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We would like to thank the families and children who appear in the photographs in this journal. Inclusion of their images does not indicate that the issues discussed in the articles apply to them.

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John Avalos



Developing an Afrocentric Perspective in Social Work Practice Through Reading African Literature: Reflections on Ghana: The Autobiography of Kwame Nkrumah

BY ROBERT S. WRIGHT

I graduated with a Bachelor of Social Work in 1989. My desire to continue my studies was delayed by a mixture of professional, community and personal obligation. In 1996, I committed to going back to school full-time to complete a master's degree in social work. Interestingly enough, my reasons for returning to school were the same reasons for the delay.

I was employed as the Race Relations Coordinator of the Dartmouth District School Board in eastern Canada. In this role, I sensed the professional need for deeper analysis of social injustice and the development of anti-racist strategies and ethics. As an active member of the African Canadian community, I saw the need to study and develop more culturally specific methods of practice. I felt the need to develop an Afrocentric perspective on the field: A perspective in which the history, experience, needs, hopes and values of people of African descent are the vantage points from which the knowledge, values and skills of social work are rendered. On a personal level, I felt the need to more fully integrate my practice philosophy with my maturing racial identity. Pursuing the MSW seemed a reasonable way to fulfill these needs.

Though the Council on Social Work Education stresses the need to integrate the teaching of cultural competence in all courses, thus far in my studies, most courses have dealt with this topic only in a superficial manner. In my first months of study, as I attempted to squeeze this content from various classes, I experienced a sense of personal and spiritual struggle that was different than the normal feeling of not being satisfied by course content. After some reading, I found a parallel to what I was experiencing in an article entitled

"Developing models of feminist pastoral counseling" (Doehring, 1992). The author, a pastoral counselor with a developing feminist identity, was finding that the skills and foundations of her traditional training were ineffectual as she attempted to reach out to clients from the perspective of a feminist therapist. In her search for answers, she expressed a sense of struggle that echoed my own. The mainstream professional literature was not feeding her developing ethic as a feminist practitioner. This struggle led her

Black Pearl

By Jennifer Joan Slater

*Rare is your beauty and priceless you are,
as every black boy and girl who must stand alone
in seas filled with pearls of different sizes and shapes
but none, none to match their shade.*

*Black Pearl you are forced to stand alone,
in classrooms where you have no friend,
on playgrounds where you sit and wish for a friend,
someone clothed in natural ebony, just like you.*

*Black Pearl, your beauty is radiant,
your strength is awesome.
So keep on standing. Stand Tall.
You are Black Pearl.*

to read more feminist literature. I reasoned that my answers might be found as I read more African literature.

In my first quarter of graduate study, I wandered about in the prescribed literature looking for something that would feed my growing construct and found nothing. Only when I expanded my search outside of the mainstream professional literature did I find works that began to meet my needs. One such text was Ghana: The Autobiography of Kwame Nkrumah (Nkrumah, 1957)

(Hereinafter referred to as Ghana). In this chronicle of the life of Ghana's first post-colonial leader, I found an introductory answer to my dilemma.

THE LIFE OF KWAME NKUMAH

Nkrumah published his autobiography in 1957 to coincide with the proclamation of the independence of Ghana from the colonial rule of Britain. In his book, Nkrumah tells of his birth in 1909 in a small village in the colony that was then known as the Gold Coast. A promising student as a youth, Nkrumah completed his early studies and went on to teacher's college in Accra, the Gold Coast's capital. He taught school for a time and then later traveled to the United States where he studied economics, education and theology. Though an exceptional student, he struggled financially and recounts stories of not having enough funds for public transport to commute from school to work. So grim were his financial struggles that he experienced a brief period of homelessness.

As a student in the United States, Nkrumah was active in politics. He served as president of the African Students' Association of the United States and Canada. In 1945, he traveled to London to join other expatriate African students. He collaborated with other African anti-colonialists to organize the Fifth Pan-African Congress at Manchester. In 1947 he left London to return to the Gold Coast to serve as secretary of the United Gold Coast Convention (U.G.C.C.), an organization of educated African elites who sought self-government for the colony. Nkrumah's aggressive style, clear vision and popular appeal quickly distanced him from the educated

African establishment.

In 1947, he left the U.G.C.C. to found his own Convention People's Party. He was ultimately jailed for organizing general strikes and boycotts in a plan of 'positive action' to promote self-government. Nevertheless, his party's campaign was successful in winning elections in 1951 under a new, colonial constitution. As the colony's primary political figure, Nkrumah was released from prison and asked to serve as the 'leader of government business'. In 1952, he earned the formal title of Prime Minister. His book ends with tales of Nkrumah pressing forward to rewrite the constitution and negotiate for the full independence of the Gold Coast, a goal that was achieved with the birth of Ghana on Wednesday, March 6, 1957.



Joe Slovo receiving the ANC's highest honor from Nelson Mandela in December 1994. Photo by Southlight.

REFLECTIONS

As I read of the end of colonialism in Ghana, I also experienced a type of liberation. As I read of Nkrumah's developing sense of nationalism, and his political activities in Ghana, I found a parallel to the development of my own set of values: A developing racial self-awareness, and a deep spiritual connectedness to Africa and things African.

Throughout the text of Ghana, there were several themes that held powerful resonance for me: i) Nkrumah's absolute belief in the righteousness of his struggle, ii) the complete absence of bitterness in his dispo-

sition, and iii) the degree of exuberance he experienced even in the face of tremendous hardship and deprivation.

RIGHTEOUSNESS

Perhaps the beginning of Nkrumah's sense of the need for freedom is best described by a statement he made in his early days while still at teachers' college in Accra. When considering whether Black and White people could ever live harmoniously he queried:

Such harmony can only exist when the black race is treated as equal to the white race; that only a free and independent people - a people with a government of their own - can claim equality, racial or otherwise, with another people (p.

17).

I believe that harmony cannot exist in relationships in which justice and equality are not the foundation. In Nkrumah's mind, this meant that his people had to achieve political independence in order to engage in equitable relations with the British, the former colonial ruler. I would assert that this is also true in social and intimate relations. By acknowledging this political premise, it impels us to look closely at the meaning and presence of power. It is essential that social workers recognize and understand it.

If practitioners do not explore the meaning of injustice perpetrated or experienced by their clients, it will be difficult, if not impossible, to help clients develop greater harmony in their lives and relationships. Likewise, the clients' experiences with more generalized societal injustices such as sexism, racism, ableism and homophobia need to be addressed. This concept is being revealed in the growth and development of feminist and anti-racist models of practice. The growing acceptance of political forms of research such as participatory action methodology is a sign that fundamental justice issues are affecting not only the goals, but also the methods of practice.

BITTERNESS

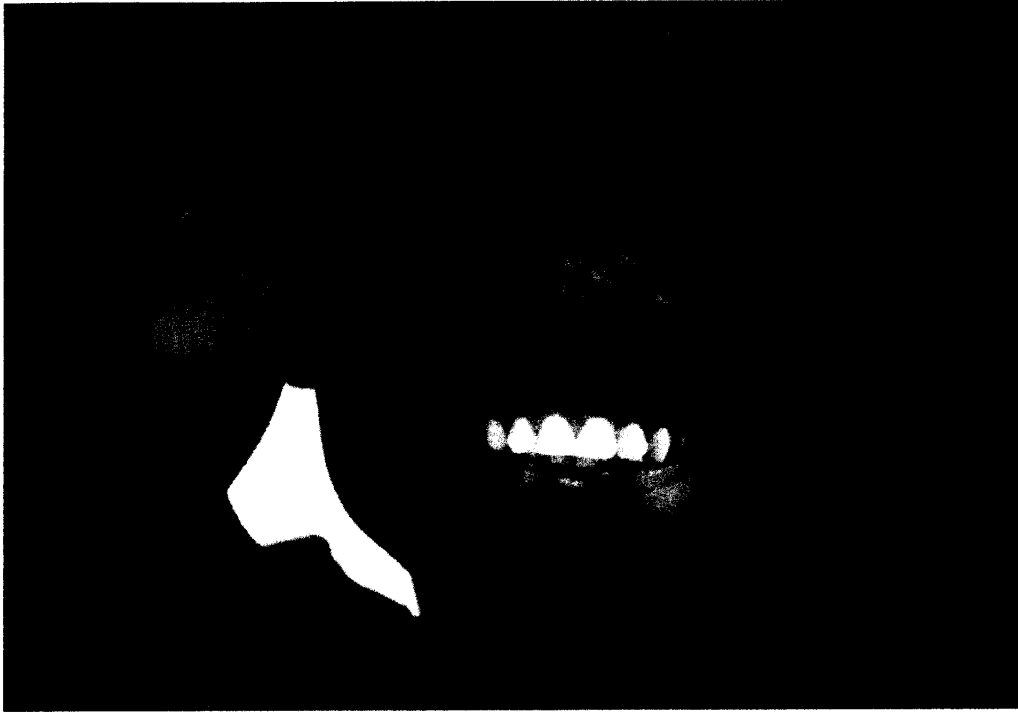
As an African growing up in a colony, Nkrumah was subjected to and observed tremendous injustice and degradation. The extreme humiliation of imprisonment just months prior to his election to the legislative assembly perhaps stung the most. For a colonial government and governor that had long since lost any legitimate authority to jail a man who was pro-actively seeking justice was a most egregious act.

The day after his release from prison, Nkrumah was summoned to the Governor's residence. There Nkrumah met face to face with the man who had imprisoned him and was asked by the same man to take on the role of leader of government business. Reflecting on this moment he said: "In spite of the fact that I was fresh from the prison cell . . . I had forced myself to forget the sufferings and degradation that I had endured. . . for I knew that revenge was bitter and foreign to my make-up" (p. 137). Today, we look at the examples set by people such as Nkrumah and Nelson Mandela who have let go of bitterness in the face of tremendous injustice. Reading this text has helped me to see that those pursuing true justice cannot harbor ill will, for justice is never accomplished through revenge. Likewise, the pursuit of healing, whether it be personal or national, must be approached by a letting go of bitterness and adopting the spirit of mercy and justice.

EXUBERANCE

Nkrumah's story begins with the traditional African feasting that accompanies the birth of a child in every small village in Africa and ends with the international celebration of the birth of a new commonwealth nation, Ghana. It seems that every page is filled with exuberance. Even in his darkest moments, Nkrumah did not hang up his harp. He was able to sing the songs of his heritage even in the most oppressive and alien circumstances.

I believe that the ability to praise in the midst of hardship is rooted in a sense of vision. Whether homeless in Philadelphia as a struggling student, or beaten and imprisoned for sedition



about capital punishment; it is the pain of not being validated when an African or South American study is referenced to support an argument; it is the pain of not being respected when 'non-professional' literature is cited to give insight into my developing social work practice ethic. It is the dissonance felt by a feminist in a paternalistic environment and the incongruity felt by the Afrocentrist in a largely White world. Though the professional literature has been less than inspiring as I continue to integrate my practice with my developing sense of self, African literature has begun to fill the need. That aspect of my self-construct that is anti-racist, feminist and Afrocentric is being fed.

charges at home, Nkrumah had an ever present vision that sustained him. In the face of such a vision, each hardship was seen not as a detour on the path to fulfillment of the national dream of independence, but rather an integral step on the journey. Likewise, the fuel for wellness is often in the vision. When clients (whether individuals, groups, communities or nations) can envision wellness, they are more likely to endure the pain of growth. Inspiring such palpable vision should be the social worker's goal, even when to do so has political connotations (such as the work of organizing communities to advocate for community health initiatives) or revolutionary overtones (such as seen in the women's movement and Take Back the Night campaigns).

It is the vision of a healed Black community that is motivating African American educators, scholars and activists to revolutionary action. Their willingness to challenge traditional foundations of education has resulted in the formation of Afrocentric schools, yet these efforts have been vigorously attacked. The development of an Afrocentric view of historical events and persons is creating a backlash in academia. This antagonism is similar to that directed at affirmative action programs and experienced by the feminist

movement.

When working with clients who are regularly discriminated against because of their color, women, persons with disabilities, or other historically disempowered groups, assisting with the development of a renewed vision can be the focus of social work intervention. By helping clients to liberate from limiting visions, political action is possible. Some of the debilitating visions include: Poor self esteem (such as the sense of worthlessness that might be caused by the perpetration of domestic violence), stereotypes that affect interpersonal relationships (such as male-female role definition or the stereotypes of race), and policies and practices that have a dehumanizing effect (for example, privacy limitations on the poor). Through vision breaking and vision building interventions, social workers can continue to challenge traditional models of practice and ethics. After reading *Ghana*, I am more prepared to challenge the status quo of practice and to develop more culturally specific methods.

I am beginning to understand the pain associated with developing a new practice ethic in a world where so many assumptions lay unchallenged. It is the pain of not being understood when I introduce the issue of race in a discussion

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