

**A Consideration of Ethics and Authority in Social Work
with thanks to Richard, Thelma, and Louise**

Mariah Breeding, May 1992

The following essay was written during my master's degree studies and in response to this charge:

"the final paper, due May 8, can take one of several forms:

1. It can apply one of the concepts which we will discuss in class (e.g., freedom, equality, authority) to a specific aspect of social policy or social work practice. (Two illustrations of this approach would be an analysis of the egalitarian dimensions of Social Security policy in the U.S. or the meaning of freedom in social work practice with involuntary clients.)
2. It can compare how two different views of the same concept (e.g., freedom, equality) have consequences when applied to a specific aspect of social policy or social work practice. (An illustration of this approach would be the meaning of freedom in the arguments of anti-abortion and pro-choice advocates or the meaning of equality in the arguments for or against affirmative action.)
3. It can discuss a general question which pertains to the impact of current policy developments on values and ethics."

Richard Sennett's *Authority* was an assigned text; the other citations are from my own reading.

Finally succumbing to procrastination instead of continuing to torture myself by neither working at the project at hand nor permitting myself to totally unabashedly *not* work at the project at hand, I went to a matinee today. Two-ten of a Friday afternoon at the Century 9 Theater Complex across from The Best (and if not exactly that, certainly The Vast) Shopping Plaza in Pinole. A medium \$1.75 popcorn with real butter, a very small free cup of water with real ice for whose size the counterperson mutely apologized, and "Thelma & Louise".

At one-twenty I had been perched on the side of my bed desultorily reading through *The East Bay Express* while despairing about not working on this paper as I do when my internalized injunctions about not enjoying myself when there's work to be done prevent me from fully being there. In the sometimes too precious, often provocative Berkeley manner the Express has of making connections, this particular issue featured a double movie review by Kelly Vance on the theme of "Where the Women Are". The women turned out to be on the road with Madonna and her boys, and also on the road but in a rather different way with Thelma and Louise and another kind of gang of boys. Vance summarized "Thelma & Louise" as "...a thoroughly humanized, decidedly feminized road picture which captures not just the look but the restless spirit, the whole hellbent wheel fever of the Sunbelt, in one dusty, liberated getaway run ... that tracks through some of the most gorgeous scenery in the West...".

Not only am I coming out of years in the graduate school tunnel, but I've driven across this country six times and headed off to the desertlands on at least a dozen or so other occasions with no greater inducement than a three-day weekend, a twenty-year-old car, and possibly enough cash to buy gas and Kwick Stop coffee. I am considering moving to the desert in the fall, the desert I have been promising myself that I would return to one day ever since I left the East and emerged out of the somewhat undistinguished Texas panhandle into the blinding piercing brilliance of New Mexico

sky/light/land. Finally, on this very same afternoon, a dear friend with whom I've been pining for connection was celebrating her birthday by sneaking off to a matinee at some suburban movie theater on the outskirts of her home city - Santa Fe.

Barry Lopez details poignantly in *Arctic Dreams* how the weltanschauung of the far northern indigenous peoples is reflected in their sensorial perceptions. An Inuit stepping out into a tundra day perceives all that is - sights, sounds, smells, and sensations of all sorts - as a whole gestalt, not a collection of reduced and random events and entities. I suspect that the Inuit include in this gestalt their internal sensations and thoughts and emotions, that the Self is as integrated into the whole as is every other piece.

If we think of the Inuits' weltanschauung as a useful and joyous one that *arises out of their context* as dwellers and equal participants in an ecology that is mostly unmediated by human beings, is it possible to apply such a viewpoint inside this culture's reductionistic, massively mediated infrastructure? Within what parameters is it ethical to utilize concepts or practices from another culture? To return to the micro situation out of which these musings have arisen - my day at the movies and my social work ethics paper - is it possible for me sanely to believe that there is a relationship between the paper and the movie, that my decision to abandon *The Task at Hand* and flee with the wind to Pinole is actually an integral part of *The Task at Hand*? Is it possible that there is a gestalt of this day's elements that flows in a way as comprehensive and seamless as the reality that greets the Inuit and the tundra? Is it possible that in analyzing the conceptual construction of this paper I am revealing that there are embedded ethical judgments underpinning even the most mundane of acts, and that the first step in discussing ethics is to make explicit the morality which shapes even those forms so often represented as value-neutral?

The Navajos have a concept called in translation "The Pollen Path", somewhat analogous to the teleological utilitarianism of "the greatest good

with the least harm" paradigm. The core difference between the two paradigms lies in how each system determines what is the correct stance or action. In modern Euroamerican utilitarianism, the hope is that needs, good, and harm can somehow be quantified, compared, and prioritized; and that through such an operation the most ethical response will be developed. The Pollen Path is divined by absolute spiritual attentiveness; the hope here is that by perfect attunement to the entire gestalt of the moment, one will act in a manner, or perhaps the only manner, consistent with all the inextricably interwoven circumstances of that particular and unique moment.

I once watched a white male therapist, clothed as always in blue and somehow vaguely reminiscent of a buffalo, whose lifetime work had been fighting to work ethically and efficaciously with those people adjudged by this society's norms to be chronically mentally ill, struggle in a training group to accept the idea that The Pollen Path exists. Sam's eventual insight that afternoon was that The Pollen Path is whatever he does, out of the interplay of his character at that moment and all other things as they are at that moment (recognizing that in the extreme of Navajo or Inuit vision there is no separate I-ego state and Thou-world state, so that to even represent his action as arising out of the interplay of his separate psyche and the separate all else is already a distortion but one that my Euroamerican mind does not know how to avoid).

This discussion of The Pollen Path and its ethical application to my micro movie scenario is further complicated by considering Joseph Chilton Pearce's suggestion in *The Crack in the Cosmic Egg* that our material realities as well as our actions and theoretical abstractions may be shaped by a cultural consensus that effects us on a molecular level. (He, within the context of his paradigm, would say that molecules themselves are a creation borne of our culture's current consensus about their existence.) DiJuana Barnes stated in *nightwood* with utter simplicity the same concept: "If you think it, than it must

be so." Pearce extends this concept to a societal level and suggests that if a sufficient majority within a people constructs internal and external reality in a specific way, reality becomes that way. I have suggested that that any assessment of the intrinsic centrality of my decision to see "Thelma and Louise" to the construction of this paper on social work ethics must be understood to be derived from deeply held, pervasive, and probably doxic values.

A further demonstration of the constant influence of an internalized moral order is possible through examining another aspect of my trip to the movies – *when* I chose to see "Thelma and Louise". There are some who would have waited until ten fifteen to see this film, who would have deferred the pleasure and called it reward for an afternoon's disciplined labor at the word processor and gone when mind, body, and soul were too exhausted to write more [or at all, depending on how successful the carrot]. I called it inspiration and ran for my Mazda pick-up and the I-80 road.

In this culture of the heirs of Freud and the drive theory, sublimation and delay of our assumed primitive and destructive wills is considered developmentally and thus morally superior. On the other side of the world - and in tesseracts within the Western hegemony - the true Dharma path involves being utterly in the moment; to be able to be in This-Moment-That-Is-All-That-Is for more than a few blessed seconds at a time constitutes the pinnacle of spiritual development. In a psychologically-driven society the supposedly judgment-free concept of health/disease actually replaces or functions as a variation of the right/wrong dichotomy of ethics: if we proceed progressively and concede the health/rightness of both extremes of the immediate/delayed gratification continuum, does it not follow that all of the many many shades that fall between these end colors must at least be considered for health rather than being summarily dismissed as diseased? Can my move towards immediate rather than delayed gratification be considered to be an equally healthy behavior and validated as firmly as is the greater academic system that demands delayed gratification? If one's behavior is at variance

with the surrounding dominant cultural norms and is an acceptable behavior within another group's cultural norms of which that person is not a member, by what standard shall normalcy be judged?

I have had several purposes in examining here a fairly uncomplicated, mundane action that transpired in say three minutes of one afternoon of my life. My first purpose has been to demonstrate the value of perceiving and enunciating the ethical dimensions of everyday events. I imagine that the course syllabus probably specifies social work practices and policies as the areas within which we are expected to be able to unveil and elucidate underlying ethical dimensions, but certainly part of being an effective social worker of whatever practice specialty involves being able to apply this same scrutiny to the greater social reality and to our own personal actions. For a dedicated practitioner (or perhaps more accurately, one with both dedication and the ever-rarer luxury of available time), every transaction is replete with material suitable for extensive ethical/philosophical/political consideration. Indeed, I think for some of us the problem is not how to plumb events for their wider dimensions, but rather how to see the tree for the forest.

My second purpose has been to illustrate the profound and intrinsic impact of culture upon our weltanschauung. This idea is, in the enlightened 90's, supposed to be nothing particularly new. Cultural sensitivity is the rallying cry of the latest generation of social service workers and even ego psychologists and object relationists. Yet by and large this vaunted cultural sensitivity practically translates into white or non-white agents indoctrinated in Euroamerican precepts, working in a Euroamerican fashion, doing business as usual, and being enlightened enough to consider non-dominate cultural affiliation *as a variable that should be taken into account when doing business as usual*.

Culture has been reduced to a series of seasonings, sometimes even prized for their piquancy or exoticness or whateverness, that are acceptable as long as they remain seasonings and don't attempt to become the main ingredients in the stew of social

structure. The totality and uniqueness of culture as a way of organizing reality is thus denied, and the social construction of madness and normalcy, success and failure continues basically unchallenged along Euroamerican lines.

Actions just as demure as my decision to go to the movies are evaluated for health or disease, for social normalcy or deviance, by us all the time as a matter of course in our various professional guises of caseworker, manager, therapist, and community organizer. Given the trivialization of culture, that is frightening enough. However, what is currently more frightening to me is that the inherent racism/classism/homophobic/woman-and-child-hating of our social order continues to flourish unaddressed because we are now being culturally sensitive. The monoculturalism inherent in the structure of our social fabric and institutions can be seen by simply extending-out any of the non-Euroamerican concepts involved in my trip to the movies and trying to imagine them as part of the structural paradigm. Can you imagine the custody of a child being decided by a meditation and discussion involving all affected parties that continues until consensus is reached? Can I imagine a mother allowed to keep her daughter home from school for a week because the first post-drought wildflowers are out now on the hills of Point Reyes?

My third purpose in elaborating on my decision to go to the movies has been to justify, establish, and demonstrate the style, the very framing of this paper. In my best moments -- as a person and as a practitioner - I conduct my life and my attempts to understand the world and the manner in which I live and practice in the same sort of contextural, synchronistic, reflective, and conscious style that I am using in creating this paper. What I would like to do for the remainder of my writing is to continue examining in the same fashion my concerns about the ethicality and effectiveness of the contemporary social work model as augmented, influenced, and informed by my simultaneously viewing *Thelma & Louise* and reading Richard Sennett's *Authority*.

Where my remarks may not seem to be confined to this specific focus, I'll agree that they probably aren't. I permit myself the luxury of greater social commentary and speculation, with the basic understanding that the broader and deeper my considerations of the world around me, the more informed and more ethical a practitioner I become.

For me one of the most compelling and germane insights discussed by Sennett actually originated with Alexis de Tocqueville; it is the idea that freedom for USNorthamericans has come to mean autonomy. Tocqueville, according to Sennett, recognized in Jacksonian America "...men and women whose desire is to be left alone ... to equalize the condition of power in society so that no one has the strength to intrude; if all are equal, all can go their separate ways." Sennett extends this analysis to discuss what happens to those individuals who enshrine autonomy as the ultimate freedom and yet are dependent upon others: "But if social conditions do not permit people to be equal, there is a second line of defense. It is indifference, withdrawal, a willful numbness to others. If you act this way, they can't get at you emotionally. A prisoner in the world, you can nonetheless go your own way inside."

Certainly this valuing of autonomy as freedom echoes throughout "Thelma & Louise." This is a story redolent with USNorthamericans' love of the road; Thelma and Louise's lawbreaking sprint across the backroads of some of the most isolated and vast country in the United States is experienced by the characters themselves as utterly liberating. At one point Thelma stands up in the green Thunderbird convertible which is so obviously where Louise allows her otherwise tightly controlled spirit to soar and yells "Crazy and Free!" It is the physical dimension of their journey as well as the emotional passage which proves to be transformative; Thelma, again, talks about feeling "...more awake than I've ever been" as the T-bird streaks along at 110 mph through a landscape totally empty of people and utterly beautiful.

The automobile is the epitome of Sennett's theorized defense of

autonomy used by those who must live with their lives circumscribed by more powerful others and robbed of equality. Marge Piercy realized the power of the car as metaphor for freedom when she had her 20th century heroine in *Woman on the Edge of Time*, transported to a 22nd century utopia, mourn only the loss of her car. Contemporary young Latino and Black men have augmented the illusion of autonomy by installing boom box speakers that effectively blot out even the sounds of the surrounding oppressive environment. A speeding car filled with loud music and only the people one wants: Tracy Chapman's evocation of this dream of the oppressed in "Fast Cars" rocketed her record to best seller of the year in 1989, acoustic guitars and all. How brilliant of the director of "Thelma & Louise" to provide the finishing aesthetics to the metaphor by filming in the desertlands.

Sennett notes that often through our very attempts to break free of oppressive authorities, be they in the paternalistic or autonomous mode, we become even more tightly bound to them. Continuing to use the automobile in general and Thelma and Louise's journey in particular as a metaphor for rebellion against authority, notice how the vehicle of freedom binds them back into the system. Cars need gas, and maintenance, and require roads. Thelma and Louise, like all other automotive autonomists, are tied into the system by their need for cash for their car and into the infrastructure by their need for roads for their car. It is interesting to note the current popularity of all-terrain, off-road vehicles as this country becomes more and more regressive.

The ultimate proof of the automobile as the primary vehicle for 20th century autonomy/ freedom, in addition to its very name, can be seen in the audience's reaction to "Thelma & Louise". The women commit 4 acts of physical violence in the course of this film; they kill a rapist, hold-up a store, blow-up the eighteen-wheeler of a trucker who has been harassing them, and disarm and imprison a state trooper after shooting-up his car. It was the imprisonment of the state trooper, closely followed by the retaliation

against the trucker, that elicited the loudest cheers and claps from the audience. Clearly our deepest rage is projected against the authority figures who intrude into and thereby shatter our illusion of autonomy, rather than the social structures that enforce inequity, or the privileged class that creates and reinforces the social structure. I have noticed that Rodney King is often identified as a motorist dragged from his car, and wonder if his being violated while occupying what has become the national castle has contributed to the level of rightful horror generated by an abuse that occurs I am sure to at least a pedestrian-a-day somewhere in this country.

In *Authority*, Sennett discusses at length the post-industrial-revolution social darwinism that made class for the first time a matter of personal weakness or strength, rather than one's inherited position in a rigid caste system. He points out that in European feudalism the role that one was born into was quite distinct from one's being as a person, and suggests that therefore a servant could address a master fairly plainly and with intact self-esteem. Under the new capitalism the social class version of the "survival of the fittest" became "the failure of the weakest".

Sennett further maintains that one of the results of this association of poverty/less-than-upper-class-status with personal weakness was that shame supplanted physical violence as a prime method of enforcing power. The shame of not being economically elite was further strengthened by paternalism, where the emergence of authority figures presenting themselves as fathers introduced shame into the act of obedience.

Thelma and Louise's experiences enportrait the reality of certain segments of the population, not acknowledged by Sennett, for whom physical violence continues to be an everyday, under-the-surface-of-every-moment event and very much a main enforcer of power. Women and children are ruled by rape and assault.

Even when Thelma and Louise are no longer actively being sexually assaulted,

the threat is omnipresent and they are sexually invaded and exploited constantly. While some factory workers may still believe enough in the boot-strap dream that their failure to achieve it is sufficient to keep them at their machines without being beaten, thousands of others must be incarcerated to be controlled.

Where Sennett is brilliantly accurate, however, is in his assertion that managers/capitalists/politicians presenting themselves as fathers acquired a greater power over their employees/subjects than fathers themselves actually had over their children. As he observes, children are expected to grow up and acquire some independence. For workers/wives/subjects/people of color there is no growing up, there is no eventual even partial independence. What is so oppressive about paternalistic authority is that the child never ever gets to become the father, a father, or his/her father's equal. Thelma's comment to Louise about her husband is "He's not your father", implying that she relates to him as if he is; yet Louise left home and father to marry husband - and she has never left husband even for a weekend in eight years of marriage.

The autonomous authority figure, as described by Sennett, depends on several techniques to maintain power, one of the most insidious and commonplace of which is what he calls the reversed response. The reversed response is a method of conversing wherein every response the person in a position of superior power makes directs the focus back on the subordinate. A typical manager/worker exchange involving reversed response is as follows: worker - "I just don't understand how you want me to do this mailing!"; manager "What do you think would be the best way/how are you going to go about figuring out how to do the mailing?". The effect of such responses, as Sennett notes, is to "... discredit the statements of the other party as intrinsically meaningful." As Hegel first stated, it puts upon the oppressed the burden of making sense of what power is; rather like a child being punished who is sent to select the switch.

There is a definite paternalistic social work type in "Thelma & Louise": the good cop, the sensitive cop, the cop who is politically aware. He verbalizes his belief that the whole indictment and subsequent hunting down of Thelma and Louise is a profound miscarriage of justice and that they are the victims of oppression. Yet he participates in hunting them down; he calls them "girls"; and he has several one-sided conversations with Louise where he discloses nothing about himself or what the police are planning/doing, tells her intimate details about her life gleaned from prior police records, and responds to her questions by commenting on her plight. When Good Cop says to Louise, after a couple of 3 minute phone conversations with her, "Louise, I feel like I know you", and she responds "You don't," certainly every client/patient/worker/subordinate in the audience must be vibrating with recognition. I think it an indication of how accepted and unquestionable such paternalism has become that the theater did not erupt into applause.

Are we not trained as caseworkers, as clinicians, to assume that we know Louise? To construct therapeutic interventions, which we do not reveal, based on our analysis of what is best for the client? Is not the reversed response the epitome of therapeutic repartee? Don't we deliberately foster a parent-like relationship with our clients out of which they will never be able to grow, from which in fact the etiquette of appropriate boundaries expressly forbids their escaping? Are we really suggesting it is either ethical or efficacious to heal the wounds inflicted by oppression through a relationship within which, even in our Good Cop moments, we are autonomous and detached?

These, then, are the questions I grapple with in considering clinical social work practice. Sennett suggests that the way out from under oppressive authority is not to have no authority but to detach from the structures of authority that we have, and begin to introduce mechanisms into authority to make it more responsive to and reflective of the needs of the people. Somewhat similarly, I believe that direct clinical practice is needed but that we who are drawn to be healers must change some of its basic protocols and

procedures and forms. I was fascinated to see that some of what Sennett offers as ways that authority structures might be challenged are somewhat like techniques that I have incorporated into my therapeutic style.

Sennett suggests that company decisions/regs/rules be written in the active voice, and that the who/why/when/for what of each statement be disclosed; I am making ever more overt the interpretations, assessments, judgments and opinions that I offer or from which I am operating during a session, and spending a lot more time educating and revealing the sources of theories. I certainly have also begun answering questions much more directly, or at least acknowledging that I don't wish to answer a question.

Sennett suggests that a role exchange is vital; Ferenczi, the training analyst of Melanie Klein, who herself founded the English school of object relations out of which has arisen so much of contemporary psychodynamic thought, had come to believe by the end of his professional life that the perfect analysis could only be achieved by the analyst and analysand changing roles, and was working on how to do that. I, too, want to figure out how such a reversal can safely occur within the therapeutic relationship, and have decided to investigate co-counseling. In the meantime I have been trying to work more and more in group contexts where, even if I am never a client, clients sometimes act as the therapist and certainly outnumber me.

In the beginning of this paper I discoursed at length upon normalcy as a social construct, and the importance of keeping that always in mind as we view our selves, our clients, and our worlds. Another equally important and closely related filter through which it is ethically necessary to view people and theory is the awareness that we live in a reality where all of us have been shaped by oppression, by being in structures that are intrinsically destructive rather than nurturing. Oppression has warped our vision, our theory, our behavior, and our very operational paradigms. I

am impatient with myself when I fail to remember that DSM III R is a portrait of dis-ease that is in itself distorted by the surrounding social structure. Even Carol Gilligan's landmark theories of female development are theories of the development of females who have always lived in a gynophobic and abusive society written by a scholar who has always lived in a gynophobic and abusive society. This bias is so pervasive and we ourselves are so infected with it that it is difficult to keep these limitations as resolutely in mind, in vision, as we must. I was most painfully reminded of this warping/distorting/distortion when I watched *Thelma and Louise* sail off into autonomy and death. I watched them and mourned for them and for the film makers who created them and for the audience that identified with them and for all of us, and all the while Sennett was eerily echoing in my ear that the ultimate injury of an oppressive and unjust authority is that we come to disbelieve in *that* authority but can only dream of someone else, *another* authority, not another way of life; or that we are left believing in nothing at all. I am convinced it is precisely this failure of imagination, born of culturally-induced hopelessness, that we need to be unceasingly and primarily addressing in our various arenas of social work practice.

How can we, as practitioners, challenge this despair, this alienation? If I return to my original contention, that through analyzing my own process in writing this paper I will simultaneously be discovering something about a larger process, several ideas are immediately apparent: first, that inspiration is available to us if we are genuinely, respectfully open to all the information in our environment, from the feedback of our clients to the philosophies of currently-devalued cultures; and second, that we must continually be discovering and making explicit the values underlying our paradigms and behavior. The mystification of information that systemically occurs in hierarchies and the pretense that value-free objectivity is possible enable both external and internalized oppression, which in turn produce hopelessness and despair; we need every available resource to

become capable of imagination and action.

By weaving together the diverse elements of my environment and examining the values embedded in both process and content, I have ended up with a paper. I look forward to that time when we have constructed a culture within which the cinematic and actual Thelmas and Louises can end up with a life.