<div align="center">**Restorative Practices in Small Group and Individual Work**</div>

<div align="center">Commentary on **Chapter 10: Small Group and Individual Interventions**[1]</div>

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In Judaism humans are imaged as God's partners in creating, repairing and restoring the world (*tikkun olam)* so that justice, peace, and love may come to flourish amongst us. Acts of restoration are not thought of as returning the present to some previous paradisiacal state, but restoring relations to what is most deeply desired though not yet incarnated. The kind of individual and small group work Prilleltensky and Nelson describe in this chapter can be read in the tradition of such restorative work. They are careful to differentiate therapeutic work that is ameliorative of individual suffering without being transformative of the underlying socio-political structures that give rise to such suffering. I would like to suggest, however, that the kind of work they describe creates a process and practices a way of being that embodies the changes they seek in the larger world, allowing amelioration and transformation to happen side-by-side.

bell hooks (1990) and Mary Belenky (1996, 1997) have called the spaces created through such work "public homeplaces," where the virtues of the home-- care for others with particular attention to the vulnerable and the excluded--are extended to larger communities. Participation in the co-creation of such public homeplaces empowers participants to name their experience and then to deconstruct their understanding of it, taking care to contextualize it (historically, socio-politically, and economically). As Paolo Freire (1989) taught, such efforts for the development of critical consciousness open such

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a group into shared dreams of a deeply desired future, from which acts of resistance to oppression and acts of creation toward a desired world can flow.

Prilleltensky and Nelson boldly and systematically articulate the scaffolding for such restorative work by exploring the steps for intervention with individuals and small groups: pre-contemplation, contemplation, preparation, action, maintenance, evaluation, and follow up. Such participatory groups begin with participants—including the leader—attempting to bracket their presuppositions about "the problem." A more open, problem posing inquiry is hosted that invites reflection on underlying assumptions and values. For instance, in an addiction recovery program, people might begin by wondering if "recovery" is what they are aiming at (Stanley, 2003)? If so, what is each person feeling in need of "recovery" from? What have they found helpful in previous efforts at "recovery"? What needs to be recovered? What in the wider community and culture thwarts "recovery" and what does or could support it? How have other efforts at "recovery" they have been involved in understood "recovery," and how did this effect how they were seen and came to experience themselves? Seeing-through the problem, deconstructing it, allows it gradually to be placed within a larger frame of understanding to which all the members can make contributions, freeing it from definitions that are overly professionalized, reductive, or collusive with the status quo.

In such group work listening carefully to one's own experience is placed side-by-side with careful listening to the multiplicity of perspectives available in the group. By virtue of this the group can begin to think more complexly about the issue at hand, as well as to begin to discern the threads of common experience from which possible joint action can emerge. Empowerment unfolds through articulation of experience and its

deconstruction, through the practice of shared leadership, and through the back and forth movement between reflection and action that honors its insights. Ongoing opportunities for the evaluation of goals, process, and action provide a dynamic participatory experience that can become a model for other collaborative relationships that aim at transformative change.

Belenky, Bond, and Weinstock (1996, 1997) present a moving example of the kind of ripple effect Prilleltensky and Nelson refer to. In her Listening Partners Project groups of twelve mothers of young children from rural areas of Vermont met once a week for a year. These women were what Bleakness and her colleagues (1986) describe as "silenced knows." Often themselves victims of child abuse and neglect, they were largely brought up in authoritarian households where there was a marked absence of dialogue and opportunities for pretend play. Once mothers they found themselves unable to resolve childcare dilemmas through verbal negotiation, often resorting to physical force. Through the kind of problem posing small group work described by Prilleltensky and Nelson these women became able to listen not only to the thoughts of others but to their own thoughts, to express them, and to risk entering into the give-and-take of dialogue. They became able to extend to their children the listening and opportunities for expression they had come to enjoy amongst themselves, mitigating against the use of force to negotiate issues of difference and questions of authority.

Prilleltensky and Nelson ask those of us involved in hosting individual and small group interventions to struggle with the possibility that work that focuses on individual healing and self-actualization may become a dead-end in terms of community or cultural transformation. They caution that while it may serve to address some of the wounds of

its members, it often fails to either sufficiently insight the connections between personal suffering and taken-for-granted cultural arrangements or to weave the necessary threads of solidarity that enable members of a group to effect cultural change on a systemic level. The authors acknowledge that therapists and group leaders must be careful to discern whether an individual may be so depleted from psychosocial emergencies that he or she is unable to turn attention to psychopolitical sources of suffering, let alone commit time to changing them.

As we struggle to move more fully from an individualistic paradigm of the person to an interdependent one, these dilemmas begin to yield. An individual's liberation cannot be complete when the systems she is part of are oppressive. We know that the structure of relations in the world we partake of become the scaffolding for our internal conversations as well as our roles in relation to others. When working therapeutically from standpoints within liberation psychologies, we see it as critically important for a person to be able to see the resonance between societal arrangements of power and both internal dynamics and one's relations to others. Such insighting allows one to understand that his/her suffering is shared by others, and is not a sign of some wholly personal inadequacy. It also clarifies the cultural pressures and their dynamics that make it difficult for us to resist patterns that are disempowering and unhealthful. Without such clarification, we are at their mercy. Instead of putting off the insighting of the cultural level of our suffering until some of it is alleviated, we begin to see that such alleviation depends in part on this insighting.

For instance, a young woman may come to individual or small group therapy complaining of depression, feelings of worthlessness and inferiority, stuck in being

unable to see a possible role for her in the future. She is quiet in school, anxious when called on to voice her opinion. Individual therapy or a small group intervention might focus on her childhood, her relation to her mother, her father's view of her. As Prilelltensky and Nelson stress, however, holism is needed as "the perfect antidote against reductionism is the formulation of problems." How was she treated in school as a learner and a thinker? How are girls and women seen in her extended family? What is the message she receives about being a young woman from the media she is exposed to? While she may not become an activist for how media represent girls, she will begin to resist its messages, and seek to extend herself into areas of challenge that she had previously avoided. It is also likely that her growing capacity to support her own strengths will extend to helping others resist cultural messages that encourage silence and conformity.

Some would argue that while it may be necessary to connect with such insight, that

a person should be more focused on their own healing before he/she embarks on efforts at community or cultural change. The argument espouses that people who come to us to get "their own house in order" should not be burdened with "correcting the ills of the world." Sometimes such a narrowing of focus is clearly a necessity. We need to leave room, however, for healing for the individual to come about through systemic change efforts in solidarity with others. Here the false divide between the internal and external, the private and the public is challenged.

To prepare others and ourselves to host and midwife such work we must learn to fluidly move between individual and small group work and cultural work on a broader,

more systemic scale. While attention has been given to what degree the small group participant can engage in cultural work while suffering under present burdens, even greater attention needs to be paid to the ethical demands placed on the practitioner of such work. For instance, in Taylor, Gilligan, and Sullivan's research (1995) with Boston inner city adolescent girls at risk for high school drop out and teen pregnancy, they slowly faced the ethical demands their listening resulted in. These girls felt failed by their teachers and their large urban public high schools, where they often felt completely on their own. They reported little continuity of relationship with teachers and counselors. Their youthful aspirations for their futures were not met by adults who could help them avail themselves of opportunities and gather information needed to turn their dreams into reality. They experienced their teachers as unwilling to engage with them around the controversial issues they wondered and thought about the most. Without such supportive engagement many withdrew into a brittle independence; their adolescent dreams of who they could be met with bitter disillusionment.

Listening to these girls, the researchers (1995) say,

is to invite disruption, disturbance, or dissolution of the status quo. To support the strengths, intelligence, resilience, and knowledge of girls whose culture or class is marginalized by society is to support political, educational, and economic change. It may be easier to sacrifice girls than to support their development, and when girls sense this, it may be hard for them, with the best of intentions, not to give up on themselves and sacrifice their hopes (pp. 202-203),

For instance, over the years of their research they witnessed pregnancies unfolding in girls who had clearly stated their intentions not to become teen mothers. As they listened to the girls' experience they became deeply disturbed by the fact that many of these pregnancies were the result of statutory rape and sexual abuse by adult men. This faced them with the ethical imperative of honoring what they heard through public policy

advocacy as well as direct services to the girls that could effect the situations from which they suffered.

Prilleltensky and Nelson use the term "natural helper" to distinguish those who are gifted at midwifing the kind of work they describe without benefit of professional training. Such helpers, however, do not acquire their gifts "naturally," but have had the benefit of situations in which there is a give and take between listening and expression, where silenced knowings have been coaxed into more public dialogue, and where the risk of seeing through arrangements of power that have been made to seem "natural" are questioned and rethought. Such helpers--whether "professionally" trained or not-- encourage acts of resistance intrapyschically, interpersonally and culturally, seeing clearly the interedependence of these levels in our lives. By enlisting others to be what Prilleltensky and Nelson call "research partners" with them, joint resistance begins to hold open a space where visions of what could be possible can arise along with actions on their behalf.

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