

Chapter 5. SOCIAL ACTIVISM--PERSONAL TRAUMA, HEARING AND READING

People are jolted by what they see, as has been described in the previous chapter, but also by what they themselves experience-- through their own personal trauma, by speeches they hear and books they read, or by a chance comment.

Adelaide Hunter Hoodless (1857-1910) grew up in middle-class Ontario where, following her marriage to a successful businessman, she produced four children in seven years, all of them looked after at least in part by servants (MacDonald, 1986). **To her great grief, her youngest died when only 14 months old, apparently from drinking contaminated milk.** From that time on, her goal was to educate homemakers to prevent such catastrophes. She worked with the Young Women's Christian Association to provide classes where girls could learn domestic science; then she was successful in persuading the Ontario government to make this new discipline a regular school subject for girls (not boys). Although she had no formal training in how to run a household, for lack of any other text she wrote a book-- *Public School Domestic Science* (1898)-- which was used in these classes. Hoodless was also instrumental in founding the Women's Institute where rural women could meet regularly for social events and to share information about housekeeping. This organization was to spread throughout Canada and to many other countries of the world. The death of an infant had affected many thousands of women in Ontario and in the world.

Caroline Norton (1808-1877), much earlier, was jolted into social activism not by having a child die, but by being refused access to her children when she left her husband. This British poet and novelist would be important in improving the lives of British women, even though she remained a staunch anti-feminist (Chedzoy, 1992).

Norton was well connected as granddaughter of the well-known playwright Richard Brinsley Sheridan. After she married George Norton in 1827, she became a celebrated political hostess and close confidante of the Prime Minister, Lord Melbourne. She bore three sons, then separated from her abusive husband. **She expected to have part-time access to her children, but found instead that according to the law, she had no right even to see them.** The law allowed a father to beat, starve and neglect his children, or even to give them to his mistress to raise; their mother had no redress. When George Norton refused to let his wife see her sons, she became desperate and decided that she would use her political influence to have the law changed. She published a pamphlet on the issue and worked to rewrite the Infant Custody Bill. Before this bill had worked its way through parliament, however, her husband decided to let her visit with her sons during the summer of 1837. She hired a carriage so that she could drive them around London. When a lawyer contacted her about the government bill, she told him it was no longer a matter of personal concern to her. It was allowed to lapse in the Commons.

Shortly after this, however, Caroline Norton was again refused access to her sons who were sent away from London. Again she realized that the law must be changed, so again she urged the lawyer to renew his campaign in the House of Commons. She based her argument not on equal rights of the parents, but on a natural

right of a mother and child to be together. The new bill was voted down, but Caroline Norton continued to disseminate her pamphlets and to write letters to the press so that the following year it was passed. It gave regular access to both parents of children 12 years or younger and was the first law since the Middle Ages that acknowledged the existence and rights of married women. The new Act applied only in England and Wales, so at first George Norton sent the boys to Scotland to circumvent her rights. Later, she was allowed visits while they attended school in England. She was also permitted to attend the funeral of William, aged eight, who died of lockjaw from an infected scratch.

Caroline Norton continued to have other problems with her separated husband, in part because married women were not allowed to have property in their own name. She therefore worked for a divorce bill which would rectify this. The Marriage and Divorce Act, passed in 1857, ensured that Caroline's income from her writing was safe from her husband.

Unfair treatment of Maggie Kuhn's aunt jolted the aunt into social activism, and later galvanized **Maggie Kuhn** (1905-1995) herself, a nationally prominent member in the United States of the Gray Panther movement (Kuhn, 1991, 18). Kuhn's aunt Pauline was known as Pline. Pline waited three years to the day after the death of her father to marry, as was the custom for mourning among Dutch Calvinists. When she and her husband, a railway man, had been together only two years, there was a terrible accident in the Buffalo rail yard in which a train plunged through a closed switch, trapping and killing her husband. Pline and her baby daughter were left penniless, as there was not yet an effective union in place. **Pline asked for compensation from the railroad company, but was refused money even for funeral expenses.** Although the matter went to court, the switchman, not the company, was blamed for the accident so there was no redress. Pline was forced to move back to her mother's house, never again to have a home of her own. This nightmare politicized Pline to the powerlessness of workers and of women and children. She became an activist, attending rallies and meetings of the Buffalo suffragettes for the next 20 years. Maggie Kuhn, who witnessed the despair and courage of her aunt, followed in her footsteps as an activist, helping to found the Gray Panther movement which would demand rights for senior citizens.

In the middle of the last century, a doctor called **Ignaz Semmelweis** (1818-1865) tried to find out why so many new mothers died of childbed fever (puerperal infection) in the prestigious Vienna General Hospital. In the First Division where medical students were taught, the mortality rate often reached 30 per cent. In the Second Division where the midwives trained, there were many fewer deaths. Women were terrified if birthing complications forced them to go to the hospital to be treated by doctors who so often brought death.

No one knew why so many women died, nor why the rate was higher in the First Division. Some doctors thought the modesty of the women there was violated by student examinations, so that they became more susceptible to fever. Others believed the foreigners among the

students were not gentle enough with the new mothers. Still others perhaps felt that morality had been offended, because some of the women had been raped and others were unwed.

It was not until his friend Dr Jakob Kolletschka fell ill and died that Semmelweis suddenly realized what was going on. Kolletschka and a student had been dissecting the corpse of a woman who had died of puerperal fever when the student's scalpel had slipped and cut him. Such autopsies were routinely done in the birthing area of the First Division by the same doctors and students who delivered the babies. This was Semmelweis' Big Jolt. He now understood that the student's scalpel had the same lethal effect on his friend as the students' hands had on the unfortunate mothers. The traumatic death of his friend had been caused by "death-dealing cadaveric particles" transferred from infected bodies to the blood stream of healthy people, killing them.

The solution, Semmelweis decided, was to insist that all doctors and students wash their hands in an antiseptic chlorine solution before examining obstetric patients. He organized experiments among the doctors and students which showed that this practice saved patients' lives.

It would be pleasant to report that the death rate quickly dropped as Semmelweis' orders for hygiene were enforced. Unfortunately, after the experiments were finished, many doctors refused to continue washing their hands; some even took pride in aprons that were heavily blood-stained to show off the many operations they had performed. Semmelweis found these doctors so annoying and the unnecessary deaths of women following childbirth so appalling that he eventually had to be admitted to an insane asylum where he died.

As in many scientific experiments, the idea that cleanliness could prevent death came to Semmelweis by a chance observation. He was perceptive and persistent enough to prove this connection which would later save millions of lives.

Ding Zilin is a philosophy professor living in Beijing. Before the massacre of students by the Chinese government in Tiananmen Square in 1989, her son, Jiang Jieliang, had been a top badminton player, president of his high school class, and an avid supporter of pro-democracy demonstrations. His enthusiasm had propelled him to the Square on the night of June 4, where he had been shot in the back and killed. His mother was heart-broken, but it was not until nearly two years later that she became what Jan Wong (1996, 297-302) describes as the government's private instrument of Chinese water torture-- a device which continuously drips water and has been known to drive people crazy. At that time Ding was watching a televised press conference of Premier Li Peng when a reporter asked why the government did not release a list of names of those killed at Tiananmen Square. Li Peng answered tersely that the family members of the dead did not want the names disclosed because they knew that the murdered

students had been involved in an anti-government riot. Professor Ding was stunned and jolted by his lies. She suddenly knew how she could give her grief meaningful expression. Two weeks later, she gave a television interview in which she declared that she was proud her son had marched for democracy and described the events that led to his murder.

When the interview was broadcast in Canada and the United States, the Chinese government immediately banned her from teaching, slashed her pay, and expelled her from the Communist Party. This gave her free time with which to write articles about her son for foreign publications; readers sent her donations which she funnelled to the families of others who had had relatives slain in the Square; they were glad to have the money, but also heartened to know they were not alone in their grief. She began compiling a list of all those who had been killed or wounded at the Square. The government tried to counteract her activity by tapping her phone, confiscating her mail, and having her followed whenever she left her apartment; in addition, she continues to receive anonymous threatening phone calls.

When Ding was honored with a Human Rights Award in 1995 by the New York Academy of Sciences, the government refused to let her and her husband leave China. Their detention encouraged others in China to speak out on the subject of democracy in their behalf. She wrote to the Academy that Chinese "should have the right to choose the kind of society, political system and individual lifestyle that is compatible with human dignity. These were the dreams of those who gave their lives at Tiananmen Square. These are the goals for which we, the living, strive."

Many people were jolted into thinking about their lives, and what they planned to do with them, by listening to eloquent speakers, as will be further noted in the later chapter on feminists. **Ethel Annakin** (1880-1951), for example, was the daughter of a Harrogate building contractor (Cross, 1966, 60-61). She had more ambition than most women of her time, leaving home to train at a college in Liverpool to become a teacher. While studying there, she joined the congregation of the Rev. Dr. C.F. Aked at Pembroke Chapel, a Radical preacher who organized social work and advocated teetotalism. "The turning-point in her life," she recalled 30 years later, was a sermon by Dr. Aked on 'Can a Man be a Christian on £1 a week?' It made her a Socialist: **'I felt my whole body glow and palpitate with the glory of the new idea, the idea of salvation through service.'** She joined the Fabian Society and, under Dr. Aked's direction, went into the slums of Liverpool to lecture on drink." She remained a social activist, working for the well-being of others, for the rest of her life.

Annakin's post-jolt activities contrast with those of Canadian **Christine Lamont** who also was galvanized by a compelling speaker, Prof. Ronald Newton, but whose subsequent good intentions failed dismally. Lamont was the daughter of a surgeon and his wife raised in Surrey, British Columbia, a suburban community outside Vancouver (Mallan, 1995). She held a variety of minimum-wage jobs before deciding, in her mid-twenties, to enroll in nearby Simon Fraser University. She was backed, as she would always be, by her parents' encouragement and financial support. One of her first courses was in Latin American history. It was an overview "consisting of horror stories about small nations overrun and exploited by European adventurers and home-grown

tyrants, a history of oppression and resistance, revolution and rule enforced by sword and gun." The professor included updates of current trouble spots which at that time featured El Salvador being torn by civil war. The suffering of the Salvadoreans "affected Christine as nothing had before. **Although the course was worth only a half-credit, for Christine it was an inspiration, firing her with an enthusiasm to do more, to become involved -- to help.**"

Lamont became an activist, to the detriment of her studies; she never even completed the history course. She helped produce a Co-op Radio show called "El Salvador Today," travelled to El Salvador, and co-founded a campus group to work on behalf of the guerillas and the poor there. Soon, she dropped out of university and moved with her friend David Spencer to Central America. Their desire to raise money for those in need brought them in contact with terrorists who planned to kidnap rich people and demand ransom money. They took part in such a scheme, were arrested and served many years in prison in Brazil before being freed in 1999.

A random remark will sometimes jolt a person into becoming a social activist. **Dorothea Dix** (1802-1887) was always conscious of the needs of others, but she was jolted to major activism at the age of 38, when she had already accomplished more than many people in their entire lives (Schlaifer and Freeman, 1991, 2,46,59). When she was 15, she had opened a school for young children in Worcester, MA, which flourished for three years. She then established another in Boston when she was 18. She continued teaching even when she became ill from overwork, developing tuberculosis which forced her to have a diseased lung removed. While recuperating in England in 1837, she visited the slums in Liverpool with a wealthy shipowner, William Rathbone, who gave half his income each year to the poor. Her host gave her a book by Philippe Pinel of Paris, the first doctor to insist, during the French Revolution, that mentally ill people not be chained like prisoners.

Dorothea Dix's life was changed on March 28, 1841 when she overheard two men walking behind her after a Sunday church service in Boston. They were talking about the horrors in the East Cambridge Jail, where insane poor were chained in dark caverns. **"We must do something to rescue these tortured souls," one said.**

Dix immediately arranged to visit this jail, and then other Massachusetts jailhouses. Everywhere she found insane people who had no one to look after them "thrown into cages, closets, cellars, stalls, pens and chained, beaten with rods and lashed into obedience". The reports that she wrote about what she saw were influential in having laws enacted to protect these people both in her state and then in other states, too. By the end of 1845 she had travelled 10,000 miles largely by stage coach and visited over 800 institutions housing the insane.

The words the two men had spoken fell on a receptive mind and led directly to Dix spending the rest of her life devoted to the humane care of the mentally ill, providing those in need with livable quarters, decent food, and the chance under medical supervision to regain their A random remark will sometimes jolt a person into becoming a social activist. Dix was always conscious of the needs of others, but she was jolted to major activism at the age of 38, when she had already accomplished more than many people in their entire lives (Schlaifer and Freeman, 1991, 2,46,59). When

she was 15, she had opened a school for young children in Worcester, MA, which flourished for three years. She then established another sanity.

Other people were inspired not by speakers but by authors and their books to become social activists. One example is the educator **Paulo Freire** (1921-1997). He first met with workers and peasants in the slums of Recife, Brazil, in the late 1950s because of his Christian commitment (Horton and Freire, 1990, 246). He wanted to teach them and to learn from them, somehow to make life better for them. What he found was horrifying: "The misery of the reality. The tremendous domination, the exploitation. **Even the very magical religious position of the people, understanding misery to be a kind of test that God was imposing in order to know whether they continued to be good sons-- even this sent me to Marx.** That is, I had to come running into Marx. Then I began to read Marx and to read about Marx, and the more I did that the more I became convinced that we really would have to change the structures of reality, that we should become absolutely committed to a global process of transformation."

Marx gave him a socialist perspective, so that Freire came to believe that knowledge grows from, and is a reflection of, social experience. From this beginning, Freire devoted his life to the problem of adult literacy throughout the world.

Joe Gelders had an experience similar to that of Freire (Durr, 1985, 112ff). He was a young man during the depression teaching physics at the University of Alabama. He and his wife Esther who taught English were popular figures on campus, both totally unpolitical. Because prices on farm goods had fallen to almost nothing, the government began a policy of killing baby pigs and plowing up cotton and corn to raise prices. Gelders found this policy incredible, since all around him were people starving who had almost no clothes to wear. He knew nothing about economics, so he borrowed books by Adam Smith to begin with, then worked through those by sociologists such as Charles and Mary Beard and the Webbs. **When he got to Marx and Engels, he said, "This is it! This is the answer to all the poverty and all of this killing the pigs and burning up the corn and cotton."** Although he had never met a Marxist or even a socialist, and had never heard of the Communist Party, he began to have meetings at his house to tell people that capitalism was the cause of the depression. Almost immediately he was fired from his job.

Gelders and his wife then went to New York where he became involved with radical groups working to improve life for the poor. They returned to Birmingham to help organize workers to protect themselves; at that time workers trying to unionize in the American south were being beaten and murdered. He also worked for the right of people in the south to vote and against the devastating poll tax.

Mary McCarthy (1912-1989) came to social activism also through reading, and through a specific author. She was raised in an extended wealthy Catholic family and educated at Vassar College (McCarthy, 1985, 210). During university she read a number of books dealing with society, but **the one that changed her life was John Dos Passos' *The 42nd Parallel* about the United States. She fell madly in love with it.** She went to

the library to read everything else Dos Passos had written, then moved on thanks to what she had read to the *New Republic*. Soon she was writing little book reviews for this magazine, and then for the *Nation*. She became a left wing socialist, an anti-Vietnam War activist, and "never looked back". She writes, "Like a Japanese paper flower dropped into a glass of water, my political persona unfolded, magically, from Dos Passos"

Andrew Carnegie (1835-1919) was jolted into social action not by the books of one author, but by books of all sorts (Carnegie, 1920, 45-47). He was born in Scotland to a poor family that emigrated to the United States when he was 12 years old. The family settled in the Pittsburgh area where Carnegie found employment as a telegraph messenger, putting in long days that ended at six o'clock or far later, when the office closed.

Carnegie had no money for books, so he was overjoyed when a Colonel James Anderson living nearby "announced that he would open his library of four hundred volumes to boys, so that any young man could take out, each Saturday afternoon, a book which could be exchanged for another on the succeeding Saturday." **Carnegie carried each book about with him so he could read in short breaks between delivering messages-- books such as Macaulay's essays and his history, Lamb's essays, and a history of the United States.**

Because of Colonel Anderson's kindness, Carnegie declared "It was from my own early experience that I decided there was no use to which money could be applied so productive of good to boys and girls who have good within them and ability and ambition to develop it, as the founding of a public library in a community which is willing to support it as a municipal institution." He spent some of his vast riches made from the steel industry in carrying out his dream, giving money to establish 2800 free libraries in English-speaking countries of the world. Many millions of children and adults have benefitted from these wonderful gifts.

Jane Eglee (1821-1896) also became passionate about freedom and liberty after a major jolt. She was a Dubliner (who would later become **Lady Wilde** and Oscar Wilde's mother) and an Anglican, granddaughter of an Archdeacon, educated by tutors, and oblivious to the nationalism growing at that time in Ireland where the peasantry was Catholic, impoverished, poorly educated and oppressed (Melville, 1994). Landowners, who often did not even live in Ireland, tended to be British, protestant, and demanding of high rents from the peasants on their lands. Her son Oscar said later that one day in 1845 she saw a great funeral pass "followed by crowd after crowd of men and women in bitter and unrestrained grief. Wondering much what man had died whom the people so loved, she asked who it was they were burying and learned it was the funeral of one Thomas Davis, a poet of whom till then she had never heard. **That evening she bought and read his poems and knew for the first time the meaning of the word country.**" She became a fervent Irish Nationalist openly defying her family's

pro-England politics. Writing under the name of Speranza, she electrified Ireland with her passionate tirades in verse and prose against the English." Later, an article by her in the *Nation* calling men to arms in the cause resulted in the issue being seized by the government and the paper suppressed for sedition. "She had, within three years, become a household name across Ireland. Her contribution to the cause of the Young Irelanders had been crucial and brought her enduring popularity."

Daniel Ellsberg (b1931) was jolted not by a book or books, but by an article in the *Los Angeles Times* published in September, 1968 (Schrag, 1974, 45). It was about the decision of the Secretary of the American Army to drop charges against Green Berets who had been accused of killing a Vietnamese double agent. This announcement didn't mean much to most people, but it was devastating to Ellsberg. The Secretary's explanation meant implicitly "that people at every level of command had been systematically lying about the case and, indeed about the [Vietnamese] war." Ellsberg had spent 15 years serving his country, in the Marine Corps, Defense Department, State Department, Vietnam, and the Rand Corporation. He had been aware of some of the deception that had been practised, and had even helped write some of these lies.

On that September day, however, he suddenly realized the seriousness of the practice of keeping the truth from the American people. **On that very day he decided to make the government stop lying about the war.** He gathered together extensive documentation from his office to verify what he planned to tell, then over a period of many weeks and months made copies until finally he had 60 pounds of material. Then he gave a copy of what has become known as the Pentagon Papers to Senator Fulbright so that he could do what he could within the government to try and stop the war. When little came of that, Ellsberg tried other means to expose the material so that the public would know what had been going on. Finally, he asked the *New York Times* to publish his documents.

When they became public, Ellsberg was charged with stealing from the American government, tried in court, but his case was dismissed after the government had spent \$10 million on the prosecution. The burglary of the office of the psychiatrist of Daniel Ellsberg in an effort to undermine the trial would help lead to the stepping down of Richard Nixon as President. As for Daniel Ellsberg, he had put his career and his reputation on the line, and would be involved with little else but the Pentagon Papers for the five years after the appearance of a single news article.

Bibliography

- * Carnegie, Andrew. 1920. *Autobiography of Andrew Carnegie*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- * Chedzoy, Alan. 1992. *A Scandalous Woman*. London: Allison and Busby.
- * Cross, Colin. 1966. *Philip Snowden*. London: Barrie and Rockliff.
- * Durr, Virginia Foster. 1985. *Outside the Magic Circle*. University, AL: University of Alabama Press.
- * Horton, Myles and Paulo Freire. 1990. *We Make the Road by Walking*. Philadelphia:

Temple University Press.

* Kuhn, Maggie, with Christina Long and Laura Quinn. 1991. *No Stone Unturned: The Life and Times of Maggie Kuhn*. New York: Ballantine Books.

* Mallan, Caroline. 1995. *Wrong Time, Wrong Place? How Two Canadians Ended up in a Brazilian Jail*. Toronto: KeyPorter.

* MacDonald, Cheryl. 1986. *Adelaide Hoodless: Domestic Crusader*. Toronto: Dundurn Press.

* McCarthy, Mary. 1985. *Occasional Prose*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

* Melville, Joy. 1994. *Mother of Oscar: The Life of Jane Francesca Wilde*. London: John Murray.

* Schlaifer, Charles and Lucy Freeman. 1991. *Heart's Work*. New York: Paragon House.

* Schrag, Peter. 1974. *Test of Loyalty*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

* Vonhoff, Heinz. 1971. *People Who Care*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, p 157

* Wong, Jan. 1996. *Red China Blues*. Toronto: Doubleday/ Anchor.