

Feminism's Influence

By: Marcy Westerling

In the late 1980s the feminist movement in Oregon embraced me. Peers schooled me as I lead a 24-hour crisis line in a rural county. All of the county level non-profits serving women experiencing violence got some funding from an Oregon Marriage License Tax. Once a year we would be visited by the lone oversight staff, a cheery ally, who always brought along a volunteer peer reviewer from another part of the state. There was a checklist that we were accountable to. It was a basic, predictable checklist with one exception, a requirement that every staff, board member and volunteer attend annual oppression awareness training — a fascinating mandate with an equally fascinating history.

When anti-violence advocates crafted the marriage license tax funding stream they saw an opportunity to create internal accountability for the future. (Every couple prior to marriage must buy a marriage license and a small amount of the fee funds county domestic violence services.) They mandated that recipients of these tax dollars must train up everyone engaged in their anti-violence services to understand the basics of power and oppression. They didn't want this to be a burden so they designed a two-hour training template to be used or adapted as local programs saw fit and provided "train the trainer" sessions regularly. This was a positive accountability loop using the feminist tradition of consciousness-raising with political education to make sure all incoming volunteers understood not only the tragic results of gender based violence but also the underlying causes that made it a global epidemic.

Crisis line programs recruit new volunteers endlessly. We provide 24 hours of coverage 365 days per year. Some years our budget barely supported one paid staff person. We were desperate for volunteers. These volunteers then needed skills to handle dicey situations – life-threatening circumstances, often at 3:00 in the morning and with local law enforcement an inconsistent team member at best.

The marriage license tax insured that the initial training was comprehensive – a minimum of 20 hours on an array of topics. New recruits needed to complete the training before they could have a role in the organization. As a director facing all the challenges of filling 24 hour shifts every day, I learned to value this training burden. It allowed us to accept every volunteer that stepped forward, knowing that despite a wide range of starting points and personalities, a distilled bottom line emerged after the 20-hour plus training. Few people dropped out. And few people didn't have their world-views challenged during the training; but since it was a collective experience, it created bonding and intimacy versus animosity.

New recruits included young housewives seeking meaning, newly retired seniors interested in more than a book club, and full time workers needing an outlet for their passions. The majority were white and most had lived in rural communities all of their lives. Most arrived simply "to help others in need." Susan typified an incoming volunteer, well intentioned and randomly selecting the crisis line to volunteer for instead of walking dogs at the humane society. She could have fled when she realized how much more she was in for but she blossomed as her protected reality gave way to deeper friendships and a new sense of connection with the world.

The *Oppression Awareness* segment of the training made recruits think, often for the first time, about race, class and gender and how discrimination and violence mirror societal power

imbalances. Risky terrain! The two hour training engaged participants in talking about power – who really had it, why, and what were the consequences. Another section used the Chernobyl nuclear meltdown as a metaphor, how radiation contaminated everyone in the area, not because they wanted to be or because they were good or bad but because they were exposed to it. In the same way, our culture had been exposed to racism, a toxic reality, over generations. This exposure could only be countered by naming and tackling the problem. We framed interrupting or exposing racism as a friendly, even routine gesture, like alerting someone to a zipper being down or a slip showing beneath a skirt. Such mishaps happen to all of us and, once pointed out, are easily handled. Of course, oppression is never easily named or addressed; but understanding racism as a shared problem to overcome lowered the stakes, motivating us to be less racist, to see ourselves on a journey including mistakes.

As I started in the work of Rural Organizing Project (ROP) I didn't have language like "political education" or "popular education" in my tool kit. What I did have was a team-developed outline for sharing information in bite-sized bits that we owned as we added in our own vignettes of life. We called it consciousness-raising. Raising people's consciousness is a serious commitment. It seems like it should be contractual: "I will illuminate these concepts, and if you stay present while you are challenged, I pledge to stay present with your reality as well. We will unravel this together because, of course, only by getting to the truth of our own experiences can transformation happen."

We understood that our recruits, however impassioned, might be new to the topics we faced. Consciousness-raising, and what I was learning to call political education (facts and context), dissected the cultural teachings of our communities, and equipped leaders and members to examine them in ways that challenged without being threatening. Storytelling, "I used to feel that way until..." made a greater impact than sharing facts, "98% of all pedophiles are heterosexual men."

Bypassing rhetoric and judgment are not usual attributes of the left. Both the anti-violence movement and ROP were embedded in rural communities, necessitating a loving and reciprocal process to change negative community norms that were vestiges of a cultural inheritance. Interweaving consciousness-raising with political education was a potent formulation. We *became* political education. We made political education the lead ingredient in all our activities - Living Room Conversations, the Democracy Grid, monthly Kitchen Table Actions, regular communiqués from ROPnet.

Other organizations employ this combination, presumably with good results. Unique to ROP may be how we use informal times to share and process, along with more formal settings. Informal times - meals, walks, and, most especially, overnight stays - allow new information to be integrated and leaders to gain mastery of the trickier parts of a topic – the race, class and gender nuances and how to support peers as they hit predictable roadblocks.

These exchanges enhanced everyone's mastery. Each conversation challenged and informed me; it was a living laboratory of dicey, complex, very real situations that needed to be addressed if effective organizing was to happen. When I added up my organizing hours, the casual processing chats would exceed in hours and import the time in larger, formal group conversations I facilitated.

Relying on formal curricula for political education can miss what we most need – time to apply and problem solve the content. ROP uses highly interactive facilitation to integrate current conditions in a community with discussion content. Such adaptive facilitation is not neutral. It requires intuition, the ability to hear what is often not said, to slow down, veer off and even jettison the original plan

to meet this particular group's needs in this community on this topic on this day. Since ROP's stated overarching mission is to provoke transformation, no standardized outline offers enough variables to compete with the role of a skilled facilitator/organizer.

Our agenda outlines make sure that core topics are reviewed and random conversation minimized, even in a relaxed setting that encourages meandering. Good timekeeping and allocation of time for each topic make sure that meetings don't go on forever, despite the laid back format.

There are times when a purely formal curriculum, with pre-made flip charts, detailed agendas and prescribed exercises are very useful. Formal curricula, regardless of how personalized and tailored, do shift the focus to completion. The ROP contract is about the process; a path to understanding and being able to help others better understand the puzzle pieces that make up our lives, communities and world. We always add in informal processing discussions with formal time. Time to process content is in openers, meals and throughout the agenda as we integrate new facts and headlines to the puzzle pieces that we feel driven to work on in our communities and world. The media and Internet now allow easy access to facts and analysis based on increasingly segregated worldviews. It is when we gather and talk about these varied forms of truth that we can deal with what divides us.

ROP political education is most formal in its informality. We have tools that rarely gather dust as they are used again and again to launch a process. The formal tools set the stage for the informal conversations to happen. A little yin and yang allows our political education to have the flexibility to meet the incredible hunger there is for these types of conversations while serving up a rich stew of useful information and analysis.