

University of Calgary

Re-Connecting Social Justice and Social Work Practice: A Testimonio

by

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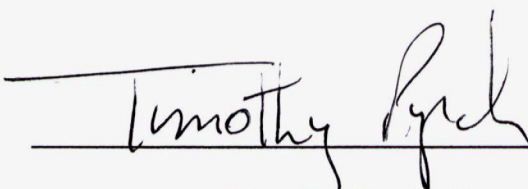
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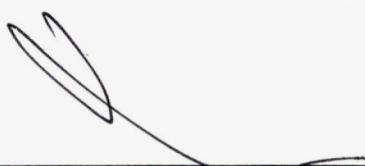
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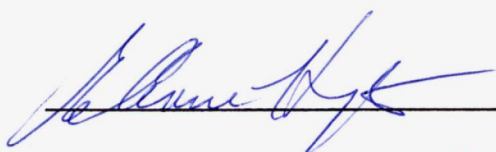
The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies for acceptance, a thesis entitled "Re-Connecting Social Justice and Social Work Practice: A Testimonio" submitted by Robert Brown in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Social Work.



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Abstract

This thesis has been written in the form of a Testimonio. It is a heartfelt, passionate and personal account of a social worker's life experience as a professional and as a client of the social welfare system. It is a critical analysis of the profession of social work and its connections to urgent matters of social justice. This thesis was written after the writer had experienced a car accident with injuries that changed the course of his life. The accident placed difficult challenges and barriers in his path that led him to be dependent upon the system of care. This experience provided the writer with unique insights into the world of social work and social justice since he was able to add the difficult experience of life as a client to his rich history as a professional social worker. Testimonio as a methodology has given the writer the ability to express his passion and deep concerns for matters of social justice while challenging traditional positivistic research methods. A Testimonio challenges traditional research methods by acknowledging the power of writing with emotion and promoting diversity in knowledge dissemination by incorporating a first person reflection on urgent matters of social justice. In doing so, the writer has managed to follow in the rich path of social work writers that have been able to critically combine the personal and political in the pursuit of social activism.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

This thesis is a culmination of many years of education, social work practice and personal struggle. It is a reflection on the social injustices of our world and my perceptions of how the social work profession can give people and issues a voice that would otherwise have gone unheard and unnoticed.

The methodology that I have used to write this thesis is a Testimonio. The decision to use this methodology was a difficult one and ultimately came from the personal struggles and hardships that I faced as a result of a car accident. Prior to this accident I had explored many methodologies, mostly qualitative, for one that would fit with my values and vision. The framework in which I practice social work and that I write with is deeply connected to my strong sense of social justice thus it became difficult to find a methodology that would allow for an expression of my heartfelt concern for issues that are so important to me. I explored methodologies such as Participatory Action Research, Auto-Ethnography, Life-History and Personal Narrative and I concluded that a Testimonio was most relevant. The hardships that I endured as a result of the car accident, which led to personal experiences that I had as a client of the social welfare system, the experiences that I had as part of my professional social work practice and my critical sense of social justice all led me to choose a methodology that could allow me to passionately write about the issues that I felt are so necessary to voice.

A Testimonio can be defined as a first person narrative regarding urgent issues of social justice and a call for action. It is a form of resistance to elements

of oppression. I chose this methodology because it addresses these urgent issues of justice and fills a void by adding heart, soul, passion, truth and justice to the realm of social work practice and academic inquiry. By adding these elements into research it can become possible for social work students and people interested in social justice to write about the feelings and struggles that people undergo when dealing with matters of oppression thereby adding this piece of humanity to the academic realm and beyond and ultimately working towards social change.

By writing this thesis it has become my intention to have the reader engage with me on a journey of resistance. A journey whereby issues of respect, dignity, diversity, poverty, hunger and human rights take precedence. A journey that I have undergone by looking deep into my heart and soul throughout my long and difficult rehabilitation realizing not only with intellect but also with heart as to the inequities in our world and the responsibilities that social work and the human race have to actively and relentlessly pursue social action and change. It is a journey of resistance whereby people who are oppressed or have their noses rubbed in the dust due to power inequity and immorality can take back their voice.

I have written this thesis as a means to express my deep concerns for the way in which social work is practiced as well as how social issues are being addressed in our society. The writing of this Testimonio is from my heart and a reflection of my own lived experiences. It is also a means to further a life-long process of de-colonization that I have begun years earlier.

In this thesis I have explored issues of power, resistance, social justice and oppression and how they have affected me personally as an individual and as a professional social worker. I have reflected upon my own personal struggles and I have related them to both private and public social work issues. I have also used powerful stories from my professional social work practice and the lived experiences of some of the people that I worked with as a way to provide insight and reflection to both the micro and macro perspectives of social justice and social work practice. I have explored the ideology and values reflected in the writing of a Testimonio and how that pertains to social justice and matters of knowledge creation, knowledge sharing and knowledge dissemination. I have written a literature review which has provided clear definitions and examples of Testimonios and arguments for and against the personal perspective in research. In this thesis, I have also included poetry by Pablo Neruda and Errol West as a way to further express the personal impact of oppression and matters of social justice. Mostly, it is my hope that the reader will find this thesis to be a deep political and personal reflection of the social issues that are in desperate need of change and how the social work profession can and needs to address them.

Orlando Fals Borda (2001) has written, " We feel that there is a need for active crusaders and heretics for the great adventures for peoples' emancipation, in order to break the exploitative ethos that has permeated the world with poverty, oppression and violence for much too long." I share this perspective and it is my sincere hope that this thesis will add to the many voices demanding

change for the most vulnerable people in our world and the end of their exploitation.

Letter To Miguel Otera Silva, In Caracas (1948)

A friend delivered me your letter written
With invisible words, on his suit, in his eyes.
How happy you are, Miguel, how happy we are!
No one's left in a world of stuccoed ulcers
Except us, indefinably happy.
I see the crow pass by and it can't harm me.
You observe the scorpion and clean your guitar.
We live among wild beasts, singing, and when we touch
a man, the substance of someone in whom we believed,
and he crumbles like rotten pastry,
you in your Venezuelan patrimony rescue
whatever can be salvaged, while I defend the live coal of life.

What happiness, Miguel!

You wonder where I am? I'll tell you
-giving only details useful to the government-
that on this coast full of wild stones,
sea and countryside merge: waves and pines,
eagles and petrels, foam and meadows.
Have you seen from very close up and all day long
how the seabirds fly? It seems as if
they carried the world's letters to their destinations.

Pelicans cruise by like windships,
Other birds that fly like arrows and bring
the messages of deceased kings, of princes
entombed with turquoise threads on the Andean coasts,
and gulls made of round whiteness,
that constantly forget their messages.
How blue life is, Miguel, when we've put into it
love and struggle, words that are bread and wine,
words that they cannot yet dishonor,
because we take to the streets with shotgun and songs.
They're lost with us, Miguel.
What can they do but kill us, and even so
It's a poor bargain for them, they can only
try to rent a flat in front of us and shadow us
to learn to laugh and weep like us.
When I wrote love lyrics, which sprouted
from all my pores and I pined away,
aimless, forlorn, gnawing the alphabet,
they told me: "How great you are, O Theocritus!"
I'm not Theocritus: I took life,
stood before it, kissed it until I conquered it,
and then I went through the mine galleries
to see how other men lived.

And when I emerged with my hands stained with filth and grief
I raised and displayed them on gold chains,
and I said: "I'm not an accomplice to this crime."
They coughed, became very annoyed, withdrew their welcome,
stopped calling me Theocritus, and ended up
insulting me and sending all the police to imprison me,
because I didn't continue to be preoccupied exclusively with metaphysical
matters.

But I had conquered happiness.

Ever since I awakened to read letters
that seabirds bring from afar,
letters delivered wet, messages that little by little
I keep translating leisurely and confidently: I'm
meticulous as an engineer in this strange craft.

And suddenly I go to the window. It's a square
of transparency, the distance of grasses
and pinnacles is pure, so I keep working
amid things that I love-waves, stones, wasps-
with an intoxicating marine cheerfulness.

But no one like's us to be happy, to you they assigned
a fool's role: "But don't overdo it, relax,"
and they tried to pin me in an insect collection amid the tears,
so that I'd drown and they could make their speeches on my grave.

I remember a day on the sandy nitrate
Pampa, there were five hundred men
on strike. It was the scorching afternoon
of Tarapaca. And when their faces had drawn
all the sand and the dry bloodless desert sun,
I saw old melancholy approach my heart,
like a wineglass of hatred. That critical hour,
In the desolate salt marshes, in that frail minute
of struggle, in which we could have been defeated,
a pale little girl from the mines
recited with a plaintive voice composed of crystal and steel
one of your poems, one of your old poems that rolls between the wrinkled eyes of
all the workers and farmhands of my country, of America.
And that fragment of your song suddenly beamed
on my mouth like a purple flower
and ran down to my blood, filling it again
with a surging happiness born of your song.
And I thought not only of you but of your bitter Venezuela.
Years ago, I saw a student whose ankles bore
the scar of the chains that a general had put on him,
and he told me how chain gangs worked on the roads
and people disappeared in the prisons. Because that's how our America has
been:

a prairie with devouring rivers and constellations
of butterflies (in some, places as thick as apples),
but always, all night long and along the rivers
there are bleeding ankles, near the petroleum before,
today near the nitrate, in Pisagua, where a dirty despot
has buried the flower of my country so that it will perish , and market
the bones.

That's why you sing, that's why, so dishonoured and wounded America
will make it's butterflies flutter and will harvest it's emeralds
without punishment's ghastly blood, clotted
on the hands of hangmen and merchants.

I realized how happy you'd be, beside the Orinoco, singing,
for sure, or perhaps buying wine for your home,
occupying your place in the struggle or in happiness,
broad shouldered, like the poets of our times
-with light-coloured suits and walking shoes.

Ever since, I've been thinking that sometime I'd write you,
And when the friend arrived, chock-full of your stories
that fell from his entire suit and were
scattered under the chestnut trees in my garden,
I told myself: " Now," yet I still didn't sit down to write you.
But today has been too much: not just one but thousands
of seabirds passed by my window, and I collected

the letters which no one reads and which they carry
around the world's seacoasts, until they lose them.
And then, in each one I read your words
and they were like those that I write and dream and sing,
and so I decided to send you this letter, which I sign off now
in order to gaze through the window at the world that is ours.

- Pablo Neruda -

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The purpose of writing this literature review is to help define a Testimonio. In doing so, I will cover the various perspectives of Testimonio and what it means to abandon traditional knowledge creation and dissemination and write from the heart and soul. I will provide clear definitions of a Testimonio as well as arguments for and against this methodology while adding my own insights to the forum of debate. For the purpose of providing clarity to the definition of a Testimonio, I will provide examples of other people's Testimonios, including some of which have not been traditionally viewed as such but fit its definition as I see it.

My Testimonio is a statement, my statement of the experiences, struggles, visions and perspective of the world in which we live. It is my personal narrative about who I am, what I have gone through, and how I see the world. As a social worker and as a human being this statement is about resistance. As a social worker I see the world through a critical lens, one which reflects upon the injustices of the world. As a human being, I see the world with heart and wonder. As both, I see the world through a lens that regards the most vulnerable people of our world as victims of social stigma, discrimination, social exclusion, physical attack, poverty, hunger and displacement. I see the world through a lens that regards the few powerful elite as people who victimize those that are vulnerable for the purpose of profit. Examples of this can be seen in the war in Iraq where countless deaths and atrocities have occurred so a few elite can reap the benefits of job contracts and oil resources. This can be seen in Sudan where

thousands of innocent people have been displaced and live with the realities of violence so a few people in power can gain even more. Additional examples include the horrible mistreatment of Indigenous peoples from around the world, corporations profiting by putting chemicals and hormones in our food that poison us and benefit through mass production and financial profit. There are countless examples.

We live in a world where morality has been lost so a few people can make a lot of money and in the midst of this profit, many, many people are suffering beyond what most people can imagine. This Testimonio is my resistance and my stance whereby I am saying that our world is unjust, and the apathetic stance of our society to accept a meaningless consumer based existence of imperialism and profit while so many suffer needlessly is wrong. It is time for people to stand up and resist. This is my opportunity.

This Testimonio is also my time to write in a manner that is traditionally viewed as unacceptable. My writing is from my heart, and it is most certainly biased. This Testimonio is my way of resisting not only an oppressive and unjust society but also the dominant culture which controls the means of acceptable learning and knowledge sharing, excluding all the minorities that use different means as wonderful and highly successful ways of sharing and passing on knowledge. It is a celebration of all of those who do not fit into the small framework that traditional learning institutions try and force us to fit into. It is my resistance to all that is oppressive that tells me that the compassion and justice in my heart is not valid and not worthy of sharing or expressing. It

is my resistance to all that is unjust and unfair in our world. Pyrch and Castillo (2001) so beautifully share this perspective when they write about the importance of breaking out of the Western dominance that has tended to define the natures of "knowledge" and "science". Pyrch and Castillo (2001) powerfully describe, "The difficulty of hearing local or indigenous voices which speak to our hidden intuitive, metaphoric and spiritual qualities still devalued by the gatekeepers of official and expert knowledge. The art of respectfully listening to these voices is hard because our academic training has tended to fragment sense from soul. Yet if we are to reach for a science that has full human validity, rather than being bound to a particular culture (that stemming from Northern Europe), we must cross these ethnic boundaries." Lincoln and Denzin (2003) refer to this style of writing as revolutionary, creating open spaces for voices previously silenced.

A Testimonio is not a new means of writing. There is a strong history and purpose which is evident in many people's writings. Some people have referred to a Testimonio as other things, such as resistance, de-colonization or personal narrative but it most often comes down to the same notion, of one person who has felt silenced, excluded or marginalized, writing from the heart, abandoning traditional means of acceptable literature and writing about what is believed to be a need for social justice to be documented and shared. John Beverley (2000) states that a "Testimonio is a first-person political text told by a narrator who is the protagonist or the witness to the events that are reported on. These tellings report on torture, imprisonment, social upheaval,

colonization processes, and struggles for survival. These works are intended to record and produce social change.” I share these values and perceptions with John Beverley and I hope to express myself well enough to have some impact on social change. George Yúdice (1985) defines Testimonio as “An authentic narrative told by a witness who is moved to narrate by the urgency of a situation.”

Testimonio shares values with Robert Mulally’s (1993) Structural Social Work theory. Structural Social Work theory examines the power inequities between social and political structures and how they impact those among us that are most vulnerable. Structural Social Work theory regards these social and political structures as the cause to the growing gap between the rich and poor and the have’s and have not’s. This power inequity also explains human suffering on a wide scale and how local policies create suffering among individuals. Mulally also believes as I do, that social work as a profession is apathetic, denying it’s role to stand up for social justice while ensuring it’s continuation amidst the capitalistic and consumer environment; by accepting standards and financing by the same structures that determine harmful policies for those that we are sworn to serve. Structural Social Work theory seeks to voice these concerns and break down barriers for people so that our profession does more than simply help people get back on their feet so that they can continue to support an imperialistic society. Structural Social Work theory helps to guide me through my practice as a social worker and as a human being reminding me of the oppressive barriers we face. It helps to guide me through my writing by reminding me that the resistance I strive for is purposeful and that I am not alone.

Many people have chosen different methods to resist the dominant and oppressive culture. The method that I have chosen is to write. Many others have chosen other methods, along with writing. For example, Dr. Martin Luther King chose to resist a nation filled with hatred and violence to gain equality for all people. He marched, organized, spoke out and risked his life to resist racism and oppression. Against all odds, he stood up and demanded social justice for what he knew in his heart was right, equality for all. Just as social workers are meant to do, he founded his resistance upon the ideals of compassion, justice, and love. Dr. Martin Luther King was quoted as saying many things about resistance that are increasingly relevant today just as they were during his lifetime. " Along the way of life, someone must have sense enough and morality enough to cut off the chain of hate and evil. The greatest way to do that is through love. I believe firmly that love is a transforming power that can lift a whole community to new horizons of fair play, good will, and justice." (King, as cited in Carson, 1998) Dr. King, in times of great stress and incredible oppression, resisted all of it and stood up and showed the world what resistance could look like, and with bravery, he said, "There are those who would try to make of this a hate campaign. This is not a war between the White and the Negro but a conflict between justice and injustice. This is bigger than the race revolting against the white. We are seeking to improve not the Negro of Montgomery but the whole of Montgomery. If we are arrested everyday, if we are exploited everyday, if we are trampled over everyday, don't let anyone pull you so low as to hate them. We must use the weapon of love. We must have compassion and understanding for those that

hate us. We must realize so many people are taught to hate us that they are not totally responsible for their hate. But, we stand at life at midnight, we are always on the threshold of a new dawn." (King, as cited in Carson,1998) Dr. Martin Luther King promoted love, peace, and justice for all in a non-violent manner. He encouraged people to regard justice as a necessary piece to our evolution. He regarded resistance as a necessary element for the oppressed to gain equality. "The oppressor never voluntarily gives freedom to the oppressed. You have to work for it. Freedom is never given to anybody. Privileged classes never give up their classes without strong resistance." (King, as cited in Carson, 1998)

Dr. King was so good at showing us that resistance is necessary for the underprivileged as a means to fight back against the powerful oppressors and to do it with love, compassion and justice. I believe that these values are the basis for social work practice. Yet, it is evidently lacking in our world, and my writing is my way of following the vision that Dr. King had and I strive for that ability to resist with love, compassion and justice. As in a Testimonio, Dr. King, being the victim of oppression, spoke out for justice, not only for himself but for all people. Dr King's work has not been academically regarded as a Testimonio, however, his narratives speak towards social change, urgency and oppressed people. Thus, I have included him as an example of a Testimonio that has gained global notoriety.

Another example of a life's work that has not been recognized as a Testimonio but whose narratives speak to the essence of a Testimonios definitions are the narratives spoken by Gandhi. According to Dr. King's

autobiography, Gandhi was a mentor to his resistance and they are both mentors to me. Gandhi resisted an entire nation of colonialism and with non-violence, compassion and love he managed to change his country and the world. Under great oppression of British colonial rule Gandhi spoke to the urgency of social change through writing and action. Gandhi embodied non-violence, peace and justice. He lived these values and held them to the highest regard. Gandhi's resistance was one of the greatest of all time. He faced prison, religious persecution and the entire British army and amidst all of this, his resistance remained strong with complete devotion to truth, love and compassion. Gandhi said that to remain firm with resistance and create change, "One must cultivate non-violence in our daily life, as between ourselves, truthfulness, humility, tolerance and loving kindness." (Gandhi, 1936) Gandhi continued to say that the pursuit of justice and the resistance of oppression must be non-violent or it would have no meaning. Gandhi referred to the virtue of resisting violence and injustice with non-violence as true bravery. (Gandhi, 1933) Similar to Dr. King, Gandhi was able to use his voice, his truth and non-violent actions to represent many people's oppression for the purpose of creating social change. As mentioned, although Gandhi's narratives have not been recognized as a Testimonio, his words certainly seem to meet the definitions provided by Beverley (2000) and Yúdice (1991).

Jean Trickey, as a child, stood up with great bravery to the Arkansas police, government and military who refused to let her into her school because of her skin colour. She is also known as one of the Arkansas Nine, a group of

students who stood at the steps of their school and refused to move when the laws of segregation prevented her from being there. In 1957, she withstood incredible pressure and helped change the landscape of North America allowing all people of all racial backgrounds to enter any school. Jean Trickey looked into her heart and realized that the policies that determined that she could not go to her school based on her skin colour were unjust. She knew that she had to resist forces that were beyond anything she had ever imagined. With non-violence, her goal of social change was successful. She stood on the steps of her school and refused to leave, even though the United States National Guard was called in to remove her. As a child, non-violently, Jean Trickey resisted the incredible oppression of racism and injustice and spoke for the oppressed and created change for all of us. Although Jean Trickey did not write about her actions and oppression, her actions spoke for her and thus became her narrative. The urgency of the situation, the oppression faced by people of colour and her actions taking the place of her words bring her story into what I perceive a Testimonio to be about. (Carla Brown, Peace and Environment News, 1996) (<http://perc.ca/PEN/1996-11/brown3.html>)

The Archbishop Desmond Tutu is a man who has also exemplified the meaning of resistance. In times of Apartheid in South Africa, Desmond Tutu stood as a symbol for peace and justice. His life was threatened numerous times and yet he continued to speak out for the voiceless and powerless and encouraged others to speak about compassion, love, dignity, respect and equality. Desmond Tutu eventually helped to overcome a nation of racism and

violence through non-violent action and resistance. Through it all, he maintained a true vision of love and social justice, in spite of all of the violence, hatred and racism that surrounded him. During the reign of Apartheid, Desmond Tutu speaking of hope had said with bravery, " The mother watching her child starve in a Bantustan homeland resettlement camp, or one whose flimsy plastic covering was demolished by authorities in the K.T.C. squatter camp in Cape Town, the student receiving an inferior education, the activist languishing in a consulate or a solitary confinement cell, being tortured because he thought he was human and wanted that god given right to be recognized, the exile longing to kiss the soil of her much loved motherland, the political prisoner watching the days go by like the drip of a faulty tap, imprisoned because he knew he was created by god not to have his human dignity or pride trodden underfoot. People are voiceless, oppressed, dispossessed, tortured by powerful tyrants, lacking elementary human rights in Latin America, South East Asia, the Far East, Africa and beyond, who have their noses rubbed in the dust. Our cause is a just cause, we will attain human rights in South Africa and everywhere in the world. (Tutu, 1984 as cited in Tutu, 1989) The Archbishop Desmond Tutu, under the weight of overwhelming oppression and with great urgency used his narrative to represent the people of South Africa and the world, creating social and political change.

Recently I had the great fortune of attending a lecture given by the Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the Dalai Lama and others in Vancouver, B.C. I was particularly taken with Desmond Tutu who said that we must look around us and take care of our most vulnerable if we are to be a just society. We must do this

with love and compassion. The Archbishop Desmond Tutu then went on to Toronto, where he lectured at an Anglican church and said that the church must open the doors to all people including gay, lesbian and transgendered people. The Archbishop probably risked his career and more to use his voice to represent the vulnerable and oppressed, to resist oppression and stand up with non-violence to promote respect, dignity and love for all. Desmond Tutu's words both spoken and written, similarly to Jean Trickey's, Dr. King's and Gandhi's, have not been acknowledged as being in the form of a Testimonio. However, they all used their narratives in one form or another to resist oppression and create change, and in my opinion, whether traditionally written or not, their actions and expressions are their messages, thus their narratives as well. Given their life of oppression and their urgency to create change, I believe that their narratives fall within the realm of a Testimonio.

The Dalai Lama, who has been the voice of resistance for a generation, lives in exile in India away from his homeland in Tibet. Although he knows of his people's suffering and cannot go home, he embodies love for all, compassion, respect and dignity. He has resisted Chinese rule and occupation for so long and has never given up. His message of peace and love is being heard worldwide. In his lecture in Vancouver, the Dalai Lama said that we must continue to resist with love and compassion for all. This is the only way. The Archbishop Desmond Tutu and the Dalai Lama are living examples of a Testimonio in action. They are always using their voices to represent the powerless and the oppressed for the purpose of justice and social change.

One of the greatest stories of liberation and struggle in my lifetime is that of Nelson Mandela. Mandela spent many years as a political prisoner fighting for equal rights and an end to racial discrimination and slavery. Upon being released from prison in South Africa, Mandela (1994) wrote about his feelings of oppression, struggle and liberation. "It was during those long and lonely years that my hunger for the freedom of my own people became a hunger for the freedom of all people, white and black. I knew as well as I knew anything that the oppressor must be liberated just as surely as the oppressed. A man who takes away another man's freedom is a prisoner of hatred, he is locked behind the bars of prejudice and narrow-mindedness. I am not truly free if I am taking away someone else's freedom, just as surely as I am not free when my freedom is taken from me. The oppressed and the oppressor alike are robbed of their humanity. When I walked out of prison, that was my mission, to liberate the oppressed and the oppressor both. Some say that has now been achieved. But I know that that is not the case. The truth is that we are not yet free; we have merely achieved the freedom to be free, the right not to be oppressed. We have not taken the final step of our journey, but the first step on a longer and even more difficult road. For to be free is not merely to cast off one's chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others. The true test of our devotion to freedom is just beginning." Mandela captures the essence of a Testimonio by authentically writing with urgency about oppression with the intention of furthering the cause for social justice.

Bridget Moran, who wrote "A Little Rebellion" (1992), recently passed away. In her time as a social worker in British Columbia she worked tirelessly resisting unjust social policy and demanding rights for the oppressed and the most vulnerable. As a result of her resistance, she was banned from the legislature and suspended from her position as a social worker but throughout her life-long career in social work she continued to resist the oppressive inequities, regardless of all obstacles. She never used violence, but provided a voice for the voiceless with compassion and an overwhelming pursuit for social justice. The shared characteristic that embodies people such as Dr. King, Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, Jean Trickey, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the Dalai Lama and Bridget Moran in my mind is their unwavering pursuit to have their voices heard amidst overwhelming forces for the purpose of social change and justice. Bridget Moran's book, "A Little Rebellion" (1992) is her Testimonio. She was one person with a small voice, yet she wrote about dominant forces that harmed her and others and she urgently demanded social change.

As mentioned, many people have resisted tyrannical, unjust forces that have harmed countless vulnerable people. Many people have devoted their lives to resist these forces. I have used them as examples to justify my writing. One such act of resistance that has at times led to extreme violence but continues to be an example of resistance to oppression world wide is that of the rights of Indigenous people. In Canada, First Nations people have had their land stolen from them, they have had their children forced into residential schools where they were forbidden to speak their languages, participate in their culture, forbidden to

see their families and often raped and abused. First Nations people have been excluded and discriminated against for generations. In many cases, on reserves, they live in poverty and their conditions are ignored as long as they remain on their reserves away from urban centers. Ovide Mercredi (1993) eloquently stated, in what I perceive to be his Testimonio, " That there are so many ways in which the First Nations of Canada have their way of law and life so distinctly different to that of Canadian law. They do not want to be forced into a life that emulates a European system. For example, In British Columbia, they have a hereditary system of self-government that has no connection at all to an electoral process. In Manitoba, on the Roseau River Reserve, they have re-enacted a clan system whereby the heads of the clan determine the head of their government. Under the clan system, the men do not vote. It is the women who choose and vote. The Ojibwa have their spirituality and politics deeply connected. They use their own system to deal with justice within their nation which largely includes Elders. The current system of jails, courts, attorneys and politicians do not reflect the communal ways of First Nations people. Only three of the fifty-two Aboriginal languages have been preserved in Canada." Mercredi attributes this to the fact that these languages have not been allowed in public educational institutions. Yet amidst all of that and more First Nations people have endured, they continue to resist and pursue their way of life. Indigenous people, their ways of knowing, knowledge creation, sharing and culture have all been oppressed. There has been a systematic attempt to rid First Nations culture by the dominant society. First Nations people continue to resist so that they can live in way that they

choose and we, being the dominant society, can stop harming and destroying their way of life. Fyre Jean Graveline (1998) has written extensively about First Nations ways of knowing and the preservation of First Nations culture. She states that in order to resist the Eurocentric way of life, we must de-colonize ourselves so that we can see what damage we have caused and so that First Nations people can heal a life influenced by a dominant, imperialistic and harmful existence and re-connect with their culture with pride. First Nations people still suffer at our hands, however, with grace, they continue to resist. I also look to First Nations people as inspiration for my own resistance. Amidst all of what they have gone through, Indigenous people from around the world continue to search for a voice to be heard. As such, I have included Ovide Mercredi's text, "In The Rapids" as an urgent narrative and call for social change and justice, thus in my opinion, it is a Testimonio.

For some people who are powerless, voiceless, oppressed and tired a Testimonio can be a form of liberation. It is a means to pass on one's struggle with the hope that somebody will read it and it will impact them and create some form of change. For others it is a means of desperation. Domitila Barrios de Chungara, a single mother of seven, working in the mines of Bolivia, used what has largely been referred to as a Testimonio in a book called, "Let Me Speak!" (1978) In this text, she writes not only for herself but for the struggles of her people. She writes from the heart, discloses her community's hardships and how they've been exploited, but mostly, she writes because she knows she has too. She could not be apathetic to life's injustices. She needed a way

to expose the truth and give people hope for change. In her text, she writes, “ I don’t want to tell a personal story. I want to talk about my people. I want to testify about all the experience we’ve acquired during so many years of struggle in Bolivia, and contribute a little grain of sand, with the hope that our experience may serve in some way for the new generation, for the new people.” She continues to write, “ Finally, I want to clarify that this account of my personal experience of my people, who are fighting for their liberation and to whom I owe my existence-well, I want it to reach the poorest people, the people who don’t have any money, but who need some orientation, some example which can serve them in their future life. It’s for them that I agreed that what I am going to tell be written down. It doesn’t matter what kind of paper it’s put down on, but it does matter that it be useful for the working class and not only for the intellectual people or for people who only make a business of this kind of thing.” Domitila wrote with courage and heart. She had a purpose of exposing the injustices faced by her community and used her voice as a means to help create social change for all those who are vulnerable and less privileged. Her words are a wonderful example of what I have attempted to do. With my writing, I have attempted to use my voice, like Domitila, to say that change is a must for the powerless of our world because there is too much suffering.

Similarly to Domitila, Elvia Alvarado (1987) speaks about her truth, from her heart in the text, “Don’t Be Afraid, Gringo: A Honduran Woman Speaks from the Heart. Alvarado very beautifully captures the essence of what I

believe a Testimonio is all about, a stand for political change from a once voiceless person or group. Alvarado says, " I thought about our struggle, how we suffer hunger, persecution, abuse by the landowners. How we fight with all the bureaucrats at the National Agrarian Institute. How we fight with the police, the army, the security forces. I'd just been released from jail four days ago. I'd been arrested many times before, when we've tried to get a piece of land for the poor campesinos to farm. But for the first time in my life I was tortured. Simply because I work for justice and speak the truth. I decided that I couldn't pass up a chance to tell the world our story. Because our struggle is not a secret one, it is an open one. I thought, once you understand why we're fighting, if you have any sense of humanity, you'll have to be on our side." Alvarado speaks with so much courage and as mentioned, I believe she captures the essence of a Testimonio.

According to Gelles (1998) a " Testimonio is a form of collective autobiographical witnessing that gives voice to oppressed peoples and has played an important role in developing and supporting international human rights, solidarity movements and liberation struggles." Gelles (1998) suggests that typically the narrator of a Testimonio is usually somebody who is illiterate. Beverley (2000) and Spivak (1988) refer to the narrator of a Testimonio as a "subaltern. " This brings about some ethical dilemmas since a "subaltern" or someone who is illiterate often requires an editor or translator to document the testimony. I believe that the basis for a Testimonio is that it is a statement from one's heart. If so, an editor or translator can lose meaning from such a sincere

and important statement. Stoll (1999) suggests that a “true” Testimonio is one whose editor has the least impact on the finished narrative. Although there has been many Testimonios that have had editors or translators such as Domatila’s and Alvarado’s, I do not believe it is necessary for the narrator of a Testimonio to be in such a place of not being able to express oneself on their own. In fact, my own Testimonio as well as the narratives of Dr. King, Gandhi, Desmond Tutu, Jean Trickey, Bridget Moran, Nelson Mandela and Ovide Mercredi are evidence of this.

One of the most famous Testimonios and most controversial, which was edited and translated, is Rigoberta Menchu’s (1984), “I, Rigoberta Menchu: An Indian Woman in Guatemala. It was Menchu’s Testimonio which largely brought public awareness to the injustices and horrors faced by Mayan and Indigenous people in Guatemala. Gelles (1998) states that Menchu’s Testimonio, “is one of the most successful contributions of Anthropology to human rights issues in Central America. Through her notoriety, Menchu has continued to be an activist for Indigenous rights in all of the America’s. Menchu was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1992. However, its authenticity has been of great controversy. David Stoll (1999) has verified many of the facts of Menchu’s stories, such as the fact that her family and thousands of Mayan villagers were massacred by the Guatemalan army. However, he also uncovered facts that show evidence that her childhood stories were fabricated to suit the needs of a revolutionary movement. Regardless of this controversy, the Testimonio itself shed dramatic light onto the atrocities and terrible

injustices occurring in Central America. In this regard the Testimonio, in my opinion, is a valid and historical work that follows the basic premises and guidelines of Beverley's (2000) and Yúdice's (1985) definitions of a Testimonio. Certainly Menchu's work met these requirements.

A Testimonio involves putting one's heart and soul into the work. Thus, the research is biased and subjective. This is the antithesis of traditional positivist and empirical research which demands objectivity at its core for determining validity. Anthropologist Ruth Behar (1996) in her text "The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology That Breaks Your Heart", describes the conflict between immersing yourself into the experience being researched or remaining an unbiased analyst. She uses a story to do so. She describes an avalanche that took place in 1985 in Columbia that buried an entire village in mud. A thirteen year old girl was trapped in the mud dying. The media descended upon her in hordes, hungrily seeking to observe and report on the story. The reporters looked onwards as the thirteen year old girl suffered. Finally, a photographer could not contain himself. He threw down his camera, dove into the mud and held her as she died. I find this to be a wonderful example of how the humanity within us must emerge and be a part of the lived experience. To not do so, is not real. We are human beings with hearts and emotions and I believe this must be a part of the research experience. George Devereux (1980) an ethnopsychiatrist said that what happens to the observer must be made known if the nature of what is observed is to be understood. I believe that a Testimonio takes this notion

several steps further not only by allowing the researcher to be the research and removing all objectivity but by adding the element and goal of social or political change.

Jane Tompkins (1993) writes that to not allow yourself to be a part of research is part of a greater issue of female oppression. She writes that emotions which are typically tied to female irrationality are regarded as unprofessional. Thus, traditional research has made it such that there has to be a split. She says that "It's the same person who feels and who discourses about epistemology. You have to pretend that epistemology, or whatever your writing about, has nothing to do with your life, that it's more exalted, more important, because it supposedly transcends the merely personal. The public-private dichotomy, which is to say, the public-private hierarchy, is a founding condition of female oppression. I say to hell with it. The reason I feel embarrassed to speak personally in a professional context is that I have been conditioned to feel that way. That's all there is to it." Tompkins continues to justify the personal in research by writing, "I love writers who write about their own experience. I feel I'm being nourished by them, that I'm being allowed to enter into a personal relationship with them. That I can match my own experience up with theirs, feel cousin to them, and say, yes, that's how it is." I agree with Tompkins regarding the fact that there is a hierarchy that determines what is valid and what is not and to pretend we have no emotions is to not be genuine with the process of research. I disagree with Tompkins when she suggests that the public-private dichotomy is solely part of female

oppression. I believe it is part of a greater human oppression that impacts men and women. Being a white male has not helped me overcome the barriers to having genuine emotional research be considered valid.

Ellis and Flaherty (1992) state that " Sociologists now generally recognize that emotional processes are crucial components of social experience." However, Ellis and Flaherty (1992) also claim that "Traditional methodological tools tend to limit work on emotion to behavioural expressions, resulting in an unbalanced emphasis on outer displays of emotions; when subjective reports are collected, they are conventionally reported in terms of preconceived categories of researchers that privilege individual and discrete emotions. Researchers who write about their own emotions risk being seen as emotional exhibitionists...One reason for this is that research has largely and traditionally been the work of males from upper-middle-class, Anglo-American, professional backgrounds where emotions are suppressed or at most, viewed as private experiences." I share the sentiment of being fearful for being considered an emotional exhibitionist, knowing that my heart and soul is going to be opened for public scrutiny and that expressing one's emotions is not a part of our Western way of life.

Lincoln and Denzin (1994) argue that positivist science has established rules that denote validity and truth. They also argue that this truth brings out exclusion and power which degrades the meaning of valued research making it available and acceptable to the few powerful elite. Krieger (1996) writes that,

“Usually academics speak in a more abstract or explicitly theoretical language, use a technical vocabulary and often refer to work by other scholars. The academic work is designed to produce distance and to exclude emotion-to speak from above and outside an experience, rather than from within it.” Brabeck (2003) writes that a Testimonio challenges traditional interpretations of what constitutes knowledge and who has the ability to produce it. Maguire (1987) says that many have argued that, “In this modern age, the key determinant of power is knowledge.” Hall (1979) continues to argue that, “Knowledge is a commodity monopolized by ‘experts’ and ‘scientists’ who use ‘rational’ and ‘objective’ methods to attain it.” Domitila Barrios De Chungara (1978) very simply says that “I think people who have had the chance to go to university should talk our language, because we haven’t been in the university and we don’t understand much about numbers, but we are capable of understanding our national reality...Those who study should maybe learn something about how to speak in our language with all the knowledge that they have, so we too can understand everything that they learn.” Thus, it would appear that many have argued that power and exclusion comes with positivist, empirical research and there is a strong resistance to it which the Testimonio methodology is a part of. Harlow (1987) argues that there is a culture of resistance literature that “Enables us to probe deeper into history and really understand it’s political objectives and methods.” Harlow continues to argue that resistance literature is a form of anti-colonial culture that, “Challenge the bourgeois institutions of power which often limit such luxuries to the economically privileged and leisured classes

of a world readership.” Tierney (1998) writes that to write about one’s life in the form of critical research, as in a Testimonio, is to ensure that silenced and oppressed lives are documented. These documents are a means to challenge the oppressive structures that create the conditions for silencing, such as the academic bourgeois. Tierney (2000) states that to write about oneself in such a vulnerable manner required by a Testimonio requires courage. A Testimonio reveals oneself in a very personal nature and contradicts a style of writing that is academically acceptable. However, as Tierney (2000) mentions, there is a much greater purpose that allows the writer to transcend being a researcher and take on the role of activist. The purpose of this courage is to create social change, thus, the risks of vulnerability and academic mockery become acceptable. To strive for the creation of space for voices once silenced, to work for justice and to try and overcome oppression is in my opinion a social workers greatest challenge. The Testimonio embraces these values and as Tierney (2000) writes, the vulnerability required to write a Testimonio, “Is not a position of weakness, but one which to create change and social fellowship.” I believe that the writing of a Testimonio is a natural evolutionary task for a social worker. Social workers are pledged to give voice to the powerless, to work towards creating social change and to stand up against injustice. I cannot think of a more courageous way of writing to attain these goals.

Having said this, I feel that it must be noted that the argument for objective, positivist and empirical research is very strong. For example, Simon and Burstein (1985) argue that “Empirical research can increase our knowledge

of nature and it's workings and can be a source of power for individuals and institutions." Wodarski (1997) goes as far as saying that research as it relates to social work is defined as "The systematic application of empirical methods for specifying worker interventions in scientific terminology." The empirical methods mentioned by Wodarski (1997) include objective testing that determines validity, reliability and clear evaluations of the programs being studied or developed. Furthermore, Wodarski (1997) states that, " Empirical methodology leads to accountability in social work and the avoidance of malpractice suits." Wodarski (1997) believes that there can be no alternative to empirical research in social work practice.

It is my belief that the rigid standards of empiricism lead to important and necessary knowledge, however, it is too narrow to allow for the overwhelming diversity and richness of knowledge creation that has been overshadowed and oppressed. Orlando Fals Borda (2001) suggests that traditional empirical research ignores underprivileged people and benefits those in power who monopolize knowledge, exploit research for career advancement and seek to maintain the status quo. Fals Borda (2001) states that research should be more about the "Discovery of other types of knowledge from unrecognized worthy sources like the rebel, the heretical, the indigenous and the common folk." In regards to social work research, I prefer the values held by Fals Borda as they are most closely connected to the principles of social work and social justice that is becoming so increasingly important in today's world.

I feel that a Testimonio allows the spirit of a person to enter into research. I also believe that traditional research reflects a western, capitalist ethic that dismisses essential human factors, such as our spirit, our heart, our soul, our diversity and the feelings and experiences that make us the rich fabric of human society. As a white Canadian male, I am a part of the dominant elite and I have chosen to become aware of this fact and to continuously move towards letting go of the oppressive and individualistic attitudes that come with this birthright. Throughout my learning, this process of awareness and change has been referred to as de-colonization. I feel that the methodology that I have chosen to write with helps to further my process of de-colonization from the dominant, oppressive and capitalistic ethic. My First Nations educators as well as other unique and special teachers in my life once taught me that to allow my heart, spirit, soul and true self into my learning helps me to resist the narrow confines of oppressive knowledge creation that only serves to maintain elitism and power. My own experiences have led me to agree with this philosophy. Thus, I have chosen to resist traditional oppressive barriers. I have chosen to not maintain a single minded western ideal. Instead, I have chosen to write with my heart. Fyre Jean Graveline, (1998) a First Nations educator, said that Aboriginal methods of knowledge dissemination seeks to challenge the forms of Western education that currently privilege the objective, rational, linear approach to knowing. My intention is to have this Testimonio do the same. Graveline says that it is a matter of resistance, and I most certainly agree.

Chapter 3: Testimonio

I am a 33 year old white male struggling to finish my Master's degree in social work. I have had several years of professional social work experience in a variety of complex capacities. I am currently recovering from a car accident that caused me great pain and a long rehabilitation that I am still undergoing over three years later. Throughout my recovery I have suffered greatly and I have had many losses. I went through a difficult separation and divorce from my wife. My financial independence and my ability to reason and make sound judgments were also severely affected, since part of my injuries are related to a suspected brain injury as well as a very serious depression. During this time of recovery, I have had a unique ability to reflect on the nature of social work critically from both a clients perspective as well as from a professional perspective.

Social work is a profession that I have been so passionate about throughout the course of my adult life. It has been the only profession that I have felt a strong and devoted connection to. I have dedicated much of my life to the values inherent within social work. Along my journey as a social worker I have encountered many circumstances with people that have had life changing experiences for me. I wish to share these stories, thoughts, feelings and experiences with the hope of benefiting the profession. I also wish to share my personal struggles and professional realizations that I have had throughout my journey with the intention that they may add to the wide base of knowledge that currently exists within the context of understanding human

behaviour, social justice and compassion. Finally, I wish to relate these experiences to the human struggles we face as individuals and as people in a global context.

I believe that social work is in a state of crisis. I know that this is not a new concept. Social work writers such as Ben Carniol (1995) and the late Bridget Moran (1992) have been making this claim for years. As evident in our media and on the streets of our cities, human suffering is increasing. Social policies continue to diminish as our neo-conservative governments voraciously cutback on social spending and the realities of the poor, the oppressed and the less privileged become filled with hardship and abandonment. Government policies in Canada reflect the values present within their actions. For example, in 2003, Ralph Klein, the premier of Alberta, was caught swearing and throwing things at the clients of a homeless shelter in Edmonton. He was caught yelling at the clients of this shelter, telling them to get jobs. He was also admittedly, very intoxicated at the time. Not long after, the Alberta government made a statement suggesting that they wanted to start charging the homeless and mostly unemployed clients of shelters to use their services. (Calgary Herald, 2004) In British Columbia, the Liberal government tried to enact a law whereby welfare recipients would be cut off after two years of receiving benefits. Welfare recipients are already living a terrible existence, as is evident on the streets of East Hastings in Vancouver. The streets are already filled with desperate panhandlers, horribly impoverished, hungry and cold people and jobs are not easy to come by, especially when one has not showered,

eaten or put on clean clothes due to a lack of financial resources. In addition, the British Columbia Association of Social Workers (www.bcasw.org, 2004) recently announced findings that suggest that the BC government will be ending funding to help less privileged children eat lunch at school. The Ontario government has also decided to cut \$45 million to the budget of the Hospital for Sick Children (Toronto Star, 2004). These services are for some of our society's most vulnerable people. Men, women and children are hungry and cold and hospitals and schools are closing all of the time. The elderly are forgotten about as senior's facilities get under funded and close and our children go to school in overcrowded classrooms and makeshift trailers that often get questioned for air quality and mold problems. Teachers are striking all of the time out of the frustration that their work does not get recognized and they are exhausted trying to keep up with a system that has placed priorities elsewhere, such as the new convention centre in downtown Vancouver and the 2010 Olympics. Thus, I feel that these realities are evidence that social work is in a state of crisis. Social work is not doing enough to meet the needs of the people who we are dedicated to work for. Social workers are not shaping social policy to support the less privileged. We are not lessening the amount of homelessness, increasing dignity amongst those that are less privileged, diminishing the gap between the rich and poor or creating health, wellness and equality for all. One can even make an argument that social work enables the current government policy that opposes wellness for all and helps the privileged few by accepting funding from the governments that they

politically oppose and taking a stance of apathy when it comes to making a solid argument against them (Mulally, 1993). All over the world, people are fighting and people are suffering and it is happening in our own backyard, right here in Canada.

As social workers we have an obligation according to our Code of Ethics (1983) to strive for social justice and equality for all. Based on what's happening around the world and here in Canada, it would seem that we have lost sight of this obligation. In so many cases social workers seem to be invisible. When I look out my window, I see BMW's all of the time. I see business people and towers of wealth. I see profitable industries and people with a lot of material possessions. I see people laughing over café latte's and carrying bags of clothes just purchased from Banana Republic and I see people talking on cell phones everywhere. In contrast, from my window I see people pushing grocery carts filled with their life's possessions at all hours of the day or night. I see people taking garbage out of dumpsters and fighting for the little food they find. I see people with AIDS on street corners begging for money and getting spit on and told to get a job and to get off welfare. I see people sleeping on church steps in the rain, waiting for morning, hoping to get a half-cooked styrofoam cup of soup and a stale piece of bread. I look further and I see First Nations people suffering from the countless effects of residential schools, such as rape, physical abuse, the fight for their rights of land, health problems, alcoholism and drug use and to regain what has been lost of their pride and culture through years of assimilatory practices and

colonization. I see a worldwide increase in HIV/AIDS and other serious concerns such as Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder and Autism. I look even further and I see people dying under the disguise of the war on terrorism when evidence suggests that it may be a war for the control of oil or energy resources and financial gain for the few people in power. I see child soldiers, countless refugees and ethnic cleansing in Sudan for the purpose of maintaining power for elites that have the profit of diamond sales and oil as their priority. I see people dying of AIDS in Africa when pharmaceutical companies become obscenely wealthy, while the opportunity exists to offer medication to those who suffer, and the need for profit takes precedence. I see racism, hatred and power used to harm others unnecessarily. G8 conference protests are ridden with violence as the people without voices continue to be beaten down and forced to be silent everywhere these meetings and protests occur. Finally, I see the IMF entering into loans with countries with lovely and traditional cultures still intact, only to have the stipulations of the loan subtly decay the culture and bring them more in line with the capitalist ideals of the west. This can be seen on the tiny Island country of Independent Samoa. The Archbishop Desmond Tutu recently stated that until we take care of social injustice, the most vulnerable, the hungry, the poor, the sick, our children, our elderly; violence and hatred will continue to be a part of our life. This is a fact that I firmly believe in and it is why I chose to become a social worker.

I believe that as social workers we have an obligation to fight for social justice. It is about what is right and what is wrong and the need for people to stand up for what's right. It is about the protection of human dignity.

I believe that all of these facts that I have mentioned affect us as global citizens. The Dalai Lama (www.dalailamavancouver.org, 2004) said in a recent conference that we cannot expect to have the people right next to us be healthy and happy people when our global values are such that our most vulnerable people regardless of where they are, go unnoticed.

After my car accident I was faced with many difficult challenges, one of them being a client of the social welfare system. The accident occurred when I was struck from the side by a driver who went through a stop sign on a cold and icy evening. I was left with serious injuries and a difficult recovery. At first I had difficulty walking, my hearing and vision were affected along with my balance. My back and neck were in pain and I was very dizzy, confused, depressed and lethargic. I had a lot of difficulty doing basic household chores such as preparing food, cleaning and budgeting. My ability to make decisions and reasonable judgments were also affected. After three years of rehabilitation I am on the road towards recovery. I still suffer from pain from time to time, my short term memory is still not great and I still have much difficulty with fatigue. During my time of recovery and rehabilitation I had to rely on the social system for care. I had many professionals who had me on their caseload. For example, I had a doctor, a physiotherapist, a physical trainer, a lawyer, and several medical specialists such as a psychiatrist, a

neurologist, and a neuropsychologist. I also had a daily caregiver. None of these people were social workers. Each person helped me in the way that they could, being patient, caring, while helping me in their area of expertise, but social workers were nowhere to be found.

I struggled each and every day to make sense of my pain only to find myself feeling more frustrated as time went on. At one point, my life became one where I was wholly dependant on the social system for care, yet I still felt alone and misunderstood. I would go to all of my appointments feeling as if I was playing a game and not really getting anywhere with my healing. Slowly, I began to identify and understand the struggles of the clients that I had worked with so many times and for so many years as a professional social worker. During my recovery, within my heart, I was searching for a social worker who could empathize with my pain, my loss and my struggles while also managing my care. I was searching for somebody to care for me and help me in the way that I was trained to do as a social work professional. The medical model in which I had become dependant on did not acknowledge the emotional suffering that I needed support for and the confusion that I felt regarding the direction they were taking me on with my healing. I felt isolated and social workers weren't available to help me make sense of this, empathize with my losses and manage my care so that I could heal in a way that was purposeful and meaningful to me. All of that work I did on my own and I still have further healing that I need to do.

I always knew that I wanted to be a social worker. I remember being 7 years old, taking piano lessons, and my instructor had asked me what I wanted to do with my life when I grew up. Instinctively, I told her that I wanted to be a social worker. I didn't know what a social worker was at the time, but it was the only answer that I could come up with and I was certain of my choice and I remember being proud of it. As I grew up, it became the inevitable path that I knew I would eventually follow through with.

My first encounter with a client as a social worker came in my first day as a practicum student in my first semester in my Bachelor of Social Work program at the University of Victoria. I was working in a geriatric hospital and my supervisor was taking me on a tour of the facility. The place was dilapidated with people crying out for help. Residents were crammed into small rooms with four people per room and very little space for their belongings. They were not allowed to share a room with a spouse and it was obvious that many residents were extremely lonely and in emotional and physical pain. It was a miserable way to spend one's last days and it was evident on the faces of the residents that this was a part of their thinking as well. On this tour, I was left alone for several minutes. To my surprise, an elderly woman reached out and grabbed my hand. She smiled and started to talk to me. It only took a moment for me to realize that this woman was genuinely warm, loving, with a beautiful heart and soul. She was also lonely and dying. I tried to comfort her but I soon realized that all I could do was hold her hand and listen to her. The system wasn't set up to care for this woman in

a dignified manner. She died a few days later. There were so many other lonely elderly men and women that I met after her that were similarly wonderful and alone and in emotional pain. At the time, all that I could do was hold their hands and try to give them some human comfort. Looking back, I could have spent more time trying to fight for the rights and dignity of elderly people, who are our parents and grandparents. I believe that social work associations and schools of social work can work harder to advocate for change for the older population and develop course curriculums with aging and social change activities as objectives within the course outline. The older population are our family members that once cared for us. As a society it is not okay for us to abandon them. Social work can and needs to do more.

As a social worker I encountered many people who were alone, feeling misunderstood, struggling and in need of empathy, support and guidance, as I did after my accident. For example, several years ago I worked as an Alcohol and Drug Counsellor in Burns Lake, BC. Much of the area that I was responsible for were various First Nations reserves as well as non-reserve villages and towns. Shortly after I arrived in town and began my work in that position I was called into the local medical clinic. An older man had been found unconscious on the train tracks that ran through the town. Upon entering the clinic I found this older man weeping uncontrollably. He was also very intoxicated. Amidst his outbursts of tears and screams, he let me know how alone he felt and how he didn't want me to leave him. In fact, he grabbed my hand and held on so tightly as if he was clinging onto me with all of the

remaining energy that he had. At the time, I understood that he was so lonely, in such emotional anguish and he was terrified. For that moment, as he gripped my hand so tightly, I was his connection to life. He begged me to stand by him, not to leave him, and I committed to doing so. Before long, he fell asleep and sobered up. Over the following three months we developed a good relationship. He had several more experiences such as the one when we first met, but at least at the time, he knew that he was not alone anymore, that he had somebody he could count on, and that somebody was me. I assured him through our meetings that I would be there for him. I assured him that I would not judge him. I showed him that regardless of his life circumstances, I was respectful of him and he was worthy of dignity and compassion. Through these values and experiences, our bond developed and he trusted me enough to call on me in his darkest times, to be a witness to his life and to care for him when he needed me.

This was a man who was in great emotional pain. He had lost many things in his life and throughout the town he was seen as a mystery. How did an older white man with no ties to the community, no ties to the reserves end up in the north of B.C., on his own? Over time, as we developed trust, he revealed his story to me. He was a man who had much success and happiness in his younger years. He was a successful business owner, a husband and father to four children. All of his children were successful in their own right with families of their own, but estranged to their father. He had not seen his wife or children in many years. One day, years earlier, his drinking

got out of control. Alcohol became the focus of his life and slowly he began to forget the value of the work that he had done. The value of his family's love had lost meaning and the memories of the family holidays and bonds that they had shared vanished. As this occurred, this man vanished as well. He walked out of his home, drunk and alone, and never returned. For several years he wandered from town to town drinking and moving on. His family lost hope and faith in him over the years while his passion for alcohol increased. As he passed through each town he was regarded as homeless and people gave him handouts that he managed to survive on. However, nobody ever really took the time to help him and social programs or social workers did not connect with him. Thus, he consistently fell through the gaps in the social welfare system and as he passed through each community, he was forgotten as quickly as he had arrived. Eventually he turned up in Burns Lake and our relationship began after he was found near death, unconscious on the railway tracks.

As the months passed, we began to talk about his family and the purpose in his life. He would always get a sparkle in his eye when we spoke of his wife. However, as his sparkle was returning his health was failing. He had developed serious liver problems from his alcohol use and after several trips to the hospital, I was informed that he did not have much longer to live. My client was now in emotional and physical pain but he was no longer alone. We had developed such a good relationship that he was content to spend his remaining days in Burns Lake knowing that I was there for him and that I

would visit with him regularly. For a while, that was enough for me, but as time passed and his health continued to fail I thought it was time to fill the emotional gap that was breaking his heart. The fact that he had left his family years earlier was extremely painful to him and he was ridden with guilt. I decided to contact his family. I spent many hours on the phone with his wife and daughter working to help them overcome the pain and grief that they felt upon losing a husband and father. After much work, they agreed to re-connect with him and they were extremely grateful that they did. Unfortunately, his sons were not interested in having anything to do with their father, but he managed to see his wife and speak to his daughter several times on the phone. This was a very special experience for them since it was soon after that my client passed away. His family was immensely grateful for the chance to speak with him before his death and to know what he had been doing throughout the years that had passed. My client was touched and relieved to know that his wife and daughter forgave him, that his family still loved him, that he had more than me to care for him, to think about him and to miss him after he died.

This experience brings to light how people can become lost in life and fall through the gaps in services set up to help those in need. It shows how social workers can make a difference in the lives of individuals and families. It also illustrates how special the bond between social worker and client can be and how important the social work role really is. An example of how this family's struggles or similar stories can be avoided in the future can be to have social work associations hire lobbyists that can push for a greater presence in

communities. To have social service agencies increase outreach in communities and to better educate social workers and communities to recognize people in need.

Unfortunately, as I suffered through my losses, my pain and my recovery, I did not have the support of a social worker when I needed it most. The reality is, that today, with social programs being dramatically cut and undervalued, more and more people feel alone as I did, and less likely to receive the support that my client and his family were able to receive before his death. For a long time, my client and his family were disconnected and suffering. As a social worker, I was able to provide them with services that didn't resolve their greatest challenges but I was able to give them some peace and connectedness to life, to myself and to each other that enriched their lives and relieved some of the suffering that they were experiencing.

My experience, being so different in the level of care that was received was similar in regards to grief and loss. I had lost my ability to work, my wife was unable to cope with the changes and stress that I was experiencing, we separated and divorced, and I felt emotional and physical pain that I wasn't sure was going to get better. I had to find strength within myself and I had to seek out others, non-professionals, and people from the medical profession to guide me and support me. However, what I needed most was empathy, respect, a non-judgmental attitude, professional boundaries and the emotional connectedness that a social worker would have provided. I could not and did not receive this level of care from the other sources that were involved in

helping me to recover. Social workers were nowhere to be found and I believe this to be a reflection of the values that our current politicians place on the profession, thereby dictating the funding for social workers and their ability to be present for people in need. I also believe this to be a reflection of the inability of the profession of social work to unite and create more awareness of the importance of their work as well as creating greater representation.

Mulally (1993) supports my concerns and statements by stating that "At the delivery level there have been cuts in social expenditure, increased categorization and targeting of programs, privatization of many public services, special investigation of welfare recipients, imposition of user fees, and cutbacks in public sector social work employment. Along with these changes social needs have increased...The net effect is that it is now impossible to address the economic and social needs of increasing numbers of people in a meaningful way – particularly the poor, the deprived and the most exploited."

To further support my claims, Mulally (1993) states, that "Even though the neo-conservative ideology of welfare offends the traditional social work commitment to compassion, to social justice and to preserving the dignity and autonomy of individuals, social work to date has been ineffective in challenging the crisis confronting it." As a social worker, I have often felt that we just accept the political demise that is placed upon us. I have often felt powerless to fight back against the cutbacks and the position of continued control that's been placed upon me. It is a difficult place to be in order to make

changes that require a shift in societal and political values and a unification within the profession that justifies the necessity of our work.

Another example of how social work can be beneficial when the appropriate resources are available relates to my work with a young boy that I met when he was only 11 years old. I met this boy doing outreach work in an elementary school in Calgary. He had just come back to Canada from Hong Kong where he had spent the last several years. He was born in Canada and until the age of 2 he was tortured by his father. It was at that point that his mother obtained a restraining order against his father to protect them from any further harm. It was also at this time that his mother took him to China to live with relatives. Several years after, the boy was shipped to Hong Kong where he was forced to raise himself on the streets. He had very little formal education and his social skills were poorly developed. Eventually, at the age of 10, he was somehow re-connected with his mother who shipped him back to Canada where he lived with his aunt and her common law spouse.

He was brought into the school system at the grade 6 level due to his age. However, he had very little formal education in China and Hong Kong and most of his learned behaviour came from what he was exposed to on the streets. Thus, he had serious behaviour problems which the school found extremely challenging to deal with. His academic work was tested and found to be at a grade 2 level but school policy dictated that he remain in the grade corresponding to his age. When I met him, he was barely able to speak to me in English and his main interests were bullying, stealing and rebelling against

school authority. I also quickly learned that he was being physically and emotionally abused by his aunt's fiancé. He was unable to trust any adult and he believed that he would always be in a situation where he would be harmed or taken advantage of.

We spent the next year or so working together. I began by communicating with him through drawing and the use of toys allowing him to direct our sessions together. I wanted him to have the power between us as long as he was acting appropriately. I acted as a support to the school who were having tremendous difficulties with him, as well as a support to his aunt and fiancé. Eventually, as child welfare emerged into the situation, I also acted as advocate for my client to ensure that his best interest was at the heart of the work that was being done and that the abuse would finally stop. Over time, my client and I became very close and I became the safe adult role model that he had never had before. He suffered from abandonment issues, issues of self-worth and had very little respect for others. Together, we worked on all of these issues and through our bond which was based upon respect, dignity, compassion and ethical boundaries, my client developed trust in me and a belief within himself that he could be regarded as a wonderful boy that was deserving of love.

Eventually, I worked with child welfare and at the request of everybody involved, especially my client, he was moved into a foster home, where he consistently received respect, care and understanding. Once again, he was learning that he too was special, and that under the right circumstances, he

was not going to be abandoned and he was going to be treated with respect. He learned how to interact with others based on these new feelings of self-worth and he was able to transfer these values into other areas of his life. For example, his high risk criminal behaviour had decreased, his attention to school work increased and the bonds and friendships he was making were based on positive and healthy choices.

This boy's story is one of extreme hardship and struggle. However, with the aid of social work values and principles, I was able to make a difference in his life. I was able to give him hope, help him to build new and loving relationships and mostly I was able to allow him to feel what it is like to be respected and to be treated with care and compassion. I was able to show him that not all adults would be taking advantage of him. Now he knows that he is capable of trusting people and that he is worthy of love. This has helped his self-worth tremendously and his potential is now unlimited.

This boy's story is another example of how social work can impact people's lives in such a positive way. This boy's story is one of many success stories amongst social workers. Unfortunately, there are so many other people of all ages who are in similar life circumstances where struggle and hardship are the main realities of their life and who do not meet the same type of success. Due to the lack of political value held for the profession of social work nation wide and beyond people do not receive the benefits from social workers that could lead to healthy and positive lasting impacts on their lives. As in my personal life, I can attest to what it feels like to not have had this privilege.

Unfortunately, as time passes fewer and fewer people are the beneficiary of social work services and it is becoming increasingly urgent that we do something to stop children from being abused; to stop people from being hungry and cold; to stop people from being exploited; to stop our most vulnerable neighbours and family members from suffering. Once again, a strong lobbyist presence with funders and policy makers who are continuously bringing these issues into public awareness can potentially be a tool in overcoming some of the shortfalls of our profession. Media exposure of stories of this nature can also be used as a tool that could potentially lead to greater social awareness, funding and representation.

Part of my journey as a social worker that strongly reflects the contradictions within the profession have been my experiences and study of First Nations culture. As a teenager, I lived close to the town of Oka, or the Kanasetake reservation of the Mohawk Nation close to the city of Montreal, Quebec. As a result, at a young age I became aware of the challenges faced by First Nations people and the barriers that the dominant white population placed upon them. I was a personal witness to the atrocities in Oka in the late 1980's, watching the military trucks role in and being so angry and confused about the violent means in which the disputes were handled. I became very passionate about First Nations issues and embarrassed and repulsed that I could be a part of the dominant race that was a cause to such terrible problems. The abuse that took place in residential schools, the impacts of colonization on health and cultural assimilation, the introduction of alcohol and

disease, the theft of land and systemic racism that continues today all infuriated me. This was another reason for me to become a part of the social work profession. I was a witness to the injustice and I felt the passion of needing to do something to correct the wrong doings of my ancestry. It became a part of who I was, in my heart and soul.

When I entered the Bachelor of Social Work program at the University of Victoria, I was amazed at how much influence First Nations methodology had on our curriculum. For example, we had two classes that were run in the format of a healing circle where we participated in class discussions regarding First Nations history, issues of colonization and much more through the use of all of the aspects of the healing circle. This felt wonderful to me. It was a methodology that fit my learning needs perfectly. It was a topic that I was passionate about and it helped me to connect on a deep and personal level with the issues that I was witness to earlier in my life and that I was still struggling with. Other classes were also influenced by First Nations methodologies through similar class structures as well as course topics. The First Nations methodologies all seemed so much more respectful to me. There were no issues of power influenced by an authoritative presence such as a professor. We were all equal in terms of our ability to share knowledge while learning from each other. Power was not a part of the class structure. This felt so liberating for me as a learner and I became so enamored by the concepts as a whole. My learning was as rich and wonderful as any educational experience that I had ever been a part of.

After I graduated with a Bachelor of Social Work degree, I was full of energy, full of passion and still repulsed by the history of my ancestry that promoted, participated in and initiated racist policies and harmful degrading practices that impacted First Nations culture for so many generations. The damage was so overwhelming. I was also clear about the damage caused by white social workers who were continuing the process of assimilation and colonization by removing First Nations children from their homes and placing them in white foster homes. In my mind, this perpetuated a loss of culture, the breakdown of families and a disconnection to one's heritage and roots. I believe that these practices were identical to historical assimilatory practices that created such horrible pain and struggle for so many First Nations people. The difference was that this was being done in the name of child protection. It wasn't enough that churches and the Canadian Government took children from their homes, placed them in schools far from their families, prevented them, at times through violence, from speaking in their native language and abused them physically, emotionally and sexually in the name of blatant assimilation. It wasn't enough, that this separation and abuse may have caused so much hardship and pain among First Nations families. It wasn't enough that we had already stolen their land and forced them onto reserves where they can be forgotten about. It wasn't enough that we had introduced alcohol into their lives and watched as they became ridden with our diseases such as Diabetes, Smallpox, Tuberculosis and Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders. Now, social workers are furthering the damage by

separating families once again, rather than supporting them through their struggles. I did not want to be a part of this process. I believed that I was going to be different. I believed that I was going to do my part in creating change within my profession and within my culture. I couldn't understand why social work, as a profession, chose to be agents of the state, and perpetuate the destruction of a culture. I believe that this is not what the values of social work represent.

So, off I went to work as an Alcohol and Drug Counsellor in the village of Burns Lake, BC. Burns Lake struck me as a tough and poor town that was dependant on lumber for it's survival. Most white people in the village worked for the lumber mills and the rest of the population, mostly being First Nations people were scattered on about 6 reserves in the surrounding area. The mills, for the most part, did not hire First Nations people and I can't suggest any reason for this type of hiring practice that can be verified as truth. My intuition suggests that it's based upon racism. It would seem that the stereotype of the "drunken Indian" still very much exists within the minds of many white people who are typically the people in positions to do the hiring.

Much of my work was with people who lived on the reserves. Most of it was helping people deal with the struggles and challenges related to alcohol use, the pain of past abuse, the loss of culture, violence, illness and disability issues. Most of my work was very much crisis related so it was very difficult to deal with issues in any real depth and in a meaningful way. It didn't take me long to realize that the best work I could do was to be honest, kind and

compassionate to all. To be respectful, to be in a position to learn and to provide empathy and support wherever and whenever possible.

Before long, I met a young man in his late twenties and his aunt who was in her 30's. Both of these people were the last of their immediate family. Everybody else either killed themselves or died through accidents or illness. They both had Fetal Alcohol Syndrome and had struggled with the criminal justice system for most of their lives. They were both heavy drinkers as well as using any substances they could get their hands on. Nobody would employ either of them due to their disability and they both realized that their future on the reserve was destined for a life of crime and alcohol and drug use. Most people did not take either of them seriously, as they both often came across as being slow thinkers and they were often taken advantage of in every possible way due to an eagerness to please others and a strong need for belonging. They were constantly in trouble in one form or another and they often felt depressed and suicidal. Both of them had already made several unsuccessful suicide attempts and I was often called upon to help support them through the emotional crises' that accompanied these life threatening attempts. In addition to all that they had faced, the aunt had been the victim of several sexual assaults that were horribly traumatizing to her.

It was so difficult for me to work with these two people. I found them to be endearing and warm people who were honest and open about their pain and struggles. They saw little hope for themselves and I never tried to fool them into thinking that there was. Given the nature of the disability's they had,

the previous trauma that had occurred in their lives, the lack of employment, their history with the criminal justice system and their current state of health, I knew that the best I could hope for was to help them find some peace for themselves based on where they were with their lives at that specific time. As time went on, and I became better acquainted with their circumstances, I realized that these people were suffering from the after effects of the much larger issues of systemic racist policy and colonization that had impacted their entire family and community. For example, they were being impacted by issues regarding residential schools, land claims issues, spiritual and cultural displacement, disease and more. They had already suffered so much and their reserve and Band council was not financially or professionally prepared to help them heal given the tremendous scope of the problems they faced.

Working in that region was a very frustrating experience for me. I tried to maintain my belief that I could do good work if I was to hang on to the principles found within the Social Work Code of Ethics. Over time, I watched my clients continue to fall through the cracks and I felt helpless to create the change that I strongly believed needed to happen. I saw so many people drink themselves to near death. I saw so many suicide attempts with no real long term interventions. I saw hospitals release very suicidal First Nations patients onto the streets with no place to go and nobody to help support them. I sat with them while they cried, encouraged them to stay alive and I tried to show them that I felt their terrible pain with them and for them. I tried to show them

the face of a white man who was not going to impose any kind of racist or colonial values upon them.

Not only do the experiences of these two individuals reflect issues of racism and colonization that is so common amongst First Nations communities but they reflect disability issues as well. Disability issues impede many people's lives and affect their ability to access many necessities of life. Given my current situation, I can relate to the lack of accessibility to our world that people with disability's face and how that impacts how we feel about ourselves and the world in which we live in. Neil Thompson's *Anti-Discriminatory Practice* (2001) describes this phenomenon very well. For example, Thompson suggests that as people with disabilities move through life they are faced with countless barriers that hinder accessibility to a dignified and self-sustaining life. People with disability's have less accessibility to work, to public places, to enjoyable activities and even to social situations that encourage friendship and intimacy. All of these factors are what Thompson relates to discriminatory beliefs held by our society in which we regard people with disabilities as being weak, less capable and less worthy of equal access to what makes one's life pleasant and enjoyable. In my situation, I have a mild brain injury that prevents me from doing some of the things that I used to do. For example, I cannot work as long as I once could due to fatigue. I cannot participate in activities that I once thoroughly enjoyed. I cannot make the same type of decisions and in the same manner as I once could. I also cannot organize my thoughts in the same way that I once could. All of this leads to

misunderstandings amongst others in my community who do not understand why I cannot act as others do or have the same abilities as I once could. I have less accessibility to jobs, difficulty maintaining relationships and I often feel isolated and sad. This impacts my self-worth and my own dignity which I have always defined by what I can provide to the world. As in the case of my two clients from the reserve, they faced barriers far worse than mine. I have the inherent privilege of being a white male which entitles me to a certain accessibility based upon my race and gender whereas my two ex-clients face racism regarding their status as First Nations people as well as the barriers placed upon them as people with disability issues and gender issues for the aunt. They have to move through life hearing racist remarks such as “drunken Indian” and “retard.” These comments are often heard and they still seem to be a part of our societal thinking. (Graveline ,1998) Over time, the results of hearing these comments are so damaging to our self-worth that it is more than likely that people in this situation will live up to the expectations placed upon them by discriminatory and racist beliefs. (Thompson, 2001)

As mentioned, the disabilities that my two ex-clients deal with is Fetal Alcohol Syndrome or Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder. This disability is an incredibly difficult problem that seems to be rising in numbers of people affected. My belief is that as women lose their voice, hope and power, due to issues of colonization, racism and violence they become more likely to drink while being pregnant, knowing the damage that may happen to their unborn child but doing it anyway since they have lost the perception of a positive

future. It is a way of subtle suicide for a future generation. The disability is growing so fast that by my unempirical estimate, certain reserves have at least 50% of the population undiagnosed. The impacts of this tremendous estimate is that huge percentages of an entire race will have generations of incredible barriers to the world in which we live. People with FASD have a greater likelihood of being incarcerated, harming others, being unemployed, perpetuating the disability, suicide, substance use, isolation and depression. (Streissguth, 1997) A conservative estimate on one Native American community stated that " The incidence of FAS, was 1 in 8. At that frequency, FAS is a community catastrophe that threatens to wipe out any culture in just a few generations." (Streissguth, 1997)

Another disability that seems to be on the rise is Autism Spectrum Disorder. There is a lot of speculation as to the causes of Autism but no certainty within the medical community. However, as funding for children with special needs decreases due to a shift in priorities within our governments, the burden of caring for people with Autism becomes tremendous. While working for an organization in Calgary, I helped support families whose children had Autism. It was always incredible to see how much stress these families had to endure as a result of the changes that occurred with their child, the grief and loss and the exhausting demands that they had to survive with on a daily basis, year after year. All of this occurs while cutbacks to support services grow and people with disabilities continue to lose their voice and fall through the cracks of our society.

It is my belief that the social work profession has a responsibility to become active in voicing the concerns for those that are most vulnerable and for those in the greatest need, such as First Nations people, people with FASD or children with Autism Spectrum Disorder. I believe this to be an urgent and imperative need. At present, and in my opinion, social work associations are quiet, inactive, and apathetic.

I believe that the social work profession can help bridge the gap between the dominant and oppressive society and First Nations people. Social workers can take a lead role in helping to facilitate opportunities for healing circles where First Nations people can teach those in positions of elitist power to begin a process of de-colonization, connection, learning and healing together. We can also be taught the value of story telling as a means to share common knowledge and interests and to continue learning from each other. As professional bodies, social work associations and schools of social work can help take the initiative in projects of this nature. I believe that we have a lot to learn from each other and it is time we learned to live together without domination, oppression, assimilation or harm. It is time that we shared our land and space harmoniously and peacefully. There is no need for people to suffer in poverty and with discrimination. Social workers can help make this happen.

As social workers, we can help people find their voice. For example, as a group facilitator for children who had been abused or who had witnessed family violence I heard incredibly traumatic stories. I was asked to work with a

child who had seen his father come back to their home after having been kicked out by his mother for his violent behaviour. The father had come home, cut his wrists with a sharp knife, and wrote violent messages to his wife with his blood on the walls of the house. The child that I was asked to work with came home from school to find his father in a pool of blood as well as the bloody messages scattered over the walls of the house. This child was extremely traumatized. He hadn't had the opportunity to share his story or even cry. He was only 8 years old. Together, we developed a trusting and respectful relationship. He felt comfortable enough to share his story with me and cry for the first time. I had helped him begin his process of recovery as well as helping him to find his voice.

In my work with children I have also come across a child who had seen his father beat his mother to near death at the age of three. When I met him, at the age of five, he was terrified of all people. He was afraid to talk to anybody, he would not play and according to his mother, he could not see in colour. This had been a problem that began after the violent incident. Over time, our work together, being based upon compassion, trust and respect, developed into a positive relationship. He began to open up and trust people again. He began to talk about his experience and even play with others. One day, after almost two years of work together, he told his mother that he could see in colour again. This was seen as a great accomplishment towards this boy's healing.

These stories emphasize how social workers can help those who are most vulnerable, such as our community's children. By expressing compassion, respect, and dignity so much can change for people who are suffering with such great atrocities. I have seen many children who have become violent and have been labeled as potential sociopaths after doing unspeakable acts. I have seen so many adults do unimaginable things that would traumatize the best of us. I have seen children whose fathers have attempted to burn them alive. I have worked with violent offenders, sexual predators, and so many people that inflicted harm to themselves out of an act of desperation to somehow relieve their suffering. I believe that these accounts of human suffering could be dealt with and possibly prevented if the values and profession of social work were more dominant and present within our society. I also believe that acts of terror, trauma and global injustice can be prevented with a shift in our thinking, from individualistic gain and the pursuit of power and economic wealth to compassion, human dignity, equality, and a respect for everybody regardless of race, gender, ethnicity, culture, lifestyle, ability and sexual orientation. Mostly, a shift to take action to help the most vulnerable people around us with a genuine attitude of compassion and respect. We don't need to be social workers to do this. Any of us can volunteer our time, or help somebody who lives next door or who we pass on the street. Any of us can help raise awareness. It is not only social workers that can create change but I believe it is within all of us as part of the human condition. The Dalai Lama (1995) and Tierney (2000) have both talked about the need

for us to allow ourselves to become vulnerable and show our hearts with genuine compassion for the purpose of helping others. They have both described how much courage this takes. This is the job of a social worker. This is what I believe we have lost touch with. This is what we as a profession need to take back from the political policies that disable our ability to be true to our ethics and values. It has been my experience that government policy, which most social workers have to adhere to due to the state of funding for social programs and payment of salary, actually prevents us from doing the work that we really need to do. Social workers are under-funded, under-paid, under-respected and extremely overworked. We need to change this in order for us to do the work that sits genuinely and inherently within the values of social work. This is what I believe needs to unite us as a profession and be our priority.

An additional option that social workers can take could be to organize town hall community meetings. This could be an opportunity to listen to people who have concerns about social issues and come up with ideas together in order to address them. It could be an opportunity for social workers to reinvent themselves in order to meet the needs that people are experiencing. It can be an opportunity to connect with communities and develop greater empathy and it could be an opportunity for communities to better understand the role of social work and how it could play a positive role in people's lives. Finally, it can be used as a safe space for people's stories to be heard who otherwise may not have an opportunity. James C. Scott in his text "Domination

and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts (1990) says that narratives are excellent tools of resistance. Perhaps community meetings of this nature can be an opportunity for people to unite and share their own narratives and create unity and resistance regarding the barriers in their lives.

There have been and continues to be great people, all over the world, that we can use as examples for our work. The current Nobel Peace Prize winner, Shirin Ebadi, who in Iran, as a woman, a lawyer and activist has spoken out and risked her life on several occasions for the purpose of protecting the rights of women and children. Throughout her life of activism she has consistently supported non-violence and human rights in an extremely difficult and oppressive environment. Others who share similar attributes are the Dalai Lama, the Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Nelson Mandela, Aung San Suu Kyi and those who have died in the name of protecting human rights such as Dr. Martin Luther King and Mahatma Gandhi. These are all people who through non-violence, compassion, peace and vision have created and continue to create social change in the name of human rights for those among us that are most vulnerable. In addition to these people, there are countless other mentors, such as the many First Nations and Aboriginal people around the world who stand up in the name of racism and oppression to tell the world their story of cultural genocide. There are the children among us who remind us through their struggles of why we need to continue advocating for global justice. There are the refugees who have been tortured and a witness to the destruction of their homes who fight their way to live a life in Canada. There

are the social workers and educators among us that although are often silenced, continue to work in the best way possible, often in isolation, towards social change.

Poverty is yet another element of global injustice that in my belief is one of the most tragic of our time. I have traveled to many places around the world and I have seen much poverty and suffering. However, one does not have to travel far to see the horribly impoverished conditions with suffering and despair. For example, the United Nations recently stated that Canada is rated number four on a list of 170 countries on what they consider to be wealth, health and wellness. On the same list, First Nations people within Canada were listed as 70th. (www.un.org, 2004) I would not be surprised if the people who live in the areas surrounding East Hastings in Vancouver, B.C. would be listed close to 70th if not worse. Many of these people who suffer in poverty in our own country are people with disabilities, people of colour, the elderly, single mothers, people who have been abused, people who have been silenced and oppressed. They are people that we have forgotten about and they are those among us who are often the most vulnerable. I sometimes walk among them, trying to feel what it is that they feel and see what it is that they see. I often quickly realize that given my current situation of having had my life so drastically changed due to a car accident, the only thing that separates us is the privileges that I have of having a family that can take care of me for the short term, my gender and my white skin. However, there is no certainty that I won't walk among them and be part of the most vulnerable and silenced

people in our country tomorrow. We live in the wealthiest part of the world, yet we allow so much poverty to exist within our borders, right in our backyard. Nobody has really taken the action necessary to do something to equal the playing field so the poorest and most vulnerable among us can live a life of dignity. This is yet another example, of the apathetic stance taken by the social work profession and our society as a whole. It is an urgent matter that we are not doing enough to change.

The notion that social workers need to act globally is one that I have been witness to in a small degree. Certainly many social workers have worked and continue to work internationally for NGO's regarding issues of peace and social justice. I have not been a part of this in an experiential way. However, I have been a witness to extreme poverty and social injustice around the world throughout my travels. One of these experiences regards a small country called Independent Samoa. The country is situated in the South Pacific and is made up of five small islands, two of which house most of it's inhabitants. Samoa has warded off three attempts at colonization and as a result has managed to maintain a beautiful and peaceful existence with it's complex culture and traditions intact. During my visit, I was shocked to encounter a foreign man, a man who holds a PHD, and was educated in Australia, who has developed an eco-tourism business on the Islands. One night, him and I were alone on a beach, beneath a bluff backed my thick jungle. The stars were bright and the sounds of the waves lapping on the shore and the wildlife from the jungle was as rich as anything I had ever heard. We were discussing the

issues relevant to indigenous people around the world, when he confessed to me that he had married into the family of a high chief in one of the villages. As a result of his family connection and his academic status, he was asked to participate as one of the few voters to determine whether or not Samoa would negotiate with the IMF for financial loans. He admitted to me that he voted in favour of the IMF loans suggesting that he did not understand the extent in which the loans stipulated economic and political change that would impact how the country was to develop. Social programs would be affected as well as cultural traditions regarding work and family roles, education, religion, health and everything else that made Samoa unique. The country managed to resist three previous attempts at colonization and many residents including this foreign eco-tour business operator believed this acceptance of help from the IMF and its conditions were the onset of modern imperialism, colonization and the end of Samoa's uniqueness. Samoan legend even states that the famous poet and author Robert Louis Stevenson helped to lead a rebellion against foreign colonizers. IMF conditions stipulated that government policies need to reflect those that were of the same standards of all other neo-conservative values. Such as a lack of human dignity and rights in the name of individualistic financial growth for the few. It was very hard for me to hear this and the news was even heartbreaking. A beautiful culture in the process of being assimilated. The process was in its infancy but so similar to countless cultures that have been suppressed in the name of economic growth and the development of a small elite social class that has privilege to wealth, while the

majority of people suffer without rights that they once had. This is yet another example of the role of social workers to stand up and unite for the rights of those who need it the most.

It is easy for me to identify with the experiences that I have encountered for I feel that I am now one of those among us that are vulnerable whose life has been damaged. I have felt and continue to feel powerless, silenced and isolated. I have been dependent on the system for help. I have felt the shame that comes with being different and losing one's ability to be seen as an active and productive member of the consumer based society in which we live. I can feel compassion and express my love to many people. I can be a loving member of my family. I can help all people that I encounter who are in need, in the small ways that I can. I can raise awareness regarding issues of social justice. I can live up to the values and ethics found within the Social Work Code of Ethics and try my best to defend those among us that are powerless, voiceless and suffering. In light of all of this, I am not perceived as a valued member of society by the powerful majority. I have trouble working, therefore, I am dependant and thus expendable and forgotten, just like all of the people and experiences that I have discussed. It would seem that our society does not value and credit the soulful emotions and goodness of heart as worthy. Many people that I have encountered have been touched by the lives of social workers and helped to find peace and meaning in their lives. Unfortunately, it does not take long for me to see so many of us that have not. Time will tell what happens to me, however, I will always do my best, no matter what condition I am in, or where I am, to

defend the rights of the people who are silenced, vulnerable and oppressed, regardless of who they are. I will always resist against people and policies that try and silence us. Finally, I will continue to try and unite social workers to stand up and be a profession proud of it's stance against social injustice, wherever it may be.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

In conclusion, this thesis, or Testimonio, has been a reflection on social justice and social work practice and an urgent call for social change. In this thesis, I have written about my own personal challenges, the challenges of some of the people that I have worked with as a social worker and stories of some of the most incredible acts of resistance towards oppression in modern history. I have provided clear definitions and examples of Testimonios and arguments for and against bias in research. I have also used poetry as a way to provide further insights into the oppression that people struggle with and I have written from my heart about the change that I feel is so urgently needed in our world and within the social work profession.

In writing this thesis, I have discovered new hope for myself and for the challenges our world currently faces. I have come to have a much clearer understanding of the meaning of resistance in both a literal and experiential sense. I have been inspired by the resistance and strength of the people that I have written about and I am now capable of seeing resistance in so many people's lives every day that are treated so poorly yet somehow they manage to continue with their struggles even if they don't even consciously know it. I can even now see this in myself.

We, as a global society, have so much work to do. Violence continues to increase in our world and political unrest and oppression are clearly seen every single day. People are resisting and social workers have an opportunity to help

guide people towards social justice and peace. With hard work and continued resistance, I hope to find myself in the role of encouraging social workers to find meaning in both resistance and guidance. I hope to find myself working hard as a social worker, in a much more meaningful way, with a deeper understanding of people's suffering, with a clearer vision of how important and appropriate resistance really is. This is the journey that I find myself on. This thesis was a wonderful tool that helped clarify this journey for me and encouraged me to know that I have the abilities and confidence to follow this path.

I believe that social workers are at a crossroads whereas the profession can move towards re-connecting with it's roots of social justice or move deeper into a role of apathy and clinical quick fix solutions where clients receive a few sessions of solution-oriented therapy and the root causes of oppression are ignored. I believe that if the social work profession is to remain valid and purposeful, we must look into our hearts, be true to our code of ethics and resist the powers of oppression that harm our world and the vulnerable people that we are dedicated to serve. We have an opportunity to make a difference in our world at a time when human rights violations are seemingly becoming more commonplace. It is my hope that we will not abandon our pursuit for social change. It is my hope that this Testimonio can act as a voice for those of us that have been silenced. Finally, it is my hope that this Testimonio can act as an inspiration to others who want to pursue social justice and greater human rights for all.

There is no one to teach me...

There is no one to teach me the songs that bring the Moon Bird, the fish or
any other thing that makes me what I am.

No old women to mend my spirit by preaching my culture to me-

No old man with the knowledge to paint my being.

The specter of the past is what dwells within –

I search my memory of early days to try to make my presence real,
significant, whole.

I use my childhood memories of places, people and words to re-create my
identity.

Uncle Leedham, a fine black man is my fondest memory-

He could sing, he could dance and play the mouth organ or gum leaf.

His broad shoulders carried me and, as I remember, I found it a great
pleasure.

I owe his contemporaries a debt- and I'll pay-

But there is no one to teach me the songs that bring the Moon Bird, the fish or
any other thing that makes what I am.

Like dust blown across the plain are the people of the Moon Bird, the fish

Or any other thing that makes me what I am.

Like dust blown across the plain are the people of the Moon Bird-

Whitey said, 'You'll be better over there, you will grow again!'

Oh, how he was wrong – why the graves of children run four deep – all
victims of a foreign disease.

They had no resistance to the legacy of the white invasion – or so they must
have thought

I am their legacy and I'll not disgrace them,

But there is no one to teach me the songs that bring the Moon Bird, the fish or
any other thing that makes me what I am.

Inside, a warrior of ages rises up – my soul he possesses, his righteous
indignation is the cup from which I drink –

I do not want blood – just opportunity - to be.

But even with him within there is no one to teach me the songs that bring the
Moon Bird, the fish or any other thing that makes me what I am.

Though wretched the invaders were – for me they created a greater

Wretchedness for they, at least, spoke their language, understood their
role, yet it was nothing to be sought.

My great-grandparents knew their culture and it could not be taken from them,
Through the minutes since their life it was taken from me – though my warrior
within says differently –

Even yet there is no one to teach me the songs that bring the Moon Bird,
the fish or any other thing that makes me what I am.

- Errol West -

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