

WHEN THE POLICE CAME

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Many moons ago, I taught in the School of Human Services at New Hampshire College, which offered a weekend degree program where those working in human services could get a master's degree. I was also in charge of assessing prior learning credit (which required a lot of training, I found out) as well as, for one of my years, running the registrar's office (including setting up the commencement exercises). I have had immense, immense respect since then for registrars and their staffs and also no desire ever to do that kind of work again.

I loved working at the school for a couple of reasons. One was the students—the salt of the professions, really—the supervisors and those whom they supervised all equal in our classroom. Whether you turned over paper or turned over patients didn't matter—they were all going through the training together, face to face, life to life.

The second reason was the ideology of our program. We taught from the core principle that the human services in a corporate capitalist country like ours were meant to keep the lid on social unrest and short-circuit any efforts people made to govern their own lives outside of what their betters thought was best for them. How we ever got away with teaching this modified Marxism always mystified me, but we brought in the students (and thus the money), passed all our accreditation tests and ran a solid academic program that met all the arcane requirements of higher education.

In 1970, the Massachusetts legislature enacted the Quinn Bill, which would give police officers a salary bump if they earned advanced degrees. And there sat our program just across the state line—one weekend a month, Friday to Sunday. We suddenly began to see more police officers in the classroom, which unnerved us a little because the police were one of the demons at the heart of what we taught our students about power, property and control.

And their presence also unnerved our students, many of whom had had unpleasant run-ins with the police in the course of their human service work.

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The staff, after long, heartfelt discussions, decided not to change the trajectory of the program at all. In our teaching, the police were part of an infrastructure of oppression, regardless of how individual officers were as individual people.

But we also instituted more opportunities during what we were doing academically in the classroom to give everyone the chance to share their stories. We brought in facilitators well versed in running meetings through consensus, borrowing from Quaker and anarchist processes the best ways that people can talk to each other without everything descending into Hobbesian warfare.

We didn't do this all day all the time. In fact, we tried to sneak in these times for sharing so that people weren't suddenly on their guards because they now had to be in "sharing mode." Several of us would start up conversations in the corners during break times, or we would order in a lunch occasionally rather than releasing people to go off on their own. Call it building community through the side-door.

Because in the end, building community is what we were trying to do—at the very least, a community of people who, often finding themselves on opposite sides of law and compassion, were able to bring to their actions an understanding of how each group labored under a regime that did not have their best interests at heart and who exploited their good faith and urge to do good works to maintain their own privileges.

I won't deny the road was rocky, which is usually the case when you're walking the road as you build it. But I think we managed to pry open enough head space in our students to accommodate the stories each of them had to tell so that they could do their jobs aware of the pressures they all had to endure in surviving their professions and in the process, at the very least, cut each other some slack.

Current proposals to defund the police function in society bring to mind the discussions our students had about the best ways to serve those in society who are damaged, lost, angry, "starving hysterical naked" because, for the most part, those discussions are not taking place now as part of the proposals. While the presence of police officers in our classroom was at first unsettling, everyone realized that of course they had to be there because the only way to break open the blinders that our institutional personas place on us is through talk, talk and more talk.

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That's not happening now as people settle down in their keeps inside their moats with bridges drawn up. What we need is another Occupy effort to entice people to at least lift their heads above their battlements to see what's going on and take a risk to join in. In fact, the way Occupy worked, through its focus on horizontal decision-making, is probably the best method to do this work, as David Graeber point out in *The Democracy Project* about the Occupy Wall Street movement:

Many have objected to the apparent military origins of the term "occupation." ... But in fact what we are doing *is* an occupation. The military analogy is appropriate. It's not even really an analogy. We are seizing space and defending it by means of various lines of force: moral, psychological, and physical. The key is that once we do liberate this space, we always, immediately, transform it into a space of love and caring. (258)

I believe that that is what we were trying to do in our program: build a space that gave people normally at odds with one another the chance to know, love and care about one another. We could not control what happened after that; we could not even state that what we were doing would make any difference in the overall scheme of things. But revolutions in understanding do not come about through wholesale changes in systems and practices. They come about because people learn new ways to talk about old things and thus turn them into new things, newly seen, freshly understood, energetically practiced. Occupy the Police might not be a bad way to have this dialogue because what is happening now is not dialogue but declamation, not open-source conversation but closed-in declarations of principle.