

Giving Away Our Power

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It is commonly believed that power is something which can be seized, taken or given. This static view of power emphasizes the separation between those who "have" power (the power-full) and those who don't (the power-less). Focusing solely on the ways in which the powerful exercise "power-over" others contributes to a sense of powerlessness and victimization; and it leaves us feeling that resistance is futile. But it is the idea of powerlessness which is really the problem, rather than actual powerlessness (Plant and Plant, 1992).

A more dynamic (as opposed to static) understanding of power focuses on the relations among individuals. Power, as a relation, flows from "sender" to "receiver." The "sender" has power to the degree to which the "receiver" consents to the relation (e.g., orders, to be effective, must be obeyed). In submitting to power, we often fail to realize that the powerful need what we agree to give them (our labor, resources, approval, etc.) (Plant and Plant, 1992).

A story will help. Several years back, a young Irish woman, less than 20, with no political background, was working at the check-out counter in a large supermarket in Dublin. She was aware of the apartheid regime in South Africa, and the fact that the black people there had called on consumers not to buy South African products. Because her store carried South African fruit she decided one day to refuse to sell it. At work she rang up all the other goods but not the products from South Africa. Customers soon complained and the managers came. The young woman was fired, but by the end of the day all the women in the store were refusing to sell South African fruit.

The strife escalated, with threats of mass shut-downs and workers in other supermarkets coming out in support of the women who refused to sell the "racist" fruit. The issue was covered in the press and on television and many people in Ireland learned about the real cost of cheap apartheid fruit. Eventually the supermarket chain agreed to stop selling South African fruit, the young woman got her job back, and, in the process, the whole community had learned about the power of one person's commitment to act in solidarity with those who are oppressed (Paraphrased from Shields, 1994).

The story of the Irish woman illustrates an important point about power. It is the fear that robs us of our power. The authentic citizen is fearless because she has clarified her values and principles. She believes in what she struggles for. The person who is beyond fear cannot be threatened or co-opted (Abdullah, 1995). M. H. Gandhi offered a wonderful example of rising above fear in the pursuit of justice when he said, "If you kill me, you have my dead body, not my obedience."

In sum, if we believe that change is initiated only by the leaders--the men, the ones who make the rules--then we are not likely to feel part of it. However, if we see considerable change happening from the bottom up--through individual acts, grass roots organizing and activism--we will know that we have a role to play in it (Shields, 1994).

Ultimately, the questions become: What are we for? What do we stand for? What are we going to do about this? Each and every one of us is a source of power. "There is nothing I can do about it" is a lie; worse it is the denial of our power and response-ability.

Who is standing in the way of a larger consensus on the definition of the better society and paths to reaching it? The businessman, Robert Greenleaf (1972), reminds us:

"Not evil people. Not stupid people. Not apathetic people. Not the 'system.' Not the protesters, the disrupters, the revolutionaries, the reactionaries. The better society will come, if it comes, with plenty of evil, stupid, apathetic people around and with an imperfect, ponderous, inefficient 'system' as the vehicle for change. Liquidate the offending people, radically alter or destroy the system, and in less than a generation they will all be back.

The real enemy is fuzzy thinking on the part of good, intelligent, vital people, and their failure to lead. Too many of us settle for being critics and experts. There is too much intellectual wheel spinning, too much retreating into research, too little preparation for and willingness to undertake the hard and high risk tasks of building better institutions in an imperfect world, too little disposition to see the problem as residing "in here" and not "out there." In short, the enemy is good people who have the potential to lead but do not lead. They suffer; society suffers."