

Why Taking Care Of Just My Own Corner Of The World Is No Longer An Option

--by Shauna L. Smith, MSW, MFT

Since the profound sense of helplessness silenced me after the first gulf war, I have been living a mostly apolitical life, pretending that the policies of our government do not affect me, my loved ones, or those I serve. Other than occasional stabs of guilt and a reason (besides tax write-offs) for donating to charitable organizations, distant anguish, prejudice, and inequality weren't my concern. After all, the economy was booming, business was good, and we were doing well. Like many people, I assured myself that by being humane and compassionate in my own small corner of the world I was doing enough.

Well, as we have been discovering, our government has been counting on the complacency, withdrawal and apathy of its citizens. While we were sleeping, the political-military-corporate-media complex has conjured up a mammoth agenda teeming with inhuman rights, abuses of power, environmental disasters, and searing cuts in freedoms and services.

And what I was doing suddenly seemed less than enough. Being apolitical stopped seeming like an option. In fact, I realized, there was no such thing. Silence, in light of the current environment, had in effect become a political statement.

As my husband, a Vietnam veteran and MFT, puts it, "I was going along in my own little world, taking care of helping others as a therapist, having a middle class life, things seemed to be going okay. But this escalation has been an attack on my conscience and has wounded my senses, my sensibilities, my spirit. My consciousness has been awakened."

And so for the past few months we have been educating ourselves: listening to NPR and KVMR, watching worldlink and freespeech TV which give us a global view of our world, following websites such as www.moveon.org, www.voice4change.org and www.democracynow.org, reading, attending meetings, sharing information, and lighting candles.

It was while talking to a group from PSR, Physicians and other Health Professionals for Social Responsibility, at the Capitol that I began to wonder why there was no organization of therapists taking a stand for social responsibility. I knew there were groups of ministers, teachers, veterans, artists, poets, and labor unions speaking out, but where were we? Should not we, I thought, who meet and affect the hearts of so many, be speaking out to reveal our

commitment to helping create a world that is less stressful, less divisive, less inhumane, less harmful of the environment and social structures ?

The rest of this article offers some reasons I think we are in a unique and critical position to speak out as a group and what we have to offer and to gain in coming together; and a proposal that we consider organizing as therapists for social responsibility, initially if not permanently, under the umbrella of Physicians for Social Responsibility .

We as therapists are in a unique position to know, understand and speak out about the inequities in our society, the crimes committed against humanity and especially children, because of a system whose bottom line is profit, not people. We know that basic social services are woefully inadequate and that reducing them while delivering corporate tax credits, subsidies and bailouts, never mind the \$1 billion a day that goes to the military and the additional estimated \$100 to \$200 billion to fund preemptive military interventions in other countries, is unacceptable.

We are in a unique position to know that any administration of any party that perpetuates and increases injustice and goes against the basic morality that we stand for and encourage in our clients needs to be changed: that might does not make right; that we can love, honor and negotiate; that listening and caring may take longer than reflex rage but the results last far longer and go much deeper.

We are in a unique position to know that more and more people are being diagnosed with stress, depression and anxiety. While we may not know the exact interplay of nature vs. nurture within each individual we do know that people's well-being improves when they live in environments which nurture and support rather than deplete and impede. We could double everybody's dosage of celexa to stabilize their moods, but in many cases people are experiencing normal reactions to being bombarded by the system they live under. They are not unduly anxious; they are being taught to fear and have reason to be afraid as well. There are external causes for the increase in depression (sadness, anger, guilt and shame). We live in a society that increasingly takes more than it gives, and this is not an individual therapeutic issue. It is broader and speaks to a profound sickness in our society that we are in a unique position to challenge. Speaking out for social change may be the drug of choice for many of us and our clients.

We are in a unique position to speak out because we are educators as well as therapists. Most of the media is owned by a few corporations, leaving us grossly uninformed. For example, most people do not know the extent of the environmental hazards caused by the policies we are

following. They do not know that we deployed tons of weapons on Iraq which contain depleted uranium 238, a potent radioactive carcinogen with a half-life of 4.5 billion years, exposing the citizens and our own soldiers to radioactive dust which causes congenital malformations, genetic damage, and cancers. (Source: Dr. Helen Caldicott). They do not know the extent of the obstructions to the production of renewable forms of energy and to sustainable agriculture which would vastly reduce the toxicity in our environment. We are in a good position to become increasingly well informed and to share what we learn.

We who are dedicated health professionals help to set the bar in our commitment to open dialogue and nonmilitaristic negotiation. We are mandated reporters of abuse. Do we not need to make our voices known? This is my chosen profession. I want to be proud of being a therapist with conscience. There are a lot of us and we are influential. Many of us are "shocked and awed" at our government's policies and are tired of sitting on the sidelines watching our rights be taken away and lies being told to our children and grandchildren. We can make a difference by joining together and speaking out for a more equitable, kinder world.

Physicians for Social Responsibility includes other health professionals. Their brochure states in part that they stand for "Promoting the physical and psychological health and well-being of humanity," and they hold the conviction that "Human life draws vital sustenance and coherence from the ecological and social systems in which it participates; that our commitment to future generations requires that problems of violence and militarism, global environmental degradation and social and economic inequities be addressed now and not be left as a toxic legacy to be solved by those who follow us; and a belief that... we can convince people and nations to choose policies which contribute to our common health and security."

Further, they state: "As individuals and as citizens, we respect and support these tenets of our society: a tolerance for diversity, a capacity to live and let live, an insistence on fairness, and an abiding respect for individual rights.It is our obligation to share with all of humanity our understanding that eliminating weapons of mass destruction, preserving a sustainable environment and reducing interpersonal violence and its causes are the most realistic strategies for assuring global survival. "

It's hard to disagree with them.

PSR has been an established organization since 1961 and has 501(c) (3) non-profit status. It offers among other things a stellar reputation, credibility, name recognition, a board, a full-time executive director, legal representation, a network of communications, mailings, and

an organized speakers bureau. As therapists and healers we are also the safeguarders of the human body, mind, heart and spirit. What we can offer is a community of therapists with like goals and expertise in our fields, speakers, articulate writers of articles and letters, creation of workshops, and expansion of the message of social and global responsibility.

Speaking out as a group will not take a huge investment of time, energy or money, and I think the rewards will be well worth the effort. Any or all of the following gains are possible for us, depending on how involved we decide to be: a sense of integrity knowing that we have added our voice to a large population of others committed to social change; connection to a community of supportive, caring people and others groups dedicated to human rights; having a forum in which to share and learn; hope and encouragement; a strengthening of purpose; increased power to create positive social change; increased pride in our profession; and the potential for some inspiring and uplifting events and meetings.

If you are interested in finding out more about therapists for social responsibility, in helping get more therapists involved, talking more about it, or being on an email list to receive or share information, please contact me at gushauna@yahoo.com or 916-447-5706. You can also check out www.psr.org to find out about ongoing events and meetings in your area.

"Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter." --Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Suggested readings:

The Eagle's Shadow: Why America Fascinates and Infuriates the World by Mark Hertsgaard
Nickel and Dimed by Barbara Ehrenreich

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