part of our families. Show us you care—we are struggling. We need you to care, but we may feel uncomfortable asking for help. This is especially true after a few months have passed since the loss and it seems everyone has forgotten.

- Show support for siblings. They may not understand why the baby died and may feel guilty as well. Their parents are grieving, so siblings may need extra support and comfort. Please let them know it is not their fault.

- Finally, please do not assume that the loss of a pregnancy through miscarriage is somehow easier than losing a full term pregnancy. Every pregnancy loss is uniquely personal and has meaning.

Ed
Kate Neider, MSW Candidate '14

The girl who had an eating disorder, the girl who is slated to present to her class of peers about eating disorders, is now writing an essay about eating disorders. Typical? Maybe. Predictable? Perhaps. The first major relationship of my life was with Ed and it was one I would become trapped in for close to the next decade of my life. Ed is not a boy; it's an Eating Disorder.

In Hesse-Biber's "Am I Thin Enough Yet?" even the title raises so many other questions to me. What is thin? What is enough? And where do I fit into all of this? I first encountered Ed when I was 15, a sophomore in high school: carefree, happy, and naïve. I had tried out for my first high school sport, swimming. I had heard of Ed before, but never thought that would be me, only the people you read about in the self-help section at the bookstore or the Dear Abby pages of the newspaper. Not me, hell no. Actually, hell *fucking* no. As I read Delia's story in Hesse-Biber's (2009) article, I knew this girl immediately. Delia was the girl next door—a daughter, a student. She could be anyone, and in an instant, Delia was me.

Hesse-Biber (2009) discusses the 'commercialization of identity,' and women constantly flipping magazine pages and scanning TV channels searching for some viable identity, something that creates a sense of belonging. But to what are we/she so desperately trying to belong? I ask myself, and I am immediately taken back to middle school, when I had the first realization that my always thin and mostly awkward build was suddenly creating an identity for me. I had to admit that I liked the looks, the stares, the positive reinforcement for simply having good genes. Similarly, Hesse-Biber (2009) describes Delia's routine, consisting of multiple daily weigh-ins and an insistence on perfection. Delia "weighed herself three times a day…She had to act and look a certain way, buy the right clothes, the right makeup" (p. 589). We have to ask ourselves—who decides what's "right?"

The barrage of messages about thinness, dieting, and beauty tells "ordinary" women that they are always in need of adjustment and that the female body is an object that should be incessantly perfected and tweaked. There came a point when my 'good genes' took me as far as they could and all of a sudden I had to work to maintain this thin ideal that I had become. The cycle of hurt and shame played out every time I looked in the mirror, every time I ran the water in the bathroom after dinner so my father wouldn't hear me retching up my pork chops and mashed potatoes, each time my throat was burned raw, every time I brought a Slim-Fast shake to school for lunch covered in tinfoil to hide from the shame. Ed and I had a well-choreographed dance. I would eat, feel the guilt well up inside me, and then purge as tears rolled down my cheeks and snot came

dripping out of my nose. My body was literally crying out for me to stop. The dance was ugly; there was nothing graceful about it. Ed knew it and I knew it, but I wasn't ready to stop dancing.

Delia laments, "God forbid anyone else get stuck in this trap…I don't really see myself getting out" (p. 589). During a time when victory should have meant winning the 50-meter freestyle at a local swim meet, it meant dropping a pants size at the local Abercrombie & Fitch. Ten years after I struggled with an eating disorder that hospitalized me, I have to wonder what has changed. Have I changed? Has the pressure to be thin eased over the past decade? I went into Gap Kids recently and bought my 4-year-old son a pair of jeans. When I got home I tore off the big tag on the belt loop which disturbingly read "Skinny Jeans."

The oppression and exploitation of women needs to stop. To accomplish this, we must nurture and support our children through their most impressionable and vulnerable stages. We have a moral and societal responsibility that far too often is ignored or repressed. Women are searching, grasping, and ultimately creating an identity that aligns itself with what they know and see. This search for the self should be taking place within, rather than under pressure from socially institutionalized media outlets. Rewarding thinness only perpetuates the cycle of belief that our bodies are in constant need of adjustment.

As Hesse-Biber (2009) states, too many "women accept society's standards of beauty as 'the way things are'" (p. 590). We need to realize that this is the way things **aren't,** the way they simply can't be.

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Finding Voice
Kristin Ramsdell, MSW Candidate '14

One recent, chilly evening, my family settled in to watch the documentary *Oceans* on DVD. At one point the film details the perils a sea turtle faces at birth, emerging from an egg buried in the sand and journeying immediately to the ocean, instinctively following the light and sound of the beckoning sea. As these nascent creatures scurried across the sand, we watched in horror while seabirds scooped them up before they reached the water's edge. My son cried during the scene and again,

later as I tucked him into bed. "It's so unfair," he lamented. "They were just born!" Indeed, the statistics are grim; it is estimated that only 1 in 1,000 sea turtles survive to adulthood. Shaken over the sheer unfairness of life and the nearly impossible odds stacked against survival, he felt it incomprehensible that most turtles "never have a chance."

In contemplating the great divide between the haves and have-nots, a divide birthed from a societal framework that systematically creates and reinforces conditions which make success, even survival, inherently more challenging for some of its members, it is difficult to avoid a freefall into the same sort of despair my son experienced that night. For MSW candidates studying the effects of oppression on the human experience and its prevalence as an indicator of the overall health of a society, a simple, daily reminder to breathe is a necessity. For it is overwhelming to be awakened to the negative effects that privilege bestows on the recipient and, as posited by preeminent educator Paulo Freire, the fear and dehumanization that occur to justify the reward of said privilege. It is with this mindset, the remembering to breathe, that social workers should embrace and exemplify the ideals set forth in Johnson's (2001) article, "What Can We Do?"

While there are several singular takeaways from Johnson's (2001) article, arguably the most valuable is a coherent enumeration of principles under which we should strive to conduct our practice and our lives. Personally, while I have loosely, informally, and perhaps unknowingly sought to be more a part of the solution than the problem, here is a recipe, if you will, for how to be not only a truly authentic social worker, but human being as well: "Make noise. Be seen. Speak up. Dare to make people uncomfortable, beginning with yourself" (Johnson, 2001, pp. 158–159, 166). Don't get me wrong—it's not easy. Silence is a much more comfortable state in which to reside. Or is it? Perhaps silence is the requisite expression we have decided is the path of least resistance. However, our coexistence, albeit brief, entails sharing the same air, desiring the same pleasures, and needing the same essentials. It unfailingly craves something more than silence in order to realize the collective humanity that dwells in us all.

In the face of adversity, often our voice is all that we possess. Life's crushingly beautiful fragility delivers the inevitable loss: our freedom, our bodies, our power, our loved ones. As a survivor of childhood trauma, I recall my voice, sometimes sore from the pain I swallowed when the words couldn't leave my throat, and at other times raw from the rage when they did, was crucial to my existence. Though my silence was the other's goal,

"In the face of adversity, often our voice is all that we possess."

my voice, and ultimately my spirit, was not extinguishable. The voice endures, but we must remember to use it.

As social workers and as human beings, our quest for visible change amid a sea of hopelessness is not that different from a boy, imploring in the darkness: "What can we do?" This boy falls asleep, only after learning he can send some of his money to an organization that will protect the turtle on its journey from shell to shoreline. This boy and his father walk along roads and beaches, collecting trash as they go. This boy sits at the dinner table and quietly reveals how he stands up to a classmate, a child who has consistently engaged in homophobic bullying of others on the bus, and asks the instigator: "*So what* if he *is* gay? What's wrong with being gay?"

I listen and learn. His voice embodies the purity of intention, the courage of faith, the beauty of truth. And I wonder.

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Letters to the Editors

We encourage our readers to share their thoughts about the content posted herein, which may be printed in a future issue.

Please contact us at pbuck@wcupa.edu, and we will do our best to address your inquiries.

Thank you!

Contributors

Jennifer Kutney, MSW Candidate '11, is in her 4th and final year as a part-time MSW student at West Chester University. She looks forward to using her degree to continue her work in victim services and victim rights as well as policy advocacy ranging from victim services to equal rights and social justice.

Cathy Plaisted, MSW Candidate '11, is a 2nd-year, full-time student with diverse experience working with families across the lifespan in a variety of settings including: child welfare agencies, family court, Girard College Boarding School, Immaculata University, Christiana Care, Main Line Healthcare, and the Department of Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Coatesville.

Jocelyn Spencer Sagrati, MSW Candidate '11, came to her graduate work with a background in yoga. She is currently counseling survivors of sexual abuse at SOAR, Inc. in Wilmington, DE. Her long-term goal is to incorporate yoga into therapeutic interventions with survivors of trauma and abuse.

Ashley Carraher, MSW Candidate '12, is a 1st-year MSW student at West Chester University. She has spent her 1st-year internship as a sex educator and counselor working with Delaware teenagers in school districts and clinical centers. In her spare time, she reads, collects vinyl records, and enjoys running and photography.

Elena Gregorio, MSW Candidate '12, is a 1st-year, full-time MSW student at West Chester University. She has a background in music and elementary education. She has enjoyed her 1st-year placement in hospice social work and looks forward to exploring her interest in addiction treatment at her 2nd-year placement.

Burgandy Holiday, MSW Candidate '12, is a 2nd-year, part-time student and graduate assistant in the Graduate Social Work Department at West Chester University. She also serves as co-president of the Graduate Social Work Student Organization. Her practice interests include childhood disorders, equitable access to education and resources for low-income families, and race relations.

Heather Sowers, MSW Candidate '12, is finishing her first year of the full-time program. She has paddled the swamps of Florida with adjudicated boys, gardened with youth at risk in Montana, and farmed with developmentally disabled young adults. She hopes to one day create an intentional community and farm school for older foster children.

Kristin Bartell, MSW Candidate '13, is a 1st-year, part-time student at West Chester University. New to the social work field, she is particularly interested in studying the philosophy of harm reduction and hopes to utilize this model of addiction treatment in clinical practice.

Laura Cekot, MSW Candidate '14, is a part-time MSW student at West Chester University who would like to pursue clinical therapy after completing the program. For the last three years, she has worked with adults living with mental illness as a Recovery Coach at Central Montgomery MH/MR Center and as a Crisis Case Worker at Montgomery County Emergency Service.

Kate Neider, MSW Candidate '14, is a 1st-year, part-time student who graduated with a BA in English from WCU. She found her way to social work based on personal life experiences and the strong desire to help others. Her practice interests include chemical dependency and terminal illnesses. Currently, Kate works with children and adolescents on the autism spectrum.

Kristin Ramsdell, MSW Candidate '14, is a 1st-year, part-time student in the MSW program. As a career changer, Kristin seeks to combine her legal education and passion for social justice in a social service setting.

Call for Submissions

We are currently seeking submissions for the fall 2011 issue of the student-led journal, VOICES. Through this type of open-access, peer-reviewed publication, we are seeking to help social workers raise their voices around issues of social justice. Current students and recent graduates of the West Chester University MSW program are invited to submit essays, poems, photography or original artwork.

Written Submissions:

- 1,000 word limit

- Double-spaced, 12-point font, 1" margins

- Professional tone and APA style

- Cover page with name, title & contact info

- Electronic submission to Faculty Advisor by 10/15/11. Essays reflecting personal perspectives on issues of social justice with clear ties to social work practice are especially encouraged

All submissions will be reviewed anonymously by the Student Editors, and final decisions will be communicated to authors by the Faculty Advisor. All questions and concerns should be directed to the Faculty Advisor.

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